Eyes Wide Open All the Time

by Macbetha

Summary

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into," Haru says even as he can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The light is in Makoto's eyes. "I know you."

In which Haru is a former addict turned dealer, Makoto is a teacher fresh out of the army, and Sousuke is a cop who makes the mistake of helping a rentboy named Rin.

Notes

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thank you saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter) and pikamouse for the beta reading | tumblr

WARNINGS: This chapter contains graphic depictions of alcohol / drug abuse, child abuse / domestic violence, suicidal thoughts and attempted suicide. The drug use is not glamorized - this is a raw look at the reality they can bring.
EWOATT’s official song was written by the ever-lovely Ingrid Windsland, thank you so much! Listen Here

Hope you enjoy and thank you for taking a chance on this crazy idea.
He was born dead and that’s how they should have left him.

The doctor should have known that there was something wrong with Haru when he didn’t start crying like normal babies after being slapped on the bottom. It wasn’t until the man noticed that Haru wasn’t even breathing that everyone jumped into action to try and save a life that wasn’t even strong enough to make it at the easiest part.

They should have left Haru’s eyes closed so he’d never have to witness the horrors that would sear into his mind and never leave him. He could have died in that warm room and never had to figure
out how to survive winters without electricity or walls or even a coat. He wouldn’t have had to know
clawing starvation or the way that hunger ripped someone’s mind apart and left them willing to do
anything for food.

Haru would have never known what it feels like to be paralyzed on a cold floor, mouth full of hot
blood, bullets buried in his chest.

He could have died in that hospital room and would have been fine with an afterlife of quiet
darkness; he didn’t know any better.

But dying as he looks up at the lights of police sirens dancing across the ceiling, Haru knows that he
won’t be satisfied with Heaven if there aren’t green eyes looking down at him when he gets there.

Twenty-three years before this, they get him breathing in that hospital room and doom him to this
fate. He thinks that this is where his dislike of people and everything else began, but he knows that
growing up in Iwatobi had a lot to do with it.

Iwatobi was a coastal city with rocky shores and cliffs. The place smelled like burnt sea salt, smog,
and spilled alcohol that had been left out in the sun for days. It was year round humidity and
sweltering heat. The few sand beaches were littered with garbage and very rarely appreciated. The
majority of occupations belonged to the sea – there were crab fishers, shrimp boats, a single whale
watching vessel, and barges that trudged back and forth across the bay. The rest of the working
population consisted of college graduates in the business district and teachers who were barely
surviving the pathetic excuse for a school system. These jobs were the cover story, the thing that
made Iwatobi look like a bustling city and dragged people into it.

But Iwatobi was much like the sea. It had a darkness that was miles deep and there was no light at
the end – only rock bottom, where so many souls had sunk. The city was a cold place, home to
merciless storms and unfathomable secrets.

One of those secrets was that Iwatobi was a drug empire and Haru’s mom and dad were the ones that
forced him into this hidden culture.

His parents were crackheads, but either way, they should have been the ones to give him a different
attitude about society. They probably should have been the first people to give him his first smile and
first hug, too, but they just didn’t do things like that.

He had two modes as a baby: crying or sleeping. There was no in-between and they never thought
that he did anything else. They had that same view of him when he turned three and still didn’t know
how to walk and had barely spoken. Haru remembers not wanting to even make a sound because he
had learned that no matter what he said, they would take his voice as too loud or too stupid to be
given any response other than a spanking.

So Haru didn’t do much of anything until his aunt took him swimming for the first time.

Her name was Mori but to Haru she was just Mo. She had been the only one to express concern over
his lack of mobility and took it upon herself to take him to a doctor. The pediatrician suggested that
someone take Haru swimming so he could get use to moving his legs without the painful strain of
pushing off the ground to do so.

Haru’s experience with water wasn’t good at that time. His momma had gave him a few baths and
they had hurt. The water was freezing but she just kept dunking it over his head again and again
despite how much he cried.

That evening, Mo took Haru to the ocean and eased in with him securely on her hip. He dug his fingers into her bathing suit in absolute horror as the soft waves met her hip, and her gentle voice was unable to reach him over his own screams. But then she trickled some water over his arm and everything stopped.

He had expected it to hurt but it didn’t. The water was warm and curled around his chubby hand without stinging at all. In fact, it felt good.

Mo smiled at his expression of reverent concentration as he leaned down and poked the surface of the water with a finger. Ripples spread out around his digit in a way that reminded him of rain puddles, and he braced himself, waiting to hear thunder and lightning, but no harsh noise came to scare him.

With a strange sense of excitement, Haru slapped his hand into the water and it splashed him back like its own version of giggling, making Haru laugh without fear of repercussion. It was an incredible feeling.

The next time Mo took him to the ocean she held his hands and rolled him on his front before requesting in that high-pitched baby voice that he try and kick his legs. She massaged them many times but he still struggled to make them work and he became frustrated to the point of tears.

But then the ocean helped him, easing the painful tension out of Haru’s legs so he could bend them. The waves gave him momentum and pushed him forward so he could glide into Mo’s arms and be wrapped up in a tight victory hug before he and Mo both erupted into fits of giggles and Haru didn’t even care about how much water he had swallowed.

It didn’t take long for him to figure out how to swim and never want to leave the ocean, but despite his determination to stay there forever, he was forced to come up on dry land to go home and go to school. However, he took every opportunity to practice holding his breath or running around to make his legs stronger.

Mo understood his strange need to swim. They were on the shore eating sandwiches and watching some other kids splash around when she said, “You know, when you’re from Iwatobi, the ocean is the best thing in the world. It doesn’t change no matter how bad everything gets; the water stays the same. Wars, racism, hunger, pain and confusion, all those things that make you feel hopeless… None of it matters to the sea. There’s no laws to break. No schedules or gossip to keep up with.” She brushed his hair back and smiled. “It’s just free.”

Haru contemplated her words for the rest of the week. Saturday finally rolled around and he was dressed in his trunks and waiting by the front door before the clock could even strike eight in the morning.

Two hours went by and he was still by that door and he had built up a childish, foolish impatience that demanded he roll his eyes over to his momma and sigh, “When’s Mo gonna be here?”

His momma cut her eyes up from lighting a cigarette and Haru knew he had made a mistake. She took a long drag, making the end of the stick light up orange, and blew out a cloud of smoke in disgust. “Mo’s just so fuckin’ great, isn’t she?”

Haru got scared when she cussed but he was suddenly more angry than anything because, “Yes.”
Mo was great. She never spoke to Haru in such a mean voice like that.

He was so caught up in his own rage that he didn’t notice that his momma was up until he heard the coffee table flip and she was coming at him.

His dad laughed his head off as she chased Haru through the house with that cigarette and he’s pretty sure his dad actually pissed himself when she pushed the hot end of the stick into Haru’s neck.

He hadn’t even been able to scream, it hurt so badly.

Haru woke up huddled on the floor at the end of the dark, looming hallway. The carpet against his cheek smelled like pee but his dominant sense was the taste of rust in his mouth.

His body was fevered and he felt ill. Dimly realizing what the cause of that might be, Haru brought a hand to his neck where the skin was crusty and pulsing so hotly it was like the cigarette was still burning into him.

He jerked when a plate exploded against a wall. His momma was screaming so loud that the floor shook but the sound of the breaking plate had made his ears start ringing, so he couldn’t make out her exact words.

She slammed down the phone – Haru knew the distinctive sound of it being slammed into its cradle – and he tensed as his momma staggered down the hallway presumably on her way to the bedroom. Her body odor was nauseating but Haru didn’t dare vocalize his revulsion against the stench. He kept so still that his body ached but he couldn’t stop himself from jumping when his momma sighed.

“Mori got hit by some drunk on the way to get you, baby,” she said. “So you won’t be seein’ her no more.”

His momma shut the bedroom door and Haru stared at the wall in unblinking horror. His insides ran cold before everything went numb and it seemed as if his veins had stopped running blood and his heart had stopped beating.

It wasn’t until Haru pressed a rag, drenched in searing alcohol, against his burn that all sensation and emotion came rushing back in and he started to cry.

School was a welcome distraction from Mo’s absence, at least for a few days. The new school year had started and it didn’t take long for him to start dreading class because Haru wore the same shirt to school three days a week and the kids felt that it was their responsibility to address it in the cruelest of ways.

His three day shirt was his favorite piece of clothing ever despite that it stayed wrinkled and the juice stains never came out. The shirt displayed a grinning dolphin on the front of it and he liked to quietly pretend that he was that dolphin, swimming in a far off ocean away from his parents and their hot cigarettes. He would imagine his dolphin-self befriending a penguin, then a killer whale, and even a shark and a butterfly. They would all be kind to him and not care about things like wrinkles or juice stains.

But Haru’s wild imagination was not enough to keep him oblivious to the whispers that would erupt when he’d wear it.
He went to his teacher after class about the teasing, his voice wobbling and his fists rolled up nervously in the hem of his happy dolphin shirt. When he finished talking, his teacher did that grimacing-smile thing and said, “Maybe you’d have better luck if you went out and bought some more mature shirts, Haruka.”

Humiliated tears burned in his eyes because he couldn’t go out and buy more shirts.

He wore his two day shirt the next day, the one he truly despised. It was this rotting-pumpkin shade of orange and the long sleeves were made of this wooly material that itched and made him sweat like a freak.

Haru went outside the school and found the back of the lunch room, wandering over to the dumpster with his dolphin shirt bunched in his hand.

He raised up on his toes to lift the heavy lid but before he could throw the shirt into the stinky recesses, the dolphin’s eyes caught his and he ended up shoving the shirt under the dumpster instead. He walked home and hugged himself around the middle but told himself that it had to be done; the other kids would stop making fun of him if he didn’t wear that shirt anymore.

He was wrong.

Clothes remained to be his biggest issue. He would have never thought that such a superficial, fucking stupid thing would make his life a living hell, but it did.

Haru hated growing up because his clothes didn’t grow with him. He was constantly tugging the sleeves of his jacket down because they were racing up his forearms. His jeans got shorter and crawled up his ankles and his sneakers? They were an unspeakable horror, apparently.

His classmates got meaner as they grew too. He once made the mistake of listening to their whispers and he heard one boy say that Haru reeked and was too stupid to know how to wipe his own ass.

He tried to think of Mo telling him that it didn’t matter what anyone said, but he couldn’t even draw her face anymore, so he found himself determined to combat the pointless opinions of his bullies.

One of the most drastic measures Haru took in an attempt to look presentable was during a rare blizzard that ripped through Iwatobi when he was thirteen. There was no electricity in the house but Haru knew it would never come on again because the lights had went out almost a week before the snowstorm hit. He also knew that the water wasn’t going to return after the pipes unfroze because the bill wasn’t going to be paid any time soon.

Nevertheless, Haru’s strive kept him going into the cold, dark night. The temperature dropped and turned the tips of his fingers blue, but he kept them wrapped around a flashlight as he waited for a bucket of ice to melt so he could wash his hoodie with the water and a bottle of vinegar.

He taught himself how to sew when summer rolled around. Everything involving his clothes had to be done at night because it was less likely for his parents to catch him mending at this time and accuse him of being stuck up and ungrateful for trying to change his clothes.

They had caught him once and after that they refused to let him have any candles in his room (the rest of the house was full of candles – the lights never came back on, like he said they wouldn’t – but
Haru couldn’t steal any because his parents had a deep love affair with Speed and tweakers tended to notice the slightest change in anything, including how many inches long a specific candle was before Haru snuck off to his room).

But Haru was determined. There was no food in the house but his parents kept a bottle of olive oil in the kitchen because they used it to melt down hash in the microwave. They weren’t smart enough to think that Haru would have any need to steal that (Haru didn’t think that either before it turned out that science class was good for things other than having your classmates hide a tarantula in your book bag).

He snuck into the kitchen and poured a glass of olive oil while his parents and their friends went into a heated political debate in the living room, something they often did when they were drunk. He hid out in his room and quietly sliced off the peel from an orange that he had got from lunch at school and he filled the bowl-like peel with the olive oil. He then took out a lighter he had found under the porch and lit the elongated part of the peel that had drove through the center of the orange. The tip charred black before a tiny flame sprouted, and Haru ate his orange slices victoriously as he used the light to patch up some jeans with a needle he got from a dismantled syringe.

No matter how intricate his sewing-in-the-dark skills became, the teasing never stopped.

By high school, Haru was hardened into a stone cold asshole and it was both a blessing and a curse that his attitude problem kept most people from approaching him. He tried not to give too much attention to that distant part of him that just wanted to be able to sit down at a table and not have every conversation be reduced to whispers and staring, but it was hard.

Haru liked to pretend that he didn’t care about anything but then he would be sitting in class and two people would burst out laughing at something other than him and it always made his chest ache. He continuously shoved the lonely feeling down and told himself that they were probably laughing at something stupid anyway.

The only source of joy in Haru’s life was the ocean. He liked midnight swims because there was usually no one around to bother him (other than the homeless) and it was easier for him to sneak out at late hours because it was during the night that his parents liked to go buck wild. Haru would swim until he was exhausted and then he’d sit in the cool sand until white moonlight rippled over the dark waves. He’d dive back into the sea and revel in the strange underwater silence, resisting the urge to come up for air, just wanting to hide from the world a little while longer.

That kept him going until he turned fourteen.

It happened in the lunch room. Haru had lost his lunch card that confirmed he was approved for free lunch and he was denied food. He shuffled over to a table by himself and while sitting alone was normal for him, he had nothing to do and nowhere to fix his gaze. He usually focused all his attention on his food whether it tasted good or not, just to avoid eye contact with anyone, but without a lunch tray it was impossible to find something to stare at without looking fucking creepy.

He was tracing a cigarette burn on the back of his hand when he heard the scrape of a chair being pulled over to his table, then another chair, and another, and another. Haru tensed and looked up through his fringe to see that he was surrounded by a group of boys that had never approached him with friendly intentions.
Haru didn’t have the courage to say anything, of course, so he sat in silence with a tightened jaw as they loudly chewed their lunches. It was fried fish today, Haru’s favorite item on the menu, and it smelled so greasy and beautiful that he got light headed.

The guy next to him spoke with his mouth full. “Want some fish, Haruka?”

Haru said nothing.

The guy made an apologetic noise. “My bad, I forgot you don’t like things that smell like fish.” The snorts and grins of his friends goaded him on and he knocked his shoulder against Haru’s, making him go rigid. “Nah,” the guy laughed, and Haru’s hands were already tightening into fists. “I wouldn’t let your queer ass eat this shit off my dick.”

It was like everything in him just snapped.

All the noise around him was reduced to a high-pitched ringing and his body heated up with so much anger that he could do nothing but lose himself to it.

The fight resulted in two boys getting sent to the hospital.

Neither of them were Haru.

He also got expelled.

It was like a weight lifted from his shoulders, an all-encompassing relief, that he wouldn’t have to go back into that school again and again like a lamb to the slaughter.

However, that terrible place just ended up being traded for another.

Haru’s parents refused to let him leave the house after they heard about the fight and they watched him like two cracked out hawks ready to tear him apart if he dared to try and escape their clutches.

Their realities were so distorted that they lost track of time and how long they were keeping Haru locked away. Not only that, but they also forgot to buy food.

He guessed there wasn’t much money for that anyway. His parents were so broke that they resorted to drinking rubbing alcohol to take the edge off, started coughing up blood and talking to people in their sleep and carried on like that even when they were awake, even if they were the only ones in the room.

They finally let Haru out of his bedroom but it was only so he could trap the rats in the kitchen. He just let them fester.

His dad went into the city to do some deals that would hopefully result in some cold hard cash and there were many discussions about what drugs were going to be bought, but no conversations about bringing food home.

Unlike his parents, Haru had kept track of time. It had been two months since he was expelled and not once had someone went grocery shopping. He had managed to live off of expired bread, peanut butter, and dried nuts for a few weeks, but now that was gone and his life depended on his decaying
home – he boiled the rainwater that came through the splits in the roof so he could drink and bathe, and he ate the clover that grew through the floorboards.

Haru was surprised he made it to his fifteenth birthday, and was even more surprised when his mom remembered the occasion for the first time in years. He was so shocked that he didn’t realize she was putting his presents in his hands until he looked down to see a spoon, lighter, syringe, and a little bag of powder in his lap.

While most people would consider this a strange array of gifts, Haru knew that every item was a combinable part that made up one thing.

Heroin.

Before his isolation, Haru had been avid about not using drugs because he didn’t want to be like his parents. Their hearts had always been impossible to find in the fog they carried around with them and being high gave them a sense of completion that he had never been able to compete with. They were disgusting to have eyes that would fill up with so much love when they were narrowing a line of coke only to come up glaring at him when he so much as moved.

Haru knew that he would never fit in with normal people but he had been determined to make sure his life didn’t revolve around white lines and bags of buds and needles and the powder that was now in his palm, waiting. He swore he could feel it staring at him. Hear it breathing. Whispering.

He tried to find a volume to set his voice that wouldn’t set his mom off. “Why this?” When her face twisted in annoyed confusion, he mumbled, “There’s easier ways to kill me.”

“Yeah well, you can’t handle that shit,” she said, her mouth a landfill of tobacco. Haru sighed because he shouldn’t have been expecting a logical answer. “This shit, this what’s really gon’ make you feel better.” She propped her bare foot on the edge of the coffee table and snorted. “Gon’ make you stop actin’ like such a cunt.”

She focused on coordinating a joint between her yellowed teeth and flicking a lighter. After a lot of spitting and cussing, she managed to light the end of the doobie and take a long drag. Haru liked the relaxing smell but he knew it would make him rabid for food, so he tried not to breathe too deeply as she exhaled the smoke.

He jerked as she barked, “Now shut the fuck up and go, you’re too fuckin’ loud for me to even hear the TV.”

Haru tensed because they didn’t have a television.

He hesitantly followed his mom’s gaze to the bare living room wall, where her eyes were so interested and enraptured that he felt his nerves frying.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when she threw her head back with howling laughter, gasping about what the skinny bitch beside her just said about the gameshow host, and Haru’s throat constricted further. He and his mom were the only people in the house.

When her eyes stopped rolling back into her head, she fixed her gaze on him and shoved him in the shoulder. “You jus’ gonna sit there like a little fucking brat? You’re actin’ like a fuckin’ spoiled little girl, Haruka, that’s what you are! A real man would appreciate a birthday gift and fuckin’ use it!”
Haru made a cradle out of the bottom half of his shirt to gather up the items and surged off the couch before his mom could wrap her fingers around his throat. He stumbled down the hallway, expecting a chase, but her laughter came to an abrupt stop and he heard her roll off the couch with a *thump.*

Haru waited for her to start shouting again but she didn’t. His hands turned into white-knuckled fists as the silence rang on and his eyes watered with a sentiment that he didn’t want to admit he had for such a vile woman.

He licked his chapped lips. They were trembling. “Mom?”

One thick moment stretched on before she erupted in giggles. Relief coursed through him so strongly that he was left in an exhausted heap against the wall.

Not daring to go back in there and express his conflicted feelings of worry, Haru slipped past the billowing sheet that divided his room from the hallway. He knew where he could step on the floor without falling through, but it was a challenge to avoid rat droppings, writhing flies, and broken glass.

There once was a part of him that demanded he keep his room in order because it was his space and it didn’t have to be ruined like the rest of the house, but he didn’t have the strength to clean anymore.

He did not have a bed, only a stripped mattress that had been ripped to shit by mice. He had one solid piece of furniture and it was a fold out chair facing the window. Haru sat down and the action made him choke on a scream; even such gentle movements proved to be white-hot agony while he was this skinny.

He was panting from the exertion of *sitting down* and that realization made him scoff in disgust.

Haru caught his breath before spreading the fabric of his t-shirt over his thumbs to make a hammock. He rolled the syringe between his digits, going back and forth, and the longer he looked at it, the higher his concern spiked. Shooting up would probably hurt the first time, the high might even hurt, and the death that he so craved might be drawn out to an agonizing proportion of time.

This could be the biggest decision he’ll ever make and the last choice he might ever have.

He wasn’t good at weighing his options about anything; that took a lot of effort he just didn’t have for a lot of things. But this was different than deciding which way to walk to school or how he wanted to part his hair and his anxiety brought up all his feelings from where he tried to hold them down. That emotion he tried so hard to bury crawled out of his heart like a monster from a well, dragging up his chest to climb up his throat and burst out as a sob between his teeth. That monster whispered lies to him, insisting that there was still a chance for him to be free, he just had to hold on, keep going…

He knew that hope wasn’t supposed to be regarded as a monster, but it had only ever brought him pain, and that had made him terrified of the emotion.

There was only a rare time in his youth that he wasn’t so afraid. He use to light candles in his heart, each one of them standing out against the darkness like bright points, like these warm moments in his future that he would one day get to touch and treasure. But there was always a storm following him around and the flames struggled to stay lit; the wax of those candles would melt at an alarming speed every time his anxiety took hold of him. He tried to keep them standing and lit by sheer will and resistance, but that too melted down to nothing but ash.
His heart had been dark for a long time. It was too cold for candles now and there were no cracks to let light in. The walls he had built around himself were unyielding, no chance of letting something in that was only there to laugh at his stupidity for opening the gates to himself.

Haru didn’t even have the key to those gates now. Maybe he tried to eat it with the clover he had been forced to live off of. Could’ve lost it in the mud when he was seven and his mom dragged him out of the house by his hair, slung him down the concrete steps, and made him go to school after he had been up all night with a fever and shivers. Or perhaps he misplaced it when his dad staggered into his room and threw up on him just to fucking throw up on him. He’d ever dare to believe that it might have been the time his dad came in his room and took a shit on him -

And then Haru realized he’d give anything for someone to stop him from doing this, for someone to just please, show him that he’s real and alive and exists and matters.

He waited for that person until he was staring out the window like his mom stared at the television that wasn’t there, his eyes dazed and unblinking.

Something crashed into the wall and Haru jerked back into reality. The noise came again and he realized that his mom was doing it again – rolling around on the floor, doped out of her mind, forcefully and purposefully throwing her body into the wall just to scare him.

He could hear the mean grin in her voice as it echoed down the hallway. “I’mmmmm gonna get you, Haruuuuuka… Harrrrrruuukaaaaaa…”

His muscles clenched as she banged her fist on the wall and made the whole house tremble dangerously. She then slammed her head down on the floor, kicked her feet and threw her arms out until he heard things start toppling. She would be bloody by the time she passed out but Haru was trapped in his present fear as her voice grew louder.


Her shout exploded into wailing laughter and he sunk to the floor to put the items in sequence.

He ripped the bag and shook it impatiently to make the chunky powder slide into the spoon. He got enough out before he heard his mom moaning and panting, breathing out these filthy sounds that just made Haru want to cry.

Her words echoed in his head and brought him a numbness, a sense of peace about pouring the fluid into the syringe and driving the needle into the crook of his elbow.

He pushed the plunger down and bit his tongue as the sludge burned up his vein.

He emptied all of it into his bloodstream and dragged the needle out from under his skin. Haru then
sagged against the wall, tipped his head back, and waited. He had nothing to think about, no last words to recite, no regrets that needed reflection. All he had to do now was wait and that thought was so relaxing that he couldn’t even be bothered by his mom’s shouting.

Haru stretched out his legs with a contented noise and let the tension ease out. His body lulled into a warm drowsiness and he could imagine himself floating on his back in the ocean, listening to the seafoam hiss as the sun touched his body for the first time in months. This place inside his mind was nice. This place was good. He was safe here.

Sleepiness nuzzled at him and darkness carried him down to the bottom of the gentle, quiet sea.

The backs of his eyelids were glowing when he came to. There was no shouting and no hands jarring his shoulders with the insistence he go turn on the stove because no one knew how to and it was cold. Haru opened his eyes and morning light streamed into the room, shining on dust particles as they rose up into the air. There were birds singing quietly outside and he could smell the neighbor’s cherry blossom tree down the road.

Haru hesitantly brought a hand up to his chest, where his heart was still beating, though its beats were now at a content pace he had never experienced before.

He grew disappointed when he remembered that it usually took movement to really get a hangover going, so he pulled himself up but was shocked to realize that there was no headache between his eyes and no waves of nausea rolling through him.

He frowned. This wasn’t how heroin was supposed to make him feel. Why was he feeling so refreshed when he was supposed to be going on rampages and talking to walls and getting sick like everyone else that used the drug?

He just felt… well, happy. He was completely grounded in himself and the depression that had haunted him for so long was out of sight. He almost didn’t know what to do with himself.

With his new found freedom.

Haru’s eyes turned down to the empty baggie beside his foot. He bit his lip.

He found his feet taking him down the hallway to the living room. It appeared that his dad was still gone, but the place was just as trashed as when he was here. Every picture frame had been ripped off the wall and thrown across room in an explosion of glass shards. Furniture had been tossed as well – a chair was lodged through a window and the couch was pushed over on its front.

Haru looked through the wreckage and found the filing cabinet in the corner still intact but also still locked.

A groan rolled through the air and Haru looked between the couch and the wall where his mom was curled up, hair matted with blood and arms splotched with bruises. She reeked of vomit.

Haru’s face was blank as he reached over the couch and took the key out of her pajama pants. He unlocked the filing cabinet and eased open the top drawer, pushing aside bags of mushrooms and weed to feel around at the bottom where his fingers glided over some loose pills before they touched plastic, and the sensation was electrifying.
He lifted the baggie to his eyes and looked at the label, which read H. There were quite a few bags with the same label and they were all small portions that cost about ten dollars. He took a few of them along with some syringes and scrambled to his feet, locking the cabinet and returning his mom’s key before he headed into the kitchen for a new spoon.

The second time he did heroin, the feeling that overtook him was what he assumed having a big cup of hot chocolate and a bubble bath was like. He imagined that after his bath he would wrap up in a fluffy robe and hide from the world in a bed dressed with silk sheets and a mountain of pillows.

He even dared to imagine a body crawling into that sprawling bed with him.

Hands would bypass the knot of Haru’s robe and part the opening to tease his bare skin, strong arms would cage his waist before dragging him into a wide, naked chest, and there would be fingers carding through Haru’s hair as a slow, relaxed heartbeat thrummed under his cheek.

He didn’t have the courage to think about something like this when he was sober.

But in this state, he could feel it – the muscles of that other body flexing and clenching as it moved between Haru’s thighs where nails would dig into his skin with barely-restrained passion. Haru would be the only one to make this man unravel like this because Haru was that special to him, and he would tell Haru that over and over against his ear, his neck, his mouth.

He did a lot of things with the man inside his head, but one of the best things that happened was imagining just laying together. He wouldn’t make Haru talk, he’d be content to just be there in the quiet with him, and the thought of someone ever being so kind was as wonderful as it was impossible to believe.

Reality came crashing back in as a fist sunk into his jaw.

The pain made his senses run wild – blood in his mouth, teeth vibrating, muffled shouting, stench of alcohol, vision blurring with tears.

Nails ripped blood out of the skin of his throat and that hand shoved Haru into a wall, forcing him to scramble on his toes as he was lifted higher, higher.

“Quit fuckin’ dancin’ and look at me, boy!”

Haru’s wide eyes zeroed in on his attacker. It was his dad and his expression was positively murderous as he spoke through his teeth. “Did you. Get in. My stash.”

Haru was hit with such a rush of fear that he almost blacked out and he was forced to call on everything he knew to keep his expression blank. “No,” he rasped.

With a vague look around the room, it appeared that his dad had trashed it. Haru was so glad that he had grown bored as he waited for his high to hit and ended up cleaning. His syringes, viles, spoons, and lighter were stashed in a box under the rotted floorboards.

Dad’s face was only inches away and his breath would have been insufferable if Haru had been able to breathe himself. “You lyin’ to me, boy?”

His hand tightened and Haru’s pulse throbbed under his skin. He knew that the vessels in his eyes
were breaking. “Hnn…ooo.”

His dad hurled him across the floor with such strength that Haru was thrown into a backwards somersault. He landed in a heap on the floor, arms curled around his head, heaving for air only to have it torn from his lungs when a boot sunk into his gut, making the room burst with light.

**“THEN WHERE THE FUCK IS IT?!”**

“ASK MOM!”

His dad froze. He probably didn’t think that Haru’s voice was even capable of shouting and honestly, Haru hadn’t thought so either but he just couldn’t *take this*, couldn’t take it from either of them anymore.

“You see her take my shit, snitch?”

Haru hid his glare beneath the cover of his arms. “She told me not to tell you,” he lied.

Dad was already nodding like he had figured everything out long before he beat the confirmation out of Haru. He bounced around the room and gestured violently as his voice rushed on, “She fuckin’ knows not to touch my stash. My stash is the top drawer of the filing cabinet, her’s is the bottom, that’s the only fuckin’ way to have a happy marriage is if you got *boundaries* like that. Fuckin’ bitch, that fuckin’ bitch.”

Haru closed his eyes and kept quiet.

Dad’s boots stomped across the floor with deadly intent and Haru braced himself for another kick but he opened his eyes to see that his dad had left the room. He almost cried out with relief and his body sagged into the floor, fire screaming through his ribs at the movement.

Haru battled his pain in cold silence and didn’t even flinch as he heard his dad kick his mom awake to make her pay.

It started taking bigger supplements of heroin to get him high. That first baggie had been enough to make his head spin for hours but then after a few weeks, it started taking two bags, three bags, four of them back to back.

Withdrawals came. At first it felt like his veins were itching and he tried to knock it off as just an annoying feeling, but then it got insistent. He scratched at his arms to try and relieve the pressure but he just ended up tearing his arms to absolute shit and getting no relief.

His nose gushed blood if he didn’t give in. His hair started coming out in chunks. His body was so inconsolable that real food didn’t make him feel better because if he was withdrawing, he puked every time he ate.

All of that should have been horrifying. He should have had that moment where he looked at his reflection in the mirror and said enough was enough, but it wasn’t enough. It didn’t matter what damage he was causing his body because he was going to be fucking *dead* if he didn’t get that *fucking dope*. He couldn’t find solace in anything else, not drawing or even swimming; he wouldn’t be able to make it to the ocean without needing to shoot up.
Haru’s addiction became uncontrollable around the time that his dad got on crank and started beating Mom. He never stopped beating the shit out of Haru but it seemed that having it happen to her put her and Haru on a level playing field. She was still a thing of nightmares but had adopted a sense of understanding with him, and enabled his addiction so she wouldn’t have to go through his dad alone.

Giving her son heroin just because she was a coward was a horrible thing to bond over, but Haru got his fix out of it so it didn’t matter.

“I’m savin’ you,” she told him as she tied a belt around his arm. “You won’t feel him hittin’ on you when you’re doped up.”

Haru didn’t give a fuck what his dad did to him until a few months later around four a.m.

It was December and the roof had collapsed during the first blizzard in years. Haru was slouched against the wall in his room, glazed eyes watching as snow flittered through the open spaces in the rafters, when his dad staggered in.

He had figured out Haru was a junkie, but he didn’t consider his son important enough to be concerned as to how this bad habit started, so he never found out about Haru stealing his stash that first time. However, he kept a sharp eye on Haru and his mom, and if anything in that stash drawer had moved so much as an inch, he’d make both of them eat his boot. Many times.

Haru had a chipped front tooth to prove it.

His dad slurred, “We’re out. Out of everythin’. I ain’t goin’ out in this cold shit so you’re gon’ do it. Write down this fuckin’ address.”

Haru hadn’t been around people in a long time and the concept of going out left him terrified but his heart pounded even harder at the realization that there was no more heroin in the house.

He scrambled for the money in his dad’s hand, wrote down the address, and left for the city without a word of protest.

Staying upright proved to be the biggest challenge, surprisingly. Every time he straightened up he became light-headed and his knees shook. The cold wasn’t helping the state of his body – the blizzard was over but that didn’t do him much good since all he was wearing was a t-shirt, some tattered jeans, and a pair of rotted sandals that he had to drag through the three inches of snow.

He worried about being in public with his humiliating appearance and weakened condition. He tried to swallow down his nervousness but his throat was so dry that he choked.

Fuck, he just wanted to get all of this done before five a.m so there would be less chance of running into a crowd of commuters that were just going to stare at him in shocked disgust.

Haru took in a deep breath and smelled smoke. He looked down a dark street where none of the streetlights were working and found the source of the smell at a gathering of homeless people who were hunched around some fire barrels. Haru made eye contact with one of them and he felt every imperfection burning on his skin - track marks, bruises, cuts, thinning hair, humongous eyes, gaunt face, disgusting clothes, always his filthy fucking clothes -

He ducked into the nearest alley in a desperate attempt to hide but that turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes of his life.
The passage was lined with a building on each side and the structure to his right appeared to be a rundown bar with a buzzing neon sign and a man smoking at the door. The stench of sweat made the air humid and the music from inside the establishment vibrated up Haru’s legs, making his knees that much more unstable. An eruption of drunken hollers rang through the alley and his body seized so tightly that he couldn’t move.

He tried to recall the process of moving his limbs but his brain shut down as the man on the steps of the bar prowled forward to bear the smell of whiskey and weed.

Haru’s voice was screaming inside his head, shouting to move, to run, but he could do no such thing even as the man sucked on his withering cigarette and used his fat tongue to lick his lips. “Hey, gorgeous. God, aren’t you something.”

Haru didn’t feel an ounce of warmth at the compliment.

“How’s Aito, why don’t you tell me yours?”

Aito came even closer and Haru retreated only to have his back meet the wall. The pressure of it made him dizzy with the realization that he was trapped, but he managed to keep a waver out of his voice as he ground out, “Leave me alone.”

The playful glint in the man’s eyes was chased out by darkness. His pupils blew wide and a flush ran down his neck and holy fuck, did Haru’s resistance arouse him?

Haru didn’t have the strength to run, he could barely walk, but he did raise his arms in a feeble attempt to protect himself before Aito slammed him between the wall and his heavy body and Haru went rigid at the contact, his nostrils flaring in absolute rage.

“Whatcha gon’ do, angel? You wanna fight?” He started rolling his hips and anger was replaced by a heaviness in Haru’s limbs, a sick understanding that he wasn’t going to be able to stop this.

But he wasn’t about to shut his eyes in submission or acceptance. He met Aito’s gaze and fixed him with a glare, and when the guy noticed it, he startled a laugh. “Oh, you’re a fuckin’ freak, aren’t you? My, you are something. I’m gonna have to make this real special for you.”

Haru reared back to spit in his face but the man quickly pressed into him harder, making his breath cut into a wheeze. “Nah, I don’t like that now. You know I don’t like that shit, you little –”

“Oi.”

Aito let out a growling sigh of annoyance and turned his narrowed eyes to the mouth of the pathway. Haru immediately began to struggle, panic surging through his limbs, but his attempt at escape was no use against the man’s crushing weight. Aito hissed, “If you don’t quit your damn bucking around –”

“Whoa baby, easy.”

That long, drawn out purr made the man still with interest and Haru turned his head in the direction of the voice.

In the mouth of the alley was a silhouette who stood in the middle of that crime-ravaged city like he
owned the place. Even in the face of the situation before him, his posture remained relaxed. Collected. In control. The figure sauntered through the passage with the confidence of a shark swimming through ocean darkness, and his sharp-toothed smirk was the first thing that Haru made out before the rest of him came into focus.

He was about Haru’s age and dressed sparsely like him, but Haru quickly realized that his lack of proper clothing was for different reasons.

It wasn’t until now that he remembered that this part of the city was crawling with rentboys and callgirls.

Haru’s theory on the guy’s line of work was further proven true as he took in the boy’s defense against the cold. He wore no bulking layers of coats, as he should have been, but instead he had on a low cut shirt that exposed the ridges and planes of his defined chest – he had a tattoo over his left shoulder but Haru couldn’t make out what it was. His jeans were worn but hugged him in ways that quickly grabbed the attention of his attacker.

The boy drags a hand up through his hair, a practiced move that caused long maroon strands to fall alluringly around his face and frame his eyes. Haru startled because those eyes burned like something that could warm you or leave you reduced to ashes.
The boy licked his lips, revealing a tongue ring that danced in the light. “I can give it to you a lot better than him.” His eyes cut to Haru and while his words should have made anger flare, Haru noticed that the confidence in his tone contrasted the way his jaw was twitching. It was as if he was having trouble keeping his inviting expression intact.

Aito’s erection was pressed against Haru’s thigh. The point of contact was damp with sweat and he could feel it pulsing insistently, hungrily.

The sensation made Haru’s lips shape words that he’d never dared to speak. He didn’t know this boy standing before him, this boy who made a living off of lying and pretending to be sincere. How could Haru, someone who was obviously nothing more than a junkie, be anything more to him than the thief of a potential client?

But something deeper told Haru that this boy wasn’t what he seemed, and that wish, that… that hope, gave him the bravery to mouth,

“Help me.”
The boy slid his gaze back to Aito and moved like liquid silk. “You were really gonna go for that?” He threw another disgusted look at Haru and tutted in disappointment while lulling his head back and forth, and Aito followed the motions with his eyes as if entranced. He was pulled in even deeper when the boy was just mere inches from him and Haru and glided the tips of his fingers down Aito’s arm, using touch to coax his fingers from around Haru’s wrists.

Aito let him go.

Haru’s mouth parted in disbelief but the boy kept his eyes locked with Aito’s, demanding all of his attention. The boy took the hand that had just been on Haru and used it to guide the rest of the man’s arm around his waist, over his ass. He pulled them flush together and the action caused Aito to step away from Haru and into him and the boy hummed a pleased sound at the contact. “See, don’t that feel good?”

Aito rammed him into the stone wall in response. The impact seemed to be more forceful than the boy had expected because over the man’s shoulder, Haru caught sight of his narrowed eyes and pinched expression, however, he was able to turn his noise of pain into a moan. “You think you can handle it, big guy? Shit, I hope so.” His grin turned dirty. “You gonna let me have that fat fucking cock?”


“Why don’t we talk somewhere else,” the boy smiled, running his fingers up through the man’s greasy hair, tangling his hands in it. “Want me to take you somewhere cozier? Warmer?” He yanked at the strands, forcing Aito’s head to the side so he could hiss in his ear. “Tighter?”

Aito slurred the affirmative and the boy dragged him away by his hand, not sparing Haru a glance, not giving Aito any indication that he was even still there, but it was clear that the man was enraptured with the rentboy even as they turned the corner and went out of sight.

Haru threw up.

His body had been churning with so much panic that when the relief hit him, there was no reaction for him to have other than rupturing. Getting sick took the last bit of strength he had and Haru was left in a slump against the wall with no energy to get him out of that dangerous place.

His anxiety spiraled back up when he heard a fight broke out in the bar. Haru pushed his legs through the snow but he couldn’t get them to stand; his arms could not support his weight either. The exertion left him too tired to even sit up and he could do nothing but lull his head back and stare up at the flickering streetlight above him as black dots danced across his vision. He might’ve even stopped breathing for a while just because his body was too depleted to do it anymore.

“Yo.”

Haru flared back to life and his fists clenched in the snow, a scream poised in his mouth, adrenaline rushing through his veins like the last dregs of gas in a vehicle -

It was just the rentboy.

He was sitting in front of Haru, back pressed against the adjacent wall. His legs were crossed at the ankle, his snapback was on backwards, and he was arching a brow. “You geeked out or something? There’s puke everywhere.”
Haru’s teeth chattered but other than that he remained silent.

“…Sure. Okay then. Back to my thoughts. You really don’t have the body for this job, so I’m going to assume that you’re either positive as fuck and were just hoping for the best, or you’re lost.”

Haru nodded shakily and the boy’s eyes narrowed on his trembling hands. His gaze darted over Haru’s gaunt skin, the sweat on his brow, and he recognized that while this boy probably didn’t seem him as a threat, taking in all those details was an ingrained act of survival. Haru had to keep his own senses sharp like that around his dad, and he could see that primitive instinct in the boy’s eyes as well.

Haru had a vague realization that working in these dangerous conditions, this boy’s most powerful weapon was not the sway of his hips or tempting smiles, but the fact that people probably underestimated him.

“Why did you… y - you…”

“It’s Rin,” he cut in gently. He seemed to be fascinated with the laces of his boots for a moment before he looked away at the ground. “I don’t really know.” His sudden brooding was a sharp contrast to the radiance of languid, open energy he had shown only a few minutes ago.

Something told Haru that Rin did know, but that reason was guarded. Haru was familiar with the feeling. “Oh.”

Rin fingered a hole in his shirt and his eyes glazed over like he was somewhere else for a second. “I’ve been there before.” He grimaced. “That kind of thing happens a lot in this…” Rin snorted. “Business. I can usually turn the situation around like I just did, but I’m still rusty in other areas of the job.”

This was the most anyone had said to Haru in years, and no one had started a normal conversation with him since Mo died. Well, he supposed it couldn’t be considered normal since the exchange was occurring between a junkie and a rentboy at four in the morning in the middle of the snow, but still. “You seem to be doing okay.”

Rin curled a smirk. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, I am good. The best. I’ll be getting clients from that club downtown in no time. Samezuka won’t know what hit it.”

He was confident to the point of arrogance but he proved to be grounded enough to take a serious pause. “Other rents tell me I’m not submissive enough. I’m damn good at getting what I want but if it’s not according to plan, like when that drunk threw me against the wall, well.” His brows crease stubbornly and he crosses his arms. “I get a little less compliant.”

Haru tensed. “Is that man coming back?”

“No, I took him down below. Subway bathrooms might sound dingy but I could tell you some horror stories about big rigs full of cats and this one time on the beach. The beach one wouldn’t have been so bad without the crabs. The real crabs and the sexy crabs. But anyway. Yeah, I jacked him off in like, fifteen seconds flat. Easy money. Added bonus was that he passed out right there and I got to lock him in the bathroom. That’s the shit I gotta stop doing.”

“I don’t think you should.”
Rin startled a laugh. “Yeah, I really don’t want to. Guess it’s gonna take a while to get the punk kid out of me.”

Haru’s gaze skittered across the ground before lifting to Rin’s face. “If he’s not coming back…” He struggled to comprehend. “Then why did you come back?”

Rin stiffened, not expecting to be put on the spot, and he turned his face away as a blush creeped up his neck. “Not like you know the way out of here,” he grumbled.

Haru hesitated before shaking his head.

Rin dragged himself onto his feet and stretched as he let out an exaggerated yawn. “Well, I’m probably not gonna get anymore rents tonight. Traffic’s about to pick up. Tell me where you’re supposed to be and I’ll walk you there.”

Haru stared and Rin shrugged.

“No one tells you that streetwalking is boring as shit if you’re by yourself. You’ll do. Now hurry up, this part of town smells like dog piss but I’ve never even seen a dog around here. It creeps me out.”

So Rin’s logic didn’t make a lot of sense and neither did his philanthropy. It didn’t take Haru long to find out that he had a bigger ego than the Iwatobi drug problem but he discovered that Rin was also kind, even though he often tried to hide that part of himself. Haru understood. Being nice in the face of danger wasn’t an option, but Rin still cared and Haru could see that when Rin barked at him to, “get a jacket or get a tan.”

The boy was strange. He didn’t know what to do with his emotions. Used pride to hide his insecurities. He was a lot of things, but something that Haru didn’t think this moody rentboy would become was his best friend.

He was glad that neither of their circumstances were typical because if they were, the normalcy would scare the both of them. So Haru didn’t worry about stumbling through a mediocre conversation about weather or restaurants or movies because Rin usually started off his greeting with, “You will not believe what this dude tried to pay me with, the absolute fucking nerve. What in the literal shit am I going to do with a fucking Home Depot gift card? Oh, I swear Haru, I’m gonna find out where this guy gets his coffee and I’ll wait days, weeks, years if I have to, and then I’m gonna –”

So anyway, Haru was content to listen in silence and Rin really liked the sound of his own voice, so it worked out perfectly.

His dad got lazy and sent him into the city more frequently, which also worked out perfectly. Haru and Rin made a routine of walking together when nights were slow and Rin would talk about subjects like how big his house was going to be and what kind of sports car he was going to have in the span of just a few years. Haru nodded along and didn’t comment on the probability of those big dreams ever coming true.

Sometimes, nights were busy and Haru arrived at their usual park bench to see Rin sideling up to a car across the playground. He would then turn to roll his eyes at Haru and discreetly hold up a finger for him to wait before stepping into the vehicle and closing the door.
Haru was content to sit on the bench and shoot up. That got him relaxed and focused enough to pull out a book he had got out of the library’s free bin, a treasure that Rin had shown him, and read under the light post as he waited.

Rin often came back with a limp and a vague, strained look. “His name was Chester. Chester, Haru. Chester.”

His audacity made Haru have to fight back a smile. Rin busied himself with garment adjustment, yanking his sleeve back up to cover the cherry blossom tattoo across his shoulder. “My mom might be a bitch but at least she didn’t name me Chester. Maybe I’ll go to the jail and give her that Home Depot gift card.”

They went to McDonalds a lot. Haru only dared to spend a small amount of the money his dad gave him for drugs, so he usually settled for the fish sandwich. Rin turned green at the sight and ordered a twenty piece chicken nugget meal with a large fry.

Haru raised his brows and he replied with, “I’m a sex worker, Haru. I get very few pleasures in life.”

They took their food to the beach at Haru’s insistence. It wasn’t very far, but getting up and moving around so much made Haru realize just how sick his body was; he could only walk for a few minutes before he had to sit down or black out. Rin never complained about it, but he did finally ask, “Is heroin supposed to make you do that?”

That was a question Haru had asked himself many times because his parents never had these side effects. He swallowed down his panting and said, “I don’t think so.”

Rin looked unnerved, but it seemed like he didn’t know what else to say, so he remained silent and he slowed his pace so Haru could keep up.

They arrived at the beach and smoothed their bags over the sand to make plates before digging in. Haru’s eyes chased the waves as they ran up and down the shore and Rin stared at the barges going back and forth across the water. “You ever wonder where they’re going?”

Haru blinked. “The waves?”

“What? No, the bar – never mind. And I saw you steal that fry a minute ago.”

Three years pass and they turn eighteen. By then, Haru thought he knew all there was to know about drugs after being around his parents so much, plus he liked to think that being an addict himself gave a lot of credit to his campaign.

But it wasn’t until his dad started forcing him to manufacture drugs that Haru realized he had no idea what he was doing.

His dad came up with this enlightened decision after the use of a dirty needle took one of his legs up to the knee and the amputation left him with a stump. He could no longer do deals in the city and claimed that Haru was too skittish and untrustworthy for the job. He didn’t quite understand this because he had been taking drugs out of the city and bringing them to his dad for months now.

“You just runnin’ the shit,” his dad snapped, making Haru curl in on himself. “Runnin’ is easy. Barely any talking, you got orders where you need to go and who’s got props on the shit you’re
carrying. Money’s already waitin’ for you.”

He barked at Haru to go get him a beer and when he returned with shaking hands, his dad added, “You too fuckin’ nervous for the job. Dealers gotta be in control of everythin’ around him.” His eyes lost focus on the television screen – they had a real one, finally. “You gotta be able to have a gun pointed at your head and not even blink. Eyes wide open all the time. You gotta be *that* cool. And you ain’t got it.” He curled a mean grin and laughed into his drink. “That’s why you’re doin’ the woman work, since you pussyfoot around so much.”

It started out with growing a few marijuana plants in the bathroom. The space was kept heated and so muggy that the vanity mirror fogged over and the walls sweated. His dad found two enormous stage lights at a yard sale and rigged them up to hang over the plants and when it was time to harvest them, it was Haru’s job to trim.

Trimming was considered a woman’s job because it was such tedious work, very careful with a need for dire precision. It was also messy work – Haru had to drench his hands in coconut oil to prevent layers of bud wax from sticking to the pads of his fingers.

His mom would use her teeth to drag the wax off her fingertips and eat it for a mediocre high. She spent hours mumbling about how she was better than this shit and Haru was thankful that she was too far gone in the head to need a reply from him. Her job was to cut down the stocks and pull off the big five-pointed leaves before handing the stock to Haru, who sat and trimmed in the barren bathtub that smelled like rust.

Haru learned that two bags of trimmed buds did not equal two pounds. He found that buds were rarely moist enough to have any substantial weight to them; they were usually light and could fall apart if they were too dry. Haru once stayed up all night and trimmed three bags of product only to find out that the weight of those bags combined didn’t even equal a pound – buds were *that* light.

Soon he could spot the difference between a bad trim job and a good trim job, what would sell for the highest bid, and what would only get sold if it was done out of pity. There were a number of problems that could lessen the value of the product: bud stems not cut short enough, too many leaves sprouting out of the bud, or a full harvest that was left out in the light for too long or too little. Haru didn’t want to put so much effort into something so probable for error but his dad had no problem beating the motivation into him.

Next was crack. Dad’s supplier gave him very little actual product but this was considered the norm because baggies were usually only 10% pure. Despite this, volume was key and had nothing to do with how much actual crack was in a baggie. Haru was told to get creative with filling the baggies to a certain weight, so he blended the product with salt, crushed pills, chalk, *brick dust*, whatever it took to fill the bag, meet the bill, and keep his own head attached to his shoulders.

Then it was heroin, and that brought in the money like nothing else, but his dad couldn’t be satisfied. Haru was forced to make anything that anyone demanded – the house had become a twenty four hour cookhouse. The manufacturing expanded into the kitchen, where Haru and his mom weighed out speed and learned how to tweak the recipe to intensify the bright euphoric feeling that came with the high.

His dad made him sit in the living room with him when clients would come through and that was the closest they had ever come to having a relationship. He told Haru to “use them creepy eyes” to see which clients had used which batch of product so they could figure out a balance of ingredients that would make the product more addictive and bring back customers.
With such a variety of drugs being made in the house, all kinds of people came in and out. There were high schoolers with the best clothes and the latest iPhones, street rats with sunken eyes and hair that smelled like sewage. Then it was housewives, doctors, teachers, lawyers – the typical stereotypes for drug users no longer applied.

Haru didn’t particularly like many people – he admitted that he had a strained acceptance for Rin and his quirks – but he became familiar with a few clients.

One was a college student named Asahi that liked the way Haru cut weed. Another was a guy named Nao who needed cocaine to get through medical school, and he sometimes brought his… friend…? Beneficial friend? Brought his person along with him who was called Natsuya. Haru tolerated him because he was a recent drop out like himself, but he found him to be a bit confusing after he stressed, several times, that his baby brother could never find out about his drug problem.

The cliental grew and more strange people came with it, but it wasn’t until Haru’s dad gave him a wad of cash and a list of ingredients that he started feeling guilty about what he was being forced to do.

It was an early afternoon when his dad sent him into the city and the rare bout of sunshine brought everyone out into the streets to congest them and cripple Haru with fear. He had shot up before he left home but being faced with a crowd brought on a terror that not even heroin could fix.

He loathed the fact that he was making drugs at home, risking death by explosion, exposure, and exhaustion, but still couldn’t stomach being around people. It seemed that his newfound occupation of forced labor had made him feel even more like a freak, so he called on someone else with a taboo job description.

His dad had gave him a cheap ass flip phone from ‘98 to stay in contact during errands like this and he used it to dial Rin’s pawn shop cell phone, which he now had to have due to his growing list of regular clients. Rin bragged about that shit a lot, and each new contact in his phone just brought him up another notch on his egocentric scale, in Haru’s factual and accurate opinion.

He tried to sound nonchalant about the trip to the grocery store, but he knew that Rin was too sharp to not notice the edge to his voice, and he’d be a liar if he said that he didn’t nearly collapse when Rin told him he’d be there in a minute, he just needed to crawl out of this guy’s bed while he showered and, “*get the fuck out of this garter belt –*”


Haru looked up at the sky as contemplated stepping out into the traffic. “*Shit’s like a torture device. I actually have my arm stuck in it right now, so I’ll probably show up with less limbs but whatever, this ass is the money maker anyway –*”

“Never mind.”

“I’m kidding, calm down! Ha, I actually meant my di - no, no, no, don’t hang up, I’m done, I swear I’m done!”

Rin walked alongside him in the bustling grocery store and read over the list of ingredients. He scrunched up his brows. “I don’t get this drug terminology. What’s Codeine?”

“It’s in Tylenol,” Haru supplied, keeping his head down so he wouldn’t make eye contact with
anyone.

Rin rolled his eyes – Haru knew because he can practically hear the action at this point in their friendship. “Well why doesn’t it just say Tylenol then? Why’s it gotta be so difficult? Why can’t everyone just love each other and use normal words?”

Haru’s migraine throbbed. “Because Codeine isn’t just in Tylenol.” However, he specifically dodged every other medication and zeroed in on that specific brand just to piss his friend off.

Rin clicked his tongue and made a confused noise as Haru lead him away from the pharmacy isle. “Where’re we going? Is that it? Thank Go –”

“No,” Haru sighed, dragging his feet. “Read the rest.”

He waited for Rin to comment, annoyingly, of course, as usual, but instead he stumbled in shock and nearly knocked Haru into the meat freezer. “Paint thinner?”

“Keep your voice down,” he hissed to no avail, of course, as usual.

“Gasoline?!”

Haru shoved a pack of frozen chicken in his face and glared at him over the top, faces inches apart. “Shut. Up.”

Rin’s wide eyes blinked. “This tastes really bad, Haru,” he muffled.

Haru sighed in defeat and tossed the teeth-torn pack back in the freezer so he could walk off with the hope that a car might burst through the dairy isle and run him over. At least he could get some sleep in a hospital, maybe. Or while he was dead. Either way, at this point.

“Okay, okay!” Rin jogged after him and held up his hands in a placating gesture. “Look, I’m - I’m sorry.” He hesitated. “But this just sounds... really scary.”

Haru stilled, not realizing he was heaving from exertion until Rin guided him to lean against the wall in a corner away from the cart traffic. Haru tipped his head back and closed his eyes for a brief moment because yes, he finally admitted in the back of his mind, he was scared.

“Sounds like you’re making a bomb, Haru,” Rin snorted, nervously trying to lighten the mood. “Especially since there’s matchboxes on the list too.”

“It’s just for the strike pad,” Haru replied absently, trying to focus on one point on the ceiling so his head might stop spinning.

This bout of information only further upset Rin. “Does your little dick bastard of a dad,” - Haru smirked tiredly - “Even know what this shit does to people? Or did he just get high and think of literally every single thing in a grocery store that could kill people?”

Haru dropped his gaze to the tile floor. It was so white that it made his head hurt even worse, and he realized that at a certain point of pain and fatigue, everyone’s resolves gives – he just didn’t expect his to crumble in the middle of a crowded grocery store on a Saturday that was drenched in humidity and way too many fucking people.
“…Haru?”

“I don’t know what it is or what it does,” he whispered. “But there’s no way it’s *not* going to kill people. And I know that all the other stuff I make kills people. I know heroin kills people, I know it could kill me…” - Rin looked away at the reminder - “but I keep *doing* it, so – so maybe this stuff is like that.” His throat was sore from talking so much, just that little sorrowful amount had drained him. “It shouldn’t bother me this bad.”

Rin jerked around and stared. “Yes, it should. You’re not a damn robot.”

Haru frowned in confusion.

“Look, I… fuck, I’m totally gonna end up binge eating myself to death from all this emotional shit you’re going to cause. And you’re not even an emotional person, like what the fuck?” Rin ripped a hand through his hair and Haru froze because he got the feeling he was about to be slammed with a really intense conversation in the middle of a grocery store.

Rin steadied himself and chose his words carefully, expression more serious than it’d ever been. “I know that you’ve been through some shit that most people will never understand. I know there’s a lot you don’t tell me but I can see what you’ve been through…” He struggled to find the words. “I see it in your eyes and the way you *see* through people. You really don’t have time for anyone’s shit.” He shrugged hopelessly. “You’re a jackass, Haru.”

Haru wanted to be angry but it was true.

“And while most people think that you’ve got the emotional capacity of a potato –” Haru kicked him in his boney fucking ankle. “Owww, prick! Let me finish! Shit, I was *gonna* say that I know you actually feel *more* than that but now I might take it back and steal that bottle of aspirin. *Shit.*”

He lifted his foot and rubbed at his ankle despite that there was no bruise and probably no pain. Haru waited with flat patience for him to finish being a child.

“Anyway, you malevolent creature – *don’t do it!* – what I’m trying to say is that you are human and you feel more than fear and exhaustion and jackassery. Sometimes.” He flinched on instinct but Haru didn’t lift his hand. This gave Rin the confidence to continue. “I’ve seen you look happy when we’re at the beach and I mean you like mackerel on a sexual level and I swear that one time we were at the boardwalk and that seal popped out of the water you were about to happily scream like a girl.”

Haru crossed his arms. “Point?”

“I also know you feel empathy because we saw that seal dead the next day after it had got caught in a net.”

Haru turned away, fingers digging into his arms at the memory.

“*See? You felt bad for it!*” Rin swooped in and peeked at Haru’s eyes under the cover of his fringe. “And you feel bad for these people that are going to get addicted to this explosive shit.”

Haru sighed. “My feelings don’t change anything, Rin.”

Rin stared at him for a long uncomfortable minute before his eyes widened. “You know… you *know* it’s okay to want to get out of there, right?”
Irrational anger burned through him. “You think they’d just let me leave?”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Rin said. “I said it’s okay to want to get out of there. To want to get out of that house and that lifestyle.”

Haru slowly relaxed his jaw from where it’d been clenched to the point of pain. He rolled his lips in and shook his head. “I couldn’t make it out… here. Like this.” He gestured vaguely to the people around them, with their clean clothes and fake smiles and bullshit concerns. He tried to sound angry but his voice was rasping. “How am I supposed to pick which restaurant I want to go to when I’ve had to eat mice to keep myself alive?”

“Do you want to keep eating mice?”

Haru scoffed and looked him up and down. “You don’t understand.”

Rin’s breath hitched and the sound halted everything inside Haru.

He hadn’t taken into consideration that Rin was probably tired too, and his exhausted emotions came ripping out of him through his gritted teeth and narrowed eyes. He forced his way into Haru’s field of vision, menacing energy radiating from his flushed skin. “Do you think I want to keep pretending I like it when someone fucks me dry?”

Haru startled so bad that his voice lodged in his throat. He shook his head and mouthed for words but Rin had already backed him up against the wall and was in his face, eyes searing into Haru’s, not letting him look away again. “You think I want to keep hearing someone’s wife come home and be shoved into a closet and be told that I am dead if I make a sound?”

His fists grabbed Haru by the collar of his shirt and Haru dropped the basket to dig his fingers into Rin’s wrists. “You think that I can just take another night of hearing these guys play with their kids while I’m standing in a closet, naked, for hours?”

Haru kept rigid, hands viced around Rin’s wrists but not having the strength to throw him off. He ignored the stares and whispers of everyone around them in favor of worrying - yes, fuck it, worrying - about Rin. He swallowed, eyes darting over his face, and whispered, “Please don’t cry.”

Rin choked. He blinked his wet eyes, causing more tears to race down his cheeks, and he shoved Haru away in favor of slashing vigorously at his own face.

People gradually started going back to the task of shopping and Rin shoved his hands in his pockets, tucked his shoulder back into the wall, and hung his head low so he could hide behind the cover of his hair. Haru kept his arms and ankles crossed in silence, eyes on the floor.

Rin’s voice was still thick. “Did I hurt you?”

“Oh, fuck you.”

Rin laughed wetly and brought a hand up to cover his trembling mouth. He shook his head. “I’m just trying to say that it’s okay to want more. You can have a dream.”

A glow flared in his chest at the thought but he was quick to snuff it out. “I don’t have dreams.”
“Then make one, you diva,” Rin sighed, dragging maroon strands out of his face to reveal his 
exasperated expression. “It doesn’t have to be complicated and impossible like mine.” - Haru 
grimaced at that - “You just… we all need something to look forward to, yeah? A goal or… or just 
a little hope, every now and then.”

Haru fought the burning in his eyes and swallowed. “I don’t have that either.”

Rin pursed his lips, looked him up and down. Crossed his arms. “Do you like the way heroin makes 
you feel?”

Haru’s insides squirmed, nervous at the sudden personal question. “Why?”

“Answer me, Haru-chan.”

“Don’t call me –chan.”

Rin raised a brow silently.

Haru thumped his head back against the wall and let out an explosive sigh. He licked his lips, glaring 
up at the ceiling. “No. Not anymore.”

“So do you want to stop?”

Haru scoffed. “I can’t just –“

“Do you want to stop?”

Haru glared at Rin and he glared back. Even standing at his full height, Haru had lacked nutrition 
and sunlight for so long that Rin had a couple of inches on him and that little bit loomed over Haru 
like the weight of that question, coming down on him, suffocating and impossible to escape.

Haru vibrated with fury and Rin just smirked. “So it’s a yes, then. That’s your dream. To get off the 
shit. To be free.”

Haru stilled at the word, eyes blinking slowly but not seeing anything other than that word racing 
through his mind like a thousand birds forged together. He mouthed it over and over, oblivious to 
everything but that resolution, and Rin simply rolled his eyes, smiled, and waited for him to finish his 
epiphany.

They took a trip to the soup kitchen and despite that Haru didn’t particularly like the weekly special 
of mushroom soup, he finished off his bowl before insisting he and Rin go the beach next.

Rin sprawled in the sand while Haru organized pieces of seashells into the shape of a very deformed 
dolphin, looking up from his work to watch seagulls bob across the waves and see two little girls 
chase fish through the shallow waters. He settled into the peaceful setting, enjoying the heat of the 
sun beating down on his scalp and warming his aching limbs.

Rin broke the silence as he raised his head. “We should get a place.”

Haru startled, cutting him a look.
Rin stared back in confusion before his expression twisted, absolutely *scandalized*, and he scoffed in offense. “Oh, don’t *flutter yourself*. I meant like a platonic roommate situation. God Almighty.”

Haru breathed out in relief. “I don’t know how we could afford it.”

“Well still.”

He studied his friend for a moment. “You really want to get Gou out of there, don’t you?”

Rin’s face opened up with sincerity and he nodded firmly.

Gou was Rin’s little sister. They had been separated in foster care after their dad had to be put in the hospital due to the worsening of his cancer and their mom went to jail. Rin had done a favor for his social worker, a sexual favor that haunted his expression when he told Haru about it, and in return the man told him that Gou was at the foster center in Iwatobi.

Rin’s own center had been disorganized and he claimed that it had been easy to get ahold of his own paperwork and change his age from fifteen to eighteen on paper. As an adult, the system no longer had to keep tabs on him and he was able to visit with Gou, something he wouldn’t have been permitted to do if her center knew he was still underaged. Rin’s foster center had been so overpopulated that he didn’t think anyone even noticed that he had ran away and headed for Iwatobi.

Rin had brought Haru along to visit Gou a few times. She was a susceptible firecracker, insistent with her opinions, adamantly about being called Kou, and had her brother completely wrapped around her finger. He adored her and praised her academic accomplishments profusely, beamed as she shoved a spelling test in his face, held back tears when she drew him pictures.

The last time Rin and Haru visited Gou, she was missing about seven inches of her hair. The cut had looked like a crime of passion, all choppy around her face in mismatched lengths. Rin demanded to know if some punk kid had done this to her, but Gou had simply told him that she had done it herself so she could look more like her brother.

Haru had been impressed that Rin had been able to hold his shit together until they exited the building. He was then forced to shoulder the common burden of patting Rin’s back as he burst into tears on the curb. Haru just pinched the bridge of his nose and flashed strained smiles at people who walked by and eyed Rin nervously as he wailed.

“There’s no way in hell I can get custody of her if I don’t have a place,” Rin said, sitting up to shake the sand out of his hair. “But I wouldn’t be able to keep giving her what pathetic little money I can so she can buy something at the book fair or an extra juice box or *something.*” He kicked at broken seashells in frustration, shaking his head at the ocean. “I gotta get her out of there and we gotta get out of our shit too, Haru. You know we do.”

Haru found his finger tracing the outline of a house in the sand, a safe, quiet place that he wouldn’t have to be afraid of. He then swiped the image away, feeling stupid.

Rin suddenly turned to him and flashed him a smile. “We’ll make a way, Haru.”

Haru stared wide eyed at his confident expression and wished that he could believe him.

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The combination of disturbing ingredients from the grocery store resulted in Desomorphine - a
murky liquid that reminded Haru of mud when it crusted over with pollen. It was said to have originated in Russia, and along the foggy sidewalks and abandoned buildings of Siberia, the drug was known as Krokodil. As an import, the name tended to change in other countries, so the drug that Haru was making was known on the Iwatobi streets as Crocodile.

It was basically a more intense version of heroin, a thousand times more addictive at just a fraction of the cost. However, that cheap hit – equivalent to only $8 in the United States – never kept anyone satisfied because the high only lasted two hours at most. Users were forced to either buy in bulk or stagger out and go to a dealer seven, eight, nine times a day.

The drug demanded time and attention and with an addiction that laborious, the side effects didn’t take long to show up, and with them came the irreversible damage that the drug brought with the high.

At first the physical changes weren’t anything Haru hadn’t seen before. The skin around an injection site always tended to bruise – the crooks of Haru’s elbows were covered in bruises because he never stopped putting needles in them long enough for him to heal – but then he noticed that Crocodile injections were different. The skin just sort of… faded in color, he’d say, as if the pigment was drawn out of the user’s skin. Then it was black dots, like faded ink stains, swarming over the body with accompanying splotches of green and grey. These odd bruises patched over with a thick, scaly texture – like crocodile skin – and what was left of the body’s expanse dried out until it yellowed, cracked, rotted.

Crocodile ate the host alive from the inside out, and those physical changes were the last stage of the drug’s effects, so it didn’t matter that Haru noticed them before anyone else because suddenly people were dying and they didn’t stop.

His dad couldn’t have been more pleased. He was considered one of the top dealers of Crocodile in Iwatobi due to the fact that he was one of the firsts to start selling the drug. He was proud that his product got the reputation of being “so good it kills you.”

After those words pierced the air with a howling laugh, Haru’s mask fell and he ended up glaring. His dad forced his expression back in line by tackling him to the floor, not a bit slower despite he was missing half a leg, and pressing a gun to Haru’s head. Mom’s voice wobbled as she cussed at Dad from her huddle in the far corner of the room but she couldn’t be heard over his dad yelling that he had to play it cool, couldn’t fuck up, couldn’t stutter like that when death was solid and quick and poised right between his eyes.

No bullet came singing through when his dad pulled the trigger, but then he pulled it again and again, laughing wild and high, eyes wide open boy, here it comes, here it comes!

After he clicked it a sixth time, Haru realized that the gun was empty. This fact did nothing to settle his nerves; only after his dad threw him and his mom out into the yard like dogs could Haru pretend that he was calming down after the incident.

His dad sent them away with the order to not come back until they bought the stuff for a new batch of Crocodile. It was 7 a.m, they had not had any sleep, and the grocery store was two miles into the city.

So they started walking.

Haru blinked awake in the cleaning isle. He didn’t remember much of the trek there, just his mom’s
enraged mumbling and his clothes sticking to him in the morning humidity. Haru heard her still talking to herself a few feet away and he shuffled along as his eyes struggled to stay open.

Mom wasn’t fairing too well either, slouched over in a pair of ratty pajama pants and a hoodie with long sleeves that hid where Haru knew her arms were turning grey and scaly.

He couldn’t blame her. He’d probably dive right into the next batch just for the fuck of it at this point.

Haru woke up in the checkout line, dead on his feet, and it was there that his mom slurred, “Did Mori tell you ’bout when I got knocked up?”

He pulled a gasp through his teeth and glared. He didn’t want to talk about Mori and know that if she were still alive she would be so disappointed in him. She’d probably cry and Haru would hate himself more than he already does.

He watched with narrowed eyes as Mom’s smile shook around the edges, her face spasming due to a lifetime of drug abuse. “I was fourteen. Your daddy was twenty. Told me to get rid of you, so I tried.” She squinted up at the blazing florescent lights. “Took all these pills. Waited. Ain’t nothin’ happen. Drank.” She snorted a laugh, licking the space where her front teeth used to be. “Drank straight vodka like a fuckin’ fish and nothin’ happened. I shot up. Nothin’ happened. You were the fuckin’ stubbornest thing in the world.”

Her eyes, yellowed at the whites and dark in the irises, blinked dazedly. “So then I wanted you to be born, jus’ to make him mad, jus’ to do it anyway. Jus’ to be a kid one more time. A rebel. Think you got that shit from me.”

Haru looked away with his expression twisted in disgust.

“You weren’t even breathin’ when you were born. Didja know that? My body tried to kill you.” Her high little laugh pulled Haru’s gaze back to her. “And then you started wailin’, screamin’ like you were so fuckin’ mad. I thought to myself, oh, shit. Hakai’s gonna have a hell of a time tryin’ to break this one.”

Haru’s jaw fell, aching, throbbing, eyes wide and tight, burning, watering.

“You was a crack baby. Born a month early to a kid that’d been shootin’ since she was eleven, but you were fine.”

Haru took a shuddering breath, everything was shuttering, breaking, falling apart inside him. “Why does any of that matter?”

His mom turned to him, wearing the same shade of blue in her eyes, having that hauntingly pale skin under those track marks, scars, bruises, cuts, every pain that she could bring on herself if there was a little bit of an escape involved. “Cause your daddy wouldn’t of been strong enough to survive none of that shit.”

Haru stared and she shrugged, her shoulders bopping up like none of this was heavy and chaining him down in the middle of a tsunami, years of pain rushing by him, tightening around him, suffocating, only for him to finally, finally realize that he was in the eye of the storm and he didn’t have to keep hurting.
His mom pitched forward into the man in front of her, and Haru reined her back in with what he thinks was a mumbled apology, but a lack of sleep and whirl of emotions had him fading in and out.

He steadied a hand on her frail shoulder and studied her as she rubbed the side of her head with a grimace. “What’s wrong?”

She waved him off with a grunt, squeezing her eyes shut. “Jus’, jus’ go get me some booze, go, get the cheap shit, you know… you know what kind it is. Fuckin’ go already, I’ll be fine.”

Haru headed off, chin tucked low as his face heated at the stares from other people in line. He stumbled down the alcohol isle, using the handles on the freezer doors as a crutch, and groped for the bottle of whiskey that sat in the same place it always had.

Haru took it out and that’s when people started screaming.

His eyes never left the label even as shouts rang out about a doctor, about hurrying, quickly, someone help, please, somebody!

Haru stared down at the bottle, gaze tracing the letters as if the familiar shapes could somehow make this a normal day. His fingers turned white-knuckled on the door handle as employees and shoppers ran past him toward the commotion, and Haru gritted his teeth, breath trembling out of his nose, tears racing down his cheeks, down the bottle, over his fingers, hitting the floor where he knew his mom was lying just yards away.

It didn’t take long for the storefront to fall silent before erupting in whispers and he caught the words he needed to hear to confirm what he already knew in his heart: “Not breathing, she’s not breathing.”

Haru put the bottle back in its slot in the freezer, handling it delicately so the glass wouldn’t make a harsh sound. He eyed it for only a moment before closing the door, letting go of the handle.

He stared into the whiskey, watching the amber liquid slosh like an angry, burning ocean.

“Dead,” someone gasped. “She’s dead.”

Haru let out a sigh he’d been holding in for the past eighteen years, slid down the door of the opposite freezer, sat on the floor with his legs splayed out in front of him, his gaze vacant and still on that bottle.

And then he hunched over and wept into his hands.

His mom’s overdose was never narrowed down to a singular cause but the headlines just cared about the positive test for Crocodile that showed up after her autopsy. National media got involved and dug up more than a dozen deaths that had occurred in Iwatobi due to the Croc epidemic. Police swarmed the streets in an attempt to regain some dignity, as if there was any honor to protect or anything they could do to change the world’s opinion on the coastal city that was drowning in drugs.

He would never have peace about his mom – he had too many circular scars to ever truly forgive her – but it was as if she was with him more now than she was when she was alive. He blamed that horse shit on the fact that he was losing his mind.
Something about that final trip to the grocery store made him start shooting up only once a day and his body wasn’t having it. He was used to shooting up three, four times a day, and cutting it down to one little cheap shot threw him into violent withdrawals. His frame was wracked with tremors and he couldn’t stop throwing up, his skin was flushed and drenched in sweat at all times, he couldn’t think straight, couldn’t speak coherently. But the worst of it was that insatiable fire that screamed through his veins and insides and mind and body with the demand to give in, give in, give it, give it, GIVE IT -

It took him two weeks to wake up.

He was sprawled out on the back porch, blinking up at the stars, listening to the birds sing in the early morning. He heard his dad’s muffled shouting from inside the house, confirming that the man was still on his binge.

Haru was still deliriously craving his fix, but he could take slow, deep inhales and exhales without hungry claws digging into his gut with each breath. He could register the sensation of wood against his fingertips, feel how damp the porch was under back.

Something inside him knew that this yearning was never going to go away. He would be fighting this battle for the rest of his life and it was never going to get easier. But every inch of Haru was glowing from the inside out, burning with disbelief, mind struggling to comprehend that he was finally, finally -

Free.

Haru startled as his cell phone rang. He groped for it and the screen told him that it was 3 a.m and the caller was Rin.

He sat up to answer the phone and Rin immediately started babbling with such excitement that Haru could feel it through the line, and while he knew the words Rin was saying, he didn’t fully comprehend. “What did you say?”

Rin groaned but it broke into a laugh and his smile was so evident in his voice that he sounded as if he were about to fly apart with joy. “I said that I found somewhere safe for us to stay, Haru-chan.” He sounded so young.

Haru’s voice lodged in his throat. “Wh…”

“Your little dick dad will never find you and none of these crazy rat bastards will be able to try and bribe me with a bed and shelter and waffles and, and – oh shit on bricks Haru, this isn’t a joke, I’m being for real.”

He actually fell back on his ass. He tried to form words but all that came out were these breathless excuses for words. “I… but we… Rin… there’s no, no money, I –“

“It’s free.”

Haru’s entire being faltered. “What like, like, like a homeless shelter?”

“No,” Rin laughed at his expense but Haru was too dumbstruck to even register it. “Look so, so you know the soup kitchen?”
Haru eased onto his back and gazed up at the full moon, reeling in disbelief. “I hate their mushroom soup.”

“Well I fucking love it and I kept going to the kitchen,” Rin said. “And I met this kid that worked there. He had that silvery hair?”

“Like a baby wizard,” Haru breathed in remembrance.

“Yes! That one!” Rin was beaming, he could tell. “I thought he was gonna like, have a nose bleed or something when he first tried to talk to me.” He groaned. “I was such a bitch to him, Haru, I had to sleep out in the rain the night before and everything was just such a fucking mess and I couldn’t handle it. But then, later, it was like…” He made a disbelieving sound. “It was like high school. He saw me sitting by myself and he pulled a chair up beside me. Looked like he was three seconds away from a nervous breakdown but still. So we started talking – or I started talking and he’d just make this half-agreeing, half-shouting sounds –”

“Rin.”

“Anyway, he was eventually able to talk back, didn’t take me long, master relaxer that I am, and I ended up helping him with his English homework like, every Wednesday night at that same table in that fucking soup kitchen. Then one night these little twinks sauntered in like they practice their fucking entrance every day after ballroom dance class and they told Ai that they wanted their homework right now. And I was like, oh, that’s why he has so much homework, and they were like, gonna beat the shit out of him, and then I was like, oh, that’s not going to happen.”

Haru arched a brow up at the passing fog. “So what happened?”

“Daddy went to work, Haru, that’s what happened. Kind of disappointing that there wasn’t much of an audience, just some stragglers like Greasy Goro, you know that dude who hangs out in that junk yard and talks about pizza conspiracies and shit? He was there. So was Ai’s dad.” Rin’s breath hitched. “Haru, Ai’s dad owns that soup kitchen.”

He didn’t know what to say and he was rendered that much more speechless when Rin’s voice thickened with tears. “He told me Ai don’t have any friends, said that no one had ever done anything like that for him. Said… Haru, Haru there’s this room in the back of the building and – and he said we could stay there. No big money, no fucking, nothing. Just because I helped Ai.”

Haru’s hand shook over the phone and he hauled himself up only to curl over his legs. “How…” He hissed out a sigh. “He doesn’t know who I am, Rin, he probably won’t trust me.”

“He already agreed, Haru,” Rin said. “I told him that I had this friend, just this one friend and he agreed to let you stay there too if you were anything like me.”

