Daughter of Division One

by protectginozasquad

Summary

Meet Ginoza Mayu, daughter of inspectors Ginoza Nobuchika and Tsunemori Akane, married team leaders of Division One. She is the smartest, cutest child Japan has ever seen. As her mom and dad go through hell, how will she stand by their sides?

Notes

I owe everything in this, and whatever is to come, to my dearest daughter Keiichi Tsukino (of textsfromthesibylsystem). Her headcanons comprise the entirety of this whole storyline. I've never had OCs, but because she is not entirely my creation, I can say with certainty that Mayu is a gem, and she is to be protected at all costs. Even if you don't ship ginaka, the idea of having a small child in the care of Division One is pretty precious, I think.
“Mayu, is something wrong?” Ginoza’s tried to keep his voice level, not hinting at the concern pulling at the back of his mind. He sat on his knees on the floor, eye-level with the small face in front of him.

His daughter shook her head vigorously and smiled, a little too wide to be sincere. She wound her jacket around herself tightly, as though not wanting to show him something.

“No, daddy, everything is just fine, but I need to go to my room right now - goodbye!”

She turned and sprinted to her bedroom, and Ginoza stared after her helplessly. He was worried that something was wrong, maybe her stomach was hurting and she needed to go to the doctor. But she was headstrong, a little bit too much like her mother, and he knew that if he pushed the issue, there was no way she would tell him what was going on.

Dime whined vaguely from the other side of the living room. For some odd reason, when Mayu had come through the door, he had retreated to behind the couch, as though afraid of her.

“What is it, Dime? If you’re upset, something really must be wrong. Come here, boy.”

Dime padded over to his owner and laid his head on Ginoza’s lap. Ginoza scratched his ears affectionately and locked eyes with his dog. Dime’s face was sympathetic, also concerned. Ginoza figured that Dime thought something was wrong with Mayu, too.

“I know,” he said quietly. “But she’ll never tell us. Better wait until Akane gets home. She’ll know what to do.”

He sighed, stood up, and walked to the kitchen, where he busied himself making Mayu an after-school snack, hoping she would be feeling up to eating. What if she needed to go to the doctor right away? But there was no use worrying too much, there was nothing he could do at the moment.

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Mayu shut the door tightly behind her and breathed a little sigh of relief. She unwound her jacket and set it lightly on the floor.

A little ball of fluff emerged from the jacket and mewed, coming back to Mayu and rubbing itself up against her leg.

“Oh, kitty, it’s okay. I don’t know what daddy will think. I’m sure he will love you, too, just like I do. But we can’t tell him right now, so you need to be a little quieter, okay?”

Mayu petted the kitten gently, and felt the little creature purr under her fingers. She grinned with childhood delight, green eyes filled with happiness as she stroked her new pet’s fur gently.

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Ginoza knocked on her door softly.

“Mayu, are you hungry? I made you a snack.”

He heard a quiet shuffling inside the bedroom, and pressed his ear to the door, trying to make out any of the sounds that he could. He heard Mayu whispering to herself, which wasn’t all too uncommon,
she had always been a talker. But normally when she talked to herself her voice was loud, bouncy, you could hear it from the living room. The quietness worried him.

“Mayu, can I come in?” He took one hand off the plate he was carrying, and another on the doorknob.

“No! Don’t come in!” She squeaked from the other side of the door.

Now Ginoza was really worried.

“Mayu, honey, daddy’s getting a little worried. Are you feeling okay? Do you feel sick? You can tell me anything, you know.”

The door cracked open, and little Mayu peeked up at him from the crack in the doorway.

“I know, daddy. I just, um,” she fidgeted nervously. “I have something I want to keep secret right now, okay?”

Ginoza didn’t like this at all. “Secrets aren’t very fun for the ones who don’t know them, Mayu.”

“But... please?” Her eyes were pleading, shining, and Ginoza melted.

“Well, is it going to be a secret forever?”

“Oh no, not forever!”

“Well... okay. How about just until mommy gets home?”

Mayu looked down and thought about this for a minute. “Okay, when mommy gets home.”

“How about you take a little bento box? I made one just for you, with little animals.” He held out the mini bento hopefully. To his relief, Mayu took it enthusiastically.

“When does mommy get home?”

“Probably another hour or two. Are you okay?” He asked once more, just to make sure.

“Yep! I need to go,” she said importantly, as though she had some serious business to attend to. For an eight-year-old, she could certainly look business-like.

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll let you know when mom gets home.”

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“I’m sure it’s nothing bad, Gino,” Akane said as she shrugged off her suit jacket and set her briefcase down.

“She looked like she was okay, but what if she needs to go to the doctor?”

Akane looked up sharply and poked Ginoza’s nose roughly.

“Ow,” he crinkled his face up and she laughed softly. “That hurt.”

“Are you listening to me? She’s fine. I’ll go check it out. I’m sure she’ll be happy to tell you her secret. She’s probably been waiting to all this time.”

Akane walked down the hallway and knocked on Mayu’s bedroom door.
“Hi, sweetie, it’s me, can I come in?”

Ginoza paced nervously around the kitchen as he heard Mayu invite Akane into her room and the door close behind them. Jealousy flitted through him briefly, really masking a desire for Mayu to share her secret with him, instead of Akane. He was her dad, after all.

After a few minutes, Akane opened the door to her room and called for Ginoza.

“Honey, can you come here? Mayu has something to show you.” Akane’s voice was soft and hopeful, and the tension eased in Ginoza’s forehead as he assured himself that she, as always, was right. Nothing was wrong.

He walked into Mayu’s room to find her large, green eyes trained on him nervously. He smiled at her, when suddenly, a soft meow floated through the room. He turned from Mayu to the ground next to her, where a tiny orange ball of fluff sat, giant-eyed and somewhat afraid.

“Mayu, is this your secret?” He said with what he hoped sounded like approval.

She simply nodded. Akane, blissfully, supplied some details.

“Mayu found her on the way home from school and simply had to bring her home. She looked lost and lonely, and she followed Mayu for a whole block before Mayu talked to her. After all, we did always teach her to help others, isn’t that right, Mayu?”

“That’s right, mommy. Fuzzyboots looked so sad and lonely.”

“Fuzzyboots?” Ginoza repeated questioningly.

“Yeah, that’s her name. Sergeant Fuzzyboots. She’s strong and powerful even though she’s small, just like mommy.”

Ginoza burst out laughing.

“Just like you, too.” He leaned down and reached his hand out to the kitten, who sniffed his hand suspiciously but allowed him to pet her softly.

“Daddy, will Dime like Fuzzyboots?”

Ginoza suddenly understood why Dime had hidden behind the couch when Mayu had come in, and laughed again. “It might take some getting used to, but I’m sure she and Dime will be best friends in a little while. Maybe we can introduce them after dinner?”

“You mean it, daddy?”

“Of course I do.”

Later, after the three family members had eaten dinner together, Ginoza and Mayu spent a long time trying to get Fuzzyboots and Dime to be friends. It had not gone particularly well: upon actually seeing the kitten, Dime had bolted to Ginoza and Akane’s room and taken refuge underneath their bed. Ginoza had chased after him quickly, assuring Mayu that he was just being a little stubborn. Fuzzyboots, for her part, was enamored with Dime, and didn’t seem to be able to wait to be friends.

In the end, Ginoza had dragged the giant dog from beneath their bed and pulled him out, holding him in place until Fuzzyboots sniffed all over him and licked his paw. The exchange seemed to ease Dime’s trepidation, and he stopped running away, but still seemed unnerved by the presence of the
mewing, adorable kitten. Every once in a while, Ginoza caught Akane observing the three of them with a huge grin, quietly off to the side.

When Ginoza tucked Mayu in for the night, Sergeant Fuzzyboots had insisted on crawling into bed with her. Ginoza had gently patted the kitten and tucked her into Mayu’s shoulder.

“Daddy?”

“What is it, honey?”

“I’m glad you like the kitty.”

He kissed her forehead and ran his hands through her dark hair, so similar to his own.

“We’re a family. We stick together. Kitties and puppies and all. Now get some sleep, okay?”

But the tension in Ginoza’s voice, which he had worked so hard to mask, had not gone unnoticed by his small daughter. She found it hard to sleep, and pet her new friend for a few minutes before crawling off the bed.

“Come on, let’s go see what daddy is sad about. We’ll be really quiet, okay?”

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“I got another hue alert today, Akane.”

Mayu heard her mother sigh.

“Did you go see your therapist?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Then there’s not really anything else you can do, right?”

“I’m worried, Akane. What if it keeps going up?”

“It won’t.” Akane’s voice was firm, hard, even. Ginoza tried not to shudder. He knew better than to question her when she got stubborn like this. Still, he was worried. He was more than worried, he was scared.

It had been one thing when he was a lone inspector, on his own, caring for himself. Of course, he would never have wanted to become an enforcer, become like his father then, either.

But meeting Akane had changed everything, and having Mayu had changed everything even more. For the first time, he understood the value of keeping his hue clear for someone else’s sake, for his family’s sake. Why his hue was spiking he didn’t know. Maybe it was Kougami. Makishima was coming back into the picture, and the way Kougami had abandoned him was resurfacing as they were reminded of Sasayama.

What should it matter? He had Akane and Mayu. He didn’t need Kougami.

“We will just keep at the hue exercises and make sure that Kougami and your dad are the ones with you in the field.”

“Kunizuka and Kagari are good enforcers too, Akane.”
“Sure, but your dad and Kougami will keep you out of harm’s way no matter what. That’s how teams are going to be divided up until your Crime Coefficient comes down. Shepherd 1, Hounds 1 and 3, and Shepherd 2, with Hounds 2 and 4.” She said it with finality. There was no changing her mind now.

Hidden behind the kitchen counter, Mayu held Fuzzyboots to her chest. The kitten looked at her with concern, an understanding creature.

“I don’t think it’s because of you, Fuzzyboots. But mommy and daddy are really worried. Daddy’s number went up. Did we upset him?”

She snuck off to her room, carrying the warm kitten, as worried as an eight-year-old could be.

Ginoza heard a door close in the distance, and hoped, to all the powers that be, that he was imagining things, that Mayu was curled up with her new friend, sleeping softly and soundly, not worrying about the grown-up troubles.
Mayu Turns Nine

Chapter Summary

Mayu turns nine, and all of Division One celebrates with her, including her best friend, nine year old Kougami Kouichi, son of latent criminal Kougami Shinya.

Chapter Notes

Everyone is currently alive, and at the request of the plot supplier, Mika is also a part of the Division, sort of. She's still standoffish for some reason against Gino and Akane, but she loves Mayu. This is super fluffy, but don't get too comfortable.

“Happy birthday, Mayu!”

Ginoza looked on happily as Akane held Mayu stead while she blew the nine bright pink birthday candles out on her cake.

The Division clapped when all nine candles went out on Mayu’s first try.

Maybe other kids would have wanted their party at a brighter venue, but Mayu had insisted that she wanted to have her party at mommy and daddy’s work, where all her grown-up friends could see.

“Mayu-chan! Open mine first!” Kagari thrust a small, poorly wrapped box in front of Mayu. She giggled and caught Ginoza’s eye. He nodded encouragingly.

Mayu had opened her present from her parents first thing when she had woken up: it was a beautiful yukata, dark pink with an elegant pattern. She had brought it to the party and proudly showed the enforcers, who had ooh-ed and ahh-ed appropriately. She hadn't wanted to wear it, as she feared that she might dirty it with her own birthday cake. She seemed to know herself well, Ginoza thought, even at the early age of nine.

“Okay, Kagari-kun!” She wasted no time ripping off the loosely-hanging wrapping paper, revealing a small, handheld gaming system, one Mayu had been begging for weeks for Ginoza and Akane to buy for her. Of course, Kagari was the one who played with her, so Akane had suggested it as Kagari's birthday gift.

“Eeeeee!” High-pitched squeals burst through the air. “It’s so pretty! I’m gonna beat you in all the games, Kagari-kun,” she grinned at him, a smile too wide to be her mom’s or dad’s. She had grandpa’s smile.

“Mayu-chan,” Karanomori Shion drawled, extending a delicate cardboard box. “You should open mine next.”

“Yay! Shion-san!” Mayu was much more careful with this one, opening the box slowly. Her green eyes went wide as she held up a pink dress, lacy at the top that frilled out at the waist with an elegant
black bow in the middle.

“Shion-san, it’s so pretty!” She turned to Akane. “Can I go put it on now, mommy?”

“Right now?” Akane smiled. “Before your other presents?”

“Yes!” Mayu insisted. “I want to wear the pink dress while I open my other presents!”

Akane laughed quietly. “Alright, let’s go get you changed then.” The able mother flashed her husband a smile as she led Mayu to the bathroom, clutching her fabulous new dress eagerly.

Ginoza cleared his throat and addressed the enforcers, and Mika Shimotsuki, the junior inspector who was training with their division.

“Thank you all so much for making today special for Mayu. She really wanted you all to be here for it.”

Enforcer Yayoi Kunizuka chuckled. “We all take responsibility for her. Of course we would celebrate with her. I think we would be offended if she didn’t want us.”

“Ginoza-san?” Another small child’s voice piped up.

“What is it, Kouichi?”

This was Ginoza’s latest problem. Mayu’s best friend was a boy. And not just any boy. He was Kougami’s boy. He had fierce blue eyes and ferociously messy black hair, the spitting image of his enforcer father. Ginoza hadn’t known that Kouichi and Mayu would ever meet. Kouichi was a leftover bit of Kougami’s life-before-enforcement, when he actually cared about his relationships.

Kouichi’s mother was never someone Kougami had talked much about. In happier times, Ginoza had been the best man at the wedding. But that all ended with Sasayama’s death. Kougami didn’t care for Ginoza, he didn’t care for his wife, he didn’t care for his son. He left them all behind the pursuit of a ghost named Makishima.

But Mayu and Kouichi went to the same school, and had become fast friends. When Mayu had come home talking about “KouKou-chan,” Ginoza hadn’t even stopped to entertain the possibility that it was Kougami Kouichi. And, yet, here they were, Kougami’s son in the office at Ginoza’s daughter’s birthday party.

Ginoza didn’t like it one bit.

“I’m afraid Mayu won’t like my present.”

The fierce blue eyes were so genuine, round, hopeful. Ginoza could tell, despite all of his misgivings, that the kid meant well. At least for now. So, he did the right thing. He bent down, ruffled the kid’s hair, and said:

“She’ll love it, Kouichi. I promise.” Apparently, Kouichi had decided that Mayu needed chocolate. Ginoza was mortified when Kougami told him, and the sinking pit in his stomach hadn’t gone away. But still, Mayu and Kouichi were inseparable. It was better that he not ostracize the kid.

When Ginoza stood back up, he could see Kougami smirking in his peripheral vision, but ignored it.

Mayu and Akane came back into the office, Mayu spinning around so that the dress flared out around her.
“You have excellent taste, Shion-san,” Akane said gratefully to the analyst. “She loves it. Don’t you, Mayu?”

“Oh yes. Now that I have a pretty dress I can open all my other presents.”

With a small gesture, Yayoi presented her gift to Mayu next, a small pair of earbuds with little kitties attached to them. After much squealing and some explanation to Division One about Fuzzyboots, the newest addition to the Ginoza-Tsunemori clan, she moved on.

Mika Shimotsuki, junior inspector who was training to take over Division Three, had been assigned to work under Ginoza and Akane for her first few weeks. Division One was overcrowded, but no one had complained since they had been closing down cases at an unheard of rate. Mika, for some reason, was not fond of either of her superiors at all. Whenever they brought Mayu into work, though, Mika’s disposition would somehow take an upward turn.

Mika walked toward Mayu stiffly and handed her a plain, brown bag. “I got this for you,” Mika said dismissively. “Because everyone should get presents on their birthdays, I guess.”

Mayu took the bag excitedly, heedless of the lack of decoration and pulled open a big, soft bunny-shaped plushie. More squealing ensued, and Mayu hopped up to give Mika a hug. The young inspector blushed slightly. “Yeah, well, just because it’s your birthday.”

“Mayu, I have one for you, too,” the older Kougami in the room walked forward, carrying a book. He hadn’t wrapped it in paper, but it had a large pink bow.

“Now, I know it’s a big one, but I think maybe your mom and dad can help you,” he flicked his eyes up between his two inspectors, “If you don’t know some of the words.” It was a paper book, leather-bound, hardback, and almost as big as Mayu herself.


“That’s right,” Kougami patted her head, a proud, almost fatherly smile playing on his lips. “It’s an old book, a classic. I think you’ll like it.”

“Thank you, Kougami-san,” Mayu smiled at him, holding the book with awe.

“Is it grandpa’s turn yet?” A gruff voice sounded from one of the desks.

“Grandpa!”

Masaoka stood up from his desk and walked to his ecstatic granddaughter, ruffled her dark hair and smiled at her in his broad, crooked way.

He handed her a box, Mayu wasted no time ripping it open, and, grinning just as wide as her granddad, held up a small, long, brown trench coat.

“DADDY, LOOK!” Mayu held up the coat and shook it dramatically at Ginoza, who couldn’t help but chuckle. She pulled the appropriately-rumbled miniature trench coach on over her pink dress, sleeves falling down past her arms. She looked adorable. Ginoza momentarily locked eyes with his dad, who cocked an eyebrow.

His relationship with his father was still tenuous, as it had always been. But Mayu gave them some common ground. Ginoza, while still ever on guard both against his father and becoming like his father, had seen the ways that Mayu loved being with her grandfather, and had, in his own estimation, done everything possible to see that they had a good relationship.
It still hurt, to see Masaoka treating her the way he should have treated his own son. But it was in the past. Ginoza tried not to let his pain get in the way of Mayu’s happiness. That wouldn’t be fair. His feelings weren’t that important.

“Mayu, I, um, I got you a present, too!”

“KouKou-chan, thank you!”

Ginoza narrowed his eyes as the messy mop of black hair walked up to his daughter, shyly handing her a package, wrapped so sloppily he had clearly done it himself. Ginoza had to admit the kid had put in a little effort. Kougami sauntered over to Ginoza as the two children interacted and elbowed him lightly.

“They seem to get along well, eh, Gino?”

“Shut up, Kougami,” Ginoza whispered in a low growl. Kougami said nothing, but laughed quietly.

“KouKou-chan got me chocolate!”

The enforcers all chuckled, Akane smiled widely, and Ginoza tried not to look too terrified.

“Th-that’s great,” he managed after a minute.

Mayu set the chocolate to the side and seized Kouichi around the waist in an enthusiastic hug.

Ginoza felt like he was going to be sick.

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“Mommy, daddy, that was the best birthday party in the entire world! I can’t wait to show Fuzzyboots all my new things. Can Fuzzyboots have chocolate?”

It was one of the best drives home from the office Ginoza and Akane had ever had. Rather than reeling from an unpleasant detective case, their car was full of a happy daughter and (mostly) pink presents. Mayu was still in both her pink dress and brown trench coat, munching happily in the back seat on the chocolate from Kouichi, who Ginoza promised himself he would keep twice as close of a watch on.

“I’m glad you had fun, sweetie. And let’s skip the chocolate for Fuzzyboots. I think Kouichi wanted you to have that for yourself,” Akane said gently. Ginoza felt his eye twitch. That boy better be careful.

“Why can’t Kouichi’s daddy come to his house like you can come to mine, daddy?”

Ginoza tried not to act surprised.

“Well, honey, Kouichi’s dad let his hue get too dark.”

“Like grandpa?”

Ginoza sighed. “Yeah, like grandpa.”

“You are just full of questions tonight,” Akane piped in. “Is that big nine-year-old brain of yours just itching to learn all sorts of new things?”

Mayu’s chiming laughter settled over Ginoza, and he was, once again, so glad to have Akane by his
side, working together with him to answer his daughter’s prying questions.

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“78.9?!?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s really high. Does the chief know?”

“I don’t know. My therapist hadn’t decided if he was going to report it yet. What do you want me to do?”

“Take some time off.”

“We can’t afford for me to take time off. The case is just starting to open up again. I’m the unit chief.”

“Yeah, we also can’t afford you to get sent to an isolation facility. The team or our family. Is that what you want?”

“Of course it isn’t!”

“Then take some time off, stay home with Mayu, and we’ll get Makishima.”

“Kougami isn’t thinking clearly. Someone has to keep him in line.”

“What? You think I can’t handle Kougami?”

“No, I know you can. Speaking of, what is with his brat and Mayu?”

Akane’s voice lightened, apparently willing to get off the looming matter of Ginoza’s skyrocketing Crime Coefficient.

“They’re friends, Gino.”

“Are you sure that’s all?”

“They’re nine.”

“I just don’t trust him. That’s all.”

“He’s nine.”

“And he gave her chocolate for her birthday. And we all know what that means.”

“Maybe no one explained it to him.”

“But did you see that smirk on Kougami’s face? And my dad’s too? I think that little monster knows exactly what he’s doing.”

Akane reached up to squeeze his shoulder and cup his cheek.

“I think someone’s had a long day. I’m tired, let’s go to bed.”

Ginoza sighed and wrapped his arms around her small frame. “You always make me feel better.”
“Everything’s going to be just fine. Mayu, Kouichi, our family, the case, everything. It’s going to be fine.”

Ginoza, as he often did, wished he could share her eternal optimism. But the least he could do was pretend.

“You go lay down, I’ll peek in on Mayu and be right there.”

“Okay, don’t be long. I love you.” She stood up on her tiptoes and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Love you too.”

Ginoza cracked the door to Mayu’s room ever so slightly, and found his daughter right where she belonged: curled up under her blankets, kitten tucked at her feet. He felt a twinge when he saw that the coat Masaoka had given her was also at the foot of the bed, a makeshift bed for the kitten. The proud father sighed, small, content, and tried, with all his might, to believe his darling wife.

Everything was going to be fine.
A strange, white-haired man comes to pick Mayu up from school, of course, outfitted in PSB wear, so why wouldn't she go with him?

The next Monday morning when Ginoza had dropped her off at school, Mayu had made sure to give him an especially long big hug; she knew he was sad about something, and hugs always made things better! Or at least, that's what she thought since her daddy would look grumpy whenever she hugged mommy but not him.

"He's funny," she told Kouichi on the way to class. Kouichi had been quiet, and not saying much. "KouKou-chan, is something the matter?"

"No," he replied.

"But you look really grumpy," she pointed out, before grinning up at him. "Well, you're always grumpy when you're in school!"

"Can I copy your homework?" He asked quickly.

"I knew it, KouKou-chan!" Mayu laughed at him. "Yukimura-Sensei will yell at you if you don't do it."

"Good thing I have the bestest friend in the whole wide world helping me," his face split into a large smile, his blue eyes shining.

"You owe me then, KouKou-chan," she handed her book over and he bowed graciously.

"Okay what do I have to give you, then?"

"You have to take me to the new crepe place!"

"But it's expensive!"

"Who's helping you with your homework and making sure Yukimura-Sensei isn't angry with him? And who is the bestest friend in the whole wide world?"

"I changed my mind, I like Sayuri-san more," he turned his nose up in mock aloofness.

"Hey!"
After an entire morning of pretending to be angry at Kouichi and letting him promise that no, Mayu was the bestest friend ever and not Sayuri-san and he would take her to the crepe place as many times as she liked, Mayu had to say she was having a good day. That meant she could tell Daddy all about it when she got home- and she should tell him that KouKou-chan was taking he'd go the crepe place. He was always interested with whatever she and Kouichi did together, and she found it funny that her usually grumpy daddy was so interested in her friendships, and making sure she was safe.

He was the best daddy ever.

Then came Mayu's favourite part of the day - lunchtime! That meant she could finally see what bento Ginoza had made for her, and it was always very cute and very tasty. Most of the time she had to share with Kouichi since Kogami was 'too busy' to make his son's lunches, and his mother 'just couldn't be bothered making them' and just have him money for the bread counter, which was usually empty by the time Kouichi got there. Mayu knew Kouichi had been skipping lunches to save money, so she cheekily told Ginoza that her lunches were 'far too small' and she was left 'starving' at the end of the day. Naturally, as a concerned father, he doubled the sizes of her bento, sometimes making her two, without ever knowing Kouichi ate one of them.

Kouichi didn’t talk about his dad working for the PSB the way Mayu talked about her parents. She knew something was different about KouKou-chan’s dad, but even after asking her parents about it, she still didn’t understand why a dark hue should keep Kouichi’s dad from making his lunches.

Her dad always seemed concerned about hue colors, too, he was always checking Mayu’s, even when he thought she wouldn’t notice. But she did notice, she just didn’t want him to be embarrassed, so she went on pretending not to know. He was the best daddy, but he could be so difficult sometimes.

Just as Kouichi had pulled his chair up on Mayu's desk and about to steal the majority of her bento (which would earn him a flick on the forehead from his pouting best friend), a chime rang out over the radio system.

"Ginoza Mayu of Class 3-2, please report to the faculty office. Please bring your belongings with you."

The two nine-year-olds shared mystified glances, before shrugging. "Taking your stuff usually means you're going home," Kouichi pointed out. "But that means I can't have lunch with you or take you to the crepe place like you wanted..."

He looked so glum that Mayu felt obliged to reach over and ruffle his hair.

"Cheer up, KouKou-chan!" Mayu grinned at her best friend. "You can take me to the crepe place tomorrow... Oh, and the day after that and the day after that..."

"How many times do you want me to take you?!" Kouichi stared at her as she began to pack her things away, leaving a bento box out for him.

"Hmm... Everyday forever!" She pulled her pink rucksack onto her back. "Come on, KouKou-chan, you can at least walk me down to the office and wave me off!"

"But if your dad's there, he'll frown at me and look at me like this," Kouichi narrowed his eyes, imitating Division One's senior inspector, raising a laugh out of Mayu. He had the look down perfectly.
"Daddy looks like that at everyone," she waved him off. "Stop being a baby, Koukou-chan, my daddy is a big softie really."

"Could have fooled me," Kouichi muttered darkly as Mayu impatiently pulled him along the corridors to the faculty office. Politely knocking on the door, she waited until a teacher bade her enter and pulled Kouichi with her.

"Hello, Shinohara-Sensei," she greeted the receptionist. "I was summoned and told to bring my belongings..."

Shinohara-sensei's face was a tiny bit pale as she smiled wanly at the small green-eyed girl and her equally tiny friend. "Ah, Ginoza-san. There is somebody from the PSB here to see you, dearie."

"Oh, so they know my mommy and daddy?" She pondered aloud. "Come on, KouKou-chan, let's go look. Maybe you'll know them." Kouichi traipsed behind her into the main reception, where a man Mayu didn't recognise sat on one of the chairs, quite contentedly reading a book. When he didn't look up, Kouichi cleared his throat, finally getting his attention.

Mayu sized him up: she was naturally cautious around strangers, but if they gave her no cause for concern, she was happy to be polite. Well, he was wearing the blue Inspector jacket her mommy and daddy wore, so maybe he was from another Division? She had never seen him before. The second thing she noticed was his hair - it was white, and even though he didn't have a lot of wrinkles, maybe he was as old as Grandpa.

Maybe he used too much anti-wrinkle cream, Mayu thought to herself. She found herself frowning at the style of his hair, too.

"A mullet?" Kouichi snorted, earning himself a glare from both the man and Mayu.

She poked her best friend and hissed, "KouKou-chan, be polite."

"Are you Ginoza Mayu?" The man smiled at her, and she nodded.

"I'm Makishima Shogo, I work with your parents," he introduced himself. His voice was soft, calm, perhaps even soothing. "They told me to come and get you."

"Why?" At her question, the Inspector looked around before shaking his head softly.

"We shouldn't talk out here in the open, Ginoza-san," he explained carefully, almost deliberately. "I'll explain everything, but you really need to come with me. I'm going to be taking care of you for a little while, since Mommy and Daddy can't come home for a bit."

"Huh?" Mayu looked worried and concerned, way too mature for her young age, earning a surprised, thoughtful glance from the tall stranger. "They're okay, aren't they?"

Makishima didn't answer her question, but simply said, "I can't tell you right now, as I said before, Ginoza-san."

"Oh. Okay. Then let's go, but you better tell me about mommy and daddy!" She pouted and walked over to him as he stood up. Before walking out the door, she turned to her best friend. "And KouKou-chan, you better take me to the crepe place soon or I will never, ever let you copy my homework ever, ever again!"

"Okay! Let's go tomorrow! I'll ask dad for money!" He winked before sprinting out the door back to their classroom. Mayu smiled after him before turning to look at her new companion.
“He’s certainly a nice boy. Your father seems worried about him, though.”

Mayu wasn’t sure she liked the way the man’s smile continued to spread wider and wider, eyes glinting as though he knew something she didn’t.

“Daddy loves Kouichi,” she huffed quickly, although even she knew that ‘loved’ was a bit of an exaggeration. Her dad just got jealous when Mayu spent time with Kouichi, that was all.

“Of course he does,” the smile spread a little wider.

“Well, are we going?”

“Yes, of course.” Makishima turned to the receptionist. “Shinohara-san, thank you so much for all of your help.”

The receptionist nodded stiffly. “Of course, Makishima-san. Ginoza-san, call us if you need anything.”

“Need anything?” Mayu repeated quietly, confused. But she suddenly remembered that if she wanted to know about her parents, they needed to get outside as quickly as possible.

“Oh, yes, Shinohara-Sensei!” She bowed before nodding at Makishima, who took her hand and led her gently out the door.

As soon as they were out the door, Mayu began asking questions as quickly as possible. “Makishima-san, where are we going? Where are my mommy and daddy? Are they okay?”

“Sh, Ginoza-san, please, a little quieter. We’re going to have to get in my car, okay? It’s a PSB vehicle, but it isn’t properly marked. My job is a little more, shall we say, sensitive, than a regular inspector’s.”

“Oh! So you are an inspector? Are you a special kind of inspector?”

“You could say that. Just like your parents as detectives, I, too, am in search of the truth.” Makishima answered as he led her, still holding her by the hand, to a parked car. He opened the back so she could get in. She threw the pink rucksack into the seat before climbing in and having the door shut after her. She heard something like locks clicking shut before noticing how deeply tinted the car windows were. She could hardly see out of them.

To her great surprise, Makishima opened the other backseat door, rather than climbing into the driver’s seat in front of her. He pulled his door shut roughly and manually locked it.

“Now, Ginoza-san,” his voice was low, calculating, playful. “We’re going to have some fun, alright?”

Mayu felt something in her stomach that reminded her of the time she got food poisoning in school from a bad snack. She remembered her dad telling her about instincts, once, and wondered, as she watched Makishima pull a tiny pair of metal handcuffs from his pocket, if she should have been afraid of him.

“What are you doing?” Yet somehow, with her voice as level as if she were talking to Kouichi, she was unafraid. This man, with his clown-wide smile and his white mullet, was ridiculous. Her daddy was so much tougher than he was.

“Don’t make this harder than it needs to be,” he eyed her charmingly, deviously. “Let me see your
“Are you taking me somewhere? I didn’t even get to eat my bento. You could have waited until I finished eating with Kouichi, you know.”

“Ah, yes, KouKou-chan,” Makishima hummed. “I tell you what. I have a suggestion for you. How about if you won’t give me your wrist, I’ll go get KouKou-chan, too? Then all three of us can have fun together?”

The discomfort in Mayu’s stomach intensified as Makishima used Kouichi’s nickname so carelessly. She hardened her eyes. She did not like this man. He was not a good man. But daddy had always taught her not to be afraid of men, good or bad.

She stuck out her wrist. “Kouichi,” she said the name harshly, as if she could protect her best friend simply by speaking his name strongly. “Is bad at Kanji, which is the class after lunch. He needs to study. Let’s leave him here.”

Amusement flickered in the mullet-man’s golden eyes. “I like the way you play, Ginoza-san.” He was gentle as he placed the tiny handcuff on her wrist, clicked the other one to the car door. “See?” He said, smiling ever-wider. “That wasn’t so bad. I’m going to get out this door and get into the driver’s side. Are you going to be quiet for me?”

Mayu snorted, forced a tiny, haughty, nine-year-old smile onto her face.

“Not for you. I’ll be quiet for Kouichi, so he doesn’t worry. And so he can practice his Kanji. Because if I’m not quiet you’ll go get him, right? He needs a good grade in Kanji. I’ll be quiet.”

“That’s my girl,” Makishima whispered, pinched her cheek lightly, and Mayu felt her insides twist uncomfortably again.

“I’m daddy’s girl. Not yours.” She stared at him coldly.

“Of course you are, Ginoza-san, my apologies.”

With that, he opened the passenger door and went back around to the front, pulled the driver’s side door open and got in. He started the ignition without a look back at Mayu, but in the rearview mirror, she could see a smile on his face that she still did not like at all.

As they started to drive, Mayu examined the handcuffs that bound her to the car door.

“Makishima-san, where are we going?” Manners were of utmost value in the Ginoza-Tsunemori household, and Mayu could tell that Makishima was fond of honorifics.

"We are going somewhere safe, Ginoza-san.”

"Will I be able to do my homework there?" The terse tone of her question made his eyes flick to face her and his eyes to narrow slightly, lips thinning into a line before that unnerving smile was back.

"Yes, of course, but I don't think you should be so worried about homework, Ginoza-san," his tone was open, easy, friendly.