Haru choked on a laugh. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Jackass, I have edict. I know how to act around adults.” He sobered up. “I know you do too, Haru.” He hesitated. “But you can’t shoot up there. We can’t have any drugs, if he finds any, we’re out. I’m sorry.”

Haru was already shaking his head. “No, I can handle it. I’m done. I’m fucking done with it.” He heard a catastrophe of drunken laughter from inside the house. “I’m done with all of it.”
Rin was smirking. He could hear it. “Shut the fuck up,” Haru replied in kind, heaving himself to his feet. He ignored the fact that he was left panting. “Can we… can we go there right now?”

“Yeah, you need to get here as soon as you can. Cops started hitting the outskirts of the city, it’s no time before you guys get busted.”

“I know.” Haru quietly eased the door open and stepped into the dark hallway. “No police came by to question us after mom died,” he whispered as he stepped into his room. “They already know, Rin, they’ve just been waiting for dad to slip up and he has.”

“Shit,” Rin breathed. “Oh dog shit, can you even get here? There’s police everywhere and no offense but –”

“I know how I look,” Haru said flatly.

“Haru, you can’t even walk without eating the dirt after a few minutes.”

“I will make it.” His tone left no room for argument, though he did hesitate after a moment. “But we can meet at McDonalds. It’s closer. You know, if it’ll make you feel better.”

“Right. Sure.”

They said their goodbyes and Haru shucked his phone in his hoodie before wavering with the realization that it was finally happening, he was finally going to get out of here, away from this house, his dad, the beatings, everything, he was going to be fr -

“BOY! GET ME A PACK O’ CROC!”

Haru’s blood froze. He was torn with choices – he could run but his dad would be hot on his ass and he’d never escape after that. Or he could get roped into doing task after task and fuck, what was he supposed to do?

“YOU FUCKIN’ DEAF? I’LL RIP YOUR FUCKING EARS OFF!”

Haru shut his eyes with the resolution that he would just do this one thing, his dad was too doped up to even think of asking much more of him than this simple task. He’d do this, pack his shit, and never come back.

He hurried into the kitchen where cockroaches exploded under his shoes and brushed past his fingers as he opened the cabinet under the sink to pull out a baggie. Haru picked himself back up and grimaced as he fought blacking out, feeling so light-headed that a migraine instantly shot through his head. He pushed the pain away, into the back of his mind.

He followed the light of the living room television as it flickered across the floor. From the doorway of the kitchen, Haru could make out the outline of his dad’s stocky frame and confirmed that the rest of the gathering were regular clients. He tried not to acknowledge that he was beyond thankful Asahi, Nao, and Natsuya weren’t there when his dad was so out of control.

But then Haru’s gaze landed on an unfamiliar individual.

The guy wasn’t built like a withered addict at all. He was tall and muscular with a similar build to those college athletes that came to the house for steroids. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows to
expose his skin, smooth, tight, without a single track mark. He had on the usual junkie chic look - battered jeans and a faded flannel - but his eyes were bright, not yellowed at the whites and sunken in, and when Haru watched him talk he saw that the guy still had all of his teeth and they were blindingly white. His hair was neat and cropped short, he sat with his leg crossed at the ankle, right hand over his belt buckle, left hand tucked close to his side, over his hip, where a gun holster would sit.

How could his dad be so fucking stupid?

Haru flipped his hood over his head to cover his face before the guy turned to him, and if Haru didn’t know this asshole was a cop just a few seconds ago, that calculating sweep of his eyes sure as shit gave it away.

Blood rushing in his ears, Haru distantly heard his dad bark at him and saw him gesture to the new guy. “Give Sousuke what he paid for,” Dad ordered.

Sousuke’s gaze was impassive, cold, and sent ice clawing down Haru’s back. He walked into the room and his suspicions were confirmed with every step he took - Sousuke’s eyes darted over him quicker than he could comprehend, looking for weapons, taking in every detail that could later identify him as a suspect, though he kept that cool, easy, dog shit smile intact.

Haru reached into his pocket and discreetly covered his fingers, or more so, his fingerprints, with his sleeve. He then pinched the baggie and held it out for Sousuke, whose eyes zeroed in on Haru’s covered fingers before he took the bag, fingernails neat and trimmed, no dirt underneath. “Thanks.”

Haru didn’t reply, didn’t even breathe as Sousuke opened the bag and viewed the product before glancing up. “You make this yourself?”

Haru’s vision tunneled until his dad spluttered, “Oh no, no, shit no, I’m a one man empire.”

But Sousuke wasn’t listening to Dad. His eyes caught Haru’s under his hood and widened a fraction before his whole body stiffened.

Sousuke knew he was busted.

He cleared his throat, frame relaxing as he stood up. Haru backed up a few steps, lowering his head to further hide his features. “I got what I came for,” Sousuke husked. “I appreciate it.”

His dad waved in false hospitality, counting the bills in his hands. “No, thank you! Show him out, boy! Be useful for once in your fucking life.”

Haru’s stomach dropped but he managed to remember how to get to the front door. He felt Sousuke’s gaze weighing on his back as he lead him out the door and Haru braced to be confronted with tanks and dogs and red and blue lights, but the yard was empty.

Haru couldn’t bring himself to feel relieved as he slinked down the porch steps and headed for the side of the house so he could roundabout to the back door.

“Hey,” Sousuke called. “Where you going?”

Haru jerked around, jaw tight. “To take a piss. That okay?”
Sousuke’s veins popped out of his arms as he clenched his fists and Haru knew that this undercover piece of shit was going to come after him first.

Haru stepped around the corner and unzipped his pants before Sousuke started down the road. When he was out of sight, Haru’s back hit the side of the house and he covered his mouth with both hands to muffle the sound of panic that had been lodged in his throat during the whole exchange.

He raced into the house through the back door and couldn’t feel his hands but he managed to open the closet. He had to hold back a shout as rats scattered across the floor.

Haru shuttered and grabbed his backpack – it was waterproof, a gift from Mo that he had kept clean and intact all these years. He tossed in his sewing kit and what few clothes he had before reaching up to grab a box on his shelf. The container held his most prized possessions: a pack of cigarettes that was filled with seashells from the beach, the wrapper to a piece of gum that Mo had given him, some books from the library bin, a drawing of a rainbow fish that Gou had gave him for his birthday, and a denim vest that his mom had considered lucky and magical.

He had no pictures. Mom had destroyed all of them during her rampages, but despite the horrors she had rained down on him, he slipped the vest over his black hoodie. The last item he had was a leather necklace he and Rin found at the beach and he was already wearing the itchy thing around his neck.

He shrugged his backpack on and stepped into the hallway, wrapped his hand around the knob of the backdoor -

“HARUKA! Get me a fuckin’ beer!”

His pulse jackknifed but he twisted the door knob and staggered down the porch steps.

Haru froze when he heard a crash from the front of the house, a collusion that resulted in the sound of splitting wood. It was the front door, he vaguely realized. Something was hitting the front door over and over and something caught his eye on the grass. Haru turned to see the reflection of red and blue lights spinning across the yard and his stomach, his heart, his hope, everything inside him, dropped.

The front door gave and a mighty shout ordered everyone to put their hands up.

Haru peered through the back window and gripped the edges as several men dressed in black gear rushed into the house in a precise formation with their guns drawn. The addicts scrambled and the officers gave chase until one of them shouted, “Captain Mikoshiba, the kid’s not here!”

The tallest officer loomed over the chaos with his helmeted head jerking around to take in everything around him before he prowled across the front porch to holler, “Sousuke, where’s the fucking kid?!”

Haru jerked around and oh shit, Sousuke rounded the house with so much power that he ripped up dirt. Haru stumbled for the woods but it was too easy for Sousuke to tackle him to the ground, his weight suffocating and leaving no room for escape.

“You’re under arrest, asshole,” Sousuke grunted, arms viced around Haru’s shoulders. He hauled him up and Haru used the opportunity to wildly kick his legs and buck his head backwards but Sousuke was unyielding, forcing Haru’s hands behind his back and shoving him forward toward the front yard.
Haru’s lungs still hadn’t recovered from being compressed but any air that he had managed to suck down came rushing out when gunshots erupted inside the house. Sousuke cursed and forcedly turned Haru so his larger body was hunched over his, shielding him, protecting him from any potential bullets. Haru was stunned at the action.

It was then he heard his dad’s unmistakable shout and the unmistakable noise of a struggle. A door slammed shut before glass started breaking and items collided with a wall. Haru whipped around and through the window of the cook room he saw his dad pouring solvents into the floor, smashing tubes full of chemicals before he fumbled with his pockets and ripped out a matchbox.

Haru’s heart stopped when his dad tore a match across the strike pad and a spark burst forth, and in the wake of the spilled chemicals and flammable products, that’s all it took.

Flames surged out of the house in a blaze of heat and the explosion rocked the ground, tearing Sousuke and Haru off their feet and throwing them across the yard.

Haru rolled onto his front and his face meshed into the cool, dewy grass, a strange sensation compared to the feeling of his hair being singed. The air was sufficiently hot but his insides ran cold as he looked up, sweat and smoke stinging his eyes, to see red and orange devour the house, eating it alive, and the place that had caused Haru so much pain went down so easily, bowing down to the crushing heat.

Haru clawed his fingers through the grass and hauled himself up, using the cover of smoke to head for the woods, not looking back. He tore through the trees, briars clawing his skin, mud gripping his shoes, tree limbs slashing his face. He was blind in the dark, ankle twisting as his foot sunk into a hole, but he didn’t stop. He relied on muscle memory to keep running after his legs went numb, depending on his primitive instinct to survive to keep himself going. Dog barks echoed through the woods, followed by shouts and a flashlight trail that skittered across the trees.

Haru broke through a clearing and hit the mud. Mist cooled the sweat on his face and he squinted through the fog to see the grass recede into black rocks, and below came the beautiful sound of waves hitting the cliff.

Haru drove his fingers into the mud and dragged himself toward the edge. He was sobbing in exhaustion by the time he reached it and his head dropped onto the rocks, no longer having the strength to stay up, and his teeth jarred and his jaw cracked. Blood poured over his lips and stained his tongue with the taste of rust as he looked over the edge of the cliff, losing himself in the sight of the waves reaching for him as they climbed up the rocks.

Longing coursed through him. He reached his arms out toward the water, aching for it to clutch his hands and drag him over the edge, pull him down into the soft darkness and let him stay. Nothing mattered to the ocean. Feelings didn’t exist. Not exhaustion and most definitely not the hope that had once again deceived Haru.

He pulled his body further over the edge and at a rustling noise he glanced over his shoulder to see Sousuke tear through the clearing. He held up an arm to shield his face from the rain of mist and he squinted before his gaze widened on Haru.

Haru smiled in weak and sad victory before he tumbled over the side of the cliff.

His last thought was that Sousuke had not only shouted for him, stop, no, please, but had
unsuccessfully lunged for him and risked his own life to try and save Haru’s.

As the roar of the waves vibrated through his body, Haru decided that maybe the guy wasn’t so much of an asshole after all.

“Sweetie, can you hear me?”

Haru’s vision was flooded with blinding light, searing tears into his eyes. He squeezed them shut and when he opened them again it was darker, the only light in the room being the soft recessed lights in the ceiling. His blurred vision slowly focused and he found his eyes on his legs, narrowing on the thin sheet that covered them. The ringing in his ears gave way to muffled beeping and the shuffle of clothing.

Haru turned his head and pain shot through his neck.

“Easy, sweetie, you’re okay.”

A woman stepped into his field of vision. Her scrubs startled him awake; they were an alarming shade of neon green. He frowned at the stethoscope around her neck and noticed machines by his bed, but he was more concerned with the IV pole that stood at his side. The bag at the top was full of thick, dark liquid and he followed the coiling line out of the bottom of the bag to the crook of his elbow, where a needle was taped under his skin. He immediately realized that he was freezing and couldn’t repress a shudder.

The woman ducked to the side and came back with another blanket. “Sorry, I forgot that iron transfusions make people cold. You probably taste metal too, don’t you?

Haru couldn’t taste anything but sandpaper as he croaked, “What?”

She helped him fit a straw into his mouth and he sucked down the entire glass of water. His whole body was invigorated at the taste.

The woman helped him settle back against the pillows before she sat down in a chair beside him. “Where am I?” Haru rasped.

“You’re at Iwatobi General,” she supplied gently. “I don’t want to overwhelm you but there was no identification on you when you were found.”

Haru couldn’t get past the fog in his head, couldn’t understand. “Found…?”

“You washed up on the beach about a day ago.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it. You’re going to be very sore for a while but you’re injuries were minor, considering, and you didn’t seem to have any water in your lungs at all.”

Haru blinked dazedly. “Oh.” He tried to understand that impossibility himself before he found his eyes trailing to the needle in his arm. “Why… what’s an iron transfusion?”

The woman stared. “You mean you’ve… you’ve never had one? Ever?”

Haru shook his head.
She laughed breathlessly, shaking her head as if his words were impossible. “Have you noticed becoming drained very easily? Being light-headed, not having any energy? Maybe passing out if you’re walking and not resting every few minutes?”

Haru got a sinking feeling as he nodded.

The woman hesitated. “We did some tests on you and saw that you’re anemic with a severe iron deficiency. It means that your body isn’t holding onto iron. It’s not even producing it.”

Haru was nauseated. “So?”

“In basic terms, let’s say iron count goes from one to ten, okay? Let’s say that if a person has a ten, they’re doing great, doesn’t have many health issues.” She fixed her gaze on him. “Now let’s say that having a four is considered fatal and a one is impossible to survive. You’ve been walking around with a two.”

He stared down at his pale arms, zeroing in on the trail of blue veins. He was churning with a hatred for his body, not understanding why it had decided to betray him and kill him so slowly, dragging out his energy, leaving him without an ounce of strength. Maybe this was its revenge for all the heroin it had to endure, all the beatings and relentless winters.

“You’re a walking miracle. I’m glad you came to us when you did; I don’t know how much longer you would have lasted without a transfusion.”

The cold feeling inside of him dared to warm. “So this will fix it?”

The woman looked mournful. “Transfusions aren’t a one time deal, sweetie. I’m sorry.”

“What happens if I don’t get them?”

She pursed her lips, looked away. Haru stilled. “I’ll die,” he said.

“I’m sure you’ll feel better than you have in years after this bag, but it won’t last forever. You’re going to get sick again. I recommend you have a bag of blood at least once a month with a bag of iron. Your case is so severe that it’s effected the production of your red blood cells as well.”

Haru tipped his head back to keep the tears from escaping his eyes. “How much does all of this cost?”

“If you’ll tell me your name I can contact your parents and get your insurance information –”

“Just tell me,” he snapped, voice pitched with rising hysteria.

The nurse sighed. “It’s... it’s hundreds. Sometimes thousands.”

Haru tried to curl up in that dark corner of his mind, a place he always went when he was too scared to face reality, but that part of him no longer felt safe. He tried to find somewhere inside himself to retreat, desperate to force himself into another reality where this wasn’t fucking happening. He wanted to throw a fit like Rin and throw himself to the floor and never stop screaming.

Haru fiddled with the IV cord, his expression spasming as he struggled to keep it blank. He couldn’t keep the tremor out of his voice. “There’s no other option?”
“Iron pills can help get you through a few rough days but they aren’t a substitute for transfusions. I’m sorry but those are also a temporary fix.” She tried to rest a comforting hand on his arm but Haru jerked away. Her eyes filled with pity and she softly requested, “I know your parents are worried about their brave little boy. Please tell me your name, I want to let them know you’re all right.”

Haru hid his watering eyes under his fringe and turned his back on the woman, curling up on his side. “I’m tired.”

The woman’s voice strained. “Just let me call your parents -”

“Please.”

He heard her sigh and stiffened as her hand smoothed down his hair. She then walked out and closed the door behind her.

Haru threw the covers over his head and curled further into himself because he didn’t know what to do.

It was only a matter of time before the police started looking for patients that had gaunt, pale skin, a shitty attitude, and a frame so skinny that it bordered on morbidly fascinating. If the cops were smart enough to ask for John Doe’s who just happened to wash up on the beach, then, well. Haru was even more screwed than he already was.

It might have been 2 a.m on the hospital graveyard shift, but that didn’t help Haru much because he was pretty sure that someone had took out his all muscles, used them as punching bags, ran them over, seared them in hot grease, threw them to the dogs, and then neatly sewed them back inside his body. Not to mention the pain that came with getting out of a soft bed when he had never had one for himself.

He managed to put his clothes on and check his backpack to see that all his possessions were dry and intact. He hated thinking of Mo, but he thanked her over and over inside his mind until he was sure that somewhere, she heard him.

He made it out of the hospital and realized as he ventured down the street that he did have more energy, wasn’t winded at all. However, he didn’t stay excited for long because he knew he would never be able to afford feeling this good ever again.

He still felt tired, and exhaustion weighed him down until he was forced to use his mental map of the city to navigate the streets. He knew that Rin wouldn’t have been able to sit still at McDonalds after he realized that Haru was not only late, but not answering his phone either. Haru would have called him at the hospital but his phone was dead, of course.

He ventured into that part of town where the streetlights didn’t work and located the soup kitchen.

Though the frosted glass of the office door, Haru could see that there was a light on inside. He went to it like a moth to flame, crossing the streets as newspapers swirled and beer bottles rolled in a gust of wind. He heard muffled voices coming from inside the office and his chest tightened as he recognized one of the high, hysterical, irrational voices.

Haru knocked on the door and when he was met with silence, he was overwhelmed with the feeling
that the darkness at his back was closing in.

But then the door swung open. Haru blearily noticed the boy with the silver baby wizard hair standing over a desk and a phone slipped from his hand when his eyes locked with Haru’s. The news was playing on a mounted television overhead, and he recognized his house before it exploded on the screen, and he looked away to look at Rin.

Rin stared at him with red-rimmed eyes, disheveled hair, hunching over with his fist clawed into his shirt, over his heart.

And then Haru lunged forward to meet him in a crushing hug that hurt so badly he would have collapsed if Rin wasn’t clutching him like he’ll never let go, never let Haru do this shit to him again.

“How fucking dare you?” Rin cried. “How fucking dare you let me think that you were…” He head-butted Haru’s shoulder repeatedly before resting his forehead there. “You owe me so many chicken nuggets, asshole,” he sobbed.

And Haru was once again shouldered with the common burden of patting Rin on the back as he cried, but this time, it was okay.

So Rin refused to let him just roll over and die.

He dragged Haru out of that back room at the soup kitchen every day, ignoring Haru’s desire to never leave the air mattress Ai provided and just go out quietly, peacefully.

Rin kindly said, “Fuck that,” and shoved Haru out into the sunlight, into the world, pulled him along to every hiring establishment they could find.

They both applied for jobs despite that Haru’s need for one had nothing to do with Rin. But he knew it was pointless to argue since neither of them had a chance at finding work - they were the same person on paper with the exact same credentials: high school dropout, no (legal) work experience, no residential address.

Haru was hunched over a table, application in front of him, when he frowned. “Is being able to hold your breath for three minutes considered a special skill?”

Rin stopped chewing on his pencil. “Shit yeah.” He bit down in concentration and startled when his pencil broke in half. He groaned in frustration, flicked the pieces at Haru, and then paused as he squinted down at his own stack of papers. “What should I put down for a personal weakness? That I don’t like comeplay?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

They applied almost everywhere in Iwatobi but no one would hire them. Surprisingly.

Rin finally let Haru have a breather after weeks of job searching. He went off to meet a client and Haru was weighted with shame because he knew that Rin was going to work himself to death to try and make enough money for Haru’s transfusions.
He found himself at the beach, swimming for hours, using up every ounce of his weaning strength until he was forced to rest on the shore. He let the warm waves roll over his feet as he gazed at the boardwalk in the distance and a flash of red caught his eye.

There was a group of young women at the end of the boardwalk and one of them was leaning against the railing. She had on a shirt that appeared to be made of crimson silk and the color reminded Haru of blood and nothing else – not a rose, not a strawberry, but a splotch of blood against a backdrop of grey sky, grey water.

Haru’s heart lurched in his chest as the railing snapped and the woman flailed for leverage. Her friends were not quick enough to grab her and she went tumbling down, red high heels slipping off her feet, red hat flying off her head, before she hit the water.

Haru dove under and when he popped back up crowd had gathered on the boardwalk, pointing and shouting uselessly, but Haru caught sight of the woman’s dark head of hair in the distance. He swam as fast as he could but the ocean was quicker and had no problem sweeping the woman under. Haru went under and squinted through the cloudy water, heart pounding and sinking with discourage, before he saw the flutter of red silk from below.

He swam down into the darkness.

Haru sat with her in the back of the ambulance. The paramedics deemed that she didn’t need to go to the hospital, but they did give her some space and wrapped a few blankets around her. She looked more outraged than anything with that mascara running down her cheeks and lipstick smudged over her mouth.

The woman introduced herself as Miho and assured Haru that her anger was caused by the fact that her friends’ slow reactions had almost made her lose her life. “You, on the other hand,” she smiled, red lips stretching to make an almost disturbing expression, “You acted so fast. I’ve never seen anyone swim like you.”

Haru shrugged in response but then he stiffened as she gave him a once over. “It’s surprising someone as incredible as you has such a bad habit.”

He followed her gaze to the track marks across his arms and was a bit stunned that she noticed them. His bruises had healed but he would always wear the faintest scars from his drug abuse, however, it took a sharp eye to really know what kind of markings they were. He hadn’t shot up at all since his house exploded and while he spent every night in a cold sweat, lusting for it, he refused to let it control what little bit of life he had left.

“Sorry for that,” Miho said, not sounding sorry at all. “I just know that it can be an expensive habit to keep up. You’d have to have quite a high paying occupation. Those are hard to find with drug testing and all, such bullshit regulations.”

Haru frowned, puzzled by her statement. “I don’t have a job.”

“I assumed as much, I’m afraid.” She smiled sweetly. “Would you like one?”

Haru craned back and she pursed her lips. “I can tell there’s something rare about you,” she explained. “I’m very good at reading people, wouldn’t have got this far in my profession if I didn’t know what I was doing. You’re sharp. You’re quick. You seem very unapologetic and that’s
something you have to have in my line of work.”

Haru frowned. “What line of work?”

She shrugged delicately, pulling the blankets tighter around her with red-tipped nails. “I’m sure you’ve already guessed that it’s a bit… under the table. No tax benefits, I’m afraid. But the pay is… well.”

He found himself anxious for her to finish and Miho raised her chin confidently. “I have every faith that you could do very well for yourself. I need someone who’s experienced with…” She eyed his track marks before inclining her head, her features soft and gentle, nothing like the bite of her smile and the flash of lipstick-stained teeth that reminded Haru of a wolf’s bloody row of fangs. “So, what do you say?”

He knew that this woman wasn’t safe, wasn’t who she appeared to be, and what she was offering couldn’t possibly be any kinder, but there was a chance he could get his transfusions. He could keep himself alive.

He hesitated for only a moment before nodding, making Miho’s terrifying smile stretch wider.

And that’s how he became a drug dealer.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork of Rin by transtachibana; Haru is by marinoxx

Chapter Explanations:

As for the odd setting, please check the FAQ page for the reasoning.

Asahi, Nao, Natsuya and little bro Ikuya - these are characters from High Speed! Free! Starting Days and I was slightly devastated to find that there aren’t more fics out there featuring these precious loves so here they are. But if you haven't seen the movie don’t stress, there aren’t any specific spoilers / references from it other than those characters.

The price of transfusions - I have grown up witnessing my mom's battle with iron deficiency. Not only are Haru's symptoms and struggles with the disorder a product of what I've personally seen, but also the price of his transfusions. This price varies depending on where you live, your personal iron levels, if your body can hold / produce iron, how much of the cost insurance will cover, and how frequently the treatments are required. The price of Haru's transfusions are what my mom's would have cost if she were to pay in cash, which is used in this story due to the location, and the reason for that can be found in the faq.
Freebird

Chapter Notes

I just want each and every one of you to know how floored and honored I am to have such an amazing response to this fic. This has meant the world to me. Thank you so much.

I know I told some of you that this chapter wouldn't be as long as the first one, but... 16k is still less than 22k right? Right?

A quick reminder that Asahi, Nao, Natsuya, and Ikuya are characters from High Speed! Free! Starting Days! Also, Nii, and Aki are from the light novel. Kazuki and Nakagawa are on the Samezuka swim team.

thank you saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter) and pikamouse for the beta reading | tumbl

And now, after all that Chapter 1 angst, I think we're all ready for some Makoto, yes?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Everything is blue, his pills, his hands, his jeans

And now I'm covered in the colors, pulled apart at the seams."

"Colors" by Halsey

Sea foam hisses as waves hit the pillars of a dock. A storm rolls across the bay, dragging with it a cloud of fog that hides mountainous rock formations and the boats of early morning fishermen, making it impossible to tell if the catastrophe of booms is from thunder or the waves slamming into cliffs. The ocean itself is a gaping hole of blackness, more visible by sound than sight, due to the fact that there are too many big city lights glaring with artificial sincerity, hiding the stars, blocking out the sun, leaving Iwatobi to suffocate under an ever-present cloud of factory smoke and smog.

Twenty three year old Haru sways his feet off the edge of the dock, lulling his head back and forth in an attempt to stretch the muscles that bunched up during his two hours of sleep. He’d had a long, demanding night and was exhausted, but being at the ocean in the early, quiet hours of the day makes him want to force his eyes to stay open and take in everything around him, like the dizzying push and shove of waves against the boats tied to the dock or the flash of scales in the water beneath the dock lights. He listens to the soft roll of waves over the shore and the distant barking of seals as they haul themselves up on the rocks with the hope of basking in some morning sunshine, and Haru allows the setting to lull him into a warm drowsiness as mist drenches his bare skin, jammers, and the waterproof bag beside him that Mo gave him so many lifetimes ago.

A few minutes later a horn pierces the air, carrying through the water with a power that makes the wood of the dock vibrate beneath Haru’s palms. Glaring lights break through the fog before a
massive barge reveals itself, loaded with rows of cargo containers that rise from the deck in looming stacks of faded green, red, and grey. They’re labeled with the flags of many nations and the scrawl of several different languages. The barge sends enormous waves rushing toward the shore, causing a pod of dolphins to surge through the water and jump through as many of them as possible with cries far too high and screeching for this hour, but Haru will let it slide.

The barge pulls closer and he sees that it’s a washed out shade of blue. The paint is peeling and makes for interesting shapes and formations between the gaps – one specifically catches his eye and it’s at the front of the ship, poised just above the crashing waves and shaped like a bird in flight.

Haru dives into the water.

He can’t necessarily say that the sun is up when he starts his trek up the beach, but the sky has lightened from black to grey, and that’s the closest thing Iwatobi has to vibrant sunrises.

He walks over the rough sand and sharp pieces of broken shells, passing hunched over crab fishers with thick beards and weathered faces, shrimp boaters in steel toe boots and layered hoodies with mugs of black coffee steaming from their gloved hands as they head for the boats. The men are familiar with the sight of Haru trudging through the sand in only his jammers at an ungodly hour of the morning, so most of them nod at him in greeting while others look out to the churning sea with haunted eyes and dread, which is not an expression that will ever be justifiable to Haru when it comes to the ocean.

He hauls himself over a line of sand dunes and his muscles strain, reminding him of how slow he swam, how pale his skin has been over the last few days, and how long it’s been since he had his last transfusion.

The sight of a row of cabins at the edge of the beach helps him push down his worry. Each cozy home is painted a different color but all of them are soft, inviting shades like mint green and lavender. Haru approaches a cabin that’s paint has been almost entirely stripped; the wood siding has only a few remaining strips of the peach paint that once covered it in thick coats.

Haru would make a mental reminder to buy some paint if he liked the color, but he doesn’t, so he doesn’t.

He steps onto the concrete slab that acts as a back porch and rinses the clinging sand from his bare feet with the hose. He then lets out a long-suffering sigh as he kicks some floaties aside and moves a pair of glittery jellybean sandals back to their rightful place beside a pair of flippers.

Haru creaks open the back door and ducks inside the cool darkness of the cabin, not needing to turn on a light to navigate his room, which is far larger than the room in the soup kitchen that he and Rin had lived out of so long ago.

He passes his bed, which has already been made with a mix of military precision and borderline religious worship. He’s never quite forgot the feeling that came over him the first time he slipped under the covers of his own bed, *his first real bed*. He had felt so warm and safe that he cried himself to sleep and he’d be a liar if he said that feeling didn’t bubble up in his throat every single time he laid his head down on the pillows.

Haru is slightly devastated that he doesn’t have time to soak in a bath and is forced to take a quick shower instead. As he towels off he glances at his reflection in the foggy mirror, and as hard as he
tries, he can never stop his eyes from darting to the faded circular scars and the pinpoints of old track marks across his skin.

Haru stubbornly looks away and tries to make himself feel better by flattening his palms over his hard stomach, and he becomes quietly ecstatic over the amount of muscle he’s been able to build over the years.

After his house exploded and he washed up on the beach, Haru had only weighed ninety pounds at the hospital. It had taken time and even a few times getting sick for him to figure out how to eat regularly, but after he found out that being so sickly thin would make his anemia worse, he grew determined to get stronger and he honestly can’t believe that he finally has.

Haru’s fingers lift to the right side of his neck, where a thick scar is covered by a tattoo that stretches up his throat. It’s a hawk that’s turned to the side with open wings and he now considers the ink as familiar as the rest of his skin.

Haru steps into his closet and drags a pair of black skinny jeans over his jammers and pulls a black hoodie down his torso. He carefully peels his denim vest from its hanger and his fingers catch on the frayed edges where sleeves once met the shoulders. He presses his nose into the material and revels in the fact that it doesn’t smell like his old house anymore – no lingering stench of alcohol and cigarettes and everything that came with them.

Now the denim smells of cheap cherry blossom air freshener, fruit-scented markers, greasy mackerel, and it’s perfect.

Haru slips the vest over his hoodie and checks the time on his phone. He swears and steps out into the hallway to push open another bedroom door.

Rin’s room is lit by a single nightlight on the far wall and it’s a glowing pink shark that sends little heart shaped reflections across the ceiling. Haru’s eyes widen in disbelief at the coloring books, stuffed animals, combat boots, and snapbacks littered across the floor, despite that the sight really shouldn’t come as a surprise anymore.

He flicks the switch on the wall and soft light floods the room. Gou’s still asleep and the expanse of the mattress is covered by her wild hair, which is already giving Haru major anxiety because he knows she’ll turn into an angry crying thing when a brush gets dragged through it.

Curling around Gou’s back just inches behind her is Rin, his body, even in sleep, bent in a protective hunch around her smaller form. It’s another sight that shouldn’t effect Haru anymore, but he can’t stop himself from cracking an exasperated smile and rolling of his eyes in a manner that most definitely, under any circumstances, in any reality, is definitely not fond.

Rin got custody of Gou four years ago. While he never found a legitimate job, he did everything he could to get good references - helping this old woman with her gardening, walking dogs, volunteering at the soup kitchen, whatever it took.

After a year of this, Iwatobi’s foster center had grown so overpopulated that they were more than ready to give Gou up after just a glance at Rin’s references and address. The center was so overwhelmed that they didn’t even question how someone without a job was able to afford a house – that’s how much they wanted to get rid of Gou. If they had actually done their research, they would have seen that Rin wouldn’t be able to afford this cabin without the help of Haru, and neither of them would have any money to their names if it weren’t for Miho.
Gou is now ten and safe and spoiled and happy all because he introduced Rin to Miho. Haru has managed to live twenty three years and get his blood and iron transfusions every month all because of Miho. He and Rin are indebted to her more than words can say, and while he should feel grateful, being under that woman’s thumb is not a place that Haru has ever felt comfortable.

He’s pulled from his thoughts as the alarm clock blares to life and Rin startles so violently that his body actually leaves the mattress. Haru isn't impressed.

Gou opens her eyes and blinks at Haru. She turns to sleepily blink at Rin.

And then the girl narrows her eyes on her surroundings before she sucks in a gasp so deep and so excited that Haru briefly looks around the room to see if there’s a puppy somewhere.

Gou is up in a blur of movement, jumping on the bed with her feet dangerously close to Rin’s face, but is totally oblivious to this fact and every other concerning thing in the world. “First day of school! First day of school!”

Haru sincerely thinks that school mornings should be made an Olympic event because they are just as stressful and just as taxing with a demand for seasoned experience, especially the morning of the first day.

He’s in the kitchen having a swell time of burning some breakfast and climbing up onto the counter so he can beat the fucking shit out of the fucking smoke detector with a hammer while Gou whines on the living room floor from between Rin’s knees as he sits on the edge of the couch and tugs a brush through her hair to drag it into a ponytail, which is a great style for a bunch of dumbasses like him and Haru because they don’t know how to do anything else.

They tried to up their hairstyle game a few years ago when Gou said that all the girls at school were wearing their hair in fishtail braids. Haru and Rin had stayed up until one in the morning, on the verge of tears, watching YouTube tutorials on how to weave them.

It took both of them, both idiots and both sets of hands, to maneuver so many strands into the proper pattern, but it looked almost decent when they sent her off to school.

However, it took two hours of Gou crying and Rin crying and Haru ready to go drown in the tub for them to pull out all the bobby pins and untangle that nightmare, so now they just stick with ponytails.

Haru’s just finished giving the smoke detector a head start on its descent into hell when Rin, sounding on the verge of a breakdown, shouts, “Haru, where are her shoes?! I can’t find her shoes!”

Haru rushes outside to grab the jellybean sandals off the porch and gives them to Gou before sending her off to her room to get dressed.

He and Rin flop down in opposite chairs, breathing heavily with the relief of just one minute of peace, not giving one shit about the stench of smoke and grease in the air or the painful volume of the cartoons playing on the television.

A thought splits through Haru’s mind and his eyes fly open to stare up at the ceiling in dawning horror. “Tell me you made her lunch.”
Rin makes a choking noise and they crash into each other on the way to the fridge.

They make lunch in record time, swiping jelly over some bread before smearing peanut butter across it, tossing an apple across the kitchen, throwing in a bag of pretzels with a chocolate bar because hell with it, they won’t have to deal with the after-lunch sugar high.

Gou stumbles out of her room with her sandals on the wrong feet but besides that they’re quick to approve of her outfit, which is an orange dress with pineapples dotted across the fabric. While her sandals might be dark blue and clash with the dress to the point where it’s almost painful, Haru just says it’s creative and Rin calls her perfect and their comments make Gou strut her glittery blue shoes proudly as they head for the school.

They actually have to break into a jog to make it on time.

The school is swamped. The carpool line is backed up, school buses are taking up the road like army tanks, the yard is maxed out with parents and teachers and kids, and Haru’s chest tightens until he can’t breathe and stops walking.

Gou looks back at him and halts, which causes Rin to stop as well due to the fact that he’s clasped her hand like a vice in this sea of people. It only takes him a fleeting glance in Haru’s direction to know what’s going on with him and say, “Haru’s gonna wait out here, Gou. Tell him bye.”

Gou runs across the grass and Haru has to bite back a wince as he crouches down, knees aching, but manages to keep himself from falling over when Gou wraps her arms around his neck in an embrace that’s made of pointy elbows and frizzy hair and whole-hearted love.

“Put the phone away, Rin,” Haru says.

“What?”

Haru squeezes Gou’s hand, where her nails are chipped with black polish. “Have a good day.”

“Okay!” she says brightly, as if it’s that easy, that simple.

She takes Rin’s hand and they head toward the school as Haru wanders off to look like a fucking creep under a tree across the road.

Waves of nausea roll through him and flashes streak his vision. He leans back against the trunk of the tree, breathing carefully, willing himself not to puke and really make an ass of himself in front of all these kids.

His legs falter and he eases down to perch on the curb, running his hand up and down his thigh to try and stop his muscles from spasming. He closes his eyes and squeezes them shut even tighter at the loud laughter of the crowd across the road, the blaring of horns, the stench of wet grass and sweltering humidity that’s all too much, too quick -

He startles when someone flops down beside him on the curb and he recognizes that brooding huff before he even has to look up and confirm that the person is Rin.

Haru pretends that he doesn’t taste his pulse in his mouth as it gradually slows. He looks Rin over and tenses, waiting for the cry that will break forth and hit the ears of everyone in a mile radius, but
Rin is silent.

Haru hesitates and discreetly puts a bit of space between them before asking, “What is it?”

Rin shakes his head, eyes vacant on the grass. “She doesn’t need me anymore,” he says blankly, simply.

Oh god. Haru rolls his eyes and sighs because now he’s going to have to use the last of his energy on a lecture that’s not going to mean fuck. “Now, Rin –”

“She just left me in the hallway.” Rin falls back in the grass like his entire being has just refused to continue functioning. “Didn’t even want me to follow her into the classroom.”

Haru pinches his nose and bows his head to hide from the stares of concerned parents that accumulate as Rin’s voice rises in pitch and hysteria. “Didn’t start crying when I left or anything. Then these mom’s started giving me these sympathetic looks and all these tissues that smelled so good and I was like, what? This is normal? This is supposed to happen? You were expecting this?”

“Look, you just have to –”

“And they were like, just wait until she starts liking boys.”

Rin falls deathly silent and the weight of his words hangs in the air very dramatically, very unnecessarily.

Haru pulls his head out of his hands to see that Rin’s still sprawled on his back like he just got fucking shot instead of what actually happened. Rin stares up at Haru unblinkingly before something, an emotion caught somewhere between realization and terror, flashes across his face and he surges upward to shake Haru by the collar before he leans in too close with no consideration for personal space, of course, as usual, and screeches, “What are we going to do when she starts liking boys?!”

“Well, what did you do when you started liking boys?”

Rin shoves him and Haru responds by hitting him in the ribs because they’re adults, not some assholes who are halfway brawling in front of an elementary school because one of them feels too much and the other not enough, no, of course not.

Haru’s two seconds away from punching Rin in the throat and ending all of this shit when his phone buzzes. He pushes Rin away by the face and holds up a finger when he rears back to grab Haru and fling him into traffic. “Hang on.”

Rin’s voice is shrill. “You can’t just tell someone to hang on in a fight!”

“It’s Nitori.” Haru responds to the text and locks his phone before shoving it back in his pocket and standing up. He brushes himself off as Rin’s jaw drops in disbelief. “Let’s go, you’ve made us late.”

“The fuck I made us late you vomitous jackass –”

Haru starts walking and hears Rin hop off the curb a little too quickly, his boots clattering across the pavement like a baby giraffe that’s too stupid to know how to walk. “Wait, we have to discuss this, this is serious!”
“She already likes boys, Rin.”

Rin stops dead in the middle of the sidewalk. “What?”

Haru turns back. “Oh.” He blinks innocently. “Did she not tell you about Hayato?”

Rin’s voice is the epitome of every single stereotype used to describe an overprotective brother. “Who in the midnight fuck is Hayato!?”

“Her boyfriend.” Haru’s expression conveys a silent *duh*. “Come on, we need to hurry.” He heads down the street and Rin stumbles after him.

The soup kitchen is crammed between an abandoned yoga studio that had caught on fire and a foreclosed sex shop. The road is empty of vehicles because most locals know that it’s a rougher part of town where the homeless shoot up in the alleys between buildings and hide from the ocean wind that sends beer bottles and syringes rolling down the street.

Some teenagers have skipped school to smoke cigarettes in front of the pawn shop at the corner and there’s a radio inside the establishment that sends the hits of ‘90’s R&B down to the soup kitchen where Haru looks at Rin with disturbance as he sways to the beat while unlocking the door.

The kitchen is the largest building on the street, consisting of a cafeteria, prep room, supply room, spare room, and an office. Rin flicks on the overhead lights in the cafeteria and Haru twists through the maze of tables to drag some box fans out of the supply room where he and Rin had lived.

Haru pauses to touch the roughness of the brick walls and his gaze travels across the room as memories flood his vision – he sees himself and Rin sprawled out on the floor nearly giggling themselves to death after drowning a bottle of stolen tequila, he recalls passionately theorizing the symbolism of *The Great Gatsby* with Nitori, he remembers the dig of Rin’s fingers in his back as Haru uselessly rocked him back and forth the night his dad died, and remembers that the only thing that had kept Rin from slipping through his fingers was Haru’s promise that he would never disappear, and the assurance that Rin was his *brother* and Gou was just as much a part of his life now, that he had no push, no strive, without Rin and his crazy dreams.

He gathers the fans and leaves the memories in the supply room as he sets the fans up in the corners of the cafeteria to break up the stuffiness in the air.

He finds Rin digging behind the buffet line when they hear a sneeze from the kitchen.

They raise their brows at each other and make their way past an array of massive sinks, fridges, and then a freezer, before they hear another sneeze from the pantry.

They step inside and Rin leans against the doorframe with an arched brow and crossed arms while Haru rolls his eyes and clears his throat.

Nitori Aiichiro shouts and whips around to point a spatula in their faces.

They blink at his weapon in silence before the boy registers who they are and sags with a nervous laugh. “Sorry! So sorry, I –”
He rears back to let out another sneeze and Rin ducks for cover like a bomb is about to go off but Haru just shakes his head because he’s surrounded by idiots.

Nitori recovers with a wet snuffle and leans back against the wall in an exhausted slump. Haru muses that he’s grown taller over the years; however, he has the feeling that the boy will always be shorter than himself and Rin. That line of thought could be because he’ll never really be able to look at Nitori without remembering who he was a few years ago – a short, silver haired bundle of nervous energy that pushed through his anxiety to give out a kindness that punks like Haru and Rin didn’t deserve, especially when he’d bring them extra blankets on cold nights and cases of water during the summer.

Nitori’s a college graduate now, an emergency room nurse with his own apartment and bitchin’ scooter, but he’s still coming here two days a week, still so untouched by the shadows of Iwatobi darkness, therefore it would be hard for Haru to believe that he’s changed even a bit.

Nitori coughs and Haru’s eyes narrow on his flushed skin and slumped posture. “You shouldn’t be here if you’re sick.”

Rin snorts and saunters deeper into the pantry. “Stellar bedside manner you’ve got there, Haru-chan.”

“Don’t call me -ch –”

“Oh, thank you for your concern but it’s really not that bad, Haruka-senpai!” Nitori’s so busy trying to placate Haru that he doesn’t realize Rin has come up behind him until his hand covers Nitori’s forehead from behind.

“What the shit Ai, you’re burning up.”

Haru bites back a smirk because Rin can’t see that most of that heat is from Nitori’s burning blush.

He lets out another wobbly giggle and breezes away, saying, “I’m fine, I’ll be fine! I’ll be right as rain after I move around a bit, get my mind off of it. Really!”

Rin doesn’t look convinced but if he touches Nitori again Haru’s 103% sure that the boy will literally go up in flames, so he drags the two of them out of the pantry to get to work.

It’s a miracle that they have everything prepared by lunch time. All the metal bins get filled with steaming soup, fogging up the glass of the buffet line, and it doesn’t take long for the hungry to start flooding in.

The number of people in search of something to eat is overwhelming and stressful, but despite that Haru and Rin have already paid their debt to Nitori’s father for the time they were sheltered here, neither of them would have made it without his hospitality, so they continue to help out with the twice-a-week lunches and strive to be there under any circumstances.

The volunteers from the local church file in at around 1 p.m. and Haru, Rin, and Nitori slump down at a small round table in the corner.

Haru crosses his arms at the occupants who were already at the table, and both of them grimace rather sheepishly. Haru cuts his eyes to one person and they cannot sit still under his stare. "What
"excuse is it this time, Asahi?"

"Nao had a flat!" Asahi waves his hands and nudges the other guilty party, who happens to be sitting beside him. "Tell 'em, Nao!"

Nao has endless patience but he has to let out a sigh. "Asahi, I had a spare. We took so long getting here because you insisted that we could save time by you trying to lift the van without the jack."

Rin perks up in interest as Asahi's forehead hits the table. "How'd that work out?"

Nao has to gall to smile. "I don't need to have the Med School experience to tell you that Asahi's probably got a few dozen pulled muscles. I also don't need to be a mind reader that his pride was hurt several times worse."

Haru hides his smirk behind his cup while Asahi groans and leans back in his chair; the simple motions is made louder by the necklaces that shift with his movements. Around his throat, Asahi wears rosaries crafted from wood and plastic, each cross bearing the aroma of incense. Alongside these are ropes tied together by knots, which, according to Celtic legend, are said to bring good fortune. There are leather pouches that hold crystals and stones; Asahi bought most of them on eBay, but he claims that they're all vessels of insight and ethereal power. There are charms tangled in wire, Buddha’s plump face smiling at Haru from beside a miniature figurine of Shiva. The longest, heaviest necklace is a medallion with the face of Demeter carved into the fool’s gold. Asahi once claimed that the goddess of crops always lets him know where to find good weed at, to which Haru couldn’t even muster up a reply. He wonders if Asahi even believes in any of the religions he partakes in, for his neck becomes adorned with yet another religious piece each time one of their friends dies in the streets.

But this strange practice is how Asahi hopes; plain and simple, if it can keep him getting out of bed another day, then Haru will not question it.

At Asahi’s shirt pocket is a row of chewed pin caps and a comb that does nothing to tame his hair. He reeks of spray paint and the creases of his hands are always filled with color from tagging buildings and traincars. There would be weed under his fingernails if he didn’t bite them off; his anxious habits can even be heard in the way his necklaces are always full of sound because he never sits still. This was annoying before Haru realized that Asahi just does things differently, from the way he finds hope to how his anxiety disorder affects him.

Haru does not have to find a string to keep his hands busy nor does he have to find someone to talk to before he explodes with too much energy, but Asahi does.

Asahi does not, however, have to continue being such an earnest and genuine person yet he does. He has remained this way no matter what, and that is worth all the loud shifting and meaningless conversations in the world.

Nao turns his attention to more important things than embarrassing him. “You’ve done a great thing today,” he praises to Haru, Rin, and Nitori. “There’s more kids here than usual.” He is sad as he looks the room over and before this emotion can overwhelm him, he has to busy himself with tearing the loose strings from his old, tattered button-up.

Nao’s appearance is a polar opposite of Asahi’s. Where the redhead sits with his legs splayed open and a toothpick poised between his teeth, Nao sits straight up and dabs at the corners of his lips with a napkin before smooching it out over his lap. Nao is homeless but his neat tendencies and proper,
thoughtful manners have remained intact entirely. His predicament does limit his fashion choices, but even so, he finds a way to make his clothing as functional as possible; his pants might be a few sizes too big but he holds them up with belts that act as suspenders - these are latched to his beltloops by safety pins. His sneakers might be older than himself but he keeps them together with wire and glue.

Nao's jacket is his finest article of clothing, made of that athletic material that can weather the damages of an active lifestyle, but also, Nao's lifestyle, which means the fabric is in a constant storm of rain, sweat, and blood. Haru knows it is not the jacket's versatility that makes Nao care for it almost lovingly. It's because on the back of the jacket, across the shoulders, is the print of a surname that disgusts Haru: Kirishima.

Despite being sickened by this, his harsh feelings are not directed at Nao - nobody could hate Nao if they tried, because while he should be bitter about his current situation and has every right to be, he is instead kind, pitying those who have it better than him. Nao is the most level-headed of them all, never impatient, always moving with languid grace, though this is not to say that he is oblivious to the danger around them all. Nao is the absolute smartest person in the room no matter where he is; he is observant, seeing all despite that he only has one eye.

It took Haru a long time to look at him and not feel responsible for the patch over the right side of his face, but it was Nao himself who helped Haru get over this and move on. Haru would not be capable of such strength if he were in Nao's shoes.

Out of the corner of his eye, Haru notices that Rin stiffens, and he follows his gaze to see a young girl at a table by herself. She's on her third bowl of soup and scarfing it down like a starved dog. She’s pulled her knees up to her chest and looks so small, so young, with her scatter of freckles beneath the smudge of mascara and lip gloss.

Rin turns to Haru with a conflicted, hesitant expression, and Haru nods in encouragement for Rin to walk over to her.

“She can’t even be fourteen,” Nitori breathes.

Nao shakes his head, his bright green eye focused on the table; he brings a hand to the right side of his face and adjusts his eye patch with a sigh. “There’s been younger here, Nitori-kun, and most of them don’t want help. We’ll have to settle with just being glad she’s got something to eat.”

They finish their food in silence before Rin comes back, sinking down into his chair with a stricken face. Haru glances at the girl. “Twelve?” he guesses.


The group gives a collective wince and Rin drags a hand through his hair. “Names Chigusa. Runaway.”

Haru glances back at the girl, and he turns to Rin with his lips pursed. "She staying at the shelter?"

Rin gives him a look. "Something like that." He lifts his brows pointedly, and Haru doesn't look at the girl again.

They finish their meal and the heaviness of being full makes Haru that much more tired. His eyes drift across the surface of the table, roaming over plastic cups and bowls, Asahi’s cigarettes, Nao’s keys, and all of their cell phones.
They all light up at the same time, in perfect sync, and buzz.

Nitori wrings his hands together at the sight before excusing himself, but even in his absence no one picks up their phone.

“Wonder what would happen if we didn’t answer,” Nao muses.

Asahi slaps him in the arm. “Don’t say that shit so loud!” he hisses. “Have some fucking respect for your existence, Nao. Love yourself.”

Nao stares at him in disbelieving silence. The wings of his sparrow tattoo flap as the skin of his hand creases while he rubs his head. “Go smoke a joint, Asahi,” he begs. “Do it for me. You make so much more sense when you’re high.”

Asahi scoffs and leans forward, making that stock of red hair clustered at the back of his head stand up even straighter. “I ain’t getting yacked with that text waiting on me. Couldn’t relax.” He jerks his chin toward Rin. “You should answer it.”

“And you should go sit on one,” Rin replies sweetly with a flip of his hair.

Haru's eyes burn a hole in the wall because Rin really has no idea how much Asahi would love that shit if it were Rin’s dick he was sitting on, and Haru’s faintly disgusted that he’s in a friendship deep enough with anyone to know that information.

Asahi and Rin start bitching and before Haru and Nao can get so exasperated that their entire beings just give up and turn into puffs of smoke, Haru picks up his phone and opens the message.

The group stares at him and waits in thick silence as Haru’s eyes roam over the screen. He then locks his phone and tosses it back on the table, suppressing a sigh and the overwhelming urge to run away. “2 p.m at the house.”

The Iwatobi suburbs are located on the quieter edge of the city. It’s a killer commute if you’re on foot, but luckily, Nao lives in a van and is generous, so they all climb in and head out.

The houses there are nice – starting at half a million dollars with granite countertops, multiple bedrooms, and shiny cars parked in the driveways. It’s a neighborhood populated with average families, with kids who spend all day on computers and phones as the husbands watch the game and the wives gossip over wine – the place is typical, it’s boring, and it’s the last place the police would think to look.

Nao leaves the van at the park behind the subdivision and they trek through the woods instead of parking on the street to resist drawing attention. They hike up the vibrant green yard, smelling a barbecue down the road, and Haru unlocks the back door so they can slip inside the house.

The place reeks of cleaning products and emptiness, no smells that indicate anyone lives there. Haru looks up at the vaulted ceilings and they make him feel small to the point that they remind him of reading *Alice in Wonderland* to Gou and coming across the part where she drinks from a bottle and shrinks. Haru couldn’t stop thinking about that scene for weeks after reading it because he’s felt like he was shrinking ever since he met Miho.
Haru shoulders a door open off from the kitchen and they make their way down a set of carpeted stairs. They step into the damp heat of the garage and use their cell phone lights to see because there’s not a single crack in the walls or the garage door that lets the outside world in. Rin and Asahi haul the pool table across the floor to reveal a hatch door in the floor and Haru opens the lock with another key before they step down to descend the ladder.

The air is constricting as they go underground and Haru puts a hand on Asahi’s arm when he hears his breathing stutter. Asahi’s eyes dart to the narrowing walls and there’s sweat on his face but Haru doesn’t say anything, just lets Asahi squeeze his eyes shut as he guides him through the dark by his elbow.

He squeezes Asahi’s arm so he’ll open his eyes as the shadows break and light blazes down from the florescent lights overhead. Haru stiffens as everyone in the room turns in their chairs and dozens of eyes stare them down. However, there’s one specific gaze that makes Haru’s jaw tighten, and it’s the one that belongs to the figure sitting in the back of the room.

Miho is cast in shadows so no one can identify her; however, the guards at her shoulders are not kept secret and neither are their weapons. Haru steps into the room first, whispers fluttering around him and the rest of the group as they make their way to the front row where there are empty chairs and familiar faces.

Rin sits down next to a voluptuous redhead who beams as he squeezes her thigh in greeting. Asahi and Nao sit beside Kazuki, who winks at them while Nakagawa pouts and puts a possessive arm around him in return. Haru sits down next to a fellow dealer, a girl with glowing contacts and facial piercings that offers him a tight nod in greeting before becoming rigid once more; she is glaring at the front of the room, her jaw tightening until Haru hears teeth grinding.

Miho’s words are distorted by the microphone on the table in front of her, but the hissing venom of her voice cannot be hidden. “Some of you are new, so I’m going to tell you how this works. I call your name. I give you orders. You follow them. It’s that simple. There doesn’t have to be any complications unless you make them yourself. Do I make myself clear?”

A few nods shake through the sea of heads as nervous glances are exchanged between the new recruits. Miho calls them up first, and Haru’s pained to see how young they are, remembering how ignorant he and the people across the front row were to the fact that Miho isn’t going to let them go once they’re here.

Miho hands the recruits one of two things: a bag of drugs to deal or a street route to prostitute. She gives them each a specific location to complete their tasks and the newbies get the most dangerous locations, such as where there’s a lot of crime or a lot of risky police activity.

“You are expected to work your way up,” Miho tells them. “Once you do so, you’ll be able to make more money and be put in safer locations. No dealers get the bigger payload and no rents get into Samezuka without proving they’re willing to put in the effort first.”

This has never been an easy task in Miho’s eyes. The only ones in her group to successfully prove themselves are Haru and the people sitting with him along the first row, and it’s not somewhere any of them are proud to be.

“Kazuki.”

The guy scratches the eagle tattoo over his forearm before taking a deep breath and standing up. He’s
new to the top of the food chain so the book bag he comes back with is only filled with crack, however, he’s already got some regular clients so he’ll get paid better and quicker than the newbies because of the clientele he’s built up.

“Nii.”

The girl sitting next to Haru rises from her seat to retrieve what’s in Miho’s hands and comes back with a bag full of her specialties – LSD, shrooms, and ecstasy.

Asahi is called and the bag he brings back reeks of weed and Haru hears the clatter of plastic pill bottles that hold anti-anxiety medication.

Nao’s bag only consists of prescription drugs and antibiotics, which could be considered the safest things to sell in comparison to what everyone else has, but Haru wouldn’t want his job because his clientele consists of struggling families that can’t afford medicine or people who don’t have the money to go to the doctor. Nao’s truly the only one out of all of them who is qualified to carry such product because he knows which medications to give out due to the fact that he almost completed medical school – this was before he started working at the hospital and they drug tested him positive for cocaine with the promise that he’d never be able to find another job in the medical field.

“Haruka.”

Miho’s voice might be warped but it’s significantly warmer when she calls him. Haru takes the bag from her hands and flinches when her ice-cold fingers brush his palm. He sits back down knowing his bag consists of the biggest payloads because Miho trusts him the most.

One glance inside the pack is like looking into the window of his old house because what’s inside is what burned the place down in the end.

Meth. Speed. Cocaine.

Heroin.

“Rin and Aki.”

The redheaded girl looks up with Rin and Miho says, “You’re in Samezuka. So are you, Nakagawa.”

She gives them the names of clients who have already paid to rent them out, however, no one gets their money until the appointments are finished and the clients leave satisfied. Rin’s given the names of international businessman and even a few C List celebrities while Nakagawa’s told which unsatisfied housewives will be waiting for him and Aki designates how many lonely men with too much money have rented her out.

“Before I dismiss you, I want all of my dealers in the front to look in the bottom of their bags.”

Haru frowns while Asahi and Nao stiffen. Nii’s hands start to shake and Kazuki bites his lips to shit before they all reach into their bags.

Haru jerks at the sensation of cool plastic and pulls out a handful of plastic baggies. Inside are blue strips that look like those dental strips people put on their tongues to make their breath smell better.
Miho asks, “Have you seen this before?”

Nii arches a pierced brow. “Looks like some kind of LSD.”

“This drug is called relay,” Miho explains. “This is what the public is demanding and this is what you will give them. I don’t care if it isn’t what you’re use to selling, you’re seasoned enough to spot out vulnerable people and make them buy.”

Shame cuts through Haru’s chest before he raises his hardened gaze to Miho. “Are you gonna tell us what it does?”

Miho pauses and the air thickens with tension. Asahi glances worriedly at Haru and he hears Rin’s jaw pop as it tightens, but Haru just crosses his arms and waits, not trembling in the slightest as Miho’s guards tighten their hands on their guns.

“It sells, Haruka,” Miho says. “And that is all you should be concerned with.”

Haru goes rigid but she’s as unwavering as the shadows around her, so he turns his gaze away and doesn’t say anything else.

Miho orders him to stay after everyone is dismissed.

He lets his friends pass by his chair and doesn’t meet their worried looks, only glances up to give Rin a nod of good luck as he leaves for Samezuka to meet a client.

The last person exits out of the hatch door and the finality of the sound echoes into the room that now only consists of Haru, Miho, and her guards.

Miho lets out a yawn and stretches luxuriously before waving the men away. “And go cut on that fucking light, will you? Turn off this microphone, makes me sound like a fucking dragon.”

Haru raises his brows because duh.

The guards flip the lights on before they leave and they reveal a young woman in a red cotton sundress, red flip flops, and a red smile that stretches wide at the sight of Haru.

Haru’s expression remains blank.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Miho sighs, sounding truly upset like she isn’t the devil. “You know I couldn’t let you just say something like that without a little repercussion. You know that,” she says again, gently, fondly.

Haru knows all too well that the warmth in her voice is artificial. “I need my bag back.”

Miho purses her lips before retrieving his waterproof bag and handing it to him. “Thank you for dropping by this morning,” she coos. “I appreciate it.”

Haru shoves his bag of drugs into the larger bag from Mo. He pauses when he notices something in the bottom.

“Is that a wet suit?”
Miho claps her hands. “Don’t you love it? It’ll keep you so much warmer than those old jammers you –”

“I don’t need it.” Haru makes to put it back on the table but Miho grabs his wrist and he freezes.

Her hand is freezing and her grip is hard. Her nails press into the skin of his wrist, pinching into his veins, and she smiles. “I’ve told you before that you look just like my son, Haruka.” She wavers. “Or at least… what I think he looks like.”

Haru’s the only one in the entire gang that knows Miho’s past. He’s seen pictures of her two kids, a boy that does look a bit like him, and a girl that she hasn’t been allowed to see for almost seven years. He knows that they were all a perfect little family before she got in a car wreck and was put on morphine. Miho got addicted to the medication and when her doctor stopped prescribing it, she was forced to take to the streets and learn how to get her fix on her own. It didn’t take long for her husband to find out about her addiction and he divorced her, leaving her with nothing, and took the kids with the reason being that she ruined their family.

Haru knows all about drugs ruining families, so he’s not as sympathetic as he probably should be, though he takes his hand back without snatching it. “I need to go,” he says.

He turns and starts walking before Miho calls, “Oh! One more thing!”

Haru’s shoulders tense and he turns in time to catch the bottle she’s thrown.

He looks down at it and finds that it’s made of orange plastic and there’s a prescription sticker on the side.

They’re iron pills.

“I really do hate that you’re a slave to those things, Haruka,” she sighs, and Haru watches his fingers go white-knuckled around the bottle. “But I’m so glad I can help you get them!”

Haru’s body is aching for the medicine to the point that he’s throbbing to the deepest muscles, but instead of giving her the satisfaction of seeing him down the whole bottle, Haru tucks it into his hoodie to ascend the stairs and the shadows close over him as Miho’s giggle bounces off the walls and inside his head.

He’s wiping a cloth across a table when his eyes catch on a bright color smeared over the wood. He reaches out and attempts to rub it away with his hand, but the pastel shavings end up blending together to stain the tips of his fingers. The shavings are all shades of blue, as vibrant and deep as the ocean itself, and that thought jars him into quickly wiping the shavings away until there’s no trace of them left.

“Mako-chaaaaaan, tell me how this looks! And please don’t try to lie – I don’t want you to embarrass yourself.”

Makoto snorts with an exasperated smile and throws his cloth in the sink before turning around. Nagisa is standing on top of a chair to hang some paintings across the wall that depict what the students did over their summer break. There’s drawings of roller coasters, camp fires, cats and dogs, and one image that makes Makoto’s blood freeze.
It’s a stick-figure child holding hands with what he assumes is an adult stick-figure, but what is so paralyzing are the adult's clothes, which are colored in camouflage shades of green and brown.

Nagisa’s voice resounds through the ringing in his ears. “Oh for the love, stop writing your name as Kou!”

Makoto raises a hand to the left side of his head to fiddle with his hearing aid. “I’m sorry?”

Nagisa hops down with an exaggerated huff before shaking his head, causing his fluffy hair to fall out of his bandana. He uses the apron around his waist to rub purple pastel shavings from his hands. “Matsuoka Gou has been insisting her name isn’t Gou for the past ever, and me and the rest of the teachers had this trench deep betting pool about when she would stop, but now it’s been like, three years and we’re this close to going to a shrine about it.”

Makoto hides his face with a groan. “She’s in my class. She was so insulted when I was calling roll this morning and said Gou. I felt horrible.”

Nagisa giggles and digs for some more tape from an overflowing drawer of his desk, which he doesn’t call cluttered, he calls it completely acceptable for an art teacher’s desk to be a little ragtag because creativity cannot be contained, Mako-chan!

Nagisa often boasts that the other teachers have hated his sweet guts for years not only because of his messy desk privileges, but also because he’s the only teacher than encourages the students to color outside the lines and be as messy as they want, and that has granted him the title of everyone’s favorite teacher.

Nagisa climbs up the chair once again to hang Gou’s picture (after vehemently scribbling out the K and replacing it with a big fat red G) and Makoto studies the drawing as he goes on. “Don’t feel bad, she’s always been stubborn as a rock.” He tapes the corners down and leans back with his hands on his hips to inspect the picture of Gou standing beside what appears to be a miniature ice castle. The caption is written in her scrawl and reads, Onii-chan and Haru got me a Frozen castle doll house for my birthday. It took them three days to put it through target to build it. They had to call Asahi and Nao for help. Onii-chan said they should of just got me a pony cause they would not half have to build it.

Makoto smiles at that. “Looks great.”

He follows Nagisa over to a table so they can flop down in some plastic chairs that creak under their weight. Makoto’s seat is too small for him to be comfortable but Nagisa’s is the perfect size for him. “Thanks for helping me clean up,” Nagisa yawns. “Did your room survive your first day of teaching?”

Makoto beams. “Yes. I was shocked.”

Nagisa smirks back. “You should be. Most of the kids go rabid when they find out about a new teacher. I can tell they really like you because you're still here.”

Makoto laughs and massages his fingers into the back of his neck where his muscles ache from lack of sleep. “I would have been the perfect target; I was a nervous wreck.”

Nagisa arches a knowing brow. “How early did you get here?”
Makoto shrugs. “Ran a bit late, actually. Walked in at six thirty.”

“In the fucking morning?”

Makoto shrinks back with wide eyes. “Should I have been earlier?!”

“Been earlier?” Nagisa throws himself over the table and looks at Makoto like he’s some rare species of dumbass. “Makoto, on my first day? My first day? Best-teacher-in-the-world’s first day? I stumbled in here and cut it as close as a college freshman trying to get to an eight a.m. class after going through a flat tire and a mugging and a zombie apocalypse and a two day heartbreak binge with a $4 bottle of wine. I was that late.”

Makoto stares in horror. “That’s really specific,” he whispers.

“That’s really true.” Nagisa flops back down in his chair with a disbelieving huff. “How’d you even get in here that early?”

“Janitor opened the door for me,” Makoto mumbles, habitually rubbing at his left ear sheepishly. “He looked at me like I was crazy.”

“I mean, duh?” Nagisa snorts. “Gotta watch out for Goro, he’s the crazy one. Only deprived soul in here that actually looks forward to pizza on the lunch menu.” He shudders. “It’s so gross, it actually drips grease —”

“Okay, okay, thank you,” Makoto waves his arms as nausea rolls through him. “I get it, don’t get here so early, don’t talk to Goro, don’t eat the pizza.” He pauses. “Honestly, those aren’t the weirdest rules I’ve been told today.”

“I hope not. You really need a declassified school survival guide to make it here.” Nagisa folds his hands under his chin and grins. “So what other horrors have you been warned about?”

Makoto tips his head thoughtfully. “Don’t ever use the third stall in the second floor bathroom.”

“Heavens no.”

“The vending machines in the teachers’ lounge don’t give you Sprite when you select Sprite. It just takes your money.”

“Corrupted bastards.”

“Bring weed to the Christmas party.”

“Eh.”

“And there was one more… oh! Watch out for –”

Someone opens the door behind Makoto. “Nagisa, do you have any – oh. Oh.”

Makoto turns around and the guy says, “Oh.”

Nagisa coughs a laugh and slaps Makoto on the back, knocking the breath out of him. “Kisumi! This is Mako-chan! He’s new.” He squeezes Makoto’s bicep. “Swol – I mean swell, right?”
“Shit,” Kisumi breathes. “I mean right.”

He’s disheveled from head to toe, but it appears to be on purpose due to the artful sweep of his hair and loose collar. He clears his throat and his expression relaxes, smile turning easy and his eyelids falling into a half-lidded crinkle. “Nice to meet you…” He arches a playful brow at Nagisa. “Makochan?”

Makoto laughs. “It’s Makoto.” He stands up to shake Kisumi’s hand and the guy’s eyes go from the floor to the ceiling they sweep him so intensely. Being scrutinized is not something Makoto’s ever been comfortable with, so he desperately tries to take the focus off of him by blurting out, “What do you teach?”

“I don’t,” Kisumi smirks. “I’m the councilor.”


“Crazy, right?” Nagisa sidles up to them and elbows Makoto in the ribs, which makes him look down at Nagisa in offended confusion. “Kisumi’s got the best office, too. Thick walls. Nice candles. Sturdy desk.”

It takes every ounce of Makoto’s military discipline to not physically explode.

Kisumi asks, “What grade do you teach, Makoto?”

“Um. Uh. Fifth, I think.” His face heats at his stupid spluttering but Nagisa almost knocked him off his feet with this bullshit.

“Oh!” Kisumi brightens. “You’re my brother’s teacher! Hayato!”

“Oh,” Makoto repeats dumbly before blinking in realization. “Oh! Yes, he’s in my class.”

Kisumi’s eyes are both affectionate and stern. “He didn’t give you too hard of a time today, did he?”

“No,” Makoto assures. “He was great. Helped me power up the Smartboard and everything.”

Kisumi groans. “He’s such a… ugh. Well. Good, I’m glad he could help you. Sorry, it’s just that he likes to show off to anyone who will let him. Really likes the attention of his classmates.”

Nagisa gasps with a conspiring whisper, “Did him and Gou break up?”

“What?” Kisumi hisses. “No, they are this school’s power couple, why in the hell would they –”

“You’re… talking about fifth graders?” Makoto asks.

Kisumi and Nagisa lean back from where they’d hunched together. “Give it a few months,” Nagisa says. “You’ll find out that their drama is so much juicier than ours.”

Makoto just stares.

Kisumi’s phone goes off and he glances at the screen. “Oh, that’s Hayato. Apparently he’s ready to go.” He runs a hand through his hair and flashes them an exasperated smile. “I guess I should head
out, then. Promised him ice cream and all that.”

“It was nice to meet you,” Makoto smiles.

Kisumi’s answering smile curls into something that’s definitely not work-appropriate according to the teacher’s handbook Makoto’s read seven times. “Mmhmm. Let me know if you ever need help with anything.” He says anything in a tone that’s more suggestive than a flashing neon sign. Or the way Nagisa’s still elbowing Makoto in the ribs.

Kisumi walks out the door and Makoto immediately rears around to grab Nagisa by the collar. “What the hell was that?”

“Just be honest with me. Have you got laid since boot camp?”

Makoto scoffs and throws his hands up. “What does that have to do with anything?!”

“Makoto, oh my god, you haven’t, have you?”

“Nagisa –”

“I’m calling Sou-chan right now. We are literally having a Facetime intervention right now. Just let me find somewhere with good lighting, I didn’t sleep worth hellllll last night –”

“Nagisa.”

Something in Makoto’s voice makes him pause.

Makoto takes a deep, slow breath, and evenly says, “Sousuke’s already tried this. And I’m going to tell you the same thing I told him.”

Nagisa’s mouth parts in shock but he remains silent.

Makoto’s face falls before his mouth twists into a sad smile. “I’m not even supposed to be alive right now.”

Nagisa’s eyes immediately fill with tears. “Mako, I’m sorry, I –”

“And I know that makes a lot of people want to live their life to the fullest, but I’m just…” He chokes before giving up with a bitter laugh. “I’m just too damn scared right now to push my luck.”

His hands tighten into fists and he shakes his head with a loathing glare at the floor. “After everything I did… after everything I saw, I just – I can’t look at someone I care about and not expect to have them taken away. So. I just want to have this right now, okay? This job has already been so much more than I ever dreamed, even with how stressed out I’ve been about it, being a teacher was always what I wanted to do, and I’ll never, ever be able to thank you enough for helping me get me this job, Nagisa, I –”

The breath rushes out of him as Nagisa hugs him so tightly it’s like he’s trying to squeeze the sadness right out of Makoto.

Makoto rests his forehead on top of Nagisa’s head as he wobbles, “Me and Rei-chan never doubted that you’d be able to be someone other than a soldier. Both you and Sou-chan, you’re both so brave and I just…” He sniffs and looks up at him. “I just want you to be happy, Mako. You deserve it
more than anyone else in the world.”

“I am happy,” Makoto promises with a pat to Nagisa’s hair. He keeps his hand steadied there to make sure Nagisa meets his eyes as he repeats, “I am.”

Nagisa doesn’t look entirely convinced, so Makoto throws caution to the wind and says, “Do you have any idea how terrified Sousuke and I were after we got out?”

Nagisa hesitates before shaking his head.

Makoto swallows down the taste of his own heart. “We did so much over there, Nagisa.” He says it so quietly, as if saying it any louder will make all that blood and sand grain over his palms like it does in his nightmares. “Things you wouldn’t even believe. And we knew that people wouldn’t understand what we’d been through, so I told him to come with me to Iwatobi because I knew you’d be there for us, even if you didn’t understand.”

Nagisa’s cheeks blow up as he struggles not to cry. “Of course I’d be there for you!” he bursts, “I – of course I would, of course.”

Makoto arches a brow and grins. “Even though Rei’s terrified of Sousuke?”

“Rei’s scared of everything,” Nagisa rasps before choking on a giggle. “Especially me. Remember how long it took him to ask me out in college?”

“After we got caught staking out his apartment at two in the morning so you could make sure he wasn’t seeing anyone?”

“That stake out was great military training, don’t even,” Nagisa scoffs. He pulls back to wipe at his eyes and flash Makoto a smile. “We should head on out, Rei’s probably already at the diner. Are you sure Sousuke won’t be able to make it?”

“I think he’s stuck at the station,” Makoto says. “But I’ll text him.”

Nagisa’s finishing locking up his classroom when Makoto opens an unread message. He then laughs so hard that he drops his phone.

Nagisa sounds alarmed. “What?! What is it?”

“Tell me it was you that changed Sousuke’s ringtone to Fuck Tha Police.”

Nagisa gasps in a brilliant moment of inspiration. “We should lie and tell him it was Rei-chan!”

And that’s how Kisumi and Hayato are brought down the hallway by some strange noises and find the two of them heaving on the floor.

He sells his entire supply of relay in a matter of hours.

Apparently Haru hasn’t been keeping up with drug culture, because he sells more of that new shit than heroin, which has always been his best-seller.

His clientele for relay is pretty consistent, most of them are young people, like college kids. Haru
refuses to sell to high schoolers – they’re only a few years older than Gou so he just can’t bring himself to do it – however, he runs into Nii and she tells him that they bought all her relay within the span of only an hour.

Haru goes to do a deal in the seedier part of Iwatobi, sneaking in an abandoned building through a broken window to meet his customers on the top floor, where they’re sprawled across couches and strung out and reek of piss and sun-ripened garbage. The smells are so familiar that Haru leaves his body and his mind is dragged down into his memories of growing up.

He then notices the syringes on the coffee table and he’s hit with a wave of lust.

His eyes trail over a girl’s arm where she’s sinking a needle in and plunging red sludge into her veins and his blood heats and his heart pounds and he struggles to not accept payment through a loaded syringe instead of cash.

Once he’s outside in the drenching humidity, Haru throws himself into the nearest convenience store for a bottle of water and a pack of cigarettes.

He then collapses under a tree in the park, face aching with a migraine, and downs a handful of iron pills with the water before sucking down at least three cigarettes to curb the withdrawals shaking through his body.

He still hasn’t done heroin since his mom died, but even after all these years, he still feels empty without it, like something’s missing and he’s never going to feel whole again. His withdrawals aren’t as severe as they used to be; however, they still have to be placated through something, and cigarettes are, unfortunately, a fix, even if it’s only temporary.

He hates smoking so much that he’s brushed his teeth until his gums are bleeding and raw just to try and get the taste out of his mouth. He can’t stand the way the smoke clings to his clothes and he hates himself for running to the very thing that’s dotted his skin with scars and woke him up screaming because he swears he can still feel the heat pressing into his skin.

Haru picks himself up, grimacing as he wavers, and hauls his bag over his shoulder to continue walking down the street. He tosses the pack of cigarettes to a homeless man on the curb and doesn’t look back.

He’s feeling sick from the taste of tobacco and the nausea makes everything so much worse. His eyes are unfocused on the sidewalk as he watches his feet shuffle along, but then a splotch of vibrant red catches his eye.

Haru stops walking entirely, staring down at the drop of blood on the sidewalk before sound comes rushing back in and he hears the distinct crack of a skull, a wet cry, laughter.

Two boys are using their boots and fists to beat up a boy curled on the pavement, and his eyes catch Haru’s and he’s suddenly fifteen again, back shoved up against an alley wall, freezing, terrified, staring at Rin and not knowing how to ask for help but needing it more than anything.

And then he’s fourteen again, in the lunch room of his school, so exhausted and so angry that no one gave a shit about him but even angrier at the fact that he wanted someone to just give a shit about him more than anything.

In a violent surge of energy, Haru rushes forward.
He claws his fingers into the stockier boy’s hoodie to throw him, face-first, into a parked car. The sound of his nose crushing against the passenger door makes fear fill the eyes of the skinny teenager, and Haru brushes his clothes off before fixing them both with a glare.

“Leave.”

Skinny shakes his head even as his breathing accelerates. “N – Nah, forget that, who do you –”

“Shit,” the guy on the ground says, staring at Haru as his nose swells and gushes blood. “Oh shit, we gotta go.” He scrambles to stand but trips over his feet and he hits the pavement once more.


“We gotta go, we gotta go!” Hiko cries. He raises his hands to Haru in a placating gesture. “Look man, we’re sorry, we didn’t – we didn’t know he was one of you, I swear!”

“Hiko what –”

Hiko digs his hand into Skinny’s hoodie and snatches it forward. “He’s part of Freebird, you idiot!”

Skinny’s eyes widen in shock before he staggers after the other boy without another word of protest.

Haru watches them go with narrowed eyes before turning to look down at the heap of bruised limbs and bloody clothes at his feet.

The boy lifts himself up on an elbow to spit out a gob of blood and a tooth clatters across the pavement. He drags his mop of teal hair out of his face, where bruises are circling his tawny eyes. The familiar hunch of his shoulders and snarl of his mouth makes Haru’s heart stutter in shock.

And then he scoffs, “Ikuya?”

Ikuya’s head snaps up and his eyes go wide with recognition. “Haru,” he breathes, dumbstruck, and his voice still hasn’t dropped, he still sounds like he’s still just nine and stumbling down the street in the dark and calling out for Natsuya to come home, and fuck, what the fuck is Ikuya doing out here?

“What the fuck are you doing out here?”

Ikuya’s voice rises until it goes high enough to squawk. Embarrassingly. “I didn’t need your help!”