"Well, why not?" She demanded, pouting and raising her shoulders in a defensive maneuver, and if she could, she would have crossed her arms. When she got this face on, Mommy would pinch her cheek affectionately and say that she was being grumpy like her daddy, and Daddy would look mortified and try to mend the situation by offering her toys and food to make her feel better.
"If I don't do my homework, then Yukimura-sensei will be angry at me and Kouichi. And then Kouichi will be sad and like Sayuri-san more, and won't buy me food."

"Why will Yukimura-Sensei be angry at Kouichi?" He asked her, his eyes trying to appear trusting. He wasn't very trustworthy, Mayu thought.

"Because Kouichi copies my homework. So if I don't do it, neither will he."

"Can't Kouichi do his own homework, Ginoza-san? After all, there are much more exciting things in life than homework."

"No, he can't do his own homework."

"And why's that?"

"KouKou-chan is a moron."

That was when Mayu heard the mullet-man’s laugh for the first time. It did not sound like the laugh of a bad man on the television, but it made her feel cold inside, because it almost sounded kind.

+++ 

Kougami had just served up the dinner for him and his son to eat. Normally, Kouichi would potter up to the dorms by showing his identification, and eat with his father until his mother called him from her car outside, not wanting to even see her ex-husband. Kouichi came to his fathers for dinner for three reasons: one, his father was an excellent chef, two, he had stopped getting along with his mother that well and three, his mothers new boyfriend wasn't there. Kouichi loved his mother very much, but she was too enamoured with her boyfriend, who hated Kouichi's guts. It was okay, the feeling was mutual.

Hence, it was his second favourite time of day, the first being lunchtime with Mayu. He watched the ramen being poured into the bowl with a strange reverence.

"Careful not to drool there, little man," his father teased. "Okay, let's eat!" Just as he was about to put his first mouthful of ramen in his mouth, there was a near frantic, loud banging on the door. "The hell was that? Stay here Kou, I'll go see what it is."

His father got up and walked to the door as Kouichi tucked into his dinner. Barely a second after opening it, Kogami was pushed back as Ginoza entered the room, looking frantic. Kouichi knew something was wrong - Ginoza-san was never frantic unless it involved... Mayu!

"Have you seen Mayu?! Is she here?! She's not answering her phone!" Ginoza’s words were rushed, his eyes wide, panicked.

"Why would Mayu be here? She only eats with us on Friday, remember?" Kougami pointed out. "Woah, are you okay, Gino? Take it nice and easy. Deep breaths. Come on."

"Kouichi's here, isn't he?" Ginoza looked up at his best friend.

"Sure. Just eating dinner," Kougami had barely finished his sentence before Ginoza had rushed over to the spiky haired and decidedly hungry boy.

"Kouichi! Have you seen Mayu?!" He demanded.

"Yeah, she's with that other Inspector person," he explained. "Didn't you send him? That's what he
"What? Why would I send anyone?!” Kouichi shrugged at Ginoza’s question, still confused. "Kouichi! Describe this person to me at once!"

"Well, he was about Dad's size, but he was really thin. And he had really stupid hair. White and a mullet. Even Mayu crinkled her nose and that's when you know you look REALLY stupid-"

"That sounds like..." Kogami trailed off and looked at Ginoza. Ginoza's face flicked from fear to fury in about five seconds as he glowered down at the young boy. Without much hesitation, he pulled the poor boy to his feet.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?! Why did you just let her walk out of there with a complete stranger?! You're meant to look after her when she's in school, or maybe you just don't care about her as much as you say you do! Now because of you not looking after Mayu properly, something bad could happen to her - hell, who knows?! With Makishima, he might have already killed her!"

"That bastard..." Kougami growled out loudly, apparently heedless to Ginoza’s near-suffocating grip on his son. Kouichi resisted the urge to roll his eyes at his typically overreactive guardians as he began to worry in earnest about his best friend.

"Hey, hey! What's going on?" Akane's voice rang out as she ran in the room. "Gino, what's going on?! Why are you yelling at Kouichi? And put him down!"

Ginoza loosened his grip on Kouichi, but did not release him. "This little... Let Makishima kidnap Mayu!" He snapped. "Oh god!” His voice wavered and he finally let go of the younger Kougami. “Makishima's probably killed her and- and-"

"Where the hell is that bastard?! I'm gonna kill him for this...!" Kougami scowled.

"I am the worst father ever, if anything happens to her I don't know what I'm going to-"

"I never got to take her to the crepe place! And I told her I liked Sayuri-san more! I was the worst friend ever and now she hates me!" Kouichi had started to wail.

"Be quiet, all of you!" Akane raised her voice sternly so they all stopped to look at her. Lowering it back to a normal volume, she pointed at Kougami's couch, “Now go sit.”

Each in turn hung their heads and ambled over to the couch, where they sat, all three with their arms crossed over their chests. It would have been cute, if the situation wasn't so grave.

Ginoza tapped his foot on the ground nervously. Kougami was fuming in frustration, and Kouichi was wiping tears from his eyes. Akane took a deep breath and walked in front of the couch, bending down to ruffle Kouichi's hair.

"It's okay, Kouichi. Don't cry. Will someone please tell me, very calmly, what's going on?"
Mayu was sat very grumpily on the sofa Makishima had told her to sit on, fiddling with her pencil, staring at the piece of paper in front of her which had become the bane of her existence. When she had finally been released from the car door and taken to what she could only think as Makishima's house, a funny man with shiny eyes delivered tea and some funny cake things to the two of them. He called the cakes 'madeleines' as he took the handcuffs off Mayu's wrists and checked them to make sure they hadn't hurt her. She liked the funny man with shiny eyes more than the mullet man, she decided.

The mullet man had tried to talk about the Sibyl system to her, but she carefully reminded him that she had homework, and only when she'd done that could they chat. He'd rolled his eyes and stuck his head in a book as Mayu frowned at her algebra sums.

Usually, when Mayu was having difficulty with homework, she'd ask her Daddy or Mommy for help, and if it was maths, she and Kouichi would painstakingly go through it, since Kouichi's strengths laid in Maths and Science. But she didn't think the mullet man would let her ring Daddy or Kouichi because of homework. So she sat and suffered in silence.

"You've stopped writing. I suppose that means you've finished?" The mullet man peered over his book.

She shook her head. "I'm stuck. Usually Kouichi or Daddy or Mommy helps me, but because of a certain someone, I can't do that and now I am stuck." She pouted. "And because of that someone I could fail my math test."

"Let me see," he snatched the sheet out from under Mayu's nose and judged it with an analytical eye. "Hm. Interesting." He returned it. "Don't you think there's more intriguing things to think about than algebra?"

"You can't do it, can you?"

"What? Don't be ridiculous."

"I knew it! You don't understand it either!"

"And if I don't? Is it so terrible, going out in the world not understanding algebra? After all, that's not
the kind of understanding one requires to understand the nature of—"

"You're worse at homework than Kouichi," she told him with a grin.

"Please don't compare me to him. That's just downright rude."

"You're right. Kouichi is much better-looking than you are."

That seemed to get to him. Mayu snickered at the shock in the golden eyes and the subtle stiffening of shoulders under that ever-ridiculous, long, white mullet.

+++ Back at Kougami's enforcer quarters, things were tense.

"Mayu didn't come home from school, so I called her but she hasn't been answering. I wondered if maybe she came here with Kouichi, only to be informed that she had been picked up by school by a total stranger!" Ginoza glared pointedly at Kouichi.

"He wasn't a stranger! He was wearing the blue jacket that inspectors always wear!"

Ginoza rolled his eyes, earning a decisive kick from Akane.

"What do you mean, Kouichi?"

"The jackets that you and Ginoza-san wear when you go into the field for work," Kouichi glanced around at the three adults. "He had one of those. It looked just like them."

"Something is wrong here," Kougami's voice was low, almost vicious.

"Of course something's wrong, Kougami!" Ginoza snapped. Akane kicked him again. "Ouch! Will you quit it?"

"Will you shut your mouth?" Akane glared at him. "You need to calm down or we'll never get her back."

That was enough to keep Ginoza quiet.

"Now," Akane said, firmly, calmly. "Kouichi, you're going to go home. Kougami, Gino, we're going to go to Shion's office. We're going to get Mayu back. Does everyone understand?"

They all nodded stiffly.

"Good. Kouichi, I will ring your mother."

+++ "Where's the man with the shiny eyes who brought me the cookies? Can he bring me more cookies?"

Makishima cocked an eyebrow at Mayu.

"They're called madeleines. Can you say 'madeleine'?"

"Cookie." Mayu crossed her arms over her chest and pushed out her lips stiffly.

The man with the funny eyes poked his head back in.
“Was there a summons for me?” He said, softly.

“No,” Makishima answered curtly.

“Yes!” Mayu spoke loudly over him. “I want more of the cookies!”

“Choe, she’s being awful. Don’t bring her anything.”

“Maki, be nice,” the man apparently named Choe had a soft voice. “She’s just a kid.”

Makishima sighed far too dramatically. His face reminded Mayu of her own painfully devastating pouting face.

“All right,” Makishima turned back to her as Choe closed the door to what Mayu assumed to be a kitchen (after all, that’s where all of mom’s cookies came from), “I need your help.”

“You need my help? Why should I help you? You haven’t helped me at all. Not only did you take me away from school, begin to starve me, you can’t even do my maths with me. Why on earth should I help you?”

“Ginoza-san,” Makishima’s tone suddenly grow sharp, lips stretched into a thing line, all trace of amusement gone. “You want to see mommy and daddy again, don’t you? And dear little KouKou-chan?”

Mayu almost wished for the smile back. “O-of course I do. But they’re going to come get me anyway.”

“They can’t come get you if they have no idea where we are. Luckily, I’m interested in the same thing as you are.”

“Really?” Mayu remembered daddy telling her that if a bad person ever tried to do something to her, she should not show if she was afraid. And she was, finally, starting to feel afraid. But she wanted to do just as daddy said.

“Oh yes. You see, I want them to come running in after you. All of them.” After a pause, with a devious glint in his eyes, he added: “Do you think KouKou-chan would miss his dad?”

“You leave Kouichi alone,” she spat, unable to control herself.

“Ginoza-san, Kouichi is already alone. I’m doing him a favor. He doesn’t need a dad like that.”

Makishima’s plan slowly started to dawn on Mayu’s mind. It didn’t matter how dark Kougami-san’s hue was, he was her best friend’s dad and he was a good person. And Makishima wanted to take him away from Kouichi.

“Daddy never lets Kougami-san go off on his own. Daddy always protects Kougami-san.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we, Ginoza-san?”

Mayu stared down, trying to tamp down her nerves - she had to be brave for Kougami-san, Kouichi, and especially her daddy. They would want her to be tough, like Mommy. So, no matter what this man said, she had to stand up to him- all he was was a bully! And she didn't like bullies, and she didn't like bullies that picked on Kouichi even more. "I won't let you hurt Kouichi's dad. Because you'll upset Kouichi."

"Oh?" He looked down at her green eyes flashing in a childlike fury. "Interesting."
"I don't care who you are, I won't let you make Kouichi sad! He's my friend!"

"Your friend?"

Mayu didn’t like that smile. She humphed with as much contempt as she could. “Yes. My friend.” Her heart pounding, she was unsure what the knot in the pit of her stomach was. She didn’t like it, and she didn’t have time for it. So she ignored it.

+++ 

Shion’s face was tight as she examined the footage from the administrative office of Mayu’s school. In it was a very clear record of a white-haired man quietly and patiently waiting for Mayu, their interaction, and them leaving the building together. The security cameras from the parking lot, however, had been expertly tampered with.

“It’s like looking for a time that never existed. Whoever did this might be better than I am,” she exhaled a long streamline of smoke nervously.

“He’s taunting us,” Ginoza said harshly. Kougami, Akane, and Ginoza were gathered in Shion’s office. Kouichi had been picked up by his mother’s disgruntled boyfriend, with many promises to him know as soon as they had Mayu back. Because, certainly, they would bring her back. Ginoza had heard Akane promise it to Kouichi and, much to his own panic, he had not believed her.

Kougami’s face was wrinkled, ugly with rage. “That bastard.”

“Kougami,” Ginoza said sharply. “Do not do anything stupid.”

“Do you want your daughter back, Gino?” Kouichi growled gruffly.

"Kougami Shinya!” Surprisingly, it was Akane who made the movement. She walked up to Kougami roughly, took his chin in her hand, forced his face towards hers, and slapped him.

“Ouch,” he whined. Ginoza winced.

“Do not,” Akane’s voice was low, more serious than Ginoza had ever heard it. “Insinuate that under any circumstances we will not get our daughter back. We will. And we need your help. So don’t be an ass.”

Shion whistled quietly, impressed, as Akane took her place back by Ginoza’s side, Kougami cradling his cheek in one hand.

“Yes, inspector,” he whispered, not without a hint of bitterness.

+++ 

“All right, I’ll help you.”

“Good. That’s nice, Ginoza-san.” Makishima got up from the couch and pulled a tripod camera stand from off the floor. He set up a camera to face towards the sofa Mayu was sat upon with her math homework.

“Now, smile for me. And let’s talk to daddy, shall we?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Just tell your father about your math problems, Ginoza-san.”
“Fine,” Mayu said haughtily before turning to the camera. “Daddy, the mullet man thinks that he has kidnapped me. But really, I decided to go with him. Please don’t be mad,” she felt her voice quiver, but cleared her throat instinctively. “Kouichi had Kanji, which he is terrible at, so we needed to go. I am having a little trouble with my maths, but I will be okay. Please don’t worry.” A lump suddenly rose in her throat as she finished.

Makishima walked in front of the camera.

“There you have it, Tsunemori Akane and Ginoza Nobuchika. Apparently your little daughter is fine, but what will become of her if she can’t finish her maths? And surely she must be hungry by now. But don’t worry, you can come get her as soon as you want.” He held up a small piece of paper with tiny writing to the camera. “This is where you’ll find us. Kougami Shinya, I hope you are watching.”

+++ A file blinked at the corner of Shion’s screen.

“This is...” her voice trailed off before she exclaimed. “It can’t be!”

“What is it?” Ginoza demanded.

“A video clip,” Shion said, voice barely level.

The video played, Mayu looking as unconcerned as possible, but Ginoza knew how she swung her feet when she was scared, the tilt of her head in uncertainty. And then there was Makishima, proud and spiteful, and Ginoza was sure he could hate no one more when a fist slammed onto Shion’s desk.

“I’ll kill him!”


She turned to her tense, terrified husband. “Call Kunizuka-san, Masaoka-san, and Kagari-kun. We need everyone.”

Ginoza nodded, pulling out his communicator as they hurried from the laboratory towards the elevators.

Surely if they took the whole team, it would be okay. No matter what traps were set, if they all went together, they would get her back. She would survive. They all would.

+++ “We’ll split up into teams. Masaoka-san and Kougami-san will go with Ginoza. I’ll take Kunizuka-san and Kagari-kun.”

The respective teams piled into the police cars and drove, Ginoza’s car in front, with sirens blaring, heedless to speed limits. They opened a line of communication between both cars and with Shion.

“The address is an old-style Victorian house.”

“Do you have blueprints?” Akane asked.

“No, it’s old. It was supposedly abandoned. The city was going to tear it down but it seems that
somewhere along the line, the paperwork got tampered with, and a demolition team was never assigned to it. I can see that there’s a basement and three floors. But that’s all I can tell you.”

“Thank you, Karanomori-san,” Akane said, tense. Ginoza could barely speak. He was floored by how well Akane was holding herself together. He felt like he was falling apart. He didn’t want to know what his Crime Coefficient was. All that mattered was that they get Mayu back. He could go to as much therapy as he needed later. Mayu was all that mattered to him.

In the backseat, Kougami was muttering at himself, Masaoka’s arms were crossed over his chest in the front seat. He looked very grave, lines of concerned etched all over his usually soft features. Kougami’s muttering was driving Ginoza insane.

“Kougami,” Ginoza barked. “Stay in my line of sight at all times.”

“That may not be possible, Gino. But I’ll try.”

“Trying isn’t good enough!”

“Fine, Gino,” Kougami resigned. Ginoza wasn’t convinced that Kougami would give up that easily. He knew how much Kougami wanted revenge for Sasayama.

Akane’s voice cut across the call. “When we get there, Ginoza, take your team to the basement. There’s probably a cellar door that leads down. We’ll take the front of the house.”

“Are you sure?” Ginoza didn’t like the idea of Akane rushing into danger by herself.

It was Kougami who spoke next. “Chances are he’ll expect that I’m going to sneak up on him. It’s me he’s interested in. It’s safest for Akane’s team to go in front.”

Ginoza couldn’t argue. His judgment was too clouded by the raw terror in his mind, images of the terrible things that could have happened to Mayu floating all around his brain.

They arrived at the house in a matter of minutes. Shion had been right: it was large, imposing, and ancient. The inspectors and enforcers piled out of their cars, armed themselves with their dominators, and with a few logistical words, were on their way. Ginoza’s team was to go around back, hopefully find a cellar door. Akane’s team went to the front door, where she knocked.