Haru just purses his lips and leans against the parked car, waiting patiently, not pointedly, for Ikuya to get up and realize that he’s probably going to have to grow an entire rib back before he can move so suddenly, and sure enough, Ikuya stands up only to fall and flap around on the pavement like a fish out of water.

Haru tries to come forward but Ikuya lashes out at him. “Leave me alone!”

Haru almost kicks the car in a moment of irrational impatience because he’s really been around Rin and his tantrums too long, plus he’s never had time for Ikuya’s stubbornness, no matter how much it’s a mirror image of his own.

It’s clear that his pigheaded attitude hasn’t gone anywhere, even if Haru hasn’t seen Ikuya since
Natsuya, his older brother, was on the streets, and that was years ago. But Haru never forgot how Ikuya’s tears had been the only thing that made Natsuya finally get his shit together and abandoned all of it. The drugs. Haru. Nao. Everyone. Everything.

Haru’s eyes drift to the bag slung around Ikuya’s shoulder and the boy’s gaze follows before he stiffens.

Haru’s voice is rolling gravel. “Oh, you’d better be fucking kidding me.”

Ikuya hesitates and mouths for something to yell but Haru lashes his arm out in a violent gesture. “After everything you saw with Natsuya, you’re gonna start dealing?”

“You’re the one I saw dealing before anyone else,” Ikuya hisses, and Haru’s left speechless. “And Natsuya’s worthless. He doesn’t give a shit about me or you or anything else and you know it. All he’s ever been worried about is himself and what he wants.”

“He got clean for you,” Haru nearly shouts. “Nobody does that but he did because he stupidly thought you were worth it!”

Ikuya stares at him in wide-eyed shock, then he chokes and turns away. He picks himself up, stubbornly keeping a scream lodged between his teeth, and turns up a glare. “Well none of that matters anymore. I didn’t need him to get clean for me or pretend he cares or whatever. I just want to be left alone.” He hesitates before his expression hardens and he barks loudly, senselessly, “So don’t follow me!”

Haru watches him limp down the street and go out of sight around a corner before he finally really does kick the car. Then he freezes and looks around nervously because if anyone saw him do that he’s sticking to the story that he was possessed by a sea demon and had no control over his body. Iwatobi’s swamp full of drugs, he could definitely get away with claiming that shit.

He’s bending down to retrieve his bag when the exertion from the fight slams into him so hard that his vision tunnels, and Haru knows what that means and knows that there’s no coming back from it, and he’s barely able to stumble into an alley before he passes out.

His heartbeat is so loud in his ears that the pounding wakes him up, and he lifts his head to blink the dust out of his eyes and brush the gravel from his cheek. He checks his phone and see’s that he was only out for about fifteen minutes. His hands are shaking as he hauls himself up, momentarily blinded by the strain, and pulls out the bottle of iron pills to down every last one of them.

He thumps his head back against the brick siding and shuts his eyes, thinking about how stupid Kirishima Ikuya is to want to be anything like him.

Haru briefly looks up at the sky and the swarm of crows perched on the roof of the building before he takes out his phone.

Nao picks up on the first ring, ever punctual, ever having his shit together when no one else does. “Haru?”

“Where is Natsuya?”

If he knew how emotions worked, Haru might have realized that maybe that was a bad (read: the fucking worst) topic to start a conversation with.
Nao is silent, probably stunned at the sudden invasive question. “He was at home with his mom and Ikuya last time I talked to him,” Nao admits quietly, his tone clipped but lingering with a pain that he can’t hide, a pain that’s stained everything he’s said since Natsuya left the streets. “Why, Haru?”

Haru hesitates, taking a moment to swallow down his panting. “Ikuya’s dealing.”

“What?” Nao makes a mournful noise that rolls into a surge of panicked babbling, “No, no, not him, why? What is he doing out here?” Before Haru can even think about answering Nao rushes on, “He can’t make it out here, Haru, you know he can’t, oh god, oh god...”

It’s as if all the emotions Nao’s kept under wraps are tumbling out and he can’t stop, and Haru really isn’t the person to be coming to with that, but at least makes an effort when he fumbles, “I can uh, call Natsuya, if you want. You know, so you won’t have to, or –”

“No,” Nao cuts in. “I’ll call him. I don’t care how he feels about me and what I do, I don’t care, he is not going to let Ikuya go out like this. Ikuya brought him back and I’ll be damned if Natsuya doesn’t do the same for him.”

Haru nods. “I’ll keep an eye out for him,” he complies. “And you know Asahi will too, even though they… kind of… hate each other.”

“They. Will get. Over it.”

Haru smirks at the good-hearted venom in his voice but doesn’t comment on it.

They say their goodbyes just in time for Haru’s breathing to speed up, throat constricting, and he pukes.

His throat is on fire as he struggles to recover, and to make everything that much more compelling, his phone buzzes just as he throws up again.

When he’s done, heaving for his life and choking on the taste of bile, it buzzes again.

“Shut up,” he rasps as he gropes in his pocket. His eyes are blurred with tears but they focus when he sees that the text is from Rin.

The first message reads: get gou from soccer. yakuza rent.


While renting in Samezuka pays the best money in Iwatobi prostitution, the disadvantage is that it can be dangerous in aspects that aren’t expected. For example, if Rin’s renting to a yakuza and the guy wants to stay a little longer, Rin’s not going to come home with a hand if he tells him it’s time to clock out so he can go get his sister from soccer practice.

But what makes this all the more maddening is that Miho didn’t tell Rin his client was yakuza.

Haru’s muscles seize in barely-contained rage.

The second message pops up on the screen: Ai’s sick. needs someone to open kitchen @6. sorry.
Haru stares at the text. Checks the time.

Almost throws his phone into the street.

Scrolls through his contacts and dials a number.

Asahi answers with, “What’s up, champ?”

“You still get around on that shitty bike?”

Asahi scoffs in offense. “It is not sh –”

“Great, does it still have that big basket on the front?”

“Why in the hell –”

“Cool, I think I’m somewhere between 7th and 5th Street –”

Nagisa and Rei tell Makoto that the pizza diner is one of the best local restaurants in the city, and as his eyes land on the buffet tables covered in steaming pans of greasy, heart-attack goodness, Makoto is thoroughly convinced that they’re right.

He can admit that his sudden passion for eating might be derived from all the stress that’s gathered inside him over the anticipation of his new job, or maybe it’s just because he was too nervous to eat breakfast (and his lunch. And maybe dinner the night before), but either way, he’s three bites away from marrying this slice of loaded-baked potato. What’s even sadder is that the moan he lets out is as he bites down is more sincere than any noise he’s ever made during sex.

And why he’s thinking about that while he’s eating, he isn’t sure, but he’s so emotionally fried that they’re all just lucky he isn’t crying on the floor at this point.

Four plates later, Makoto falls back into reality and he blinks at Nagisa and Rei from across the table.

Rei is looking at him like he’s trying to hide that he’s fascinated but Nagisa doesn’t even appear impressed with his six empty plates in front of him. He delicately blots his mouth with a napkin and shakes his head in disappointment. “Sousuke ate nine cheeseburgers in a row when you guys came home, Makoto. Nine of them. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

Rei looks down at the table and splutters, “Nagisa! You had six plates?”

“Hmm? Oh, no that lady came by a little while ago and cleared the table, I think there was like, three more there, I dunno –”

“You are going to have a heart attack!!”

“Ah, but Rei-chan will dress up like a nurse and give me sponge baths in the hospital!”

Makoto bites back a smile as Rei flies into a lecture about blood pressure and sodium and Nagisa just nods along like he’s listening instead of quietly beaming at his concern.

They haven’t changed much at all since college, Makoto thinks. Even though he’s twenty three now
and his friends are both twenty two, Rei is just as dramatic as he’s always been and Nagisa’s that same angel-faced devil that caught his eye.

It would be easy to look at them and assume two people so in sync could never have almost shattered to pieces, surely they’ve always just clicked and had everything fall into place, but Makoto’s one of the few people in the world who knows how hard they had to fight to be together.

When Makoto met Rei, he quickly noticed his intense study habits. It was mildly amazing that he looked up from his homework long enough to even notice Nagisa, but once he did, it took no time at all for him to be the only thing that could pull Rei’s nose out of a textbook.

As their relationship became something serious, Rei’s studying intensified, and he finally admitted to Makoto in the library that he had too much to prove to take a break – his scores, essays, and formulas had to be perfect. He croaked that he had to make a life for him and Nagisa because Nagisa deserved one more than anyone in the world. Rei didn’t want him to ever want for anything and not be able to have it and he needed to be the one to give that to Nagisa.

Makoto said in return that Rei was the only thing Nagisa wanted, but that didn’t help at all.

They started fighting to the point that Nagisa didn’t smile anymore and Rei stayed hunched over his desk for days.

Makoto remembers stumbling to his door at three in the morning to find Nagisa there needing a place to stay with the declaration that he was done with Rei, despite that he wouldn’t tell Makoto why.

A few weeks later, Nagisa was in the shower when his phone rang and Makoto answered it to find that it was Rei’s brother, who was calling because Rei had overdosed.

Makoto had heard about speed – it was a drug that some students used but it was usually only the ones that needed to stay up studying for days, and Makoto sunk into a chair and put his face in his hands because shit, how could he not have seen it?

Makoto told Nagisa what had happened and went with him to the hospital. This was where Nagisa charged into Rei’s room to slap him hard across the face and bury his head in his chest with a cry.

And Rei has been clean ever since.

He’s become so vehement about not using drugs that after he and Nagisa relocated to Iwatobi and saw how bad the drug problem was, they started a support group.

Makoto remembers hunkering down with his team in a cave that reeked of their wounds and sweaty gear before Sousuke held up a flashlight so he and Makoto could look at a picture of a church basement that Nagisa had sent along with his letter. This is where they did their support group for years and gathered up an impressive number of members.

Makoto takes a sip of his drink. “Have you been by the new place for the meetings?”

Rei shakes his head while rubbing the back of his neck. “I haven’t been able to gather the courage to go into that part of town.”

Makoto stiffens. “Is it that bad?”
“Rei-chan is dramatic,” Nagisa says. “It was the church that suggested the place. They’ve been going there twice a week for years and everyone’s always came back alive.” He pauses. “But I guess it could be bad, I mean they had to kick us out of the basement so they could start supplying more donations for the place.”

“What is the place?”

“A soup kitchen,” Nagisa pipes. “Very chic, very spacious, I’m sure. It’ll be fine.” He wraps both arms around Rei’s bicep. “Rei-chan worries too much.”

Rei still looks worried, but at least he smiles when Nagisa sticks his tongue out at him.

Makoto hasn’t seen much of the city given the short amount of time he’s lived here, so he’s stuck trailing behind Nagisa and Rei like a lost puppy as he tries to take in everything around him.

They shoulder through the crowded streets of people standing in front of restaurants and the movie theatre and Makoto thinks fine, this is fine, but then they trail into the quieter neighborhoods and that’s when he hears it.

The sound of the ocean right behind the row of cabins they’re walking past.

Makoto keeps his eyes down on the pavement as the noise rakes through his chest, shaking his blood and trapping his pulse in blue darkness. He’s forced to stop breathing entirely so he doesn’t hyperventilate, and he discreetly takes out his hearing aid to muffle the clawing drag of the waves against the shore.

He tries to remember what Sousuke told him to do – focus on something, anything, tell me what it is and what color it is and then find something else and do it again and again. Think about Ren and Ran and how much they need you to keep going.

We gotta keep going, Makoto. As much as we don’t want to anymore.

“Ahh, is that it?!”

Makoto jerks up and focuses on Nagisa – blonde hair, pink shirt, pink button-down shirt – before realizing that it was Rei – dark hair, dark blue hair, glasses, red glasses, grey sweater vest – who had spoken.

Makoto follows his wide-eyed gaze down the street, or at least he tries to. None of the streetlights are working. The only light that breaks through the shadows is a fire barrel at the corner where a small gathering of homeless are heating the food out of dirty take out containers. Makoto’s chest aches at the sight and it draws him out of his own pathetic fear.

His eyes drift to the buildings on either side of the street and he’s surprised to see one of them charred and half-way collapsed as if it had caught on fire. Another rundown building, presumably abandoned, displays a sign that reads The Cockpit and posters of lingerie and skimpy costumes that make Makoto’s face heat.

And then, in front of the building crammed between the two, is Matsuoka Gou.

Makoto’s mind flatlines before he’s left reeling in confusion. Concern has his feet moving, walking
him down the street, and Rei whisper-hisses at him to come back, sounding like that one smart friend in the horror movie who’s trying to stop the busty blonde girl from going into the haunted house.

Something cracks under Makoto’s shoe and he looks down to see broken syringe. His breath hitches before he pushes on, walking past felled trashcans and even an empty wheelchair. Every inch of the street makes his concern grow until he reaches Gou, who’s sitting on the curb and clicking the heels of her cleats like everything is perfectly fine.

“Gou?”

Gou turns around with a blink, wearing a grass-stained soccer uniform, and a black kitten slowly peers over her shoulder to stare at Makoto.

He stares back, not knowing what to do, until Gou’s face brightens and she smiles. “Mr. Tachibana!” She stands up with the kitten cradled in her arms like a baby and rushes to the door of the building to tug on the denim vest of a guy standing with a key in the doorknob. “Look, Haru, this is my teacher.”

The guy’s shoulders tighten and Makoto’s so familiar with the sensation that it courses through his own muscles before the guy turns around.

He’s the embodiment of what scares Makoto the most in the world – his hair is blacker than the depths of the sea, his skin is white sand, the breath moving through his chest is the rise and fall of the waves, and his eyes, his eyes are bluer than those pastel shavings and his nightmares and his pulse should be hammering, there’s supposed to be adrenaline ripping through his blood, that color and what it reminds him of is supposed to cripple him -

But Makoto’s jarred with the realization that he’s never wanted to drown so badly in his life if it can happen in this guy’s eyes.
Those eyes widen as they take in Makoto, and he watches a blush crawl over the pale skin of his neck like the sunset over the shore before the boy asks, “Are you Rei?”

His voice is so nice. “Huh?” Makoto replies intelligently.

Gou and the boy stare at him and he jerks. “Oh, no, uh. No. Are you Ai?”

The boy raises a dark brow until it disappears behind his fringe. “No.” He tips his head, causing his neck to stretch from the collar of his hoodie, and Makoto’s mouth dries when he spots the ink spanning down the side of his throat because holy shit, he didn’t even know he liked tattoos until now –

“This is Haru!” Gou chimes, and Makoto jumps because he truly forgot she was even there. “Haru, this is Mr. Tachibana. He’s my –”

“Makoto,” Makoto splutters.

Haru squints like he’s desperately trying to comprehend what the fuck is going on and Makoto adds, “I mean. My name is Makoto. Before the. Tachibana part.”

He really wishes he had one of those cyanide pills they gave him before dangerous missions so he can just die, but he’s pretty sure his own embarrassment is about to kindly do that for him.

Makoto grunts as a solid weight collides with his back and he looks down to see Nagisa’s tiny hands clutching his shirt. “Mako-chan, we thought you were abducted and forced to join a gang –”

Makoto turns to the sound of Rei panting and watches him slow from a jog with a whine of, “Nagisa, you left me out there to fend for myself!”

“Oh, but Rei-chan is so big and strong –”

“You’re Rei?” Haru demands.
Rei turns to him and he blushes before quickly adjusting his disheveled clothes and standing up straighter, “Y – Yes! You’re Ai?”

“This is Haru,” Gou says.

“Gou?” Nagisa says. “What are you doing here?”

“Standing with Haru. And it’s Kou.”

Haru pinches the bridge of his nose with a long-suffering sigh and at Gou’s noise of concern he pats her on the head, making her beam proudly. Haru then looks up, rather defeated, and says, “Ai’s sick. I have a spare key.”

And with that, he pushes the door open and Gou skips after him.

Neither of them wait for Nagisa, Rei, and Makoto to catch up, so they hurry after them.

Haru leads them through the dark until he flips some switches on the wall and lights flicker on. Makoto’s surprised at how spacious the room is but Haru guides them through the maze of tables to open another door.

He steps in and reveals it to be an average sized room before inclining his head to the closet. “Chairs are in there. Nitori-sama expects you to put them back when you’re done.”

“Of – Of course!” Rei nods. “Thank you!” He hesitates before wringing his hands together. “I’m sorry if this inconvenienced you in any way.”

Haru arches a brow before a smirk ghosts over his lips and Makoto stares. “Gou and I will be in the cafeteria,” he tells them, and that hint of softness in his voice says, *let me know if you need anything.*

Gou blinks up from where she was standing the kitten up on its back legs and making it dance with her.

Haru just lets out another sigh and guides her out into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

So naturally, Makoto can’t concentrate worth hell on the meeting.

While he’s not an addict like most of the people around the circle, Nagisa and Rei suggested he come just to check it out. Makoto had been grateful for the excuse to not go home after work because he didn’t do well with alone with a lot of time on his hands. Too much thinking. Remembering.

They’ve made it around to a tall guy named Natsuya, who drags his hand through his thick brown hair every few words and is pale beneath his natural tan. He was too anxious to go into depth about his story, but he made sure to stress that he was an addict and wouldn’t have made it without Rei and Nagisa’s help, however, he found out today that his baby brother has ran away and is dealing on the streets and it’s entirely his fault.

Everyone assures Natsuya that it isn’t and Makoto’s surprised by the unexpected layers of depth that come with a support group. It’s not just talking about all the crazy and regrettable shit someone did while they were high, or how many people they’ve lost, or how much money they’ve blown on
there’s a serious emphasis on what these people are going through right now, whether they are recovering or struggling or everything in between, it doesn’t even have to necessarily be drug-related because drugs aren’t always the worst aspect of someone’s life.

Natsuya starts crying and Makoto’s chest tightens so painfully that he has to quietly sneak out of the room. He then thumps his head back against the door and squeezes his eyes shut against a vision of Ren and Ran and how horrible it would be if they were homeless and fending for themselves like that.

He can still hear the group comforting Natsuya, so he decides to waste a little time with the hopes that they’ll be able to convince him not to hate himself in the span of a few minutes.

He shuffles down the hallway and pushes open the door that leads into the cafeteria. The room is empty, save for Gou, who is in the corner of the room watching cartoons on the mounted television. She’s talking on a cell phone while swinging her feet off her chair, and Makoto notices the rolls of sushi amongst her open textbooks on the table.

“Silly Onii-chan,” Gou says into the phone. “Don’t cry. Haru got me sushi.” She discreetly slides a roll of it under the table to the kitten curled up in her lap, and Makoto laughs quietly.

He leaves her be in favor of traveling deeper into the room and startles at the sharp smell of cleaning products.

He peers around a buffet line to see Haru hunched over on the floor, a bucket of soapy water beside him with a sponge clutched in his hand so tightly that the bones of his fingers bulge.

He jerks his head up as if he can feel Makoto’s stare and his eyes narrow into a glare. “What is it?” His voice is breathless but the tone still sends ice clawing down Makoto’s back.

He startles at the sharpness of Haru’s eyes and a self-conscious blush heats Makoto’s face. He suddenly feels out of place in his own skin. “I’m sorry, I just, um – where’s the bathroom?”

Haru sits back on his haunches and wipes the sweat from his flushed face before pointing a trembling finger in the general direction of another door across the room.

“Oh, thank y –”

Haru turns so his back is facing Makoto and scrubs furiously at the floor.

Makoto is too stunned to move for a moment before he wanders off and pretends that the burn of rejection doesn’t hurt more than a bullet to the chest.

He’s still put off after he exits the bathroom and in an irrational moment of self-respect that he seriously doesn’t even have, he marches across the cafeteria to give Haru a piece of his mind.

He’s got his whole speech wrote out in his head, introduction, body, conclusion, when he rounds the buffet line only to be greeted by the lone soap bucket.

Makoto’s eyes narrow on the way the sponge has been left on the floor, still drenched and soapy. He huffs and kicks it over with the toe of his shoe before he stills.

There’s blood on the floor. Not a lot of it, just enough to stain the soap bubbles pink. It probably
wouldn’t even be noticeable to someone who hasn’t seen as much blood as Makoto has.

With a sinking gut, Makoto walks into the back of the kitchen, passing by a row of sinks, fridges, a freezer, and an open doorway.

He hesitantly walks through and glances around before his gaze falls and a gasp rockets from the bottom of his lungs.

All his previous hurt flies out the window with the speed of a bullet as Makoto slides to his knees and rolls Haru over from where he’s face down on the floor. He’s unconscious, and Makoto would give anything to remember his training and everything they told him to look for if someone passes out on the battlefield, but there’s so much panic racing through him that he can’t even think straight.

Haru’s face is pale and sure enough, there’s dried blood in the cracks of his chapped lips. Makoto slips his hand around the back of Haru’s head, grimacing at the sweat, and bends down to hear his breath, weak as it is, hiss through his teeth.

He still can’t bring himself to be convinced, so he presses the knuckles of his other hand against the side of Haru’s fevered neck, over the hawk inked into his skin, and he breathes in relief when he feels Haru’s pulse thrumming against his touch.

Haru lets out a high-pitched wheeze and he opens his eyes only for Makoto to see that they’ve rolled back. Nauseated at the sight, Makoto calls out softly, “Haru, can you hear me?”

The answering silence sends his nerves frying. He rests Haru’s head on top his thigh in favor of keeping one hand over that bird on his neck, waiting for his pulse to somehow stop because that’s just what happens to people around Makoto.

Haru parts his lips and Makoto notices that one of his front teeth is chipped and he’s bewildered to be hit with the thought that it’s almost kind of cute. Then Haru’s eyes squint open and a distant part of Makoto is amused because they seem to be naturally set in a glare.

But then Haru stares up into Makoto’s eyes like he’s never been this close to anyone before and can’t understand it, and Makoto doesn’t know how to feel anything but understanding for that lost look.

Then Haru scrambles away to heave against the opposite wall before Makoto can even register what’s happened. Haru’s breathing shallowly at a pace that he knows all too well, and he gently says, “Hey, you’re okay, you just –”

“Did Gou see?”

In Makoto’s stunned silence, Haru’s eyes widen like he’s failed at everything he’s ever done, and Makoto quickly shakes his head to get that look off his face. “No, I don’t think she did.”

Haru’s eyes slip closed with the weight of his relief. He then looks at Makoto and his voice doesn’t shake like it should belonging to someone who just passed out. “Go back to the group. They’re going to come looking for you.”

Makoto scoffs but Haru doesn’t flinch at the sound. “You just passed out! You need to go to a hospital or at least –”

“Don’t tell me what I need to do,” Haru says, and his voice is the most unwavering thing that
Makoto’s ever heard in his life. “Go back. Forget about this.”

“Forgot about this?!”

“Keep it down,” Haru hisses, eyes flashing.

Makoto isn’t fazed. “You could have a concussion.” His eyes narrow at Haru’s glare. “And I know you’re spitting up blood too, I saw it on the floor.”

Haru’s nostrils flare and he snaps, “Look, this isn’t the first time this has happened.” He hesitates. “Not even today.”

Makoto’s eyes widen and Haru snorts with an angry roll of his eyes. “I already know what the issue is,” he says. “And I don’t owe you shit but I’m gonna to tell you that there’s nothing anyone can do about it so you’ll leave and forget this ever happened because it can’t be helped.”

Makoto stares at him. “You end up dealing with this on your own a lot, don’t you?”

Haru falters. “What?”

Makoto rises to his feet with a shake of his head. “Look, I know all about trying to hide stuff. Especially the stuff I know most people won’t understand.”

Haru stiffens as he walks closer to stop right in front of his sprawled legs. Makoto tips his head knowingly, crossing his arms as he leans his weight on one hip. “But the harder you try to pretend like it’s not effecting you, the easier it is for people to see that it is.”

Haru’s breath hitches as Makoto holds a hand out. “So it’s better to just get over yourself and realize its okay to ask for help.”

Haru’s jaw twitches and he glares at Makoto’s fingers before his gaze rolls over his wrist, up his arm, carrying with it a look that Makoto will feel in his bones for weeks after this night, but right now he doesn’t have a problem standing in the middle of that pantry and waiting for Haru to finish glaring at him before he sighs in defeat and slips his hand in Makoto’s.

He helps Haru into a stand and after making sure he isn’t going to fall over, he retracts his fingers from Haru’s, though he swears he can still feel them on his skin even as he shoves his hands in his pockets.

Makoto arches an expectant brow and Haru lifts his chin. “I’ll go to the hospital tonight,” he accepts. “But only if you –”

“Pretend this never happened, I got it,” Makoto says with an exasperated smile.

Makoto’s eyes aren’t quick enough to see Haru’s eyes fall to his mouth before he looks away.

He heads out of the pantry but then he stops, his heart, the world, everything stops at Haru’s whisper: “Thank you.”

The softness of his words tells Makoto that they’re not said very often for reasons that are probably deeper than just stubbornness. The vulnerable quiet of Haru’s voice makes Makoto want to hold it in
his chest and warm it against his heart, make the layers of ice melt so it can always be as gentle and rich as it is in this moment.

He looks over his shoulder and smiles. “You’re welcome.”

And with that, he heads back to the meeting, the same one that he’s still not going to be able to concentrate on, but that’s okay.

Makoto stays behind to help Nagisa and Rei put up the chairs.

When they ask him why he was gone for so long, Makoto steadies himself because this lie needs to be believable for Haru, so he says that he had asked the guy about what days the soup kitchen was open and how he could get involved with volunteering.

Nagisa gasps. “Oh, that would be great! It’d be a great way to spread word about the support group! Mako-chan’s so smart!”

They step into the cafeteria and Makoto spots Gou still at the table with her kitten but Haru has joined them to devour some sushi.

Makoto’s eyes fall to another person at the table and the sight of the guy sitting next to Haru has something deep and sharp wedging into his chest - a burn that is irrational and not justifiable in the slightest but still demands to be felt.

The clench of his muscles loosens when the taller guy snaps out a hand to take the last roll of sushi from Haru’s hand and Haru reaches up to slap him on the back of the head. The guy then rams the toe of his shoe into Haru in the ankle and they proceed to act like twelve year old siblings, letting Makoto breathe easier.

Rei however, doesn’t know what to do with the sight. “Um –”

Haru blinks up from where he’s pushed his friend, his very platonic friend, Makoto’s decided, away from him by shoving a foot against his face, not looking winded at all. Which isn’t arousing. At all. “You done?”

“Um. Yes?”

Haru nods approvingly before giving another good shove with his foot to push the other guy away and plop the sushi in his mouth. He stares his friend down as he chews deeply before swallowing with a smug bob of his head.

Gou spins around in her seat and says to Makoto, “Mr. Tachibana, this is Onii-chan.”

Onii-chan scrubs the boot mark off his face with some dark mumbling sent Haru’s way, but it’s ignored by Haru completely. He then turns to Makoto with a winning smile full of sharp teeth and the glitter of a tongue ring and introduces himself as Rin, Gou’s brother, and noticing that the two of them have the exact same shade of hair and eyes makes Haru’s place in this all the more confusing.

Makoto, Rei, and Nagisa are still outside the building when Haru’s locking the door. Rin stretches with a groan, shirt riding up to reveal twisting, bending designs of tattoo ink, and pops his neck, where Makoto notices dark bruises around his throat. He blushes before looking away.
Gou’s still got the kitten in her arms. Rin says, “Time to let the cat go, baby doll.”

Gou’s eyes fill with tears and she shakes her head frantically. “But she loves me. She told me.”

The dark circles around Rin’s eyes are more prominent as he sighs. “Gou –”

Haru turns sharply to Makoto, startling him. “Was she good today?”

Makoto bites back a smile at Gou’s wide, pleading eyes before he says, “Yes. She was perfect.”

Haru nods in approval and pockets his keys. “You can keep her, Gou.”

Rin’s spluttering is nowhere near as loud as Gou’s victory shout, and Haru meets Makoto’s eyes to give him one last ghost of a smirk, to which Makoto responds with his own shy smile.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork by Starshi
"Oh my heart is gold
And my hands are
cold."

"Gasoline" by Halsey

He doesn’t remember the parts of the story that everyone else does but what he does remember
doesn’t let him go.

As always, there had been too much noise around him, but what was different this time was that he
was in such a state that all the sound, all the war, was festering inside his head, bullets bouncing off
the walls of his skull, the stench of peroxide burning through his lungs like acid, his bones blowing
away with the hot sand that the helicopter blades threw as they whirled.

The soldiers in the familiar uniforms jarred him as they hauled his stretcher up into the flyer and
Sousuke hadn’t known if they were just bringing his body home or if he was actually still alive.

He remembers finding such bitter humor in drowning in a desert, unable to breathe around the blood
lodged in his throat as that merciless heat clawed into his heart and he remembers when it first seared
his emotions away and burned him clean to turn him into a soldier made of smoldering iron and a
cold, empty chest.

He doesn’t remember much of what was said between the soldiers around him – just one sentence
that spikes through his thoughts every few minutes of each day, leaving him with a haunted disgust
that he can never shake.

“Did you find his arm?”

Someone said yes and Sousuke looked down at himself.
Before he could start screaming they brought Makoto out and one look at him told Sousuke that Makoto was dead too, even as he fought like a cornered animal against the hands that were trying to help him.

Makoto’s eyes, wild and cold, met Sousuke’s bloodshot gaze, and hope flared in his chest because he knew Makoto would do this for him, even if he wasn’t Makoto anymore and never would be, they had an unbreakable bond that only war could forge, and that war-torn animal inside his friend’s body would, *god, please*, follow through on this last order that Sousuke mouthed at him.

“*Kill me.*”

But then a syringe pierced the back of Makoto’s neck and Sousuke *hated* him for it, for collapsing and letting these bastards tear open his shirt to try and save him even as he struggled. *Kill us,* Sousuke’s eyes begged the medic above him. *Just kill us, you bastards, look at us, you know we can’t come back from this.*

*You can’t bring us back.*

*We’re already dead.*
His stance is solid, his motions seasoned with years of combat training, but he’s forgotten that Makoto is quicker than he looks and uses that gentle exterior to hide that he’s an absolute snake when it comes to sparring, and in that split second of trying to catch his breath Makoto flips Sousuke, taking down six feet of solid muscle like it’s nothing but funny, and Sousuke hits the mat with enough force to make him wonder if his lungs actually exploded on impact.

He rolls over to cough; despite being a jackass, Makoto comes over to check on him and that’s when Sousuke swipes out a leg and rips his feet out from under him.

Makoto doesn’t do as well with spontaneous attacks, which is where Sousuke has always excelled, and he uses that fact to pin Makoto and lock his limbs under his heavier weight with a request of, “Say it, asshole.”

Makoto struggles uselessly, never giving up, so earnest, before his thrashing weakens and Sousuke smirks in victory.

But then Makoto throws his head back and head butts his nose so hard that Sousuke doesn’t even realize he’s the one pinned until he stops seeing stars.

Makoto smiles smugly from above him. “Say it, Sir.”

He grits his teeth and throws all of his weight, making Makoto almost tip over before fire rakes through Sousuke’s shoulder.

“Whiskey Tango Foxtrot,” he wheezes, kicking his legs out, but the pain is so demanding that it takes his strength out of reach. “Whiskey Tango getthehellowoffmeyouprick –”

His swallow tastes like metal when Makoto’s weight leaves him, and Sousuke rolls his bitten tongue before waving Makoto away when that mother hen bullshit kicks in and he tries to get him to tell him what’s wrong.

Sousuke sits up and gropes his right shoulder, resisting a surge of panic as he tries to slide it back into place, and his body jolts like an electric shock when the bones settle together. He sighs in relief and massages the spasming muscles. Even through his shirt, his fingers are met with the thick rope of scar that wraps around his shoulder where they surgically reattached his arm, which is now tingling with numbness.

Makoto sounds more pained about the whole ordeal than him. “I told you we shouldn’t –”

“I’m fine,” Sousuke stresses a bit too loudly, voice shaking just a little too much for it to be believable. He looks away from Makoto’s unconvinced eyes to call across the gym, “Echo. Water.”

A dark shape rises from beside Sousuke and Makoto’s gym bags, so intimidating that it’s hard to believe it would take orders from anyone. The Belgian Shepherd noses through Sousuke’s bag before delicately taking a bottle between her teeth, four of which glitter with titanium coating, and trotting across the empty gym to drop the bottle in Sousuke’s open palm.

He cracks the seal and strokes her thick neck. “Thank you.”

Makoto’s smile drips with fondness to the point that it’s disgusting. Echo disregards Sousuke when she remembers that Makoto, oh yay, the fun one, is here, and she crosses the mat to sprawl over his
crossed legs with the silent demand for a belly rub. He complies with earnest, rubbing through her dark fur and cooing, “Such a good girl, Coco, yes, yes you are!”

Sousuke rolls his eyes so hard he’s surprised they don’t stick and takes a long sip of his water before glancing over at the clock on the wall, which reads 9:00 p.m. He finishes off the bottle and scrubs his face to suppress a yawn, wincing as his ears ring in the silence of the gym – too much exposure to the loud noises of gunfire and explosions and screams has left them damaged beyond repair, but he’s thankful he didn’t get an eardrum blown out like Makoto did.

His hand discreetly sneaks over to Echo’s leg to lose his fingers in the comforting, familiar thickness of her fur. “So’d you like it?”

Makoto blinks. “What, the job?”

Sousuke braces himself and nods.

Makoto’s eyes brighten with a sincerity he can’t believe is possible for someone who has seen so much. “Yes! Oh, it was amazing. It was just –” His throat works and he shakes his head, covering up his emotional falter with an endless smile. “It was amazing.”

Sousuke is dumbfounded. “That’s. Good?” He winces and clears his throat. “I mean, that’s – really good. That’s great.”

Makoto’s smile wavers and he ducks his head. “Yeah, I didn’t think I could do it either,” he whispers.

Sousuke curses himself. “I didn’t mean –”

“Sousuke,” Makoto sighs, his smile as honest as it is tired. “It’s okay.”

He looks away guiltily, eyes falling to watch Makoto’s hand trail over Echo’s old patrol vest, a faded tan thing that’s hardened from the dry heat of the desert. The harness has been stripped of the antenna that once rose from the back, but the Velcro patches are still proudly displayed along the side.

**ECHO LA RUE**

**EXPLOSIVE DETECTION DOG**

**AFGHANISTAN**

**IRAQ**

There’s a string of words written in faded black marker: *Handler – Sergeant Yamazaki.*

Sousuke cracks a disbelieving smile at the dog because she’s taken to civilian life better than both him and Makoto. No one would assume Sousuke’s jumped out of a plane with her in his arms at one hundred and thirty miles per hour, but he has several times, to the point she got excited for it. He’s carried her on his back after she’s been shot in the leg, he’s had her crushed against his side as a grounding weight on long nights, he’s swam through icy rivers with her, and held the end of her leash as she sniffed out enough bombs to give her a higher military rank than both him and Makoto.
“Does she still get upset when you try to take it off?” Makoto asks, sliding his fingers under one of the vest’s thick buckles.

Sousuke nods. “She won’t stop crying until she’s got on that one or her police vest.”

Makoto sighs and trails a finger between her closed eyes. “That’s so sad.”

Sousuke shrugs. “Not to her. It’s all she knows.”

That doesn’t make Makoto look any happier.

Neither he nor Sousuke would be here if weren’t for Echo, who had been with their team the night they were ambushed. She escaped at Sousuke’s order to run and she raced through the wilderness for miles without stopping until she reached the base; her arrival had been the only alert their commanding officers were given to indicate something had even gone wrong.

After being rescued, Sousuke woke up in the base hospital and this was where he was told that only three members of his team had survived the captivity following that ambush.

Sousuke’s thoughts had been too tangled at the time to remember being rescued or the helicopter ride and he had demanded to know who was alive with so much ferocity that they had to restrain him. After he woke from the shot of morphine, the medics told him that it was Makoto who was still alive.

In that moment, Sousuke’s entire life purpose became getting out of that bed and crawling to Makoto’s side to be there for him, to protect him, but they had to calm him down once more before softly admitting, “Corporal Tachibana can’t have visitors right now. He’s… in the pysch ward.”

That information had thrown Sousuke into a depression that he never thought he’d come out of. Guilt crushed any efforts he made to heal and it took weeks for him to gather the strength to ask who the third survivor was.

The medics helped him into a wheelchair and brought him outside where a truck pulled up to the building and Sousuke’s heart stopped – or more like started beating again – when he heard barking.

A soldier rounded the truck and dropped the trunk to pull out a kennel. Claws clicked across the metal as the animal inside moved restlessly, and the young woman unlatched the gate for the dog to jump out.

She landed in the dust and hunched over the ground in an anxious crouch, eyes darting over the empty horizon line, barking over and over, calling out. When she received no answer, she let out a whine and Sousuke had never heard anything so lonely in his life.

“Echo,” Sousuke croaked. “Echo!”

She stopped barking entirely, tripping over her own legs to whip around and her eyes locked on Sousuke before she lunged at him, ripping her leash out of the soldier’s hand.

Sousuke almost cried out from the pain that hit him when she jumped into his lap but he didn’t resist as she hid her face in the embrace of his arms, sniffing him everywhere to check him for injuries because she knew how stupid he was, and then she licked his face until he laughed for the first time in months.
“She’s been a wreck since the two of you were separated,” he was told. “We don’t think you two have the kind of bond that can just be traded for another handler. So she’s yours if you want her.”

Sousuke had no family. He grew up in foster care and hadn’t even had friends he was sad to leave when he was deployed. Echo was all that he had.

That was until they let Makoto come home. Sousuke had been given the clear to go weeks before but he refused to leave without him, and it was on the flight back into civilization that Makoto suggested the three of them go to Iwatobi.

Sousuke had lived there before. After high school he went straight to the police academy and graduated quickly. He worked for the department in his town but there was no challenge – he got up every morning just because it was routine, not because he had a purpose. He was watching the news one night when he saw the terrible state of a coastal city called Iwatobi and transferred immediately.

It was more than he had bargained for, he’ll admit that much. He averaged about four hours of sleep a night before he was called in for a raid or a burglary but Sousuke loved it. He liked his heart beating quickly, his blood racing, he liked thinking that he was making a difference and that these kids wouldn’t have to grow up in homes like he did.

Sousuke had loved being a cop until he was put on his first undercover mission.

His objective was to confirm that a house on the outskirts of the city was the last major cookhouse they needed to bring down. He’ll never forget how the place smelled when he went in, like rotgut whiskey and so many cigarettes that he swears the stench infested all of his clothes.

He bought the drugs and was proud of himself to complete his task so quickly before he realized he had been found out.

He was handed over his drugs by a fucking kid. The kid was an asshole, Sousuke didn’t give a shit if he didn’t know him or could barely see his face under his hood or heard him say even five words. He took one look at Sousuke and ripped through his months of training and preparation like it was a fucking joke.

Sousuke left the house and ventured off into the woods to meet up with the rest of the force and confirm that that was the place. Captain Mikoshiba asked how many people were in there and Sousuke told him before the Captain froze when he said that it was some scrawny teenager who had given him the drugs. Sei ordered him to point the kid out when they raided the house because the boy was probably being forced to make the drugs – his testimony would be all they needed in court even if all the drugs were gone by the time they raided the house.

Sousuke had felt like an amateur because he hadn’t considered that the boy had been forced to do anything. He just thought he was a dick. Which he still was.

But that night changed Sousuke’s life. He had chased the boy through the woods like he was nothing more than a criminal, not like someone whose house had just blown up and probably had everything he knew ripped away in a flat second.

Of course he couldn’t think like that as a cop but that boy wouldn’t have jumped off that cliff if Sousuke hadn’t made him feel like he didn’t have any other choice.

They never found his body and Sousuke felt like a murderer.
He enlisted in the army not even a month after that because he didn’t deserve to help people anymore. He wasn’t capable of that. Only killing.

Sousuke met Makoto at boot camp; they were both nineteen but nothing alike. Sousuke kept to himself while Makoto went out of his way to help people. He was straightforward and cold while Makoto looked away and squirmed. They were total opposites but war doesn’t give a fuck about that — it brings people together as much as it tears them apart.

It didn’t matter that Makoto was so considerate he was suffocating because he had Sousuke’s back. And it didn’t matter that Sousuke himself thought he hated Makoto before he ran through a firefight and slaughtered a building full of armed assholes just to drag Makoto’s unconscious body off the roof because no one in the army, no one in the world, thought Sousuke was anything more than an asshole other than Makoto, so he was not going to leave his annoying ass out there to bleed out in the sun and get left behind.

Makoto dragged him to his family home every time they were given leave. Sousuke told himself that he just went because he would get bored by himself but after a few years of being in the Tachibana house, he found himself dreaming about the painful dig of the springs in his futon as he crawled under a briar bush for sleep cover. He’d get so frustrated with a rookie’s attitude that he couldn’t wait to lose video games to Ren and have him rub it in his face. He would stroke the dust out of Echo’s fur at night and wonder how many stray cats Ran had brought home and begged to keep. He even looked forward to getting shitfaced with Makoto on cheap beer after they visited his dad’s grave, where he was laid to rest after being killed in the same war Makoto was now fighting in.

Sousuke met Nagisa and Rei too, and he’ll never be able to convey how it felt getting a letter from them each time Makoto did. They didn’t just mention him in a quick little scrawl across the bottom of Mako’s letter, oh, tell Sousuke hi. They sent him his own letters and they weren’t just a copy of Makoto’s with their names switched — Nagisa would tell him how his favorite sports team was fairing and Rei even saved his ass one time by writing a letter that included a list of which local plants were edible and which ones were poisonous.

Sousuke would see the pictures Nagisa sent Makoto of that church in Iwatobi and he couldn’t stop himself from feeling like that was just a little too weird, too coincidental, for him to keep getting updates on that city even when he was across the world. He still felt tied to it. Bound to it.

So after they escaped hell on Earth, recovered at the Tachibana house, spent months in physical therapy and too many visits with a therapist, he and Makoto were given a passible bill of health, both mentally and physically, and they headed for Iwatobi.

Sousuke didn’t even have to try to get his job back at the police department — all it took was Sei hearing his voice over the phone. “No, shut up, just shut the hell up,” he’d said. “That’s it, it’s done, you’re in, holy shit are you in.” He let out a hysterical laugh like he couldn’t believe his luck. “Shit Yamazaki, we’ve needed you here. This city has needed you here.”

They needed a good police dog as well. Echo was overqualified for the job but having her on the team meant that he wouldn’t have to leave her at home to wonder if he was ever going to come back, so she added police dog to her long list of titles.

Sousuke clips Echo’s leash to her harness and he and Makoto exit the gym to head for their shared street. They had been worried about being too far apart on their first try at relearning how to be civilians, so their houses were right next to each other, and Sousuke had made sure the neighborhood
was quiet and far from the ocean before they even showed up to look at the place.

They had never even considered living together because neither of them had been allowed one inch of personal space in those three years in the army – they had seen so much of each other that they were both dead inside at this point, and they’d been crammed together in tanks and forced in the middle of a six soldier *mandwich* on so many cold nights that they just desperately wanted to take advantage of having some breathing room.

Sousuke’s phone buzzes and he frowns as the screen reveals the caller to be Mikoshiba. “Sergeant Yamazaki,” he answers.

Sei clears his throat. “Ah, heeeey Sousuke.” His voice doesn’t sound nearly as confident as it has been since he received the title of Chief Inspector. “I, uh… shit.”

Sousuke blinks. “Sir?”

“So listen, there’s something happening tomorrow that I might have forgot to tell you. It’s about a, ah. New guy.”

Makoto raises his brows with a mean little smirk on Sousuke’s behalf – or rather, his look of dread. Sousuke throws him a lewd gesture that Mrs. Tachibana would lecture him about for two hours before replying, “And who might that be?”

“You remember my brother, yeah?”

Sousuke stumbles on the sidewalk because *no*. This is not where this conversation is going.

“Can’t say I do,” he breezes. “Don’t remember him at all.”

Makoto shoots him an unimpressed look because he doesn’t even have to know what the conversation is about to know that Sousuke is lying.

“Well he just graduated from the academy and –”

“Oh god.” His voice is very small. Dying.

“…I’m sorry?”

“I mean –” And that piece of shit Tachibana is laughing at him because Sousuke’s probably never looked so scared in his life even though Mako’s seen his face as he’s walked through a minefield and waited for the ground to explode.

Sousuke shoves him and Makoto pushes back and Echo’s eyes dart between them like a kid who hates it when her parents fight. Sousuke clears his throat and clips, “Nothing. Go ahead.”

“Anyway, he graduated from the academy and has been accepted into the police program!”

Sousuke feels the horror bleed into his expression and he uselessly kicks Makoto in the shin when he has to sit down right on someone’s lawn because he’s cracking up so bad. “That’s so great,” Sousuke rasps. “So great.”

“Are you all right?”
“…”

“Yamazaki?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Well, what I forgot to tell you is that you’re going to be mentoring him.”

Sousuke considers jumping out into traffic as he watches the cars speed by. He seriously considers it but god, then Echo would get left to Makoto and he’d let her eat whatever she wanted and she’d get so fat, so quick that she’d die of a heart attack before they even put Sousuke in the ground. *Fuck.*

“I don’t know if I’m the right one for the job,” Sousuke tries. Begs. Pleads. “I haven’t been back on the force very long and I –”

“No, don’t doubt yourself like that!”

Sousuke sits down right in the middle of the fucking sidewalk because he just can’t anymore.

“You’re the best person for the job,” Sei assures. “And I know you’ll whip him right into shape in no time at all. You’re just what he needs!”

“Yeah, Sou-chan,” Makoto says, and Echo *yips fearfully* when Sousuke tackles him because Makoto has fucking spoiled her and has let her eat pizza enough times to convince her that she’s a person and he knows that Makoto doesn’t do shit but watch soap operas on Sousuke’s DVR when he’s dog sitting and she probably thinks she’s about to get split between them in a dramatic divorce or some shit. Which is actually going to happen in about four seconds if Makoto doesn’t stop laughing, so let her prepare herself for it, fuck it, *fuck it.*

“He’ll be ready to start tomorrow morning when you get to the station,” Sei says. “Hope Echo doesn’t mind the extra company in the squad car.”

Sousuke perks up because Echo seriously might tear Momotarou’s head off if he tries to make her get out of the front seat. With that hope lighting the way, Sousuke replies, “Yeah, me too.” Not at all. Not at fucking all.

They hang up and Sousuke dips his head between his raised knees and groans.

“He can’t be *that* bad,” Makoto says. He knocks his knee against Sousuke’s. “He can’t be any worse than Ren and Ran. Or that recruit that tried to convince us that the whole war started because they said Pluto wasn’t a planet anymore.”

“Tell me there’s alcohol at your house,” Sousuke muffles into his hands. “Just a little. Just the watered down shit. Even if it’s that bubble bath wine.”

Makoto scoffs. “Uh, I have work in the morning? And so do y – wait, what do you mean, *bubble bath wine? That is a stout wine –”*

“Why does everyone act like having work in the morning is the worst reason in the world to get drunk?” Sousuke asks the sky. “Has anyone ever even been to work before? It’s the best reason to get drunk.”
Makoto lifts himself up and brushes the grass from his basketball shorts. “You’re being dramatic. You’ll be fine.”

“That kid might actually make me wreck the squad car because he spots a penny on the side of the road. I’m not kidding. I’m not being dramatic at all.”

Makoto’s stare is almost as flat as his voice. “Right. Not at all.”

Sousuke sighs in defeat and puts his left hand in Makoto’s so he can help him to a stand. “I am going to die tomorrow,” he accepts. “Three tours. Kill count of one hundred and eight sons of bitches plus that cobra I found in your boot that one time. I climbed the ranks like a low-bearing tree. Strangled a warlord with nothing but some shoelaces and a condom. Got honors and medals and so much shit to be buried with.”

Mako looks thoughtful. “I can have your shoes though, right?”

“No.”

So Haru doesn’t have the money to go to a real hospital but even if he did, he… probably wouldn’t go.
He tells himself that he’s headed to Nao’s at his own insistence, not Makoto’s. He’s just going to get some iron pills, he won’t even mention how many times he’s passed out in the last twenty four hours because it doesn’t matter, like he told Makoto, and like he said, there’s nothing that can be done about his health condition other than getting transfusions, and he does not need anyone’s help, he can manage this on his own like he always has.

However, the words are out of his mouth before he can stop them. “I’ve never spit up blood before.”

Nao blinks. He’s perched on the edge of the van’s open trunk with both back doors spread to reveal the most immaculate interior for someone who lives out of their vehicle. The twin mattress is sheeted and dressed, his clothes are folded up in a lone drawer, and his medical supplies are stacked up in neat rows. That tidiness is what has always set Nao apart from the rest of the homeless – he might not have anywhere to go but he will still be a neat freak, and if being homeless doesn’t break that habit, then Haru doubts anything will. “Spitting up blood usually isn’t a side effect of iron deficiency,” Nao says.

Kazuki’s eyes triple in size before he spits whiskey across the sand and thrusts the bottle into Nao’s chest like it’s burned him. “I just drank after you and you’re spitting up blood?!”

Nao snorts and takes a swing. “Are you saying that if I took an oral swab of your mouth right now there wouldn’t be traces of Nakagawa Shouta’s semen in it?”

“Nao!!”

Haru shakes his head in the most pitying manner he’s capable of before Nao hands the bottle off to him. Haru takes it because their bodies have gone through so much that things like blood and jizz really don’t mean fuck to them anymore – drinking after one another is nothing compared to sharing dirty needles, which all of them have survived doing at least once in their careers as drug addicts.

Haru grimaces as the whiskey sears down his throat and Kazuki snatches the bottle from him to stubbornly force down another drink despite turning green as he does so.

Haru lets the headiness of the drink settle in his limbs as he takes in his surroundings. Nao’s usual parking spot is at the edge of a beach where the homeless accumulate on hot summer nights to sleep in the cool ocean breeze. The sand is lit up with small bonfires and the hot smoke is a dizzying contrast to the salty mist in the air.

Drunkenness seeps into Haru’s thoughts and his mind wanders to green eyes before Nao’s voice hits him like a bucket of ice water. “I think the blood was from your respiratory disorder,” he says. He eyes Haru carefully. “You smell like cigarettes. Did you smoke?”

Haru meets his gaze before looking away to yank the bottle out of Kazuki’s hands and Nao nods. “That was probably what flared it back up,” he tells him gently.

Haru just tips the bottle back and swallows the liquid fire because having an iron deficiency and being anemic isn’t enough for his fucking nightmare of a body, he was also diagnosed with a respiratory disorder at the hospital all those years ago because of the conditions of the house he grew up in.

He checks the time on his phone and he and Nao go ahead and take care of the business that Haru came out here to do in the first place. Nao gives him a baggie of iron pills but when Haru tries to hand him the cash, he grimaces. “What?” Haru demands.
“I really don’t want to take your money,” Nao sighs, and the pain is so genuine in his voice that Haru is stunned. “You need to save up as much as you can for your transfusions and I just –“

“Nao.”

He looks up and Haru narrows his eyes. “Don’t act like you had anything to eat this week before the lunch at the soup kitchen today.”

Nao ducks his head in shame and pockets the money with his shoulders hanging low. Haru hates to admit that he looks terrible - his clothes are hanging off his thin limbs, his cheeks are hollowed out and gaunt, and that growing patch of blood under his eyepatch was a lost cause before Haru gave him that money because treating an injury as serious and painful as a missing eye is not cheap.

Nao looks even worse because he’s got his lavender hair pulled back to reveal that his good eye is red-rimmed and his cheeks are flushed from crying, which can only be from the phone call he made to Natsuya after the incident with Ikuya.

Haru drowns some pills in whiskey and Nao insists that Haru at least lets him give him a ride back to the cabin, to which he agrees before they all climb in and grimace as the van groans to life.

Kazuki, sprawled in the back seat with his hand still wrapped around the neck of the bottle, slurs, “You guys sell all your relay yet?”

“No,” Nao replies, squinting as he hunches over the steering wheel to try and stay on the road. It’s kind of unfortunate that the only driver in the group has only one eye, but they would probably get jumped on the way home if they walked, so they’ve always chosen to take their chances with Nao’s driving (even when he’s tipsy). “Mind you, my customers over the last few days have consisted of families looking for cheap cough syrup and not a new street drug.”

Haru’s eyes meet Kazuki’s in the rear view mirror. “Do you know what the side effects are?”

“Nah,” Kazuki shakes his head. “But I’ve had some clients come back for more and their tongues are stained blue from the strip. That’s about all I know.” Haru watches him grope the muscles of his neck with a grimace and a yawn. “I gotta go do some deals around Samezuka for the next few hours. Maybe I’ll try and get some info but dealing makes me jumpy as shit, so I don’t know.”

Haru isn’t particularly jumpy as shit about dealing anymore but he can understand not wanting to talk to anyone. At least that common trait gives Kazuki one redeeming quality, other than checking his hair every two minutes and giving Nakagawa something to do other than check his hair every two minutes.

“I like to just get out of there, don’t like sticking around to talk about the weather or how particularly fuckable I’m looking that day,” Kazuki sighs, using the rear view to muse his long hair before he curls a grin at his reflection. “Heh, well, most of the t–”

Haru already knows what’s coming and he braces his hands on the dashboard before Nao slams on the breaks, hurling Kazuki into the back of the passenger’s seat. He spills the booze, overwhelming the cab with the smell of alcohol as he rears back with a cry of, “HEY!”

“Thought I saw a dog,” Nao smirks.
Haru rubs at the migraine spiking through his forehead and stumbles out of the van when Nao stops in front of the cabin. He’s barely out the door when Kazuki crawls in the front to take his seat, causing Nao to groan and thunk his forehead against the steering wheel.

Haru’s just stepped onto the stone path leading to the cabin when Kazuki calls, “Um! H - Hey, Haru.”

Haru represses a sigh and turns back to the van, where Kazuki is hanging out the passenger window. He’s averting his gaze, rolling his lips in and biting them to shit like he always does when he’s nervous before he looks up at Haru and says, “I um. Just, thanks. For helping me out.”

Haru stands there, unsure of what to say. He would’ve called all those times that Kazuki followed him on deals to learn the trade annoying rather than helpful but Kazuki’s smile is lopsided and sincere, so Haru nods in reply before the van takes off and he slips the key in the lock.

He steps into the house quietly, easing the door closed and checking the lock three times before he’s convinced that it’s secure.

Haru startles when something pushes up against his leg and vibrates, and he looks down to see that it’s the kitten, which was revealed to actually be a boy after close inspection. His eyes are flashing in the soft darkness, and Haru frowns when he notices that there’s a light on in the kitchen.

He steps through the doorway to see Rin hunched over a can of Red Bull with his cell phone. His hair is wet from a shower but instead of lounging in his pajamas he’s decked out in a tight shirt and leather pants – his work clothes.

The bruises circling his neck weren’t that bad at the soup kitchen because they were recent, and Haru had been able to slip Rin the scarf he kept in his bag before Gou could notice them. But now, under the kitchen lights, it’s easy to see that the bruises are shaped like fingers that gripped Rin’s throat with so much unchecked strength they caused his voice to rasp.

Haru’s nostrils flare on a heavy exhale and he opens the fridge to take out an ice pack.

He sits down beside Rin and slides the frosted bag across the table. Rin takes it in his hand and when he presses it against his fevered skin, dark bruises, strained muscles and torn capillaries, he squeezes his eyes shut, a whimper ripping through gritted teeth.

Haru crosses his arms tight over his chest to not completely fly into a manic rage and glances at the clock on the wall, which reads 11:00 p.m. “Why are you drinking Red Bull so late?”

Rin pushes his phone all the way across the table like he’s disgusted by it. He scrubs his hand over his face before dragging it through his hair and croaking, “That bitch booked me another client for tonight.”

As soon as Rin says it, Haru’s anger overwhelms him to the point that his body goes numb. And then his expression twists into a look of raw, primitive hate. “Give me the phone.”

Rin snatches it out of reach and hisses, “Are you out of your fucking mind? You’re a fucking idiot if you think you can stop this.”

Haru opens his mouth to retort but he startles at the disgust in Rin’s eyes as he adds, “Especially when someone just gave her ten grand just to fuck me.”
Haru is stunned out of his own body. “Ten… I don’t care, I don’t fucking care, you can’t –”

Rin chokes on a laugh. “Haru,” he mumbles, eyes lulling shut, and Haru just wants to lose it because Rin looks so exhausted. “She only let one of us go,” he says, voice sharp and quiet. “And it was that ignorant fuck Natsuya. And you know that there was only one reason why she didn’t gut him inside out for leaving.”

“Rin, don’t –”

“Because Nao took the blame,” Rin says, muscles clenching with so much restrained anger that his veins pop. “And you remember what that bitch made him do so she wouldn’t go after Nat.” He shakes his head, glaring at the phone with a hate that Haru can feel burning in the air. “She said there still had to be repercussions, that there had to be some punishment given to somebody, and Nao told her he’d do whatever she wanted if she’d let that prick live. Just so he could go off and never come back, never give another fuck about any of us, but especially Nao. Now you remind me what she made him do. Say it.”

Haru is filled with anger from the deepest muscles to the surface of his skin.

“She made him cut out his eye in front of all of us.”

His own eyes are unseeing on the wall.

“And then made him eat it.”

He swallows bile and hunches over to press his sweaty forehead to the table.

“Nat wasn’t even one of her favorites. He wasn’t as important as me and you are.” Rin’s voice is twisted in gut-deep shame. “None of this would have even happened if we hadn’t been there from the start and she knows that it will all fall apart if she loses one of us now.”

Haru rears up and is so angry, so scared. “Then why does she keep letting you get hurt?”

“Because it’s money,” Rin stresses, disgust dripping over every syllable. “But that doesn’t even mean fuck because I have to do whatever she says, whatever she wants, no matter what, because I am not letting you help me.”

Haru’s eyes spiral wide and Rin’s brim with tears. “So don’t you ever try to tell me that you’re going to try and fix this ever again. Because I swear on my life, Nanase Haruka –” He flinches because no one else in the world knows his full name besides Rin. “I will find a way to make you regret it if you ever try to help me like Nao did. You dumbass, you jackass –” His voice fades to a rasp and he lifts a hand to squeeze the back of Haru’s neck. “Fuck you for even trying.”

Haru hangs on to Rin’s wrist and tries to desperately find something to say that will change all of this, but Rin just shakes his head with a smile that is so sad it crushes Haru. “No one can save me. Nobody wants to besides you and I’m never going to let you go through with it.” He swallows. “No one – no one but you and Gou have ever looked at me like I’m more than just something to fuck but that’s okay, I can just have that and be okay.”

“Stop,” Haru bares down on his wrist until the veins are throbbing under his fingers but he has to make him understand. “You don’t think of yourself like that, you don’t –”
But Rin’s eyes are honest and it’s horrifying.

Haru kicks him weakly in the shin. “Don’t ever say that again,” he says, voice stronger than he feels. “Ever again.”

Rin sighs. “Haru –”

“Never again.”

Rin stares at him for a long moment. “Okay,” he whispers. Then he gets up from the table, leaving the scent of perfume in the air, making Haru nauseous.

“The guy only paid for an hour so I’ll be back in time to get Gou ready for school,” Rin says, keeping his eyes down as he laces up his boots. “Miho’s not going to let him have more than an hour without paying more. He paid so much for one hour; she knows there’s more where that came from. I’ll text you if there’s an extension. My phone is charged.”

Haru’s chest is aching with so much grief. “Do you know him?”

Rin looks up to shake his head. “I’ve never had anyone pay this much so quickly.” He curls a grin. “Shockingly.”

“You’re stupid,” Haru whispers without the barest amount of heat.

“Yeah, well.” Rin downs the rest of the can and heads for the doorway. Then he pauses.

“What is it?”

Rin shakes his head. “I was just thinking – even if we could get away from her, what could we do? We can’t get jobs. We’d be on the streets.” He looks over his shoulder and his eyes are hard. “I’d rather go through this every night of my life than let Gou go through what we did.”

“You know I would too.”

That seems to comfort Rin because he flashes him one last grin that shakes too much around the edges, and there’s a disturbing finality in his expression before he slips out the front door.

Haru sleeps on the couch so he’ll hear when Rin gets home but after a restless night of jolting awake at the slightest sound, it’s his alarm that wakes him and not Rin.

He jerks to life in an instant, eyes darting to the front door before he gropes for the phone and silences his alarm to see that it’s 7 a.m. He stares at the time, not understanding, and then he lunges off the couch in a flurry of blankets and pillows to rush down the hallway and throw open Rin’s door.

The bed’s empty.

Haru stares at it for almost two minutes as if that will change anything, then he backs out of the room and closes Gou’s bedroom door on his way to sink into a living room chair. He wills his breathing to remain steady as he dials Rin’s number.
It goes straight to voicemail.

Rin’s phone never goes dead. He lowers the volume to silent when he’s with a client but even if he’s naked and twisted like a pretzel his phone is on and near him at all times; he never turns it off because he knows what can go wrong so he always keeps it on, he never –

Haru waits for his hands to stop shaking so he can scroll to Kazuki’s name and hope that he might’ve seen Rin.

Kazuki’s phone doesn’t even ring – it’s dead.

Haru paces across the floor at a speed that increases with every turn before a flash of realization hits him and he dials Nakagawa’s number.

He answers, and the relief that crashes down on Haru is so overwhelming that he has to sit down right where he is in the middle of the floor. “Haru, what the hell?” Nakagawa croaks. “It’s seven in the morning, you limp dick.”

“Have you seen Rin?”

Nakagawa must hear the fear in Haru’s voice because his sleepiness is gone in an instant. “I – no? I mean – shit, I saw him a few hours ago but I didn’t – hang on, lemme find Aki.” There’s a shuffling sound before hurried footsteps over tile floors. “I’m still at Samezuka, I’ve been here all night. But I passed out a while ago so maybe she’s seen him. Here, hang on, she’s right here.”

Haru’s crossed legs bounce against the floor in a spastic pattern as he listens to Nakagawa explain the situation. Then Aki’s voice rushes over the line. “Haru sweetie, what’s going on, what are you talking about?”

“Someone gave Miho ten grand last night to rent Rin out for an hour,” Haru says, distantly surprised that he can even speak coherently. “He left at eleven and didn’t come back. I need you to tell me if you saw him. His phone is dead.”

“What?” Nakagawa breathes. “He – his phone never goes off, why…”

“I saw him leave with some guy,” Aki whispers in Dawning horror. “Oh. Oh no.” She must hear Haru’s breathing pick up because she adds, “Now Haru, stop that, we can’t all just assume –“

“Assume?” Nakagawa scoffs. “Aki, there’s no assuming. He was supposed to be gone for an hour but then he left with some guy and now his phone is dead?” Hearing someone else say it makes Haru’s stomach drop. “Fuck, fucking shit this is bad, you know nothing good comes out of a client who pays that much that fast.”

“Naka, shut up!” Aki hisses. “Haru, listen to me sweetie, okay? Don’t underestimate Rin.” She hesitates and her voice isn’t as strong when she says, “I know what kind of hell he goes through on rents but you know what he’s capable of. Right?”

“Right,” Haru rasps but he’s shaking his head.

“And you know better than anyone in the world,” Aki says, voice turning firm and passionate, “That he’s not going to let anyone, anyone take him away from Gou. Right?”
Haru swallows and nods. “Right. Nakagawa?”

“Yeah man, whatcha need?”

“I was at Nao’s van last night and Kazuki came by for some allergy medicine —” He pauses when his words seem to rip a gasp out of Nakagawa. “Um.”

Aki’s laughing in elated disbelief. “Awww, Naka don’t cry!”

“You go to hell, Aki,” Nakagawa chokes. “I am not —” He clears his throat but it doesn’t make his voice sound any steadier. “He um. It’s just that he doesn’t have allergies, Haru. I do.”

Haru blinks. “Oh.” He feels like he’s supposed to be sentimental about that, this feels like a possible sentimental moment, but his heart is still beating too fast and Rin still isn’t here, so he goes on. “Kazuki said he was doing some deals around Samezuka last night. I tried to call him a few minutes ago to ask if he saw Rin but he didn’t answer.”

“That prick,” Nakagawa says fondly, “Isn’t as serious about keeping his phone charged as Rin is. He’s supposed to be here right now to take me to breakfast but he hasn’t shown up yet. Probably got lost or some shit, doesn’t even know his phone’s dead. I’ll ask him about Rin when he gets here and get back with you as soon as I know something.”

“I’ll call around.” Aki assures. “Maybe Asahi or Nii saw him around the city last night.”

Haru doesn’t say anything and Aki says, “We know this city better than ourselves, Haru. There’s nowhere he can go that we won’t find him.”

Haru tells her okay even though he doesn’t believe her.

He hangs up and his body moves through the house in total numbness as he heads down the hallway to Gou’s room.

He walks around the side of her bed and shoos the kitten off the pillows so he can gently nudge her awake. She lets out a yawn and squints up at him before smiling sleepily. “Good morning, Haru-chan.”

“Hi Gou,” he rasps. He clears his throat and looks away to take a breath. “I need you to go ahead and get dressed, okay? I’m gonna go make you something to eat.”

She sits up with a gasp of excitement. “Can it be pancakes? With blueberries on top?”

Haru’s chest tightens. “Whatever you want.”

Gou proceeds to tell her kitten about the wonders of blueberries and Haru shuts the door before resting his forehead against it.

He relies on muscle memory to navigate the kitchen and make breakfast.

Just as he’s slid the pancakes onto a plate, Gou skips out of her room with her kitten sliding over the hardwood to keep up. Gou’s looking proud of her outfit, which is a pair of neon green shorts and a
shirt displaying a big sunflower on the front, and of course she’s finished the look off with her clashing blue sandals.

Gou pulls herself up to sit on a high stool at the breakfast bar after taking the kitten in her arms so she can plop him down on the counter beside her, and Haru’s throat is too constricted to say anything against it.

He sets the plate and a cup of apple juice down in front of her before turning around to brace his hands on the sink and anxiously stare out at the foggy, empty road through the window.

Gou hums a little tune as she eats and he can hear her swinging feet hit the side of the island. Then her song trails off and her fork clatters against the plate.

Haru doesn’t turn around as he feels a heavy tension sink into the air and he doesn’t even try to fight his way out of it.

“Where’s Onii-chan?”

Haru calmly slips the pan into the sink, keeping his eyes cast down to work on lathering the sponge before scrubbing it across the pan as the hot water reddens his skin. “He got called into work,” he says, voice flat as it’s ever been. “So I’ll walk you to school.”

Gou doesn’t say anything and something shifts in the quiet, making Haru tense, and he turns in time to see the whites of her eyes turning red with unshed tears and he actually hears his heart break.

“Gou –”

“You’re lying,” she whispers.

Haru shakes his head, “No, I’m not. You need to calm down before –”

“Why are you lying?” she demands.

When Haru meets her question with silence her face twists in betrayal and her voice rises. “Where did he go? Is it – is it because of the cat? Then take him, I don’t want him!!”

Haru’s heart rockets up his throat as he darts across the kitchen to stop Gou from shoving the kitten off the counter. Gou wrenches her hand away and bursts into tears, breaths going quick and shallow, and oh shit.

He struggles to keep his own panic at bay as he rushes around the counter to steady his hands on her arms even as her entire body wracks with tremors that she can’t control. Haru gently requests, “Gou, I need you to calm down for me, okay?”

“I’m mad at you,” she chokes before her eyes widen at the realization that she can’t breathe.

“You can be mad, that’s fine,” Haru assures but she just cries harder and the sound splits him in two. “Gou, you can be mad, but I need you to breathe like the doctor told you. Just follow me, in and out, just try, it’s okay, you’re okay. I’m not going to let anything happen to you, you’re safe, I swear, just –”

Her face drains of color as she struggles to follow his directions. Haru doesn’t know what else to do other than take her in his arms, and when he does, Gou squeeze him like a vice because she’s trying
so hard but she still can’t breathe.

Haru paces back and forth across the living room as she cries into his shoulder and he assures her that she’s doing great, wonderful, amazing. Even though she’s small, her weight is such a strain on his body, but he doesn’t care, just keeps going back and forth even though it feels like there’s knives lodged in all his joints.

Her breath gradually slows and Haru’s relieved but so drained that he feels like he could sleep for a year. He sits her on the couch and lets a small smile break through as the kitten jumps into Gou’s lap and she hugs him to her chest. Haru says, “You can stay home today if you need to. I’m not going to make you go like this.”

“But it’s only the second day.”

“I don’t care.”

Gou wipes her face and shakes her head. “Just go find him.” She sounds as tired as he feels.

Haru hesitates. “He really did get called into work, Gou. He’s just running a few hours behind.”

“Where’s he work?”

Haru falters. “What?”

Gou shakes her head. “I’m not stupid.” Haru mouths for words but her voice hardens. “I am not stupid.”

Haru’s shock fades enough for him to remember that there was a time when Rin and Gou were living with their mom and she put Gou through worse things than Haru’s ever been through. It’s so easy to forget that when she’s so happy and full of life, but it’s hard times like these that all of them show what they’ve been through – or what they know can be taken away so easily. “I know you aren’t.” He sighs into his hands. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Gou just nods in forgiveness before wrapping him in a hug and heading off to her room for her book bag.

Haru had stupidly hoped that the school wouldn’t be as crowded on the second day.

He’s never been so wrong in his life – they get there right in time for the buses to back up and the air is hot with exhaust and the hiss of hydraulics and he’s probably holding Gou’s hand tighter than she is his.

The half-circle of concrete path in front of the school is congested with teachers helping kids out of cars and oblivious parents who don’t know how to get the fuck out of the way as they laugh about all this trivial bullshit. Haru weaves through them with this ferocity burning through his thoughts, but he keeps his eyes down as if he thinks that meeting their gazes will result in something painful.

He takes Gou to the bottom of the stone steps that lead up to the school’s front doors, which are open and feeding him the loud murmur of voices inside the building and the sound quivers through his blood. He’s about to stutter something to Gou about hoping she has a good day but he notices her roll up her fists in her jacket, eyes anxious as they dart from the steps to Haru. “What is it?” he asks.
She looks afraid of admitting it. “I don’t remember how to get to my classroom.”

Haru immediately smooths her hair down to make the fear leave her eyes, but then he bites the inside of his lip as he dares to raise his own gaze to the doors. Students and parents are weaving around him and Gou like they’re nothing more than obstacles, paying them no mind, and Haru hopes that everyone will continue to look past him as they ascend the stairs.

By the time they get to the top, Haru’s about to fall right back down because he can’t even feel his legs; he is so exhausted. But Gou looks just as scared as he is, so he ignores the terrifying numbness that grips his limbs and they step into the building.

His head cranes back to take in the vaulted ceilings before dropping to admire the rows of trophy cases that line the hall. The place is nice – no wonder he and Rin pay for Gou to go to this school instead of the rundown elementary school in the more dangerous part of town.

Gou tugs on his sleeve and it feels like she dislocates his fucking shoulder he’s hurting so badly. “Oh, there’s Mr. Hazuki!”

Haru swallows his pained noise to look down at her blankly, keeping the discomfort from his expression and voice. “Who?”

She blinks. “Oh, um. Nagisa? The short man with the fluffy hair that came to the soup kitchen last night.”

Haru kind of took a swan dive for the pantry floor last night, so he can’t remember too many details about what specifically happened before that, but when he sees the short man with fluffy hair that Gou so accurately described, he remembers him and almost lets himself feel relieved.

Haru and Gou move through the crowded hallway with their destination being Nagisa, who is standing outside what Haru assumes is his classroom door, and he looks far more prepared for facing a bunch of rabid children than Haru does with his battle armor of a bandana and an apron, both of which are already splattered with colorful war paint. Nagisa’s smiling at everyone, literally everyone, and Haru realizes fast that he likes him because he can read that expression as *I am so much better than all of you but I can’t lose my job because I need money for binge eating and alcohol after all this shit.*

Haru can relate.

Nagisa turns to them with that fake smile already straining on his face but then his expression breaks into one of honest excitement when he recognizes them. “Oh! Haru-chan! Hi!”

Haru frowns. “Don’t call me -ch –”

“Where’s Mr. Tachibana’s classroom, Mr. Hazuki?” Gou asks, standing anxiously on her tiptoes. “We can’t find it.”

Nagisa struggles to point over the sea of people but his finger directs them in the general direction of a staircase at the end of the hall (so many people, *son of a bitch*, where is the plague when you need it). “Up the stairs, first classroom on the left.”

“Thank you,” Haru says, meaning it with all the sincerity he is capable of, which isn’t a lot, but
Nagisa gives him a kind smirk anyway.

Haru and Gou weave through the hallway, dodging kids as they race from room to room, and Haru has to yank Gou out of the line of fire when a paper airplane sails through the air. They make it up the stairs but he has to roll his lips in and bite down to keep his pants from breaking through. His vision darkens at the edges and he’s so sleepy – he could lay down right here on this tile floor and get trampled on without waking up, he is so tired.

But then the crowd parts and he zeroes in on Makoto and a shock jolts through his chest, turning his blood into a red river of heat, making his lungs feel like they’ve been reduced to dust storms, spinning, spiraling, throwing his breath into a dizzying percussion that he can’t keep up with. Then he scoffs because this insistent asshole has the nerve to just nonchalantly have on this flannel, and how dare he, who in the hell does he think he is to just show up in a flannel and make Haru’s lips dry and mouth water –

“Ah. Um. Haru?”

– and this is not happening, when is anything in the universe ever this aesthetically pleasing, he wears glasses, he is literally wearing glasses. Was he wearing glasses last night? No, Haru would remember something like that, something like this, and glasses have never looked even half-way socially acceptable on the attractive scale to Haru because they make people’s eyes look bigger, which makes him nervous, but Makoto’s eyes, god, those eyes, are only round and wide because he’s blinking at Haru in confusion.

Shit. “Shit.”

“…”

“I mean. What’s up?” Haru clears his throat and glances back at the staircase to see if he could vault himself from right here and have a fatal crash landing at the bottom. “Gou didn’t know her way here.”

This is when he realizes that she’s still clinging to his hand, shrinking against his side. He gives her a look of question, eyes firm with the reminder that she can still go home, but Gou forces him a smile and hugs him tightly, too tightly, before breezing by Makoto without even looking at him and stepping into the classroom.

Makoto slowly turns back to Haru with a frown. “Is she all right?”

Haru’s mouth is dry for reasons that send cold dread through him instead of slow heat. He doesn’t realize he’s dropped his gaze until Makoto dips down slightly to peer under Haru’s fringe. “Are you all right?” He hesitates. “You know, since um. The thing.”

Haru looks up to raise his brows at Makoto’s blush. “The thing?”

Makoto grimaces and shoves his hands in his pockets to gesture with his flapping elbows, looking away. “You know.” Haru stares at him in silence and Makoto emphasizes, "The thing."

“You mean when I blacked the fuck out?”

Makoto startles a cough before it shapes into the sound of a laugh. “Yeah,” he smiles weakly, raising a hand to rub the back of his neck sheepishly. “That thing.”
Haru crosses his arms stubbornly. “It was what I said it was.” And now he should stop talking, just leave at that, he doesn’t have to say anything else, but it’s like Makoto’s sincere eyes are forcing – no, coaxing - the words from his throat. “I got some medicine though.”

Not legit medicine. Nao’s street-sold generic expired iron pills are the best medicine he can get right now.

And it’s as if he said that entire line of thought out loud because Makoto’s eyes narrow a fraction – not enough for the average person to see it, but Haru’s survival has always depended on how well he can read people, so he notices it and stiffens.

But Makoto just nods, doesn’t call him out on it even though he isn’t convinced. He’s perceptive, Haru realizes. He hears what people aren’t saying.

That’s a strange trait for a bright-eyed elementary school teacher.

His mind then travels to Gou, who is unexpected in that same aspect, with her constant smiles and skipping feet, who still looks for the good in the world even though it’s only gave her hell.

Haru looks at Makoto and finds his mouth parting before he slams it shut because this is not his secret to tell. People like him and Rin and Gou have learned that they have to keep their pasts hidden because they’re dark and scary like monsters that no one else understands.

He and Rin don’t want Gou to grow up thinking she needs to hide who she is or what has shaped her, but they don’t know how to stop that from happening. Yes, they understand her because they’ve been through bad things just as she has, but Haru can’t help her to ultimately stop having panic attacks because he’s never stopped having them and Rin can’t teach her how to stop carrying the weight of hating their mom because he still carries it.

She needs to know that not everyone grew up like she did, like they did. Not everyone is full of pain and clinging to it because they don’t know how to be without it. She needs to talk to someone who is untouched by all this.

“Um. Actually.” Haru realizes that this is actually happening and he’s so full of fear that it feels like the world is slowing, not letting him escape the drag of this unending second. “Is there.” He grimaces, clenching his fists so tightly in his jacket that his nails cut into his palms. He takes a deep breath and forces himself to meet Makoto’s stare. “Is there someone that Gou can talk to?”

Makoto’s brows raise but his voice is as serious as it is concerned. “You mean… like a councilor?”

Haru shrugs before nodding.

Makoto nods back. “Yeah, there’s one here. I’m sure he –”

“No.” Haru’s voice is so vehement that it pushes Makoto back a few inches but Haru shakes his head with just as much insistence. “No, she can’t handle that.”

“Handle what?”

God, Haru never wants to think about that, just the thought of it makes his expression break into one of desperation and his voice leaves him in a rush of whispers. “I need to know right now that I can
trust you with this.”

Makoto’s eyes flutter in dazed confusion before Haru adds, “I don’t know how anyone could even help with this but she –” His breath catches. “She needs to hear it from someone else that this isn’t something she has to hide.”

Makoto opens his mouth but Haru’s voice is a quick, razor-sharp slice through the air. “And whatever you think of my sickly ass and this fucked up situation is fine, it’s fine, but I need you to tell me right now that you’ll keep that opinion the hell away from what you think about her.”

Makoto is stunned, looking so winded it’s as if Haru has knocked the breath out of him. He shakes his head in disbelief. “When did I say I thought you were fucked up?”

A gasp catches in Haru’s throat but it’s thankfully as quiet as Makoto’s voice. “I might be new to teaching but it’s already easy to tell which parents – er, caregivers – choose to…” He frowns in deep thought, eyes searching for the answer across the floor. He then blinks up at Haru. “See. There’s a difference in the ones who see what’s going on with their kids and the ones who just… look away. You and Rin don’t do that.”

“You sure you know what you’re talking about?”

Makoto crosses his arms, resting his weight on his slanted hip as he arches an unimpressed brow. “The first thing you said after waking up from passing out wasn’t where am I or what happened, was it?”

Haru looks away.

“You asked about her. Not yourself. And I don’t think that’s fucked up at all.”

Haru lifts his eyes and keeps them locked with Makoto’s, using their warmth as a guide through the cold horror. He parts his lips and whispers, “Gou is scared of being alone with a man.”

His words are vague, not explicit in the slightest, but he conveys their deeper meaning through his eyes and Makoto’s gaze doesn’t miss it. “Oh,” he says weakly, as if all the strength has been ripped away from him. “Oh god.”

“Yeah,” Haru whispers. “She’s had um. Panic attacks. Ever since. Even if that isn’t the situation, they just kind of happen without warning sometimes.” He swallows. “And she had one this morning so don’t hold it against her if she’s out of it today.”

Makoto scoffs, jerking away with a twisted face before he looks at Haru with narrowed eyes, and while his glare doesn’t hold enough heat to threaten him, it’s enough to surprise him. “I’m sorry, but did you see me run over a box of kittens or something? Because you’re really painting me as pretty emotionless person right now.” He smooths down his hair from where he raked a hand through it in exasperation. “I’m not going to hold anything against her and I most definitely won’t be calling her out on it. Lord.”

Haru dips his head down to hide his blush of embarrassment beneath his fringe. “Good.”

Makoto pauses thoughtfully. “Gou’s um – friends with Hayato, right?”

Haru raises his brows. “You know about that already?”
Makoto winces. “I am not proud of it. But the councilor is his older brother. Do you think that would help any?”

Haru hesitates. “I don’t know but I really don’t want to chance it.” A sigh of frustration tears through his chest. “She hates talking about it in general so I don’t know if she’d even talk to a woman. I don’t know.”

Haru startles as the bell rings and Makoto laughs through a wince and clenches his shoulders. “Yeah, I hate it too.” Haru’s eyes widen as the breath shudders through him before he clears his throat. “Well, I can assure you that I’ll keep an eye out for her today.”

Haru’s expression must convey his stress because Makoto rests a hand on his arm, making him suppress a jolt.

Makoto’s forced to dip down a few inches once more because if Haru meets his eyes he’s going to have a stroke. That one point of contact between them has his heart quivering, blood singing, muscles heating, but none of that even compares to the feeling that courses through him when he shyly meets Makoto’s eyes through his fringe. “We’ll think of something, all right?” he murmurs. “Even if there’s not a lot of options right now we’ll find something for her, I promise.”

Haru’s eyes flutter with the intensity of wanting to believe him. “Okay,” he whispers.

Makoto squeezes his arm and though his skin burns with the imprint of his fingers after he lets go, it is Haru's mind that gets branded with the sight of his smile.

“What's this button do?”

“Don’t touch –”

“But I can touch this one, right?”

“No –”

“Will a turret pop out of the hood if I push it?!”

“What? No, we’re in a squad car.”

“Ahhh, you’re no fun, Yamazaki-senpai!”

Echo slowly turns to Sousuke from the passenger’s seat and stares him down until he winces and meets her eyes. Sousuke’s been around her long enough to know that look means she’s already so over this shit. She’s never liked rookies. He thinks that’s why they’ve always got along so well.

Momotarou flops down in the back seat with an exaggerated groan of boredom. “Why do I have to sit back here? I can’t see anything!”

“Echo doesn’t like the back seat,” Sousuke replies with clipped patience, breaking at the red light with just a little too much force and throwing Momo into the caged partition between the back and front seats.
He recovers far too quickly, voice so fucking loud as he says, “Eh?! But she’s a dog!”

“Yeah,” Sousuke nods. “With four titanium teeth.”

Echo snaps her jaws proudly and Momo shrinks away, suddenly looking thankful for the partition.

He then huffs and crosses his arms with a pout before pressing his face against the window and staring out at the world like an angsty teenager. Sousuke gives Echo a pat on the back because her outburst has just earned them their first fifteen seconds of silence in the past three hours with Momo in the car.

But then he starts right back up, spurring to life and pressing his face against the cage. “Have you ever shot someone?”

Sousuke snorts because he’d probably sleep better at night if that was all that he’d ever done to someone. “Sure.”

“Really?!” Momo is entranced. “Was it with a bazooka?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Oooh, Yamazaki-senpai is so mysterious,” Momo cackles, throwing himself back onto the seat with enough force to shake the car. He spends the next few minutes sighing every ten seconds but Sousuke doesn’t pay him any attention before he hears the snap of a camera.

His eyes narrow behind his Aviators as he looks at Momo through the rear view mirror. “Don’t fucking tell me you’re taking a picture of yourself right now.”

Momo scoffs and takes one more with his phone before tapping away on the screen. “It’s called a selfie, caveman.”

Sousuke blinks. What the hell is a selfie? How has language evolved so much in the few years that Sousuke was in the war? He should not be this illiterate, he and Makoto learned several different languages in the army given that they worked with soldiers from around the world, not to mention they had to figure out the local dialect, which was a special kind of challenge.

Wait, is he just old?

He quickly looks at Echo for the confirmation because at this point he’s sure she can read his mind. Echo just blinks slowly at him and yawns as if to say, tired, you’re so tired, old man.

Sousuke looks out at the road with a blank stare. He’s old. His dog just told him. He’s twenty three but it doesn’t matter, that saying about war aging you a thousand years is so true, he just didn’t think he would find that out through slang terms.

“Ugh, have you got this new iOS update yet? It’s birdshit.”

Sousuke’s fingers go white-knuckled on the steering wheel. “What?”

“The new update on the iPhone, like, I just got the 6S and it came with the update but –”

“What the hell is a 6S?”
Momo stares and Sousuke just suddenly feels like a dumbass for some reason. Even Echo seems to be looking at him funny. “You don’t know what the 6S is?” Momo breathes.

“I didn’t say that,” Sousuke snaps. He’s grasping at straws here. It sounds familiar, and he’s sure most of the army would know what Momo’s talking about, but he had dedicated all of his focus to the war effort during his time as a soldier.

He realizes that Momo’s still staring at him and Sousuke barks, “You’re not even supposed to have your phone out right now, put that shit away.”

“Okay, big guy, okay,” Momo chuckles easily. Then he snaps about forty more pictures in rapid-fire succession before he types out a message and shucks his phone back in his pocket with a dreamy smile. “My baby’s scared shitless about me having this job,” he says as if it’s the most adorable thing in the world. “He needed confirmation that it was me he was texting and not a criminal who was holding me and my phone hostage.”

“Seriously?”

“I know,” Momo coos. “He’s so cute. It’s really misleading. And hot.”

Sousuke looks away from Momo’s curling smirk because if he doesn’t even know the lingo of modern society then he can’t imagine the convoluted shit people are doing in the bedroom these days. Not that Sousuke’s a prude, but realizing he’s so far behind on the times is really making his stress levels rise.

He makes the mistake of parking on the side of the interstate to catch super-speeders. Momo whines until Sousuke just fucking loses it and orders him to sit in the front seat and shoves the speed gun into his eager hands before he stomps to the edge of the woods so Echo can find a nice tree to relieve herself by, but she seems too busy trotting along like it’s such a pretty day, such a nice world, oh, look at the birdies, Sou-chan, can I eat one?

Momo starts popping the gun and making sound effects every time a car goes by (“Pew! Pew! Pewpewpewpewpew!”). Sousuke takes deep breaths, pretending that he’s just annoyed and not feeling the realest kind of panic over not knowing even the most basic information about the civilian world.

Makoto’s nagging inside his head, so disgustingly motherly that he might as well be wearing a flour-covered apron, “Now Sousuke, you mustn’t beat yourself up about this, you’d know everything about everything if you hadn’t been so busy literally sleeping under rocks and getting shot at almost every day for three years! Silly boy!”

But Sousuke doesn’t want to be babied about this because he’s always sucked at this – even before the war he never kept up with politics or trends or any shit like that because none of that mattered in his world of having nothing to prove and no one to impress.

He startles when Echo pulls him from his thoughts by leaning against his leg and craning her head back to look up at him. His laugh is hollow but she doesn’t call him out on it, just flips her ears back in pleasure when he scratches between them.

“A HUNDRED AND TWOOOO!”
Sousuke whips around in time to get hit by the slipstream of a red sports car as it zooms down the highway and Echo jumps through the passenger window of the squad car before Sousuke steps inside to fit her between his knees on the floorboard and buckle up.

Momo’s still in the driver’s seat and is staring at Sousuke with wide eyes.

Sousuke shrugs and crosses his arms. “You think you can handle it, go for it.”

And he already knows he’s made a mistake because this look crosses over Momo’s face before he whispers, “It’s this button for the sirens, right?”

“…yeah. And that’s the pedal toooooooo shit, shit, slow down!!”

“Ha! It’s just like Grand Theft Auto!”

“You have a grand theft auto charge?!”

“What? No, it’s a –”

“Watch the school bus, watch the school bus!!”

They catch the sports car without killing anyone.

Actually, they’re going so fast that they pass the sports car, but they find it again and write the driver a big fat ticket before letting him go.

Sousuke’s nerves are pleasantly fried after the drive so he decides it’s time for lunch. They recuperate at McDonalds, or more so, Sousuke recuperates while Momo doesn’t look winded in the slightest after hitting one hundred and ten miles per hour in the squad car and blaring the sirens so loudly that he’s pretty sure Sei could hear them all the way from the station.

Sousuke goes up to the counter and orders, “A coffee with two shots of expresso, please.”

“Yamazaki-senpaaai –”

“Make it four shots, please. Also a salad with –”

“Ooooh, do you think you can help me fly the chopper next?!”

“Fuck it, give me two double cheeseburgers. But with a small fry.”

They eat outside on the patio area and sit at a table that’s sticky and way too close to the busy sidewalk but there’s a rare bout of sunshine this afternoon and Sousuke needs to bask in it. Echo seems to be enjoying the weather too as she sprawls out in the cool shade beneath the table and alternates between napping and lapping at a bowl of water. And if Sousuke drops her a few fries then, well. At least Makoto’s not here to call him a hypocrite for letting her eat things she probably shouldn’t, now is he?

He’s brought some reports with him and he grazes over his food each time he finishes a page. Meanwhile, Momo lets out a burp that’s so loud it startles Echo awake because she probably thought
an explosion went off somewhere. Sousuke just sighs and thinks about what he’d do for some bubble bath wine right now.

“Whatcha readin’?” Momo chews. He’s damn lucky he didn’t spit food on Sousuke.

“Just some stuff about recent drug raids.”

“Oooh, what are those like?”

“Bloody.”

“…oh. Why?”

Sousuke shrugs, eyes glazing over, no longer focused on the printed words of the report. “Just always ends up like that.”

A few minutes later he realizes that Momo hasn’t said anything and Sousuke looks up to see that he’s stopped eating. His eyes are anxious on some spilled ketchup on a napkin and he looks up at Sousuke to ask, “Is there any good stuff that ever happens?”

He almost scoffs, but he manages to resist because Momo’s looking at him with so much wide-eyed earnest that he has the feeling this isn’t something he needs to fuck up.

Sousuke takes a thoughtful sip of his coffee, which tastes like battery acid, just how he likes it, before asking, “Why’d you want this job?”

Momo doesn’t even falter, which surprises him. “To help people. My mom was a cop. My brother is a cop. I’ve wanted to be one forever.”

“Your mom’s a cop?” Sei never told him that.

“Was, yeah.”

Sousuke hesitates before Momo nods with sad eyes. “She passed away a few months ago. Routine traffic stop. It was at night. The truck driver didn’t see her, so.” He clears his throat abruptly, busying himself with smoothing his hands down the legs of his pants so he won’t have to look at Sousuke. “It was an accident, but. Doesn’t make it much easier, you know?”

“Yeah,” Sousuke mumbles. “I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

Momo nods with a grimace. “Sei took it really hard,” he admits quietly. “Most people don’t really get how bad it hurt him. She was his best friend. We just, um…” He works his throat. “We weren’t… expecting it. We weren’t ready for it at all. She was just kind of always there, like, our dad bailed when we were little but she was awesome. Made sure we never felt weird or anything because it was just her there. So.” He takes a deep breath and lifts his head, eyes as firm as his voice. “So I do want to be here. I want to do this for me, and for her, and for Sei.”

Sousuke nods, convinced. “Growing up in a cop family showed you that you’re going to see more bad than good, right?”

Momo shrugs before bobbing a nod.
Sousuke thumbs the edge of his coffee lid, scraping the pad of his finger down the plastic like waves hitting and sliding down a cliff, waiting to catch a body that Sousuke might as well have thrown over the edge with his own two hands. “There’s a lot of bad. But. The good parts. They make it bearable. Gives you just enough to make you think you can keep doing this one more day. Those times are worth it, is what I’m trying to say.” He sighs, a blush heating his cheeks before he scratches the back of his head. “Does that make any sense?”

Momo nods earnestly. “Yes!”

Sousuke takes another sip of his coffee as he struggles to figure out how to word this. “The people out here… the kids, everyone working and living on these streets.” He winces in apology before admitting, “Their stories usually have bad endings. They’re scared to ask for help because they’ve never opened up to people without being taken advantage of.”

He levels his gaze with Momo. “It’s our job to change that. To help them no matter what that means. We save people, we protect all of them. No matter what it costs. Fuck your fear, fuck your hang-ups. None of that matters when you put that badge on and people are looking to you for help. Do you understand?”

Before Momo can answer there’s a crash.

Sousuke immediately knows it’s a vehicle collision despite he can’t see the road due to the sudden rush of people. He can taste the exhaust in the air, hear the hiss of smoke and see it billow up above the crowd.

He gets up and clicks his tongue for Echo to follow before Momo chases after them.

Sousuke weaves through the crowd, glaring as people take out their cell phones to video the crash instead of calling for help, but luckily he’s here to do that, already pulling his radio off his vest to call in a wreck on the west side of the square, but then his voice trails off.

He assumes the vehicle was once a black SUV, but now it’s a heap of metal that’s been split down the middle by a light post. His eyes follow the sharp tire tracks that indicate the steering wheel turned abruptly, might’ve even been yanked by someone else in the cab.

Sousuke jumps as a combat boot slams through the back window and shatters it in a rain of glass. His jaw drops in disbelief as two hands claw for purchase on the window pane before fingers bare down on the edges even as sharp, broken glass drives into the palms.

A leg wraps around the door and a boy hauls himself up and out of the SUV to hit the pavement in a crumble of limbs. Sousuke’s eyes dart over anything that can identify him later, just the basics – young, twenty something maybe, tall, muscular but lean, maroon hair, dark eyes, can’t tell that color due to the distance.

Then Sousuke takes in his injuries, expecting some bruising that could indicate the start of some internal bleeding or maybe even some burns from the air bag, but his eyes zero in on the finger-shaped bruises around his arms, his neck, and the slash of nails where fingers dug into his skin.

The boy drags his boot back on, breathing heavily, panicked, tries to make a run for it but he stumbles and hits the ground once more, and Sousuke watches his eyes flutter and roll back over and over. One might assume that he’s just disoriented from the crash, but his tousled hair and torn clothes
are telling Sousuke that his foggy state is not from the wreck but from perhaps being drugged.

A hand shoots out the broken window and snatches the boy by the wrist. A stout man crawls halfway out of the opening to snatch for the boy’s hair but a growl rips through his sharp teeth before he slams his boot into the man’s collarbone, and sure enough, Sousuke hears it snap in an instant, ripping a howl out of the man.

The boy is experienced with defense; he’s not a professional fighter or trained in combat, but he knew what to look for and went for it without hesitation.

The boy, now freed, crawls away and hauls himself up, but as soon as he’s on his feet, the man inside the vehicle kicks open the door and points a gun at the boy’s head.

Sousuke shoots first.

The bullet rips into the man’s arm, tearing through veins and muscle and bone in a spray of blood before he drops the gun to cry out in pain.

The boy jerks around and his eyes are heated red where Sousuke’s are icy blue. Those red eyes widen and he stiffens in fear as if he’s waiting on Sousuke to shoot him too.

Sousuke lowers his gun and with every inch his hands move downward, the boy’s jaw drops even further in disbelief.

The man on the ground cries out again as he heaves to his feet and tries to stumble away. The boy uses the opportunity to race out of Sousuke’s line of fire and out of sight.

“ECHO!”

She’s there in an instant, every muscle coiled tight, all hairs standing up on end. Her eyes are already locked on the wounded man and she barely needs Sousuke’s nod of confirmation before he says, “Attack.”

He’s fully confident in her abilities to take the asshole down and keep him down without killing him – Sousuke would have directly gave her that command if that’s what he wanted done. Echo takes off like a bullet and Momo rips through the crowd in time for Sousuke to order, “I’m calling for back up, follow Echo and do not let that son of a bitch get away, he’s armed!”

Momo nods and races off without a word of protest.

Sousuke pushes through the gathering around the wreckage to chase after the boy. He could be anywhere but Sousuke tries his hardest to take in everything around him as he calls in both his suspect and Momo’s while darting into restaurants and weaving through a line of street vendors only to see that no one looks like his suspect.

He glances down an alley before heading for an intersection but then he stills and whips around to take a second look down the path, and sure enough, his eyes catch on bright maroon hair.

The boy’s on the ground, backed up against a dumpster with his knees pulled into his chest. He’s hiding his face in the cover of his arms, fingers cutting into his skin as he trembles.

Sousuke’s chest tightens and he dips into the shadows of the alley to approach him. He moves
quietly, his steps cautious before he crouches down a few feet away and quietly says, “Hey.”

The boy sucks in a gasp and he twists like he’s going to get up and make another run for it, but he freezes when recognition dawns on his face.

Sousuke raises his hands in a placating gesture and backs off a few more feet. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he assures, voice intimately quiet in the darkness of the passage. “You’re safe with me, all right?” His stomach churns at the smell of blood and he notices a red stain on the boy’s black shirt. “Can you tell me how badly you’re hurt?”

“Get the fuck away from me,” he husks, voice raw and deep. Sousuke’s gaze catches on his blue tongue. “Get away.”

Sousuke shakes his head as that red stain grows over the black material. “I can’t do that,” he says. “So get over it.”

The boy’s fingers dig across the concrete for purchase like he’s expecting Sousuke to drag him closer, to force him to comply with his words. Sousuke backs up even further to prove that’s not going to happen. “I know you were drugged,” he says. “I’m not going to arrest you for that.”

“What do you mean arrest m–” Then his dilated eyes narrow on Sousuke’s badge.

He’s more spaced out than Sousuke first assumed if he didn’t notice the badge when he shot his attacker down. That only adds to the list of clues that confirm his suspicions – the ripped clothes, the staggering around, the bruises, it all suggests that he was at least drugged.

But he knows this wasn’t a chance occurrence because of his perfume, which is seeping into Sousuke’s pores, heating his blood before he even realizes it. He could see the clues in the way the boy fought, and – well, that face. That mouth. There’s no way he doesn’t have people throwing money and hearts his way.

But nothing confirms that this boy is a prostitute like the way his eyes widen in terror on his badge before he takes off like he’s running for his life.

Sousuke gives chase, but it’s clear that this boy knows his way around the city because he takes him down the most crowded streets, knowing exactly where trashcans are waiting to be thrown in Sousuke’s path. It’s also clear that the drug he was given, whatever it was, is wearing off because he isn’t about to stop running for anything.

Sei’s voice crackles over the radio. “Yamazaki, where the hell are you?”

Sousuke barely makes it across an intersection without getting run over. His clothes are clinging to his skin with hot sweat as he rushes, “This asshole knows where he’s going, he’s giving me hell.”

“You’re going to have to arrest him if you catch up with him.”

Sousuke almost falters. “What is –” He gasps and hurtles over a wheelbarrow full of concrete and forgets that he’s no longer that spry young soldier that could jump across a mountain of rubble without even breaking a sweat – he’s going to be feeling this shit for weeks.

But even with the fire in his muscles he keeps his eyes zeroed on that shock of maroon hair. “Sir, what is he being accused of?”
“It’s the Commissioner’s orders,” Sei responds. “We caught up with your wounded runner but that’s –” There’s an evident grimace in his voice. “Corro’s not going to be satisfied with that, you’re going to have to do it. He wouldn’t be running if he was innocent, Sousuke. Bring him in.”

Sousuke’s heart pounds that much faster because he already knows that this rentboy isn’t innocent.

His thoughts tangle with conflict before the boy makes the mistake of racing down a passage that’s got a chain link fence blocking the other side.

Sousuke gains a burst of victorious speed, expecting the boy to freeze in panic, but he only runs faster, and with a shocking display of strength he lunges up the side of the fence and claws his way to the top.

Sousuke catches his ankle before he can haul himself over but he stills because he doesn’t want to throw the boy down and possibly kill him when he hits the ground – there’s no telling what could happen if he hits his head while that unknown drug is still coursing through his veins.

But in his moment of hesitation, the boy rears his foot back and drives the steel toe of his boot into Sousuke’s cheek.

It’s a miracle that he doesn’t black out on impact.

But he does fall on his ass and has to swallow down bile when the cold shock wears off and the fire hits him. His face is burning with a pain so deep that it feels like the entire right side of his head is melting. He feels the rush of blood over his skin, probably needs a few dozen stitches, probably needs a few dozen x-rays, sure as hell needs a few dozen drinks.

But even so, he hauls himself up because he can’t kill that soldier inside him no matter how hard he’s tried – can’t get rid of that raging, self-righteous idiot that doesn’t know how to stay down.

Though there are tears blurring his vision, he sees the boy jump down and take off for the next street over.

Sousuke’s pain sears into anger and it’s by power of will alone that he’s able to give chase again.

This time around, they’re both struggling. Sousuke’s about to get delirious off this ache and while the drug might be wearing off, the boy’s wounded and been running across several blocks, and he doesn’t get far.

It’s down an empty street that he stumbles and Sousuke shoves him into the concrete siding of a building. It knocks the breath out of the boy and that gives Sousuke enough time to pin his body between the building and his own frame. He snatches the boy’s flailing arms and yanks them behind his back so he can drag him away from the wall, which makes the boy stagger backwards into Sousuke with a panicked noise. “You’re – under arrest,” Sousuke pants.

The boy’s wrists are small enough that it’s easy for Sousuke to hold them both in one hand while he grabs his cuffs off his belt with the other.

But then he lets out a startled grunt when the boy collapses and pulls Sousuke down a few inches.

Sousuke can’t remember how to pick himself up though, because his focus is locked on the boy’s
head hanging low between his shoulders, and his own breath hitches when the boy’s pants turn into shallow gasps and his body wracks with sobs.

Sousuke forces him around, startled to find that he doesn’t even resist, and he checks him over for any more serious injuries, confused by his pained noises, but then his eyes lift to his face.

His hair hides most of it but Sousuke can still see his eyes, which are open and staring vacantly at the ground as tears drip off his chin.

He shifts those eyes to Sousuke’s and he startles because he’s never seen anyone look so tired.

Not only that, but he looks so afraid of Sousuke.

Without even realizing it, Sousuke looks deeper into his eyes and there it is, he sees it. That looming darkness that he’s watched Makoto carry across battlefields, that darkness he himself never got rid of, just learned how to hide. It’s the same unending gloom that was in that boy’s eyes when he looked at Sousuke and went over the edge of that cliff.

He could say broken, he could call it hopelessness, but those words are too emotional, too alive.

This is death. An expiry that has taken the life out of this boy’s eyes and clawed the warmth out of Sousuke’s own gaze. He’s only seen it in the face of people who have lived through such trauma that there’s no way they could make it out without dying just a little.

Death should be vacant and still, but this kind of darkness never works like that. It’s trapped in Sousuke’s eyes, keeping him rigid and tense at all hours of the day, because he’s seen that if he isn’t then people, soldiers, his friends, will die. It’s still in Makoto’s eyes, tormenting him with nightmares because he can’t let go of what happened in the war.

But this boy.

He’s looking at Sousuke with that hopelessness because he thinks Sousuke can’t see him.

The boy’s resigned to what everyone else sees – the promiscuous clothes, the body, the face. Maybe he doesn’t know how to look at himself any other way, but he doesn’t understand that Sousuke’s looking straight into his pain, a pain he knows all too well.

“They’re scared to ask for help because they’ve never opened up to people without being taken advantage of,” he’d told Momo. “It’s our job to change that.”

“Help them no matter what that means.”

“Fuck your fear, fuck your hang-ups.”

“We save people. No matter what it costs. Do you understand?”

Yes, he understands.

Sousuke checks both ends of the street and finds them empty. He silences his radio.

And then his hands slip from the boy’s wrists.
Sousuke feels him staring but he keeps his eyes focused on putting his cuffs back in place. “What are you doing?” the boy croaks.

Sousuke barks a laugh. “I don’t know. But you should take advantage of it and get out of here.” He lets out a long sigh of defeat, crossing his arms before he raises his brows at him.

The boy prowls closer with clenched fists and Sousuke catches a flash of sharp teeth but he doesn’t move. “You’re getting off on this shit, letting me think you’re really gonna fucking let me go before you just start running after me again –”

Sousuke shakes his head. “I’m not coming after you. Just go.”

The boy is stunned, breath hot against Sousuke’s face, clinging to his skin. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

Sousuke smirks tiredly. “Too much, obviously. Now go. I’m not saying it again.”

His brows crease as he desperately tries to understand. He searches Sousuke’s gaze and he stands there patiently until the boy’s eyes widen with the realization that he’s telling the truth.

And it’s still so clear that he doesn’t understand, can’t even begin to think there’s no underlying meaning or payment involved. But he believes him.

Sousuke expects him to run now. He’s waiting for it.

What he doesn’t expect to happen is for the boy to back him up against the brick siding of the building, frame his face with a delicacy that he’s never been touched with, never thought he was worth, and press a kiss to his mouth.

It rips the breath out of Sousuke. It rips away his bodily functions, his brain capacity, he’s got his arms out at his sides and he can’t move them or any other parts of his body because he’s never been hit with so much shock in his life.
But the boy’s mouth is so sweet, lips closed and still managing to turn Sousuke inside out like no other kiss has ever done. The boy catches his lips again to let him taste an aching sigh, and that it hazes over his thoughts, burns his blood, sinks into the depths of his chest where he thought he was empty.

He tastes like pain but more than that, he tastes like gratitude, like Sousuke isn’t just letting him go – he’s letting him live.

And Sousuke parts his lips to kiss back because that sentiment already lets him know that he isn’t going to be able to bring himself to regret this, no matter what it costs him. This feels like the right thing, even though he was convinced such a feeling didn’t exist after searching for it his entire life and never finding it.

Against his lips, into his mouth, and down into the parts of himself he thought had died, the boy whispers, “Thank you.”

He’s gone when Sousuke opens his eyes.

He’s still savoring the taste of rusty sweetness on his tongue when Momo rounds the corner. “Yamazaki-senpai! Are you oka –”

“Whiskey Tango Foxtrot,” he breathes.

Momo’s brows jump into a terrified expression as if Sousuke’s just had a stroke right in front of him.
“Maybe he did. Shit, probably. “Huh?”

“It means What The Fuck.” Sousuke leans his head back against the wall as it throbs. “It’s military lingo.” He snorts. “At least that’s something I know about.”

“…did you fall on your head?”

“Yeah. Kind of.”

Momo lets out a shout as Sousuke pitches forward, and he manages to catch him but he’s quick to pick himself back up and wave him away. “I’m fine, I’m fine. Sei said you caught the guy?”

Momo nods, still tense like he’s waiting for Sousuke to fall a second time. “Yeah. There was another guy in the vehicle too. They rushed him to the hospital.” Momo turns green. “They – they don’t know how it happened but his throat got ripped out by… something.”

Sousuke remembers the sharp nip of teeth and he pulls his bottom lip in to run his tongue over the indentions there.

“Did you catch the other guy?” Momo asks.

Sousuke shakes his head. “Disappeared.”

Momo slaps him on the right shoulder and Sousuke almost throws him over the building. “Ah, don’t worry, Yamazaki-senpai! You’ll get ‘em next time!”

Sousuke inwardly groans because he doesn’t know how he’s going to handle that inevitable bout of confidence that all rookies get. He frowns. “Where’s Echo?”

“Oh! She was –” Momo spins around to wander around the corner and Sousuke hurries to keep up.

They find her just on the other side, head down with her nose pointed toward a dumpster.

Sousuke’s confused before he smells it.

It’s a stench that never leaves you once you get a whiff of it that first time. Makoto claims to smell it in his nightmares and Sousuke knows that it haunts all of his.

His steps are slowed by the weight of dread as he approaches the dumpster. He picks up a stray napkin from a toppled garbage can and uses it to cover his fingerprints before he lifts the lid.

He slams it down immediately, kicking the garbage can clear across the street and rakes his hands through his hair, pacing back and forth and shaking his head over and over, over and over.

Momo shuffles closer to the dumpster. “What –”

“Don’t.” Sousuke holds out an arm to block him and orders, “Go back to the rest of the team, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Momo’s mouth trembles around a question and Sousuke snaps, “Go!”

He finally does as he’s told and leaves Sousuke and Echo by the dumpster. She’s laying down with
her paws tearing over her ears, her eyes, her nose – not wanting to hear the confirmation of what the smell is, not wanting to see it, not wanting to smell it ever again.

Sousuke wishes they could both do that before he turns on his radio. “Calling all units, I’ve got a dead body in the dumpster on 4th street.”

“Identification?” someone crackles.

Sousuke shuts his eyes against the image in his head. “Young adult male. Skinny. Long dark hair. Tan skin.” He clings to the taste of rusty sweetness to get him through this, closing his eyes to focus on that and nothing else. “And a bird tattoo on his arm.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork of Sousuke’s flashback by brickerbeetle; Sousuke and Echo by YouSayTron; SouRin by bakapandy
Seijuro’s got thirty five stress ulcers and they’re all named Sousuke.

Thank you to saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter) for being such an awesome person and beta reader!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We're the underdogs in this world alone
I'm a believer, got a fever running through my bones
We're the alley cats and they can throw their stones
They can break our hearts
They won't take our souls."

Halsey - Empty Gold

The old swim club would have been torn down years ago if the city hadn’t ran out of money in the middle of the demolition budget. Now the building stands as nothing more than a tomb full of empty pools and locker rooms. The structure used to be a canvas for bright murals that once entranced Haru, but now the paint is faded like a dream he forgets when he wakes up, unable to convince himself that it had ever even happened.

Mo had brought him here when he was little, but it wasn’t until years later that he realized it was where he had seen his friends long before the streets brought them together. He saw Asahi in the pool, glared at him from a few lanes down as he made too many waves and talked too loudly. Aki used to wear this big floppy hat and sit in a lounge chair with a magazine like a grown up instead of joining her younger cousins on the slides, and the only time Haru had ever seen Ikuya laugh was in the kiddie pool with Natsuya, who praised his dog paddling and chose to ignore his friends on the diving boards after finding more enjoyment in helping his baby brother learn how to swim.

The Olympian pool with eight lanes has since been drained and the lining is torn. He glances up at the lane dividers stretching through the air like powerlines before dropping his gaze to take in the people around him.

Huddled beneath a pool ladder is Asahi, who is anxiously thumbing his lighter to make it spark in the soft darkness. Beside him, Nii sits beside him with an impassive gaze, but her tightly crossed arms prove that she’s on edge as well. Nao is pacing across the bottom of the pool intently, his steps as calculated as the thoughts in his head, and Aki’s chipping away her red nail polish in sharp flicks that quicken as she struggles to contain her own distress.
Nakagawa’s casually fiddling with a toothpick between his teeth, but he’s worrying his lips in a learned gesture of nervousness he picked up from being around Kazuki so much.

Aki lets out an explosive sigh of frustration and roughly brushes the flecks of nail polish from her skirt before looking up at Haru. “Did Gou-chan ask where Rin was this morning?”

An ache pierces his chest at the memory, the kind of deep-rooted pain that only a child can bring to one’s heart. Knowing he couldn’t assure Gou that everything was all right makes him feel like a special kind of failure, but seeing her be so afraid brings forth a shame that has covered every inch of him since this morning.

He lowers his eyes to his scuffed Converse, toeing at the faded smiley face she drew on the side of his right shoe a few years ago. “She didn’t believe me when I tried to tell her Rin was coming back.”

“We’re going to find him,” Asahi snaps, grimacing as his words carry too loudly through the yawning space. He rips a hand through his hair and scoffs. “Why the fuck’s everyone around here always gotta assume the worst shit?”

“Because the worst usually happens to us,” Nii says with a look of annoyance, her glowing contacts flashing in the shadows.

Asahi’s mouth twists into a snarl and he almost retorts before Nao speaks over him. “Nakagawa, have you been able to get in touch with Kazuki?”

Nakagawa shakes his head with a shrug. “No, but I’m more worried about Rin right now. Kaz is a dumbass, but he can take care of himself.”

The following silence is thick and everyone casts their gazes in different directions as they wrestle with their thoughts. Asahi’s sudden burst of laughter startles the group. “You sure?” He curls a grin at Nakagawa. “You must’ve forgot that he almost shit himself when he finally got a Freebird tattoo.”

Nao snorts and Aki hides a giggle behind her hand, but Haru just rolls his eyes along with Nii. “Told him not to get it on the inside of his arm,” she says. “That’s a sensitive area, especially for a first tattoo.” Both of her arms are sleeved with ink, making Kazuki’s exaggerated description of the pain seem very miniscule. Or very pathetic.

“Yeah, but that eagle looks fuckin’ sick though,” Nakagawa says.

Nii considers. “True.”

Haru’s eyes fall shut without his permission and he slips out of consciousness before jerking awake as his phone rings.

He scrambles to find it in his vest as Aki rushes forward to crouch beside him. “Haru, who is it? Is it Rin?”

Haru digs out his phone and doesn’t recognize the number on the screen but it could still be Rin, so he answers. He opens his mouth to speak but falters when Nao shakes his head with wide eyes to silence him. Haru winces, remembering just how many gangs want his head on a platter and how easy it would be for them to use his cell phone to find his location after hearing the confirmation of his voice.
There’s breathing on the other end of the line but it’s shallow. “H – Hello?”

“…Ikuya?”

Nao and Asahi’s jaws hit the floor and Aki shakes her head as if to clear it, but she still sounds dazed as she breathes, “Natsuya…”

Nakagawa’s expression twists into a look of revulsion. “That’s Nat’s brother?”

Nii scoffs, her pierced brows scrunching over her narrowed eyes. “Why the hell is he –”

“Shut up!” Nao’s voice is filled with a vehemence that stuns everyone into silence. "Just listen to him!"

Haru recovers from the outburst quickest and manages to put the phone on speaker before daring to ask, “What’s the matter, Ikuya?”

His voice quivers. “I – I um. I’m at the – the police station.”

“Shit.” Asahi whispers, hands climbing over his head in distress.

Haru slowly asks, “And why are you there?”

Ikuya clears his throat with exaggeration and the sound makes something click inside Haru’s head – Ikuya hasn’t said Haru’s name, hasn’t let him say anything that might give away who he is.

He realizes that the kid’s smarter than he gave him credit for because Ikuya seems to realize that the call is being tapped by the police. “I was walking around. Around downtown, close to Samezuka. And I saw…” His breath hitches. “I witnessed a crime. And the police saw me hanging around and said I looked suspicious. At first they just said they wanted to ask a few questions but…”

Haru’s eyes narrow. “You went with them willingly?”

“No! I told them I didn’t want to go with them and I ran. They caught up and arrested me, but – but they just said they wanted to ask me some stuff…”

Nao’s already shaking his head at Haru and the anger on his face is surely mirrored on his own because they both know that the police are bullshitting Ikuya. “Did you have…?” Drugs, did you have any drugs on you, dumbass?

“No.”

Haru clings to the relief that washes over him before dread pours over the feeling. “What kind of crime did you see?”

“A murder.”

He stiffens. “Did you know the person who was killed?”

“Yeah. So did you.”
He counts the lane dividers as they blur and wills himself to keep counting, even as darkness edges his vision. Panic crawls up his spine and he stands up, waving his friends away with a look that leaves no room for argument before he hauls himself up one of the pool ladders to venture into the locker room, where he corners himself in the farthest shower. He runs his fingers over the tiles, clinging to their familiar texture as he whispers, “What’d they look like?”

“He – he was fine, before. He was nice to me,” Ikuya sounds just as uncomprehending as Haru. “I saw him a few hours before it happened and he – he recognized me from – from a few years ago. My brother used to hang out with him.”

Haru covers his eyes and bears down to hide in the darkness. Even if he removes his hand, he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to find light again or even understand it if Rin isn’t there to explain what it is with that innocent exuberance, that - that hope that Haru’s never been able to grasp.

Realizing that Rin could’ve taken that light with him… realizing he could be dea - gone, replaces Haru’s blood with ice, and it’s searing through him at a speed that he can’t keep up with, he feels the chill of it under his trembling lips, hears it cracking in his voice. “What was his name?”

“I… oh god, I’m sorry, I…”

A growl raws his voice. “Damn it Ikuya, just say it!”

“M – Minami.”

He slowly drops his hand from his face and his eyes squint, not understanding the words even as realization blooms in the distant part of his brain that isn’t going into shock. His head slumps to the side and he shakes it dazedly. Then a noise of hysteria quivers up his throat as memories are turned into nightmares inside of his head.

It was years ago that the boy named Minami - the one who liked his hair too much, who never learned how to worry about what others thought of him - he preferred to go by his surname. From then on out the name Minami was rarely used, save for those times Asahi and Rin wanted to fuck with him, or when the group dragged Haru along to Samezuka and he heard him and Nakagawa making out in a dark corner. Haru had watched Nakagawa wear so many masks in order to survive that it was hard to believe it was his voice filled with so much sincerity as he whispered that name over and over in between kisses like it was a prayer – or like it was the answer to his prayers. “Minami, Minami…”

“Kazuki Minami,” Ikuya croaks.

Haru shakes his head. “No, that can’t. That. I just saw him.”

“I’m sorry –”

“I just saw him.”

“I’m so sorry, I –”

“That’s not even fucking possible, he was fine when I saw him, he was, –no, he’s not… he’s not…”

But Ikuya’s silence says that he is.
A muted sob wracks through his chest and he goes rigid against the ones that try to follow. He swallows them down, forcefully reminding himself that this isn’t about him and he can’t feel this right now.

He pushes the grief to the back of his mind, where he’s good at keeping things suppressed, like the lingering pain of his childhood and the crippling fear over his health situation. His memories of Kazuki don’t go down without a fight, and they’ll be coming at him in a blinding white-hot explosion of grief in a few hours, but that’s just the price he’ll have to pay because he cannot feel this right now.

“Does your mom know where you are, Ikuya?”

“No, I haven’t even talked to her since I ran away.”

Haru’s muscles spasm with the intensity of his anger. “Your mom loves you.” He remembers his own mother and his mouth twists into a snarl before he hisses, “You have no fucking idea what we would’ve done to have that Ikuya, and you’re just throwing it back in her face like it’s nothing.”

“I know,” Ikuya rushes, “I know but please don’t call her, she can’t – this would kill her, she couldn’t take it, I’ll make up for it, I promise, just please don’t –”

Haru clenches teeth at the audible despair in his voice. “Fine. Whatever. What about your brother?”

“No,” Ikuya says quickly. “No, he can’t know.”

Haru scoffs. “So you think you can just –”

“I can’t get him involved in this!” Ikuya practically screams. “He’ll start using again, okay? Okay?! And if you call him and tell him then it’ll be your fault just as much as mine! So don’t call him.” His voice breaks on a whisper, “Please.”

Haru rolls his tongue and purses his lips. “How much is your bail?”

“What?”

He grinds his jaw. “Do you really want me to repeat myself?”

Ikuya sounds stunned. “It’s – it’s fifteen grand.”

Haru almost drops the phone. That shouldn’t even be legal – it most definitely isn’t the average cost of bail. Haru would know; Nakagawa’s got a bad habit of getting into drunken brawls and calling him at four in the morning needing bail and a bottle of aspirin. He’s even helped post bail for other friends after they’ve been arrested with the suspicion of drug dealing and prostitution, and none of those bails were as expensive as Ikuya’s.

That proves he isn’t just there for a simple questioning. The police are probably assuming that Ikuya belongs to the same gang as Kazuki because he was hanging around the crime scene. After all, it doesn’t take much profiling to see that both of them look pretty shady and a lot like drug dealers.

And if they’re assuming Ikuya’s got connections with Freebird, the most powerful gang in Iwatobi, then they’re not just going to let him walk out of the station.
“I’ll see what I can do.”

Ikuya lets out a hysterical noise. “Thank you, Har – thank you.”

He twists the string of his hoodie between his white-knuckled fingers. “Did you see Kazuki talking to anyone before…?” He lets out an explosive exhale.

“Yes,” Ikuya says.

Haru stills. “Did you know them?”

“Yeah. He cries a lot. Really thinks he’s hot shit.”

His relief is dizzying and he slides further down the wall. “Was he okay?”

“He was fine when he went into – to work.” Ikuya clears his throat pointedly and Haru knows he’s wanting to say Samezuka, Rin was going into Samezuka, but he isn’t vocally saying it because like Haru said, Ikuya’s smarter than he thought and understands that if the police found out the club is connected to Kazuki, to Freebird, then Rin, Aki, and Nakagawa would get busted and the rest of them would fall in no time flat.

His hand tightens into a fist against the tiles because that’s all the police have ever cared about – pretending they think they can really break down the drug empire that is Iwatobi while not giving one shit about how many kids like Haru and Rin, like Ikuya, like Kazuki, get swept up in it and destroyed in the process.

Defiance burns through him. “You give them hell.”

“I will. Seen you do it enough times.”

Haru’s chest tightens before he hangs up, and he doesn’t realize that he’s wandered back to the pool until Nao’s in his face, hands braced on his shoulders. “Haru, what’d he say, what happened?”

Haru’s eyes must be saying what he doesn’t have the strength to because when he looks at Nao, the boy falters in confusion.

Haru’s gaze then moves to Nakagawa, who doesn’t look interested at all in what Ikuya said and most likely doesn’t want to know anything about anyone who has to do with Natsuya.

Feeling so hopeless, Haru sends Asahi a pleading look, making him blink between him and Nakagawa before he freezes, and Asahi proves that he's so much more perceptive than anyone gives him credit for when he pales beneath his natural tan and shakes his head pleadingly, lips fumbling as he silently mouths, “Kazuki?”

Haru looks away and nods.

A pained noise tears out of Asahi but he covers it up by forcefully clearing his throat, and he scrubs his hands over his face before tugging at Nakagawa by the elbow. “C’mon man, let’s go smoke.”

Nakagawa yanks his arm back. “Don’t feel like it.”

“It’s the good shit man, c’mon, you know you need it.”
Nakagawa sighs lazily, as if getting high will be a chore, but he follows Asahi up a pool ladder anyway.

Haru waits until he can no longer hear their footsteps echoing through the building before he says, “Last night, Ikuya saw Rin talking to Kazuki before he went into Samezuka.”

Aki perks up. “Maybe he told Kazuki who his client was!” Her laugh of delight spears through Haru. “So now the only problem is getting Kazuki to answer his phone and tell us where Rin is!”

Nii is staring at him and her gaze corners him, making him feel like there are walls around him that won’t let him escape her question of, “What are you not telling us, Haru?”

He stares down at the pool lining, eyes tracing the pattern like they traced the letters of that whiskey bottle that was in his hands when his mom died. He feels just as ruined as he did that day when he looks up and meets Nii’s eyes. “You already know what I’m not telling you.”

Nii doesn’t move for a full three seconds.

And then her mask of indifference shatters, a sob ripping up her throat, chest heaving against the onslaught of emotions they all try so hard to pretend they don’t feel.

Who were they to have ever thought they were more than just kids?

Nao is visibly struggling to understand. “What – I don’t – what are you talking about?”

Haru chokes, “Kazuki’s…” But he can’t even finish.

“No,” Aki cries, sinking down the wall with a vigorous shake of her head as mascara streaks down her face. “No Haru, please –”

And who were they to pretend they were born as more than just mistakes? Who were they to have believed their lives would end up as anything more than young tragedies, than numbers on a list of statistics that acted as nothing more than a score sheet for this city?

He’s never been able to conquer that reality - always had something crush his belief that he’s more, or even as strong as his friends insist that he is.

But he hears them grieving and the sounds resonate in his own heart, and maybe he isn’t strong, maybe he’s never going to end up as more than a statistic or his dad’s punching bag or his mom’s ash tray, but his friends are more than that, and they’ve always been his reason to get out of bed each morning instead of hiding under the covers like he wants to.

Haru crouches beside Aki and she startles when he puts a hand on her shoulder. He doesn’t even try to keep the pain out of his voice. “Kazuki was one of us and always will be.”

Nao sniffs from where he’s hiding his tears behind the cover of his hair. “That’s right,” he croaks. “Haru’s right.”

Nii’s sob warbles into a laugh. “He’d call us a bunch of pussies if he saw us right now.”

Aki’s face goes blank before a smile trembles over her face. But then her giggles dissolve into tears
and Haru squeezes her shoulder so she’ll look back up at him. “You know we’re going to find who
did this to him. It’s like you said, we know this city better than ourselves.” His voice wavers as it
struggles to contain his rage. “And there is nowhere they’ll be able to hide once we have them. You
know what we’re capable of. You know we’ll make them pay for what’s been done.”

Nii swipes at her eyes and nods reverently as Nao pulls his hair back to reveal his determined
expression. Aki stares at all of them before looking down shamefully and whispering, “But what if
they killed Rin too?”

Haru goes very still, and his voice is very soft, as quiet as Death prowling through shadows in search
of a victim. “Then I feel bad for them.” He rises from his crouch and turns to meet the determined
eyes of his friends before a smirk pulls at his mouth like claws, and his voice is no less hungry.
“Because they’ve just made the biggest mistake of their lives.”

Aki’s eyes cut into a heated glare that burns her tears away. Nii’s hands clench into fists and Nao
works his jaw as he gives a nod.

Somewhere up above, high over that swim club and war ravaged city, Haru hopes that Kazuki’s got
a good seat to the show.

They find him easily enough.

The news is running a story about an unidentified male found stabbed to death in a dumpster. This
situation is too common to get the attention it deserves or even more than two minutes of screen time,
but the little twist that makes people give a shit is that the dumpster belongs to one of the few
distinguished restaurants in Iwatobi.

The place is called *Veleno*. It’s a fancy name to throw around if you’re among people to impress, but
the word actually translates to mean ‘venom’ or ‘poison,’ which are the perfect words to describe the
rich and prestigious because those people all wear “Miho smiles,” as Rin calls them. “You can tell
how much money someone’s got by what makes them smile. Use it to size up clients all the time.”

Haru used to shoot up in an abandoned car that sat in the parking lot across the street and he
remembers watching beautiful women with silky hair step out of purring cars and breeze into the
restaurant with men that looked as clean as newborn babies after their first bath. Food would be
served at the long tables on the sprawling balcony and the aroma used to make his aching stomach
and burning veins that much worse.

He’s even got memories of this dumpster because this is where he first considered Asahi tolerable –
maybe even a friend. It’s definitely something special when two people are clawing through the
garbage like animals, starved out of their minds, but are still willing to share the food that people
have sent back to the kitchen with petty, bullshit complaints – complaints that ended up saving Haru
and Asahi’s lives when they found that food in the dumpster and ripped into like dogs.

But it wasn’t this situation that made Asahi tolerable.

It was when he paused his digging and blinked over at Haru to say, “You like that mackerel shit,
right?”

Haru had glared in confusion before Asahi offered him a handful of tiny cooked fish that was still
warm, and Haru hadn’t been able to comprehend because no one had ever noticed what kind of food
he liked and went out of their way to give it to him.

And from then on out, Asahi was just somehow bearable. Most of the time.

Here they are, lifetimes later, standing in that parking lot and staring across the street where that dumpster is blocked with caution tape and surrounded by investigators with latex gloves as they dig through the garbage Haru used to eat. He doesn’t even have the voice to protest when Asahi looks away and presses his forehead into his shoulder, because knowing that was Kazuki’s body inside that long, black bag makes him feel confused as to how anything in the world even matters. Kazuki’s in there, in that fucking bag with a shitty zipper and stains when he deserves a casket made of as much gold as his heart was filled with.

Some men from the crime lab put Kazuki in the back of a van and the vehicle takes off, leaving Haru, Asahi, Nao, and Nii to settle with the dust.

They collect themselves at the square, or at least they try. Haru struggles to ground himself, tries to focus all his attention on the bite of prickly grass against his crossed legs but he just can’t grasp anything right now. Nao is sitting beside him, hunching over to hide his face which is twisted in grief behind the curtain of his hair, and Nii is dragging handfuls of green blades out of the dirt, her eyes unblinking and vacant.

Asahi’s hand shakes around his second cigarette and he offers it to Haru, who declines, but Nii snatches it and closes her trembling lips around the stick before taking a long pull. Haru watches ash flitter through the air and tastes the smoke Nii breathes out as she says, “What’re we going to do about Nakagawa?”

Dread sinks into Haru’s bones at the mere thought but he can’t help but feel thankful that Aki took pity on him and stayed behind at the swim club to break the news to Nakagawa.

“We’ll take care of him,” Asahi barks with a glare that loses heat as his eyes water. He looks away to quickly take out another cigarette and his throat works as he struggles to not cry.

Haru stares at the fountain in the middle of the square where traffic circles the ornamental structure in a dizzying spiral also known as a roundabout. There’s no water streaming from the jets or spilling over the stone bowls which grow larger as the eyes descend the pillars – the damn thing hasn’t worked in years, so the sight of it dried out and robbed of the coins that once sat at the bottom is not surprising, but what does make Haru falter is when his eyes catch on a strip of yellow tape that’s stretching across the far intersection on the other side of the fountain.

Nao notices him stiffen and follows his gaze before he frowns in concern. “Is that more caution tape?”

After Asahi and Nii look up to see what he’s talking about, the group shares a look of suspicion and leaves the park to venture closer.

They move through the crowd that’s gathered around the assumed crime scene and the lack of personal space makes panic swell in Haru’s throat. It’s almost as if he’s just called out for Asahi, the way he turns back and his eyes fill with understanding. He takes Haru’s elbow as he does when they’re in that narrow tunnel beneath Miho’s house and guides him through the maze of people until they manage to break away from the crowd and find Nii and Nao at the front.

The crowds and the caution tape have come together for a car wreck, Haru realizes. There’s a big
black vehicle crushed like a paper ball and a light post is acting as the trash can that caught it after it sailed through the air. Pieces of the SUV are all over the street, with a tire clear across the square and sunlight catching on the broken glass atop the pavement.

Haru’s sharp eyes focus on the vehicle’s back window, which is shattered and edged with clinging glass. The shards are bloody as if someone cut their hands on them – maybe from trying to crawl through the window?

“That’s so sad,” Asahi whispers, his soft voice a contrast to the harsh tobacco on his breath. “Someone probably died here too.”

Nii and Nao punch him in opposite ribs with just a bit more force than necessary but Haru’s attention is locked on the investigators prowling around the wreckage. He recognizes them as the ones who were just at the dumpster for Kazuki, only now they’re taking photos of the vehicle and speaking with people from the crowd – witnesses?

Haru hunches closer to his friends so they can hear him over the murmur of the crowd. “This isn’t a normal wreck, those people from the crime lab are here.”

Asahi steps on his cigarette with a twist of his foot to snuff it out. “Then let’s go find out why.”

They blend into the flow of commuters along the sidewalk and as they cross the street to move closer to the caution tape, Haru notices a group of parked squad cars taking up the west side of the square to block off the wreck. There’s also a few ambulances among the police cars but there’s one in particular that’s got four armed policemen facing it, where someone’s being treated by a medic who’s blocking Haru’s view of the injured person.

“Maybe someone just got hurt,” Asahi suggests.

Nii shakes her head in confusion at the policemen. “Too much fuzz around for it to be that simple.”

Haru catches a glimpse of a man’s thick calves hanging from the ambulance’s bumper where he’s sitting on the edge. His nostrils flare at the smell of blood and he notices one of the man’s arms is zip tied to the bumper while the other arm is mangled from what looks like a gunshot wound.

Haru’s never been shot before but Aki has and he’ll never forget that experience.

It was a few years ago on a quiet night at the soup kitchen when Rin burst through the door with a girl in his arms and panic in his voice as he shouted for Ai. Her clothes (or lack there of) told Haru that she was a callgirl, the female counterpart of a rentboy. Haru didn’t know her and neither did Rin but that didn’t matter because her white dress was turning red and she looked as scared as they did – at least until Rin slipped his fingers between hers where they were pressed against her wound and he told her to keep her eyes open, on him, and he asked her everything from her favorite food to her favorite song as Nitori, who had barely been in medical school a month at the time, managed to extract the bullet and save her life.

This wounded man and his stocky frame are unfamiliar to Haru and a headache pulls at the backs of his eyes because they’re back to square one, no closer to finding Kazuki’s killer or Rin and he –

“That’s bullshit!”

The group startles and looks in the direction of the shout, where a shock of bright hair catches Haru’s
eye. The hair belongs to a tall man standing on the other side of the nearest squad car and it’s clear that he’s a cop despite that he’s got his back to Haru – his clothes are a dark shade of navy blue and made of that stiff material that screams uniform attire. Not to mention the broad set of his shoulders and confident stance suggests he’s in a position of authority.

However, the man’s self-assurance falters as the guy in front of him draws up and radiates an anger that Haru can feel even from where he and his friends are hidden in the narrow gap between two buildings. He can’t see the other guy’s face due to Tall Cop looming all over the place but he can at least see that the other guy is wearing a police uniform as well.

But what puts the two of them on opposite ends of the spectrum is that his hands are clenched into fists where the taller cop’s hands are raised in a placating gesture.

Tall Cop says, “Calm down, Yamazaki –”

“A kid was just stabbed to death, Mikoshiba,” the unfaced cop – Yamazaki – stresses, his voice filled with as much anger as Haru feels. “So this had better be a joke.”

Mikoshiba’s hands fall to his sides before he rests them on his hips in silence.

Yamazaki scoffs at the action and his voice heats with even more vehemence. “I refuse to be told that a kid just got killed behind a five star restaurant and no one saw anything! That place is in the middle of downtown where there’s hundreds of street cameras and you’re saying that all three of the cameras that had range on that restaurant and that dumpster were not working?”

This guy’s got to be new meat because that’s not surprising in the slightest. The city’s budgeting team consists of a bunch of monkeys on acid and they usually end up putting most of the money in the police department. There’s not much left over to use on things like working security cameras, or traffic lights, or oh, maybe helping kids like Kazuki instead of just tossing him in a greasy body bag like he’s trash –

Mikoshiba stands tall for only a moment longer before he turns to fling his radio across the hood of the squad car like he’s throwing in the towel. He scrubs a hand down his face, which is twisted into a look that’s struggling to not be classified as defeat.

“Don’t act like you’re the only one who gives a shit, Yamazaki.”

Haru’s stunned by his words but Yamazaki isn’t fazed by the display of emotion at all. He comes around the car faster than Haru’s eyes can follow and he barely catches a glimpse of his profile before he leans in and hisses, “You know they won’t convict the yakuza.”

Mikoshiba’s eyes flicker to the guarded ambulance and cut into a glare.

“They’re fucking afraid of him.” Yamazaki’s muscles are coiling tighter with every word of truth. “They’ll take his word when he tries to put all the blame on my suspect. He’s already trying to say that the boy mugged him and the other yakuza that got sent to the hospital.” He pauses as another officer slips by pretending to be busy and not eavesdropping before he continues, voice quieter but no less outraged. “He’s going to say that the boy held them at gunpoint before he ‘forced them’ in the SUV and it wrecked. And you damn well know that nobody’s going to check for fingerprints on that gun to prove if that’s even true.”

“You thought your suspect was drugged,” Mikoshiba tries, perking up slightly. “He couldn’t do any
of that if he really was.”

Haru’s nails cut into his palms – *drugged*. That suspect could’ve been Rin and he could’ve been *fucking drugged*.

“Easy,” Nao hushes, and only then is he aware that his breathing has gone shallow. “Don’t go there yet, Haru.”

He nods faintly despite that his panic isn’t calmed. The only glimmer of hope he’s got is that Rin’s been drugged before and survived it an excessive number of times. It’s a cold comfort but it’s the only thing he’s got to cling to right now.

He jerks when Yamazaki scoffs. “You really think the boy will come forward? Really, Sei?”

Mikoshiba’s own stress appears to break the barrier of control andskyrockets. He doesn’t hold back when he shoves Yamazaki out of his personal space and snaps, “If he doesn’t come forward then it’s because he fucking ran!”

His outburst draws the attention of practically everyone on the street but Mikoshiba rages on, voice slicing through the tension like a knife. “And he ran because he had something to hide!”

“He ran because he knew what would happen if I caught him!”

Haru and the group are stunned. Yamazaki’s got his back to them but he and Mikoshiba are only inches apart, bodies coiled tight enough for muscles and veins to pop. Asahi’s making a bet on who’s going to swing first (“Yamazaki sounds like a hood bitch,”) but then Mikoshiba works his jaw and turns his face with a look of shame cast in the direction of 4th Street, where Kazuki’s body was found.

Yamazaki sighs before lifting a hand to squeeze Mikoshiba’s shoulder in apology. “That was out of line.”

“Nah,” Mikoshiba snorts without the faintest hint of amusement. “I get it.”

“It’s just that even if a kid’s brave enough to come to us for help, we just…”

Mikoshiba’s breath rolls into a growl and Yamazaki’s is no better. “Even if they tell us they’ve got roped into a gang and can’t get out,” Sei finishes, “We make them tell us everything they know and throw them right back to the wolves.”

“It’s because Corro’s too scared to take on the gangs, Sei,” Yamazaki insists.

“Who’s Corro?” Nii mumbles.


Asahi’s brows crease. “How’d you know that?”

Haru remains silent before the group’s attention turns back to Yamazaki as he continues, “If a kid admits to dealing, we charge them.” His voice raws with an anger that leaves Haru reeling. “And you know what those assholes in Holding do to the prostitutes.”
Mikoshiba doesn’t even try to hide the revulsion from his expression.

“My suspect knew that,” Yamazaki urges. “The court would’ve just seen his clothes and his face and –” He takes a steadying breath so his voice doesn’t waver. “I would’ve ran too, if I’d been him.”

Mikoshiba stiffens and he slowly turns to stare at Yamazaki with narrowed eyes. “Why do you sound so sure that your suspect was a rentboy?”

Haru flares to life and Nao sucks in a gasp before Nii’s hand clutches the fabric at his arm. “That’s Rin,” Asahi breathes. “That’s gotta be Rin!”

“Wait,” Nao whispers, despite his own eye brightens with just as much cautious hope. “We don’t know for sure yet.”

Haru wants to shout at him for that but then Mikoshiba sets his gaze on Yamazaki in a way that’s so intense it makes everything around them seem to freeze, Mikoshiba breaks his stare only to cast a glance around the area like he’s making sure no one’s close enough to hear him say, “If something happened between you and that boy –”

Yamazaki’s muscles jump before they tense and Sei doesn’t miss it. The action causes his eyes to widen and his voice to rise in barely contained hysteria. “Then you tell me right fucking now, Sousuke.”

Haru’s stomach leaps up his throat and his brain hits the ground.

He doesn’t realize he’s fallen sideways into Asahi because he can’t even feel the hands jarring his shoulders or hear the words his friends are whispering frantically because he’s not with them anymore.

He’s on the edge of a cliff with dirt in his eyes and ash in his hair. There’s panic zipping through his veins – the kind that only shows up once in a person’s life because it happens just as someone realizes they’re truly and inevitably about to die.

Watching Sousuke tear through that clearing only solidified that fate. Even though his glare broke to pieces when his eyes landed on Haru, the guy had already proved he was as unyielding as the rocks Haru was dragging himself across and wasn’t going to budge – most especially for some crackhead kid that had proved to be capable of only acting like an asshole.

Sousuke’s flash of sympathy might have been real but he still had a job to do, and even if that job was being a cop, life had taught Haru that he couldn’t depend on people to save him – only the ocean had ever done that, and that’s where he went, over the edge of the cliff and into the blue darkness.

Haru comes back to himself at the insistent grip of Asahi’s fingers against his arms, a grounding point of contact that’s so tight it almost hurts. Haru blinks at him and Asahi looks very young, like a kid lost in the dark, before Haru chases the shadows away by assuring, “I’m fine, Asahi.”

He still doesn’t look convinced but Haru finds his gaze moving back to Sousuke. Where he once looked athletic and capable, he’s now muscled and intimidating. He’s still got that air of cool confidence but there’s a new edge of tension to him that weakens his demeanor – most people probably wouldn’t even notice it but Haru can see it in the tight set of his shoulders, which haven’t relaxed once through out this whole exchange, and in the way his jaw automatically falls into a
clench when he’s not talking.

Something happened, Haru realizes. He most definitely wouldn’t be able to do that undercover mission over again – the restlessness would give him away in a matter of seconds.

He’s still working that resting bitch face and physically, his features hasn’t changed that much, despite the new addition of dark swelling around his left cheek.

What makes Sousuke so unrecognizable is his eyes. They're even sharper, darker, than the last time Haru saw them, and just as tired as the smirk he’s curling at Mikoshiba.

“He gave me a boot to the face, Sei. And it didn’t turn me on that much, so I’m afraid I wasn’t that motivated to take it a step further.” His smirk deepens. ‘But if you don’t believe me, you’re more than welcome to check those street cameras that weren’t working.”


“Go to hell, Sousuke,” Mikoshiba sighs, not taking the bait, rolling his eyes with a shake of his head. He walks off to speak with the investigators, slapping Sousuke on the back of the head before leaving him alone by the squad car.

But he’s alone for only a moment before another cop wanders over. He’s a younger guy that resembles Mikoshiba, despite that his hair and eyes are brighter. He approaches Sousuke cautiously, holding out an ice pack as a peace offering.

Sousuke blinks in surprise before pressing the chilled little bag against his bruise. “Thanks.”

The younger cop flashes him a weak smile. “No prob! I um –” He fumbles with the clipboard in his hands, almost dropping it before he splutters, “Sei told me there wasn’t much I could do besides get witnesses and stuff. So, um. He said to get a description of your suspect.” His face colors with a blush and he scratches the back of his neck. “I mean, I know I saw him too, but I just – I can’t really remember everything.” He hangs his head low.

“There was a lot going on, Momo,” Sousuke says, his voice uncharacteristically soft. “You handled it better than most guys would on their first day.”

Momo beams, practically swaying on his feet as he coos, “Awww, Yamazaki-senpai is so sweet!”

“Watch it.”

“Right, sorry. Anyway. Description stuff.” He squints at his clipboard with an air of importance. “He looked like he was twenty something, right?”

“Early twenties,” Sousuke guesses with a shrug, wincing as he brings the ice pack back to his face.

“What else?”

Sousuke sounds dazed. “Maroon hair.”

“Oh my god,” Haru whispers.

“Oh!” Momo perks up. “His teeth! I remember those.”
Sousuke looks away. “Um, yeah. Sure.”

“Oh my god…”

Momo scrawls across the paper, saying, “Never seen teeth like that! They were almost as sharp as your dog’s!”

Asahi’s cursing up a storm in the most joyful way and Haru is filled with an adrenaline that, for once, isn’t mixed with panic. Instead it’s hope that’s making his pulse surge.

“He looked pretty strong too,” Momo remembers with a tap of the pencil against his chin. Then he laughs in disbelief. “I’ve never seen someone use a combat boot to break a window before, either. That was some crazy shit.”

Oh, that manic son of a bitch. Rin only wears combat boots while he’s working for this exact reason.

Shoes are an unexpected weapon in the prostitution business. Aki keeps razor blades taped to the bottom of her high heels and Nakagawa buys his sneakers a size too big so he can have room to tuck a pocket knife against the arch of his foot. Rin’s boots all have steel toes and at least one interior pocket under the tongue where a dagger and a small tube of pepper spray can be tucked away. On the more dangerous rents he’s even been known to hide a compact Glock under the array of leather straps and buckles that wrap around the calf of his boot.

But it looks like Rin only had time to use the steel toe as his primary weapon of escape – the SUV’s broken window and that bruise on Sousuke’s face are proof of that.

Haru’s eyes narrow on the guarded ambulance. “We have to get over there and talk to the yakuza. We already know he’s got something to do with Rin but he could have something to do with Kazuki too.”

Nii nods firmly before hesitating as she glances at the ambulance. “How’re we gonna make those cops disappear?”

They all frown in thought before slowly turning to Asahi.

He squirms under their gazes. “What?” he snaps nervously.

Haru lifts his brows at the book bag slung on Asahi’s shoulder. “You’re packing, right?”

Asahi frowns in confusion before it clicks, and he waves his arms frantically. “Whoa, whoa, I am not shooting anyone today, Haru!” He adjusts his clothes that became disheveled in his outburst but his anxious hands only wrinkle them further. “I’m high as fuck right now, you can’t just say shit like that!”

Haru tries not to bang his head against the side of the building. Repeatedly. Passionately. “I’m not asking you to shoot anyone. I’m asking you to go a few blocks over and fire the gun.”


“Who’s Anne?”

“No, it’s _an_ assassination, not –”

Nii snorts. “Do you even know how to turn the gun’s safety off, Asahi?”

“I know that your nose ring is fake!”

“Oh – _shitshitshit_, whoa Nii, whoa!” It takes quite a bit of effort for Nao to hold her back, but Haru doesn’t even have to take his eyes off the ambulance to yank Asahi back by the hood of his jacket like he’s pulling in the reins of an overconfident Shetland pony.

“Okay, everyone calm down,” Nao says in that tone Haru only hears exasperated mothers use. “Let’s just all listen to what Haru has to say and pay attention and pretend that we’re all adults, yes?”

They’ve already shot that goat in the face, he thinks, but he continues anyway because what else is new? “Go to 2nd Street. Chigusa’s in room 109 at the hotel there.” It’s a shady place but none of the street cameras work there, either. Haru knows this because there’s been plenty of times he could’ve got caught with blood on his hands after a few deals went wrong with some clients staying there – luckily the street cameras were fried, and that was as much of an advantage then as it is now.

Asahi breaks away from glaring at Nii to blink at Haru. “Chigusa? You mean the harlot from the soup kitchen?”

Nii scoffs, “Who in the hell says _harlot_?”

Before Asahi can retort, Haru says, “Fire off the gun behind the building, then go hide out with Chigusa. Trash it before you go in there because the cops are going to search the hotel rooms. Use that manhole in the alley on the left side of the building and drop the gun in the sewers. And don’t look at me like that Asahi, guns can’t get their feelings hurt.”

Nao’s expression softens. “How did you know Chigusa was at that hotel, Haru?” By the tone of his voice, it appears he already knows the answer.

Haru lowers his head to hide his blush under the cover of his fringe. “Me and Rin gave her some money. We didn’t think she’d actually use it for something like this, but.” He winces. “She got beat up the other day and I think that had a lot to do with it.” He clears the lump from his throat and looks up to ask Asahi, “So can you do it?”

Asahi bites his lip and his nails cut across the straps of his book bag nervously. Nao takes note of this action and comes up behind him to split the zipper of the back pocket and take out a handgun made of harsh lines and black paint, a contrast to the soft, pale hand that grips it. He tucks the gun between his back and his jeans. “I’ll do it.”

Asahi shakes his head weakly. “Nah Nao, you and guns ain’t the best of buds, you really don’t have to –”

“It’s the least I can do in return for you distracting Nakagawa.”

Asahi hesitates. “Have you – I mean you’ve like – at least seen one before, right?”
Nii groans like Asahi’s stupidity causes her actual pain while Nao slowly arches a brow. “Did you forget that I’m a drug dealer too?”


Nao recovers and shares a nod with Haru before breezing down the sidewalk, slipping through the crowd with an ease that only he possesses.

Haru dials Chigusa to give her a quick heads up and she assures him that she’ll be ready to let Nao in as long as he doesn’t talk when this disturbing yet romantic vampire anime Haru’s never heard of comes on.

The fact that she doesn’t even sound fazed by the task he’s requested of her is awful because a twelve year old should be oh, maybe, scared as shit, about anything that has to do with a guy she doesn’t know and a gun in her proximity.

But that does speak volumes about the kind of trust she’s got in Haru, and he trusts her too – he knows she’s strong enough to handle the situation whereas he would’ve went to pieces if someone had put this kind of heat on him when he was twelve.

Shots ring through the air and the sound fuses his whirlwind of thoughts together, pulling in his focus. He quickly yanks Asahi and Nii deeper into the alley as civilians and police rush by in different directions. Mikoshiba wastes no time in leading most of the police toward the bullets but before Sousuke chases after them he peers into the squad car and says something, and Haru almost doesn’t believe it when a monstrous canine leaps out of the open passenger window to flatten her ears and bare her teeth at the eruption of gunfire.

“That’s a bear,” Asahi splutters. “Haru, that’s – that’s a fucking bear.”

“No, you’re high, idiot,” Nii whispers with a jam of her elbow into his ribs. “Stop sounding like amateur hour and get it together!”

“Shh,” Haru hisses as the dog’s ears flicker, but he’s not quick enough and her eyes find his. He can’t even pretend that alarm doesn’t shoot up his spine when the dog growls at him because he swears he can feel the vibrations of the sound through the pavement.

Luckily, Sousuke orders her to follow him before she can give Haru and his friends away. Asahi lets out a breath of relief but the dog whips around and slings foam from her jaws as she snaps her teeth at him, making him yelp before she chases after Sousuke.

Haru stares after them. “You’re right. That was a bear.”

They’re on a short time limit and that sends energy buzzing through them, but when Haru gets ready to head for the ambulance he notices that one cop has been left to watch the yakuza and it’s Momo.

“I got him,” Nii says. She unwinds her braids and leaves her hair in a mess of disheveled tangles, then drags her hands down her face to smear mascara over her cheeks and make it look like she’s cried her makeup off.

Nii runs out into the street before Haru can stop her, but he’s left stunned when Nii pushes through the crowd and slams into Momo with a hysterical cry and a never-ending stream of tears.
Haru moves with barely a shuffle of fabric while Asahi somehow manages to trip over air, but thankfully, Nii’s got all of Momo’s attention with her tears and cleavage, so they make it to the side of the ambulance without getting caught.

Haru opens his denim vest to take out his switchblade, twirling it through his fingers, grounding himself in the weight of it as it spins over his palm.

And then in an explosion of movement, Asahi and Haru dive around the ambulance where Asahi yanks a bandana between the man’s teeth and Haru snaps his zip tie with his knife. They've got him pinned against the side of the ambulance in less than five seconds.

The man’s voice is muffled by the bandana but he still tries to shout. Asahi uses the hand that isn’t holding the ends of the bandana to shove him with a strength he rarely displays. “Keep it down, shortcake, sounds like you got a dick in your mouth.”

The man struggles and Haru slips the blade of the knife under the edge of his neck brace to make him go rigid. Sweat drips into his eyes as Haru calmly says, “I’ve had a long day. So I’ve got enough effort in me to ask you this once.” He leans closer until he can practically smell the fear. “But I almost want you to not tell me anything because I think you’ve hurt my friends and – well, you probably already get that I’m an asshole.” His voice isn’t as indifferent as he whispers, “There aren’t that many people willing to be around me very long so you can imagine what I’m willing to do to anyone who hurts them.”

Asahi loosens the bandana just enough for the man to choke, “I ain’t tellin’ you shit.”

Haru snorts quietly before moving his scarf to the side, revealing his tattoo. The sight of the bird causes the man’s breath to stutter and his eyes dart to Asahi, looking for a similar gang mark, but Asahi says, “Mine’s on my thigh. Sorry you won’t be seein’ it big boy, I don’t like wearing my skirts above the knee.”

“You’re both fucking crazy,” the man wheezes. “I know who you are, you’re fucking crazy…”

“Yes,” Haru drawls like he’s talking to a child. “And now you’re going to tell me about the crazy rentboy.”

“I don’t –”

Haru presses the tip of the knife a little deeper into his skin, raising his brows mockingly. The man swallows against the blade and rasps, “Look, we all got a boss. Your life ain’t yours as much as mine ain’t mine no more.”

“Captivating. You’ve got two seconds.”

Asahi forces the man’s head up by yanking his hair back and he rushes, “My boss is workin’ with somebody, all right! Said they could make our gang more powerful but my boss ain’t believed them. So they give him ten grand last night, tell him how to get ahold of a Freebird rentboy. Boss sends me out, says we do whatever it takes to get some info out of hiiii –”

Haru had unconsciously driven the knife deeper and he grimaces at the hot rush of blood over his fingers, but he doesn’t pull back. The man splutters, “Boss sent me and another guy to Samezuka, said go to the bar, ask for a drink called Sharkbait, look man, please, I’ll tell ya whatever, just please
Sharkbait is Rin’s codename. All the Samezuka prostitutes are given one to keep their names and illegal profession hidden. If someone wants a prostitute they have to go to the bar and know what drink – what codename – to ask for.

“Boss says get the boy ‘n take him to the car, make him tell us who pimps him, who’s leadin’ Freebird, figure out how ya’ll get drugs into the city without gettin’ caught.” He falls silent and Asahi tugs harder at the man’s hair, making his eyes fill with tears and a surprising look of regret. “The boy wouldn’t give, I didn’t have no choice.”

Haru rams his knee into the man’s groin but pins his shoulders so he can’t curl over in pain. “What did you do to him.”

“I didn’t! I couldn’t!” The man is heaving. “He put up too good of a fight, stronger than he looked… oh shit… he almost got away, almost wanted him to but then – my partner grabbed him and – and used that new shit on ‘im.”

Asahi’s eyes narrow. “You talkin’ about relay, lollipop?”

The man nods frantically, so close to bursting into tears that it’s pitiful. “Works like speed, gives you all this energy, doesn’t let you pass out, that’s – that’s why it’s called relay, jus’ makes you keep goin’ and goin’… And… and if you give enough of it to somebody their body just gets so cranked that it locks everything up. Paralyzes them physically, but everything else –” His breath hitches. “The boy jus’ kept his eyes open the whole time, couldn’t move but he never stopped staring at me, oh god, I’m so sorry –”

Haru’s so consumed by rage that he’s about to drive the knife straight through the man’s throat before he’s grabbed and thrown backwards.