“This is the MWPSB. Open the door.”

+++  

“Ah, it seems our guests have arrived.”

Makishima came up behind Mayu. She yelped as he wrapped both arms behind her. She squirmed and wriggled, but he was stronger than he looked.

“Now, Ginoza-san,” Makishima hissed in her ear. “I want you to scream as loud as you can.”

“No,” she fought against his tight grasp. “I won’t do it.” She didn’t know what he wanted with the adults who loved her so much, only that nothing good could come of it.

“But I know where KouKou-chan is this very minute.” Mayu’s breath hitched. “He’s probably sitting under that tree in his front yard, and, oh, his blue eyes go so well with the blue roof, don't you think? I bet the French windows in front are closed, since mother’s boyfriend is home, and Kouichi, well, no one would notice if he just... disappeared from under the tree. What do you think?” Mayu said
nothing in reply, tried to hold very still.

“Do you see this, Ginoza-san?” Taking her twisted wrists in just one of his long-fingered hands, he pulled out a knife. He flicked it open, and Mayu tried not to shiver. “Do you see how easy it would be for me to just,” he slid it under her chin. “Come up behind Kouichi. All I have to do is this, and suddenly, no more KouKou-chan. Scream, Ginoza-san, or Kouichi will never, ever buy you those crepes he so nicely promised.”

Unbidden, tears sprang to Mayu’s eyes. She couldn’t bear the thought of this man doing anything to Kouichi. As tears spilled out of her eyes, she nodded, and Makishima pulled the knife away.

She screamed, a loud wail tearing itself from her throat.

“Ginoza-san, you can do better than that. Scream for your daddy. Scream for Kougami-san.”

“DADDY! KOUGAMI-SAN! HELP ME!”

“That’s very good.” Makishima slipped his knife back into his pocket and dragged Mayu to the side of the room, where an old-fashioned space heater was latched to the wall. He pulled out the handcuffs once more, cuffed her to the wall, leaving one hand free but useless. Choe came into the room as Makishima left, settling on the couch casually.

“I’m just waiting here with you.”

Mayu decided she did not like the funny-eyed man, either. She shook her head angrily as the tears continued to fall, and she looked away from him, hating herself for screaming, for putting her mommy, daddy, and everyone else in such terrifying danger.

+++ When Ginoza heard Mayu scream, he almost sprinted down the steps that stood before them in the cellar entrance that, sure enough, they had found in back of the house. Kougami and Masaoka together had taken him, one by each shoulder, and held him back.

“This is what he wants, Gino,” Kougami said slowly, with his own rage laced through his voice. “Nobuchika, Kou’s right. Let’s take this slow.”

“Slow?!” Ginoza’s voice came out raspy, desperate. “I want my daughter back!”

“And we’re gonna get her back,” Masaoka said firmly, with the gravitas of a father who knew what he was talking about, and for once, Ginoza tried, with everything in him, to believe him. “Okay?” Masaoka shook him gently from behind.

Ginoza grit his teeth. “Okay.” He took a deep breath to collect himself, and regained his composure as a leader. “Let’s go in quiet, he clearly wanted us here. And Kougami,” he hissed, vicious.

“Yeah, boss?” Kougami’s tone was sardonic, halfway between biting and amused.

“Don’t go off on your own.”

Kougami didn’t answer, only set his shoulders. Ginoza knew without looking behind him the determination set on Kougami’s features. He could feel hatred radiating from his former partner, and wished, for his own part, for rage, instead of this blinding, paralyzing terror.

+++
On the ground level, at the sound of the scream, Akane and Yayoi, together, kicked the front door down of its hinges. They wasted no time rushing in, dominators aimed throughout the room, reading as though the room was empty.

“It sounded like she could be on the second or the third floor,” Akane spoke between breaths as she ran up the stairs with her two enforcers. “That means, that unfortunately, we’re going to have to split up. Kagari, do you mind—”

“Going it alone?” Even in his tone, the grin was present. Ever the jokester, Kagari always tried to make everything better. “Not at all. It'll be a race. Whoever finds Mayu first wins. If I win, you have to buy me that game that Gino-san keeps disapproving.” Without waiting for confirmation, he continued up the stairs, while Yayoi and Akane proceeded to survey the various bedrooms of the second floor.

Mayu could hear them coming up the steps, but was too afraid to make a noise. She didn’t want the shiny-eyed man to hurt mommy or daddy or one of their subordinates. So she sat, trying not to quiver against the heater, wishing she could stronger, braver.

Choe seemed unconcerned about the noise, until the door received a loud shock, and Mayu, startled, looked towards it, as he sprang up, holding a small, strange piece of metal in his hand.

“Mayu-chan!” A familiar voice called to her. “Are you in there?”

“KAGARI-KUN!” She shouted, torn between relief and terror. Kagari kicked the door in roughly, something in his hand Mayu had only heard stories about, a dark object, glowing bright blue at the end. A dominator. Mommy and Daddy had only told her how dangerous they were.

Kagari-kun’s eyes glowed blue, and he hissed at the man named Choe, “You bastard,” before pulling the trigger. Mayu knew daddy would want her to look away, but she couldn’t. At the same time as Kagari, the other man pulled a lever on his own device.

Mayu screamed again as she watched both her captor explode and her rescuer fall to the ground, dominator clattering away.

“Kagari-kun!”

He looked up at her, eyes strangely misted over. His hand clutched his side, and scooted himself closer to her.

“Mayu-chan,” his voice was strained. “It’s okay. I’m so glad I found you. You should close your eyes for now, okay?” With his free hand, he brought his communicator up to his mouth.

“Akane-chan, Mayu’s on the third floor. She’s safe.”

Mayu heard the line crackle, and suddenly heard her mommy’s voice. “Kagari-kun, thank goodness. Stay there.”

“Ahh, Akane-chan, can you tell Mayu that she should close her eyes?”

“Close her eyes?”

“She’s seen too much already,” Kagari’s breath was labored, he sounded to Mayu like he had been running for too long. She hadn’t listened to him, and her eyes were fixated on the space in his side where his hand was. It was bloody, much worse than any cut or scrape Mayu had ever had.
“Kagari? No...” Mayu had never heard her mommy’s voice so sad.

“Please. Tell her.”

“Mayu, can you hear me?”

Relief washed over Mayu as her mother’s voice, strained though it was, floated to her ears.

“Mommy! Something happened to Kagari-kun, he’s hurt.”

“Mayu, honey, can you reach Kagari-kun’s hand?”

With her free hand, she reached out. Kagari still had a smile on his face.

“Yes, mommy.” She took his hand.

“Good. Now be a good girl, just hold Kagari-kun’s hand and close your eyes. Okay?”

“But why?”

“Hey, Mayu-chan, I’ll let you play on my new game console if you listen to your mom, okay?” The mist over Kagari’s eyes was growing thicker.

“O-okay.” She linked her tiny fingers with his and squeezed tightly. She didn’t know why he wasn’t squeezing back. “Promise we can play?”

“Promise,” Kagari’s voice was quiet. Mayu didn’t like it one bit. Kagari-kun was supposed to be loud and bouncy, like her. “But only if you keep your eyes closed until your mom tells you.”

“I’ll be right there, Mayu,” Mommy’s voice was firm, and Mayu believed her.

Mayu bit her lip, eyes tightly shut, gripping Kagari’s hand, until she heard the communicator click off. She tried so hard to keep them shut, but when Kagari’s touch started to grow cold, limp, she squinted open, sucking in a deep breath as a fit formed in her stomach at Kagari’s eyes, misted over so thickly they didn’t look real anymore.

“K-Kagari-kun,” she whispered, green eyes wide, panicked, locked to a heat radiator, alone. “P-Please wake up. Kagari-kun...” and eventually she could contain her horror, her sorrow, her confusion no more.

“DADDY! KAGARI-KUN IS GONE! DADDY, MOMMY, HELP ME!”

She sat, holding the quickly cooling-off hand of her best video-game friend, her rescuer from the shiny-eyed man, the easy, light smile, sobbing as she realized it would never be warm again. She would never see the smile again.

No, she shouldn't have screamed.
These Birds With Their Wings Torn Apart

Chapter Summary

The rescue mission ends.

Chapter Notes

I really am sorry. Co-written by me and Keiichi Tsukino!

Kougami, Masaoka, and Ginoza walked carefully around the basement, dominators out.

“I don’t understand what good dominators are going to do us, Gino.”

“Shut up.” Even as Ginoza barked at his best friend, the same concern gnawed at the back of his mind.

As they tip-toed around the basement, something very strange floated to their ears. Tingling, sweet, melodic, a voice sang soothingly.

+++ 

After making the video to send to Division One, Makishima had asked Mayu for an additional favor, promising cookies upon completion.

“Does your dad ever sing lullabies to you to go to sleep?”

Mayu eyed him suspiciously. “Maybe.”

Makishima’s smile was back. “All I need from you is a little sample of that. Just a little one. Just sing for your daddy. Think about it: if he can save you, how special would it be for you to sing to him?”

Mayu did not like this at all, but she knew she needed to maintain an air of fearlessness.

“Well, only because it would make daddy happy, not because you asked.”

Makishima had opened a file on something that looked a lot like mommy and daddy’s PSB communicators, and she sang a little lullaby, softly, closing her eyes and thinking of daddy, so she didn’t feel like she was singing to the mullet man.

“I say goodnight to the day star, as it slowly goes down, carrying my wish with it for tomorrow...”

It was a pretty song. She liked to sing it.

As she neared the end of the lullaby, she suddenly felt a warmth behind her and gasped in surprise as the knife came under her throat once again. Her eyes snapped open and she yelped out, “No, don’t!”
With that, Makishima ended his recording.

“That was very good, Ginoza-san. Now we have the perfect trap for daddy.”

+++ 

The familiar song trickled through from a corner of the basement, and Ginoza, slowly, moved towards it. But then he heard his daughter’s singing turn scared. Fate was indeed against them that day, for just as the recording ended, Mayu’s real scream tore through the air above them.

His mind went blank with a white, blind terror. Panic paralyzed him for a moment, and before he could move, he felt someone, strong, firm, grab him around the waist. Maybe his dad was trying to calm him, but all he did was turn the terror red, enraged, instead of white.

Her scream was piercing, and Ginoza couldn’t handle it, he ran to where the voice was, where it was supposed to be, where it was coming from.

He wrestled free from the firm grip of Kougami, or his father, it didn’t matter which, and he ran, blindly, not knowing that Akane was about to scoop Mayu up into her arms, tear her, crying, away from the cold Kagari. As he broke free, he heard his name gasped out from behind him - it was his father, not Kougami, where was Kougami? But that didn’t matter. Mayu was what mattered.

“No-bu-” His father started again, as Ginoza ignored him, to continue running, blindly towards where he thought the song came from, and he felt, absentely, a soft push against his ankle. He didn’t have time to wonder what it was.

There was the sound of metal crashing, bone splintering, a scream Ginoza barely recognized as his own tore itself from his throat. White hot pain enveloped his side, his shoulder, when he struggled against it, he was met with only a painful ripping, so he held still, teeth clenched, vision blurring.

“Don’t move, Nobuchika! Your arm-”

“But Mayu, Mayu,” Ginoza gasped out desperately, terrified, hot tears spilling unbidden from his eyes. He looked up at his father, felt, again, like a child, looking up for help, guidance, as though this weren’t a world where fatherhood could be quantified, quarantined, exchanged for a high number, like Russian roulette for his childhood. It washed over him like high tide, as he heard his own daughter wail, sobs growing ever quieter, maybe for the pain pounding in his ears.

As he looked up to lock eyes with his father, the same eyes, Ginoza screamed again as a face flashed behind his father.

“Look ou-”

But Makishima already had his knife out, slashed it down towards Masaoka. Masaoka turned in time to react, held his arm up and there was a dull thwacking sound as the knife came down on the metal prosthetic. Makishima jumped back with inhuman speed.

“Not bad, old man,” he grinned wickedly as Masaoka held his dominator up.

Ginoza, chest heaving under the weight of the metal crates, which he could see had been hanging precariously, saw the dominator glow red, his dad cursing and tossing it to the side. Everything was blurry around the edges, red stars of pain interspersed throughout his vision.

Masaoka ran for Makishima, who darted around him. Masaoka’s age didn’t often show, but with someone so skilled at evasion, there was a subtle lag between them.
Makishima slashed at the older enforcer and caught him on his good arm, deep but not dangerous. Masaoka growled out in pain, caught Makishima by the neck with his prosthetic.

Ginoza could see his father squeezing Makishima around the throat.

“You dare to try to kill my son,” Masaoka spat.

“Ah,” Makishima’s voice was tight, somehow still amused, taunting. “There’s much more I can do to him than kill him.”

Shifting his weight around, Makishima flipped his knife up and shoved it, hard, into Masaoka’s throat. The enforcer dropped Makishima, held his real hand up to his neck.

“D-Dad!” Ginoza called out, pained, terrified.

“You see,” Makishima stepped back, spread his arms wide. “This is much better than killing him first.”

A gunshot rang out, and Kougami reappeared, the dim light of the basement glinting off of an old-style revolver he must have kept hidden in his quarters, all these years. Makishima turned from the bleeding Masaoka to face his real prey. If he had paid more attention, Ginoza would have recognized the revolver, but he was too busy, distracted by his father, bleeding from his neck, stumbling towards him.

“Nobuchika, let’s get you out,” the older man gasped out.

“Dad, you can’t-”

Masaoka didn’t answer, only reached for his son. “This is going to hurt,” he whispered, grabbing Ginoza by his free arm and the top of his trapped shoulder.

Ginoza didn’t want to scream, didn’t want Mayu to hear him, but the pain seared through him, a sickening crunch aching through him as he was dragged from beneath the metal crate, the well-set trap.

More gunshots echoed, as Ginoza screamed, and, in some corner of his mind, he hoped that Mayu couldn’t hear any of this.

Immediately after Ginoza was free, Masaoka collapsed, almost on top of him.

“D-dad...”

Kougami growled loudly, but Ginoza wasn’t listening. His arm was mangled, but with his free hand, he put it up to his Masaoka’s neck, tried to stem the blood, but it was no use.

“Nobuchika, it’s okay,” Masaoka managed to get the words out. “I’m so proud of you, and your little girl. Protect your family. They are all that matters.”

His eyes closed, his chest stilled. He was gone.

Tears filled Ginoza’s eyes. “Dad! No! Don’t leave me here! I don’t know how to be a dad!”

Vaguely, Ginoza was aware of the fight between Makishima and Kougami raging around the cellar.

“I knew you would find me, Kougami Shinya,” Makishima dropped his knife as he stumbled backwards against the wall. He held his arm where one of Kougami’s bullets had lodged itself. He
was trapped, still smiling.

“Say, Kougami? Do you think you’ll be able to find a replacement for me?”

Kougami spat at Makishima’s feet, looked him straight in the eyes. “I sure hope not.”

Makishima crumpled at Kougami’s shot.

Turning to look at Gino, messy hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, Kougami whispered, “I’m so sorry,” before pulling out his communicator. “This is Hound 3. Shepherd 1 is in critical condition. Hound 1 is...”

“Kougami?” Akane’s voice cut through, all need for pseudonyms gone. “What’s happened to Ginoza? And Masaoka-san?”

“Get down here as fast as you can, inspector. Gino is alive, but he needs medical attention right away. I’ll go outside to meet with an ambulance.”

Ginoza knew Kougami had no intention of waiting outside.

“K-Kou, Kou, don’t leave!” He gasped out between clenched teeth.

Kougami’s blue eyes were stormy, filled with both satisfaction and regrets.

“I don’t want to make her kill me,” he said simply before darting up the cellar door.

Ginoza let himself scream, hoped against hope that Mayu wouldn’t hear him. Mayu. He hadn’t lost everything yet.

Akane arrived at the basement, eyes wet but determined. “Gino!” She yelped when she saw him, lying over the bleeding body of his father. “Masaoka-san...”

“You need to get up,” she knelt next to him, pulled the belt off of her skirt to bind it, wincing, around his arm, as he gritted his teeth, groaning in pain.

“Ak...a...ne...”

“I’m right here, Gino,” her voice was firm, grounding, but still, he knew, he knew this couldn’t last.

“Check... my... hue...”

“At a time like this? We can deal with that later. Let’s just get you out of here.”

But it was at that moment that Division Two, headed now by the ever-soured Mika Shimotsuki, rushed into the building. Mika herself pounding down the basement stairs. The younger detective surveyed the mess, paling at the sight of two dead bodies, and a rapidly bleeding inspector held by his wife.

Mika held her dominator up, and Ginoza wasn’t surprised to find it glowing blue.

“Step back, inspector Tsunemori,” the younger inspector said with an authority Ginoza was surprised at.