The impact of hitting the pavement is blinding – he can’t even breathe with the pain. The concrete has baked in the sun and it burns where flecks of it rake into his skin and his strength has been ripped away with the breath in his lungs.

But primitive survival roars through him and he scrambles for his knife despite that he doesn’t even realize it, but just as his fingers brush against it, someone yanks it away and grips the handle in a white-knuckled fist.

Haru slashes the tears out of his eyes to see the yakuza being thrown against the ambulance with enough force to shake the vehicle.

Asahi hauls Haru to his feet and the two of them stare at the guy who is pinning the man and pointing the tip of the blade at his eye. His back is to them, but that cropped auburn hair and lithe frame are unmistakable, bringing horror to their faces.

Haru spurs to life, reaching forward just as Aki stumbles around the front of the ambulance, panting like she’s just ran all the way from the swim club. But even in her exhaustion she still tries, reaching out to Nakagawa, tears in her eyes and voice. “Shouta –” Nakagawa flinches but doesn’t move away. “You know this won’t change anything, Kazuki wouldn’t want you to live with this!”

“Kazuki is dead.”
Nakagawa’s anger is an inescapable heat in the air, dragging Haru into it as much as he wants to pull Nakagawa out.

In a surge of movement, Nakagawa leans in until there are only inches between him and the man and Haru doesn’t recognize the voice that comes out of his mouth when he whispers, “Did you kill my boyfriend?”

The man splutters in fear and confusion before Haru clarifies, “He was a dealer.”

“And our friend,” Asahi says, eyes cutting into a glare that doesn’t look right against his soft features.

The man heaves under Nakagawa’s weight but manages to gasp, “I c-c-called my boss, I told him the – that the rentboy wasn’t gon’ talk.”

Aki freezes, mouth and eyes moving dazedly before Asahi nods gently and wraps an arm around her shoulders, giving her someone to lean on.

“That unknown source tells him the rentboy was talkin’ with som guy before he went into the club, told us where we could find him, what he looked like, said – said make him tell us who’s runnin’ Freebird and if he didn’t talk to…”

Nakagawa goes very still. “He tell you to kill him? Told you to stab him to death? Throw him in a dumpster? That’s what he told you to do, that’s – that’s what you did?”

“I couldn’t get a gun on him!” the man cries, tears catching in the weathered lines of his face. “I got a fuckin’ baby, you think I wanted to hurt him?! Only thing I could do was say to myself that if it had to happen then I’d make sure it was quick, but then he jus’ kept fighting and we had to drug him before we got caught. It – it wasn’t me that killed him! That shit was all my partner, he didn’t have to knife him down right there even if that’s where we was told to kill him, didn’t matter, he didn’t have to do that shit.”

A shadow haunts the yakuza’s face. “But what was even crazier… that kid didn’t even look scared. He just… just stared at us and then he started laughing like we were so stupid. Kid s-said, you don’t know who my friends are, do you?”

Asahi shakes his head and turns to rest his hands on his knees but Haru can’t even feel his own body. The man cracks a wet laugh, “I didn’t know what the hell he meant until a few hours later when that rentboy started movin’ around in the SUV.” He shakes his head, whispering, “I don’t know where he pulled that kind of strength from but he jumped in the front of the cab and yanked the steering wheel and –”

Haru stares vacantly. “Put the SUV through a light post.”

The man doesn’t even seem to hear Haru, he is so lost in his own terror. “My partner grabbed him, held him down and laughed, said there wasn’t anything he could do now, and then the kid – the kid reached up and bit him. Then he tried to make a run for it and I knew I’d be dead and so’d my girl, baby too, but – but even if that cop hadn’t shot me first I wouldn’t have shot the boy cause I didn’t want to kill anybody, not him, not the dealer and I’m sorry about him, both of them, I’m sorry about your boyfriend, I’m sorry, please –!”

Nakagawa’s pained noise rips into a snarl and he tears the man’s neck brace off. Time slows but
even so, the knife blurs as it spins in Nakagawa’s palm, and Haru looks away with a grimace as the blade slices across the man’s throat.

His cry of shock rings through the air at a volume that’s going to grab attention quickly. He falls to the group in a heap of limbs while Haru gently prises the knife from Nakagawa, whose eyes are widening at that growing pool of red, and all that heated anger ices over into fear. “I didn’t – oh my god, Haru, I didn’t mean to –”

“I know,” Haru assures softly, bloody fingers sticking to his. “But it’s over and we have to go.”

Nakagawa has already gone into shock and is uncomprehending, but he’s docile as Haru, Aki, and Asahi guide him around the ambulance and lure him into the back of the crowd that is gathering around the other side of the vehicle.

The group moves through the sea of people like zombies. Nao and Nii find them with questions poised on both their lips but the blood on Nakagawa’s hands silences them before Aki pulls his sleeve over his fingers to hide where they’re stained.

They find sanctuary back at the swim club where Nakagawa collapses and breaks down, curling into himself with cries that drive straight through Haru’s chest. He crouches down to offer what comfort he can, rubbing his back alongside Nao as Aki and Asahi wrap him in a crushing embrace and Nii strokes the tangles from his hair.

“I loved that bastard,” Nakagawa rasps into someone’s shoulder. “And I never even told him, I was too fucking scared to even tell him…”

“He knew, Naka,” Aki assures, fingers smoothing over the tears on his face. “You didn’t have to say it.”

Asahi chuckles. “You were kind of obvious.”

Nakagawa’s face goes blank before he barks a laugh. “Yeah. Guess I was, wasn’t I?”

After that, his tears soon drain into exhaustion and he passes out with his head pillowed in Aki’s lap, right there on the floor. The rest of the group remains huddled around him and Haru makes sweater paws to cover his own bloody fingers. The weight of the knife in his pocket makes him feel like he’s sinking until Asahi’s voice pulls him from the darkness. “That cop said Rin got away. Maybe he went home.”

Haru shakes his head and winces as his neck strains from the movement. “He would’ve been scared Gou caught a cold or something and had to stay home. He wouldn’t take that kind of chance with her.”

Nao purses his lips, brow raising over his eye patch. “He might’ve passed out somewhere. But I’d like to think he knew somewhere safe to go other than the house before that happened.”

Haru’s eyes lull shut as his own need to pass out sweeps through him. His brain muddles over Nao’s words before they meld together and his eyes fly open.


“I know where Rin goes when he’s hurting.”
Nitori’s apartment building isn’t far but the distance feels like a hundred miles.

Haru almost collapses with the relief of seeing the building come into sight. He drags himself up the stairs and almost doesn’t make it before the familiar scent of peonies from the flower box under Nitori’s kitchen window gives him the strength to reach the door and bang on it with his fist.

There’s a sign nailed to the door displaying a fluffy white duck holding up a piece of wood reading *Welcome*, and the sign almost falls off when the door bursts open to reveal a frazzled Nitori.

He stares at Haru for a full five seconds before recognition dawns in his wide eyes. “Haru,” he sighs, falling back against the door. “Oh, thank god, I – I was just about to call you.”

He ushers Haru inside. He doesn’t even remember to take off his shoes but he knows how to maneuver down the hallway and finds himself gravitating towards the living room, where he squints in the soft lighting before his eyes land on the couch.

“Rin, you piece of shit.”

Rin looks up from where he’s sprawled across the cushions. His shirt’s gone and the expanse of his skin is splotched with bruises, cuts and scrapes, but Haru can’t help but feel relieved because he’s seen Rin beat up more times than he’d care to count and this isn’t nearly as bad as it’s been before, despite that the stench of sweat and dirt that is making Haru nauseous – it just shows him that this is real.

But nothing proves Rin is alive and breathing like the way he curls a tired smirk and whispers, “Hey, jackass.”

“Don’t even, you – you bag of dicks.”

Nitori ducks his head to hide his smile and excuses himself, leaving them alone. Haru steadies himself and finally toes off his shoes, dazed at the familiarity of the action, can almost tell himself that this is a completely average day before he walks over to the couch and reality crashes in at the sight of the cushions stained pink with dried blood. Haru pushes aside bandages and ointments to make a place for himself and when he sits down Rin tenses, just a little. Haru doesn’t miss it and he pretends that he’s just settling into the cushions when he’s really putting a few more inches between him and Rin to give him the space he needs.

That understanding makes Haru resist assessing Rin’s injuries because having eyes roam over him, platonically or not, would surely make him self-conscious and uncomfortable after everything that’s happened.

“Where’s your shirt?”

“Ai had to trash it.”

Haru frowns at the tightness of his voice. Then he realizes that while Rin’s usually confident about his body, he surely feels violated and exposed right now.

Haru slips off his vest to unzip his jacket and hand it over without a word, and Rin’s eyes fill with a gratitude that’s heartbreaking before he shrugs it on. He zips it up all the way and slowly relaxes into the cushions, finally looking like he feels a little safe.
The fact that Rin stays quiet instead of making a bitchy comment about how the jacket reeks of mackerel is nerve wracking. Haru looks down at his socks and keeps his voice quiet as he asks, “How do you feel?”

“About how I look.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” Rin lifts the jacket and shifts to show him a line of stitches trailing down his bare side. “That’s the worst of it, though. Ai had to get all this glass out.”

“From where you crawled out of that car window?”

Rin stiffens and Haru grimaces because wow, that could’ve been said better in like, any other way. “I mean.” He sighs, finally meeting Rin’s gaze. “I saw the SUV.”

Rin is stunned, looking away as he struggles to understand. “You guys went looking for me that quick?”

“Well duh, idiot. We love you.”

Rin is so unprepared for Haru’s rare display of emotion that he seems to not even believe he heard him say anything. Haru almost feels smug at that because he might not know how emotions work but he still pretty much has them, as fucking weird as they are. Plus there was an insistence in his gut that was telling him Rin needed to hear that he wasn’t alone because nothing isolates a person like going through what he just has.

And if it threatens Haru’s title of being an unyielding piece of shit then that’s okay because it only takes those three monotone words to make Rin start laughing and crying at the same time in a way that makes Haru believe he might actually be okay.

Rin rests his head against the back of the couch and Haru lets his own head sink into the cushion beside him. They both stare up at the ceiling as Rin whispers, “I guess a normal life wouldn’t be this exciting, would it?”

“No, but we’re both going to die of heart attacks by the time we’re twenty-five if things keep going this way.”

Rin snorts. “Heart attack would be easy at this point.” He circles one of his bruises with a vague shake of his head. “I guess I could start out by saying that last night began like any other, but. I don’t know if that would really make sense because you have to always be expecting this kind of thing to happen.”

Haru knocks his knee against his and Rin pushes back with a feigned look of annoyance. Haru stiffens at a thought and asks, “Do you need to talk about it?”

Rin’s entire body goes rigid like there’s an earthquake in his chest and Haru sits up to rush, “Sorry, I’m sorry, never mind, don’t – please.” He shakes his head firmly at Rin’s look of hesitance. “Don’t. I shouldn’t have asked.”

God, Haru hates this side of Rin as much as he knows it needs to be acknowledged. Everyone else
sees the Rin that is confident to the point it’s maddening, but Haru’s the only one in the world who sees that Rin still doesn’t understand that he has choices and can say no to anything he doesn’t want to do.

But luckily Rin trusts Haru enough to know that he won’t make him do anything, and he nods in thanks before worrying his lip, and that’s when Haru notices that his tongue is blue.

Kazuki’s voice splits through his head: “I’ve had clients come back for more and their tongues are stained blue from the strip.”

“You have to stop selling relay.”

Haru startles at Rin’s voice, or more so, his words. Rin levels their gazes. “Haru, they used it on me and –”

“Rin, you don’t have to –”

“You need to know!” Rin snaps, brows creasing over his bloodshot eyes where the vessels are red and angry against the whites. “Haru, it –” And then he falters, looking away with a shuddering breath. “I couldn’t move. I just… couldn’t move. But I could still feel everything, see everything. And I tried to stop breathing, tried to make myself pass out.” Rin slashes at his wet eyes and laughs bitterly. “God, I would’ve told them everything if it had been as simple as giving up Miho. I’d fucking take ’em to her, I’d watch and everything.” His mouth twists. “But it wasn’t that simple. Never is. She’d make sure we all went down with her.”

Haru busies himself with wrapping a cut on Rin’s arm that’s started to fever and swell. He quietly says, “You know you saved our lives then, right?”

Rin smiles crookedly – Haru feels it, doesn’t have to see it. “That your way of saying thanks?”

“Yes,” Haru says honestly.

Rin exhales and rakes a hand through his matted hair. “Well. You’re welcome, or whatever. Jerk.”

“Bitch,” Haru replies in kind, but Rin snorts a laugh and he almost sounds normal again.

They sit in silence for a while. It’s clear that Rin is exhausted but he’s fighting sleep, forcing his eyes wide so they won’t droop shut. Haru would leave to let him rest, but every time he shifts Rin’s breath hitches, like he’s scared he’s about to be left alone. Therefore, Haru makes the decision to not leave for fucking anything. The entire block could be raided by zombies and he’d face them with bored, unimpressed eyes and stay right where he is.

But then a question starts gnawing at him, and it’s as if Rin can actually hear his thoughts when he mumbles, “What is it?”

Haru clears his throat and shakes his head. “It can wait.”

“I don’t want to go to sleep,” Rin says, and Haru turns to see that he’s got his knees tucked against his chest and is hugging a pillow just a bit too tightly. “So just say it. I don’t care, just. Keep me awake.”

Haru sighs, picking at his nails, thankful he washed off all that blood on his fingers before he got
here. He wouldn’t have been able to explain it, admits that he doesn’t have the strength for it. “A lot happened,” Haru says carefully. “While you were. Um.”

Panic lights Rin’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

Haru mouths for words but all that comes out is a hollow breath. Then he startles as Rin shares some of the blanket with him, pulling it up to Haru’s neck and forcing him to lie down on the pillows.

“Never mind,” Rin says. “Don’t – don’t tell me right now. Neither of us can probably take it right now.”

Haru nods. His aching bones practically sing at the warmth of the blanket and it's like the couch is a drug in his veins he feels so delirious. But he manages to mumble, “Nakagawa wanted to tell you about it.”

He had woken up just as Haru was racing out of the swim club. He said that he needed to be the one to tell Rin about Kazuki and that made Haru remember that Rin saw more of Kazuki than he did because Rin and Nakagawa were so close - they had walked the same streets long before they were both pulled into Miho’s trap.

Haru really can’t grasp the depth of the situation despite that he was close to Kazuki, too. Rin’s the only one who’s going to be able to understand just what’s been taken from Nakagawa.

And there’s so much alarm racing over Rin’s face but he just nods because they’re both so close to breaking under this stress that he can feel it in the air.

But Haru can’t stop himself. “Did you get chased by a cop?”

Rin doesn’t react at all and that’s how Haru knows he’s going to try to lie.

It’s really pathetic. “Have you ever been able to lie to me?”

Rin startles, takes a breath and lets it out with a dizzied laugh. “You won’t believe me if I tell you what really happened.” He clenches the blanket harshly. “You’re gonna say I hit my head or some shit.”

“No,” Haru assures. “I won’t.”

Rin falters at the firmness of his voice. He tries to speak but he has to sit up to hunch his head between his knees and hide his face as his breathing accelerates.

And then it stops all together. “He let me go, Haru.”

Haru blinks. “Come again?”

“He literally let me go.” Rin looks at him so earnestly that it’s reeling. “He had me cuffed and everything. And then he just let me go.”

Haru sits up, “Did he bug you? Did he follow you?”

“No! He –” And then Rin's eyes water and yep, Haru’s going to skin somebody and he’s going to draw it out like a fucking blueprint. He’s one patient son of a bitch, he could probably make it go on for months before –
“Haru, I didn’t even have to do anything.”

Haru tips his head and shakes it in confusion, trying so hard to understand. “I didn’t have to do anything.” Rin stresses, and then the tears spill over as he grips Haru’s arms with shaking fingers. “I didn’t have to beg him, I didn’t have to fuck him, I’ve – no one’s ever –”

*Oh.* Haru looks up at the ceiling to keep his own tears from brimming over because Rin’s voice is so small, so confused as he presses his forehead against Haru’s shoulder. “He was so strong, I’ve just always thought… if someone’s stronger than you, why wouldn’t they use it on you? No one’s ever –”

“Gave you a choice,” Haru finishes. “No one’s ever gave you a choice.” And then his heart stops because there’s no way that cop was – “You don’t know his name, do you?”

“No.”

Haru struggles to keep his voice even. “What’d he look like?”

Rin sniffles, sitting up to wipe at his eyes. “Um, he was tall. Black hair – not like yours, kind of browner.”

*Oh my fucking –* “What else?”

“Blue eyes. Like really blue. Like Blue Lagoon Crayola crayon blue.”

Haru finds himself forced to hide his face in his hands because he can’t keep these emotions off his face.

That’s Sousuke. Sousuke let Rin go. Sousuke, the guy that –

“Haru, what is it?”

He drops his hands and stares at them for a while before mumbling, “I just can’t believe it.”

He looks at Rin and realizes that Sousuke might be Sousuke, but this is his best friend. “But I… I believe you.”

There’s a steaming cup of green tea between Haru’s fingers and a mug of coffee between Nitori’s pale hands. “He needs medicine,” he mumbles, voice softened to not disturb Rin, who has finally passed out. “You said he was in a car wreck. He might’ve come out amazingly well but he’s going to be sore when the shock wears off.” He hides his trembling mouth against the lip of the mug. “I can – I could try to get some medicine from the hospital.”

“No,” Haru tells him with no room for argument. “You’re not risking your job.” Nitori suddenly looks very small and he sighs, “You’ve already done more than enough, Ai. We’ll take care of the rest.”

Nitori nods in hesitant acceptance.

Two hours later, Aki is curled up with dead-to-the-world Rin on the couch, watching him breathe,
brushing her fingers through his hair as Nao checks over Nitori’s work on his injuries, sometimes mumbling in approval and making Nitori beam.

Nii is sitting against the wall and her headphones are blaring rock music that everyone can hear in the quiet of the room, but no one has the strength or desire to ask her to turn it down. Music has always been her escape, helps her retreat to that safe place in the back of her mind, and no one’s about to take that away from her after today.

Haru remembers when he saw her for the first time, or more specifically, found her at the swim club. She was tucked into the corner of a dark locker room with those same bulky headphones on, and she was sweating and trembling in a way that told him she was dopesick – withdrawing from heroin.

He never tried to talk to her, remaining silent as he brought her boxes of pizza and bottles of water, leaving them on the bench at the far side of the room so he wouldn’t have to approach her and scare her. He’d come back to find the boxes and bottles empty, one day he found her hunched over a pizza box and admitting that she hated cheese pizza but now she’d eaten enough to never like another kind again.

Nii glances toward the glass door leading out to the deck, where Asahi is smoking and keeping watch. She then meets Haru’s eyes before the two of them send a nervous look to Nakagawa, who is alone at the kitchen table, staring at his hands as if he didn’t already scrub the blood off in Nitori’s kitchen sink – it’s like he can still see it staining his fingers.

Knowing Nii is more than capable of taking Nakagawa down if he snaps, Haru joins Asahi on the deck, sliding the glass door closed firmly behind him.

He sits across from his friend in a cheap plastic lawn chair and observes the sky, which is dark with a looming storm, and the drenching humidity is somehow comforting right now.

Haru casts one last glance at the glass door, assuring that the curtains are pulled before he says, “I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything,” Asahi says automatically, simply.

Haru puts a folded piece of paper in his hands and Asahi opens it. His eyes go wide as they scroll down the list. “This is like… medicine, right? For Rin?”

“Yes.”

Asahi tenses nervously. “Antibiotics are easy enough, but… all these fluids and the prescription shit? You’d have better luck with Nao on this one Haru, I…”

Nao won’t take Haru’s money. “Please.”

Asahi meets his eyes and the anxiousness in Haru’s own gaze makes him nod. “Yeah, hell yeah, man. Of course.”

Haru gives him a wad of bills and it’s all the money he was saving up for his transfusions. Asahi hesitates at the sight of it. “Haru.”

“I don’t even know if that will be enough for everything,” Haru says, voice strained. “I don’t even know if you’ll make a profit.”
“Well, fuck that,” Asahi shakes his head. “I don’t care about that.” He takes the money with a pained look.

Haru nods and means it with everything he has. “Thank you.”

Asahi nods back, pocketing the money and taking a pull of his withered joint. He blows smoke before coughing, “Man, I don’t even know what I’m doing. There ain’t enough weed in the world for all this shit.”

Haru can do nothing but agree. Spiritedly. Then he says, “Nitori saw Rin without his shirt on.”

Asahi turns and looks positively murderous, so seriously offended that Haru can’t help but grin. Asahi sighs and fights his own smile in favor of trying to look pouty. “You’re the devil.” He brings the joint back to his lips and pauses. “You think Ai’s got pictures?”

Haru just rolls his eyes and Asahi finishes the blunt and stumbles after him back inside, where Nao grabs everyone’s attention by asking, “What about Ikuya?”

Haru glances at Nakagawa, but he is too out of it to remember his position as captain of the We Hate Natsuya and Everyone Involved with Him Except For Nao club.

“He’s probably already been forced into a gang,” Nii says, headphones now around her neck. She casts a cautious look at Nao. “You said Natsuya told you he ran away out of the blue. I doubt he brought enough money with him to buy drugs and start selling from there.”

Nii’s right. The way the gangs have set up the local drug industry is that there’s very few independent dealers, or people who don’t answer to a boss and keep all the profit for themselves. If Haru hasn’t been able to gain that status after all his gathered experience, then it’s doubtable Ikuya was able to manage such a title as an independent dealer right off the bat.

“They’re going to assume Ikuya’s giving them away to the police,” Nao says, rubbing at his temple where a headache has probably spiked to life. “They’re going to try to bail him out before the cops can talk to him.”

Nitori frowns from where he is scrubbing down his medical equipment over by the sink. “And then what?”

Nao falters, mouthing for the words he isn’t strong enough to say before someone speaks them for him.

“They’ll kill him.”

Nakagawa’s voice hits the air like a livewire but he calmly meets everyone’s wide eyes. “We should bail him out,” he says.

Nao’s expression darkens in a way it rarely ever does. “Why? So you can beat the hell out of him instead of Natsuya?”

“Dayum,” Asahi whispers.

“Shots fired,” Nii mumbles as Aki groans into her hands.
Haru tenses in preparation for the fight that’s about to break out in this shoebox apartment and vows that he’s going to guard Nitori’s prized duck figurines with his life because he deserves that much, given that this entire street is about to go up in flames because gang fights tend to get explosive and pretty creative.

Nakagawa leans back in his chair, crosses his arms and shrugs. “He’s just a kid. Not his fault Natsuya’s his brother.”

Asahi’s jaw drops. “Oh – *hooo, Nao!*” He and Haru scramble to get a hold on him but then Asahi tackles him and sits on his back.

“ASAHI GET OFF ME!”

Asahi’s too busy pressing down on Nao’s spine with a look of horror. “Bro, you’ve got some dark energy stuck in here. Let’s just do our breathing and align the chakras. Ai, you’ve still got that *Sounds of African Safari* CD, right?”

Nitori looks very out of place. “Um –”

“ASAHI.”

“ALIGNMENT, NAO.”

Aki’s on the verge of tears, she’s so overwhelmed, and she whips around toward the kitchen and screams, “God, you couldn’t leave this alone for five minutes of your life, Nakagawa?”

“No, he’s right.”

They all turn to Nao in astonishment.

Asahi numbly gets off him and he sits up only to look so pained as he admits, “I know you all blame Natsuya for – for what Miho made me do.”

Hearing someone finally say it out loud makes them all look away guiltily, but Nao doesn’t falter. “You all need to realize that Natsuya doesn’t even know about my eye. And he might’ve been the reason I lost it but that was *my choice,*” he stresses with a hand on his chest. “I knew what letting him go would mean for me and taking the heat was my choice, not his.”

“It’s the fact that he never spoke to you again that makes us hate him,” Nii says, voicing everyone’s whirlwind of thoughts in so little words.

Nao shrugs. “That was his choice.”

Nakagawa throws himself over the table and slams a fist down. “But you’re still in love with him and now you’re stuck with those feelings – *they’re* not a choice!”

Nao’s control explodes and he lashes out. “Would you have chosen to stop loving Kazuki if you knew what was going to happen to him?!”

The room is silent and frozen as Nakagawa’s eyes redden with unshed tears. “No,” he whispers.
“Then I can still love Natsuya even if he hates me.” And if a tear slips down Nao’s cheek, no one calls him out on it. “And I would go through what I did a million more times because it saved Nat’s life. You all saw him. You know he wasn’t going to make it much longer, he was – he was in too deep.”

He was, Haru remembers. There at the end, Natsuya was getting dopesick every few hours, forced to shoot up countless times a day due to his body’s unyielding demand for heroin. Haru had seen it before, lived through it before, but seeing Natsuya go through it didn’t even feel real because he was always so in control of everything, holding all the attention in a room without even trying. He was the golden boy, confident and firm in everything he did, unwavering up until it came to Nao.

He made him falter, made him have to hide a blush every time they spoke, and Haru remembers Natsuya coming to him and saying, “His eyes, god, Haru, have you seen his eyes?”

Natsuya and Nao kept most of their relationship private but they couldn’t hide the way they looked at each other or how their hands found each other without them even knowing it. What they had was just second nature to them, as easy as breathing, and it brought an ease to everyone around them.

Natsuya was only using heroin a few times a week, back then when things were good.

It never stays like that.

Soon he was calling Haru at three in the morning stuttering for an address where he could get his fix, he was puking every time he ate, lashing out at anyone who even looked at him.

To make things even more of a nightmare, Ikuya showed up – nine years old and running down the street in the middle of the night in tears, screaming for Natsuya, and Haru had dragged the boy back to his house kicking and screaming, where his mom answered the door and looked no better herself. She and Ikuya cried together and Haru just couldn’t understand how anyone could not want people who cared that much.

If there's anyone to blame for Natsuya leaving the streets then it's Haru, because he’s the one who told him about what happened with Ikuya. After that, Natsuya wanted out and nothing was going to stop him.

Nao helped him escape and Natsuya called them all deadbeats for not getting clean like he did, said they were killing people with the drugs they were selling – the drugs he had been selling barely a year before.

They can act like they hate him and they do, to an extent. But their anger is fueled by hurt, and that’s what has made it so strong.

“I’m sorry,” Nakagawa says, voice as hollow as his eyes.

Nao sniffs and nods in return. Then he looks up at Haru. “How much is Ikuya’s bail?”

“Fifteen grand.”

Asahi sounds like he just got kicked in the balls. “The fuck? The fuck?”

“We can pay it.”
Haru looks over at Nakagawa. “I might not like Natsuya that much anymore, but. Ikuya always looked up to you, Haru, and – and you and Rin paid my first bail when I was his age, so.” He looks away.

Haru nods and turns to Asahi as he snorts. “Kid better cough up those Pokémon cards he stole from me after all this shit.”

“You said it was porn magazines he stole from you,” Haru says flatly.


After another assessment of Rin’s injuries, Nao deems that he shouldn’t be moved for a while and Nitori says that Rin can stay with him.

“We’re staying too,” Nii proclaims, crossing her arms over her leather corset and raising her chin against Nitori’s visible hesitance. “Rin could’ve been followed and he’s in no state to protect the two of you.”

Nitori blushes, looking down to toe at the carpet. “I feel like a burden now.”

“Ai,” Nao calls from the kitchen table where he’s wrapping Nakagawa’s bruised knuckles. “You’re part of this family too. You always have been.”

Nitori sucks in a breath and his mouth wobbles before he blurts, “Okay, Nao-senpai!”

Haru checks the time on his phone and grimaces as he realizes he needs to pick up Gou from school, but before he can even stand up to leave Aki gently pushes him back down and says, “I’ll go get her.”

At Haru’s strained look she adds, “I’ll even take Asahi with me.” She squeezes his arm. “Just give yourself a breather, Haru. You deserve it.”

“We bringin’ her back here?” Asahi raises his brows at Rin’s cuts and bruises.

“She has to see him,” Haru says. “No matter what he looks like.”

“I am awake you know,” Rin muffles from the depths of the pillow mountain he’s buried under.

Haru just turns back to Aki. “She’ll need an overnight bag if she’s staying here tonight, so I’ll have to go home anyway. It’s really no big deal.”

“I’ll go,” Nii cuts in with a smug smirk. Haru opens his mouth and Nii arches a brow to silence him. “Haru, I’ve got about five knives and maybe an illegal firearm under this corset. I hope someone’s there waiting for me.”

Haru nods, convinced, and sits back while Asahi risks his life by asking her what else she’s got hidden under that corset.

He becomes restless quickly, shifting constantly, unable to fall asleep because of so many thoughts running through his head. Nitori takes note of this and says, “I can give you a list of things to go get
for Rin if that’ll make you go get some air, Haruka-senpai.”

Haru’s glare is weak but he takes the list and gets up anyway.

Just before he walks out the front door, he casts a glance back at the living room. Nii is throwing a pillow at Asahi’s head as Nao listens intently to Nakagawa mumbling with his hands fumbling in his lap and Aki’s laughing with Nitori at the sink while Rin falls back to sleep surrounded by the assurance that only these people can bring.

The sight of them reminds Haru that blood has never meant a thing to him – his mom and dad weren’t his family. And that house he grew up in was never his home.

These people are.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Explanations:

Clues about Kazuki Being the Dead Body - So before I posted this chapter I got a few people wondering who Sousuke found in the dumpster. Of course I was thrilled at this because I was so overjoyed that I didn’t make it obvious lol. However, I tried to leave a few clues along the way.

Let’s start with the beginning of Sousuke’s description of the body:

“Young adult male. Skinny. Long dark hair. Tan skin.”

[Chapter 3 Snippet] “I like to just get out of there, don’t like sticking around to talk about the weather or how particularly fuckable I’m looking that day,” Kazuki sighs, using the rear view to muse his long hair before he curls a grin at his reflection.

Kazuki has long hair. While Haru did not describe Kazuki’s hair as dark, I couldn’t just have Sousuke say “long hair,” because then there could be some assumption that the body is Nao, who has long hair if you’ve seen an official image of him. So I made sure to also describe Nao’s hair, which is lavender, not dark:

[Chapter 3 Snippet] Nao looks even worse because he’s got his lavender hair pulled back.

I also had Sousuke add that the skin was tan because Nao is pale, which further disregards the theory that the body could be his.

Sousuke also says the body is “skinny.”

So then I thought this was going to be too easy and ended up purposely throwing that in there to MAKE people think it was Nao, since Haru had previously described how thin he was:

“Haru hates to admit that he looks terrible – his clothes are hanging off his thin limbs, his cheeks are hollowed out and gaunt…”
So that was a line that was actually thought out and planned because I didn’t want to completely give the identity away, I wanted a little speculation. But remember, just because I said Nao was skinny doesn’t mean that Kazuki wasn’t ;)

HOWEVER, lol, I also had someone tell me they thought the body was Ikuya, who DOES have dark hair:

[Chapter 2 Snippet] He drags his mop of teal hair out of his face, where bruises are circling his tawny eyes.

But Ikuya was not described as having a bird tattoo on his arm, so he can be disregarded. True, I could have just not mentioned that he had a tattoo, but I specifically had Sousuke describe it:

“And a bird tattoo on his arm.”

Because it’s been mentioned before:

[Chapter 2 Snippet] “Kazuki.” The guy scratches the eagle tattoo over his forearm before taking a deep breath and standing up. He’s new to the top of the food chain…"

Kazuki has an eagle on his forearm. But what makes this particularly interesting is that Kazuki is scratching it – new tattoos itch, and Kazuki just recently got moved to the top of the food chain. While we know that a few members of Freebird have been revealed to have a bird tattoo, the gang markings will be given a further explanation as the story progresses.
Thank you for the beta, burlesquecomposer (tumblr | archive of our own) as well as saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter)

The incredible marinoxx on tumblr has done some breathtaking depictions of Haru and Rin! Go forth and help me give the praise they deserve! <3

WARNING - this first section is one of Makoto's war flashbacks. It's short but there's a brief description of a gruesome injury. You'll figure out what it is by reading the next section if you choose to skip the first one, but what caused the injury is specifically in the flashback. However, considering that you made it through that very dark and very detailed first chapter, I think I can say that I have quite a bit of faith in you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I want to know whoever broke you
I want to know how you can grow bigger
And don't go looking for some kind of rescue
You are the only one who can save you
We are more than our scars
We are more than the sum of our parts."
Mary Lambert - "Sum Of Our Parts"

The coast of Iraq had never been his target, but Makoto and his team had been theirs.

It’s at this enemy compound by the sea where they kill him even as his heart continues to beat, torturing him out of his own body until he’s devolved back into an animal hungry for blood and everything else Makoto wouldn’t want if he were still himself.

He tried to hold on by mentally reciting the street names of his neighborhood, anticipating what was happening in the new installment of that book series he and Ren love so much, remembering the way Ran hates scrambled eggs but never protests when Sousuke makes them for her because she knows he can’t cook anything else.

But by the end of his captivity, he can’t remember his mom’s face... or even his own.

Rescue does come but not before an explosion rocks the compound where Makoto is still imprisoned. Even to this day, he can still feel the vibrations of the bomb detonation rippling through...
his bones. The explosion forced the air to split and rush apart at a speed so powerful he thought it ripped his skin back and shredded his organs. The explosion blew out his left eardrum and would later force him to spend the rest of his life trying to find a new center of balance.

Makoto won’t remember how it felt to have his body crushed under the roof of the cell block when it collapsed into fiery wreckage and sent down a beam that went through the floor like his leg hadn’t been in the way. Shock will take away the memory of how it felt to have his limb trapped and how the split wood drove into his leg to turn it inside out, his skin going up in smoke to expose muscles and burn them until they seemed as if they were liquefied.

All Makoto will have nightmares about is the one thought that tore through what was left of his mind.

*How bad do you want to live?*

Being a teacher has made him happier than he’s been in a long time, but he can’t help but feel relieved as the final bell of the day blares to life – his heart still quietly races at the sound but he’s got other things to worry about right now.

Makoto’s smiles are sincere as he responds to the goodbyes his students shout at him while they race out the door, too fast and too loud. He just lets out a sigh because growing up with the twins has taught him that there’s no making kids calm down when Friday afternoon rolls around. Besides, he doesn’t have the mobility to chase anyone at the moment.

As if his right leg has a mind of its own, heat flares through his thigh in a fiery spiral, bottoming out at his knee only to spin back up through his muscles and make them spasm. Makoto’s forced to bite the inside of his cheek but he keeps smiling and remains standing until the last kid stumbles out the door – only then does he ease down into his chair and the relief of taking the weight off hurts so good that he almost lets his eyes fall shut before he notices someone at the back of the room.

Gou is still at her desk, appearing to have not even noticed the commotion of the end of the day or Makoto’s distress (thankfully). Her eyes are vacantly tracing the grooves and dips in her wooden desk and she looks very tired, hunched over with her chin meshed against her fist.

Makoto stiffens, not sure what to do. His natural instinct is to approach her and find out what’s wrong, see if he can do anything to help, but after that intense conversation with -

His face is heating at the mere thought of who, and Makoto considers propelling himself out the nearest window because this poor child before him is obviously in a crisis, therefore this is *not* the proper time to be having these kinds of bodily reactions about her… whatever Haru is to her.

Makoto’s a professional. He can do this.

But then he recalls the actual conversation that was had instead of just the quality of the voice that spoke one end of it, and he tenses because he’s now realizing that he and Gou are alone in the room and this was the flashing neon sign of situations that should *not* be blazing to life.

Crap, should he leave?

Makoto takes another look at her and decides no, he can’t bring himself to do that when she looks
this upset. Then he tries to calculate the probability of how bad things are going to go if she’s alone with him versus if she’s alone by herself.

The results aren’t good, but then again Rei’s always viewed Mako’s math skills with thinly-veiled pity, so maybe he’s wrong.

He still doesn’t know what to do but he really wants to call his mom. Or Ran? How would Sousuke handle this situation?

Makoto almost snorts because Sousuke would’ve already loomed the hell out of the room like the shadow of a hulking, socially anxious ghost, which would expose just how awkward he is under that intimidating exterior. And maybe make Makoto laugh. Like, really hard. And then they’d end up brawling because Sousuke’s also really sensitive and Makoto stopped pretending a long time ago that he doesn’t use that information as blackmail for movie tickets and extra fries and maybe even his own evil amusement because Sousuke makes way too big of a deal about it to convince him that he isn’t more sensitive than a landmine.

He makes the decision to rise from his seat, as painful as it is, and cautiously make his way down the farthest row of desks, which is nearest to the wall and corners him to give her more space and also allow clear view of the open door. He makes enough noise moving around so he won’t startle her too much when he softly calls, “Gou?”

She doesn’t even look up, continuing to dig her nail into a dip in the desk like she didn’t even hear him.

Okay been there, done that – he’s got a sister, he knows when he’s being ignored versus when he hasn’t been heard. But nonetheless, his voice is just as kind as he asks, “Are you all right?”

Gou’s hand stops moving across the wood and she stills. Then her fingers curl into a fist and her brows crease into a discouraged expression.

Makoto waits with the type of patience that is gained only through living with younger children until she caves in and looks over at him. “I just think I’m broke.”

The writhing of his leg muscles is nowhere near as painful as the ache that is brought to his heart by her words. He sits down in the desk he was previously leaning against so he won’t be standing over her. “I feel broken too, sometimes,” he admits.

Her eyes widen in disbelief. “Really?”

Makoto quirks a smile and nods. “Mmhmm. Everyone does.”

Gou’s eyes turn down at that and she shakes her head in frustration, lifting her legs to wrap her arms around her knees and hug them against her chest. “Not like that kind of broken. I think I’m different.” She tightens her embrace around her calves anxiously but her eyes are glaring down at her desk. “Like a broke kind of broken.”

Makoto shakes his head as gently as he can muster. “I don’t understand Gou, I’m sorry. Can you try to explain it a little more?”

Gou hesitates, eyes darting to him before she worries at her lip and looks away. Makoto grimaces, thinking he’s blown it, but then her voice silences that worry. “I’m scared of things I shouldn’t be.
I’m –”

Her breath catches and she lets it out in an explosive sigh. “God, it’s so stupid, I’m just acting like a baby.”

Makoto is about to deny that before she speaks over him, her voice a rush and snap of bitterness. “Minako wanted me to come to her birthday sleepover tonight and it’s not that I don’t – I really, really want to go.” She rubs angrily at her eyes as Makoto briefly recalls the face of the student she’s talking about – sits in the desk in front of Gou, wears so much cotton candy perfume that Nagisa’s ready to start wearing a gas mask at school. “And it’s like, a really big deal. Everyone’s gonna get to wear a white tee shirt and they’re gonna fill balloons with paint to turn them into splatter shirts and everything.”

Makoto adjusts his hearing aid because he doesn’t think he heard her right, but his silence causes Gou to raise her eyebrows at him like he’s stupid for not understanding how incredible the aspect of staining tee shirts and possibly getting hit in the face with a flying object is, so he switches out his confused frown to nod earnestly before she continues. “Her birthday parties are a big deal. Everyone’s gonna be there, even – even all the parents.”

At her falter, Makoto thinks he’s figured out the real problem because he’s under the assumption that Gou’s parents aren’t as responsible or present as they’re supposed to be, given that the impossible task of raising a child seems to have been forced onto Rin and Haru. That situation might be odd to Makoto and probably the rest of the students and parents as well, but Haru’s already proved that he and Rin are trying, which is more than enough for Makoto to accept it.

But then Gou says, “I really, really want to go but I had to tell her I didn’t feel good and couldn’t come. But it’s not because I’m sick. It’s –” And she looks mad at herself about this, like this is her fault. “It’s cause I don’t like being around my friends’ dads.”

He’s very careful to keep his expression blank, but her words bring him such grief, defeating him to the point that he just wants to curl up and never again face a world where kids are going through what she means – what Haru implied.

And those implications bring him an anger that might be worse than what he felt during his time in captivity because if he ever found out someone did that to Ran, there would be no one in the world able to stop Makoto and Sousuke from coming after them and –

He takes a deep breath and shakes those thoughts from his head before he realizes there’s only one thing he can say to relate to Gou’s situation.

He doesn’t talk about this with anyone, not even Nagisa. Sousuke knows to an extent but never asks to know further, though he’d listen if Makoto ever gained the courage to speak on it. Makoto’s refrained from that because he knows Sousuke blames himself for their team getting captured and his eyes fill with shame every time Makoto’s tried to discuss it or insist that he’s never blamed him for what happened.

He’s tried to tell Sousuke that he had been one of his only hopes in captivity because Makoto knew he was the strongest out of all of them and he was going to make it even if no one else did. That had brought him peace, for a time – an assurance that Sousuke would take care of his family, their family.
But Sousuke’s never fully convinced and it’s heartbreaking to realize that he might carry the weight of guilt the rest of his life, but more than that it’s so frustrating because while he might’ve been the leader of their team, he’s forgetting that Makoto and the rest of them knew what could happen if they went with him that night and they did it anyway.

It wasn’t because they thought Sousuke could keep them alive – it was because they had been hit with the realization that they were all probably going to die out there and decided that if it had to happen, then they were going down as Sousuke’s team and no one else’s.

Even if Sousuke didn’t blame himself, Makoto would still be hesitant to vent because in all honesty, both of them are cautious to really get into what happened in the war. Conferring it hardly ever makes them feel liberated since there’s few people who can understand and not look at them differently after they’ve described the experience, whether it be through the monotone report summary or the uncut version, which sends all those paper descriptions to the butcher block and makes people look at Makoto and Sousuke like they’ve just been chopped to bits right before their eyes, like they’re ruined, pulverized, broken.

Therefore, they usually don’t take that gamble and just let the grief build up inside, which is exactly what they were told to never do, but Sousuke’s done it his whole life and Makoto just can’t take those mixed looks of morbid fascination and overbearing pity anymore.

But Gou just told him she knows what it’s like to be scared of things other people aren’t. The thing he’s most afraid of is so pathetic that the fear is unbelievable in comparison to all the things he should be scared of after going through what he did, but if there’s anyone he’d ever tell this closely-guarded secret to, he wants it to be someone who needs to hear it.

So he says it. “I’m scared of the ocean.”

Gou’s brows jump before they crease in confusion. “You mean drowning?”

Makoto clears his throat against the panic swelling there and he shrugs with a wince. “Well that too, but just the ocean in general. I don’t, um. Don’t really like it.”

Gou leans forward with an expression of bewilderment, the sadness momentarily gone from her eyes. “But the ocean is so pretty! And the beach is so much fun!”

Makoto tips his head with a sad smile. “It is for a lot of people, yeah. But not me.”

Her voice is gravely serious. “I’m sorry.”

Makoto laughs and shakes his head. “It’s all right.” He hesitates, wringing his hands together under the cover of the desk. “It does kind of bother me sometimes. But that doesn’t mean I have to think that I’m broken.”

Even though he does, he can’t let her or anyone else know that.

Makoto’s good at faking smiles and even better at sounding convincing, for Gou nods her head, trusting his word. “And you shouldn’t be ashamed of anything you feel,” Makoto says in all honesty. “Even if it’s being scared.”

Gou nods again and there’s guilt in her tone. “Hayato said he wasn’t gonna go to the party if I didn’t. I feel bad even though he said he’s too cool to go anyway.”
Makoto chuckles at that before the sound fades into hesitant silence. “Have you ever met his brother? Mr. Shigino?”

Gou grins for the first time since the start of the conversation. “Uh-huh. Hayato bought me this stuffed walrus for Valentine’s Day last year and he made Kisumi pay for it.” Makoto resists raising his brows in surprise because he didn’t think she’d already be comfortable enough to call Kisumi by his first name. “Kisumi said he was so sorry, that was the most unromantic gift he had ever seen in his life but he didn’t have a choice.” She shrugs. “He’s a drama queen. I like him.”

Makoto says, “Did you know he works here at the school?”

Gou makes a face. “Yeah, but I don’t really know what for.”

“He talks to people. That’s it.” He’s not discrediting Kisumi, of course being a councilor is so much more than that, but he doesn’t want to overwhelm Gou. The job description needs to be as simple as possible. “Students come to him and talk about their grades or what’s going on at home. Maybe even things that are bothering them.”

He tries to not give her a pointed look but she appears to notice it anyway. “You want me to talk to him about…”

Makoto shakes his head, voice soft but his words firm. “No, I want you to do whatever you want. I’m just letting you know that Mr. Shigino has probably talked to other kids about this kind of thing.”

Gou blinks. “Other kids?”

Makoto nods. “Yes. Everyone is scared of something.” He cracks a smile. “And there’s only so many somethings out there. You’re not alone.”

Her face lights with a surprise that fades to a cautious hope. She looks back down at her desk in deep thought before she shrugs. “Okay. When?”

“It would have to be next week,” he guesses. “But you can take the weekend to decide if you still want to talk to him or not. The choice is up to you.” He makes sure to stress that. “No one’s going to be upset if you don’t want to.”

Gou is surprised at that, but she relaxes a little more and nods with a tiny smile. “Okay. I’ll think about it.”

She gathers her things and is almost out the door when she turns around and looks at Makoto. “Haru told me the ocean saved him one time,” she says. “I don’t know what he meant but maybe it can save you too one day.”

Makoto breathes a laugh. “Maybe you’re right. Have a good weekend, Gou.”

“You too, Mr. Tachibana.”

Sousuke’s on his fourth cup of syrupy instant coffee and the taste is so bad that it makes him question his own existence, but he hasn’t even been home since finding that body yesterday (it’s now a crisp 4:00 a.m.), so he’s going to have to deal with it and remind himself that it isn’t the coffee he drank as
a soldier, which made Makoto dry heave and made Sousuke consider saving gunpowder by exchanging it for those coffee grounds because there was no way that shit wasn’t flammable.

Seijuro tried to get him to take the day off, given the nightmare that was yesterday, but he’s never been one for that kind of thing (“You mean taking care of yourself,” Makoto would say before Sousuke throws something at him).

So here he is, back straining as he hunches over a wooden bench that trembles so much under his weight that it’s almost offending, his thermos in his hand and filled with the liquid form of bad life decisions, his face throbbing under his stitches, and his eyes watching the interrogation room through the trick wall.

If looks could speak, the glare that the boy inside is sporting would rupture the mirror with its screaming ferocity. At the other end of the table sits Corro, whose gaze is focused on the paperwork he’s idly flipping through before he drawls, “There must be something pretty nasty stuck in my teeth for you to be looking at me like that, kid.”

“Don’t call me that,” the boy hisses, clenched fists hidden by the long sleeves of his jacket, which is weathered and a few sizes too big for him – probably a hand-me-down.

Corro lifts a dark brow and looks up slowly, voice curious. “All right then. What would you like to be called?”

The boy grits in silence and Corro nods with a disappointed sigh. “Thought so.” He leans back in his chair, crosses his arms and ankles. He watches the boy for a while before his expression softens. “Look, I get it.” He shrugs at the boy's glare of confusion. “You’re scared.”

“I’m not –”

“And I would be too,” Corro rushes to assure. “If I’d found out my friend was dead.”

The boy is quick to pull his bottom lip in before it can start to tremble. He glares down at the floor, offering no response, which Corro seems to have been expecting. He leans forward, hulking forearms spread over the table in a gesture of openness. “I want to help you,” he says with a warmth that Sousuke can hear even through the crackling speaker. “I want to make sure these people never hurt anyone else. And I definitely don’t want them walking around in the same city where my kids live.”

The boy timidly looks up. Corro smiles then, and Sousuke’s hand tightens around his thermos before he hears him say, “And I definitely don’t want these people to kill any more of your friends, Ikuya.”

The boy flinches in shock and Corro grimaces with a tight smile. “Sorry, I lied.” He sighs and pats the files under his hand. “You ran away from home a few years ago – you already had a file here. One of the deputies recognized you.”

Ikuya’s cheeks flush red with anger but chill bumps rise over his calves, which are exposed under the frayed edges of his shorts that are also too big for him.

“And someone killed your buddy, Mr. Kirishima.” He lets out a remorseful noise that makes Sousuke’s jaw clench. “Stabbed him to death, specifically. Stabbed him –” He peeks into another folder on the table. “Fifteen times, to be exact. Passionate crime.”
Ikuya looks as sick as Sousuke feels but Corro remains insistent. “I don’t want that to happen to you, son.” Then he hesitates, drawing a nervous look out of Ikuya. “But it might. I can’t prevent it from happening if you don’t help me connect some dots and tell me how you and your friend knew each other.”

Exhaustion thickens Ikuya’s voice. “I already told you that he knew my brother.”

Corro sighs through his teeth with a wince. “But your brother isn’t here, Ikuya. And neither is your friend.”

Sousuke’s headache digs deeper into his skull as his anger intensifies. Ikuya doesn’t say anything further and Corro shakes his head and shrugs. “All right.” His smile is one of strained patience. “I’ll give you a break.”

He rises from his seat and gathers his papers to leave, which makes Ikuya sag in his chair, but then Corro pauses at the door and says, “I at least hope your brother will be able to protect you out there, since he couldn’t protect the other guy.”

“…Kazuki.”

Corro pauses and looks up from the doorknob.

The expanse of the boy’s face is covered by the fall of his thick hair but his mouth is twisted into a snarl that breaks apart on a gasp – he’s trying not to cry. Sousuke can’t believe he’s held up as long as he has, honestly.

“Beg your pardon?” Corro says.

Sousuke jumps (too much coffee) when Ikuya slams his fist down on the table and shouts, “My friend’s name was Kazuki! And he was nice, and –” His breath hitches. “And good and he was a person! He messed with his hair too much and he wore stupid band shirts! And the only thing he told me that night was that his boyfriend was still a pain in the ass but he was gonna marry him and if there’s anyone that should have been there for Kazuki then it’s you.”

Corro chuckles. “You’ll learn, son. You’ll learn that kids like you don’t stand a chance without our help.” He gives Ikuya’s cuts and scrapes a once over and snorts. “You’re all too busy trying to kill each other to see that. It’s your choice to be different.”

Corro leaves the boy stunned, eyes wide on the closed door, and Sousuke looks away with a tight chest and slips into the hallway, where he finds himself numbly moving through the building towards one specific place.

He pushes the office door open without ceremony to find Seijuro in the familiar position of hunching over his desk. “You could knock every once in a while,” he says, the dry tone of his voice indicating that he knows his words are useless to change anything, but like Sousuke opening his door without knocking, he says it out of habit.

Echo’s curled up in a worn doggie bed Sei keeps in his office specifically for times when she’s unable to go with Sousuke on certain assignments because he’s got a heart of gold that was revealed when Sousuke admitted she does nothing but cry when she’s left at home alone. After that, the doggie bed and too many bacon-flavored treats became Seijuro’s thing.
Echo’s pulled out one of Seijuro’s enormous neon tennis shoes from his gym bag without his knowledge, it seems. She’s gnawing on the heel, not with the intention of tearing it to shreds but to curb her anxiousness, which appears to only heighten when she notices Sousuke.

He discreetly kicks the shoe back into the bag, thankful that Seijuro doesn’t think he’s worth acknowledging by looking up from his computer screen. Sousuke flops down in one of the chairs at the front of the desk and Echo rushes over to sniff his clothes, looking for rips, tears - entry and exit wounds. She nudges at Sousuke's right arm as if she can sense the pain in his shoulder that’s deepened from lack of rest. He hushes her whines with a brush of his hand down her neck, and while that does seem to calm her, she still sits down right on top of his feet and cuts him a stern look that makes him to grin because she’s about had it with him sneaking off when she isn’t looking.

Seijuro leans back to stretch and the pop of his bunched bones makes both him and Sousuke grimace. He pulls out his phone and scoffs. “Sousuke, what time did we clock in yesterday morning?”

“Ten.”

“We’ve been on the clock for eighteen fucking hours.”

“I thought it had only been fifteen.” His voice is a sarcastic drawl that makes Seijuro roll his eyes and smirk tiredly.

Their earlier argument at the crime scene has been all but forgotten and forgiven, despite that they both still feel guilty about it. They let stress get to them in front of a lot of people they shouldn’t have, but Sei’s got an ease about himself and his actions that helps Sousuke just say fuck it.

He rubs his aching eyes closed. He’s gone far longer than this without sleep, but that was during captivity and he doesn’t even know where he pulled that kind of endurance from because he definitely doesn’t have it now. He pinches his fingers together at the bridge of his nose and lets out a deep sigh, burning with an anger that he doesn’t understand. “Corro let the kid have it.”

Seijuro’s voice is stretched out by a yawn. “Are you that surprised?”

“He made the kid think all he wanted was justice for the guy in the dumpster but he was really wanting him to confess that they were in the same gang.”

Echo peers back at him when she notes the growl tucked in the back of his throat and he smooths his hand over her ears in apology.

Seijuro crosses his arms with a shrug. “Kid’s an easy target. Had to try and get some information out of him since Corro doesn’t have the balls to be questioning either of the yakuza any time soon.”

Sousuke’s fingers pause in Echo’s silky fur. “They’re both still alive?”

“Yeah,” Sei confirms, sounding just as surprised. “Even the one that got jumped. I told you the cut across his throat was shallow.” He scowls in annoyance at him, which just makes Sousuke throw a gum wrapper at him before throwing him an actual piece. Seijuro chews, “Bastard wouldn’t have made it if Momo hadn’t acted so fast though.” He beams, radiating a pride that Sousuke can’t help but feel inside his own chest.

Finding neither gun nor suspect at the source of gunfire had been discouraging, but coming back to
the ambulance to find Momo on the ground over the yakuza with a bloody towel pressed against his throat didn’t even seem real. “Is Momotarou okay?” Sousuke asks with genuine concern.

Seijuro nods, dragging his hair back from where it drooped after the gel softened. “Yeah. He’s just glad the guy made it.” He and Sousuke share a look because they both know that kind of innocence doesn’t last long in this line of work. “Ai was more upset about the whole thing than he was.”

“Who?”

“His boyfriend.” Sei snorts. “We’re all lucky that Momo was at least smart enough to take the day off and calm him down. Ai’s shy but he’s the kind of quiet person that can tear up the town if he gets pissed enough.”

Sousuke remains silent as the guilt festers deeper inside him.

He startles when Seijuro groans and throws his gum wrapper at Sousuke’s head. “Yamazaki, don’t even. Momo is okay – give him some credit.” Sousuke’s tentativeness must show on his face because he adds, “Or if you don’t believe me then trust that between you, me, and Ai, we’re not going to let this get the best of him.”

Sousuke nods – that much he can accept. His eyes fall to the paperwork scattered over the expanse of the desk. “What’ve you got?”

There’s a shift in Seijuro’s expression and his brows crease over his narrowed eyes. His nostrils flare on an exhale and he holds up a thin folder before slapping it down with a shake of his head. “That’s all we’re gonna get on the dumpster body. Should’ve remembered there’s no good calls at three in the morning.”

“What?”

“I just got a call saying that there was going to be an autopsy,” Seijuro says, “But now they’re telling me that the cause of death is obvious and further procedure is un-motherfucking-necessary.”

Sousuke goes very still, his voice quiet and slow with a disbelief that’s quickly reaching something explosive. “They’re not going to do an autopsy on a murder victim?”

“It made sense to me too for a second – whoa, down boy, let me finish.” At Sousuke’s look of outrage Seijuro offers up a larger file, thicker with more papers, as a peace offering. “But then I read this and shit stopped making sense to me.”

Sousuke takes the report and his straining eyes dart left to right down the expanse of the opening page. “These are arrest records. For…?”

“At the bottom, big guy.”

He feels himself sinking a few inches lower in his chair. “Kazuki Minami.”

“That guy was a scrapper. He might’ve been scrawny but it looks like he always had something up his sleeve. All of those records are from street fights – all of which he came out looking better than the other guy.”

Sei leans over the desk to turn a few pages and point at a specific summary. “Look, look at this shit.
He had two handguns drawn on him by another yakuza and he managed to get both of them out of the guy’s hand.” He thunks Sousuke in the forehead for emphasis, making him glare and Echo growl.

Seijuro jerks his hand back with a wince of apology before he sits back down and refocuses. “I just don’t get how someone like that could be cornered. Especially if he’s got that kind of resume and he might be in a gang like Freebird.”

Sousuke closes the folder and flops it back on top of the other mountain of papers. “So what’re you saying?”

“I’m saying that I felt like something was handicapping the guy. Had him off his A game.” At Sousuke’s look of confusion he hands him the thinner file and he opens it to recognize it as an evidence report. “I looked at his confiscated bag,” Seijuro explains. “I saw these, like… little blue strips the investigators had deemed as dental strips. But they weren’t in packs, Sousuke.”

“This says the kid had crack on him. You think he was dealing the strips as some kind of synthetic?” He thinks back to how the rentboy was able to speak coherently and doubts that it was knock-off LSD strips.

“I don’t know,” Seijuro admits and his fingers tighten on his arms where he’s got them crossed. “But I told the lady something wasn’t adding up and she told me that she didn’t have the funding to test them, at least not this month.”

“The fuck – the fucking funding?”

“Apparently this month’s budget all went to weaponry,” Seijuro says mockingly with a bob of his head and raised brows. “So they can’t even test the strips unless we somehow find a massive quantity that can prove it’s a street drug and a big problem. But I already know it’s a big problem. How, you ask?”

Sousuke didn’t ask how, but Seijuro’s pleased smirk makes him think that doesn’t even matter because he’s just as sly in passing him another folder. “I looked at what had been confiscated from the yakuza who got his throat ripped out in the car crash.”

Sousuke’s eyes widen on the printed words. “He had strips in his pocket.”

Seijuro nods smugly. “And you won’t believe what I saw when I went to the morgue and looked at Kazuki.”

Sousuke’s consumed by the memory of recklessly moving his hands up into maroon hair, losing his fingers in the strands until they were trapped, soft lips opening for him so he could slide wetly against the tongue inside where he tasted the metal of a barbell as the rentboy pushed him harder against the wall and kissed him deeper, god, that tongue, that blue tongue.

“Kazuki’s tongue was blue,” Seijuro says. “And I don’t have to take a trip to the hospital to see that the yakuza’s tongue isn’t.”

Sousuke averts his gaze, holding his breath, turning away.

“What is it?”
He refuses to meet Sei’s eyes because he knows he can’t lie but he can’t look at him either. “I’m not going to put it on you to keep secrets.”

It’s suddenly too quiet in the room, for Seijuro’s sharp intake of breath is even louder than the thrum of Sousuke’s accelerated pulse – he’s almost scared it can be heard it’s so loud.

“This is about the rentboy. Isn’t it, Sousuke?”

Sousuke doesn’t say anything but he doesn’t have to. He looks up to see a thousand emotions flashing in Seijuro’s eyes before he rises from his chair and Sousuke jerks (too much coffee) when he hears the lock on the door click shut.

Sei sits down in the chair next to Sousuke instead of the one behind his desk, and he pulls it closer to face him and lean forward with his elbows braced on his knees. His gaze is intense but his voice is struggling. “You swore under oath, and vow, and everything we stand for, that he got away. You told me that he got away.”

Sousuke meets his wide eyes. “Not in the way you think he did.”

He stares. “You let him go.”

Sousuke is quiet.

Seijuro closes his hands over his face and scoffs against his palms, shaking his head in disbelief. “Sousuke, why?” He sounds more pained than anything.

“Because I knew I couldn’t help him as a cop.”

He gestures angrily, “What the fuck does that even mean?!?”

“You know what it means,” Sousuke snaps. “You know it.”

Seijuro’s expression twitches, almost faltering.

“And I let him go because he knew too.”

Sei looks at him for a long moment before he works his jaw and turns away, face twisting in defeat. His voice is hollow. “So now you’re going to make me choose if I want to be a cop or if I want to help people.”

Sousuke doesn’t know what else to do other than reach over to squeeze his shoulder in apology, in shame, in confusion because he doesn’t know what to do either.

“I know what my mom would do,” Seijuro mumbles.

Sousuke follows his gaze to a rusty brass picture frame on the corner of his desk, where a muscular woman in a police uniform looks back at him with her mouth curled more into a smirk than a smile. She’s got fierce gold eyes and her son’s confident posture, and she stands tall in the way that only people who are deeply loved stand – like someone’s made them think they can take on the world.

Seijuro wipes a shaking hand over his mouth before he chuckles. “She’d call me a dumbass, first of all, for even letting you tell me this.” His laughter fades and his eyes harden with resolve on the
picture. “But then she’d tell me to do what’s right as a person.”

He smirks at Sousuke’s look of puzzlement and adds, “She always made sure to tell me that – don’t ever forget you’re a person. Just like them.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out in a whoosh before shrugging hopelessly. “All right. I’m ready. Tell me.”

At Sousuke’s reluctance he quietly says, “I’m with you, Sousuke. I’m not going to tell. I’m in this too.” He’s accepting of the realization there’s no going back now.

Sousuke nods because he trusts him without even having to think about it. “The rentboy had a blue tongue too.”

Seijuro is a professional once more, eyes narrowing as his mind slowly weaves into the same line of thought as Sousuke’s. “So let’s say it is a drug. Then both Kazuki and the rentboy were targeted by the two yakuza.”

“It has to be a drug,” Sousuke insists, holding up Kazuki’s thick file for emphasis. “I can believe they were able to hold him down for a second and shove a strip in his mouth but I can’t believe they could take him down completely without handicapping him in some way. And the rentboy wasn’t messing around either – I’m almost positive he wrecked that SUV when he came out of the effects.”

“Well what are the effects, then?” Seijuro asks. “Because they’re not looking too good if they’re able to throw off two guys like this.”

Sousuke thinks hard before he stills.

“Oh god, what now?”

“The boy that got arrested. Ikuya.”

Sei leans forward, eyes more awake now. “You think he knows what the drug does? That he might be a dealer?”

“He looks like the type.”

Seijuro checks the time on his phone again and rises from his seat with purpose. “They’ve probably put him back in holding – come on, Akira’s on shift right now, I can get us back there without grabbing too much attention.”

Sousuke slowly raises his brows at him.

“We’re literally going fucking rogue Sousuke, I think slutting out for a few minutes is really the last ethical decision I’m worried about right now.”

“True.”

Ikuya’s got his back pressed against the wall of the cell and he’s dragged the hood of his jacket over his head, where his quick breathing is muffled by the confinements of the fabric.

Sousuke raps his fingers against the cold bars and Ikuya yanks his hood back to glare with bloodshot
eyes and damp cheeks. “Leave me alone!”

“Ah, hell,” Seijuro sighs. “Here we go.”

Sousuke eases down into a crouch so he’s level with the boy and his voice is quiet, rushed. “I don’t care how you knew Kazuki – I knew he was your friend and you cared about him. I don’t give a shit about anything else.”

Ikuya startles and Seijuro arches a brow at Sousuke.

“We think he was drugged,” Sousuke tells Ikuya. “I need to know if you know what this drug was.” Before Ikuya can snap a retort he speaks over him in a firm voice. “I’m not going to ask if you’ve ever used it – I’m not even going to ask how you know what it does.” His fingers circle one of the bars tightly. “I just need to know what it does. That’s all.”

Ikuya’s knees press tighter against his chest as he backs up farther against the wall. “You don’t sound like the other guy.”

Seijuro snorts. “Yeah, I feel like we’re gonna get a lot of that shit pretty soon.”

Sousuke waves away Ikuya’s look of confusion and focuses him. “The drug looks like dental strips, turns a person’s tongue blue. Do you know anything about that?”

Seijuro knocks his knee discreetly against Sousuke’s back when Ikuya’s brows jump the barest inch. “No,” he lies.

Sousuke hunches forward, straining. “I want justice for your friend. And if this drug had anything to do with him getting killed then I want it out of the city,” Ikuya hesitates and Sousuke vows, “I promise I will find a way to stop this from happening again if you just – just help me.”

Seijuro nods in agreement at his words and Ikuya inhales sharply. He bites his lip. “Kazuki called it relay,” he whispers.

Sousuke’s heart jumps like it hasn’t in a long time. “Did he know what the effects are?”

“He said he had found out it worked in four stages but he didn’t know anything else.”

“That’s more than enough,” Sei says, vigorously patting Sousuke on the back with an exuberance he thought was lost. “We got a name, we can go from there.”

He rises from his crouch and Sei’s already headed down the hallway but Sousuke pauses. “Thank you,” he mumbles. “I’m sorry about. About him. But I’m going to do something about it, I promise.”

“You better,” Ikuya replies. His eyes are pleading, a contrast to the forced sharpness of his tone.

Sousuke nods either way, and follows after Seijuro.

He had dropped his eyes to the floor in thought and runs into Seijuro’s back, which he thought was a brick fucking wall before he dragged him behind a tall filing cabinet. “Look, someone just paid his bail,” he whispers.

Sousuke blinks, remembering the absurd amount of money Ikuya’s bail had been deemed.
He and Seijuro share a look and a nod before they discreetly follow after Ikuya and the cop that’s escorting him to the front of the building. They hang back once they get into the open area of the waiting room and Sousuke searches the rows of empty chairs and barren floor before he notices a redheaded boy round the corner.

The cop unlocks Ikuya’s cuffs and the boy approaches him for what Sousuke assumes will be a hug, but it turns out to be a sharp slap to the back of the head.

Ikuya stumbles and rears back to bare his teeth like a perturbed kitten and give a squeaky roar but its cut short by the redhead’s crushing embrace.

“DUMB ASAHI!” Ikuya kicks feebly at his legs, practically writhing with horror. “Let me – ugh, you’re so embarrassing!”

“Stupid Ikuya,” Asahi responds in kind, pulling away only to smack him in the head once more with an added tug to his long hair. “Look at this mess, my god Nao’s going to be horrified, he’s gonna blame this shit on me, I know it. I mean he’s probably right, but –”

“What?” Ikuya whispers. His eyes are wide and round, very young. He folds his hands together and brings them to his chest in an anxious, hopeful gesture. “Nao’s here?”

“Not here, no. Trust me, that guy has been clucking and scratching like a rabid mother hen over your ass. We’re gonna take you to him, he just had, um. He didn’t want to startle you or anything.”

“What would he…?”

“He just looks – different is all,” Asahi says with a vague shrug. “Plus he had to stay behind for Rin. He’s seen better days but he’s gonna be cool. Oh, here.” He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper, grimacing at the wrinkles. “Gou drew you a card. Said she missed you.” He clears his throat. “For whatever reason.” He crosses his arms stubbornly and looks away.

Ikuya’s stunned to tears at the card but he quickly blinks them away. “You’re here by yourself then.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Sousuke looks up when another boy rounds the corner, looking down as he zips up an empty duffel bag to hang the strap off his shoulder.

Ikuya gasps. “Haru!”

Haru looks up and there’s almost a smile poised on his lips before his eyes cut to Sousuke and everything freezes.

All Sousuke can hear is the rush of blood in his ears and he’s drowning in the sound. He’s seeing flashes of every body he fucked into trying to forget the night that changed everything about himself, about the world, and he tastes every drop of vodka he poured down his throat with the hope that the next bottle would kill him so he’d never again have to think about the blue eyes he’s staring into right now.

Those eyes are the same, but there are other things about him that have changed. He’s gained weight – muscle. His biceps are round under his shirt and his chest is strong under his denim vest - his
clothes were stained and torn the last time Sousuke saw him. His face is still pale but his cheeks are no longer gaunt, and his hair is too long like it was before but now it’s silky clean.

Sousuke distantly notices Asahi eyeing him anxiously. The boy nudges Haru in the shoulder with the quiet mumble of, “C’mon Haru, let’s get out of here.” He sends another tense look to Sousuke but Haru remains where he is, the tense set of his shoulders making Asahi’s tighten as well.

Haru is not scared of Sousuke – that is different as well. He’s poised with the deathly calm of a snake, ready to take the enemy with his fangs and not let go until there’s no longer a threat.

Seijuro’s hand lands on Sousuke’s arm. “What is it?”

He shakes his head dazedly, not because there's nothing wrong, but because he doesn’t think any of this is even real. He’s probably hallucinating from lack of sleep, he’s just poured so many emotions over killing the kid in front of him that his guilt has manifested him right here, making Sousuke face his actions.

“Nothing, it’s – it’s nothing.”

Haru doesn’t relax in the slightest, at least until Asahi tugs more insistently at his arm and guides him to the door, and when Sousuke doesn’t chase after him, Haru’s eyes finally widen in disbelief, as much disbelief as Sousuke feels himself, and Haru follows Asahi out with Ikuya scrambling behind them.

The door slips closed and the echoing sound lets Sousuke know that this is all too real.

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Even hours later, Haru is still reeling from seeing him again, so much so that he can barely comprehend the text message flashing across his phone screen.

*i don’t know how i’m gonna lie 2 rin about where u are*
Haru levels himself and responds to Asahi’s text, *I know you can do it.*

He startles when another glass sails through the air and explodes against the wall, followed by an enraged scream that makes him glance up at the chandelier to listen to the crystals chime in the wake of Miho’s fury.

He winces at a strange, crunching sound and turns back around to the expanse of the kitchen, where Miho walks over the glass shards without even flinching, catching them in the hem of her silk robe, under her bare feet. Her breathing picks up before it rips into a snarl and another glass meets its end against the floor.

Haru warily looks over at the nearby living room, where two housekeepers are wiping cloths across the windows and sending him pitying looks, to which he responds with a sad smile.

Miho pours herself another glass of wine, the dark red liquid sloshing over the lip of the gauntlet to drip down her robe. Miho ignores the mess to blot at her flushed cheeks with the backs of her wrists and takes a long sip of her drink.

Haru’s eyes slide to the front door in the entry way across from the kitchen, which is where his gaze always falls when he’s at Miho’s apartment. This is her real home – the house in the subdivision is the gang base but this is where very few people know she resides.

And Haru is unfortunately one of those people.

“I should’ve known Kazuki wasn’t ready,” Miho hisses, mouth red with wine and eyes hungry for blood. “Should’ve stabbed him to death myself. Should’ve made fucking Nakagawa stab him to death.”

Haru softens his voice until he doesn’t even recognize it and cushions his tone in artificial sweetness. “It isn’t your fault, Miho. You have to stop blaming yourself for other people’s mistakes.”

Miho makes a noise of agreement and sighs. “Yes, I know, Haruka.” She saunters over to the island and the invasion of space causes him to bite the inside of his lip until he tastes copper. He resists lashing out when she eases down into the chair beside him, overwhelming him with the aroma of perfume and alcohol when all he wants to smell is the ocean, the exhaust from Nao’s van, Rin’s cherry blossom air fresheners, Gou’s magic markers, Asahi’s cigarettes.

Miho takes one of his hands between the soft fingers that have strangled the life out of him and everyone closest to him. “I know which of Rin's clients are yakuza. However, I do not deal with the rival gangs and had not the slightest idea that they were going to drug Rin.”

Miho didn't do her fucking research, Haru thinks. She didn't care if they might have had it out for Rin - money is money, like he said.

"But Rin should have handled it better," Miho growls. "He should not have caused such a scene. He was sloppy. He's losing what he once had, Haruka. I can't let him make another mistake like this ever again. It's business, my love. And I’m not sorry for business but I am sorry for you.”

He nods in assurance. “I understand.”

At Miho’s surprise he gently squeezes the fingers he’d like to cut off one by one. “I just hate how
much time you’ve wasted on him,” he sighs. “You worked so hard, it’s just such a waste.” He shakes his head mournfully and looks away.

And it doesn’t take long for Miho to start panicking. “Yes but this one mistake could have ruined all of that.” Distress pitches her voice higher because she needs Haru to agree with her. “He could’ve brought all of us down with his bullshit idiocy!”

Haru draws out another sigh with an exaggeration that makes her eyes widen in anxiousness. “Well,” he shrugs. “I guess that means Nakagawa will be your new front runner, then?”

Miho’s fingers numbly slide away. “Oh fuck,” she whispers. “Fuck.” Haru tucks both of his hands back into the safety of his pockets as she groans and covers her face. “I can’t have him representing me, especially if he’s anything like Kazuki.” She scoffs and drowns the sound in her wine glass.

Haru’s blood is replaced with fire and he wants to burn this entire place to ashes, but more importantly, the woman sitting across from him. But he can’t do that, at least not yet.

Because he’s the only one that can save his friends’ lives, and to do that he can’t do what he wants to – he has to do what it takes.

“You’ve worked so hard,” Haru stresses, forcing himself to take her hand once more for emphasis. “I don’t want you to lose the clients you deserve more than anyone else in Iwatobi.”

Miho sits up straighter at his words and Haru takes his chance. “I think you should keep Rin alive only because you’ll lose less clients during the time it will take for him to recover than if you make Nakagawa your top rentboy.”

She’s quiet with thought and every second makes Haru want to scream even louder than the last until she nods. “Yes, you’re right, Haruka. You’re always right.”

Haru tries to not let his breath of relief be too obvious.
“You told her what?”

“Shhh,” Haru hisses, eyes darting over Asahi’s shoulder to see if anyone’s wandered into the pantry due to their concerning whispering. Reassured they’re alone, Haru allows himself to discreetly rest his weight against the shelf, biting back a grimace as his body aches at the point of contact.

“You went to Miho’s,” Asahi says, his jaw dropping until Haru can practically hear it hit the floor. “You went to the witch’s gingerbread house and managed to get Rin’s head out of the oven.”

Haru startles a glare at Asahi’s choice of words, causing him to wince in apology before Haru bites back, “Yeah, I did.”

Asahi is dumbfounded – a lot more than usual. “I mean, like. How?”

“She’d rather give Rin a breather than have Nakagawa take his place.” He hopes the way his words are slurring together isn’t too noticeable, but he can already tell that he’s this close to sounding as drunk as he did on his twenty first birthday when Natsuya claimed he could handle more alcohol than him and they ended up drying up a bottle of tequila together before they woke up on top of a
school bus in the junk yard. That hangover never really left him.

“Why? Is it because Nakagawa’s so upset about Kazuki that he’d channel a bare assed hyena if Miho asked him to do anything right now?”

“No,” Haru says, nauseated at that mental image. “It’s because he’s Nakagawa.”

“Oh,” Asahi exclaims like he’s reached enlightenment, as if it all makes sense now. “But I mean, that’s kind of a good thing, right? At least for this reason.”

Haru doesn’t have the strength to muster up a reply and thankfully Asahi gets bored quickly, so he takes out his phone and disregards Haru to peck at the screen.

His legs feel boneless in the worst of ways and he’s more annoyed than anything when numbness curls around his spine.

“Well shit,” Haru sighs.

“Mmn?” Asahi doesn’t look up from his phone.

“I’m about to pass out.”

“Wh–aaaat!” Asahi dives forward and probably catches him – Haru would like to give him that kind of credit but he’s out cold before he can know for sure.

Twelve minutes later, he’s dragged back into consciousness by Asahi slapping him on the cheek and inadvertently spitting on him as he babbles too close to his face. The wake up call is not as pleasant as his head being rested on the cushion of soft jeans and a firm, muscled thigh, feeling fingers on his pulse point and gliding over his skin in a way that made him wonder if there was heroin singing through his veins, and looking up into green eyes that were deep with a concern Haru still doesn’t get.

He’s delirious enough to want to stay in that memory even if it doesn’t makes sense but unfortunately, Asahi brings him back to life by shouting, “Yeah, I’m gonna need the hose, Ikuya!”

He doesn’t mean to sit up so quickly and headbutt him in the throat, but whatever works.

Asahi manages to be dumb enough to think it’s a good idea to send Ikuya into the pantry to watch over Haru while he hauls ass on his skateboard to the nearest gas station. Ikuya’s pressed against the farthest shelf and seems to be waiting for Haru to explode when Asahi stumbles back into the pantry with a large Styrofoam cup full of crushed ice. Haru takes it and distantly realizes that Asahi looks like shit, to which he assures, “Oh, don’t worry Haru, it was just a dog.”

Ikuya is shocked. “You were attacked by a dog?!”

“I didn’t say attacked! I just said it was a dog!” Asahi’s face bunches up at Ikuya and the expression makes Haru lull his head back against the wall repeatedly because that’s what Asahi looks like when he’s trying to come up with a manly excuse for his injuries, which is more common than not.