“What are you doing?!” Akane yelled, Ginoza wanted to tell her that it was okay, he didn’t want to be awake for this any longer, he wanted to forget, wanted to not wonder how to tell Mayu that her grandfather was gone, that daddy let it happen, that daddy let Mayu’s best friend’s father get away-
He heard Akane scream, “Don’t!”

Everything went black.

+++ 

Kunizuka-san’s arms were tight around her as she carried Mayu out of the big, looming house, where the terrible things had happened.

Mayu had heard too much: she had heard daddy scream, over and over, heard mommy yell. She tried to listen to Kunizuka-san when she was told to hold her hands over her ears, but she couldn’t.

“I’m sorry I don’t have my earbuds for you, Ginoza-chan,” Kunizuka-san looked down at Mayu, who tried to smile, but couldn’t. Tears were falling from her eyes, although she didn’t feel like she was crying.

She felt empty, hollow. She wanted daddy, mommy, or Kouichi, but they weren’t here. Something was wrong with daddy, she knew it, but she didn’t want to ask.

She and Yayoi stood outside the house, and suddenly sirens screeched through the air behind them. And ambulance wailed up behind them, but Mayu wasn’t startled. She wondered, absently, if they had come for Kagari-kun, and wanted to tell them it was too late. She had endangered him. But instead of running through the front, the medical team ran down to the back, around to the cellar door. Mayu, for the first time, felt something other than sadness: fear.

Daddy was down there. So was grandpa.

She heard Yayoi talking worriedly on her communicators, and suddenly she was being shooed inside the car, but she refused to get inside of it.

“Kunizuka-san, but I need to see daddy-”

“Mayu, please,” Yayoi sounded desperate, frantic, and it scared Mayu. Yayoi was always calm, steady, like mommy.

“No! What’s going on?!?” She pushed against Yayoi, and she felt bad for it, but she couldn’t help it.

She saw the medical team pull someone, on a stretcher, out from around the back of the house. At first all she saw was a mop of dark hair: daddy, or maybe Kougami-san? Her heart froze.

The next thing she knew was what Yayoi was trying to protect her from.

Another stretcher was brought up, but instead of wheeling it over to the ambulance, like they did with the first one, a big, black bag was brought over.

“GRANDPA!” She yelled, broke free from Yayoi’s grip.

“Mayu, stay back!”

She didn’t think her mother’s voice could ever scare her, but, right now, Mayu was terrified by the tone of mommy’s voice, so beaten, so tired.

Mayu fell on her knees, the tears that hadn’t stopped falling faster.

She closed her eyes, felt herself cry out for her daddy, felt her mom reach her, sink to the ground with her. She did not find solace being gathered in her mother’s arms. Her stomach was twisting, she
was shaking.

After a lot of shushing and cooing, Akane spoke real words again, with difficulty. “Mayu, I need you to go with Kunizuka-san, okay?”

“Where is daddy?”

“Daddy is... daddy is okay.”

“Where is he?”

“He is with the people who can help him.”

“G-grandpa?” She whispered, voice cracking, because she had seen the big black bag, and somehow knew what it meant, knew the answer.

“Mayu...” mommy’s voice wavered. “Grandpa is gone.”

Mayu nodded, defeated.

“I need you to go be with Kouichi. Would you like that?”

At the mention of Kouichi’s name, Mayu cried harder. “K-Kouichi,” she gasped.

“Yeah,” her mom lifted her chin, so their gazes met. “Shimotsuki-san and Kunizuka-san are going to take you to Kouichi’s house. I’ll come get you later.”

“W-what happened?”

“We can talk later, Mayu. Go see Kouichi.”

Somehow, Mayu ended up in the back of the car, sniffled her tears up, wiped her face on the back of her sleeve. Daddy would want her to be strong.

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Out of the window, Mayu spied Yayoi talking to Kouichi's mother, who looked horrified at whatever the female enforcer was saying. Finally, she nodded, and Yayoi walked briskly back to the car, and opened the door.

"Ginoza-chan. Ms. Tendo says you can stay here for tonight, until Mommy and Daddy comes for you. Is that okay?" Mayu looked away from Yayoi, feeling guilty. Kagari was Yayoi's friend, wasn't he? And because of her, Yayoi's friend was... "Ginoza-chan? Can you stand?"

Mayu's mind had been a blur, but she could vaguely recall Yayoi's arms lifting her as if she weighed nothing, carrying her as she sobbed uncontrollably. She hadn't made a noise since. At Yayoi's question, she simply stared at the older woman, nodded slowly and slid out of the car, feeling like she was made of paper.

Ms. Tendo was shouting for Kouichi, but Mayu barely heard it. She barely took in any of her surroundings as she staggered slowly to the front door, Yayoi keeping her upright.

Kouichi's foot falls were as loud as ever as he threw himself down the stairs, his mother's boyfriend popping his head out from the living room. "Why's Mayu here? Where are her parents? Why does she look so sad?!" Kouichi shouted across the hall as he approached the door.
"She probably finally realised she's best friends with your pathetic ass." His mother's boyfriend grinned at the small boy.

Kouichi scowled at the old man, mentally vowing that one day he was going to break his knees, before pushing on to the door and past his mother.

He saw Mayu walking almost limply up the garden path, the mere sight wanting to make him cry. Mayu was meant to smile, and she was meant to be a crybaby... But she wasn't meant to look so utterly defeated.

Was this because he let that man take her away? Why was he such an idiot? Why did he do that? To one of his best (and only, on that note) friends?

"Mayu!"

His voice seemed to cut through the omnipresent mist in her head. Her legs stopped working then, and she halted, so he sprinted over. "Mayu? What happ- no, you don't need to tell me. I'm just glad that you're safe now."

Mayu looked up at him, and finally, she knew it was okay to cry again. She threw her arms around him and began to wail into his chest, and an minute later he was smoothing out her hair. "It's okay, Mayu. Just let it out. It's not healthy to bottle it in, you know." After a minute, he looked at up at Yayoi, who had watched the scene in stoic silence. "I'll look after her, Miss Kunizuka!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Yayoi nodded.

"Mayu, come on. Let's go inside. We have hot chocolate and we can watch those dumb movies you like."

Mayu leaned on his shoulder, felt him wrap his arm around her waist, and she went with him inside. He guided her, almost as gentle as mommy, it was surprising, to the couch.

Ms. Tendo poked her head into the sitting room. “I’ll make some hot chocolate for you both. Kouichi, why don’t you get a blanket for Mayu? She looks cold.”

After a few minutes, Mayu had a blanket wrapped around her, a steaming mug of hot chocolate, and she and Kouichi sat on the couch, his arm still wrapped around her, silent, for a long time.

She wanted to be grateful for Kouichi, he was being so kind to her.

But all she could feel was her heart breaking apart on the inside, her chest heavy with guilt and sorrow.
I Don't Know The Truth, But What Can I Do?

Chapter Summary

Mayu, Kouichi, and Akane all start to wade through the aftermath of the rescue attempt.

Chapter Notes

Eventually it's going to stop being so sad, I promise! Things are on the way to being mended. ALSO, please check out some AMAZING art of Mayu and Ginoza done by tumblr user lifeinredshades. IT'S AMAZING. This chapter is, as usual, co-written by myself and Keiichi Tsukino. This chapter title and the previous are from the Japanese lullaby that Makishima made Mayu record to trap Ginoza. HAHA SADNESS.

Cold. It was all very cold. Everything… cold, and unforgiving; permeating her clothes, sticking to her skin, paralysing her muscles, freezing her bones and cracking her heart. The only thing that was warm were the tears still on her cheeks, and even those nearly burned. The mug of hot chocolate in her hands felt like it was blistering her skin. The only warmth that was tolerable was Kouichi’s arm, like the sun on a hot day.

She still hadn’t been been able to tell him what happened. It was like her mouth was sewn shut. It was all she could do to nod or shake her head when she was asked a question. Kouichi’s mom, after trying every question she could think of, retreated to the kitchen, reminded Kouichi to take care of his friend.

Mayu knew she wasn’t being polite, and she hated when she wasn’t polite. But the pain inside her was so deep, so strong.

Kouichi himself had no idea what to say – he had no idea what was going on, or why it was Shimotsuki and Kunizuka who dropped Mayu off, and not Akane. What could be preventing Mayu’s own mother from leaving work? That very rarely happened.

As he thought this, his mind was pressing him to think a different thought: what if something had happened to his dad? No, that was stupid – his dad was practically indestructible, near enough. He’d seen his dad train against the sparring drones, so a real person couldn’t even be a real match, right? Not if it was that lanky, stupid, idiotic, hateful mullet-donning man. Kouichi hated that mullet man, but not as much as he hated himself for even thinking he was remotely trustworthy.

She looked exhausted – too exhausted for a nine year old to look – borderline world-weary. Mayu needed Daddy; she needed Mommy; but all she had was Kouichi and she was just grateful that he was there. He’d started rubbing her shoulder in a comforting gesture, and she finally worked up the strength to take a sip of hot chocolate.

Finally, she glanced up at Kouichi, remembering Makishima’s threats directed towards the boy, and felt a tiny amount of comfort at the fact that because of her, none of them had been carried out.
“Did you study for your Kanji test, Kouichi?” Her voice was small, burdened.

He laughed, almost nervously. “Well, I-”

“You didn’t, did you?” she shook her head softly. “Honestly, Kouichi, You’re the biggest moron ever. The stupidest idiot. The foolish fool.”

Despite her insults, there was no malice behind them; if anything, they assured Kouichi that the old Mayu from earlier that day was coming back. But even Kouichi wasn’t that stupid, something had definitely changed.

Despite his outward actions and behaviours, Kouichi was incredibly perceptive for one so young, something his father had picked up on. However, he knew that acting like a doofus made Mayu happy (though mostly irritated), and kept the Sibyl System off of his back – as his therapist reminded him, children on latent criminals could potentially be at greater risk themselves. So he knew that whatever had happened this afternoon, if he ever found out (his best chance would probably be asking his dad, or Akane – they would tell him), had changed Mayu, and had also changed the innocent little bubble they lived in.

The happiness from earlier that morning wouldn’t return, not for a long time.

But both of them knew they had each other, and it made it just a little more bearable.

“M-Mayu,” he started slowly. “What... happened?”

She didn’t look at him. A lump rose in her throat and tears sprang to her eyes.

“I didn’t mean,” he said quickly as he heard the sniffle that inevitably came with the welling tears. “You don’t have to tell me-”

“No, KouKou-chan, it’s okay,” she interrupted him softly, hoarsely. “The bad man, Makishima-san, he took me to a big house, and he kept me there.”

“Did he hurt you?!” Hot rage flared up in Kouichi’s chest, unbidden and unstoppable.

“No!” she yelped. Kouichi jumped, startled.

“He said, he said he was going to hurt you.”

“Me?” Kouichi asked quietly.
Mayu shook her head, a tear splashed onto Kouichi’s hand, still under her chin.

“So I screamed. And I don’t know what happened, it happened so fast. Kagari-kun came to rescue me, but Makishima-san’s friend shot him with a strange thing, and Kagari-kun he... h-he... he got so cold.”

Kouichi released her chin and pulled Mayu all the way into a hug on the couch. He had to admit, it hurt him to know that, too. He and Kagari weren’t as close as Mayu and Kagari, but he had been so kind of Kouichi every time he came to the tower to visit his dad.

“And grandpa... grandpa!” She wailed into his shirt. He put his hand awkwardly on her head, started stroking her hair again.

*Masaoka-san too?* Kouichi couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Mayu’s grandpa wasn’t exactly a spring chicken, but he had always seemed so invincible.

He didn’t want to ask about his dad.

As though reading his mind, she mumbled into his shirt. “I don’t know where your daddy is, Kouichi.”

Kouichi’s heart sank.

“Is he... you don’t have to lie to me... did he die?”

He felt Mayu shake her head against his chest. “No, they didn’t put him with Kagari-kun and grandpa. He can’t be hurt, because he wasn’t with my daddy either. I just don’t know, KouKou-chan. I’m s-s-sorry,”

“Shhh, shhh, it’s okay. Someone will let us know as soon as they can.”

They sat on the couch, Mayu’s fists balled up in Kouichi’s shirt, a blanket across their legs, soft sounds of dishes clanking coming from the kitchen. A slowly heating teapot sputtered in the background.

If someone didn’t know better, the house was muted and calm enough, full of a misleading warmth, they might think that it was an ordinary day.

+++ 

Ginoza floated in and out of consciousness the entire ambulance ride, only lucid enough to fumble through various names.

*M Mayu, Akane, Kou, dad.*

*Akane, dad, Mayu, Kou.*

*Kou, Akane, dad, Mayu.*

*Dad, Mayu, Kou, Akane.*

*Over and over again, in different orders, different volumes, different levels of agitation and fear. The nurses kept telling him to relax, talked over his voice. Akane knew that they had to, but wished they wouldn’t. She wished she could reach and grab his free hand, the hand that wasn’t mangled beyond recognition.*
But Tsunemori Akane was a professional, a clear-hued rationalist. She almost wished the tears would come, that terror would eat her up, that she could scream at the nurses to save him.

Akane didn’t need to. She already knew that they would save his life. That, at least, was salvageable. What the wreckage of his mind would be once they had sewn his body back together, she didn’t want to think about.

The ambulance went to the isolation facility. Akane couldn’t say she was surprised. She tried, for an instant, to convince them to take him straight to the tower.

“I’m sorry, inspector Tsunemori,” a nurse replied to her protests softly. “Not only is his Crime Coefficient well above regulation value, but the MWPSB tower doesn’t have the surgical resources to ensure that he can be stabilized physically. We have to go to the facility.”

As soon as the ambulance pulled up to the front of the building, the nurses piled out, gently but quickly pulled Ginoza out on the stretcher, and before she could orient herself, they had run on ahead of her into the facility, the giant doors shut behind them and Akane, for her part, felt her knees finally give. She didn’t notice her nylons rip, a slim layer of knee skin tear, as she fell to the ground.

Still the tears didn’t come.

The terror did.

Nausea washed over her, an empty hole opened up in her chest. Ginoza wasn’t a free man anymore.

She was barely aware of the ambulance driver, blessedly, lifting her from the ground. She thanked him without thinking about it, straightened her spine, walked, stiffly, confidently showed her credentials to the facility doorman, and entered the sterile, white building, which was now her husband’s twisted, disgusting home.

She stood outside the operating room, pacing back and forth as the doctors worked. A nurse walked outside.

“We were not able to save Ginoza-san’s arm,” the nurse said somberly.

“You had to...”

“We had to remove it, ma’am. There wasn’t another choice. He was losing too much blood. To ensure his safety, we had to remove what was left of the arm and seal it up. The doctors are optimistic about the possibilities of a prosthetic, but they suggest that you leave the decisions for tomorrow.”

Akane sighed. He had always worried that he would become his father. The irony of the missing arm was not lost on her.

“Can I see him?”

“No ma’am. They aren’t done with surgery, and, from what I understand,” the nurse’s eyes softened. “You have a daughter who is not currently with a family member.”

The nurse paused.

“If it isn’t too presumptuous, inspector,” she continued after a pause. “I think you should go get your daughter and return tomorrow morning. Ginoza-san has stabilized, but won’t be out of surgery for a few hours.”
Akane nodded. She knew when she was being dismissed.

“Make sure the surgeon knows to reach me the moment he’s done with surgery.”

“Of course, inspector.” The nurse turned and headed back into the operating room.

Akane took another deep breath, turned, not sure if it was a betrayal to her husband, and headed for the door.

+++ 

When she arrived at the house, Akane thanked Kouichi, bowed to Ms. Tendo, and extracted Mayu carefully from the blankets. Mayu tugged on Kouichi’s shirt, so Akane whispered quietly.

“You can come see Kouichi again tomorrow. He’ll be right here. I don’t think either of you should go to school tomorrow.”

Akane saw Kouichi push, gently, on Mayu’s hands.

“Go with your mom. Maybe you can help me with my Kanji homework tomorrow, okay?”

Akane felt her heartstrings tug ever so faintly as Kouichi, who somehow knew much more than he should, tried for a smile. He was always so caring with Mayu.


“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said confidently before bowing to Akane.

Akane guided her daughter, surrounded by an impenetrable fog, out the door. The drive home was silent. Night had fallen around them without preamble. Akane didn’t know if it was the chill of loss or of the night that was seeping into her, neither did she care.

They parked, Akane opened the back door and gathered up her tiny daughter in her arms. Mayu was limp, barely a shell of the usual bouncing ball of energy she was known to be.

The apartment was silent, as though the air was grieving with them. Akane walked in, Mayu in her arms, made her way to the couch.

Once settled on the soft seats, Akane shifted, opening her arms to adjust Mayu on her lap. Mayu fit easily against her chest. Finally, the tiny girl began to cry again, and Akane had to fight against her own tears. She could have them later, when it wouldn’t upset Mayu.

“When is daddy coming home?” Mayu managed through grit teeth, sniffles abounding.

Akane didn’t know how to tell Mayu that daddy was never coming home, not like it was before. The doctors had told her to be optimistic, that the hue spike could be reversed, but she wasn’t stupid. His Crime Coefficient had been climbing for weeks, and with everything that had just happened, the likelihood of it coming back under regulation value was so slight she didn’t even want to hope.

But telling Mayu would make it real.

“I don’t know, sweetheart.”

It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the truth, and Akane hated lying to her daughter. But Mayu had been through so much for one day. She needed to get in to see a therapist as soon as possible.
Akane couldn’t lose Mayu, too.

Against her usually curious nature, Mayu simply nodded, asked no more questions. As relieved as she was to not have to say any more, Akane was saddened by her daughter’s dampened spirits.

They stayed quiet and silent like that for a while, Mayu sitting much more still than a nine-year-old ever should. Eventually Akane felt Mayu’s breath grow hot against her skin, tiny snores radiating from her exhausted little body. As gently as possible, Akane lifted her up and carried her to her room. As she laid Mayu down, covering her in her blankets, the little girl stirred. Green eyes squinted open, and her tiny voice came through.

“Mommy, where’s Fuzzyboots?”

For all the sadness, Akane allowed herself a small smile at her daughter.

“I’ll go find Fuzzyboots for you. Close your eyes and I’ll bring her to you.”

Mayu nodded, pulled the blanket up, but as Akane walked out to find the kitten, she saw, in her periphery, Mayu pooling a little space in the blanket next to her face, for her warm, fuzzy friend.

+++ 

Mayu felt soft warmth curl into her neck.

“Hi, kitten,” she murmured, let sleep overtake her. Hoped when she woke in the morning, daddy would make her breakfast.

That it would all be a nightmare, something she could wake up from.
Redefining Freedom

Chapter Summary

The Ginoza-Tsunemori family is reunited, for better or for worse.

Chapter Notes

I know it's still sad, but it's a lot happier, okay?? This chapter is mostly Akane POV. The line about Mayu calling Ginoza the world's coolest enforcer comes from an art piece done by tumblr user lifeinredshades. The KouMayu (Kouichi x Mayu) banter continues to grow, because I'm trash and I ship my own OCs really hard. Thanks to everyone who supports Mayu and brings her to life! I owe everyone a ton of thanks. She's really special. Of course, the most thanks goes to Tsukino Keiichi, my dearest daughter.

“Akane, you can’t bring her here. She can’t see me like this.”

“I can, and I will.” Akane’s voice was hard, despite Ginoza’s pleading, fearful eyes.

They had been arguing about this since Ginoza had been stabilized. Mayu had far too many questions, and Akane had tried to answer them as much as she could. But she didn’t want to do the talking for Ginoza. She wouldn’t let him disappear, she wouldn’t speak for him, because that would be too easy, and before they knew it, he would slip away from them. She wasn’t about to let that happen.

He had been at the facility for just over a week. His Crime Coefficient had gone down, slightly. He was no longer in any danger of permanent institutionalization. Chief Kasei had already cleared him to return as an enforcer when he was ready.

He was still fighting it. Lying to himself, and Akane hated it.

“Akane, listen-”

“No. You listen to me, Ginoza Nobuchika.”

Behind the glass, her husband’s eyes widened, his mouth closed. He was listening.

“I know that this is hard. I know that you’re worried that you’ve become your father. But you know what happened with your dad? Bless his heart, may he rest in peace, but when he left, he really left. You don’t have to do that to Mayu. We can still be a family.”

“What if I can get better? What if I don’t have to stay here?”

Akane let her eyes fall to the ground. She cleared the rising lump from her throat, blinked the tears away, crossing her arms over her chest. Finally, after a long moment of uncomfortable silence, she looked back up at him. Told him the truth. She couldn’t let him lie to himself anymore.
“You and I both know that isn’t even worth hoping for.”

He started blinking more quickly, and she let actual tears fall, placed her palm against the glass. He didn’t reach up to meet it.

“I miss you,” he whispered, broken, honest. It broke her heart, that her partner was being kept from her.

“I miss you, too,” her voice cracked. “But so does Mayu. I’m bringing her tomorrow morning. You owe it to her to see her. She thinks you don’t want to see her. Do you want her to go on thinking that?”

Ginoza shook his head, looked away from her.

“Of course not.”

“Gino, look at me.”

He shook his head again.

“Nobuchika.”

He looked up at her, slowly, through his bangs, overgrown, they needed to be cut, his eyes were sunken, he looked so helpless, his remaining arm hanging, useless.

“I love you.”

He coughed to disguise a sob, but the tears were unmistakeable.

“I love you, too.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

+++ Mayu knew Kouichi was trying to help. She appreciated it, the way he tried to pretend that nothing was wrong, that both their dads were simply on vacation. But she couldn’t take it anymore.

She wondered at how easily something new, something sad, can become normal.

When daddy used to bring her home, Kouichi was walking with her. She loved having Kouichi there. No one else could understand like he did. But she missed the walks with daddy, the homemade snacks.

She and Kouichi sat in their living room, waiting for Akane to come home. Ms. Tendo was out of town with her boyfriend, and Kouichi had been deposited at the Ginoza-Tsunemori household for the last few days.

Mayu thought it was rather unkind of Ms. Tendo to leave her son when his dad had just disappeared, when something terrible had happened. Ms. Tendo didn’t seem to care for Kouichi’s dad very much anymore, but at least she could have stayed to help Kouichi understand why his dad had left. Mayu herself certainly didn’t know. Oh well, it didn’t matter. Mommy had done a good job taking care of both Mayu and Kouichi. It wasn’t fair, Mayu knew, that mommy had to take care of everyone, without even daddy to rub her shoulders when she was tired or to cook dinner.

Drone-made food was not nearly as good as daddy’s food, but it was also better than mommy’s.
After all, mommy couldn’t be good at absolutely everything.

“I bet anytime now my dad’s gonna call. Maybe it’s all a big joke.”

“KouKou-chan, stop it.”

“Or at least he’ll call explaining where he went. And he’ll have some way to get your dad feeling back to normal. I mean, except for the whole arm thing. If the surgeons at the facility couldn’t do it, I mean-”

“Kouichi, shut up!”

Mayu didn’t mean to yell.

Her mop-headed friend’s bright blue eyes cast themselves down towards the ground.

“I’m sorry, Mayu.”

Her heart sank. Kouichi was the one person who was able to be there for her whenever she needed. Mommy had to work, and she couldn’t talk to daddy. She didn’t mean to make him feel bad, to isolate him like that.

“I didn’t mean that, KouKou-chan.”

“I know,” he looked back up at her, with strange softness, for a boy, especially one so young. “I guess I just keep wishing everything will go back to normal, even though I know it won’t.”

“Do you think my daddy is ever going to come home?”

This was not the first time Mayu had asked him. At first she had wanted him to lie to her, to tell her what she wanted to hear.

“They told me that my dad would come home eventually,” he said, not for the first time. “And you know, he never really did. My mom hates him now.”

He looked at her sharply. “I don’t think that will happen to your mom though!” He spoke quickly.

She smiled. “I know. Your mommy isn’t a bad person for that, though.”

“No. My dad is kind of a moron.”

“Like father, like son, isn’t that a thing they say?” Mayu poked him.

“Hey!”

The banter, the small smiles, though they were only distractions, they felt good.

“Anyway, you should help me with maths until mommy gets home.”

“Only if you let me copy your Kanji homework!”

“Not copy, KouKou-chan. I will help you. You need to learn. I know that might be hard for you, being a moron. But we will get through it together. I will help you, despite your stupidity.”

“Wow,” he muttered. “No rest for the weary.”

“I’m only teasing,” she reached up and ruffled his hair, the way mommy sometimes did. “...sort of.”
“Daddy!”

She pounded her fist on the glass, a real smile splitting her face for the first time in longer than Akane wanted to think about. Not just Mayu, but Ginoza had a smile, too, strained, overwhelmed, yes, but real all the same.

“Hey, sweetie,” he put his hand up to meet hers against the glass.

“Have you been a good girl for mommy?”

Mayu nodded, looked to meet Akane’s eyes, who inclined her head in affirmation.

“Well, that’s great, sweetie.”

“Daddy, does it hurt?” She motioned towards his shoulder.

“Oh, no, sweetie, it doesn’t hurt.” His voice was tight. “I can’t do as many things, but they’re going to get me fixed up with a new arm, one that’s real strong and tough. That way I can protect you and your mom like I always do.”

“Are you gonna be an enforcer like Kouichi’s dad?”

There was a pause, shorter than Akane would have thought, before Ginoza answered unhesitatingly.

“Yeah. An enforcer, like Kouichi’s dad.”

He flicked his eyes up to meet Akane’s briefly, and she saw them glossy, misted over. It was the first time he had admitted it out loud, agreed to it. It hurt, the reality of it. That he would have a metal band forever connected to his wrist. That she would log him in and out of the tower, their home, record the details of their visits.

Their nights together, outings to the park, picnics, all of it would have to be recorded. It’s not that she hadn’t known Sibyl was watching before, but it seemed so much more sterile, so much crueler now.

Maybe she had been too idealistic, thinking they could be safe in this world. Maybe she had been wrong.

“...and Kouichi’s mommy left him all alone, isn’t that mean?”

“That’s terrible!”

Ginoza and Mayu were conversing easily. Akane only wished they could be closer, that this glass wasn’t separating them like an invisible ocean, so cold and unfeeling, unsympathetic.

“But I bet you’ve been a good friend to Kouichi, right?”

“And he’s been the best friend to me!”

With a wry smile, Akane observed Ginoza flinch. He still couldn’t face the fact that Mayu was best friends with a boy. This was going to get so much worse, she knew. She had a feeling Mayu and Kouichi were destined for a life of closeness. Not romance, necessarily, but still, they were bound together now. If they weren’t before, their loss of their fathers, in different ways, would bind them together. The cheating ways of the system would wrap them up together.
“How about school?” Ginoza asked her.

“They let us take the beginning of the week off,” Mayu said seriously. She was always so serious. “But now we’re back, because of Kouichi’s kanji, mostly. Moron.”

“Mayu,” Akane intervened. “You shouldn’t say such things. Especially not about your best friend.”

“But he is a moron. He says it’s because of Kougami-san. He says he gets it from his dad.”

Ginoza stifled a laugh. Akane’s heart warmed, to see the lines in her husband’s forehead ease, if only for a few moments.

“Daddy, can I have a hug?”

“I don’t know. Maybe if you ask the doctor.”

“Yes! I want a hug. Call the doctor in, right away!” Mayu stood up on the chair, making her as tall as Akane.

“If you sit back down in the chair, sweetheart, I will.”

“Fine.” She plopped back down, crossed her arms over her chest.

Akane flicked her wrist, punched a button on her communicator, and a voice answered her almost immediately.

“This is the facility floor two doctor, how can I help you?”

“Yes, I would like you to let us into cell block C.”

Cell block. It sounded so final, so much like an execution date, or a branding mark. Even if it was temporary, even if he could come back as an enforcer, there was no denying the permanency of latent criminality.

“I’m afraid that requires high level clearance.”

“I am acting unit chief of Division One of the MWPSB. I assure you I have the necessary security clearances. Please come immediately to cell block C.”

“O-of course, inspector,” the doctor stammered from the other line.

Akane had been promoted, provisionally, at first, but once it became clear that Ginoza wouldn’t recover, she had been promoted permanently. She hadn’t pulled it out at the facility yet, since Ginoza hadn’t seemed ready to let her touch him. It hurt, in a small way, that Mayu was the one to bring that out of him, but it seemed only natural. They shared such a strong bond.

The doctor hurried in moments later, and she showed her ID card to him. He hurriedly unlocked the door, and Mayu all but ran in.

“P-please be careful,” Akane heard the doctor eke out the words as she and Mayu entered Ginoza’s room, white and harsh and not at all therapeutic like they promised.

“DADDY!” Mayu screamed as she opened her arms wide.

Ginoza slipped from his chair and knelt to the ground. He seemed to be adjusting to the imbalance of only one arm somewhat well, although the prosthetic was sure to be an entire battle of its own. But
for now, Akane watched, as Mayu embraced Ginoza around the waist, as Ginoza pressed a kiss to his daughter’s forehead.

They stood, a quiet family, knit together by a kind of suffering that was impossible to explain. Chains in plain sight. Prisoners by association. Whatever you wanted to call it, they were all now a part of the same surveillance, the same sick game of cat and mouse, hostages in the name of justice.

But they were together. In a few weeks, Ginoza would be reinstated in the MWPSB. He could eat dinner with them. Akane enjoyed the thought of his glaring at Kouichi, his careful preparation of food for them. Even in their prison, they had freedom to be a family, to experience joy, to mourn their dead.

They would survive. They would take it minute by minute. In truth, it’s all they had ever done.

Mayu laughed, and Akane found solace in it. Somehow, as she always managed to do, found hope for tomorrow.

When they turned to leave, Mayu ran back for one last hug, whispered something quiet in Ginoza’s ear. He kissed the top of her head and bid her run along, to follow her mother.

Safely in the car, Akane asked, “What was the little secret you and daddy shared back there?”

“I told daddy he’s going to be the world’s coolest and best enforcer.”

Akane let herself laugh, for the first time since all of their lives had gone to hell.

“Yes. He is going to be.”
The knock resounded loudly, dinging, metallic and harsh under Mayu’s tiny hand. Still, she loved knocking, felt hope and joy swell in her chest as she heard her dad walk up his stairs on the other side of the wall.

The door opened with a swish. “Hey, sweetie.” Green eyes, so much like her own, she noticed when they looked in the mirrors together to do their hair, greeted her. For all her youth and naivety, she noticed the way they were glossier than before, the way his shoulders strung themselves as though on a tightrope, like those gymnasts Mayu saw on TV.

“You know mommy can let you in herself, right?”

She nodded at her dad. “I like knocking. It makes me feel important.”

Ginoza chuckled, soft but not too loud. A few months earlier, the laugh would have echoed off the walls of their warm apartment. Now, even against the metal walls of the enforcer quarters, so much like a cage, it was muted, as though he meant it to be background noise. She pretended not to notice this, too.

“You are important, sweetheart.”

She shut her eyes, smiled brightly. “I want to come in.”

“Of course, anything for the boss,” he winked, as she opened her eyes and playfully stuck out her tongue, and she believed for a moment that everything was well and fine with the world.

She walked down the steps to stand at the sofa, then put her backpack down and proclaimed loudly:

“I brought you a present!”

“Is that so?”

Ginoza’s eyes flicked around the room, shimmering with an amusement that made Mayu feel safe, even in this strange, prison-like room, which reminded her of the terrible building they had kept her daddy in for so long. This was better, she knew, but it wasn’t freedom. His metal arm, cold as it was, had the additional burden of a tracking device. It looked like a clock, or a communicator: what a joke. The only time it kept was the endless confinement, the only communication it gave was for requests for freedom, small, abridged, not anything like what it should be.
“Yes!” She knelt down and started ruffling through her pink backpack, the one she had gotten for the start of school this year, a big occasion. Out of her folder she pulled a picture.

It was a drawing. A pictures of the NONA tower, with what looked like Akane, Ginoza, and Mayu standing next to it. The proportions were silly: the stick figures were far too big to be to scale.

“See, Daddy? This is you and me and mommy together, like work is our new home.”

Daddy made a strange sound with his throat, and Mayu worried suddenly that she had done something terribly wrong.

“Daddy? What’s wrong?”

He smiled at her, eyes glistening, like mommy’s had been doing more often lately.

“Did I make you sad?” Her heart sank.

Ginoza knelt on the ground in front of her and pulled her into his arms. His hugs were not as strong as they used to be, because of his new arm, her parents had explained. Until he got more used to it, he needed to be careful so he didn’t hurt her.

But Mayu felt all of the love her dad had had for her in this hug.

“You didn’t make me sad at all, Mayu. You made me very happy.”

“You didn’t look at the whole picture, though!” Mayu pulled back, stuck the picture back out in front of daddy’s face. He didn’t wear his glasses, anymore. Mayu was afraid to ask him why. Did they fix his eyes at the big scary prison-looking building?

“It’s Dime and Fuzzyboots, too!”

Sure enough, next to the stick figure Akane, Ginoza, and Mayu, were two unmistakable blobs: one orange and one grey-brown, with ears and tails.

“It’s not a family without them, is it?” Ginoza said, eyes less glassy, smile more sincere. Mayu hugged him tightly, let the picture fall to the ground without worrying.

“I liked my present. Thank you, Mayu.”

+++ The pan crashed loudly against the wall, food splattering everywhere, hot flecks of something burning Kouichi’s face. Kouichi bristled, arched his back, tried to make himself look bigger.