Ikuya, who is a foot shorter than Asahi and at least sixty pounds lighter, crosses his arms and cocks his hip with an unimpressed attitude that’s more adorable than annoying.
At Ikuya’s raised brow and flat stare, Asahi blurts, “I just – the dog distracted me, okay?! It wasn’t even on my sidewalk, it was alllll the way on the other side of the street. That what you wanted to hear, pistol shrimp?”

Ikuya’s voice pitches high enough to make dogs whine. “DO NOT CALL ME –”

“And to make it all even better –” He flops down on the floor and sends an explosion of dust rushing up from under his ass. “The guy that was walking him looked like he just stepped out of some soft grunge porno.”

“What?” Ikuya looks at Haru for guidance but he just chews loudly on his ice in response.

“He had this pink hair, y’all, this hair.” Asahi groans and Ikuya puts a few more feet between them, looking at him with disturbance. “You know how guys try to get that ‘just fucked’ look but it never works out? This guy worked it out. Worked it like Rin on that stripper pole at Samezuka on Nao’s twentieth birthday.”

“Ew,” Ikuya whispers, causing Asahi to launch a solid cucumber at his head.

“One at a time, Asahi,” Haru reminds him.

“Right, back to dick whisperer.” He clears his throat with purpose. “So he was walking his dog and then I’m staring and then I hit this dip in the pavement and I start wailing in dread and he looks over with these boysenberry eyes –”

Ikuya looks at Haru in distress. “Asahi likes his colors,” he says. “I think it’s purple.”

“Haru, he was walking-talking pastel sex,” Asahi stresses before looking crestfallen. “And he saw my ass fly through the air and hit the pavement like a used rubber. Just like –” He smacks his palm against the floor. “Plop. Sploosh. Dead.”

They’re silent.

Then giggles bubble out of Ikuya’s mouth and he bites his lip around the sound, but it isn’t until Haru breathes a laugh that Asahi whips around in betrayal. He scoffs at the two of them and crosses his arms as he blushes. “You are both hollow souls. And I am going to pray for you.”

“Pray for your sex life,” Ikuya grins before Asahi chases him with the nearest broom and lets out a battle shout that sounds more like an eagle cry.

Nao and Aki are able to handle the gathered crowd in search of hot soup until the church volunteers file in. After they’ve done their part and the homeless shuffle back onto the streets, Haru eases himself into a chair at a vacant table to rest there instead of the cramped pantry.

He lets a small grin play over his lips at the sight of Rin taking Gou’s hands in his to drag her around the room on Asahi’s skateboard. Rin’s smile is genuine despite that it’s strained at the edges – he’s sore, like Nitori said he would be, but Nao deemed that he didn’t appear to have any broken bones nor bruised ribs, so he carefully suggested that Rin might heal quicker if he moved around versus being curled up in bed all day.

Asahi was able to contact some clients last night and managed to get all the medical supplies Haru had listed for Rin. After a nice dosage of fluids, antibiotics, and the gift from god otherwise known
as pain killers, Rin almost looks normal. Though it is a bit strange seeing him covered up with a scarf wrapped around his neck where it’s bruised and there’s a long sleeve shirt hiding where his arms are scraped up, Haru will take it.

Nao is sitting beside him and curling a tired smirk at Ikuya and Asahi as they bitch while scrubbing down the buffet line together – Asahi insisting he move the sponge in this direction with this hand while Ikuya does the complete opposite just to piss him off. It’s annoying to hear but the sight of them doing what they do best, fucking with each other, is something Haru didn’t think he’d ever see again, and it brings him a warm fuzziness he’ll never admit out loud to having.

“Haru, thank you,” Nao says with a sincerity that’s heavy in his voice. “For helping Ikuya, I mean. He’s always meant a lot.”

Haru nods because he has, but even more so to Nao due to the fact that he was so impossibly close to Natsuya.

Speak of the devil – “I talked to Nat this morning and he asked about you.”

Haru doesn’t expect the upsweep of emotions to come roaring through him but he’s staggering in their wake, looking at Nao in shock. He tries to shove the confusing feelings down but he’s hopeless to do so when Nao adds, “He asked me how you were doing. Health wise.”

“The fuck why?” His voice is sharp with the hurt he felt when Natsuya said he didn’t deserve to live if he was just going to waste his life on selling needle – being a drug dealer.

Nao startles him by reaching down beside his feet and placing a backpack in Haru’s lap. “I found that in the van this morning.” He swallows, pulse fluttering beneath the skin of his neck. “I didn’t see him but then I called him and he confirmed he had put it there.”

And Haru’s so disbelieving that he can’t even comprehend, but deep down, he knows what’s inside the backpack without having to look. “He didn’t.”

“He did.”

“He – why?”

Nao’s smile is bright and small like a point of light in the dark. “I could say I think he’s changed but I’m a little biased, given that I was engaged to him for three years. I guess he still had all those medical supplies I left at his house so long ago and remembered how to do it himself.” He fondly traces the sparrow tattoo at the crook of his thumb and forefinger, eye moving over the shades of brown and blue on the wings. “He wanted to thank you for helping Ikuya.”

The first thought Haru has is that he wasn’t the only one that helped pay that bail, they all had pitched in. But he knows this is different because Ikuya had called him at the police station since he trusted him, and Natsuya is thanking him for not letting that trust go to waste like he did.

Haru cuts his nails into his palms to ground himself in the moment but he can’t escape the memory of passing out and waking up in the back of Nao’s van with Rin hunched over him and sobbing, calling him a bastard for not taking care of himself. Haru could smell the ocean and Asahi smoking outside, heard the soft mumbling of Nakagawa and Kazuki’s voices somewhere in the distance.

He blinked, eyes straining against the harsh overhead light, and found Nao sitting beside him,
looking fretful until Natsuya took him under his arm and pressed a reassuring kiss to his forehead to chase the fear from his two green eyes.

Haru’s own gaze turned to Natsuya’s other arm, where there was a needle taped to the crook of his elbow – the needle was connected to a tiny tube that lead to a longer one, which sent blood to the crook of Haru’s arm, where warmth and an invigorated energy was spreading through him.

At Haru’s look of shock, Natsuya curled a smirk and shrugged. “I’m your blood type.”

Blood transfusions aren’t iron transfusions but Haru needs both to survive. Having one won’t put him back at 100% but he’ll be back at 50% where he was in the negatives.

He peeks inside the back and sure enough, it’s an old transfusion bag filled with fresh blood.

Haru can’t breathe against the emotions bubbling up his throat. He turns away and his voice is thick. “You um – can you help me with this?”

Nao is smiling. “Yeah, come on.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork of Haru by brickerbeetle and Miho by niansue. Thank y’all!

And yes that was Kisumi that Asahi saw!

Anahi bringing Haru crushed ice - Crushed ice helps give energy to people with iron deficiency. They start craving it when they’re weak - I’ve had to haul ass to the nearest gas station for my mom many times.
Makoto’s right leg gets worse from a combination of stress, lack of rest, too much physical activity, and skipping the physical therapy appointment that had been scheduled for Monday, which was when he was too busy fretting over school starting on Thursday to even think about taking care of himself.

It’s Saturday and his appointment has been rescheduled for this evening, and while Makoto thinks he has every intention of going, that all changes when Nagisa texts him to say that support group is tonight.

He knows he needs to decline. He’s pretty sure he can’t be in any more pain than he already is but he knows that if he doesn’t go to PT then he’s in for a completely different realm of agony.

But here’s thing: Makoto doesn’t like admitting he has a problem. He doesn’t like acknowledging anything that happened in the war but most especially his injuries, which make people think that he’s less than capable of what he was before, most definitely less than a whole person.

Sousuke’s done everything he can to not let Makoto feel that way, never holding back when they spar, dragging him on four a.m. jogs or late night gym sessions so he’s still making Makoto move around but doing it at times of the day when there are less people around to see him in basketball shorts.

But Makoto hasn’t felt like a full person since he woke up in the base hospital and they told him why he wouldn’t ever walk the same.

So, being as stubborn and stupid as he is, he replies to Nagisa’s text with the confirmation that he’ll be there, knowing he’s doomed to fail but doing it anyway because he doesn’t want to accept defeat.

Echo stirs at the end of the bed and Makoto makes sure the comforter is covering him from the hips down despite that he’s wearing boxers –she might be a dog and not care if he’s dressed or not, but she always freaks out when she sees his right leg. He can’t really blame her.

She crawls up the bed to nose at his bare chest before curling up against it, causing him to breathe a laugh as he pets her fur down from where it’s sticking up.

He tries to assure himself that he probably won’t be hurting as bad today since he’s been in bed ever since Sousuke dropped Echo off this morning so he could go back to the station and focus on his work, whatever it is. Makoto knows he’s not the only one not taking care of himself because Sousuke was only home for a few hours last night, which only adds to Makoto’s worry about everything.
But then all that concern vanishes when he stares up at the ceiling in realization.

_Someone_ very specific might be at the soup kitchen. Someone who is so unrealistically pretty that Makoto swears he came right out of one of his grandma’s romance novels that he used to read behind comic books on the playground.

Not that he’s getting his hopes up, of course not, when does he ever, _ha._

But if he spends an extra few minutes (twenty six to be exact) figuring out what to wear then, well. He’s just glad Echo’s the only one here to see him stressing.

He places two shirts on the bed and stares down at them in concentration, his fingers curled against his mouth in a gesture of deep thought. He rubs at his hearing aid nervously.

“Coco.”

Echo whines with exaggeration and drags herself up from under the mountain of blankets to glare at him sleepily.

“Help me pick one.”

Why yes, he _is_ pathetically lonely on top of everything, thank you for noticing.

Echo sniffs both shirts before nosing the blue and grey flannel and dragging the covers over her to return to the depths of her lair. He smirks and picks up the shirt. “Thank you.”

She growls quietly in response.

Makoto drops Echo off with one of the neighbors she actually likes other than him. The older woman has a German Shepard that enjoys tackling Echo on sight because, “he has a crush on her,” Miss Tsukino explained with a mischievous smile.

Rei gets his car back from the shop and Makoto considers shouting to the heavens because he isn’t sure if he would have made it to the soup kitchen on foot. Nagisa proves himself to be so good at multitasking that it’s disturbing because he’s fiddling with the radio and the air conditioner while orchestrating two different conversations between Makoto and Rei all as he holds his phone in one hand and Rei’s arm with the other.

They make it to the soup kitchen where Makoto limps behind Nagisa and Rei to push open the door and be overwhelmed by the scent of bleach and lemony cleaning products. The cafeteria is vacant save for Gou at her usual corner table with a variety of coloring books and crayons spread out before her.

Beside her is a young woman drawing and giggling with her, her ginger hair braided in a similar style as Gou’s. Makoto feels immensely better at the sight of his student laughing with the freedom every kid deserves to have.

His ears flex at a muffled noise and he looks to the other side of the cafeteria in time to see Rin appear from the depths of the kitchen. Makoto notices he’s got a strained expression, and his gaze falls to the dark blotches across Rin’s arms before he pulls his bunched sleeves down to cover them.
Makoto’s eyes narrow a fraction.

“Ah, good evening, Rin-senpai!” Rei greets.

Rin curls them a smirk, which seems to be his default expression for pleasure or even just contentment. “Ai’s got something going on so we’re here for you again.”

Rei frowns in worry. “Is he all right?”

Rin shrugs, crossing his arms in annoyance. The action is done gingerly, with a small wince that Makoto catches before his face smooths over with practiced grace. “I guess so. He was kind of vague about it when I –”

“He’s with his boyfriend, Rin.”

Makoto tries to prepare himself for looking up but that strategy goes up in flames when Haru rounds the corner, thickening the air with the cloud of steam that trails behind him from where he was washing dishes with hot water, Makoto assumes. The sudden humidity makes everything more intense, from watching Haru push his damp hair back to the smell of clean sweat that fills Makoto’s lungs as the boy wipes the glistening sheen off his face with the hem of his shirt, which exposes his torso to reveal that the skin flexes around the hard muscles of his abdomen when he moves. Makoto’s fingers twitch at the sight before he shoves them in his pockets, feeling like a teenager and not knowing what to do about it.

Luckily, Rin’s still coherent enough to break the tension by screeching, “What do you mean his boyfriend?!”

Haru rolls his shirt back down without hurry and the fabric is wrinkled but it just makes him that much more attractive because he doesn’t seem to care at all. He blinks at Rin innocently. “Did he not tell you about him?”

“You rat bastard, we are not going through this again –”

Haru lets him bitch but his eyes slide to Makoto and the way his gaze darts over the patches of blue on his shirt is kind of worth all the pain in the world.

So naturally, he’s yet again a jackass because he can’t concentrate on the meeting worth hell.

He does pull his head out of the clouds long enough to hear Natsuya exclaim that his brother is back at home and is safe and sound. This makes Makoto even happier, which causes his concentration to fall even deeper into the realm of jackassery, but at least he can get by with sitting quietly and not commenting nor sharing his story just yet – he’s going to hold that one off for as long as possible.

After the meeting, Rin comes in to help put up chairs. Makoto stiffens at this, recalling his bruises and strained movements, but he’s not sure how to say anything about it. Rin obviously doesn’t want people noticing it, with the way he’s covered up and smoothing over every falter with an enthusiastic smile.

Makoto’s not even curious, he’s just concerned. So while he and Rin are at one side of the room and Nagisa and Rei are at another, he quietly asks, “Are you okay?”
Rin startles, eyes going wide and blinking rapidly. He hadn’t been expecting for Makoto to be so perceptive, but he’s finding himself too worried to be offended.

Rin sighs, his mask falling for a few moments. “Yeah, I just got in a car wreck. I’m fine, just sore.” He hesitates. “Thanks though. For the – concern or whatever.” He doesn’t seem to know what to do next, looking awkward and embarrassed as if he’s never faced the social predicament of someone expressing concern – at least from a stranger.

But then he surprises Makoto even more when he stutters, “Um, I – thanks for… helping with Gou. Too.” He looks like he wants to say something further but he quickly closes his mouth, rolling his lips in despite that Makoto can still see that they’ve started to tremble.

Rin takes a deep breath, skin flushing red before it drains pale. “I didn’t know what to do about it. I didn’t know what was gonna make her feel better or worse about it. And I know you probably think I’m the worst brother for even letting it happen but –”

Makoto shakes his head firmly, shocking Rin. “No.” He looks over his shoulder to make sure that Nagisa and Rei are still oblivious before adding, “I don’t know what I’d do either, if it were my little sister.”

“You’d want to kill the person that did it.” Rin sobered up. “And then you’d hate yourself for not being there to protect her.” At Makoto’s hesitance he says, “It was our mom.”

Makoto tries to remain composed but Rin’s words are so traumatizing that there’s no possible way it isn’t showing on his face.

Rin shakes his head at his horrified expression. “No, not like that,” he assures. Then several emotions flash through his eyes – sorrow, disgust, but more than anything, there’s rage. “She, um. I’m not going into detail about it but I’ll tell you that she knew what was happening and didn’t stop it.”

Makoto inhales, lets it out slowly. “I’m so sorry.”

Rin is still surprised but he isn’t floored like he was the first time he realized that Makoto cared. He jerks a nod, shrugs. “Me too. She’ll be okay though – she’s strong, so much stronger than me. Everything to me.” Rin clears the lump from his throat. “But you really helped her out and me and Haru too, we were so fucking scared not knowing what to do. So thanks again.”

Makoto’s heart warms at that and he nods in reply and Rin has a new found ease about him as they finish stacking chairs.

After this, Makoto follows Rin, Nagisa, and Rei into the hallway, where he walks behind them so no one will notice that he’s shuffling. They reach the cafeteria and Gou leaves her table to jump into Rin’s arms, which surely causes him pain but he doesn’t let it show as his sister informs him that she and Aki are going to see a movie. Rin approves and follows her outside to walk her and the redheaded woman to the end of the street, but before Gou leaves she rushes over to her table where Haru is sitting and gives him a hug, which he returns and makes Makoto quietly melt.

Rin and Gou slip out the door and Nagisa sprawls in the vacant chair beside Haru, making him jump. “So, Haru-chan.”

“Don’t call me –”
“Are you from here?”

Makoto’s confused before Nagisa’s eyes slyly shift from Haru to him.

Oh *no*.

“Why?” Haru puts a few more inches between him and Nagisa and Makoto wants to cheer him on because yes, back away, run, don’t be fooled by that face, he’s the devil.

“No reason,” Nagisa sighs, and the exaggerated softness makes Rei look over at Makoto in horror because he knows what this is. “I just thought you might know some good places to eat is all.” He blinks up at Haru innocently, rolling his chin on a fist.

*Shit,* Makoto should’ve been more careful. But how was he supposed to keep it together when he saw that row of abs that had been hiding under Haru’s shirt? It’s like the universe knew that was his weakness and just very rudely threw it in his face.

And *no,* he hasn’t been laid since boot camp, but that wasn’t even an issue until now.

Nagisa smirks at him and oh yeah, it’s definitely an issue now because he’s playing Cupid and giving him pointy objects like heart-shaped arrows has never been a good thing.

Haru arches a brow. “Don’t you live here too?” Makoto is half ecstatic and half distraught that he’s putting up a fight.

“Yes, but you’re a legit local,” Nagisa says.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Didn’t say you weren’t~”

“...So?”

“Locals know where all the good food is! You’re supposed to eat like a local!”

Haru shrugs. “Rin probably knows ~”

“*Perfect!*” Nagisa throws himself out of his chair to glide away as if he’s too holy and graceful to make an exit any less extravagant. “I’m going to the bathroom. We’ll leave when I get back!”

“Oh,” Makoto tries.

But Nagisa’s already gone and that leaves Rei to look very conflicted. Makoto clenches his teeth with wide eyes, but Rei’s body language skills seem to be as pitiful as Makoto’s math skills because his face brightens and he drops him an exaggerated wink before hurrying off in the same direction Nagisa went – the exact opposite of what Makoto wanted him to do.

“You okay?”

Makoto realizes someone’s making choking noises and he realizes it’s him. His voice is cracking like his thirteen year old brother’s when he turns to Haru and practically shouts, “Yes! I am fine!”
Haru’s mouth curls at one edge but he hides it behind his fingers before Makoto can be blessed with the sight of seeing him grin.

He then freezes when Haru inclines his head toward the empty chair because that’s not what he was expecting.

Haru says, “You’re limping.”

The words devastate Makoto but Haru doesn’t seem to think it’s that big of a deal. He just pushes the chair toward him with the toe of his sneaker before tucking it back under his own seat with an expectant look.

Makoto eases into the seat, struggling to make his leg cooperate with the movement but Haru isn’t paying attention, thankfully – he’s looking away, seeming fascinated with the ceiling as Makoto comes closer into his personal space by sitting down next to him.

They both clear their throat at the same time before wincing. Haru breaks the silence by mumbling, “I need to thank you for talking to Gou.”

Makoto remains silent, letting Haru talk, listening to his voice. “I don’t know exactly what you said but you convinced her to talk to Hayato’s brother.”

“Kisumi.”

Every drop of blood in Haru’s body rushes to his face in a flat second.

Makoto blinks.

Then the blood explodes in his own veins as he splutters, “That’s – Kisumi is his name! Not!” Oh my god. “That’s Mr. Shigino’s name!” He thought he was telling him to kiss him. “Hayato’s brother’s name.” He’s going to throw up.

“Oh,” Haru replies, voice rough. It takes a minute for the normal coloring to return to his face but then he looks pretty much over it; however Makoto’s over here contemplating changing his name and moving to Iceland to become an isolated sheep herder after that disaster.

“You’re welcome,” he finally says. “I want her to be happy – not feel like she’s different.”

“Me too,” Haru says.

Makoto hears muffled ringing – a cell phone. He frowns and palms his shirt pocket to find it empty. “Oh,” he sighs. “I think I left my cell phone in the room.”

Haru’s eyes ghost over Makoto’s right leg, causing him to stiffen as he waits for him to offer to go get it himself, to pity him.

But he just shrugs and nods, trusting that Makoto can handle it himself.

His own mother doesn’t even have that kind of trust in him – always bringing Makoto the remote even when it’s in his range, refusing to let him get up from the couch to get his own drink, constantly asking if he needs her to do anything for him.
So Makoto’s a little flabbergasted when this guy, who he barely knows, is that confident in him. It’s – it feels overwhelmingly good, if he’s being honest.

Dazed, Makoto manages to find his phone meshed between two metal chairs in a stack. He assumes it fell out when he was bending down to lock them together, and looks at his screen to see the text is from Nagisa – How’s it going out there, big boy?

He’s contemplating his heated response as he reaches the mouth of the hallway but then he pauses when he hears footsteps echoing across the cafeteria.

It’s Natsuya, who is looking down and dragging his damp palms over his jeans, which makes Makoto assume he just got out of the bathroom.

Haru’s sharp intake of breath makes both him and Makoto look over at him.

Natsuya stumbles before coming to a complete stop. “Nanase?”

Haru is floored, blinking like he doesn’t believe the sight before him. Natsuya, who at first seemed like a pretty confident guy, is now awkward in his own skin, having nowhere to put his hands before he clasps them behind his back. He clears his throat but his voice is still a nervous waver. “Hey. You, uh, you look good.” He flashes him a weak smile.

“Thanks.”

Natsuya scratches the back of his neck. “How’ve you been?”

“Fine.”

“Oh. That’s good.” This is getting painful to watch. “How’s everyone else?”

“Fine.”

“Oh.”

Haru works his jaw before he sighs in defeat. “I got your – what you left in the van. Thanks.”

Natsuya perks up. “Yeah, no problem.” He chuckles, rubbing his fingers over the crook of his elbow where there’s a band aid. “It was kind of funny, seeing that Nao still doesn’t lock his doors. I always bitched at him about that.”

His eyes fall to the back of his hand, where a sparrow is inked into the skin there. “It’s been nice talking to him again. I’ve tried to get him to meet me somewhere but he keeps making excuses like he doesn’t want me to see him or doesn’t want to be around me or whatever.” His eyes fill with shame. “Can’t blame him.”

“It doesn’t matter if you fucking blame him or not,” Haru snaps, voice rawing with a vehemence that startles Makoto. “No one blames him for not wanting to see you and if you were half as smart as you think you are then you’d stop calling him.”

Natsuya’s eyes narrow. “Even though he’s the one that calls me first most of the time?” His voice is tense, making it clear that both he and Haru are defensive over whoever they’re talking about.
But Haru is unwavering, making Natsuya give up and drag a hand through his messy hair with a shake of his head. “I just wanted to apologize to him, Nanase.”

Haru wavers. “What?”

“Even if – if he hates me,” Natsuya shrugs and traces his bird tattoo with the fingers of his other hand. “I want him to know that I hate me too, after what I said about you guys.”

Haru purses his lips and crosses his arms. He looks away. “Nao doesn’t hate you,” he says to the wall. “You broke his heart but it’s still obviously yours, as much as we all can’t stand it.”

Natsuya sounds like he just got punched in the gut but his sharp breaths quickly lift into a dazed laugh. “He really still…?”

“Too much.”

“Oh my god,” he breathes, smearing the tears away with his sleeve. He can’t stop smiling.

Haru says, “Is Ikuya home?”

Ikuya is Natsuya’s little brother that ran away, Makoto remembers. “Yeah,” Natsuya assures. “He came home a few hours ago while mom was at work. We ordered some pizzas but we didn’t really talk. He fell asleep and was still out when mom got home and I left.” He laughs bitterly. “I’m gonna do everything I can but I know I’m not enough to keep him from running away again.”

“No one’s enough,” Haru says, voice almost comforting. “But I’m still kicking your ass if I find him out here again.”

Natsuya’s laugh doesn’t sound as hollow. “Okay.”

Rin and Haru seem to be regulars at the restaurant they bring Makoto, Rei, and Nagisa to, for the cooks shout greetings at them from the long kitchen pick up window where they break up the smoke in the air by sending exuberant waves in their direction.

Makoto isn’t sure what they yell exactly because the place is loud with conversation and laughter. He’s overwhelmed by the crowd – the restaurant is packed with no elbow room at the bar, extra chairs crammed at the corners of overflowing tables, high chairs at the ends of filled booths. But then a waitress shouts across the floor and orders the hostess to send Rin and Haru and Co to her section, where she’s busting a round table faster than Makoto’s eyes can follow.

The restaurant is sweltering hot but all the windows and patio doors are open to pull out the claustrophobic heat as well as the scents of greasy fish and stove smoke. The establishment itself reminds him of a weathered ship, with worn floorboards that dip under his feet like the floor is rocking from the push and shove of ocean waves, but a quick look up proves that there are walls around him, not miles of sea in every direction, and a vaulted ceiling instead of a merciless sun, thank goodness.

They pass the crowded bar and he notices that there are yellowed blueprints under the glass top, which is covered in mugs of frothy beers and glasses brimming with dark liquor. The line of stools consists of fisherman, who are falling over each other with booming laughs and slurring the lyrics of
old sailor songs – they’re still wearing their gear of tattered overalls and boots, which reek of saltwater, but it’s still a happy sight.

Haru notices Makoto’s slight smile and tells him, “They just got back from a job. They were probably out there in the water for days.”

Then Makoto would be very happy too, if he were in their shoes – boots. Ecstatic even. Probably wouldn’t ever take another shower once he was back on dry land. Just the thought of it makes him feel sick and want to move to a desert somewhere. Or Mercury.

He notices that there’s ship memorabilia layered across the walls, more specifically pieces of old ships that trudged through Iwatobi’s harbor hundreds of years ago – there’s rusty chains and anchors in glass displays, steering wheels (“Ship wheels,” Rei clarifies), frayed ropes and even a tattered mainsail that canopies from the ceiling and ripples in the breeze from the open windows.

Rin points to a section of framed photographs that appear to be from more recent times and taps on a picture of a fisherman standing confidently in front of a boat that’s seen better days. Despite that, the man looks no less proud of it. “That’s my dad,” Rin says just as proudly, and even Haru’s eyes warm with fondness at the man.

Makoto looks at the writing etched into the copper plate to read that Matsuoka Toraichi died from cancer only a few years ago, but the plate also informs him that he was sick a long time, which might indicate why Rin and Gou were left to fend for themselves when their mother should have been the one to do so.

Their waitress is a girl named Nii who has piercings in places Makoto didn’t know could be pierced, but she takes the time to learn his name as well as Nagisa and Rei’s and takes no shit from Rin when he pokes at her green leggings, which are patterned like mermaid scales.

As Nii chews him out with a ferocity that reminds him of Ran when Ren steals her diary, Makoto looks down at his menu and raises his brows at the name of the restaurant. “Seven Tears?”

Haru takes the menu out of his hands, fingers warm and rough where they brush his, which is a fascinating discovery because he was expecting them to be cool and soft. Not that he’s thought about it in his spare time or in his dreams or anything.

Haru flips the menu around to the back page, where he points to a drawing while Makoto rams his foot into Nagisa’s leg under the table as he whispers to Rei, “Look at our baby boy growing up! Get a pic for Uncle Sou!”

“This is a selkie,” Haru states as if this is a very important topic.

Makoto looks with rapt attention at the charcoal print of a man (a really attractive man, holy shit) sitting on the beach with a cloak wrapped around his shoulders and he startles when he realizes that the hood of the cloak is actually the head of a seal. His eyes follow Haru’s finger as if entranced with the movement until he taps on the description below the picture, where Makoto reads that male selkies have powers of seduction – they’re very handsome in their human forms and prey on those who are weak and unhappy with their lives.

He squints at Haru almost suspiciously because he might not be dissatisfied with his life as a whole but he has every faith that he could be considered weak prey if selkies look anything like the boy sitting next to him.
“If someone wants to purposely call for a selkie, they have to shed seven tears into the sea,” Haru explains.

Makoto’s got bitter amusement about that but he finds himself curling a grin anyway. “Do you believe it?”

“Believe it?” Rin snorts into his drink. “He’s tried it.” Nii and Haru slap him upside the head, making him squawk.

She takes their orders without even needing a pad and pen, already knowing what Rin and Haru get as their usual, only needing to know what Makoto, Rei, and Nagisa want.

Nii departs, weaving through the maze of tables like a champ before Rei perks up and says, “We heard you talking with Natsuya, Haru-senpai. May I ask how you know him?”

Rin’s eyes become so wide over his glass that Makoto thinks he’s about to do a spit take before he ends up choking on his drink instead. He dissolves into a hacking mess, making Haru shake his head as he coughs, “You – Nat – piece of shit –”

Nagisa tips his head as Rin bangs his fist on the table and heaves. “You both know him?”

“We grew up with him,” Haru says flatly, slapping Rin on the back with one hand and pinching the bridge of his nose with the other.

Rei straightens up in realization. “So you knew him back when he…”

Haru tenses, hand curling into a fist on Rin’s shoulder before he drops it under the table. Rin rolls his eyes at the action, smoothing his palm over his eyes and flicking the tears from his hand. “He’s in support group with them, Haru, I think they might know something about the drug addiction thing.”

Haru glares in response and something unspoken flashes between their eyes. Rin sobered up, clearing his throat. He takes a second to think before clipping, “Natsuya was a different person, back when he was on the shit.”

Nagisa blinks in confusion. “Yeah? That’s usually what happens?”

“No, I mean he was a better person,” Rin snorts. “Like, humble.” His chest expands and his nostrils flare. “He got clean and we were happy for him but then he started acting like a prick so we – I haven’t talked to him in years.” He looks pointedly at Haru, who responds with silence.

“His situation is… so common here.” Rei is visibly struggling to wrap his head around it. “Resorting to drugs, I mean. I didn’t even think this kind of epidemic was possible.”

Haru surprises Makoto when he speaks up. “It’s always been a problem. But it got the point that people stopped having a choice about whether they wanted to be around them – it’s too common, like you said.”

Makoto frowns. “Aren’t there rehabilitation centers around here?”

Haru levels his gaze with him, eyes gravely serious. “Rei and Nagisa are the first people I’ve ever seen do something like that and I’ve lived here my entire life.”
Nagisa is touched, hands over his heart and joy in his voice as he throws himself over the table, “Oh, Haru-chan!”

“That’s so kind, Haru-senpai!”

Haru nods in reply but Makoto can see that he’s not as happy about that information as Nagisa and Rei are.

With the crowd gathered inside the restaurant and the long line at the door, it’s a given that their food will take a while to be ready.

So of course, Nagisa gets bored and asks Rin what kind of drinks are good here, to which Rin responds with a deeper smirk than usual, causing Haru shake his head in sympathy at Rei’s look of terror.

Makoto admits to getting pretty bored as well, so he orders something called a firefish. The drink is made to look like the colorful fish it’s named after – the liquor at the bottom of the glass is murky dark, bleeding into a layer of orange soda before it’s topped off with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Hitting the alcohol at the bottom startles him because he wasn’t expecting it to be so strong, given the sweeter ingredients on top of it, but the buzz eases the pain in his leg and relaxes him until it isn’t as nerve wracking sitting by Haru – especially when their knees brush under the table, which weirdly happens even more after Haru has a few sips of his own drink. It’s a neon blue cocktail that reeks of tequila so strongly that Makoto gets tipsier off the smell than his own drink. But Haru’s breath smells like lemons when he asks Makoto to pass the salt, and after he hands it to him with another brush of their fingers, he notices there’s beer salt at the cushion of his lips and he wonders if it tastes sweet or maybe sour or what the fuck is he drunk?

He tries to reign in his thoughts just as Haru sprinkles a generous amount of salt onto his lemon slice and sinks his teeth into it to suck the juice out, cheeks hollowing just the slightest before his eyes slip closed.

The sight makes Makoto realize that yep, he’s kind of drunk.

Luckily, Nagisa’s too drunk himself to even notice. Rin had recommended a drink called shipwreck and that’s exactly what Nagisa becomes after four of them – a shipwreck. So much so that when Makoto’s phone buzzes on the surface of the table, Nagisa snatches it but still manages to open the lock screen, knowing the code is 0112.

Makoto and Sousuke’s team was nicknamed Squad 112 after they were told the location of their next deployment was as deadly as it could get and the chance of all five of them making it home was impossible – but one might survive. So, because they had to have humor about it or completely fall apart, they combined all their ages together to make 112, which was what the person who made it home had to live to.

It makes for a pretty easy passcode, but it’s the one thing he doesn’t want to ever forget about the war.

Rei would scold Nagisa, Makoto’s sure of it, if only he weren’t looking like he’s on the verge of an emotional breakdown after just a few sips of his own drink.
Makoto sighs, “What are you doing, Nagisa?”

“Nothing,” he sing-songs before finishing the message and sliding the phone back over to him with a grin.

Makoto glares in response and immediately goes to check his messages, where he sees a conversation with Sousuke at the top. The first message is from him and reads, *I am fucking starving*.

Of course.

Nagisa’s reply is, *SOUCHAN CUM EAT HRE W USSSSS <3 <# <3<<#<<3<333*

The phone vibrates as he receives another message. *Where is here, Nagisa?*

Makoto hopes his sarcasm can be felt. *Gee, how’d you know?*

*Because you don’t drunk text me*, Sousuke replies. *You usually drunk text mom.*

Makoto grimaces at that because that’s as horrible as it is true. He’s an emotional drunk, of course. Can’t be all slow murmurs and glazed eyes and dripping charm and complete sleaze like Sousuke is when he drinks – Makoto’s got to start crying at the drop of a hat and eating handfuls of shredded cheese.

*And then she calls me*, Sousuke adds, *and says I’m being a bad influence even though YOU’RE the one that skipped out on physical therapy tonight.*

Makoto stares down at his phone like a deer in the headlights as Sousuke adds, *Oh yeah, asshole. I know about it. See you when I get there.*

*You don’t even know where “there” is!!* He feels very victorious about this.

*Yeah, I do*, Sousuke retorts, *because I just texted mom about you playing hookie and she told me where you are*.

*HOW?*

*She made Ren, the nerd, put a tracker in your phone case for emergencies and shit*, he responds. *But don’t worry, Echo has one too.*

Makoto immediately goes to rip off his case and throw it out the nearest window but then a distant part of him realizes how crazy that would look, so he goes on to demand, *Why don’t you have one??????*

*Because I’m responsible and don’t miss PT??????*

He locks his phone and glares down at it on the table.

Then it buzzes again. *Is Nagisa at least getting you laid*

Now he turns his phone off, fingers fumbling as his cheeks heat with a blush that only deepens when Haru arches a brow at him. His cheeks are flushed too, probably from his drink but it’s still a nice
“Our friend is working late,” Makoto explains to his look of question. “He’s on lunch. Do you mind if he stops by?”

Haru shrugs. “I don’t care.” He sounds honest. It seems that he isn’t very moved by a lot of things but most especially such a mundane request.

Makoto smiles anyway. “Okay.”

Haru nods back and they look away awkwardly. Makoto’s at least thankful Nagisa is in conversation with Rin and Rei’s gone off to puke somewhere.

He perks up. “Are you and Rin and Gou all from the same part of the city?”


“Oh,” Makoto pauses. “Then what part are you from?”

Haru stiffens. “The outskirts,” he clips, not offering another breath of information about where he’s from.

“Oh,” Makoto says. “I haven’t been there. Well, I haven’t been to a lot of places here but –”

“It’s really not that great.”

There’s a sudden tightness to Haru’s voice that causes Makoto to pause, but he doesn’t press the issue, much to Haru’s relief. He then looks down at his glass, biting the side of his lip as if nervous. “Where are you from?” he asks his drink.

Makoto loves his hometown so he’s open to giving much more detail than Haru did, but he doesn’t seem to mind – he might not ask a lot of questions or say much of anything at all but his eyes, when they finally turn back to him from his drink, are alive and focused as he nods at the appropriate times and he remains looking interested in what Makoto’s saying for however long they talk.

He loses track of time and even the anxiousness that’s been a constant weight in his chest for more than a year. Haru doesn’t have any expectations or judgement in his gaze, despite that this is such a trivial subject and Makoto shouldn’t be expecting it – it’s just natural for him to be waiting for it after everything.

But what feels even more natural is that his mind is clear of that worry, so content that neither he nor Haru realize that Haru’s calf has been resting against Makoto’s left leg where he assumed it was the leg of a chair. But Makoto does finally notice it as the muscles of Haru’s calf go rigid against his when Sousuke walks through the door.

Nagisa almost stands on top of his seat to call him over before he’s grabbed and yanked down by Rei, who doesn’t even have to look up from where his face is meshed against the table with a cup of water and Alka-Seltzer fizzing by his head. Nagisa still manages to catch Sousuke’s attention with his ass in a chair and his eyes lock on Makoto so he can glare at him like you’re busted, and Makoto can glare back like fight me.

But then Sousuke’s gaze moves to the rest of the table and his expression turns into one that Makoto
has seen very few times – one being the time that Ran asked him how gay sex works and the other being when they were captured and he was tied and bound with a rifle pointed at his head. This look is somewhere in between there.

Sousuke appears to be considering walking right back out into the street but when Makoto frowns he seems to become conflicted. Then Nagisa shouts at him from across the floor and that turns every single head around to Sousuke so that he can’t leave without being noticed, and he grimaces under so many pairs of eyes and lets out a deep, heated breath like he does right before it all becomes too much and he punches a wall or something.

But he doesn’t do that. Instead he shoves his hands in his pockets as deep as they’ll go and forces himself to come over.

Makoto turns in his seat to face Rin and Haru so he can introduce Sousuke, but both of them are frozen and looking like they’re ready to make a run for it too.

Makoto slowly follows their gazes to – Sousuke?

He is tense when he comes up to them, so rigid that he barely moves when he breathes.

Nagisa is, of course, oblivious to this. “Sou-chan, these are our new friends! That one is Haru,” he points to Haru, who’s looking at the table with eyes that are wide under his fringe. “And that one is Rin!” Rin just stares into his glass like he’s wondering if he could drown himself in such a small amount of liquid.

Sousuke gives them a curt nod, which is his usual response to meeting new people, being the social butterfly that he is, but something’s off about all of this, Makoto knows it.

Rei starts to shuffle his chair away from Makoto so Sousuke can have space to pull up a seat and sit by him, but instead Sousuke blindly reaches for a chair and sits beside Nagisa, in front of Rin and Haru.

He leans back in his seat, crosses his arms and stares them down while Haru looks like he wants to flip the table and Rin, like he wants to hide under it.

What in the hell?

Rei’s shrill voice cuts through the tension in the air. “Sousuke-senpai, what happened to your face?!”

Makoto’s jaw drops at the line of stitches knitted over a bruise on Sousuke’s cheek. The sight makes him feel very irrationally offended. “You wanted to call Mom about my thing when you’re walking around with that?”

In perfect synchronization, Haru and Rin whip around and say, “He’s your brother?”

Makoto blinks. “Oh no, not biologically, no.” In arms and legal definition he is, though. It hadn’t been necessary for his mom to adopt Sousuke for him and the twins to call him their brother, but for inheritance purposes and helping Makoto with Ren and Ran if something happened to her before they were eighteen, it had to be done.

“I think being a cop helps my case a little more than yours,” Sousuke says in reply to Makoto’s earlier comment. He sounds just as irrationally offended.
“But what happened?” Rei insists, eyes wide like he can’t imagine anything ever getting the jump on big bad Sousuke.

“Got kicked in the face,” Sousuke says very pointedly. “With a combat boot.”

Rin winces in sympathy before ducking his head to shake it against his fist.

When Rin turns his head to the side it exposes more of his neck, and this is where Sousuke’s eyes fall, tracing the underside of his jaw before roaming lower where there’s bursts of blue, red, and purple over his skin.

Sousuke probably thinks they’re hickeys but the chance of Rin having a lover doesn’t stop his teeth from clenching, which makes Makoto want to scoff in disbelief because really? Who’s the one that hasn’t been laid here?

Haru clears his throat and Sousuke’s eyes snap up, narrowing before settling on the table.

“Wow, Sou-chan,” Nagisa breathes, entranced by the story. “Does it hurt?”

“No, not if you—well, don’t poke it, Nagisa!”

“Nagisa,” Rei whines, “That’s so rude!” With Sousuke’s help they pry Nagisa away but he just ends up hugging Rei in response to his weak restraint, snuggling up against his chest, making Rei let out a long-suffering sigh and pat him on the back without another word of scolding.

Makoto shakes his head at the sight before Haru’s breath hitches like he’s been holding it in for the entire time. He looks at him with concern and Makoto doesn’t know what it is that tells him to knock his knee against his, but whatever told him that was going to help was damn wrong because Haru jerks back like Makoto’s burned him before he composes himself just enough to turn to him with strained eyes and clenched fists.

Rei, now wrapped up in the boa constrictor that is Hazuki Nagisa, goes into some polite conversation with Sousuke about work and the police force while Rin sucks hard on his straw despite that there’s nothing left in the glass. No one is paying attention when Makoto quietly asks, “What’s wrong, Haru?”

He almost looks like that question is funny, but then his bitter laugh catches in his throat and he grimaces. His voice is equally as soft as Makoto’s. “Nothing, he just—looked like someone I knew. That I don’t really like. But I don’t think he’s him.”

Makoto frowns because well, he’s not going to call him a liar but he’s heard that one before. “Who does he look like?”

Haru’s brows raise slightly, tone defensive. “Why?”

“Well, I don’t know, I guess I don’t want you to be uncomfortable?” Does he have to spell it out here? Make a PowerPoint?

But it’s almost looking like Makoto does need to do all that because Haru is so confused he’s dazed, like nothing around him is making sense at all.
He doesn’t think Haru even knows he’s even talking when he murmurs, “Honestly? He looks like my dad. His hair was browner than mine and his eyes were lighter.”

He snaps out of his reverie with eyes full of horror, as if he’s never told anyone about such a simple thing, but Makoto knows all about not wanting to be around people that look like his dad, so he nods in understanding without needing to know the details of why Haru might feel the same.

“It just caught me off guard,” he says, voice hard and voided of emotion. “It’s no big deal.”

Makoto thinks it is but that isn’t his business, despite that he’s concerned. He might’ve pushed harder back before his time as a soldier, but now he knows when to stop fighting.

Rin whispers something to Haru and he jolts like an electric shock before hissing a reply, to which Rin responds in a firm tone that leaves no room for argument.

He leans over the table to rest his weight on his forearms, tipping his head so his hair falls in his eyes, a strand catching on the side of his curling lips.

He looks Sousuke dead in the face and says, “You should come outside with me.”

And then he gets up and leaves.

Makoto wipes his glasses and checks his hearing aid because there’s no way he saw or heard that right.

Sousuke is just as disbelieving but Nagisa isn’t fazed; in fact he’s practically shoving him out of his seat. “What are you waiting for, Sou-chan?”

Haru growls and the sound isn’t as nice to hear as Makoto thought it would be, but Sousuke isn’t fazed by it either way. In fact it seems to motivate him to get up and stomp across the floor and follow Rin outside.

Sousuke ducks around the line of waiting customers that extends from the hostess station all the way out to the benches by the front door. He breaks away from the gathered crowd to squint down both ends of the street, which are coated gold from the rows of lamp posts edging the length of the sidewalk.

Sousuke steps into one flickering patch of light, hearing the buzz of flies that swarm the dying lantern overhead, feeling the itch of mosquito bites over his arms and under his collar, the sensation making him irrationally frustrated and paranoid as he realizes that he doesn’t see the rentboy – Rin – anywhere.

But then Sousuke rounds the corner to the back of the restaurant and he’s shoved against the wooden cladding, which scrapes and splinters into his back.

“What the hell is your problem?” Rin hisses, arm crossed over Sousuke’s chest to pin him down so his eyes can bore into his from mere inches away. Before Sousuke can even think of something to reply with, Rin goes on a tangent all by himself, snarling, “I knew it, I fucking knew it, you’re following me or you’re undercover or some shit –”

Sousuke has enough room in his airways to scoff under the pressure of Rin’s arm. “I’m undercover
or some shit? What the fuck are you doing in there with them?”

“Uh, eating?” Rin shakes the fist knotted in Sousuke’s shirt in exasperation. “Socializing? Not stalking people?” Then he freezes. “Oh my god, are you all under cover? Even the short one?!?”

“No –”

“He’s a cop?!”

“No –”

“He’s fucking tall enough to be a cop?!”

Rin gasps when Sousuke shoves his heel into the back of his knee, throwing him off balance just enough for Sousuke to reverse their positions and pin him down where he just was.

Rin’s lungs expand against where his own are filling with the smell of his detergent and his gasps, which are hot and damp. Sousuke locks Rin’s wrists by his sides and waits for him to stop flailing – he doesn’t have an ounce of patience for any other aspect of his life but he’s so exasperated with this turn of events that he somehow just finds it in him.

Rin settles with a huff but he remains tense, telling Sousuke that it’s a trick to make him let go so he can attack again.

He’s got to explain this, bottom line, not only due to the waning control on his own temper but also because he doesn’t want Rin to strain his injuries.

His hair is disheveled from the struggle and splayed across his eyes – Sousuke remembers the texture of the strands from where he tangled his fingers in them, but now he’d like to do something fucking stupid like tuck them behind his ear or something else Makoto probably dreams about doing.

He tells himself it would only be to get the hair out of Rin’s eyes, but if he actually did it then Rin would most definitely sink his fist into either Sousuke’s ribs or his kidneys or something very important further south, so he keeps his fingers locked around Rin’s wrists, just tight enough to restrain him but not enough to hurt.

He levels their gazes. “I am not following you. I had no idea you were here. Those are my friends that I’ve known for years and I don’t know a damn thing about you.”

He stays still as Rin searches his gaze with his own before once more finding the truth. He purses his lips and nods shortly, crossing his arms when Sousuke releases them and steps away.

Rin leans against the building in a casual stance that contrasts his harsh voice. “So you’re not arresting me?”

“No,” Sousuke says, more sure of that than anything else in the world.

Rin looks like he’s more frustrated at Sousuke’s actions than grateful for them. He fixes his scarf, tugging and shifting until Sousuke catches sight of the bruises around his throat, and the sight makes him blurt, “I want you to come forward about what happened.”

Rin almost makes a run for it before he raises his hands with a grimace. “I’m not forcing you to, I’m
asking because I don’t have a chance convicting the yakuza if you don’t –”

“If I don’t what?” Rin pouts, tipping his head mockingly. “If I don’t let a judge tell me I was probably doing drugs myself, or I was drinking, or I was dressed for – for getting drugged or beat up or some shit like that?!” His voice rises to a furious shout by the end and he closes his mouth with a bitter twist to his shaking lips, looking away.

Sousuke tries to come up with an argument but he knows there isn’t one. “You’re right.”

Rin can hardly catch himself against the wall as he’s knocked off his feet by Sousuke’s words. “Is that… why you let me go? Because you knew that?”

Sousuke shrugs. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does, jackass.” Rin snaps, unimpressed with his brooding even with Sousuke’s shadow looming over him. He’s a reckless idiot if Sousuke’s ever seen one but he reminds him of that proverb he learned in grade school, something about sharks not being afraid of dark waters. Or some shit.

“Look, I’m just trying to figure out what happened to this kid that was drugged like you were.” Sousuke’s too stressed about this to build up to the point and break it to him gently.

Rin stiffens in a way that makes Sousuke back pedal until he hits the wall. “You knew him,” he breathes. “You knew Kazuki.”

Rin flinches at the name and gives up with a sigh of, “Fuck.”

Sousuke pushes off the wall and lifts his hands again, mind racing. “Listen, I know I should give a fuck about that but I don’t, I really don’t right now, this is more important.”

Rin hesitantly meets his eyes, rigid and guarded.

Sousuke softens his voice as much as he knows how to. “Do you remember enough to tell me the effects? How the drug works?”

“The hell why?” he croaks.

Because he has to fix this, because the shame is killing him, because everything he thought he was fighting for is slipping through his fingers like none of it ever even mattered, because he went to war over a kid he never even killed, but still couldn’t save him from having eyes that look as dead as Sousuke feels after finding so many bodies, so many people he should’ve saved.

“Because I don’t want to see it used on you again. Or anyone else. I need to know how to fight this, I need to know so I can stop this.”

Rin tries to remain composed but Sousuke throws him off kilter, making him look dazed as his voice wavers. “It starts out nice. Really nice. Like swimming on your back and there’s no clouds but the sun isn’t in your eyes either.” At Sousuke’s strained expression he breathes a laugh. “Or it’s like good sex and a good blunt. That a better description?”

Sousuke nods. “You’re saying it just makes you feel high at first.”
“Right. Then the next part is way more intense. Gave me lots of energy. Made my heart speed up until it got scary.” He absently puts a hand over his chest, hand closing into a fist around the fabric as his eyes turn vacant on the ground. “You ever snort coke?”

He has but he’s trying to cling to some dignity as an officer of the law, so he dodges the question by asking his own. “You’re saying that the first stage is like one drug and the second is like another?”

Rin shakes his head in frustration. “No, I mean – yes, but I’m not saying it was just specifically like coke.” He’s visibly having trouble with explaining it.

Sousuke frowns, brows creasing. “Could you classify the first stage as impacting you like downers and the next was uppers?”

Rin blinks. “Yeah, I guess so. That makes the third part make more sense since it’s kind of both.”

Sousuke waits in anxious anticipation as he struggles to gather his thoughts. “I’ve never done heroin,” Rin begins slowly, and those few words have him weighing down with dread. “But I’ve heard it makes you feel so good it’s like ecstasy. Not the drug, like –”

“I know what you mean.”

“Makes you feel like you’re flying.” Rin tips his head back to look up at the yawning black sky. “And even that part felt so fucking good.” His eyes slip closed and he takes a breath slowly before letting it out with a grimace. “I knew it was supposed to be like heroin when the next part came. Everything started fucking falling apart.”

Sousuke would offer comfort if only he knew how to, and he feels more incompetent that he ever has, almost wants to tell Rin to stop but he lets him finish. “I’ve seen that shit happen before – people being all warm and fuzzy before they start getting dopesick and losing themselves in it until they can’t control it and you can’t help them.” He sniffs hard, shoving his hands in his pockets and hiding the lower half of his face in his scarf. “I don’t remember what I did after that. If I acted crazy like that too. But I do remember that my body started freaking out on the inside. Everything was just going too fast and then it just… stopped.”

Sousuke’s insides run cold. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I literally could not move.” His hands rub over his arms as if he’s making sure he can still perform the action. “But I could hear everything, see everything, I just couldn’t do anything about it. And I think there were too many effects going on inside me to let me pass out. It’s like there was no control, it… it just lets you go. Makes you free when free isn’t supposed to feel like that.”

Sousuke doesn’t want to ask a question more, in fact he almost wants to forget this entire exchange and get drunk and go shoot something. But he has to quietly ask, “Can you tell me how much they gave you and how long it took for that fourth stage to happen?”


Sousuke shakes his head, so petrified that he can’t even fully comprehend it. “That’s not possible,” he breathes. “Something that powerful can’t work that fast, there’s no way –”

“Heroin works in minutes,” Rin barks with a forward snap of his head. “Cocaine works in minutes. Fucking erectile dysfunction pills can hit in minutes. Good vodka. Spicy burritos. It’s not that much
of a stretch.”

Sousuke puts his hands on his hips for leverage to remain standing because this is a nightmare.
“You’re saying that relay combines the effects of almost all the big drugs. And it does it in a matter
of minutes.” At Rin’s solemn silence he bends down to lean his hands on his knees. “Shit.”

“Those pricks wouldn’t have needed all four stages to – to overpower Kazuki. The high was strong
enough to knock me on my ass but Kaz could’ve still won a fight if it had been a – a regular street
fight or something. Or if I’d fucking been there.”

Sousuke straightens up to rub a hand down his face, where his eyes are aching from exhaustion and
stubble scratches his palm. He was discouraged enough before this conversation but now he doesn’t
know if he’ll ever be able to sleep again, he’s so overwhelmed with defeat. That flicker of hope
somewhere in his chest was all that’s kept him going but now it’s burning out faster than ever before.

He drops his hand and crosses his arms before shrugging, which causes his right shoulder to click in
protest of the movement. “I guess… guess that’s it then.”

Rin stares. “That’s it?”

His indignation burns through Sousuke, firing off in his voice, “I can’t do shit if I can’t get the stuff
in the lab and I can’t do that if I don’t find more of it!”

In the ringing silence that follows, Sousuke looks at Rin a little differently as a thought hits him. Rin
must notice the change on his face because he scoffs. “Please, I am not the drug dealer – I am
the drug.”

“You know one though, don’t you. A dealer.”

“Of course I do, baby,” Rin coos, batting his lashes. “But I also know this cop that doesn’t know
how to use hand cuffs the right way.”

Sousuke glares, cheeks heating with an angry blush. In his embarrassment he snaps, “You think your
friend in there might know a little something about it?”

Rin goes very still and Sousuke knows that he has royally fucked up.

The boy doesn’t come at him with teeth and claws bared, but the hostility is clear in his voice even
though he speaks quietly. “You come after Haru,” Rin says calmly, “And I will kill you. No
descriptions of weird ass torture or chasing you to the ends of the Earth – I will kill you. I don’t care
if you helped me or not. You come after him and I am fucking coming after you. Do you
understand?”

Sousuke’s more impressed than anything – he didn’t expect such a reaction, especially all for an
asshole like Haru. But it’s clear now that they have some strange bond, maybe forged over the both
of them having a knack for surviving things they shouldn’t.

He now notices that the feral, primitive strength in Haru’s eyes is also in Rin’s, which tells him that
the rentboy has surely had people hurt him like Sousuke did Haru.

He doesn’t know how he’s going to not lose his mind over the realization that he was never a killer,
at least until he made himself one overseas. He doesn’t know what he’s going to do about anything,
if he’s being honest.

But Rin has at least told him one of the too-many options is no longer available, and that’s coming after Haru like he did all those years ago.

He can agree to those terms. “Fine,” he says. “Just be careful then.”

“…beg your shitting pardon?”

“I said just be careful,” Sousuke repeats a bit too loudly, stomach fluttering where he’s supposed to be made of steel. “Let those bruises heal and don’t get any more, okay?”

His voice bounces off the surrounding buildings, not because he shouted, but because it can’t help but resonate both inside of him and in Rin’s wide eyes.

Then something about him shifts – his body relaxes of tension even as he bears an expression of resolution and he lifts his chin in challenge.

“Kiss me.”

Sousuke tastes his own heart because it’s rocketed up his throat. “Um. What?”

“Kiss me,” he repeats simply. “If you mean all this.”

Sousuke’s brain doesn’t understand but apparently neither does the rest of his body because he can’t move it, can’t remember how to.

But Rin spurs him back to life when he pushes off the wall and saunters forward, making Sousuke back up against the building without even having to be pushed, without Rin even needing to touch him. “You did it once before,” he murmurs with deliberate softness, making Sousuke strain to hear him, making him listen. “And I could tell that wasn’t part of your plan, whatever it was.”

“You kissed me,” Sousuke hisses in weak retaliation.

“Did I put your tongue in my mouth too?”

Sousuke kicks at his ankle but that just makes Rin laugh before he shrugs easily. “It’s just a kiss. Just to prove you’re for real.”

“For real about what exactly?”

“Being different.”

Sousuke’s eyes widen, causing Rin to pause. “I’m not going to force you or anything if you really don’t wa – himmm.”

Sousuke’s smug at the discovery that Rin’s mouth doesn’t move as confidently when he isn’t the one running the show, not at first at least. But all it takes is Sousuke bringing his hands up to frame his face like he did him for the boy to get his shit together, leaning just a breath away to lick his own lips and make them wet and supple, and Sousuke sighs at the accidental brush of his hot tongue and the cool slide of a barbell, though he’s distantly sure that the action might not have been as unintentional as he thought.
Rin tips his head to slip Sousuke’s bottom lip between his and suck him there until he’s delirious and struggling to recuperate, resorting to using his hands to maneuver the boy’s face to the side so he can breathe and give another kick of annoyance at his ankle, making Rin kiss him hard in retaliation and hum against his lips – the sound vibrates through Sousuke’s bones and it’s a noise that should wake him the fuck up, tell him this is enough, that’s plenty, what are you doing, but they’re so close that he can hear Rin’s tongue ring clacking against the back of his teeth and the sound is addictive.

They part in a way that reminds Sousuke of waking up so slowly in the quiet of his home on that first day back from war. Rin looks up at him hesitantly before lifting himself up on his toes to reach the line of stitches on his cheek, where the skin is heated and swelled against the press of his mouth.

Rin backs away and licks his lips where Sousuke rolls his in to cling to the taste of alcohol and watermelon chapstick and everything he should not be tasting right now.

“Was it… was it the same?”

Sousuke startles, blinking at him almost dazedly. Rin looks out of it too but in the worst of ways, like he can’t believe any part of what just happened was real until Sousuke answers his question of, “Am I the same?”

Am I still me?

Sousuke doesn’t know who he was before he was drugged or what happened in between or even in the hours that have followed up to this point, but he does know that he is burning where he once was cold, feeling just as reckless and confused about this kiss as the last one.

But like that one, he can’t find it in him to regret this one either.

“Yeah,” Sousuke says. “You’re the same.”

Makoto is surprised to see Rin come back alone with the excuse that Sousuke had an emergency at the station and was forced to leave. Makoto wants to ask why he wanted to go outside with Sousuke in the first place but he’s hesitant to do so because the sight of Rin makes Haru’s shoulders drop from where they were a straight, rigid line, therefore Makoto chooses to not say anything despite that he desperately wants to.

The rest of the night isn’t strained with lingering tension, in fact it can almost be considered heated or even passionate with the way they all practically launch themselves on their plates when their food finally arrives to their table. Makoto is ecstatic to find out that this is one of those restaurants that serves too much instead of too little – he’ll regret it later, but he likes to shoo all his little problems into later, that slot of time that never seems to actually come around and has yet to overflow with the hundreds of things Makoto really should be taking the time to worry about.

Like the fact that when they finish their dinner and walk outside, he has absolutely no idea how to get home.

Nagisa, being drunk and stuffed, can barely walk – seriously, he’s almost as bad as Makoto, who is really, really having a hard time of keeping himself upright and standing like a normal person when he’s so exhausted, and the drain of energy makes his leg pulse even harder.
He settles for resting his weight on his hip, which he usually resorts to, but he’s at a point that nothing’s going to help until he gets home and is able to reach down and –

Bile swells in his throat and he swallows down the acidic taste with a grimace, forcing himself to give all his attention to the present situation instead of the dreaded ritual that’s going to happen when he gets home.

Nagisa is resting all his weight on Rei, who looks just as tired and is yawning something about going to find a bus stop instead of walking back to the soup kitchen. Rin assures Rei that he can leave his car there for the night before informing Haru that he’s going to walk him and Nagisa to the bus stop so they can go straight home and he can go pick up Gou from the theatre.

Makoto is quietly proud of himself for taking in so many details at once, giving himself something else to think about, until his mind trainwrecks at the realization that he and Haru are now alone in front of the restaurant.

He tries to keep it cool, squinting down one end of the street to see if he recognizes anything, which he doesn’t, of course. A look down the other end reveals the same result, but now Haru is in his field of vision and asking, “You lost?”

“No,” Makoto automatically replies before remembering he’s transparent and just hurting way too bad to let this go on long. He gives up with a timid smile, softly admitting, “Ah, yeah. I might be.”

“Where do you live?” He doesn’t sound exasperated, which makes Makoto feel a little better.

“Sagebrook,” he replies, dreading going home but yearning for the quiet of his neighborhood.

Haru nods and heads down the street.

Makoto stares for a long moment before it clicks and he hurries after him.

Walking in silence makes him so awkward, which gives him this wonderful surge of energy that makes him feel like there’s a shaken soda can inside his chest. To make matters worse, he can’t walk at a normal speed given that he’s pretty sure there’s a knife lodged upward through his knee.

But Haru doesn’t seem to mind, not even commenting on it, which Makoto is so beyond thankful for. He does slow his pace though, which is something he can deal with without being offended.

They circle the more vacant blocks and Makoto thinks that means they’re getting close, but he doesn’t know, so he’s forced to ask, “Um, how much farther, do you think?” His voice is very quiet, almost timid.

Haru stops walking entirely, making Makoto blink back at him. Neither his voice nor his eyes waver.

“You know you can ask to sit down.”

“I don’t need to sit down,” Makoto responds mechanically, going numb from the ice that races down his spine.

“I don’t think you get how much it would make me feel better if you did it anyway.”

Makoto wants to curl in on himself and away from Haru’s piercing gaze, but he has no such luck. So instead he follows behind him like a prisoner to the guillotine until they reach a bench on the edge of
the sidewalk and Haru flops down without ceremony, not looking at Makoto very pointedly, but definitely with a look that’s going to be pointed if he doesn’t sit his ass down.

Makoto eases down onto the bench and he can admit the relief is almost worth screaming over. He refrains and stubbornly grumbles, “Thanks.”

“You don’t even mean that,” Haru says.

“I can still say it.”

“I can still not believe it.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Makoto slowly arches a brow at him, mouth lifting into a smirk that Haru rolls his eyes at before mirroring it in his own subtle way.

They seem to be at a park. The wide open space before them is covered by yellowed grass and dandelions that make Makoto’s nose itch and eyes water just from the sight of them. The playground equipment is rusty under the flecking paint but it looks well-loved and worn, with scuff marks from tennis shoes on the slides and chalk drawings all over the concrete slab used for basketball.

In the far distance he makes out two netted soccer goals and white spray paint lining the grass. “That’s where the school has their tournaments,” Haru says. “Rin takes it way too seriously. He knows everyone calls him a soccer mom and just doesn’t care.”

Makoto laughs. “That’s actually believable.”

Haru mumbles, “You could come if you want. I think I’ve seen Rei and Nagisa there before.”

Makoto looks away with wide eyes, oblivious to the fact that Haru’s blushing even harder than him. “Yeah, sure,” he says, hoping butterflies don’t burst out of his mouth when he talks. “That sounds really fun.”

They start back walking a few minutes later and it is easier to keep up with Haru, so much so that Makoto quickly forgets how upset he was about needing to stop.

He’s able to take in more details around him with the duller pain and finds himself so fascinated with the place around him that he asks, “What’s your favorite place in Iwatobi?”

Haru doesn’t even hesitate. “The ocean.”

The words throw him like a swirling undertow, leaving him unable to keep up with his own pulse and lost in a blue darkness he was stupid to think he’d ever escape from.

They’ve reached Sagebrook but Makoto can’t even feel relieved, his mind everywhere it shouldn’t be and his emotions are retangled in the knots that took so long to pull apart, but he’s still good at faking smiles and even better at sincerity, so he doesn’t even miss a beat when he turns to Haru and his voice is warm where the rest of him is cold. “Thank you, you didn’t have to do this.”
Haru believes he’s okay because Makoto is damn good at this if nothing else. He nods in response, head dipping, eyes catching in his fringe, and before he can say anything Makoto forces himself to turn and walk away from the sight.

“Makoto.”

He inhales and holds the breath tightly as he turns back around. Haru’s eyes flicker to his expanded chest before he meets Makoto’s strained expression. “You don’t have to be scared of it.” He nods at his leg. “Of yourself.”

Makoto forces one more placating smile. “I know, Haru. Good night.”

Haru isn’t convinced but doesn’t push it further, and Makoto’s both happy and sad that he knows when to stop fighting too.

He steps inside his house and as soon as the door is locked, the hiss of pain he’s held in for hours comes rushing through his teeth. He sucks in a deep breath but it catches in his throat as it swells with the anxiety he’s also pushed down.

Makoto lowers himself to the couch, knowing he won’t make it to the bedroom, and he’s breathing way too fast because he doesn’t want to do this, he wants just a minute longer of pretending he’s like everyone else, like he was before, he’d even take all this pain if it meant he could take everything for granted like he did before.

Makoto drags a hand through his damp hair and presses the other over his mouth, where he can feel his pulse thrum in his lips. The pain is so intense that it’s vibrating in his teeth, aching in every knob of his spine, and he’s faced with the decision of either getting this over with or blacking out to have Sousuke find him, which would be more painful than anything else in the world because the only time he’s ever seen Sousuke cry was at the base hospital, after he yanked the blanket out of Makoto’s hands and stared down at what he had been hiding.

Makoto tips his head back, face twisting before he gives up, but doesn’t dare look as he rolls the right leg of his pants up. His fingers shake as they move over his – he can’t even call it skin anymore, it’s more scar than anything else. But he moves down past his knee to reach just below where there’s no calf, nothing human at all.

He almost passes out at the touch of warm metal because this part never gets easier nor any less horrifying. Taking himself apart is a sickening concept, one he’s never been able to grasp, but it’s almost a comfort to know that the artificial limb he detaches from his stump is just that – artificial.

Makoto drops the prosthetic like it’s burned him and despite that he doesn’t want to, he looks down at himself to see that below where the flesh of his right leg is turned inside out with burns from the compound explosion, his stump is swelled, blistered with abrasions and inflamed.

He turns away in disgust, pulling the blanket from the armrest to cover himself. He tries to lie down but he has no balance now, unable to position himself in a way that’s comfortable, and he becomes so frustrated that he grabs the nearest pillow and curls around it, not even having the strength to scream.

He cries a lot more than seven tears that night.
Makoto’s prosthetic and leg pain – there are a lot of different artificial limbs out there and there’s thousands of soldiers that have them. Makoto’s artificial limb is called a transtibial prosthetic, which is used to replace parts missing below the knee. Giving him an injury above the knee would have made it more difficult for him to get around normally because he would’ve had to have an artificial knee joint as well.

There’s also further damages to his leg because Makoto’s amputation was a self-amputation, which he did after his leg got caught under that beam in the explosion from his flashback in the last chapter. Due to the fact that Makoto did it himself and he was burned, the rest of his leg was left severely damaged, which further complicates his prosthetic.

Makoto was in all that pain because one, he was doing extensive physical activity by pushing himself too hard and two, missing physical therapy, where prosthetics are
frequently adjusted and users learn how to better maneuver them and such. Makoto is not supposed to over exert his leg because if it’s inflamed when he’s getting fitted then the prosthetic won’t fit right when the swelling goes down, which would make it a bad fit and might even prevent him from using it.

Because he ignored the doctor visits and continued to push himself, Makoto’s leg swelled and chafed where the prosthetic was attached, which messed up the fit and caused so much pain. It wasn’t the artificial limb was hurting him – it was the stump, which can have issues all on its own, such as temperature control, fluids shifting, shrinking muscles, and moisture management, which aided the pain. Makoto's over exertion results in blistering, pressure ulcers, abrasions to the skin, and all of the above side effects such as inflammation, swelling, chafing. Pretty bad deal.

How’d Haru know about the injury so quickly – Haru does not know it’s an artificial limb but he knows it’s a serious injury. If he had only seen that Makoto was limping then he might think differently, but he’s perceptive and noticed that Makoto has rested his weight on his hip not only in the pantry but also at school when Haru talked to him about Gou. He knows it’s a bad injury if he’s had it long enough to form that kind of habit but he doesn’t yet know it’s a prosthetic.

Haru sucking the lemon – craving salt and sour foods is a side effect of anemia. So he was not purposely trying to make Makoto freak out lol.
Chapter Notes

Big wet tearful uncomfortable embarrassing hugs to aleishadreams for the hoooooot depiction of rentboy!rin, and to butts-and-kisses for their screamingly adorable depiction of Sousuke and Echo. You all make me do the Carlton Dance at inappropriate times with the joy you've brought me.

This chapter was beta'd by sierrasuke (twitter | tumblr) and saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter) thank you both so much!

I hope these two chapters will help you step away from your own lifely ridiculousness for a time <3 relax and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The moon is high over the water when Haru makes it back to the familiar row of pastel cabins lining the beach after walking Makoto home. He steps into the sand, too dazed to realize he didn’t take his shoes off, and goes to the shore as if magnetized to it.

He is welcomed by warm mist clinging to his face and he breathes in the salty air, lungs expanding to take in more of it until he’s lightheaded. The breeze makes the neighbor’s wind chimes tangle and the seals are howling from a rock formation in the distant water. The waves roll across the beach like thunderclouds, dark with white reflections of moonlight flashing through them like lightning. Seagulls muddle together on the roofs of the cabins, shaking out their wings to send feathers into the wind and through the air to the ocean, where they get swept up in the rising tide and drown in a crash of waves.
Haru’s pulse is quick and heavy as it thrums through his fingers. He curls the digits of his hand into a stubborn fist before shoving it in his pocket with a shake of his head to try and clear it, though his thoughts continue to rush by like the feathers spiraling around him in their race to the sea.

He’ll never confess out loud to having these bodily reactions but inside his own head he can admit to knowing that these responses are due to Makoto.

Haru instinctively tenses up a bit when meeting anyone’s gaze, but having his stomach drop each time his blue eyes meet green is a strange new addition. His nerves quivered so much at dinner that he was feeling nauseous and his over-analyzing gave him a fucking headache. It didn’t help that he was drunk – that just enhanced everything, especially Makoto’s voice, which is too sweet to match his smirk.

But above all else, Makoto’s got Haru so responsive because he carries and guards a part of himself (his leg injury) like Haru does his heroin addiction.

It’s so clear in both situations that something is off about him and Makoto, a hesitancy that builds walls around them – cages.

Haru can’t be intimate because of it. He can fuck, resist meeting eyes and withstand touching when it isn’t necessary in the act, but he can never really be close.

Of course he still wants that connection, of course he does. That’s one of the things he misses most about heroin – the fantasies he had while he was high felt so real and so right. He was a different person inside his own head, someone who didn’t go rigid when they were about to be touched – he welcomed it, it made him feel good. Reality isn’t as kind. Not even during sex is he brave enough to want it.

Instead he closes himself off, never stays afterwards, and doesn’t call back. He’s cold and he never wanted it to be that way but it has to be because he has to wear his pain across his skin in the form of track marks, and they’re impossible not to notice up close. He doesn’t want them to be acknowledged, probably just as much as Makoto doesn’t want his leg injury to be realized, by anyone around him.

For Makoto, he could have his own scars or there could be metal plates drilled between his bones, making him feel less human. Either way, Haru saw it when he was asked to sit down on that park bench. He never thought he’d see so much self-loathing in anyone’s eyes other than his own.

Haru does not know what the specific damages are to the limb but his observations tell him that Makoto’s had the injury for a while, long enough for him to lapse into the habit of resting his weight on one hip. He did it at the soup kitchen, both in the pantry and cafeteria, as well as when they spoke at school and also outside the restaurant.

Makoto has to be in a lot of pain for him to stand like that more often than not. He’s surely aware of hurting and his compulsive habit but even so, he clearly doesn’t want to injury to be addressed. Haru isn’t even sure if Nagisa or Rei know about it.

Or Sousuke.

That’s a whole new issue on top of everything else that he doesn’t know how to handle. Seeing Sousuke was overwhelming, so much so that Haru needs a week in the tub with multiple bubble baths and bottles of liquor to even process it, but he can’t allow himself that because Sousuke, who
saw Haru at his darkest, is close with Makoto and definitely will not have any hesitancy in telling him all about that night five years ago.

Despite that there’s no biological connection, Haru is convinced that Makoto and Sousuke think of each other as brothers in another sense. He doubts they ever worked together as policemen and adopted the title there before Makoto became a teacher. Though he’s definitely got the body for that line of work. Probably wouldn’t look bad in a uniform either. Or hand cuffs.

“Shit,” Haru splutters, ass hitting the ground when the force of that mental image hits him. “Shit.”

He drags a hand through his hair before scrubbing it over his face, struggling to refocus on the issue at hand, whatever the fuck it was. He snorts because oh right, the impending doom of the world, how could he forget.

Haru realizes with a start that someone was probably adopted. His eyes narrow as he imagines Makoto and Sousuke being known as the Tachibana Brothers back in that town he was told so much about at dinner. Sousuke probably goes by Tachibana around those parts instead of Yamazaki, never being seen without Makoto and having no secrets between them – especially something as juicy as Haru being from a place where starved dogs find overdosed bodies before the cops do.

How excited he imagines Sousuke will be when he tells Makoto that Haru lived in a shack where the wood was damp with mold and rust crawled up the sinks, the syringes. After Sousuke tells him, Makoto will never be able to see Haru as anything more than what he was that night: a ninety pound deadbeat who hadn’t been outside for days and hadn’t had anything but heroin in his body for even longer.

Perhaps there will be some sincerity in Makoto’s pitying humor but even if he didn’t laugh at all, Haru wouldn’t want that sympathy because it wouldn’t be real. Makoto can’t understand him – he’s an elementary school teacher, he’s normal. Even with that injury, he doesn’t know what it’s like to be trapped like Haru was, so isolated from society that he’s the definition of a freak, so many unspeakable things keeping him up at night that he’s the definition of a monster.

Makoto won’t get what it’s like to wake up fighting for his life every day or killing just to stay alive.

Haru dips his head with a sigh because he can’t expect him to, doesn’t want that for him anyway. He can be adult enough to admit that he’s glad Makoto doesn’t carry that weight – such punishment is only for those who didn’t realize they were in too deep until their throat was slashed.

He touches his neck, pressing into the scar hidden under the tattoo there. The rough texture of the skin is evidence that night was real, that this nightmare of a life has always been real and he still doesn’t know how to escape it.

But he knows that getting closer to Makoto will only make it all worse. Haru will have to distance himself while managing to keep an eye on him, Sousuke as well. Especially now that he’s looking at Rin like a piece of meat.

He hears the familiar slide of their back door being pushed open and Haru turns around, gazing across the expanse of the beach to watch Rin slide the glass partition closed. He steps into the sand with bare feet and treks down the shore, hair flying wild with his chin tucked against the wind.

His sweatpants are rolled up low on his hips to reveal fresh gauze wrapped around his side, where Nitori pulled out chunks of glass. The fresh bandages explain the awful stench of peroxide Rin
brings with him as he eases down beside Haru, grunting, “Thought you were already asleep. Thought you got home before us.”

“No,” Haru replies, offering no further detail because he is not dealing with the waggling eyebrows that will show up if he tells Rin that he was with Makoto. “Gou asleep?”

“Yeah.” Rin ties off his hair with the band around his wrist, though some strands break loose to catch in his narrowing eyes. “Where were you then?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Haru watches his own fingers roll over his Converse in an anxious thrum. “Rather talk about how much of a dumbass you are for talking to – to him alone.”

“Him?”

Haru grits his jaw, voice drawing into a tight hiss. “Sousuke.”

Rin’s eyes narrow further until they’re sharp at the edges, their bold color standing out in the night. “You think I can’t handle myself?”

That’s so far from the truth that Haru burns with frustration, fire rawing his voice as he snaps, “I think that you’re fucking insane!”

He immediately wants to take it back because he knows he’s just lashing out with all these emotions he’s feeling at once but doesn’t know how to convey.

But instead of being in this present moment, he’s stuck in all of the memories he’d rather bury than resurrect and face: the sear of lit cigarettes against his skin, the burn of that whiskey Kazuki loved so much, the soft brush of Makoto’s hand, the ice that clawed down his back when he first met Sousuke’s eyes.

Haru opens his mouth to apologize but by Rin’s expression, it appears he’s more surprised than hurt by the outburst. Haru waits for him to retort just as irrationally but instead Rin looks away in silence, which speaks volumes of the distress he must be in himself, because he usually lashes out with just as much heat as Haru does when he snaps at him.

Rin is loud and dramatic but not when he’s really feeling the pressure of everything around him. He goes quiet when he’s closing himself off, pulling away.

Haru isn’t having that shit tonight. “Look at me,” he says. Demands. Doesn’t really have the best comforting tone in the world.

Rin does so with jerky movements, muscles coiling tight until his collarbones stand out against the hunch of his shoulders. Haru says, “I know you’re capable of protecting yourself.”

Rin worries his lip with the points of his teeth, mouth twisting into a bitter grin. “I’m not though. None of us are.”

Haru is about to give another heated response, but Rin lunges forward to snap, “Not when we’re in this fucked up city, not when there’s Miho, not when we’re just a bunch of drug dealers and prostitutes and liars and killers and –”

Haru cranes back and goes very still. “You were drinking coffee.”
Rin rears back so fast that he has to catch himself on his elbows. He shakes his head quickly, eyes round. “Nuh-uh.”

“I smell it. Ya-huh.”

“N–”

Haru is so fed up that he tosses a handful of sand at him. Rin’s defensive stance is the fetal position but when the grains land in his hair, he jerks up like he might really hit Haru. Just before Rin’s about to strangle the life out of him, he appears to realize this is all useless, flopping back on the ground to shake the sand from his hair and mutter under his breath, “Fucking all-seeing jackass bitchnut.”

Rin hates coffee like Haru hates cigarettes, only drinking it at times when he needs to remember where he comes from despite that the place left him with memories most people would like to forget. Coffee takes him back to his mom’s house, where she drank pot after pot of steaming black liquid and threatened to throw it in Rin’s face if he didn’t do the things she asked of him, things a mother should never ask of her son.

The taste of coffee, cigarettes – they take Rin and Haru back to their own dark places, reminding them that they have to keep going, try to rise above but still do whatever it takes to survive.

“What were you staying up for?”

Rin pops one of the rubber bands around his wrist. He was counting money, most likely his week’s earnings and stressing over how much he’ll lose in his week of recovery.

“You’re not going to be out of work forever,” Haru says as he kicks more sand at Rin, who responds by throwing a scrap of driftwood at his head. “I’ve got deals all this week but we have enough in savings to make it even if I didn’t. We’ll be fine.”

Rin picks through the dried seaweed scattered around them and pinches two feathers between his fingers – one is as black as the ink of his cherry blossom branch tattoo and the other is as white as the skin around the hawk on Haru’s neck. Rin stares at the feathers and shakes his head at them. “You can’t promise that.”

His voice is quiet under the crash of the tide, which is climbing higher up the beach with each passing minute. Rin opens his hand to let the feathers go and they whip through the air, flying blindly toward the dark, treacherous water. They break apart from where they were together, the wind carrying them off in different directions. But they both end up washing away, the undertow pulling them down into a darkness they’ll never rise from. They’ll never again be in the sky, free as they’re supposed to be, but bound to those deep, endless shadows and drowned. “Can’t promise that.”

“Yes,” Haru says, lifting his brows in challenge. “I can.”

Rin doesn’t say anything, just looks exhausted, and the dark circles around his eyes encourage Haru to add, “You should get some sleep.”

“Yeah,” Rin snorts. “But I can’t. We have to talk about Sousuke.” He hesitates. “You’re sure that’s him? The one that...”
“Yes,” Haru says, throat spasming with the effort to keep his voice even.

Rin’s breath leaves him in a whoosh that’s so heavy he has to brace his elbows on his knees. He takes a moment before nodding to himself. “Okay. I believe you.”

Haru stiffens. “But what?”

He hears Rin’s barbell dancing against the back of his teeth in a habitual nervous gesture. “But I don’t think he’s undercover this time.”

Haru jerks back, disbelief rushing through him so intensely that his legs drop from where they were tight against his chest. “You don’t seriously think that he let you go out of the goodness of his heart.”

“I didn’t say that!” Rin gets up to stalk through the tide and kick up the water in his frustration. “I’m just – I don’t know why, okay?! But I don’t think it was because – ‘cause he was ordered to do it or some shit!”

“Then why?” Haru tears off his socks and shoes and hauls himself up to stand in Rin’s way, stopping right in front of him and radiating just as much hostile energy.

Rin’s hands tighten into fists and Haru’s do the same because he’s fucking ready to fight anyone at this point, so far gone in his own stress, but then his clenched hands go slack when Rin chuckles, shaking his head as his mouth twists. “It took a whole year for you to tell me what happened that night.”

Guilt swells in Haru’s chest, forcing him to turn away. “It wasn’t because I didn’t trust you.”

“Doesn’t mean it didn’t weird me out just as much. Or hurt.” Rin’s brows are shiny, wet with mist as they crease. “You barely spoke to me at all that year. Avoided everyone. Worked for Miho night and day, came back to the soup kitchen beat to shit almost as bad as I was. At least until…” Rin nods solemnly at Haru’s neck, where he saw that long, jagged wound before it was covered up by a tattoo.

Rin takes a deep breath to lift himself out of that painful memory. “It wasn’t a surprise that was what made you come clean about everything. The dealing. Miho. Sousuke.”

Rin stares out at the water with a gaze that’s almost as firm as his voice. “Feel however you want to about this. But I was so thankful for him being there that night because your dad ended up dead and he couldn’t hurt you anymore.”

Haru’s lungs snag on a rough breath and Rin looks up at the noise before snorting at his expression. “I’m not saying he’s a good person. But he was your way out back then and I think he can be that again.”

Haru’s already shaking his head in defiance, causing Rin to persist with a vengeance. “He can help us get relay off the streets, Haru!”

“Yeah.” Haru nods. “He can also help us get our tongues cut out when Miho finds out we’ve been talking to a cop.” He’s so serious that he can already taste the rust of blood and razorblades in his mouth.
“Miho is terrified of the police,” Rin retorts, lifting his chin in confidence of his words. “You know how many times they’ve been on our asses? She’s got plenty of us by the balls to get some families killed if she demanded it but she doesn’t. Instead she runs off and hides while we’re out here sweating bullets, can’t find her or get in touch with her until everything calms down. She is scared shitless.”

Haru shrugs because that might be true, but that doesn’t bring him any closer to being onboard with this idea.

But Rin is tireless with his insistence and that makes Haru almost want to give in because he trusts his judgment – he’s never wrong in his impressions of people and in all the years he’s known Rin, he’s never seen him as sure of anyone as he is Sousuke.

“No one in any gang will be able to do a damn thing but stay on their toes when he starts an investigation on relay.” Rin shakes Haru with adamant hands on his shoulders. “Me and you, all of us, we already stay on our toes. We can handle a little more police activity.”

That makes Haru go rigid with a horrified thought and he stumbles when the next wave barrels through him in its rush to the shore. He manages to catch himself and starts shaking his head before he’s even straightened back up. “Getting relay off the streets means taking down the dealers.”

Rin isn’t as quick with his response to that.

Haru says, “I’ll get busted. So will Asahi. Nao. Nii.” He stresses each name without a care for the emotion making his voice go hoarse. “The cops will find out we’re connected with Samezuka and they’ll come after Nakagawa and Aki, too. Sousuke will arrest you when it comes down to it, Rin. I know you know that. You’re trying to find a way around it and there isn’t one. I’m sorry.”

Rin’s face is strained as he grasps at straws. “You’re the best at what you do and so are Nao, Asahi, and Nii. The dealers in the other gangs will get caught before you do, and by then Miho will realize it’s too much of a risk and stop distributing it.”

“That’s the best case scenario.” Haru can’t help but go cold with bitterness. “It’s also the one that never happens for us. There’s too many ways this can go wrong –”

“I’m saying,” Rin’s voice crawls into a tight shout, “that this is a start. That we might not –” His breath hitches, eyes reddening with unshed tears. “We are so fucked any way this goes. If it goes wrong, we all go to jail. If it goes right, we don’t have any way to make money and I have to give Gou up before she grows up to be like us.”

“She won’t,” Haru blurts, determination burning through him, but under that fire is a stronger one called fear because he knows he is powerless against that happening if Gou is subjected to the streets. But a foster home could be such an awful experience that it could end up sending her down a dark path as well.

Rin’s eyes are so miserable and tired that Haru barely recognizes him. “Fucked if it works, fucked if it doesn’t. But we’re even more fucked if we keep going like this.”

Haru wants to consider himself and his friends capable of winning this war, but they’ve been in it so long that they’re all casualties, no matter if some of them are still breathing or not. He feels sick as Kazuki’s face flashes through his mind.
“We’re the people we would’ve been terrified of when we were kids,” Rin says. “Gou would be too, if she knew about what we’ve done.”

“What we’ve had to do,” Haru tries weakly. “What Miho’s forced us to do.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Rin wraps his arms around his middle, his breath quickening. His mouth trembles as he rushes into a panic. “I can’t keep doing this Haru, my body can’t keep doing it. You’re dying just as much as I am and so is everyone else. And I don’t know what kind of shitty life we’ll have when this is over but this has got to stop.”

His expression shifts into one Haru hasn’t seen in a long time, not since Rin was that teenage punk with all the crazy dreams. “I have enough of myself left in me to still think that we’re more than this.”

Haru is shocked that Rin doesn’t even care that he’s crying – he usually tries to hide it, which is exasperating given how easy it is for him to tear up, but now Haru wishes he’d do that because the sight makes him want to give into the stinging in his own eyes. “Please, give him a chance because he’s the only one we’ve got,” Rin says.

Haru blinks rapidly, looking down at the comforting sight of the water. He turns away from his reflection with his mouth twisted into a disgusted snarl.

Rin waits as the tension strings tighter between them. But then Haru sighs and the weight is lifted by the sound. “I can bribe Miho into giving me Asahi, Nao, and Nii’s relay. I’ll give them my route – it’s safer with drop-offs that have plenty of exits and space so one of them can watch the others’ backs at all times. There’s still risks with them dealing at all right now but I’m confident in their skills to not get caught, especially on my route. I’ll take their routes. I’m going to be the one taking the risk and I won’t go along with this if it’s any other – get off me or I will drown you.”

Rin pulls back from the crushing hug with a bright gaze and an even brighter smile. Haru rolls his eyes and brushes off his clothes. “The next shipment of drugs comes in the morning. I’ll pick it up like I always do but I’m going to tell Miho the relay wasn’t there. I’m going to give it to Sousuke. I won’t be able to get away with double crossing Miho again – he’ll have to come through on this.”

“How will you get it to him?”

Haru stares out at the ocean where the lights of a barge are flickering in the distance. The horn blares to life and hums through the water, rippling the surface. “Sousuke has no idea what he’s getting into. But if he wants it, then he’s getting it in a way that will show him there’s no going back. I’m doing this my way.” There isn’t an ounce of hesitation to be found in his expression.

“Didn’t expect it any other way, jackass.”

They’re headed back up the beach when Haru pauses, causing Rin to turn to him with a puzzled blink. “I know he helped you,” Haru says. “Even though I don’t know why. But I can’t expect him to be anything other than what he is.”

“A cop,” Rin clarifies.

Haru nods. “He has a job to do and this isn’t going to change that.”

Rin’s brows jump before they crease with acceptance. But Haru still isn’t convinced he really gets
what he’s saying. “We can’t be expected to be anything other than what we are, either.”

“Dealers. Prostitutes.”

“If it comes down to Freebird and the Police Department…” He sighs. “If it comes down to us or him, you need to ask yourself if you’re ready to face that.” He lifts his chin, “I am and the others will be too – we’ve all figured out that not being able to sleep at night is better than being dead. Ask yourself if you can take that shot not because I need to hear you say you can but because I don’t want you to hesitate in that moment and end up dead. Because if I see that happen – if your family sees that happen, Sousuke will die in a way that will land all of us in prison for the rest of our lives.”

He heads up the beach as Rin stares back at the brewing storm across the ocean.

Sousuke takes a deep breath that does nothing to cool him down – in fact, the added time for the exaggerated intake just gives him more time to think about all the ways this is complete and total bullshit.

Seijuro is struggling to remain composed just as much as he is, sitting beside him with his arms crossed tight over his chest and his jaw a rigid line.

Corro sits at the other side of the desk and he’s lounging back in his chair with a coolness that makes Sousuke want to throw a fucking bag of ice in his face. “I’ve heard of relay,” Corro sighs. “There’s been cases of it in surrounding cities but I doubt it’s worth all the hype.” He raises his brows. “Much less all the funding it would take to begin an investigation on it.”

In return, Sousuke lifts his own brows as high as they’ll go and is about to say something he shouldn’t when Seijuro kicks his leg under the desk. “We’ve heard it combines the effects of all the major drugs in circulation around Iwatobi. Weed, cocaine, heroin, every knock off in between.”

Seijuro chooses his next words carefully, expression pinching as if he doesn’t want to be too insistent with his boss but he needs to stress the severity of the situation. “If that’s true, it’ll be no time at all before there’s so much of it on the streets that we won’t ever be able to get it out of the city.”

“Yes, if that’s true,” Corro drawls so slowly like Sousuke and Seijuro have just come to him in all professional seriousness and said they are hanging up their badges for sporty little sailor hats and headed out to sea to hunt the fucking kraken.

Sousuke’s glad that Echo’s with Makoto because if she were with him, he would’ve already given her a command that would’ve got him tackled and tased.

“Drugs have been around here a long time,” Corro says. “Heroin’s always been the top seller, always will be. I’ve found it in alleys and gym lockers and between the pages of old ladies’ Bibles. It’s everywhere in Iwatobi and nothing’s going to replace it – nothing can. Meth is a strong runner up; it’s pretty easy for the dropouts to make it instead of going out and making something of themselves. It’s in all our schools and I wake up every day praying my kids will be stronger than the pressure to be like their friends and start using.” His expression is one of unashamed fear.

“Pot is all through the high schools, too,” Corro continues. “The climate here isn’t that good for growing it, not enough sunlight, but people find a way. That’s why you can’t find a lamp in any department store around here for miles.” He sobers up, staring down at his desk. “We’ve gone too long without another crocodile uprising, there’s bound to be one right around the corner.”
Sousuke freezes at the name of the drug that sent him undercover into Haru’s home five years ago. Corro must remember too, for he adds, “You helped us take down almost every major cookhouse in the city back when you were just a rookie, Yamazaki. We’ve been able to keep tabs on the locations you helped us bust, but. Well, cooking itself is a hard practice to track and it’s even harder to find all the people doing it in places like the outskirts. We’ve already busted two shacks out there this month for making croc.”

Sousuke’s head drops forward before he can catch it, the weight of exhaustion suddenly too heavy inside him. He’s not surprised by Corro’s words, not really. Though he’d like to be a little more upset that the countless hours of work leading up to his undercover mission were all for nothing.

It was that mission that told him nothing in Iwatobi or himself was going to get better any time soon. Five years later, it’s still apparently too soon for the change this city so desperately needs, one that it’s too settled in its ways to make.

“You’ll have your hands full soon enough, Yamazaki,” Corro assures, patting his desk with a nod. “But as for right now, I’m telling the both of you that there’s too many old favorites in this drug industry for there to be a new rising star. So let this go.”

Seijuro can’t help but strain forward. “Sir—”

“Let it go, Mikoshiba.”

Seijuro’s eyes are narrowed, but they’re cast to the floor in what might as well be submission. He nods and departs from Corro’s office with slow, calculated steps that indicate he’s holding back a storm that will be unleashed on a very unfortunate punching bag in the near future.

Sousuke rises to leave and find his own boxing gloves or maybe his old desert eagle, which he plans on firing off at the shooting range until they kick his ass out.

But Corro lifts a hand to make him pause. “Sit, Sousuke.”

He bites his tongue and does so, easing into the seat as his muscles ache. He settles his hands on the armrests, where his nails cut into the wood in an impatient pattern. He needs to get out of here and call Rin because having an investigation done officially isn’t going to happen, that much is obvious.

Sousuke doesn’t know enough about the crime lab to sneak in and look over the drug himself. Shit, he doesn’t even know how to turn on a microscope. He feels a little better about that when he realizes Seijuro probably couldn’t do such a thing either, but he could at least get the lab door open for him.

Maybe Momo knows something about science? Or chemistry? Biology? Doesn’t Ren want to be a pet psychologist or something else that Sousuke can’t even believe is a thing? What the hell do they even call a branch of science that’s dedicated to picking apart dog brains? Or street drugs, for that matter. He doesn’t know. He’ll settle for magic.

He is so fucking deliriously tired.

Corro’s voice stops him from giving into the darkness tunneling at the edges of his vision. “Even before you became a soldier, you carried yourself with the same sort of air you have now. Back then it was like you had already won and didn’t owe the world a damn thing.” He laces his fingers together against his chin in deep thought. “You’re still confident but it’s a different kind now. You
can’t accept no for an answer, not from anyone, especially yourself and your body. You’ve been staying here later and later every night, don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

Sousuke’s never been one to appreciate being told how he feels, not back when he was a rookie with an attitude problem and most especially not now when he’s got real shit to be defensive about. “I’ve been taking care of myself by myself for a long time,” Sousuke clips. “It’s not an issue to be concerned with.”

Corro’s brow arches with his smirk. “See what I mean?”

Sousuke’s nostrils flare on an angry exhale. Corro isn’t intimidated. “I noticed the change when you first started working here again but – this running on empty thing has gotten worse since you found that body in the dumpster.” His voice softens just a note. “I know you’ve seen worse things than that. What was it about him that made you go down like this?”

Sousuke scoffs bitterly, rubbing a hand over his eyes as colors flash in his mind, red blood and green camouflage and all the shades of his troopes’ eyes that went dark on his watch. He doesn’t know what color Kazuki’s were, but knows it’s his eyes that he’s seeing in his nightmares along with everyone else’s.

He wishes he had on his gear right now and wishes that the sun was baking into his scalp, searing away all these bullshit conflicts that are eating him alive. Fuck, he just wants to be in the middle of a firefight where he belongs and stop pretending, playing this game, acting like he’s fucking fine, he needs to go back because that’s the only place where it’s okay to turn it all off – “You miss it, don’t you?”

Sousuke mouths for words but he’s speechless. Corro leans back in his chair not as smugly as he expected him to. “My dad was military too,” Corro explains. “Never could relax when he got home, even though he was safe and we were with him, me and my brothers, our mom. Being in war…” He waves a hand through the air back and forth, over and over. “It’s constant adrenaline. He said it gives you this brand of fear that’s addicting, and when he wasn’t able to feel it anymore, he just… didn’t want to feel anything else.” He sighs. “ Wouldn’t go to a doctor about it, ended up killing himself when I was twenty three.”

Sousuke is surprised at being told such an intimate story. “I’m sorry.”

Corro nods, eyes grave. “I see you going down the same path. I don’t want that for you.” He snorts, grinning with exasperation. “Your stupid ass reminds me more of my son than my dad, actually. You look just damn like him.”

Sousuke glances over at a frame on the wall where there’s a photo of Corro with a teenage boy, who does in fact have Sousuke’s stubborn eyes and thick hair. Beside the two of them in the photo is a woman with pitch black irises and blonde curls, which are tight and shiny with too much hairspray. She’s wearing a wedding ring and so is Corro, therefore Sousuke assumes she’s his wife.

“I want you to forget about this relay thing, Sousuke,” Corro insists, drawing his attention back to him. “For your own good, I’m asking you to take some time off. I care about you, boy. We need you here.”

At Sousuke’s hesitant silence, Corro sighs and adds, “Look, it would all be different if we could get our hands on a larger supply of relay but that hasn’t happened yet. You’ll be the first to know if it
does. But you need to worry about yourself right now.”

Sousuke’s chest burns and swells as he takes a deep breath and he grimaces at the ache. “Fine,” he bites.

“Good,” Corro smirks. “Now go, take care of yourself. And stop drinking that instant coffee, I can smell your fucking breath from here.”

Sousuke rolls his eyes on his way out of the office. He shuffles down the hall, not caring to pick up his feet, and he’s rubbing at his shoulder when a scream rips the air in two.

His focus zeroes in so quickly that his ears ring and he gets dizzy. Seijuro and Momo pop out of his office but Sousuke rushes past them toward the noise, hand pressed tight against the holster at his side.

The scream has faded into anxious babbling and he follows the sound into the mailroom at the end of the hall. No one has any weapons pointed but that’s barely a relief because he still doesn’t know what the hell is going on. “What happened?”

It is the clerk who’s fretting, her eyes wide and cast down at something that fell from the mail chute – Sousuke can’t see what she’s looking at because his line of sight is blocked by her desk and she’s standing behind it.

He makes his way around with cautious movements before halting when he steps on something.

Momo dips under his arm and Seijuro looks over his shoulder as he moves his foot to reveal a clear little baggie meshed against the tiles.

“Fuck me to tears,” Seijuro blurts, stumbling around the desk to gasp when he looks down at the floor. He gives the clerk a wild look. “How – MOMO, DO NOT TOUCH IT.”

“I didn’t bring that shit in!” She waves her arms wildly before thrusting a finger at the mail shoot. “It came out of there!”

Sousuke walks around the desk numbly, bracing himself before looking down.

The little baggies full of relay strips are strewn across the floor, stray packs caught on the edges of the mail chute before falling to join the massive pile before him.

Sousuke’s jaw has never dropped further in his entire life.

He flashes his cell phone light up into the chute, where he sees nothing. He leans back, eyes narrowing before going wide.

“That son of a bitch.”

He throws himself back into the hallway and with no time to wait for the elevator, he hurdles down the nearest staircase, his breath reduced to a wheeze when he finally reaches the bottom floor. He tries to not be too much of a jerk as he pushes through the lobby and hauls open the entrance doors but even after all that effort to be a nice guy, he has to catch himself on the railing of the stairs because they’re slick from the morning rain and apparently no part of this can be easy.
His blood is racing at a speed that makes him waver until it freezes in his veins when his gaze meets another through the crowd.

Sousuke pulls himself out of his own shock to take off after Haru, damning the crowd as it grows with the morning commute. A red light flares to life just as he’s racing across the street and he’s so done that he lifts both hands to send double birds at the taxi driver that’s cussing him out while he continues to give chase.

He pushes through the foot traffic and stumbles onto a quieter street, where there’s no head of dark hair in sight. Sousuke spins around about four times, blinking hard as if that will make Haru reappear, but he has no such luck.

He hunches over to catch his breath but it hitches when his phone rings. He digs it out of his pocket and wipes at the sweat on his face, panting, “Sergh – Yama –”

“Corro’s pissed,” Seijuro whispers, excitement lighting his voice. “He’s in the mailroom and deeming all the relay as an outside threat.”

Sousuke scoffs high and loud. “Fucking duh.”

“We got an investigation.”

He finds himself on the curb, unsure as to how he maneuvered himself there in his shock. “We… we do?”

“Yes. Me and you are leading it. We – Sousuke I can hear you powerwalking, turn that ass right back around and go home first. We are not starting until you take a fucking nap and a shower and sit the hell down, do not even think about coming back up in here and subjecting me to that shit again.”

Sousuke can’t help but give up and laugh as he accepts his terms.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork of Haru and Rin by niansue!
"Baby, some people are made to be loved and others just make it."

Zayn feat. Kehlani - "Wrong"

He’s tucked against the passenger door of his mom’s truck, digging for purchase in the ripped leather interior as he longs for a seatbelt to protect him from her reckless driving, which gets so much worse when she’s upset like this. Tears are streaking through her makeup and glistening on her painted lips as she worries them with the sharp points of her teeth. Her bangles clang with each cut of the steering wheel and her cheap necklaces color the skin of her neck in faded green rings.

He looks down at his sister sitting between them in the cab, the one lasting seatbelt wrapped around her as she slouches against him, heavy and dead to the world. He’s amazed that she can stay snoring through their mom’s driving, but he gets that she’s tired from the hospital visit with their dad.

“We’re going to Dai’s house,” his mom says. Her voice always fades into a quiet hiss at the end of a sentence because of her piercing teeth. He hopes he never sounds so awful even though his mouth is the same as hers. He hates looking in a mirror because of that and makes an effort to talk with his chin down so no one can look past his lips.

But right now he has his teeth on full, merciless display as he curls his lips over them in a snarl. “We’re not going over there, he makes Gou cry.”

His mom growls out an angry sigh, mascara smearing as she wipes her eyes. Her voice is tight with stress. “I’m providing for you the only way I know how to. Your dad’s too spaced out for me to even make him understand that the insurance quit on us and the house is gone, it’s been gone for weeks and we don’t have anywhere to go other than Dai’s.”

“Me and Gou are staying with Grandma.” His voice is firm but he holds his sister’s hand, which is sticky from the apple juice she spilled all over herself at the hospital and clammy from the truck’s lack of air conditioning in the drenching July humidity.

He smears the sweat droplets from his eyelashes and digs through the trash in the floorboard, trying
to find his water bottle for Gou to have when his mom shouts, “You are not staying with Grandma and you will not tell me you’re staying with Grandma! You’re coming with me because she’s kicking me out and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let that woman treat me this way and tell my kids who I am!”

He rears up, flinging newspaper as he lashes out. “She’s kicking you out because she found out you’re cheating on Dad!”

“I am not cheating on him!” She pushes down on the gas and the truck accelerates until she can barely control it as it dips off the road and sprays mud across his window. “I waited,” she cries out at the highway, hands bony and tight against the wheel. “I waited until he went into the hospital and can’t even remember what…” She swallows, struggling to keep her eyes on the road as they brim with more tears. “Can’t even remember the flavor of our wedding cake.”

The air thickens in the silence until it becomes so much that it bursts, her fist cracking down on the dashboard in an explosion of rage. The truck fishtails until she jerks it straight, hissing, “I deserve to be happy after all those nights he was out on that piece of shit boat and left me to take care of two kids that look too much like him!”

“You were giving Dai blowjobs way before Dad went into the hospital, Dai told me so!” He crosses his arms, huddling closer to the window with a murmur of, “Stupid bitch.”

She cuts the wheel so hard that it knocks the breath out of him. Chunks of dirt fly up at the windshield as the tires burn through the mud, heating the air with the stench of smoke.

The truck lurches to a stop so suddenly that he has to catch Gou before she can hit her head on the dashboard. His sister jerks awake, mumbling in sleepy confusion, and he’s about to come up with some reassuring lie to tell her when their mom kicks open her door and rounds the truck to then yank open his as well.

She rips him from the cab with a stoic expression that remains intact, even as Gou reaches for her brother and cries out for him in terror. Even with the pain it brings Rin, he forces himself to kick the door closed so that she won’t fall out by trying to chase after him.

She bangs her little fist against the window but he shakes his head, eyes pleading for her to stay in the relative safety of the vehicle. He’ll get her out and run if he needs to, but for now he’s busy thrashing against his mom’s hold, which vanishes as she pushes him away.

He stumbling but catches himself before he can hit the mud. The close call infuriates him, and he opens his mouth to scream at her but she slaps him, ripping his voice clear out of his mouth.

His head snaps to the side so hard that he hears a crack and a shocking heat pulses through his neck. From that day on, it will hurt whenever he moves it a certain way but he’ll never tell anyone about the injury because he’ll already be carrying a part of her in himself – that ache in his neck. He won’t want to speak of that July afternoon by the highway and manifest her through his voice, no matter how much agony he will be in.

She forces their gazes together and crouches down to his level, breathing hard, hissing like a fanged snake. Her teeth are stained from black coffee and he can smell it on her breath, making him shudder.

She smooths her fingers down his cheek and the fake diamonds in her rings cut against his skin.
“You’re going to think what you want about me,” she says, pinching his chin with an acrylic nail that smells so bad that he might get sick. “But you are going to do as I say.”

He’s so defeated that he can’t help but start to cry.

She smears his tears away with her thumbs. “I’ve cried a lot about this too. But it’s not about what I want or what you and Gou want.” She levels their gazes, words branding into his mind in a way that he’ll never forget. “It’s about keeping your eyes open and your lungs moving.”

She shakes her head at him firmly. “It’s not about what feels good or what hurts. You can’t ever let that matter to you because you’re not going to be able to think like normal people. You can’t have their lives – you were born into this one and there’s no getting another one. If you see a light at the end of this tunnel then it’s a train, baby, and you need to run from it because you’re going to keep hearing it roaring after you and it’ll chase you until you think it’s fate and high time things got better but they don’t, Rin.”

She runs a hand up through his long hair. “You’ve got an advantage over other people, one you got to use. You know what it is?”

He shakes his head.

“You’re pretty. And that’s all you’ll ever need if you know how to use it.” Her face is blank, eyes vacant, but a stray tear falls down her cheek as she whispers, “I just wish you didn’t have to use it this early in life.”

The weights are so heavy that his muscles pull taunt and bulge as he lifts them. After he hauls himself up and over the chin-up bar a few dozen times, he climbs on top of it to wrap his legs around the bar so he’s suspended upside down. He lifts himself back up and down in a series of curls, his abdomen flexing hard with each deep breath that he takes on the way up. Even when he’s thoroughly spent, he tangles his hands in a rope to drag a tractor tire across the gym until his back is aching and strained.

Rin finishes up with two miles on the treadmill and sprawls across the nearest mat to cuss the ceiling out as he pants. He rips his earbuds out and lets the silence of the gym ring in his ears. His hair falls from the tie to splay across his face in damp strands and he pushes them back as he sits up to glance at himself in the mirrored wall, where he sees that he looks wrecked with his hair disheveled and all his muscles twitching.

Good thing he looks best when he’s wrecked. He used to think that he was supposed to stay composed as a sex worker, never breaking a sweat, but he learned that making the kind of money he needed wouldn’t happen if he just laid there. He puts in 110% and that effort is what makes him unforgettable and keeps his schedule full.

It’s a tough job to keep up that quality of work, but it’ll be a special challenge to relax with someone after what happened with his last clients.

Rin looks down at his bare side, where his stitches have been removed but the scar lingers. He’s already made an appointment with the tattoo parlor to have the wound covered up like the rest of them, but he’s dreading it because he’s still sore from the car wreck even after that long week off.
But he’s got to get it over with because he isn’t allowed to have any blemishes, especially scars. Rin arches a brow at himself in the mirror because the entire expanse of his skin is going to be covered in black ink if Miho doesn’t cut him some slack soon. He snorts – *that’s* never going to happen. She wants her rentboys and callgirls to have the most flawless bodies possible, despite that they’ve all got at least one stab or gunshot wound. She’s unsympathetic to that, forcing them to let her check them over as frequently as she wants and it’s always the worst experience ever.

Miho allows him to have tattoos because he already looks like trouble with his teeth and tongue ring. Tattoos only help emphasize his look to bring in his specific clientele – people that like trouble.

He stares down at the tight, shiny scar, blinking tiredly as he wishes to just leave the thing there and try to accept it. It really wouldn’t be that big of an issue for him, he knows he looks damn good and no one’s going to notice it if they saw the rest of him naked, but leaving it exposed isn’t an option. He has to hide it like he has to hide the rest of himself.

Rin startles from his thoughts when he hears a gym bag hit the floor. He turns around to see Nakagawa with his brows raised at all the equipment strewn across the room. His voice is flat. “You gain three pounds on your week off or something?”

Rin flips him off because he doesn’t have the energy to come up with a useless retort to that. He finishes his bottle of water as Nakagawa sets up the weight bench to his liking, stepping over the plates Rin left on the floor instead of finding a reason to pick them up. He then reaches over his head to drag his shirt off and reveal his lean back and a cardinal tattoo over his left shoulder blade.

“Aww, how cute,” Kazuki smirked when he first saw it. “Did you guys know that male red birds are such pricks that they attack any other males they see?”

“Oh, like I’m about to fucking attack you?” Nakagawa cooed.

Kazuki blew a raspberry against his shoulder in retaliation. “They even attack themselves if they see their reflection. That’s some savage sh – get your bony ass romance hands out of my hair, Naka!”

Nakagawa is looking at himself in the mirror and his eyes darken before he turns away from the glass, his expression twisted in disgust.

“You need a spotter?” Rin blurts.

Nakagawa shrugs in response but Rin gets up anyway, catching himself on the wall as his energy rushes and drains. He wobbles over to the weight bench and quietly hopes that Naka won’t really need any help lifting the bar because he’s probably going to have to get Aki down here if that happens.

She’s upstairs in Samezuka reeling in a client, he’s pretty sure. The gym and private rooms are all underground and not included in the modern blueprints. Though Miho knows about the secret addition, she doesn’t have a copy of the old layout. That’s because Nii found the original blueprints under the glass bar at Seven Tears and snatched them before anyone realized the old papers were more than just vintage flare.

By studying the prints, Rin and the others found out that there are secret exits and passages all through the joint, which was a whorehouse some hundred years ago as well. The tunnels were used for the prostitutes to escape to safety if needed, though a trip to the historical section of the library told them that the women didn’t always make it to safety when drunken sailors came through and
fights broke out. Rin likes to think that those women watch over him and the other rentboys and callgirls as well – not to be creeps, but because if anyone gets how dangerous this line of work is, it is them.

Nakagawa is clearly resisting asking for help, despite that he struggles to lift the bar when more and more plates are added. Rin’s used to him being bullheaded (or what Aki calls “driven”) but now it’s as if Nakagawa thinks he has something to prove. That dark, determined set of his eyes unsettles Rin as much as he understands it.

They take a breather after a while, sitting on opposite ends of the weight bench and not meeting each other's gaze. The air between them is uncomfortable because there’s so much poised on the tip of Rin’s tongue but Nakagawa’s never ready to talk about anything and he doubts Kazuki’s death will be any different.

Naka scratches at his cropped hair with a grimace as he clears his throat. “You really shouldn’t have gave me your clients last week.”

Rin looks over at him with a brow lifted high, voice colored in sarcasm. “You didn’t have fun?”

“You’re paying my chiropractor bill because it was your clients who expected me to be as flexible as you. It’s not funny.” Nakagawa tosses a weight belt at him, making Rin laugh harder. “Excuse the hell out of me if I can’t touch the back of my feet with the back of my head! How do you even – did you have bones removed?”

Rin grins like an idiot. “No. I can show you how to do it.”

“You wish.” Nakagawa rolls his eyes. “Whatever, I am not filling in for you again. Can’t wait to get back to my depressed housewives. They bring me pies.”

“Bet they do,” Rin leers.

Nakagawa smirks around the lip of his water bottle before finishing it off. He leans back against the bar and crosses his arms, watching Rin closely. “So are you just fretting over yourself as usual or is this crazy gym routine about what happened?” He tips his head, slanting his eyes knowingly.

Rin tenses. “What do you mean?”

Nakagawa’s head dips further like this whole exchange is tiring him. “You really think getting stronger will stop you from getting jumped again?”

Rin sets his jaw. They can’t just talk shit like they used to; Nakagawa had to become a prick and make sure everyone knows it.

Rin looks down, trying not to acknowledge the scar at his side, which he can see out of the corner of his eye. “I’m not letting… what happened to me. Happen again.”

“You’ve been raped before, Rin.”

Hearing that word outside his own head is like being turned inside out, his pain exposed for all the world to see. He can’t remember how to put his mask back on but he tries to remain composed, swallow the bile, force the tears away. He wants to curl in on himself and hide in a dark place where no one can find him. He feels awful for not wanting to be touched by anyone ever again, not even
the people that love him.

He’s forgetting that he shouldn’t open up to Nakagawa, that he can’t do that anymore, but he can’t stop himself either. “I’m afraid of my body.”

“Huh?”

His words are fumbling, voice drawing out so much that he’s almost slurring. “I’m not saying I – I still like parts of myself a lot, I still want to show them off but it’s not… My body’s not mine anymore, it just – people think it’s theirs and it gets me hurt and I’m scared of it. It’s not an advantage anymore. It’s like I’m walking around with a pack of dogs around me. All the time.”

“It’s not yours in this job but it is an advantage,” Nakagawa says. “It’s a weapon in every way but the one you need it to be.” He pauses. “I’m sorry. You know I know how you feel.”

Rin scoffs, lurching off the bench to turn away before Nakagawa can see that he’s crying. But he’s so tired that he doesn’t have the strength to keep on pretending, so he faces him with uncontrolled fire in both his eyes and voice. “I can’t just forget about it like you do.”

Nakagawa shakes his head. “You have to. It’ll make you weak.”

“Oh my god, then fucking fine!” Rin’s laugh is high with exasperation. “Then I’m weak, fine, fine! But I am not weak for not being able to get over it in just seven days!” His throat closes up and he looks away. “It doesn’t… does not make me weak even if I never got over it the first time.”

Nakagawa opens his mouth but Rin’s eyes silence him. “I was a kid. And I’m not listening to anyone who tries to tell me I was anything other than strong for making it through that.”

Nakagawa sighs, dipping his head in a nod. His voice is quiet and for a moment he sounds like his old self. “You are strong, that’s why I don’t understand why this messes you up so bad.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“You’re always going to have clients that are into it.” Nakagawa shrugs. “You’ve always had a submitting problem but this is work, you can’t tie up your emotions with it.”

“At least I care about what someone’s doing to me, Naka,” Rin growls, breath hissing through his teeth so much like his mom’s that he’s going to be sick when all of this is over.

“That’s your problem, not mine.” Nakagawa stands up to put his shirt back on and walk over to his gym bag at a languid pace and that’s when Rin loses it.

“Tell me why you weren’t at Kazuki’s service, you piece of shit.”

Nakagawa freezes mid-stretch, back going rigid. He slowly drops his arms from where they were raised and picks up his bag with movements that aren’t as smooth, not responding to Rin’s demand.

Rin prowls across the gym with his fists clenched and every intention to punch the answer out of him when Nakagawa says, “He kept my bed warm and my dick wet.”

Rin stumbles. His blood halts in his veins and his heart spasms to a stop.
Nakagawa is indifferent to his reaction, eyes vacant as they meet his. “Others can do that for me too. I – oomph, fucking cunt!”

Rin’s got him slammed against the nearest wall with his forearm crushed into his neck, body bearing down on his. Naka doesn’t have a chance at escaping because Rin’s the best at hand-to-hand combat in the whole gang, not to mention he’s never been more pissed in his entire life. “Don’t even try to play that!” He shoves Nakagawa harder when he struggles. “God, if he were here, he’d beat the shit out of me to beat the shit out of you for even saying –”

“If he were here!”

The mirrors shake as Nakagawa’s voice bounces off the walls and Rin stumbles back, ears buzzing from his yell. “If he were here,” he repeats. As if hearing that reality for the first time, Nakagawa’s indifference falters for a moment, his brows creasing and his eyes widening in a look of unbelievable panic before his expression smooths over into another mask. “He’s not. Accept it.”

Rin is numb as Nakagawa pushes past him to strap his gym bag around his shoulder. “There’s a lot of things you need to accept, Rin. Where you are, what you’re in.” He pauses at the door. “It stops hurting when you accept that you’re not strong enough to overcome it. You just let it win. Let it go.” He inhales sharply and his fist tightens around the door knob. “Kazuki was like you. He thought there was a way out of this. There’s not. And now he knows that better than anybody.”

Nakagawa leaves Rin standing in the middle of the floor, alone in the silence.

“Nakagawa is hurting. He’s in pain. Men can’t handle that kind of pain.”

Rin gives Aki an offended look that she raises her brows at because they both know she’s right.

He huffs and situates himself against her headboard, socks sliding over the mattress, which has no traction at all. That’s because the bed is stripped with the red sheets piled on the floor – she had a client on them before Rin stopped by her room.

Her curls are damp from a shower and she’s pressed against him in nothing but a silk nightgown and robe, which is a bit distracting. Even if they didn’t have history, he’s a raging bisexual and that alone can make her stir something inside him, even if it’s no longer his heart.
She touches his face and he wishes the sensation could bring him the kind of heat it used to. “What’s wrong, Rin? This isn’t just about Nakagawa, the two of you fight too much for you to be like this.”

His lips move against her hand. “Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to distract me from what’s really going on?”

He pauses in skimming his mouth down her fingers, blinking up at her as she gives him a flat look.

He sighs and pulls away, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling and pretend he’s alone in the room as he whispers, “If there was a way out of all this… would you take the chance on it?”

She cranes back, blinking. “Oh.” Her voice is timid. “Well, I… I’d like to think that I would be.” She touches her hip, where he smeared kisses over the bullet scar there until she was able to look in a mirror without crying. “But I don’t even know if I would’ve been brave enough to help me if I had been you the night I was shot.”

Aki is always so unsure of herself yet unyielding in her belief that her friends are strong and capable. It’s a contrast that’s heartbreaking to see. “You would have,” Rin assures her.

Aki snorts, disgusted with herself. “Don’t say it’s because I’m brave.”

“It’s because it’s the right thing to do,” Rin says. He tips his head to look at her, faces so close that their noses brush. “And you’d kick anyone’s ass if they tried to do something different.”

Aki smiles at that and when she leans in, he shuts his eyes and goes on autopilot, feeling his fingers shape her jaw and tip her mouth open wider. Not because he wants to, but because she likes those kinds of deep kisses and he really does want her to feel better.

He’s on top of her with his hands under her robe when he pauses. “Wait, did you answer the question?”
She’s panting, face flushed as she moves against him insistently. “Um, I don’t – can we come back to it later?”

Rin hesitates.

Aki goes still, her eyes wide and sad. “Are you that upset?”

“Um.” He fiddles with the silk belt, voice quiet. “Yeah, kind of.”

She stares and he’s afraid she’s going to kiss him again, but instead she tugs him down to wrap him up in her arms and legs, embracing him. He hugs back because they are friends despite the complications, in fact she’s his best friend – the person he trusts most after Haru, who he’ll always think of as a brother despite that he’ll never admit to it because he’s not sentimental in the slightest.

Yeah. Because the two emotional breakdowns today can really back that up.

“I can’t see you like this,” Aki whispers against his ear, slipping her hands under his shirt to glide her fingers up the lines of tense, corded muscle. “I need you to be strong. We all do.”

Rin stiffens as a realization hits him.

His friends aren’t just looking to Haru for assurance. They’re looking at him, too. They think he’ll make the right decisions for them, ones that could cost them their lives.

Lives they trust him with.

Rin understands Haru so much more now. No wonder he’s so impassive it’s infuriating – he knows that he can’t show his fears around his friends.

Rin almost blacks out from the panic that races through him because where in the fuck is he supposed to put all these feelings? He doesn’t have some dark, hopeless void to throw them all in the back of his mind, there are too many thoughts running through his head for that kind of room. And more importantly, how is he supposed to take his emotions out of making the right choice for everyone?

He gets off Aki to sit in the middle of the bed, where he buries his face in his hands. He feels the mattress dip as she shuffles closer, fingers brushing his shoulder. He jerks away from her with a rough shake of his head. “No, I can’t.”

The air is thick with so much tension that it’s hard to breathe and it physically pains him to speak. “I can’t do it anymore.”

He looks up to see her smiling sadly. “What? Pretend you love me?”

He cranes back with a lie already in his mouth but she shakes her head to silence him. “I know you love me, Rin. Just not in the way I love you.”

His face falls hopelessly.

Aki startles him when she takes his hands to squeeze them. “I’m not asking you to. You love people in a way that can’t be faked and I don’t want that to change, not even for me.” Her eyes water and teardrops cling to her lashes. “I’ll take whatever I can get with you. And I know that’s so pathetic but I just – I need you, I’m so sorry –”
He hushes her, cradling her face and kissing the tears from her cheeks, tasting warm salt. “I can’t love anyone like you love me. It’s not just you.”

That makes her cry harder. “That’s not true, you can.”

“No. I have to accept that.”

The sadness is so demanding of his body that he finds his hand moving from her waist to her stomach. Aki straightens up at the touch and gasps, tears shining at the corners of her wide eyes.

He doesn’t know what he expected to feel. He knew her stomach wasn’t going to jump under his touch like it once did, when it was stiff and round in the cup of his palm. “I’ll never – never be able to replace what you gave me,” Rin whispers, his fingers moving in a daze across her skin. He remembers keeping this same hand on her stomach as much as possible, whether asleep or awake, that protectiveness inside him a pain as much as it was a joy.

She presses her hand over his in understanding. “I’ll never replace what you gave me, either. You made me dream again. That’s what made me love you in the first place. But most especially when I said I was pregnant and it was yours.” Her smile wobbles. “You weren’t scared like I was. It was like we – we were going to be okay, that the baby would make us okay… oh god…” Her sob holds so much grief.

He pulls her into his lap and she wraps her arms and legs around him again, clinging to him as he holds her just as fiercely. In the back of his mind he knows he’s supposed to be the strong one in all these impossible situations, most especially this one, but he’s weak. And this sorrow is so much that he doesn’t even know how he’s still breathing with it, so he allows himself to hide his face in the crook of her neck and cry there despite that he will never, ever have enough tears to finish grieving that baby.

_Hitomu_, he mouths, lips fumbling as he silently repeats the name over and over against Aki’s skin. Rin owes their baby to take care of his mother and everyone she cares about, the same people that got Rin through losing him.

Aki calms down enough to whisper, “You changed after that. After Miho –”

“Don’t,” he begs. “Please don’t.”

“Sorry.” She wipes her eyes and hides in his chest, where his heart is pounding from the exertion of feeling so much. “I’m sorry.”

They lie in silence until Rin hits that level of exhaustion where he’s too heavy to even fall asleep. Everything hurts from the inside of his chest to the surface of his skin. He isn’t even thinking anymore; his mind is full of emotions that don’t even have names but he just wants them all to go away.

He knows what could turn it all off, give him relief, release, but that same thing will only cause more problems.

He looks down at Aki at the same time she leans up and kisses him so hard that he can taste the pain they share, but even with that connection, he pulls away.
Aki blinks, looking rejected and hurt before she recognizes his expression and says, “You are not taking advantage of me. I know how you feel.” Her hand slides under his shirt, thumb tracing over his heart. “I know what you need, too. What we both need.”

Closeness.

He lets her straddle him and leans up on his elbows to meet her softer kiss, trying to feel it instead of just doing it. “Pretend I’m someone else if you need to,” she says. “That’s what I do with you.”

Hours later they have nothing left to feel and are intertwined in a way that makes Rin feel so alone. It’s almost like he is by himself in the room despite that Aki is a warm weight against him as she glides her fingers across his back, where her nails scored red lines down his skin.

His mind goes blank enough to finally let him shut his eyes, and in that emptiness stands one remaining question. “Who do you pretend I am?”

He can see Aki’s sad smile, even in the darkness behind his eyes. “Who you used to be.”

Samezuka is a well-known historical landmark of Iwatobi and the reason has nothing to do with the fact that it’s a three hundred and sixty year old strip club.

It’s because several gruesome deaths have occurred in the establishment throughout history. They were said to have been caused by neglect of the ancient building – floors collapsing, chandeliers falling, gas leaks, floods, and fires have all occurred – but placing the blame on poor up-keep became harder to do when some sailors went missing around two hundred years ago.

Their bodies were found in the walls and under the prostitutes’ beds after they confessed the men refused to pay for their services. The women were put to death but strange things continued to happen and now the locals say the misfortune is caused by the prostitutes’ spirits, especially the complaint of hearing moans and cries under the floors.

Samezuka was bought by an investor about a decade ago – they put the building through a drastic remodel to ensure that it would be a safe place but deaths have begun to reoccur there in very recent history. Now that Sousuke’s investigation has led him to Samezuka, he has a hard time believing ghosts had anything to do with them.

He appreciates that the owner seems to know what the building is known for and doesn’t try to hide its history by instilling generic club design. He can already see its darker charm from the outside, where the stone walls and archways remain unchanged.

Above the crowded entrance is an updated art piece from the original exterior, a cluster of tangled stone serpents with ruby eyes and smoke pouring from their fanged mouths.

Sousuke arches a brow when one snake turns to glare at him with a mechanical whirl. “They’re security cameras,” he realizes.

“Hope so,” Seijuro mumbles with a shudder.

They make it inside where the corridor is lined with statues that were part of the original décor. The figures are both men and women but they’re all naked, intimately embraced in pairs of two or even three, with iron chains and garlands of dried roses wrapped around them.
They pass a stone lady with a face that’s half deteriorated. Something about her makes Sousuke tense like he’s being watched and that suspicion is confirmed when he hears a familiar mechanical whirl and her remaining eye follows them as they pass.

Sousuke pulls his leather jacket a little tighter around himself, comforted by the sharp press of his gun holster under his shirt.

The end of the hallway splits into three wings. At the far left are two women at a host stand and behind it is a space with the ambiance of a lounge rather than a restaurant, though the smells of liquor and spices indicate that it might double as both. Most of the tables are filled with businessmen in suits or couples in fine clothes – they have an air of something Sousuke likes to call bullshit, so it’s confusing to see them here since they don’t look like the kind of “respectable” people who would be comfortable being seen at a haunted strip club.

He realizes that putting a restaurant in Samezuka was a business move – a smart one. The owner has to know there are people who would be embarrassed at being caught in a place that’s just known for strippers. If they don’t have a safe excuse for being in the building they might not come in at all. The restaurant gives them that excuse, a reason to already be here. The dancers are in the next wing over and that’s enough to make someone’s curiosity reach breaking point and make them give in.

Sousuke looks away from the restaurant to glance down the far right hallway, which is barren and so dark that he can’t even see the end of it. He turns to the nearest hostess with his head ducked, eyes hopeful under his lashes. “What’s down there?”

She blushes and clears her throat. “It’s um, under construction. Off limits for now, s-sorry.”

“Any idea what they’ll use it for?” Seijuro arches his brow over a smile, making her cheeks redden further before she opens her mouth to speak.

The other girl leans over the host stand and says flat and loud, “Probably a gift shop.” She gives her coworker a look of warning before turning back to shuffle through the menus.

Sousuke and Seijuro share a glance and step away to head down the middle wing. Once they’re out of sight, Seijuro says, “I came here for the first time four years ago and that wing was ‘under construction’ then. Something’s down there.”

Sousuke nods as he checks his phone. “It’s 9:38. They’ll probably do a shift change at ten. We can check out the rest of the place ‘til then.”

Seijuro nods in return and they continue down the hallway. The air thickens until it’s sweltering and when they make it to the heart of the building, Sousuke’s overwhelmed by the heat of smoke and sweat, but even more so at how that’s somehow now an alluring combination.

The dance floor is a yawning space that’s covered in a sea of people. There’s a bar stretched across every wall and the employees race behind the counters to tend to the gathered crowd. The men’s uniforms are tight silk shirts rolled up their muscled forearms and the necks of the women’s shirts dip at their cleavage. They’re all managing charismatic smiles despite the hustle and bustle, which either speaks volumes of their professionalism or their worry that their boss is somewhere around.

Sousuke watches them cast nervous glances up to the second floor balcony, where there are men in fine suits and chunky jeweled rings as well as women holding champagne glasses as they throw their
heads back to laugh. He goes ahead and concludes that the owner of the building is somewhere up there.

Sousuke would like to get a clear view but there’s so much going on that it’s getting difficult to focus on one thing. It’s hard to maintain a clear head with all the movement going on around him but even more so with the loud music, the bass growling through the floor, humming under his skin and shaking his thoughts apart. It’s as if the air has a pulse of its own, thrumming so hard and fast that he feels like he can’t catch his own breath.

The lights flash with the rhythm of the song and that’s when he notices the dancers through the haze of red smoke, positioned above the floor so they can hold the attention of everyone in the room. They’re hitting every beat, not so much as dancing but swaying, teasing what kind of moves they’re really capable of.

He wasn’t expecting there to be men. Especially men with predatory eyes and hair tousled from their slow, hard grinding around the poles at the stages and platforms. They move with a confidence that borders intimidating and Sousuke has to look away and take a second because he really can’t catch his breath now.

What a great time for him to remember that he’s going home to an empty bed.

“Oh yeah,” Seijuro says, voice tight with restrained laughter. “Sorry. Forgot to tell you. They have male strippers, too.”

Sousuke almost decks him right there and it must show on his face because Seijuro has to roll his lips in to hide a grin.

But then his expression freezes.

Sousuke follows his gaze to a curvy dancer in a black, sparkly bikini and black heels. Her skin is warm under the lights, as is her ginger hair. Her eyes are locked with Seijuro and the smile she gives him is shy, a kind of temptation that’s dangerous.

She crawls down on her front with languid grace to the edge of the stage, where she throws her head back to dishevel her curls with a playful twist of her hips. She dips forward, cleavage spilling over as she retrieves the wad of bills the nearest man offers her, though her eyes stay on Seijuro.

She rolls back to her feet and climbs the pole in a show of flexibility and strength that’s captivating. She holds herself up with the crook of her elbow, wrapping it around the pole to hold herself vertical and move her feet as if she’s walking on air. She ducks her head to hide a giggle at Seijuro’s wide eyes before she spins into another pose, focusing her attention on pleasing the money-bearing crowd.

Sousuke turns back to Seijuro with the intention of being a smartass, but then his gaze is dragged to another platform and his voice lodges in his throat.

This dancer has a raven tattoo on his back. The bird’s looming wings are spread across either shoulder blade and its talons are poised and diamond sharp. Its eyes are a menacing shade of red and bore into Sousuke’s before the dancer turns around.

He’s wearing latex tights, muscles flexing under the black material as he moves. His chest is bare of a shirt but covered in tattoos that are glossy under a sheen of sweat. He’s got a row of thick abs and a sculpted back that flares into strong hips and the most glorious ass Sousuke has ever seen. A ruby
twinkles at his navel and his tongue ring glows in the dark, flashing red inside his mouth to illuminate the sharp points of his teeth.

Rin moves against the pole on spread knees, his back arched and long hair splayed over his eyes. He drags himself up so slowly, building a tension that makes Sousuke ache. He then wraps a fist around the pole and swings all his weight forward, gaining the momentum to flip his hips over his head and spin with his toes pointed and legs spread in the air.

The crowd applauds the pose before he wraps a foot around the pole to suspend himself upside down, all his weight held at the crook of his ankle. From there he lifts himself up to grab on with both hands and let his legs fall free, using them to move himself in a spiral around the pole, causing it to spin faster than it did before. He curls until his stomach, clenched around it, is the only thing keeping him in the air.

His muscles are bulging under his tattoos and his hair is flying but he’s in complete control – at least Sousuke thinks he is before he relaxes his abs slightly and drops.

Someone actually gasps in panic (it’s not him, definitely not). But then Rin clenches his stomach around the pole at the last second and stops himself mere inches from the floor.

He flips his hair back and his eyes are as big as his grin and Sousuke may or may not in that moment realize that he is so fuckt.

The girl in the black bikini wolf whistles at him and so do the other dancers on stage. Rin smirks and picks himself up without even looking winded, which takes the breath from Sousuke.

And then their eyes meet.

Sousuke feels like he’s the one that’s barely wearing anything, exposed, caugh. Rin’s jaw and fists clench before he’s once again moving fluidly, though his eyes keep darting up to the second floor. He moves his hands up through his hair and presses a finger against his ear, his mouth barely moving. Sousuke notices there’s a sort of Bluetooth device flashing under the cover of his hair.

Rin glances over at the DJ booth and Sousuke sees that the man there has his headphones pulled back to reveal that he’s got a blinking device at his ear as well. He looks up and nods at Rin before reaching over to one of the hundreds of switches across the boards in front of him. He flips it and the second floor goes up in strobe lights.

Once that happens, Rin isn’t as discreet as he quickly says something else into his device. A lean male dancer with cropped hair tips his head into his own ear piece and stiffens, gaze narrowing at Rin. That catches the attention of the female dancer and Rin looks down with wide eyes, appearing torn.

Sousuke’s about to make this decision for him and get the hell out of here before Rin cuts his eyes at him in a look that dares him to try and leave.

“What is it?” Seijuro asks, breaking his stare with the female dancer to follow Sousuke’s gaze.

Sousuke stops him by gripping both his shoulders and hollering, “How do you feel about drinking on the job?!!”

Before Seijuro can reply, whether to respond to the question or cuss him out for shouting in his ear,
Sousuke thrusts him toward the nearest bar and loses him in the crowd.

Sousuke turns back to the platform to see that the male dancer with cropped hair has taken Rin’s place. He searches the crowd and finds Rin moving through the sea of people and headed straight toward him.

His walk gains more lustful stares than anyone giving it their all on the dance floor. One man licks his lips at Rin’s backside and the guy must feel the furious heat of Sousuke’s glare, for he looks up with such fear that the Grim Reaper might seriously be standing behind Sousuke. The guy splutters and quickly turns away. Smart man.

Sousuke is smug with victory before Rin shoves him out of the nice feeling. His strength was dazing when he was covered in bruises and scrapes just two weeks ago, but now that he appears to have healed, that one shove makes it difficult for Sousuke to believe anyone ever got the jump on him.

Rin shoves one more time and Sousuke sprawls back in the chair that catches him. He tries to get up but Rin uses his hands to force Sousuke’s knees wide apart, making it impossible for him to stand because well, that’s not exactly an attack he was ever taught how to defend himself against in the military.

Sousuke’s mouth twists into a frustrated snarl that Rin isn’t intimidated by. His eyes are so intense in this light, smudged with liner under his spikey lashes. “My boss is here,” he says, voice so tight that it wavers. “And she’ll kill you if she finds out who – what you are.”

Sousuke stares. “You have a boss?”

“Pimp, whatever, listen to me –”

“A woman is pimping you out?” His eyes flicker up to the second floor and Rin darts forward to tug him by the hair, dragging their gazes back together. Sousuke hisses at the dull pain – it’s just enough to piss him off and he kicks Rin’s ankle hard enough to make him let go and lose his balance, landing right on top of Sousuke.

The weight forces his breath to leave him in a rush and any air left in his lungs vanishes when their lips graze.

It was an accident but it’s as if Rin can’t stop himself from firming his lips around Sousuke’s bottom one to suck him there, and his answering hum is a trembling sound. Sousuke leans in to taste the points of his teeth and the sharp drag over his tongue is an addicting burn, one that lights a pressure inside him that’s already curling, aching.

Rin pulls back, bracing his hands on Sousuke’s chest where his heart has either stopped or is racing too fast for individual beats. “Please,” Rin whispers. “You have to play along or she will kill you.”

Sousuke’s body responds to Rin’s fear by holding him tighter. He doesn’t mean to but it’s automatic – the way Rin is gripping his jacket too tightly is burning something primitive into Sousuke’s blood. He’s feeling sick with the intensity of this sudden protectiveness.

Even though it’s so clear that Rin doesn’t need help defending himself, Sousuke is dumb enough to want to help anyone who looks this scared. But with it being Rin it’s – fuck, it’s just so much worse.

As if he senses Sousuke’s distress, Rin intertwines their fingers, which is something Sousuke’s never
done with anyone before. His own hand is bigger, fingers calloused where Rin’s are so soft as they curl tightly around his, the pressure warm and comforting. He’s never experienced the kind of intimacy that comes from just being able to feel someone else’s pulse against his own. “I’m fine,” Rin assures. “I’m fine. But you won’t be.” There’s a note to his voice telling Sousuke that Rin needs him to be fine.

He’d be just fine and fucking dandy if he could drag his ass out of here kicking and screaming – this situation is so much more dangerous now that there’s a pimp involved, especially one that’s instilled this kind of fear in Rin. But this is also a situation Rin’s obviously familiar with and can handle better than Sousuke, so he nods in acceptance to whatever he’s asking of him.

Rin nods back and says, “You’re gonna have to play along.”

Sousuke is confused until he stands up only to bend over him with an arched back, hands braced on Sousuke’s thighs.

Oh no. Oh yes? Shit.

Sousuke takes a deep breath, a very composed, professional breath, and relaxes his legs until they open wider at the push of Rin’s hands. He doesn’t know what possesses him to ask this but he hears himself saying, “Can I touch?”

Rin goes very still. “You’re asking?”

“It’s your body.”

Consent is the sexiest thing in the world, Sousuke. It’ll make you hotter than anything else, knowing you’re safe with someone and it’s a choice. So hot, Mrs. Tachibana said as Makoto screamed into a couch cushion in horror.

But she must have been right because a flush pulses up Rin’s throat.

He sways on the tips of his toes, ass up and hips grinding to the slow, sexy beat that’s heating the air. The loud music is somehow not so bad anymore. “I’ll make an exception.”
Everything suddenly feels like Christmas but Sousuke refrains, just watches as Rin’s toes give way so he can slide his legs apart on the arches of his feet. He presses flush with him and the thin fabric of Sousuke’s shirt does nothing to hide the heat of his skin, the contours of his muscles as they move against his. Rin’s breath is hot and damp when his mouth touches Sousuke’s ear. “Are you alone?”

He shakes his head, squeezing his eyes shut so Rin won’t see them rolling back as his teeth graze his earlobe. *Fuckshit.* “My partner, he’s here.” Whatever his name is.

Rin jerks back, looking outraged and hurt.

Sousuke curls a slow, deep smirk. “My *law enforcement* partner?”

“Oh.” Rin curls his own smirk and something about it makes Sousuke’s fall from his mouth. Rin dips closer, causing Sousuke to lean away until he’s digging into the back of his chair, and that makes Rin’s eyes twinkle like the piercing in his navel. Sousuke realizes that’s what he wanted him to do because now he has no way of escaping as Rin lifts a thigh over his, bracing his foot against the back of his chair.

His leg is up and bent at the knee, his tights contouring around the muscles that jump under Sousuke’s fingers, which he’s trailing down the back of Rin’s raised calf in a slow line. He uses his nails on the way back up and licks his lips at the chills that rise under the sheen of sweat on Rin’s skin.

Rin’s standing with a leg between Sousuke’s and he dips forward, knee grazing the inside of
Sousuke’s thigh, dragging along the seam of his jeans and making his fingers jerk. Rin grins at the reaction and rolls his hips forward, drawing them back in a teasing circle that deepens into a grind, his back arching into the movements. He balances himself by drawing his fingers up the back of Sousuke’s head, massaging his fingers through the strands and laughing when he hisses a curse.

Not one to be outplayed, Sousuke waits until Rin’s got his head thrown back to reach down to the leg he’s standing on and yank the back of his knee up and over his hip, causing Rin to fall into his chest and land in his lap. He’s so startled that Sousuke has to catch him from falling sideways, holding him tight around the waist as Rin balances his hands on his shoulders.

When he’s steady, Rin’s expression is still one of shock but Sousuke is smirking. “You said I could touch.”

Rin arches a brow. “You want old school?” He leans back with his hands on Sousuke’s knees. “I can handle old school. Don’t think you can, though.” He starts to move and the grind of his hips is so much more intense when they’re against Sousuke’s. He gets so swept up in the movements that he pushes up when Rin moves down and forward, causing Rin’s pupils to blow wider the harder they move together.

Just when the pressure is about to become too much for both of them, Rin pushes Sousuke’s knees apart and drops through the space, rolling backwards to throw his hair back on spread knees, panting and grinning while Sousuke’s jaw is dropped.

Rin saunters forward to slide over his torso, dragging all the way down until he’s looking up from between Sousuke’s legs. “Your partner, what’s he look like?”

It is a miracle Sousuke finds his voice. “Why?”

“He’s the one you told me about, right? The one doing the investigation with you. You dragged him into this, he needs protecting now too.”

Sousuke’s body goes rigid at that realization. He’s surprised when Rin takes both his hands to pry open his fists, uncoiling his fingers so he can bring them down flat over his chest, where his bare skin is hot and twitching with his pulse. Rin meets his eyes as he lifts himself up, dragging Sousuke’s hands down his torso as he rises to a stand.

He rolls his stomach insistently when Sousuke kind of spaces out and forgets what they were talking about. “Hair,” he blurs. “Red hair, he’s got red hair. Gold eyes.”

Rin’s brows go high. “You mean that hunk Aki was eye-fucking?” He doesn’t wait for a reply, instead he fiddles with his ear piece as he turns around and backs up against Sousuke, letting him know that his ass is so much more glorious in his lap where he can feel the weight of it as he dances on him.

“Mai, go cover for Aki,” Rin says into the device. His voice and muscles go tight with stress as he waits for a response and Sousuke steadies his hands on his waist before trailing them down the expanse of his abdomen to his hips so he can pull him closer – he hopes the action is somewhat reassuring. It apparently is, because Rin rests the back of his head against the top of Sousuke’s, body relaxing under his touch as he moves.

A girl with glittery blue hair steps on stage and the ginger dancer leaves gracefully, though Sousuke can hear the confusion in her voice as it crackles through Rins’ ear piece. “Why do I need
“covering?”

“I need a favor,” Rin says. “That guy with the hair and eyes –”

“The hair and eyes?”

“You know who I’m talking about.”

Aki blushes. “You know him?”

“I need you to keep him away from the second floor.”

She tenses.

“I’ll explain it all later, I promise,” Rin assures. “Can you do it?”

She nods to herself and spots Seijuro at the bar. Aki breezes through the crowd and his expression would be hilarious in any other situation – he looks like there’s a train barreling towards him and he’s tied down to the tracks. But that panic goes away as Aki eases him into the nearest chair with soft nudges paired by an even softer smile, and she glances up just quick enough to give Rin a nod.

He leans back, so close that Sousuke doesn’t have to raise his voice as he asks, “Your boss, is she the girl’s pimp too?”

Rin goes so rigid that he stops breathing, coiling so tight that air flow isn’t possible. Sousuke touches him in concern and Rin’s breath hitches, color flooding his face, but he doesn’t move.

Sousuke turns him around and he falls into his lap numbly, his expression one of dread, as if he knows where this is going even though Sousuke isn’t even sure what’s going on.

Rin inhales deeply, steadying himself as he bears down on Sousuke’s arms and speaks with a tone that’s almost defensive. “Aki has nothing to do with relay.”

Sousuke wasn’t expecting such a change in his demeanor but that doesn’t change his firm response of, “This place has a lot to do with it though, doesn’t it?”

“It’s a club,” Rin says with exaggerated obviousness, as if that will hide the panic lighting his eyes. “Of course there’s drugs going around, that’s happening in all the clubs, not just this one.”

“But the investigation brought me to this one.” Sousuke lifts his chin where Rin’s creases under the tight line of his mouth. “You’re right, there is a lot of drug circulation downtown. That was an easy lead, given how many clubs are on this block. That also made it difficult to pinpoint where most people are going to get their relay.”

He looks away, shaking his head in disbelief. “I knew that with the effects of the drug being what they are that relay would get popular quick. Seijuro knew that too but no one believed us and now in just a week there’s been overdoses all across the city. But most of them occurred here, downtown. They’ve happened in all the clubs, I’ll give you that. But you know what makes Samezuka different?”

Rin doesn’t say anything.
“This place never calls the cops. It’s always someone calling from a cellphone after they’ve ran up on a body in the bathroom or saw a deal go down at the bar. That’s not normal. It’s what made me first think that Samezuka was being controlled by a gang, but now I know that it is.”

“You don’t—” Rin shakes his head, breath quickening, shaping into hisses. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

Sousuke leans forward with emphasis of his words. “You have a pimp. Aki has the same pimp. It’s the same person that owns the building. And they’re up there on the second floor and I know that because every single one of you working here keeps looking up there like someone’s got a gun to your heads.” He levels their gazes. “You’re in a gang. And you’re the only way I’ll be able to take it down.”

Rin stares, his wet eyes gleaming in the flashing lights. Sousuke doesn’t understand the reaction; he’s as confused as he is concerned. “Don’t you want out of this?”

Sousuke’s eyes search his gaze. “I know you want to stop this, I can see it.” He shakes his head almost frantically, whispering, “I see you.”

Rin blinks hard and Sousuke uses his thumb to smear away the tear that landed on his mouth. Rin sways into Sousuke’s hand for just a moment, resting his head there. “I’m so sorry,” he murmurs against his palm.

Sousuke opens his mouth to ask why but Rin silences him with his lips, his fingers just barely grazing Sousuke’s face as if he’s not allowed to touch anymore. The kiss is so finalizing that it sends alarm racing through Sousuke, and he pulls away as he tries to understand.

Rin drops his hands to Sousuke’s chest, resting both of them over his heart. “You’re a good man, Sousuke. Don’t let anyone tell you differently. Even if it’s yourself.” Rin swallows. “But you can’t come back here.”

Sousuke’s fingers drop, stunned, and Rin hunches in on himself when the touch leaves him. “It’s not because I don’t think you can do this but because I know you can.” Rin’s weak smile is almost marveling of him. “And you’re the best I’ve ever seen, but—” His expression falls into one of defeat. “But she is better and you… my family will end up in caskets before she ends up in a jail cell.”

Rin lifts his eyes to the dancers on stage. “Everyone here, they’re mine. I’m theirs. We’re all stuck in this and it’s not just rentboys and callgirls, it’s the dealers too.”

“…Haru?” Sousuke’s disbelief is reeling.

Rin ducks his head as if he no longer has the strength to meet Sousuke’s gaze. His eyes are squeezed shut under the fall of his hair. “I can’t ask him not to shoot you if you try to arrest him.”

Hurt and anger rip Sousuke to shreds before leaving him broken at the realization that the conclusion Rin is speaking of is inevitable – this situation will end like that with him being a cop and Haru being a dealer.

With Rin being a prostitute.

At this point he should know the answer to this question, he shouldn’t even be asking it because it
doesn’t matter anymore. But he can’t stop himself and his voice is smaller than it’s ever been.

“Would you shoot me?”

Rin’s is just as quiet. “Would you arrest me?”

“No,” he rushes, too fast for him to compose himself enough to be believable. He can’t pretend that he’s not building walls around that mental image, he doesn’t want to see it – he can’t face the reality that’s coming for them faster than they ever thought it would.

“You would,” Rin says. “You’d have to.” He doesn’t sound angry, just tired. His eyes are vacant on his as he draws his fingers through Sousuke’s hair. “You probably need to, actually. Not because I’m a rentboy but because I’ve killed a lot of people.”

Sousuke can’t find it in himself to look at Rin any differently after that confession even though he knows he should. But even if Rin confessed that those crimes were done out of hate, Sousuke would still be able to resonate with him because that’s what he was filled with as a soldier, nothing but a hate he was using to pretend that he wasn’t so scared that he was crying himself to sleep every night.

“The people from the other gangs, they come in here and try to use the place for their own business. They never make it out alive and it’s not because of any fucking ghosts.” Rin eyes flicker through the crowd. “There’s dealers here right now. Some of them are people I love and they’re people you won’t be able to pick apart from the dealers of the other gangs.”

Sousuke tries to find something to say against that but he can’t and his head drops in defeat. His eyes trace Rin’s skin, his tattoos. He looks to his side where he remembers seeing his shirt stained red from a wound after the car wreck – that gash is now covered by a tattoo, in red ink that reads Hitomu.

Rin follows Sousuke’s gaze to the ink and his laugh is so painful to hear. “God, I was so fucking stupid to think this would somehow work.” His voice is hoarse and Sousuke’s heart has only come back to life to shatter. “We’re not the good guys, I’m not doing anything good. I don’t deserve for it to go right.”

“Rin –”

“I have a sister,” he says, and the love poured into that one word is so unfathomable that it would have been impossible for Sousuke to grasp it if he didn’t have Ran, who doesn’t see him as Sergeant Yamazaki, as a cop, a soldier, a fuck up, a killer, but as her big brother. All she sees is the person he is with her, the person who was cleaning pistols with Makoto when her first date came by the house to pick her up, or the person she calls at three in the morning when she’s trying so hard to like her mom’s new boyfriend but she just misses her dad and doesn’t know how to handle it.

He understands that love in Rin’s voice and understands so completely as he says, “She is the only thing I’m getting right.” Rin swallows, his voice wobbling between acceptance and fear. “And I know I’m already on borrowed time but she needs me to stay alive as long as possible, so I’m asking you to forget this.”

Sousuke finds his hand and Rin holds on for dear life, voice a hysterical whisper, “Because I’m not going to be able to shoot you but I can’t get arrested because she needs me, and Haru’s a jackass but he needs me too, and I need them and everyone else that’s caught in this and –” His breath is high, impossible to catch in the whirlwind of so much. “There’s no way this won’t end up with someone dead and I just don’t want it to be you because you’re not trapped yet so please, just… please, just
leave and forget this. Get out while you can.”

Rin gets up from his lap, legs shaking and hands fretting before he wraps his arms around himself. He stares down at Sousuke with pleading eyes. “I need to hear you say it.”

Sousuke’s fists tighten over his legs. He looks up even though it physically hurts to meet Rin’s eyes. “What about you?”

“This isn’t about me,” Rin whispers. His acceptance of that brings Sousuke to the verge of giving up on everything, not just this. “It’s not about me and it’s not about you. It’s bigger than that and more people are going to get hurt.”

Sousuke doesn’t know what to do – he knows what he wants to do, or more so, who he wants, but Rin is right.

“Okay.”

Rin’s gone when he looks back up and something about that empty space in the air changes everything inside Sousuke.

_You’re a soldier, Ran told him once. You know what’s worth fighting for and what isn’t. And when you and Mako find the people worth fighting for it’ll just – it’ll all make sense in the end, no matter how stupid it makes you look or how impossible it all seems. Maybe they have war in their hearts, too. They’re probably scared of things. They might not know how to fight or how to stop fighting. But you can help them win that war, Sousuke, because it’s probably the same one inside of you. Don’t give up._

He won’t give up.

Chapter End Notes

Aki fanart by [donguris](https://example.com/donguris) and SouRin art by [bakapandy](https://example.com/bakapandy)
The Dynamite in My Chains

Chapter Notes

I've been so damn excited to write some Makoharu.

Thank you all for your sweet messages, thoughts, vibes, and prayers for my sister, who had to go to the hospital for emergency removal of her appendix. She's made a full recovery. Flowers for all of you. <3

There were FIFTEEN fanart pieces done between this update and the last. Are you kitten me. All of these are linked on the fanart section of the ewoatt links on my tumblr but this was too insane not to thank everyone so these beginning notes are long but idgaf because igaf about thanking these beautiful people. Please go and appreciate the time they took to create such amazing things.

The wonderful bakapandy did FOUR pieces, one being the Sourin lapdance from chapter eight (do yourself a favor and go swoon over that shit), another being a gut-wrenching depiction of the Sourin meeting / kiss in chapter three, another piece being Miss Tachibana giving Makoto and Sousuke the talk as mentioned in chapter eight, and another being a depiction of Haru with some rad-ass colors and handwriting. Thank you, ily.

ice-teal did an entrancing piece of Haru with sparkly haunted eyes that I'm in love with.

lace-prince did an adorable comic of the Seven Tears scene with Rin and Sousuke at the table. <3 <3

phoebulous-me got a tumblr JUST TO SHOW ME THEIR BEAUTIFUL HARU PIECE I'M SO HONORED!

The delightful miss-seria did two incredible pieces, one being Rentboy Rin with killer hair and a killer crop top, and the other being a depiction of stitched Sousuke and blue-tongued Rin together. You're perfect.

free-merms did a depiction of Sousuke in his chapter three Iraq flashback that literally, sincerely, made me cry. But it hurts so good because you art so good.

transtachibana made me say "dayuuuum" out loud in the quiet of my own home with the hothothothothot depiction of Rentboy Rin.

The perfect stunning jenuinelly did two awesome pieces, one of which is the Sourin combat boot kick from chapter three and the other being of Rin looking wrecked and wrecking me.

And niansue floored me with their incredible art style in two pieces, one of which is chibi Haru with the most adorable big ass ears I've ever seen and another piece being Asahi, which slayed me with the cigarette and pot leaf silhouettes in the background.

Thank you all so much. If I missed anything or anyone, please tell me, and if you do fanart for this story, please mention me in the post or even better, send me a private message / ask informing me so I can dote the hell out of you. <3
"I'm feeling loose, feeling untamed,
And you're the dynamite in my chains."

Ryn Weaver - "Octahate"

It’s been two months.

The birds leave and so does the sun in exchange for white, barren skies and cold, silent mornings. Iwatobi is grey with fog against a backdrop of concrete and cement until the wind tears the leaves from their branches to color the city in an autumn palette. The drop in temperature brings new aromas to the air, the scent of coffee filling the streets as the need for warmer beverages grows, and the cover of smoke hovers over the alleyways in a musty, thickening cloud as the homeless keep trashcan fires going to fight the chill.

Makoto spends September and October settling into his house, his classroom and the people around him. He gets a local therapist and tries to do what she suggests, figuring out how to be comfortable by himself and not drown inside his own head when he’s left alone with his thoughts. He forces himself to face his own exhaustion and stay in bed just to scroll through his phone and nap away the tension that comes from pushing oneself into a full-body mask of normalcy over and over again, day after day.

Makoto feels refreshed with a brand new disposition after taking the time to properly rest. The improvement makes his therapist assume that taking his anti-depressant down by a few hundred milligrams is a good idea, which Makoto isn’t sure about. At first he’s happy about the decision because even if his diagnosis is fresh (around a year old, arriving with the PTSD confirmation for him and Sousuke), he’s more than ready to be done with taking pills every morning and dealing with the ball-and-chain of medication – but he’s nervous about taking less because he isn’t that confident in many aspects of himself anymore, most especially when it comes to handling what’s going on inside him.

His worries come to life when the next step arrives - asking for help when he needs it, whether emotionally with his nightmares, physically with his handicap, or any situation that he doesn’t want to face alone. That’s when all of his progress dives south because he can’t just do that; he’s ashamed enough not knowing how to come back into society and pretend he’s a normal person.

The modern world is a whole new war to him. He doesn’t see it as he once did, as a blissfully ignorant civilian boy. He's now seeing everything through the tired eyes of a three-limbed war vet.