“Kouichi, listen to him,” his mother screeched.

“Why are you on his side?” Kouichi demanded, looking away from the man in front of him as he searched his mother’s face for an answer. He couldn’t understand. Why she hated Kouichi’s dad, sure, he could understand that. But this?

“You need to learn to respect authority, Kouichi,” she crossed her arms over her chest. “That report from your teacher didn’t look good, either.”

“I’ll respect authority once it’s deserving of my respect,” he spat, turning his attention back to the harsh eyes in front of him. His mother’s boyfriend, Rin Masaru, backed Kouichi towards the wall, imposing, obviously trying to make Kouichi feel small and helpless. If there was one thing Kouichi
wasn’t going to stand, it was that.

“Kouichi-kun,” Masaru said Kouichi’s name maliciously, “you heard your mother.”

“Yes, I heard her, Rin-san.”

“Then you should listen to what I say and clean that goddamn mess up.”

“You threw it,” Kouichi didn’t back down. The pan Masaru threw contained what Kouichi had attempted to make for dinner in it. “Why should I clean it up?”

The night had started out decently. His mom had been exhausted from work and Masaru, true to typical form, had moaned and whined about having to cook. Kouichi was trying to help his mother, wanted to be kind for her. Since Kougami had left, Kouichi was spending more afternoons at home. Not that he cared much for it either, but it was just the way it was. He tried to stay with Mayu, but it was no substitute for being with another parent.

“You made the mistake of making something awful,” Masaru hissed. He had been very dissatisfied with Kouichi’s attempt at dinner. Kouichi had to admit that it was terrible, but who could blame him for trying? He was only nine.

“You should have left it to the automated system.”

“I hate eating the automated food,” Kouichi replied stiffly.

“I hate eating something that a useless brat calls an excuse for a real meal,” Masaru reached out and pushed Kouichi roughly against the wall with both hands.

“Masaru!” Kouichi’s mom squealed, “What are you doing?”

“Do you think your son is just going to learn to respect authority with that attitude? Someone has to knock some sense into him.” As if to emphasize the point, Masaru pushed Kouichi against the wall again. His head hit it, hard. His shoulders ached as Masaru kept them anchored against the wall.

“Now, you’re going to punch something in to the automated system and bring it to the living room when it’s done, like a good little boy, isn’t that right, Kouichi-kun?” Masaru didn’t release his hold on Kouichi against the wall, but smiled sardonically.

“You’re not my father. You don’t tell me what to do.”

Masaru lifted him off the wall just to bang him against it again. “What was that?”

“Masaru! Stop it!”

“I’m just trying to help your son’s behavior improve,” Masaru finally let go of Kouichi’s shoulders, before stomping back to the living room, hitting the doorframe on the way out of the kitchen. “You could try being grateful. He’s gonna turn out better because of me,” he called back.

Kouichi looked towards his mother with wide, pleading eyes.

She ran to him and embraced him, whispering that she was sorry. Kouichi stood limply in her arms, didn’t cry. He knew she was sincere, but knew that she wouldn’t ever stop Masaru. With Kougami gone, she had a very small income, and she couldn’t sustain both of them on it. As much as she hated her ex-husband, he had been faithful in sending most of his paycheck to her every month, reserving for himself only what he needed to buy cigarettes and food to cook for Kouichi.
“I’ll take care of dinner, okay?” She pulled back from him, eyes glassy with tears, ruffling his hair.

“Geez, mom,” Kouichi used the same voice he did whenever Mayu cried, “I’m okay.”

“I know you are,” she whispered. “I just wish…”

She looked wistfully at an empty spot on the wall behind him, and Kouichi tried not to be angry.

“I’ll do it, mom,” he pushed himself out of her arms and wandered slowly to the wall, where he punched in an order to the automated system for dinner.

Masaru was right, Kouichi thought. He should have just left it to the system. His mother wouldn’t be crying this way. Ginoza-san wouldn’t give him that prying look, lingering on his arms where slight darkness whispered hints of the bruises. Mayu’s dad knew what darkness looked like, Kouichi was sure of that.

He didn’t need Ginoza-san, who had been through so much in the last few months, worrying about him. Kouichi could handle Masaru.

It only took a few minutes for the drone-made food to ready itself, and Kouichi made quick work of dishing it out and taking it to the living room. He sat it in front of Masaru, who barely looked at Kouichi before shrugging dissatisfiedly.

“Sure took you long enough,” Masaru managed.

“Kouichi,” his mother called for him as he headed back to the kitchen, where he had left a small bowl of drone-made curry for himself. “Are you going to eat with us?”

Kouichi didn’t blame her, really, for wanting him to try, for desiring the kind of family she had wanted with Kouichi’s dad, the kind of family a woman like her deserved. As he hated the curry he ate in the kitchen, sitting with feet splayed out on the kitchen floor, he felt sorry for his mother, told himself he shouldn’t feel sorry for himself. At least he was warm, with food. He almost smiled when he realized that Mayu was probably eating drone-made food as well. He and Mayu both had such good cooks for fathers. Until now.

Even something as simple as dinner mocked them, in their loss.

Kouichi was too young to know that he was too young to know all of this. After all, Mayu’s dad was a prisoner, and Kouichi’s dad was a fugitive, if he wasn’t dead already.

When your father is a criminal, you learn to treat the world as if it’s about to imprison you.

Because most of the time, it is.
Chapter Summary

Things haven't been looking up for Kouichi. What is the Ginoza-Tsunemori clan to do?

Chapter Notes

The poor son. He'll be saved soon, I promise. Everyone is worried for him.

“Kouichi, your arm looks funny again.”

Kouichi flinched at her statement and immediately pulled the sleeves of his uniform down further, despite knowing it wouldn’t work. This had been going on for a few months, now. Ever since his dad had left, and Rin had moved into his mom’s house. It was difficult, to hide it from Mayu. Besides, Kouichi knew he wasn’t really hiding anything.

He looked away from her, head down, said nothing.

“KouKou-chan, can I look at it?” He felt her tug at the sleeve and wrenched his arm away from her.

“Just leave it, okay?” He snapped, blue eyes sharp as he looked up at her. Mayu stepped back and frowned, tiny tears pricking at the corners of her eyes.

“Ah, I’m sorry,” guilt pooled into his chest at the hurt on her face. He made to stand up, to give some real apology, but Mayu waved her hands.

“It’s okay,” the tears were gone as quickly as they had come, but the frown remained. “Did you run into another wall, KouKou-chan?”

“S-something like that,” he mumbled into his lunch as he turned back to it. It was something supplied by Mayu, undoubtedly made by Ginoza-san. Kouichi hated it, how he couldn’t take care of himself. Even something as simple as his lunch had to be made by his best friend’s dad.

“You know, you never run into walls at school or at my house or daddy’s apartment, KouKou-chan.”

He looked at her once more, guilt eating him from the inside out. She was so worried - he hated it. But what could he do? His mom needed that awful boyfriend, and it’s not like anything was too horrible. He just got yelled at and slapped around once in a while. He had dealt with bullies at school - this wasn’t any different, was it?

Sure, the bully was a full-grown adult man who was supposed to be something of a father figure, but, as Kouichi thought more about it, father figures were just a myth in the end.

His dad’s abandonment had sure proved that.
“How about the Kanji homework?”

She sighed, and caved. “Did you even try?”

He couldn’t ease the guilt in his stomach, and he suddenly wasn’t hungry anymore. He ate anyway, though, for Mayu. He was already lying to her - he couldn’t refuse her generosity, too. Kouichi was grateful that she didn’t push the matter more.

“Of course I did! You’re just so much smarter than I am that I would be totally lost without you. I need you to check it for me!”

She rolled her eyes and poked his cheek. “Whatever, KouKou-chan.”

Kouichi smiled for her, because he knew it was what she needed. He needed it to; he needed everything to be okay.

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A rare night off for both Ginoza and Akane afforded them some time at home.

Kouichi had been over for dinner, but Ms. Tendo had picked him up later in the evening, with a tired but kind smile.

Ginoza tried not to let his smile slip as Ms. Tendo thanked them for taking such good care of her son. If Ginoza wasn’t mistaken, he knew what he was seeing from the bruises ghosting up the sides of Kouichi’s arms, the sleeves worn inappropriately in warm weather, the black and blue still peeking out on his wrists. Ms. Tendo herself wasn’t doing a very good job taking care of her son.

“It was nice to see you again,” Akane was much more genuine in her smile. “Feel free to bring Kouichi over anytime!”

Ginoza caught Kouichi’s eye fleetingly before the door shut behind them. He didn’t like the subtle fear building behind those eyes, so bright and blue like his father’s. It hadn’t escaped Ginoza that Kouichi spoke more quietly lately, less quick to be his playful self. The untrained eye might attribute this to Kougami’s disappearance, but Ginoza knew that Kouichi had buried that by now.

Mayu pranced off to bed without much complaint, although she had asked for extra story time, from both mommy and daddy. The tiny family had shared almost a full hour of reading before Akane sighed with finality.

“It’s Mayu sleepytime.”

She didn’t even whine, only snuggled into the covers, her quickly-growing kitten nestled into her side on top of the pink comforter.

Ginoza kissed her forehead gently before standing up. “I love you, sweetie,” he whispered to her.

“Mmmmm you too, daddy,” she mumbled.

Ginoza locked eyes with his wife, beautiful even in the dimmed light of their daughter’s bedroom.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” Akane finished before the parents left the room, closing the door quietly behind them.

Ginoza prepared tea, just like he used to do every night. They didn’t get to do this every night anymore. They were lucky if they got to practice their nightly routine even once a week. Even filling
the cups with hot water was a reminder of his failure. The walls of his enforcer quarters, Dime’s restlessness, Mayu’s subtle hints at the weather when she visited since she knew Ginoza couldn’t see it himself - all of it was a reminder of how he had failed his family.

Steaming cups in hand, Ginoza and Akane nestled themselves into the living room couch, a blanket shared across their laps. Dime breathed softly against Ginoza’s feet.

“I’m worried about Kouichi,” Ginoza said after a long silence.

He felt Akane’s exhale as her body deflated a tiny bit.

“You’ve noticed too, haven’t you?” He asked when she didn’t respond.

“It would be hard not to,” she replied, voice heavy and tired. “MAYU has too.”

“Has she asked about it?” It hurt Ginoza how he didn’t know that Mayu was worried. When they had lived together, seen each other every day, been - he swallowed - a real family, a luxury his carelessness had lost them, she wouldn’t have hesitated to share her concerns with him.

“No,” Akane paused, “but she is gentler around him. Doesn’t tease him as much as she used to. It doesn’t feel right.”

“God, what kind of world do we live in where nine year-olds can’t be children?” Ginoza couldn’t stop the statement soon enough.

Another small movement against him told him Akane had sighed again.

“I’m sorry. That kind of thing is why we aren’t a real family anymore,” he said with resignation.

Akane snapped up from leaning against him, found his eyes, her own sharp and harsh.

“We are a real family,” she said, voice low.

He closed his eyes, felt his heart sink. This was their only real area of contention, other than Akane’s recklessness in the field, which had diminished significantly with her transition to motherhood.

“I-I know,” he mumbled, staring down at the tea, following the curls of steam that rose lazily with his eyes. “I just wish things were different.”

Akane sank back against him. “If wishes were fishes...”

“... there would be no ocean,” he finished for her. “I hear there’s hardly an ocean anyway. Apparently the world outside Japan has destroyed it.”

Akane reached a hand up from her mug to massage her temples. “That’s beside the point.”

Ginoza allowed himself a very, very small smile. “You’re right.”

“So what are we going to do about Kouichi?”

“It’s hard, because neither Kouichi nor Ms. Tendo seem interested in talking about what’s going on.”

“You would think that whatever his name is’s Crime Coefficient would be through the roof by now.”

Akane hummed thoughtfully. “It’s strange the things that they let slip.”
“They?” Ginoza mused.

“Ah,” Akane backtracked quickly, an odd high tone in her voice, one that came when she lied. “The processes of the system.”

Ginoza could tell something wasn’t right, but it didn’t seem like the right moment for it, so he let it go.

“Kouichi can’t take this much stress so early in his life,” he said. “I mean, the Kougami family isn’t famous for its pure hue, that’s for sure.”

“Gino,” Akane said with a vague chastising in her tone.

“What?” Ginoza felt irritation - directed at his former best friend, not Akane - flaring up inside him. “We all know it’s true. Kouichi shouldn’t be a self-fulfilling prophecy like his father. It isn’t fair to the poor kid.”

Akane looked at him with soft eyes. “I thought you were the one ever on guard against him?”

Ginoza gaped at her. “W-well, that’s just b-because of Mayu.”

“Uh huh.”

Ginoza fumbled for a few more seconds before closing his mouth entirely.

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Mayu tried to fall asleep, she really did. But as she lay nestled into her blankets, Fuzzyboots wasn’t purring as usual. She peeked up from her pillow to meet her feline companion’s eyes, which were open unusually wide.

“Can’t sleep either, huh?”

Fuzzyboots yawned and brushed her head against Mayu’s nose. “Ah!” Mayu snorted. “That tickles!”

It wasn’t that she got out of bed often. She just seemed to have a knack for knowing when the right time was. Mommy and daddy probably would have considered it the wrong time, but she needed to know what was going on.

“Allright, but we gotta be really quiet, okay?” She whispered at her orange companion, who licked Mayu’s cheek as if in assent.

With extreme caution, Mayu pulled the blankets off of her and slipped off of the bed. Opening the door took a full minute, as she opened it meticulously millimeter by millimeter, careful to make sure not a single creak echoed from the hinges. Once the door was open, she crawled along the hallway wall, Fuzzyboots padding along silently with her, to take her place at the edge of the hallway, where if she was quiet, she could make out the parental conversation taking place on the couch.

“Do you think there’s any way to get him out of their house?”

“If Kouichi will admit to what’s going on, maybe,” she heard her mom answer. “I’m just worried about his Crime Coefficient. Ms. Tendo’s can’t be good, either.”

Mayu did not like the sound of that at all. She worried for KouKou-chan's number. She had always heard things about “inheriting a predisposition to criminal latency” (was that way to say that? The
words were so big and clunky.), which basically meant if one of your parents had a bad hue, you were in a bad spot. Not only was she worried for Kouichi, but Ms. Tendo, even if she was not defending Kouichi well, wasn't a bad woman. She was very sad and probably very lonely, Mayu knew.

She heard a deep sigh from daddy and refocused on the conversation.

“If anything, the person whose hue should be deteriorating should be that pathetic excuse of a man.”

“Shh, Gino, Mayu’s sleeping.”

“Sorry.”

They quieted. Mayu held her breath as quietly as she could, but felt tears pricking at her eyes as she thought of how sad Kouichi must be. A sniffle escaped her and she clamped a hand over her mouth.

A familiar squeak came as someone stood up from the couch. Daddy was probably just getting mommy more tea. As long as she stayed tucked in her place in the hallway...

“Hi sweetie.”

Mayu jumped as Daddy’s face appeared in the hallway.

“I just, um, I j-just...”

“It’s okay,” her mom’s eyes were soft and comforting as she poked her head out behind daddy’s. Mayu felt at ease, even for how startled she was. “You’re not in trouble. Why don’t you come and sit with us?”

“You’re worried about KouKou-chan, right?”

Mayu nodded. She felt warm tears fill her eyes, although she didn’t know why.

Dad ran his fingers through her hair, she looked at him despairingly. Why did she feel so empty? It was the kind of feeling like when Kagari-kun had died, but KouKou-chan wasn’t in danger. At least not the kind of danger Kagari-kun had been in, yet the hole in her heart remained.

She sniffled.

“Rin-san is a bad man,” she said finally.

Her mom nodded. “Yes he is.”

“Why won’t Ms. Tendo stop him from hurting KouKou-chan?” Her voice cracked, hot tears spilling down her cheeks.

Mom stood up to walk to the kitchen where she retrieved some tissues.

“Ms. Tendo doesn’t have very much money, Mayu. Rin-san takes care of that.”

“Rin-san doesn’t take care of her or KouKou-chan!” Mayu said defiantly, angry despite the tears.

“No, he doesn’t,” mom sighed, tired. Mom was always tired lately.

“What about Ms. Tendo’s hue?” Mayu asked. Surely if they were worried about Kouichi’s, Ms. Tendo’s couldn’t be in good shape either.
Her parents locked eyes over her head, and she wasn’t sure if it was good or bad.

“Ms. Tendo probably needs a hue examination, don’t you think, honey?”

Mayu wasn’t sure what mommy meant by that when she asked daddy, but if it meant getting Kouichi further away from Rin-san, that was all that mattered to her.
Escape And Rescue Mean The Same Thing

Chapter Summary

“And we decided that you’re going to live here with us.”

Of all the things Kouichi might have expected, this certainly was not it. His jaw dropped.

“I, you, what?” His brain struggled to understand what was happening.

Chapter Notes

///slides in after not updating since March///

heyyyyy friends! i still exist, and so does Mayu! i love her, and i love Kouichi, and Kouichi needed rescuing. this chapter (as many of them are) is dedicated to my dearest daughter, k1. if you decide to read this after all my months off, blessings on you and your loved ones, because holy shit, that was a long time between chapters. This chapter alternates between four different POVs, which idk i was feeling it so that's what yall are getting

Lunchtime at school seemed to have fallen back into Kouichi and Mayu’s normal routine. They ate bento boxes made by Ginoza. They were as good and thoughtfully made as ever. Sometimes Mayu pretended that things had always been this way, that Kagari and grandpa would still be waiting for her at the PSB building, Kougami-san waiting for Kouichi. Of course, this was not true. None of them were waiting. They had been lost, forever. Even Kougami-san, who hopefully still walked this earth, was lost to Kouichi and Mayu.

“My mom got some weird message saying she needs to get a hue evaluation,” Kouichi said, interrupting Mayu’s thoughts. He looked like he was trying to appear bored as he said this.

Mayu didn’t know what she was supposed to do. Since she and her parents had talked together on the couch, she knew that they were making preparations to try and get Kouichi away from his home, where his mother and boyfriend lived.

She had not divulged this to Kouichi, fearing that he would do something reckless like run away. Mayu felt like they were both hiding things from each other, and doing a terrible job of it. Kouichi knew something was off with Mayu, while Mayu saw the edges of Kouichi’s bruises hidden under his sleeves. Secrets hidden in plain sight.

“Are you worried about it, KouKou-chan?” It was a stupid question. Of course he was worried.

“I mean, it’s better to catch these things earlier, right?” Kouichi held a neutral expression, but Mayu could see the darkness in his eyes.
“I think so,” she kicked her legs at the air. She tried to sound sincere. She knew that wasn’t what was happening. She consoled herself with the simple fact that Ms. Tendo wasn’t having hue problems, but mommy needed a pretense to bring her in to discuss Kouichi. It was probably wrong, since it was kind of a lie.

Lies were okay if it was for the right reason though, she thought. It was confusing, but that’s how she had worked it out for herself. Mayu wondered if mommy and daddy felt the same way. Taking care of the people you love is more important sometimes than the truth.

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“Are all the members of your household present?” Akane asked, voice level and calm.

Ms. Tendo sat in an uncomfortable PSB chair, a screen reading with all her recent hue data projected in front of Akane, who sat opposite her. Ms. Tendo was well-kept and appeared professional, but fidgeted and squirmed enough to make the appearance insincere.

“Well,” Ms. Tendo looked flustered, “it isn’t just Kouichi and I anymore, but we haven’t fully transitioned into a new household status, according to the city.”

Akane smiled pleasantly, no matter how frustrated she felt. She was practiced enough at this. “I understand, Ms. Tendo.” She paused. “Even if the other party present in your household can’t be here right now, it’s important that you give us his information.”

“Why is the PSB handling this?” Ms. Tendo changed the subject, perhaps not intentionally. Her eyes were wide, round with an ambiguous fear. Akane couldn’t blame her. She couldn’t say for sure, but she figured she would be scared, too. “I know the kind of things you guys deal with, and I assure you,” Ms. Tendo picked up some harshness in her voice, “this has nothing to do with any of you.”

Akane took a deep breath to prepare herself. “Ms. Tendo, I’m going to be honest with you. There is a reason that you’re here. I don’t imagine you will have to think very hard to understand what we’re talking about.”

Ms. Tendo’s shoulders stiffened. She said nothing.

“We have reason to believe that Rin Masaru, who recently began living in your house, may be abusing your son Kouichi.”

“Did you get that from my hue assessment or from your daughter, inspector?” Ms. Tendo snapped.

Akane felt her heart constrict, out of pity more than guilt. “That’s a reasonable question, Ms. Tendo. You’re right, I didn’t get this from your hue assessment. To be frank, some of it is from Mayu, who you know well, but we have questions from teachers at his school as well. The bruising is well hidden, but is still there-”

“Okay, okay,” Ms. Tendo’s voice was tight as she interrupted Akane. Few people interrupted Akane, but this did not faze her. “I get it.” Ms. Tendo’s harsh demeanor had softened. Though she looked like she was about to cry, no tears collected in her eyes. Akane wanted to tell her that it wasn’t healthy to keep all of that inside of her. Akane wanted a lot of things, none of which were possible.

“All I’m saying, Ms. Tendo,” Akane continued, “is that it’s time for you to make some decisions regarding Kouichi’s wellbeing.”

“I can’t leave Rin,” she whispered. “We won’t make it without him.”
Akane was soft as she replied. “Kouichi isn’t going to make it very far with him.”

Ms. Tendo covered her face with a hand. “Has his Crime Coefficient gone up?”

“It’s stable for now,” Akane spoke slowly, “but repeated exposure to an abusive environment can only have detrimental results for a child’s hue. Especially a child with abandonment issues and a familial history of criminal latency.” She emphasized ‘abusive’ and ‘latency,’ hoping to get Ms. Tendo to understand how dire the situation was, both for her and for Kouichi.

Ms. Tendo’s palms clenched and unclenched. To Akane’s trained eye, she could tell that they were clammy. Probably cold.

“We need to evaluate Rin Masaru,” Akane supplied when Ms. Tendo remained silent.

“You don’t have a legal precedent to do so,” Ms. Tendo said with a hollow voice. “He won’t come in unless you make him.”

Akane let a pause hang between them, waiting for Ms. Tendo to finish.

“I can’t have my income taken from me again. With Kouichi it’s too much.”

“About that,” Akane tried to choose her words carefully, weighing each one before it crossed her lips. “While I have serious doubts that the violence is limited to Kouichi, should you choose not to report abusive tendencies on Rin Masaru’s account, I - as a personal favor - am willing to offer you an alternative for taking care of Kouichi in your home, rather than going forward with the full-blown investigation that is normally carried out in these circumstances.”

“An alternative?” She looked shocked. “You’re not sending him away, are you?”

“Not at all, Ms. Tendo. In fact, I am offering that Kouichi be taken into guardianship of the Ginoza-Tsunemori household.”

Ms. Tendo blinked a few times. “You mean your house?”

“That’s right,” Akane said resolutely. “We will take care of everything. Expenses, logistics, schooling, scheduling, all of it. You would be allowed to visit whenever you like, of course, and Kouichi will be allowed to visit your home as long as I am present. Rin Masaru would not be allowed to accompany you on your visits, naturally.”

With a resigned expression, Ms. Tendo nodded her head. Akane knew the battle was over. She couldn’t really call it a victory, but at least it was done.

“I’m an awful mother.”

Akane smiled softly. “You’re doing the best you can.”

“How do you do it?” Ms. Tendo’s eyes were as hollow as her voice when she looked, positively helplessly, at Akane.

“I have Ginoza and Mayu, and that keeps me going.”

“But Kouichi isn’t enough to keep me going,” Ms. Tendo said without accusation or criticism, but true desperation.

“I want to help you,” Akane said, her own voice scratchy. This time, the tears did come to Ms. Tendo’s eyes. “You will still be his mother,” Akane continued, “and you will still be in his life. No
In a choked voice, Ms. Tendo asked, “What do I have to do to transfer his guardianship to you?” Tears streaked down her face, but Ms. Tendo made no sounds to indicate that she was crying. Like most of her suffering, it was done in silence.

“If you’ll allow me a couple of minutes, I’ll go find the necessary paperwork, and we can make the transfer of guardianship right here at the PSB.”

Akane stood up from her chair and walked quickly to Shion’s office. She wanted to make it as quick and smooth as possible.

It didn’t take long once the paperwork was printed. Next to Ms. Tendo’s signature, a single tear leaked onto the paperwork.

“I’m sorry,” she wiped at it, embarrassed.

“It’s no trouble, Ms. Tendo. Would you like me to see you out?”

“No, I can find my way.” Her expression was hollow as she gathered up her handbag and jacket. She moved methodically yet lacking purpose.

“Thank you,” she whispered without looking behind her.

“Of course,” Akane said to Ms. Tendo’s back. Her shoulders were shaking as she walked out of the PSB building. Akane couldn’t imagine how it must feel, to give up the only good thing you have. But Ms. Tendo wasn’t caring for Kouichi, and both of them knew it. This was, indeed, the only way.

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“He’s going to live,” Ginoza gaped, “with you? And Mayu? At the apartment?”

Akane beamed, ignoring Ginoza’s shock altogether. “Kougami Kouichi is now officially a resident of the Ginoza-Tsunemori household,” she held the paperwork up in front of him, waving it around like a medal. They sat on the couch in his enforcer quarters. As soon as she had left Ms. Tendo, Akane had rushed down to Ginoza’s apartment to share the good news. Mayu and Kouichi were both at school. Kouichi would be given the news when Akane went to pick the two of them up from school.

Ginoza knew he should count this as a victory, but he was too stunned to do anything except let his mouth hang open. The blood seemed to have drained entirely from his face.

“They’re nine,” Akane said in a chastising tone, as if reading his mind.

“What?!” Ginoza spluttered. “You don’t even know what I was going to say!”

“I am pretty sure I do,” Akane’s eyebrow was cocked in a knowing way. Ginoza was done for. “They’re nine. Get over it.”

“It’s not going to be easy once they become teenagers!”

“They have their own rooms,” Akane rolled her eyes, “and anyway that is years away. We can deal with that as it comes.”

“I find it’s best to be prepared for these things.”
“You know that? From your vast experience with children and teenagers and things of that sort?”

Ginoza crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes.”

“Well,” Akane sighed, “it’s too late now, so I guess you better start thinking of intervention plans for Mayu and Kouichi’s teenage years which aren’t happening for - last time I checked - another five years, at least.”

“One can never be too prepared, Akane,” Ginoza huffed. He couldn’t believe that she wasn’t taking this more seriously. She was right, they wouldn’t have to worry about it for a long time, but they would eventually have to worry about it. It’s not that Ginoza didn’t like Kouichi, he just wasn’t sure he wanted Kouichi living in the same place as Mayu for the rest of their childhoods and into adolescence and early adulthood.

“At any rate,” Ginoza said, willing to admit to the truth. Despite the obvious trepidation about Kouichi and Mayu existing within the same space, he couldn’t help but be glad the bruises he had seen on Kouichi’s arms were going to fade for good.

“I am glad that he’s out of there.” A weight had been lifted from Ginoza’s chest. This was one less anxiety for him, one less person to worry about losing. Sure, it was Kouichi, who he would be unendingly suspicious of until Mayu married someone else (surely she would find someone who wasn’t Kouichi), but Ginoza loved Kouichi.

“Me too,” Akane said. “I couldn’t stand one more day of listening to Kouichi lie about running into walls at home.”

Ginoza winced. He hadn’t actually heard Kouichi make up a story, but that was as lame as they come. He was only nine, after all. He shouldn’t have to lie, but it’s no wonder he was.

“How do you think he’s going to take it?”

“I think he will be really confused, understandably,” Akane said. Ginoza nodded. “But I think he’s glad to be getting away from Rin. I just hope he doesn’t think that it’s any slight against him.”

“Kougami would think of something like this as a defeat.”

“Kouichi has a little more sense than his father.”

“It would be hard to have less sense than his father,” Ginoza said darkly, but not without an edge of humor to it. It had been long enough now that Ginoza could joke about his best friend without being too derisive. He meant it, but with a certain fondness.

Ginoza wondered, though, how the afternoon was going to go, breaking the news to Kouichi. He knew that Kouichi would be grateful and relieved, but Kouichi tried very hard, especially lately, not to burden Akane or Mayu. Ginoza’s heart had grown softer toward the younger Kougami as he watched this transition, guilt plucking at him every time that he remembered this change had come over Kouichi after Ginoza’s demotion.

“I’ll do the talking,” Akane said gently, once again seeming to read his mind. “It’s not going to be easy, but he’ll be okay.” She put a hand on his arm, and the familiar touch soothed him.

He let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. She never failed to comfort him. Ginoza had long since come to the realization that he didn't deserve her, but that was okay. He knew he made her happy, even if he wasn't good enough for her.
"You're pretty amazing," he said.

Akane simply smiled at him, in her easy, natural, beautiful way.

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Kouichi trudged himself out of the school building next to Mayu, reluctance to go home aching deep within his bones.

Mayu had been strange in the last week or so; jumpy and nervous, not at all like her calm, collected self. He spared a thought to wonder why, a good distraction from his dread towards going back home to his mother and Rin.

Most days, Kouichi got to go home with Akane and (sometimes) Ginoza-san, accompanying Mayu home, eating either system-cooked food if Ginoza-san was absent, or a homecooked meal if Ginoza-san was home. Either way, it was a thousand times preferable to being home with his mother and Rin.

Today was one of those days with both of Mayu’s parents.

“Mommy! Daddy!” Mayu jumped and waved next to him, pleased to see them both. Kouichi let himself relax. He had a little more time to be free, today.

It wasn’t long before they were back at the house, the scent of fresh rice and miso soup permeating the air. It was comforting, if only for a few hours, that Kouichi could have moments like these. He could steal small pieces of happiness from Mayu’s family, even if he couldn’t truly have it for himself. He and Mayu sat in the living room, working their way through homework as the two parents cooked side by side in the kitchen. Kouichi couldn’t remember a time when his parents had acted that way. Certainly it wasn’t something that happened now, with Rin.

“KouKou-chan, that Kanji homework isn’t going to do itself,” Mayu tapped him with her pencil.

He scowled. “Well maybe I’m not going to do it, either.”

“I’m not doing your Kanji for you.”

“But Mayu-”

“Dinner!” Akane called from the kitchen.

Mayu shot Kouichi a glare before they stood up to get their food. Kouichi knew she didn’t mean it. She wasn’t actually mad.

Dinner at the Ginoza-Tsunemori house was always something Kouichi enjoyed. Real food, not drone-made, questions about their day, and a little bit of teasing were always parts of it. Kouichi liked even seeing Ginoza-san a little more relaxed.

“We need to tell you something, Kouichi,” Akane said as they made their way through dinner. “We’ll talk after dinner, okay?”

Kouichi felt his stomach twist. Suddenly, he didn’t feel like eating. He had no idea what Akane could possibly be talking about, but it didn’t sound good. His nine-year-old intuition could smell bad news from a mile away. Disappointment was the theme of his life, so of course it was what he expected.
“It’s nothing bad, Kouichi,” Akane added. Kouichi didn’t believe her. “So finish your food.”

Mayu elbowed him in the ribs. “Eat your food, KouKou-chan.”

“Ow!” He complained, but continued eating anyway. Mayu always knew how to make him feel a little bit better.

Even Mayu’s teasing wasn’t enough to stop Kouichi from being worried, though. As the four of them marched to the living room when dinner was over, each member of the family was now tense in their own way. The quiet pressure of the room was not lost on Kouichi. Mayu was looking down at the ground. He wanted to reach out and hold her hand, like he would if they were crossing the street, just as some extra protection.

After they were all settled in, Mayu and Kouichi tucked on the couch, close to each other but not touching. Ginoza and Akane in chairs across from them, Akane took a deep breath in. Kouichi braced himself.

“So, Kouichi, today your mother and I had a nice talk.”

Kouichi swallowed. His mom was a latent criminal, that’s what he expected Akane’s next words to be.

“And we decided that you’re going to live here with us.”

Of all the things Kouichi might have expected, this certainly was not it. His jaw dropped.

“I, you, what?” His brain struggled to understand what was happening.

“We know what’s been happening at home.”

Out of habit, Kouichi tugged at his sleeves, covering the bruises. Akane looked at him sadly.

“What about my mom?” He finally managed.

“Your mom does not have enough strength to take care of you right now. Does that make sense?”

Yes. It did. But Kouichi didn’t like it. He thought of himself as his mom’s protector.

“I don’t know,” he answered.

“You want to protect your mom, don’t you?”

He nodded in response.

Mayu spoke up. “KouKou-chan, I think it hurts your mom when you are hurt, so you are protecting her this way.”

Kouichi looked away from Akane to stare at Mayu. He couldn’t put his finger on how he felt. He felt pulled in many directions, like his heart was being torn between relief and despair. He knew Mayu was right, though. How many times had he seen the desperation in his mother’s eyes after Rin took out his anger on Kouichi?

“I’m going to live… here?” He said stupidly, even though that’s exactly what Akane had said.

“That’s right,” Akane answered.
He felt like he should say something in response, but no words would come out of his mouth.

After a long moment of silence, Mayu (of course) helped him to feel better:

“KouKou-chan, you really are a moron.”

He blinked, looking at her in surprise.

“You’re safe now,” she supplied when Kouichi didn’t reply.

Kouichi felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes. “Yeah,” he said quietly, “I guess I am.”

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