There are new challenges, one of which is a strain to the actions that used to feel natural. Smiling, for example. He’s not lying to anyone when he offers one up, they’re just a bit weaker than what they once were because he doesn’t yet know how to overcome this new brand of wariness that refuses to
As much as Makoto knows he needs to, he can’t ask for help with the weight he’s carrying. It’s up to him, he just has to build his emotional stamina back up to the impossibly high point it was at before. Then he’ll have all the energy in the world for meaningful smiles and feeling happy, it’s no big deal, Sousuke.

Makoto says this to him after he expresses concern and one look at Sousuke’s answering blank stare tells Makoto that he didn’t buy that line of shit at all.

So then Makoto starts pushing everyone away, which is just what his therapist expected, and she tells him this with a drawn out sigh that infuriates him because if he’s so stereotypical with how he’s handling this then why doesn’t she just fix him?

She tries to remind him that his friends and family have already welcomed his changes and accepted all of them, even his prosthetic, as a part of himself, and he doesn’t have to hide anything. Makoto knows his changes have been accepted but he hasn’t been able to do that himself yet. He likes to pretend that the war never happened and doesn’t want any part of what it did to him to be acknowledged. His prosthetic is one of those things and it’s something that Haru almost discovered.

So Makoto’s been avoiding him for two whole months, like an adult.

No, that wasn’t the plan, wasn’t even a fluid thought that ran through his head. Makoto never would have been able to make the conscious decision to ignore Haru when he’s such a presence, one that demands all the tired parts of him to wake the hell up and start living again, but Makoto just can’t face him.

He’s tried to forget that night outside the restaurant when Haru saw him in such a weak moment, barely able to walk, but seeing the boy brings that memory to the surface. The sight of him brings up a lot of emotions – good ones that Makoto surely can’t be strong enough to take on when he’s this messed up.

God, if he were better, if he were the same person he was before losing the leg, then he would go for it, run for it, be all there and present for it, but just the thought of opening up to someone is petrifying to him now. Even if he needs touch, closeness, someone now more than he ever has, there are so many things keeping him awake at night that he can’t even keep up with it all – he can’t expect someone else to be able to do that for him.

So he has closed himself off to practically everyone around him, but most especially Haru, and that was painful enough, but what’s even more painful is the realization that Haru is very clearly avoiding him.

Makoto’s a selfish fool to be upset at that. He should be thankful for the cold indifference – there’s no confrontation, no conflict.

Just a hell of a lot of awkwardness.

Everyone can feel it in the air at the soup kitchen. It’s so present that Nagisa asks Makoto in private if he and Haru broke up and Makoto has to remind him that there was nothing to break up, which makes Rei scoff so hard that he chokes.

A few weeks into this silent treatment, Haru’s nonchalance about the matter becomes something with
a little more heat to it. It might come off as anger to most, but Makoto knows that it’s hurt because he’s feeling the same way. At first he’s glad that he isn’t the only one feeling so selfish and wanting more even as he pretends not to, but he takes all that back when their eyes finally meet one night at the soup kitchen.

Haru’s gaze brings forth the biggest screw it moment Makoto’s ever had in his life. He wants to stop the charade and take a running leap of faith on his repressed feelings for this boy, who is so quietly gorgeous that he makes Makoto remember lines of poetry from school, beautiful things don’t ask for attention, but before he can take a chance, Haru’s eyes cut into a glare and he disappears into the pantry.

That left Makoto feeling awful up until next week when he’s coming home from work one afternoon. It’s at that point in the year when the seasons are jumbling together in confusion, leaving the air humid even as the wind becomes a contrasting chill, which forces Makoto to keep taking his scarf on and off throughout the day. The effort is ridiculous, Halloween is too close to keep his students at bay, and stepping into a dark, empty house is so crushing that he can’t even feel relieved to be home.

But then he flips on the living room light and the space before him is not empty.

“Mom?”

He grunts when she races across the floor to collide with him. She lifts herself up on her toes so she can reach his neck and sways happily in their embrace, Makoto’s body going with the movement because he’s so dazed. “Surprise,” she laughs, and the sound makes his eyes burn. “Ren and Ran went over to Sousuke’s to surprise him, Nagisa gave us the extra keys he had and we –”

Warmth eases away the numb shock and her presence breaks down all his walls, prying off the mask he’s been wearing for weeks. He wraps her up in a hug, lifting her feet from the floor as he buries his face in her shoulder, where he starts to cry.

“Wh – oh, Mako…” Her voice becomes thick and startled all at once. After a while of standing there, patting his hair and rocking him back and forth, she tucks her face against his chest, where the top of her head barely reaches his heart. Her next bout of laughter is tearful. “Did my big strong soldier miss his poor momma?”

He smiles despite himself. “Yeah. Yes. So… so much.”

She reaches up to dry his face with her sleeves, which smell like vanilla, like home. She doesn’t wear makeup so there are no mascara tears streaking through foundation, nothing covering up the way her face is glowing at the sight of him. “I missed you more.”

Makoto’s backyard is the width of his house and the length of it isn’t much more expansive but the property makes up for it in character, which is why he chose this to be his home in the first place.

The cobblestone patio might be concaved with tree roots pushing through the cracks, but the grooves and dips have become familiar under his shoes. The strings of ivy crawling up the back of his house might be considered annoyances to most people, but Makoto finds the greenish purple leaves to be
pretty. The wooden fence has seen better days but the stain is new, a protective green coating that looks gold in the sunset. Plus there’s a gate that leads to Sousuke’s backyard and Echo’s already dug herself a space under the posts so she can sneak over to Makoto’s house when she’s supposed to be relieving herself – instead she comes over to eat Makoto’s leftovers before tunneling back over to Sousuke’s house.

There is enough grass space in Makoto’s backyard for Sousuke and Ren to throw a baseball. The fence is lined with flower beds the previous owner installed and Makoto’s glad someone other than himself can finally appreciate them – Ran’s face is intent as she picks the best blooms and weaves the stems together to make flower crowns, which she models on Echo’s head. The dog allows Ran to take pictures with an old Polaroid camera before trying to eat the flowers.

Makoto and his mom are sitting on the porch swing. The chains that hold it up to a tree limb are rusty and the bench’s red paint is flaking. His mom stares down at the chipped paint with a glint in her eye that tells Makoto she’s thinking of all the ways that the swing can be improved.

She has a passion for restoration of all kinds and goes after it with messy vigor. The hem of her long skirt is speckled with bleach and the toes of her boots are splattered with colorful paint from other projects she took on with this same excited anticipation on her face. She eyes most broken things like that – not seeing what’s in front of her but the beauty that lies underneath.

She pulls Sousuke’s jacket tighter around herself as the breeze picks up and it almost takes her hair out from where it’s drawn up into a bun with a pencil pushed through the strands. The pencil is dark blue and the color reminds Makoto of Haru’s eyes, makes his chest ache because he wants, he wants so much.

“Surprised you don’t have any cats yet,” his mom says, pulling him out of the darkness and into the light of her crinkled eyes.

He smiles back and means it this time. “Echo is enough for now.”

“That’s hard to believe,” she snorts. “Considering that’s coming from one of the boys I had to post bail for after SOMEONE –” Sousuke almost jumps out of his skin, he’s so startled, and whips around to cower at the woman’s playful glare. “– got drunk with him and went along with it when he said that they should break into the animal shelter at two in the morning and free all the cats.”

Ren and Ran howl with laughter at the memory. “They were going to be euthanized,” Makoto cries, horrified that his own family can’t see how there was no other option but to take those babies from that barbaric slaughterhouse.

“It was a no-kill shelter, Makoto,” Sousuke says flatly, beyond dead inside. “Which I didn’t know at the time.” He gives their mom a pointed look but that only makes her smirk widen and his own blush deepen.

Makoto lifts his chin and crosses his arms. “I’d do it again.”

“I’m kicking your ass if you do it again,” Sousuke scoffs.

Makoto lifts his brows high in challenge and that causes Sousuke to raise his own even higher, which makes both of them look so stupid that their mom has to laugh. She throws her arms around Makoto to kiss him on the cheek. “Oh, how I’ve missed my boys,” she sighs, resting her head on his shoulder to watch as Ren and Sousuke get back to throwing and Ran finds another flower bed to tear
His mom lifts her gaze to the sky as it flushes pink with evening light. “I like this place,” she concludes. “It’s quiet. More peaceful than I expected.”

Makoto shrugs with a nod. “I think the city’s reputation gets blown out of proportion. People have been really welcoming. The school is great, really great. I haven’t explored much but what I’ve seen so far is… interesting. In a good way.” He opens his mouth to say something else but then his voice dies in his throat.

His mom sits up to face him in concern. He shakes his head with a tight smile that makes the crease between her brows deepen. “Sorry,” he mumbles. “I was just going to say that the, um. The beach.” He has to pause but she nods in understanding, patient for him to continue. “I was just going to say that it’s pretty far from here so it… hasn’t been much of an issue. Yet.”

“Good.” Her voice is distant, mind elsewhere, and he can practically hear her thoughts running a mile a minute, eyes darting as she studies him. “Have you been taking your medication?”

He represses a sigh. “Yeah.” She gives him a look and he winces. “Yes ma’am.”

She nods in approval, gaze piercing. “Is it working, Makoto?”

He’s already got the script written out in his head and opens his mouth to recite it, but he falters because this is his mom.

She watches him shake his head. “It’s not?”

He shrugs tightly, voice clipped, words vague. “I’m not any worse than usual.”

“…what’s usual?”

“Nagisa didn’t tell you?”

She cranes back at his sharp tone and he winces in regret. “Sorry, I’m sorry.” He scrubs his hand over his neck, his face, disgusted in his own skin and the fact that he can’t control anything he’s feeling. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to take this out on anyone but especially not you. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes shine and she blinks away the mistiness, trying to catch her breath at the sight of him so upset and unreachable.

“I just…” Makoto lowers his voice soft enough that only she can hear. “I’m – if I talk about all this, it just… I’m such a burden, Momma.”

Her face twists in startled pain. “You are not a burden.”

She cups his cheek, forcing him to meet her eyes. “And I’ll have you know that the only reason I even let you and Sousuke move away after everything we’ve been through is because I made Nagisa promise that he would tell me if either of you started –” Her breath hitches. “If you started… slipping away.”

Makoto stiffens. “What did he say?” He’s unsure if he really wants to know.

“At first he said you were doing great at work, giving it everything you have.” She squeezes his hand with a fond smile. “That made me happy up until he said that he could tell you were putting on
She casts Sousuke a worried glance and turns back to Makoto not looking any better. “Nagisa said he could tell you were tired but you kept pushing yourself until it became so much that you started pushing him away and staying at home all the time, isolating yourself every chance you got.”

He busies himself with readjusting his hearing aid. “My therapist told me to do that.”

“All weekend, every weekend, huh?”

He shimmies lower on the bench, looking away with a blush. She thumps him on the knee affectionately. “Nagisa loves you, Mako. So do I. You are the farthest thing from a burden to us.”

He still isn’t convinced but before he can voice that, he catches the look on her face. “…what are you smiling at?”

She clears her throat but the sound wobbles with laughter. “Nothing, it’s just that Nagisa might have said something about, oh.” She shrugs. “Just someone.”

Makoto shakes his head in confusion. “Someone?”

“Someone like…” Her eyes wander around innocently before locking on him and making him freeze. “A blue-eyed Bambi?”

“I’m going to kill my best friend,” Makoto says. “I am actually going to kill him.”

Her laughter bubbles over and she waves her hands in a placating gesture that really isn’t that effective when she’s shaking with giggles. “No, d-don’t. You stop that.” But she can’t stop and Makoto’s pouting like a child.

She finally recovers with a wipe of her eyes, smiling at his look of misery. “Tell me about him.”

He perks up because he’d honestly love to do that. “He’s…” Makoto doesn’t even know where to start. “He’s stunning.” That’s good. That covers a lot of his feelings.

His mom beams, scooting closer with a conspiring whisper, “What else?”

He chuckles at her excitement, but he’s feeling giddy himself. Giddy. When’s the last time he felt giddy? “He’s kind of an ass sometimes.”

“So are you,” she nods solemnly.

Makoto’s scoff of offence pitches into a laugh at her pointed look. She nudges him again. “Tell me more.”

“Mom, it’s really not that serious –”

“Then can you please make it serious?” She flops back on the bench dramatically. “I need adopted grandbabies, Makoto. I needed them yesterday. I SAID I NEEDED THEM YESTERDAY, SOUSUKE.”

He startles again, jumping like a bomb just went off under his feet. “Needed what?”
“Grandbabies~” Ren and Ran coo in high-pitched voices that Sousuke practically writhes at.

Their mom rolls her eyes and turns her attention back to Makoto. “I can tell you really like this boy.”

He feels rather hopeless about that. “Yeah.”

Her smile drops into a frown. “Then what’s the issue?”

His happiness leaves him in an overwhelmed rush and he’s once again a hollow shell, lonely even in the presence of others. His voice is distant to his own ears. “What isn’t the issue?”

She glances down at his right leg before she can stop herself and smiling becomes painful for him once again. The strain is familiar, almost a comfort in the wake of his self-loathing. “All of me is an issue, not just my leg.”

She flinches, halting her breathing to keep her tears at bay. The sight hurts worse than anything else in his life. “Mom, I’m – I’m sorry –”

“It’s not you, baby,” she sighs. “It’s not you. Well.” Her shoulders jerk in a clumsy shrug. “I mean it is, but it’s seeing you trying to take something like this on by yourself, that’s what’s breaking my heart.”

Panic rises in his throat, choking him. “I have to do this on my own.”

“And how’s that working for you, Makoto?” Her voice is hard but her eyes are fearful. “How has that worked out for any soldier ever?”

He curls in on himself. “I just need to get back to normal, I would already be with someone if I were the same as before –”

“You don’t need to be the same.”

Makoto whips around in shock, positive that he didn’t hear that, puzzled as to where such words came from.

He watches his mom take his hand but doesn’t really feel it as her fingers pull his across the perch of her knees. She takes a moment to gather her thoughts, leaves rustling at their feet as she traces his callouses and scars and learns the scaly texture of his faded burns.

She smiles down at his blemishes like she’s proud of them before she pats his hand and lifts her gaze to meet his eyes. “Sometimes we have to go through hell to find the person we’re meant to be,” she says. “But also to find the person we’re meant to be with. What happened to you and Sous –”

Her throat closes up and she clenches her jaw. He maneuvers his fingers around hers and hangs on, patient as she smears her tears away. “I can’t bring myself to say that was meant to be.” She shakes her head with a nauseated look, hair slipping from her bun to cling to her damp face. “I lost a lot of faith over it. It’s made me question a lot of things.” She places a reassuring kiss to the back of his hand before folding it between hers in a tight grip. “But I know that this is who you’re supposed to be.”

He gives her a disbelieving stare, mouth already open to speak against that before she continues over.
him. “I know you can’t see it but you’re more yourself now than you’ve ever been. Even after what happened, you still go out of your way to help others. You still look for the good in people after what was done to you. Makoto,” she stresses, “If that isn’t strength then nothing is.”

Her words make new thoughts light up in his mind but his doubt snuffs them out. “I’m not ready.”

“You know that’s not it,” she whispers as she combs a hand through his hair. “Baby, you’re just scared.”

“Yes,” he rasps, losing his voice with the intensity of his fear.

Her lips firm into a line and she goes back to studying his hand. She finds a scar that cuts down the inside of his thumb to the center of his palm, traces the raised edges that sealed the wound shut and healed it. “I’m going to tell you a secret about life.”

He falters, blinking rapidly as he tries to understand anything in this whirlwind of getting nowhere.

She’s silent for a moment, gaze shifting to trace the cracks in the pavement. “You’re never going to be ready, Makoto.” She looks up into his horrified eyes. “But the good news is that no one else is ready either.” She shrugs. “I don’t know what I’m doing about anything. I don’t have a damn clue, don’t have any plan. I wake up every morning and stare up at the ceiling and say to myself, ‘I have to be better than yesterday, I have to do better for my kids, I have to be more for myself.’”

She sighs with a crooked grin. “Those little pep talks get me nowhere because as soon as my alarm clock goes off, things start going wrong – Ren doesn’t want this for breakfast and Ran doesn’t want to get up and I have a headache and miss your dad.”

She takes a deep breath. “What I’m trying to say is that I have never met anyone in my life that has their shit completely together. None of us know what we’re doing. Everyone is broken. Everyone’s scared. Especially of love.”

That word makes Makoto feel warm and anxious all at once. Every inch of him aches for it, from the surface of his lips to the demons inside his head, he is dying for it.

His mom squeezes his hand. “I want you to try,” she whispers. “Just try. Not for me or anyone else but for yourself. And you, my sweet boy, you are worth trying for. But you have to reach out.”

He’s feeling so tired, exhausted at the mere thought of doing so. But his heart is not tired – underneath his aches and pains it’s pounding with vigor, reaching out for another as it has been for a long time.

He just needed his mom to show him that someone else might be as well.

“I’ll try, Momma.”

He takes a deep breath, steadying himself before he knocks on the door.

“Yeah!”

Makoto twists the knob and steps inside the art classroom, overwhelmed by an assault of orange and black. There are paper jack-o’-lanterns covering the walls, drenched in glue and glitter with different
faces cut out in their centers, and black cats with googly eyes and witches on popsicle broomsticks taking over any remaining space.

Candy wrappers are everywhere – the tables, the floors, but mostly on Nagisa’s desk.

A plastic cauldron of leftover candy is perched in his lap. He sits with his chair leaned back and his feet up, his boots latex with a six-inch heel. He’s got on glittery devil horns and a red cape because it’s Halloween and most of the teachers participated in it.

Makoto wasn’t one of them for he was in a rush to get out the door this morning after sleeping in because he took Ren and Ran to the store late last night to get their own costumes. His mom thinks that taking the twins trick-or-treating will be a great way for Makoto to show them Iwatobi before they have leave in two days on Sunday. Mom is going to be spending Halloween night solely with Sousuke and Makoto hopes the attention will wake him up from the slump he hasn’t had a chance in hell of escaping as of late.

Nagisa perks up at the sight of Makoto. “Mako-chan!” His voice is muffled by the chewed chocolate still in his mouth. He swallows and smiles somewhat nervously. “Hi.”

Makoto’s answering smile is sheepish. “Hey.”

He wants to say a million things but more than anything, he wants to apologize for avoiding his best friend.

That would be hard to do even if Kisumi wasn’t in the room, hip propped against a filing cabinet as he sucks on a lollipop. The tip of his nose is black, there are streaks of whiskers painted across his cheeks, and his grin is as sly as the fox he’s pretending to be. “Don’t you look festive,” he says, sarcasm dripping.

Makoto rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, I didn’t really have time this morning.”

“Mmm.” Kisumi looks him over and twists the stick of the lollipop with his tongue.

“Don’t choke,” Nagisa snorts under his breath.

“Oh honey,” Kisumi scoffs, making Nagisa burst out laughing.

Makoto couldn’t hear what either of them said and he fiddles with his hearing aid as he turns to Nagisa. “I was just wondering if you were going to the soccer game this afternoon. I haven’t been to one.”

Nagisa’s eyes light up, voice delighted. “Yeah! Yeah, I’m going! Kisumi ‘n Rei-chan are the coaches.”

Makoto’s brows jump. “Really?”

Kisumi nods, hair fluffing across his eyes. “I coach the basketball team too. Played in school, couldn’t have afforded college without the scholarship. I was damn good.”

Nagisa rolls his eyes. “He was damn good,” his voice goes raspy-sultry in an intimidation of Kisumi’s, “before he tripped on air and tore his ACL.”
Makoto grimaces. “I’m sorry,” he says to Kisumi.

Kisumi shrugs. “No big deal. I love this job. Kids are easier to deal with than adults.”

Makoto chuckles in agreement before Nagisa waves at him, saying, “You can’t go to the game wearing that.”

He looks down at his blue and grey flannel. “But these are school colors.”

“No, I mean.” He eyes Makoto critically and Kisumi just eyes him. “Wear the flannel but have a school shirt under it.” He pounds his own chest twice, over his IWATOBI JELLIES shirt. The cartoon jellyfish on the fabric is winking at Makoto and kicking a soccer ball. “Represent.”

Kisumi draws his sucker out with a loud pop. “You gonna keep the boots on?”

Nagisa sighs, clicking his heels together. “They’ll distract Rei-chan.”

Kisumi nods sadly before they both smirk. “You wearing them, then?”

“Definitely.”

“I don’t have a school shirt,” Makoto coughs.

“I have one,” Kisumi grins, standing up to saunter out the door with a wave of his lollipop, indicating Makoto should follow.

Before Makoto can do so, Nagisa pounces on his back and holds tight like a leech. Makoto laughs, nudging him with the back of his head. “Sorry I’ve been such a jerk.”

“It’s cool.” Nagisa nods against his shoulder. “Do you hate me for calling Mamibana?”

“No,” Makoto says. “Thank you for that, I needed it.”

Nagisa lands on his feet and smiles. “You’re welcome.” He nudges him out the door. “Hurry up, this’ll be fun!”

Makoto stumbles out into the hallway to head for Kisumi’s office and he’s overwhelmed by an alluring combination of strawberries and apple scents when he steps through the door. “Wow, it smells really good in here.”

Kisumi looks up from where he was digging through a cardboard box behind his desk. “Thanks. It’s called Margarita Time.” He nods at the big green candle on the shelf. “I pay more for organic candles than I do my half-sweet, non-fat caramel cortados.”

Makoto didn’t understand a word of that sentence but he’s saved from trying to figure it out when Kisumi stares at him with a slow, heated drag of his eyes and breathes, “What size are you?”

Makoto almost blushes for some reason. “Um. I. Wear a large in shirts?”

Kisumi watches him for another moment before tossing him a shirt. “Well, damn, don’t think we have any larges! I’m sure you can squeeze those big muscles into a medium, right?”
Makoto opens his mouth –

“Right!” Kisumi pipes, coming around the desk to lean against it and smile big, arms crossed and expectant.

Makoto frowns nervously. “You’re sure you don’t have a large?”

“Positive!” Kisumi doesn’t check.

Makoto turns his frown to the shirt. “Well, okay then. Thank you. I’ll go change.”

“Janitor’s in the bathroom. Change here.”


He waits for Kisumi to leave but he just stands there with raised brows and that big smile.

Makoto says, “Um.”

“KISUMI.”

Makoto startles and turns to face Nagisa, who’s standing in the doorway with a judgmental brow lifted. “You know, it really smells fantastic in here, kind of like evergreen.” He gestures and sniffs. “You know, a lot of pine.” He sniffs harder. “Lots of pining going on in here.”

Makoto tips his head in confusion but Kisumi sighs, dragging his feet as he steps out in the hallway, appearing defeated. Nagisa shakes his head after him and whispers to Makoto, “Don’t worry, I don’t think there’s any cameras set up in here.” He snorts. “Not yet, at least.”

“What?”

“Either way, hurry up!”

He shuts the door and Makoto blinks at it for a very long time.
Makoto isn’t one to enjoy crowded places, but he makes an exception for the gathering at the park. Parents are herding groups of costumed children along the sidewalks, using the paths to commute across the city in an effort to find more houses offering candy. The school is using the grass fields to host multiple soccer games and the concession stands are selling hot chocolate – the aroma is even sweeter with the chill in the air.

Being out in the open with so many people is a nerve wracking experience but when he recognizes some of his students on the soccer team and they beam at him, it makes it worth all the anxiety in the world and he’s glad that he came.
The bleachers are packed and there are occupied blankets laid out at the sidelines but some parents are too revved up to even sit down, choosing instead to stand and shout encouragements. Nagisa is on his feet with the conspiring moms and is the king of their shit-talking empire. He alternates between mumbling about how awful the other team’s uniform color scheme is and groaning about how good Rei looks in his coach pants.

Makoto meanwhile, is feeling very out of place until Nagisa remembers he’s there so he can ask, “Mako-chan, be a gentleman and get me some hot chocolate with lots and lots of marshmallows, would you? Love you.”

Makoto jumps on the excuse to escape the gossip circle and heads for the concession stand, feeling the heat of a blush even with the wind on his face as the moms erupt in whispers and giggles.

He gets Nagisa’s damn hot chocolate with extra marshmallows and concentrates on not bumping into anyone or spilling anything on his way back to the bleachers. He’s so focused on the task that he doesn’t look up until it’s too late, and his breath leaves him in a magnificent rush at the sight before him.

Nagisa has moved to the bleachers with two individuals, the taller one wearing a black hoodie and black jeans, long hair whipping under a black snapback. The person is Rin – that much is obvious by the clothing choice.

Beside him is Haru, who is watching the game, content to be left out of the conversation, comfortable by himself and needing no other validation. Makoto’s ashamed to have ever thought he was cold – he’s just quiet where others are screaming for attention and Makoto’s been too busy needing his own form of acceptance to realize that.

Haru’s head is dipped to hide his mouth behind his thick scarf as the wind picks up. He seems to have been forced to retire his denim vest in exchange for more seasonal clothing – he’s shoving his gloved hands into the pockets of a pea coat and there’s a beanie slouched over his head, though his fringe catches in his lashes as the breeze moves through his hair and Makoto’s own fingers ache to glide through the strands.

Even with all those layers on, Haru appears to still be cold, feet moving in a restless shuffle to try and keep himself warm. His face is unfortunately the only expanse of skin that Makoto can see and it’s pale, the loveliest shade of white even if the color is concerning to see.

Haru turns as if he can feel Makoto’s reverent stare and their gazes lock as they did a few nights ago. But unlike then, Haru doesn’t look away, even as his brows crease angrily.

But he can’t pull that mask over his eyes and they brighten with the dare of hope as Makoto comes forward.

Rin notices him and glances at Haru before looking at Makoto like he’s torn between beating him up or going to find him a sympathy beer. He appears to settle for being polite, tipping his standard smirk as he says, “Hey, Mako.”

“Hello, Rin.” Makoto smiles back before he nudges the hot chocolate against Nagisa’s hand. He takes it with raised brows and expectant eyes.

The toes of Makoto’s left foot curl tight and inside his pockets is where he clenches his fingers into a
steadying fist. It’s hard to swallow his pride but it’s even harder to keep it up in arms and Makoto lets the weight go, head dipping in surrender as he breathes, “Hi, Haru.”

It’s clear that he wasn’t expecting to be addressed – his nostrils flare but he manages a curt nod of response before turning back to the field.

Well, that was better than nothing, but it doesn’t make Makoto feel that much better.

Rin clears his throat with a wince. “I’ve ah, never seen you at one of these things before.”

Makoto brightens at a realization. “Oh that’s right! Gou’s on the soccer team, isn’t she?”

Rin points to the left goal, which Gou is guarding with a smirk of confidence that widens as the other team kicks the ball toward her. Makoto chuckles, “I’d be scared if I were them.”

“I know,” Rin sighs with adoring eyes. “She’s a man-eater.”

“Wonder where she got that from,” Nagisa says with an evasive sip of his drink.

Haru snorts in agreement but Rin doesn’t deny it – that just makes him look even prouder.

Something either really good or really bad happens on the field and causes Rin and Nagisa to rush to the sidelines as shouts erupt and whistles blow, leaving Haru and Makoto alone on the bleachers.

Haru’s eyes are furious on Rin’s back and Makoto’s own gaze is surely no less kind on Nagisa. He can barely move with the tension in the air but he’s suddenly got far too much energy, not knowing where to settle his hands or how to sit on the bleachers or what in the hell he is supposed to do.

He clears his throat and almost chokes, gasping, “You, uh. Look cute.”

Haru slowly turns his head to stare at him and Makoto feels his own soul step out of his body to cry out at him in horrified disbelief because there was no worse way to start off the conversation than that.

“Weather’s nice enough. I mean, it’s. You know,” Makoto clarifies. “Good that it’s not too cold with everybody going out tonight. Because. You know, Halloween.”

Haru doesn’t say anything in response.

Makoto rolls his lips in before he smacks them, eyes moving over the ground as if he’ll find something to talk about in the rows of ants. He startles when another whistle blows and stammers, “Do you uh, know if we’re winning?”

Haru is silent.

Makoto bites the inside of his lip, where he can feel his pulse racing. He wants to cry, and as he feels himself give up he whispers, “I’m sorry.”

“Really now.”

Makoto’s pain washes away with the relief of hearing Haru’s voice again. Even if his tone is defensive, it’s something. “Yes,” Makoto breathes. “I’m sorry I’ve avoided you. It wasn’t your
Haru doesn’t look convinced and Makoto tries, “It wasn’t, it’s just that –” Fear closes his throat, refusing to let him speak.

The silence causes Haru’s expression to twist in regret, as if he shouldn’t have opened himself up to giving Makoto another chance.

But Makoto isn’t the only one at fault here and he scoffs, “Don’t act like you weren’t avoiding me, too!”

Haru goes rigid, surely not used to his actions being confronted so bluntly. Makoto’s not used to acting this blunt, but making things right doesn’t always happen if he tries to be sweet about it.

He realizes with a start that his mom was right. He doesn’t need to be who he once was because if this situation occurred before the war, he wouldn’t have had the courage to confront Haru at all – they would have never spoken again.

The innocent boy he used to be wouldn’t have known that this was worth fighting for when Haru gets up to walk away.

But Makoto, the man with one leg, one working ear, and one bruised but beating heart knows it’s worth it, and he grabs Haru’s hand.

A distant part of himself takes in the details of this moment, like how worn Haru’s glove is and the dots of lint that spot the fabric, but right now his world is narrowed down to their point of contact, where he can feel the shape of Haru’s fingers, which are thin inside his glove, and the way he looks murderous.

But even with all that fire in his eyes, it seems that Haru can’t find a reason to pull away.

“Stay,” Makoto says. “I want to work this –”

“Work what out?” Haru snaps.

Makoto’s smile is one of fond exasperation and he threads the tips of his fingers between Haru’s, making the boy’s face flush as Makoto feels the same warmth bloom across his cheeks and the surface of his heart.

“That,” he breathes. “I want to work that out.”

Haru’s teeth clench, chest moving a bit quicker. He stares down at where their hands are joined and Makoto can see through his mask, knows he’s afraid and rubs his thumb over Haru’s palm because he is too – Haru’s eyes flutter closed at the sensation and he swallows hard.

He then opens his eyes and takes his hand back to shove it in his pocket.

The loss is so encompassing that it terrifies Makoto – how can he already be so dependent on the comfort that touch brings him when he’s only felt it a few times, when he’s never going to feel it again because Haru is about to walk away?

The boy stands over Makoto with his head low to stare down at him, hair skipping across his eyes as
his lip trembles from the cold and so many other reasons. Makoto lets him search his face without hesitation, knowing he’d cut himself open right here and let Haru take out whatever he wanted if there was something inside him that he was scared of.

But it appears that Haru can see through Makoto’s mask as well, for his eyes soften as if he’s just said that dedication out loud. Makoto’s chest is tight with anticipation until the boy sits back down beside him instead of walking away, causing Makoto to almost fly apart with joy.

Haru rolls his eyes at his smile, which is so deep that it hurts in the best of ways. The edges of Haru’s own mouth aren’t lifted but they’re relaxed, and that content expression is different than his blank one, might even be Makoto’s favorite so far.

Haru sighs, “What happened?”

He sounds like he’s dreading the answer, voice hoarse with exhaustion. Makoto has every intention of explaining himself but concern dips him forward into Haru’s space. “Do you have a cold?”

Haru smirks like that’s funny. “You talk first.”

Makoto chuckles at his stubbornness before he goes quiet, looking down at his feet as he gathers his thoughts. It’s so hard to get his right shoe on when he doesn’t have a real foot to maneuver it into place, still hasn’t figured out how to get the prosthetic foot to work with him when it comes to that task or any other task for that matter.

“My leg.” He takes a deep breath. Another one. Haru is patient in the silence. “Not a lot of people know about it. I’ve tried to keep it that way.”

Haru studies him. “You haven’t accepted it.” It’s not a question.

A small part of Makoto wishes he would ask questions so he could get mad and storm off and not have to talk about this, but the bigger parts of himself know that he owes Haru an explanation and maybe even needs to talk about this himself. He really doesn’t want to though.

But he forces himself to keep going, weak as his voice becomes. “I’m really, really self-conscious about it. And you – you saw what it can do… or what it –” His mind is racing so fast that it goes blank.

Haru is observant and catches on quickly, that much is proven true when he recognizes what Makoto needs and presses his own elbow into the crook of Makoto’s arm, giving him a point of contact to be present for even though he usually displays a wariness when it comes to touching. But he doesn’t back off until Makoto weakly pushes back. “You were ashamed,” Haru says, digging his hands deeper into his pockets but remaining close so they can hear one another as the crowd cheers.

Makoto nods. “But more than that I was scared.”

Haru is so surprised that Makoto has to grin and the action feels good when the boy’s eyes flicker to his lips. “I didn’t want you to find out about it,” Makoto says. “I like to pretend it never happened even though everyone else has already accepted it.”

Haru studies him. “You haven’t accepted it.” It’s not a question.

Makoto stiffens and shakes his head hesitantly, waiting for Haru to be judgmental, but he just sits
there. He meets Makoto’s gaze without flinching, as if this isn’t so embarrassing that Makoto’s honestly ready to burst into tears.

Blindly, Makoto asks, “How does that make you feel about me?”

Haru shrugs. “I really don’t care.” He grimaces. “Wow. I don’t mean it like that, I just meant…” He bites the side of his lip in thought and Makoto tries his best to remember what they’re even talking about. “It’s your deal – how you feel about it is your deal. There’s no wrong way to handle it.”

Makoto thinks he understands but doesn’t want to get hopeful. “You don’t think that’s…”

Haru scoffs. “What, weak?” He shakes his head as he stares out at the field. “You’re not weak.” His dark tone indicates that he’s seen weak people – he said the word with disgust, maybe even anger at Makoto for trying to put himself in the same category as those people.

Makoto takes this in with another heavy breath, but he still becomes lightheaded. He manages to finish his train of thought, mumbling, “I’ve kept trying to be who I was before the injury and I can’t. I’m finally realizing that.” He sighs. “Slowly. But it’s hard.”

Haru’s shrug appears to be his acceptance of Makoto’s apology. “I get that.”

Makoto’s shoulders drop in relief as he drags a hand up through his hair – his body sags and he almost falls backwards until he remembers he’s on shitty metal bleachers. He hesitates to ask this when things between them are finally okay but he has to know, “Why were you avoiding me?”

Haru’s lips part and that must be his version of mouthing for words because he obviously doesn’t know what to say, or at least he can’t say it to Makoto.

A lightbulb goes off – a very late one. “Does it have something to do with Sousuke?”

Haru looks away.

Makoto nudges him and that makes him glance up anxiously. “He hasn’t said anything about you if that makes any difference.”

Haru doesn’t relax. “And Rin?”

“Rin?” Makoto’s brows crease so deeply that his glasses slide down the bridge of his nose. “No?” He glances at Rin, who is entirely focused on the game and not paying them any attention.

The tension drains from Haru bit by bit and with that, Makoto decides to not question him further because he doesn’t want to keep the boy nervous – the feeling probably takes all his energy when he’s looking this sick.

“Can you tell me what’s wrong with you now?” The dark circles under Haru’s eyes are making him worry. “Are you sick?”

Haru’s smile is one of bitter humor. “Guess so.” His eyes close as if he can fall asleep where he’s sitting before he admits, “It’s not the kind of thing that goes away. It’s always there.” Quieter, “Always there.”

Makoto isn’t sure if he can ask for details – he already knows enough to be more than nervous about
the situation, seeing as he found Haru passed out with a mouth full of blood on the night they met.

He watches Haru’s shoulders jerk as he represses a shudder. “You look like you’re about to freeze to death.”

“I fucking am,” Haru snaps, making Makoto startle a laugh. Haru relaxes a bit more at the sound but his careful tone and glances at Rin indicate that he isn’t used to talking about this in detail. “I’m always cold. That’s part of it.”

“Even in the summer?”

“I have to wear two jackets under the vest in the middle of July. But when it actually gets cold outside it’s…” He glares at the fallen leaves and dreads sinks into his voice. “Winter is a nightmare. This is nothing compared to it.”

Makoto purses his lips. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Haru arches a brow at him before Makoto steps away, moving through the crowd with a new purpose that leaves no room for his usual anxiousness.

He comes back to see Haru hunched over with his head down, eyes shut. He might actually be asleep, at least until Makoto sits down beside him and nudges him awake, causing his eyes to set into an annoyed glare before it registers where he is and who’s beside him, but more importantly, what Makoto is offering him.

Haru blinks at the cup of hot chocolate and Makoto holds to memory the sight of how big his eyes get, like a child with their face pressed against a candy store window. “Consider it a peace offering.”

Haru takes the cup with gloved fingers that curl around Makoto’s and brings it to his mouth. He pauses before drinking it, sniffing a little.

Makoto winces in apology. “I forgot to ask if you wanted marshmallows.”

“I’ve never had it.”

“I tried them once and it’s really hard to alternate between eating something in your drink and drinking the actual drink so I don’t really prefer –”

“I mean I’ve never had hot chocolate.”

Makoto stares. He stares for a long time. “What?” He catches a few stares with how shrill his voice becomes. “What did you drink when you were little and it was cold outside?!”

Haru stiffens, eyes going distant as he mumbles, “My parents weren’t very traditional.”

Makoto’s heart sinks with the sinking look on Haru’s face.

Then he smiles softly, ducking his head so he’s not looming over the boy so much with their height difference, which is apparent even when they’re sitting down. Makoto says very matter-of-factly, “My mom would ground me for life if she found out I met someone who had never tasted hot chocolate and I didn’t make sure they discovered how awesome it is.”
“She’d ground you?”

“For life.”

Haru lifts a brow at his serious expression, almost smirks at it. He brings the cup to his mouth, closing his eyes against the steam before taking a hesitant sip.

Makoto watches his throat work as he swallows and waits for the verdict. Haru wipes his mouth and blinks down at the drink. “Well fuck me.”

Makoto would have a whole bunch of feelings about that statement if he wasn’t too busy laughing at the boy’s reverent expression.

“LITTLE BOY BLUUUUE!”

A figure takes a running leap and crashes into Haru, shoving him into Makoto’s chest, where he gives a long-suffering sigh. He peels himself away with a look of apology that really isn’t necessary. Makoto would actually be elated if it happened again.

The guy that’s appeared at Haru’s other side is dressed appropriately for the cold up until his flip flops. He rips a knit hat off and reveals a head of red hair with a stalk of strands sticking up in the back, and Makoto watches the tip of it move with his animated gestures. “Sorry I’m late,” the boy laughs, or maybe that’s just how his voice sounds, light as if anything can be turned into a joke if you try hard enough. “Foot traffic was a three-eyed bitch and traffic-traffic was its mother. So what’s going on? Can I smoke out here? I know Rin’s already been asked to leave, that’s why he’s not sitting here, right? Right? Is nutmeg’s team winning? Oh hey, you drinking that?”

Haru doesn’t put forth any effort into answering any of his rapid-fire questions, indicating that he’s too used to this. “Makoto, this is Asahi. We grew up together.”

Makoto perks up and smiles in greeting, to which Asahi stares blankly in response. “Damn. I mean hey. You got a great aura, lots of color going on.”

Makoto glances down at himself nervously while Asahi whispers to Haru, “His spirit animal is a killer whale, I can tell by the way his hair is parted. Don’t worry, they’re gentle giants, lots of endurance.” He winks at Haru’s furious look. “But I’m wearing my crystals today and they said –”

“Where do you have on your crystals?”

Asahi scoffs, brushing himself off with an offended look. “You could at least take me to dinner first.”

Makoto’s brows jump but Haru just shakes his head at him in a silent plea for him to save himself from trying to figure his friend out.

The Jellies win the game and Gou races off the field straight for Rin, which makes Makoto’s heart melt a little. Okay, maybe a lot.

Rin spins her around in an embrace as she shouts, “Didja see? Didja see me?” Her fists are clenched in excitement to know.

“You were amazing,” Rin gushes, going on about every little thing she did until Gou looks fit to
burst into light with how hard she’s beaming.

Gou comes over to the bleachers, ecstatic at the sight of Makoto. She tells him all the reasons why soccer is so great, speaking too quickly for responses, but Haru and Rin don’t look as stressed about this as Makoto feels. The two of them are up and in caretaker mode, Haru touching the back of his hand to Gou’s cheek, her forehead, making sure she isn’t too cold under the sheen of sweat. Rin notices this and helps Gou into her hoodie even as she continues to babble, tucking a beanie over her reddened ears before Hayato hurries over to take her hand and drag her to the lineup where they have to high five the other team.

Makoto smiles when Haru is finally able to sit back down after finding Gou some water and crackers and sending her off. “You’re great with her,” he sighs, hoping he doesn’t sound too dreamy.

Haru snorts. “She’s very spoiled.”

“Damn right,” Rin snaps before he and Asahi step off to the side to discuss something.

Kisumi comes over, fanning himself with a clipboard as he pushes his hair back and smiles at Makoto. Haru stiffens, which is odd because Kisumi looks friendly enough as he sits down beside Makoto and leans into his space to ask, “So, worth all the hype?”

Makoto nods. “Yes, it was fun to watch.”

“Mm, I know the feeling,” Kisumi mumbles, looking Makoto up and down. Haru’s eyes might go narrow under the cover of his hair but Makoto isn’t too sure.

Kisumi gasps when he notices who is at Makoto’s other side and bends over him to curl a slow smile. “Hi, Haru-”

Haru’s eyes are flatter than roadkill. “Shigino.”

At Makoto’s puzzlement, Kisumi explains, “We met at the school a few years back.” He inclines his head sweetly. “I’m used to seeing Rin more often but it’s great to see you! Gou talks about you all the time. You mean a lot to her.”

“She means a lot to me.” Haru shrugs, unbothered with how deep that sentiment is, unashamed of it. Makoto can’t handle this.

Kisumi looks over Haru’s shoulder and gasps again, pointing his finger. “Hey, I know you!”

Makoto turns to see that Asahi is back and staring at Kisumi like a deer in the headlights. “No you don’t,” Asahi says.

“Yeah, I do,” Kisumi laughs, all sugary and bringing a pink stain to Asahi’s skin. “You’re that guy that was on that bike and –”

“I have no recollection of this,” Asahi almost shouts.

“And you’re in my Sunday yoga class.” Kisumi snaps a finger gun and shoots Asahi accusingly.

“No, I’m –”
“Drop your pants.”

Asahi’s blush radiates a heat that Makoto can feel even from where he’s sitting – or maybe that’s just his own blush.

Haru isn’t fazed, lifting his brows as he watches Asahi with a loud slurp of his drink.

Kisumi’s smirk widens in the tense silence. “If you dropped your pants right here there’d be a Toucan tattoo on your left thigh. I know this because you wear shorts to the yoga class you’re in with me and that thing is bright as hell.”

“Well then,” Haru nods, convinced. He tugs on Makoto’s arm, hauling him up to stand with him. “We’ll leave you two to catch up.”

Asahi claws for purchase on Haru’s jacket, hissing, “I will cast a spell on you if you leave me here!”

“Go for it.”

Asahi’s pleading turns desperate, “Stay and it can be a good spell! I swear I can turn you into a mermaid this time, just don’t –”

Haru isn’t having it and Makoto allows himself to be dragged away but he does glance back at Asahi and Kisumi and ask, “What’s that about?”

Haru appears to be too inside his own head to answer that question, giving Makoto a look before casting another in Kisumi’s direction. He blushes and works his jaw, remaining silent as they come to a stop where Rin and Nagisa are standing.

The two of them are waiting for Gou and Rei to finish with the after-game meeting. At Haru’s arrival, Rin looks up miserably, causing him to tense. “What is it?”

“Asahi can’t do it, he has to work tonight.”

“What?”

“Can’t do what?” Nagisa pipes, standing on the tips of his toes and swaying into Makoto with a smirk. Makoto holds back a sigh and looks up to the heavens with a plea for strength.

“I have to work tonight,” Rin says. “So I can’t take Gou trick-or-treating.”

Makoto and Nagisa give Haru a questioning look and he glares at Rin. “He doesn’t want me to take her alone when I’m sick. Asahi was supposed to go with me.”

Rin rolls his eyes, unimpressed with his attitude. “It’d be different if it was just Gou going but I said that Hayato could go with her because Kisumi’s doing trunk-or-treat with the other teachers at the community center and he wasn’t going to be able to take Hayato.” His sigh is explosive with stress. “She’s already got her costume and everything, she’s gonna be heartbroken.”

Haru looks down at the ground, expression twisted in a shame that Makoto knows all too well.

“I could go.”
They all turn to him in varying degrees of surprise that make him blush. “I mean…” He shrugs, hides his hands in his pockets so he can move his fingers through this burst of nervous energy. “My brother and sister are in town and I was going to take them tonight anyway. I didn’t really have any idea where the best places to take them would be.”

Nagisa smiles, “Mako-chan is so smart! Is Sou-chan going too?”

The volume of Makoto’s hearing aid isn’t loud enough to let him hear Rin’s sharp intake of breath, but he does see his eyes turn to the empty field, wide and distant.

“No,” Makoto says slowly, almost turning the word into a question in his confusion. “He’s spending time with Mom tonight.”

Rin ducks his head, hiding his face as he ties his hair up in retaliation against the wind. He politely asks, “How is he? Your brother?”

Depressed, Makoto wants to say. Not working as much but he can’t thrive without stress. Doesn’t want a life that isn’t in constant jeopardy. “He’s fine.”

It’s a lie but it’s one he has to tell more for himself than anyone else.

Rin’s head dips into a shallow nod. “Good. That’s really good.” His voice is soft, almost weak.

Haru is too busy staring at Makoto to notice. “You’d do that?” he says. “You’d go with me?”

Makoto smiles reassuringly in the wake of Haru’s hesitation. “Of course I would.”

Haru appears to not know what to say, pulling his top lip in with raised brows, unable to speak. He breaks their stare so his eyes can drop to Makoto’s mouth one more time before he looks away and nods in acceptance.

Gou is Peter Pan for Halloween and Hayato is the Shadow.

“You can’t be Peter Pan,” Hayato cries with a stomp of his foot. “You’re a girl and Peter Pan is a boy!”

“Gou can be a boy if she wants to, Hayato,” Kisumi says sternly, guiding his little arm through the sleeve of his black jumpsuit. “Maybe Peter Pan’s shadow wanted to be a girl.”

Hayato looks down at his jumpsuit and sighs. “Fine.” He pulls the hood over his head and crosses his arms, making Gou smile triumphantly beside him.

From the soccer field they make it to Sagebrook, where Makoto picks up Ren and Ran while Haru follows Gou and Hayato as they ravage his nearby neighbors for candy.

Mom and Sousuke have already gone to dinner, which is a relief because Makoto doesn’t know what he’d do if his mom saw Haru – or Sousuke for that matter. Having the twins see him from afar is bad enough because they both already know what this is and won’t hesitate to be obvious about it. “He’s just a friend,” Makoto tries weakly.

“You think he’s cute,” Ren muffles from beneath his Optimus Prime mask.
“I didn’t –” Makoto sighs. “How do you even...?”

“But he thinks you’re cute too,” Ran says as she twirls a strand of her Sailor Moon wig. “I can tell.”

Makoto stills. “Really?”

Ren snorts, “Did your teen magazines tell you that, Ran?”

“Yes,” Ran replies. “They also told me you’re gonna die with thirty two cats.” She thunks him on the head with her plastic Moon Stick.

“That actually doesn’t sound that bad,” Makoto mumbles to himself before he has to break up a fight between his siblings.

Makoto drops off Echo with Miss Tsukino and her delighted German Shepard before finding Haru, Gou, and Hayato across the busy street. Makoto’s considering making everyone hold hands, pride and cooties be damned, with how many people are around.

Haru’s face is tight as if he’s thinking the exact same thing. “It’ll be fine,” Makoto assures.

Haru cranes his head back to look up at him flatly. “You’ve never done this by yourself before, have you?”

Makoto blinks. “Well, no.” He perks up and brightens. “But I have faith in us. I think that – Ren, that’s not your lightsaber!”

“Hayato no, take her hand – I don’t care if you don’t want to, you’ll get lost –”

“I can’t hold your bag for you, Ran!”

“No, you will stay where I can see you –”

“Excuse me? You’re tired? You’re tired?”

“Stop running – you still have faith, Makoto?”

“Ah, well, I – DO NOT CROSS THAT STREET! – you know what, let me get back to you on that one, Haru.”

Night crashes down and lit up lawn decorations act as a guide through the darkness. The temperature drops with the setting sun but Haru’s had Makoto’s jacket on for a while now, brown leather swallowing him up but protecting him from the cold.

Makoto vastly underestimated Halloween. In fact he hasn’t had this much of a workout since basic training. He now understands that this is a holiday that has to be tackled with military precision if one wants to make it out alive. Preparation is crucial and there needs to be a tactical plan of action to hit the most houses on the fewest streets because stamina runs out quick in these conditions – this is a battlefield of crowded sidewalks and minivans and stoic-faced parents as they drag their screaming kids away from just one more house.
Makoto manages to keep himself going because he’s loaded with the ammunition of patience and when that runs out, his survival depends on the acceptance that children are simply impossible to have under complete control where candy is involved.

After a while, the walking causes his stump to chafe where it’s connected to the prosthetic, but the feeling isn’t enough to cause him pain. Though, of course a break would be incredible if it were an option.

Haru is putting on the same brave face even though he’s struggling, dragging his feet and wavering when he’s standing in place to wait for the kids to finish at each house.

Seeing him this way changes everything Makoto thought about not stopping. Quietly, he says to him, “You know you can ask to sit down.”

“I don’t need to sit down,” Haru drones mechanically, used to wearing this mask.

How familiar. Makoto curves a smirk. “I don’t think you get how much it would make me feel better if you did it anyway.”

“I hate you,” Haru sighs, making Makoto smirk wider.

Haru’s fatigue gets the best of him and once he’s reassured that all four kids are in clear sight and only a few feet away across the quiet street, he settles beside Makoto on the curb, his exhale heavy with relief as he sits down.

Makoto’s prosthetic is heavier than his real leg, so it’s a bit of a struggle to get it in a comfortable position without drawing too much attention. Haru seems to notice his embarrassment and busies himself with pulling his knees up to settle his arms over them and rest his head there.

His face is hidden in his folded arms, so he can’t see Makoto when his eyes move over the boy on their own accord, without his control. His gaze traces the muscled curves of his legs and he wonders if Haru’s thighs would be cold under his hands, and that’s so unhelpful right now that it’s despairing. He moves his eyes to safer areas, like Haru’s back, but the sight of him wearing his jacket stirs up a warmth and an even deeper heat that makes Makoto feel dazed with the rush of it.

He then shifts his eyes to what he hopes is an even more innocent place – the back of Haru’s head. He’s trying to learn the wave pattern in his beanie when he becomes entranced by the color of his hair and is sure that there can’t possibly be a name that does that shade justice. Neither dark blue nor black is the color Makoto is looking at, and he’s so wrapped up in these thoughts that he doesn’t realize Haru’s eyes are moving over him in the same kind of half-lidded wonder.

He does finally notice it after a minute and looks away to watch the kids as he pretends that his face isn’t burning. “Can you make it?”

Haru sighs. “Got to. I’m fine.”

Makoto arches his brows as he keeps watch of their herd. “I bet you say that a lot.” He tugs on some frosty glass blades with a shake of his head. “You can’t mean it every time.”

“No one means it every time.”

That’s true and makes Makoto very sad as he watches his siblings, who don’t yet have a reason to lie
about their feelings, nor do they have any hesitation in asking for help. “I miss being a kid sometimes. Don’t you?”

Haru glances at him but before Makoto can meet his eyes he looks away, arms tightening over his knees. “No.”

Makoto shrugs because there’s definitely certain aspects of his own childhood he doesn’t want to go back to, like his dad forcing him to join sports when he didn’t want to. He’s thankful that he was benched most of the time, even though he was bullied for never being aggressive enough.

Makoto shakes his head, jarring the memories from his mind, and glances about the street. “Is this the route you took trick-or-treating when you were a kid?”

Haru’s sigh is one of dread and Makoto turns to frown at him. “I didn’t go,” Haru confesses, grimacing when Makoto’s jaw drops. “Not traditional, remember?”

“But that’s – that’s –” Makoto freezes. “Do you need a hug?”

“No,” Haru scoffs. He tucks his face deeper into his scarf to hide his angry flush. “Need people to stop making a big fucking deal about it. I’m over it.”

The defensiveness tells Makoto that he’s not over it, not at all, but he’s familiar with that lie, tells it to himself all the time. He knows that no good will come out of trying to force anything, so he obliges with a nod. “All right. I’m sorry.”

Haru grimaces again, looking more frustrated at himself than Makoto this time. “I swam,” he blurts.

Makoto frowns.

“I swam,” Haru repeats numbly. “That’s what I did. Not any of this.” He gestures weakly to the decorations around them, the life, the laughter.

Makoto’s heart breaks but comes back together when he notices the light in Haru’s eyes. This boy’s heart isn’t broken and he doesn’t seem to have ever missed any of this because he had something else to make him nostalgic.

Makoto’s never seen him look so openly happy and that brings a smile to his own face. “Gou told me you taught her how to swim.” He wonders if he’s pushing his luck when he asks, “Were you her age when you learned or older?”

Haru’s grin curves a little deeper. “Younger.”

Makoto cranes back. “What?”

“I knew how to swim before I knew how to walk, Makoto. And so did most everyone else from here.” He shrugs. “That’s just who we are. That’s our traditional.”

Makoto can’t imagine that. His mom didn’t even let him swim without floaties until he was twelve. “Wow,” he breathes. “I bet you swim better than everybody else, though.”

“What makes you say that?”
Makoto’s brain makes a shattering glass sound because he just spoke that line of thought out loud. “I, just. Uh.” He draws his lip in nervously, wonders if he could bite down and lose enough blood to die right here in the street and avoid this question. “You’re just… built… like that, you know?”

Haru’s smirk is clear in his voice. “No, I don’t.”

Makoto glares at him. “Teasing people is very rude.” He sticks his nose up even as he can feel his face heating. He jumps his left foot up and down in a desperate attempt to release some of the restless excitement at all of this. “What all do you, ah, like about it?”

“Swimming?”

Makoto nods.

Haru falls into silence, deep in thought – apparently this is a very serious topic to him. His expression is resolute and his mouth opens to respond but then he falters.

“Haru?”

He’s drawn his knees up even tighter to his chest, doesn’t seem to realize he’s rocking back and forth a little. Haru uses a gloved finger to trace a mark on his own wrist, where a dark, round scar stands out in contrast against his pale skin. His hand tightens into a fist before he lets it go with a sigh. “My aunt, it was my aunt.”

Haru hesitates and Makoto nods in encouragement for him to continue. He looks like he’s going to be sick if he keeps talking but he does it anyway, having to force the words out like they physically pain him. “She was the one who took me swimming. And she told me why the ocean is important when you’re from Iwatobi.”

Makoto takes careful breaths, studying each wave in the pattern on Haru’s beanie, making himself count them even though he knows it’s supposed to look like… like the ocean.

Makoto demands himself to keep listening to Haru because he’s not the only one in pain – that much is clear by the boy’s voice. “This place is bad. You can’t turn it off, you can’t ever stop fucking feeling the things it can do. The things it can take.”

Is that why you’re like this? Makoto wants to ask. Is that why you’re so strong? So hard? Is that why you can smirk at all the things that make me want to cry?

Haru’s voice shifts into the lightest tone Makoto’s ever heard him speak, higher than content, daring to be considered gentle. “My aunt said that water doesn’t change. Nothing can change it and nothing matters to it. It’s free. That’s why I love swimming.”

Makoto’s brows go high and crease. “Then why do you look so sad?”

Haru stiffens, eyes moving across Makoto’s face as if he’s trying to find something. “Rin doesn’t even know about her. I’ve never told anyone about her, I don’t know why I told you.”

Makoto shakes his head and smiles at the boy’s surprised expression, like he expected that statement to offend him. “I’m glad you told me either way,” Makoto murmurs, meaning every word. “So I can be glad you had her and that she gave you something that makes you look so happy.”
Haru stares at him. “Go out with me.”

Makoto’s ears ring, high-pitched and dazing. He tries to bring a hand up to adjust his hearing aid but Haru’s hand bears down on his insistently and wow, okay, he’s stronger than he looks, that’s a little fascinating, but Makoto’s too busy thinking about more important things to concentrate on that, like where the nearest hospital is because he can feel himself going into cardiac arrest. “You w-want me t-t-to…”

Haru lifts his chin with a pointed look. “Go out. On a date. With me.”

Makoto’s face is numb and he can’t feel his mouth moving. “I might pass out.”

“On the date?”

“No, now.”

Haru’s voice is tight. “Why?”

“Do not laugh at me!” He blushes so hard that he’s nauseous with the heat. “You are so rude.” He shouldn’t sound so adoring about that, nor should he be smiling.

Haru’s eyes fall to Makoto’s lips as they often do but what’s different about this time is that he looks for so long that he’s staring. Makoto didn’t realize just how close they are, his head dipped down and Haru’s tipped back, bodies so near that Makoto can smell blueberry candy on his breath – the scent hazes over his mind, leaving him in a warm fog.

Makoto swallows thickly, his eyes widening as they fly over Haru’s face. His pulse pounds in his lips until they’re aching and his lungs are on fire but he can’t breathe. Their proximity has made everything more intense, heightening every sensation – the dig of concrete under Makoto’s palms, the hesitant touch of gloved fingers as they find his against the sidewalk. Gravity has been reversed, pulling him closer and closer to Haru as he’s drawn in by that same force.
Makoto can’t hear the crickets anymore, they’re a distant echo of another world, a call from another reality that doesn’t exist in this new space they’ve created with one another. Makoto feels untouchable from even himself, assured by the firm set of Haru’s eyes, never feeling so safe in his entire life.

Makoto doesn’t want to be scared of the ocean anymore, he wants to look out at the sea and think of this boy, who is telling Makoto with those blue eyes that treacherous waters are ahead if he comes any closer. Haru goes still just a breath away because he doesn’t want that for Makoto, no matter how much he needs to lean forward just an inch more to satisfy his own feelings.

Makoto smiles to himself because he’s been drowning ever since the desert and moving closer to Haru doesn’t feel like getting swept up in the waves at all.

It feels as though someone dove into the water after him when he isn’t worth such sacrifice – they’re letting the darkness swallow them up just so they can find Makoto in the shadows and take hold of the chains that have kept him pinned down in the dark blue deep and away from the warmth of light even as he’s reached for it. Makoto had no hope of breaking his chains, for they were heavy with fear, but one touch of this boy’s hand makes them explode.

Kissing Haru doesn’t feel like drowning.

It feels like someone has hauled Makoto up out of the water into the blazing sunlight and is telling him, “It’s over.”

Haru’s lips are cold, dragging hot chills over Makoto’s skin at the touch of them. They’re chapped but he finds himself marveling at their texture, feeling rough creases like little scars he wants to kiss
better or at least learn and be able to find with his thumb and know in his sleep. Even with that roughness, the kiss is soft as all first kisses should be, with an innocence someone like Makoto didn’t think he deserved and someone like Haru didn’t think he was capable of giving.

They linger to savor another moment, then another, and then just one more, before they pull apart. Haru’s eyes flutter open only to roll closed when Makoto can’t stop himself from kissing him again and memorizing the fit of his mouth and the shape of his lips. He blushes at his own eagerness and pulls away only to have Haru drag him back in with his teeth in Makoto’s bottom lip – the gentle indention is straight save for the chip in his front tooth.

Haru kisses him with a fervency he never displays, one that Makoto knows so few people have seen, hopefully even less who have felt like this, as Haru breathes in his deep exhale and a sound catches in the boy’s throat, a noise so weak that it’s as if he’s been starving and doesn’t know if Makoto is making it better or worse but he doesn’t want to stop.

Makoto takes his face in his hands, thumbs moving to warm the skin before they part, and he finds himself so dizzy that he has to rest his forehead against Haru’s. Makoto nuzzles against his hair, inhaling the scent of grape shampoo and praying it will get stuck in his lungs so he’ll be able to carry it with him. Haru’s grip is tight on Makoto’s wrist as he leans back, eyes tight with an anticipation that’s turning into worry at his silence.

Makoto knows he’s already seen too much but he hasn’t seen enough of this boy, who makes him feel reckless with all the parts of himself that he’s been tiptoeing around, who barely says anything but has a voice that resonates louder inside Makoto’s head than any gunshot or explosion or scream.

Haru is scared but he’s trying, he wants to try for Makoto.

Makoto’s nerves are livewires under his buzzing skin and he is terrified, but he’s going to fight tooth and nail for this even if that means fighting himself.

“I would love to go out with you, Haru.”

Chapter End Notes

Nagisa, Kisumi, and Makoto comic by bakapandy and MakoHaru by brickerbeetle.
Thank y’all so much!
burlesquecomposer (tumblr | archive of our own) and saltyaf (archive of our own) were my amazing betas this time around!

Sincere appreciation goes out to the following angels for their fanart and cosplay!

Thank you to:

katashit, for your depiction of Asahi during one of his quieter moments. ^.^

niansue, for your SIX incredible new pieces including Nao, Nagisa, Gou, Makoto, Haru, and Rin! Thank you so, so much. Your style continues to fascinate me and destroy me so happily.

staishblackrose and welldonealice literally, sincerely, truthfully, 100% made me cry real tears when I saw their cosplay depictions of ewoatt!Haru and ewoatt!Rin. You are both gorgeous and your details and dedication took my breath away. Thank you so much!

bakapandy did three pieces and all three of them have been subjected to staring and smiling at by me for long periods of time because they make me that happy. One piece is the Makoharu kiss, the other is a comic version of Nagisa busting in on Kisumi trying to get a strip tease in chapter nine, and the other is the infamous drunk catnapping scene. I hope this chapter warms your Sourin heart. <3 <3 <3

laceprincedraws did a three picture panel from chapter nine and it is the most precious thing ever. THANK YOU BOO.

phoebulous-me did a depiction of the Makoharu kiss and it’s just so sweet and intimate that I get all fuzzy inside let me hug you please and thanks~

brickerbeetle just destroyed me with Haru's damn eyes and damn hair and damn tattoo and earrings and Makoto's FUCKING FRECKLES WERKKKK <3 <3 <3 Seriously I love it so much thank you lol.

butts-and-kisses did a too cute depiction of the Makoharu kiss and I'm still head over heels with Haru's tattoo depiction and how damn adorable they look.

jenuinelly did Sousuke's flashback from chapter three and yes, there were tears, but also warm fuzzies because you are so talented and I feel so unworthy thank youuu~

Thanks to everyone else for their continued support of this fic! I hope you like. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Official man, delusions grand, and now I'm a free agent.

I'm here to make a stand for causes I don't understand and make a statement."
I'm not defeated, I believe that I can turn this ship around,

Believe me when I say I'm gonna be big explosions,

Crack through thunderous mountains,

Hearts exploding, minds, volcanoes pop and blow.

Who am I kidding, I'm sad, no ideas coming,

It's driving me mad, it's turning me bad,

It's closing in on me, I need recovery, I need closure,

I'm coming home."

Raleigh Ritchie - "Stronger Than Ever"

His fingers are splayed out on the table and the dark wood makes the spaces between them look even wider, emptier. He hides his hand under the table to link his fingers together but the action doesn’t bring him nearly as much comfort as it did when it was another’s hand he was holding – Rin’s hand.

“Pumpkin?”

“I am not a pumpkin,” Sousuke says, despite the fact that the words won’t do a damn thing to make that awful pet name go away. But deep down, very secretly, he’s happy that someone trusts him enough to not be scared of teasing him like this. “I’m a Sergeant. A feared, legendary Sergeant.”

His mom grins wider. “Also my pumpkin. My feared, legendary –”

He sinks lower into his chair with a groan, making her chuckle and throw a roll at him. He chews it with a pout while she turns her attention to more important things, like the paintings mounted across the walls of the restaurant. Her mouth moves silently as she talks to herself about core shadows and line definition, and while her art terms are painfully confusing to Sousuke, the familiar sight of her examining something so avidly makes him smile behind his coffee mug.

The cold weather and the holiday have drawn crowds elsewhere, leaving the establishment quiet enough for Sousuke and his mom to talk at a comfortable volume. The conversations of the other patrons are a low murmur, so soft that the knock of metal pans and the searing of grease can be heard from the kitchen. The atmosphere is even more relaxing with the aroma of his mom’s blueberry tea in the air – she brought a single pack of it with her to dinner. Sousuke knows that blueberry bushes grow at the Tachibana house and a few years ago she blushingly admitted that she might, sometimes, possibly get anxiety when she travels and the tea calms her. The smell of it reminds him of the old house too, and while this all should leave him without a care in the world, his gaze is moving restlessly across the restaurant, searching with purpose.

In the back of his mind, he knows who he’s looking for and why he thought coming to Seven Tears for dinner was such a good idea, but for the most part he’s still trying to pretend that he isn’t possessed by the need to find a certain set of red eyes and hold that gaze, find it and keep it, never again go two months without losing himself in it.
“You look like you’re having a really amorous inner-monologue,” his mom says, startling him from his thoughts.

“The hell’s an ar-mor-oos?”

“Amorous. Was it not you that got in trouble for reading Makoto’s prosy romance novels on watch duty during your second tour? You should be very familiar with that term – you look like you’re amorously looking for someone in here.”

Sousuke tenses, hiding his mouth behind his coffee mug. “I’m not looking for anyone.”

His mom makes a face, freckles shifting. “You’re almost as bad as Mako when it comes to lying.”

“Am not.” He’s very offended at that.

She snorts into her cup, steam fogging up her thick glasses before she pushes them up over her bangs. “You are to me.”

He opens his mouth but his lips end up drawing into a tight line because it’s useless, she can see right through him. This whole damn family tore down his walls a long time ago and he should most definitely know that he doesn’t have to have his guard up around his mom anymore – she’s seen him at his darkest and when someone accepts and adores that part of you, bullshitting that person becomes an insult.

He considers the year of recovery after his last tour to be his darkest time. It was in its starting hours for him and Makoto when their plane landed and they weren’t allowed to get off until the area had been cleared of any reporters that wanted the first look at the soldiers turned brothers turned hostages turned survivors. Neither of them felt like they deserved that last title, not on that day at least – Sousuke was still falling into hysterics every time he lost feeling in his reattached arm and Makoto was still vehemently refusing wheelchairs despite how much he was struggling with crutches.

Sousuke knew that Mrs. Tachibana and the twins would have eyes only for Makoto and he didn’t mind that, not really – Sousuke wouldn’t even be someone’s second thought if Makoto hadn’t been crazy enough to think he was worth all the trouble in the first place. Echo was there with him but she had no comfort to offer; Sousuke was going to have to pull her out of her own trauma from their separation before she would be capable of giving the same.

Neither Sousuke nor Makoto even had the chance to get off the plane before Mrs. Tachibana forced her way past security and all of the other protocols that didn’t have a chance in hell of fighting her off in the state she was in. Sousuke had never before heard such frenzied passion in anyone’s voice as she dared a flight attendant to try and keep her away from her sons.

They were both in uniform, ironed and pressed, shaved and trimmed, but she saw through that bullshit to what they had become. It was as if she could see the bandages under their sleeves; she flinched like she could feel the pain of each and every bruise. But she pushed her own feelings away so that she could take on theirs, coming forward to throw an arm around each of them and hold them tight.

That crushing hug made him realize that he was no longer just a stray the woman’s son had brought home – he was now the one that had brought Makoto home, and that made Sousuke her son, too.
His real mom was on the other end of the spectrum. She was sixteen when she had Sousuke and he did not inherit her easy grins and warm, dark eyes. Her hair was usually in thick braids but he had adored it, lost his hands in the curls when she’d set them free at night. He tells himself that he doesn’t still miss her voice, which had been raspy from cigarettes but never loud, always soft when he sat in her lap at her busted up keyboard and she told him where to put his hands on the keys and what order to press them in.

She did her homework on the floor and he would distract her by crawling over her books and binders. He tried to eat her papers but she just laughed and held him back with endless patience before deciding that she would tell her teachers her baby ate her homework so she could play with him instead of finishing it.

As for his father, smoke poured from his mouth every time he talked and it made Sousuke’s head hurt. He busied himself with taking another drag of his pipe instead of holding or even touching him but his mom still liked the guy despite that he didn’t like Sousuke – at least until something happened with another girl. Sousuke’s hands had been too small to catch his mom’s fat tears as she sobbed that the girl was nothing like her with those big blue eyes and smooth, pale skin, but what made them alike was that the girl had a baby that belonged to Sousuke’s dad too.

He doesn’t think his parents were ever really together but whatever they had was what had been holding his mom together. Sousuke wasn’t enough to keep her from quitting school yet never coming home, staying awake for days but never having the time to play with him.

Soon after that he was placed in foster care. He had spoken to his real mom once since then and that was on the phone after a statement had been released to the public that he and Corporal Tachibana were now recovering at home – he’s sure that’s the only way she knew how to find him. His throat had grown tighter and tighter with each moment of silence neither of them knew how to fill until she rasped, “I done you wrong, baby. I done you so wrong. But I ain’t ready to meet you yet. I wanna get it together first, you deserve a mom that’s got her life together, I – I just gotta prepare myself is all, ’cause I know you gonna be a mirror image of your daddy, I just need to find a way to handle it and –”

Makoto’s mom had been sitting right there and when she heard that, her brows went very high and her voice went very low. “Give me the phone.”

Sousuke had been too surprised to resist when she took it and long story short, he thinks she conveyed what he had been feeling all his life with just the right amount of sincerity and grief-stricken rage.

As for his father, one of his family members tried to reconcile with Sousuke a few years ago but he wasn’t having it – that void was filled a long time ago by the brother he’d found on the battlefield and the woman sitting across from him right now.

She weaves the frayed ends of her scarf through her fingers anxiously. “Sousuke, what is it? You’ve been spacing out all day. Just tell me, please. You’re worrying me more by not saying anything.”

His fingers tighten around the handle of his mug until his knuckles are straining. He can keep telling himself a lie, that he’s more comfortable keeping everything inside, but he knows that’s not true and he also knows that she deserves an answer after all the tears she’s shed for him.

He tries to figure out when all this turmoil began. In reality he knows when that was, but how can he explain what happened in that alley with Rin or what happened behind this very restaurant with Rin
or in that club with Rin or –

He takes a deep breath. “I was on a case. Few months ago, I guess.” He shrugs, taking another long sip of his coffee. “Fell through.”

“…Someone died, didn’t they?”

He lowers his mug numbly, head shaking as he mouths for words. He can’t believe her ability to pick apart a mere three sentences and find out what’s truly wrong with him. She just smiles around a sigh, recognizing that look on his face with her own expression of understanding. “I’d give anything for you not to be so hard on yourself.”

“You don’t even know what happened.”

“I don’t have to, sweetheart.” She inclines her head with a shrug. “That’s what you do – blame yourself and work too hard. And drink coffee like it’s your religion.”

“There are worse habits than coffee,” he tells her with crossed arms.

Her head lulls further to the side and she gives him a flat stare, seeing right through his poor attempt to change the subject.

Sousuke’s gaze moves across the floor restlessly. He tries to find somewhere inside himself to pull the words from but he finds himself empty.

“Oh, okay,” she says, leaning back with a thoughtful stroke of her chin. “Let’s try this: I’ll ask the questions and you just nod or shake your head. That’s worked before.”

That’s true. It’s not like this is the first time he’s never wanted to talk about something nor is it the first time that she’s had to find a way to get him to speak without words.

He nods hesitantly.

She nods back and studies him before asking, “Were you there when that person passed away?”

“Should’ve been,” he growls, insides chilling and blood boiling at the memory of Kazuki in the dumpster.

She pulls him out of his head by throwing another roll at him. “That’s not how this works. It’s yes or no.” She folds her arms expectantly. “Were you there?”

He works his jaw before jerking his head to the side.

“Were you supposed to be there?”

He opens his mouth but his voice is silenced by her firm expression. He sighs and shakes his head.

She leans forward, eyes narrowed as his own fall to the floor. “Did someone else get hurt, Sousuke?”

He nods before he can stop himself and he winces, mouth twisting into a frustrated snarl. She isn’t intimidated, simply waits for him to fumble through his thoughts and grope through the dark. He’s struggling to find concrete words for the intangible void inside him.
“I let someone down,” he mumbles. “And that’s not just me blowing things out of proportion, I did do that, I really did.” He looks up at her despite how hard it is. “I was so sure that I was equipped to help.” His mouth curls into a tired smirk. “Nothing could tell me I wasn’t. No one’s been able to tell me much of anything since I spent fifteen years in the system.” His smirk fades with his voice. “But especially since Iraq.”

She places her hand over his fist on the table. “There aren’t a lot of people that can get to me after that, Mom,” he says. “Echo, you and Mako. The twins. That’s about it, that’s all I give a shit about.”

She opens her mouth to protest but he shakes his head. “So when everything showed me that I shouldn’t do this case, I ignored it. I couldn’t make myself give a damn about the odds and I couldn’t stop liking it when they weren’t in my favor. I put everything into it, knowing it wasn’t healthy and that it was probably wrong, but I just – I needed it to work.”

She ducks her head, bangs slipping from beneath her glasses to fall over her eyes. He watches her swallow before a laugh trembles past her lips. “Sorry, it’s just – it’s so hard to think that you can’t even see yourself, all the good you’ve done.” She looks up and her smile is firmer despite that her voice is quiet. “The people you’ve helped and saved. You think you aren’t good enough and I know you thought this case was your chance to fix that somehow but…”

She worries her lip as she struggles to make him understand. Sousuke startles when she pries his fist open to splay his fingers out beside hers. “Here, look at that. How many fingers do I have on my hand?”

He frowns. “You have five.”

“And how many do you have on your hand?”

“Five?”

She watches him for a moment, her smile going crooked. “Am I human, Sousuke?”


She waits for him to catch up and he shakes his head, tries to withdraw his hand but she grabs it in a show of strength that surprises him. She isn’t afraid to look him square in the face as she says, “You’re human too, Sousuke. I’m sorry but you’re going to have to accept that. You can’t be everywhere at once and you’re going to make mistakes and that shit’s going to hurt but you will overcome it. Shining example right in front of you.” She flicks her wrist, bracelet shifting to make the dog tags chime. “My high school sweetheart didn’t deserve to die in the belly of a tank instead of with his family but that’s what happened and that’s what I had to survive.”

Makoto’s dad was killed in the war before Makoto enlisted but the man still deserves every ounce of Sousuke’s respect, despite that he never met him. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

Her brows scrunch and her eyes shine. “I just want you to realize that you’re giving it everything you have and everyone can see that. You’re trying.”

He squeezes her hand in apology. “I know. I get that, I do.” He smirks. “Guess I just forget it sometimes.”
He’s prepared for the next roll she barrels at his face. He sets it down and his momentary grin falls into a sigh. “I just can’t let it go, the person I let down, they – he...” Sousuke’s chest aches, heart contracting. “I know, I know he still needs my help but he’s not going to ask for it. But I don’t even know how to offer it or how I could make anything better.”

She stares down at her plate of noodles, pursing her lips. “People appreciate effort, Sousuke. I think the fact that you’re both confused would make the effort to try even more meaningful.”

“We already tried though,” he says stubbornly as he tries to rub the ache out of his right shoulder.

“Then you try again.”

Sousuke goes still at her words but she just grins and lifts her brows. “You’re allowed to give people second chances, you know. Even if that person is yourself. Something doesn’t work, then you do it again in a different way, you keep going.” She leans forward and her grin widens. “You, my ‘feared’ and ‘legendary’ sergeant, have been called many things, but not once have you ever been considered a quitter.”

She sits back with a proud lift of her chin. “I know you, crazy boy. And all I’ve ever wanted was for you to realize that you’re the last person in the world that’s going to give up on someone who needs you.” Her voice thickens but her tone is one of exasperated fondness. “Now give your poor momma a damn tissue, please.”

Sousuke chuckles, ducking his head to hide the shine in his eyes. He blindly grabs for the napkins at the corner of the table and hands them over, swallowing to try and relieve the swell of emotion in his throat.

They finish their meal over lighter conversation and Sousuke is eased into an almost peaceful state, one that’s not an entire relief but wouldn’t have even been achievable with all those feelings still buried in the back of his mind. Though he’s still carrying a weight inside him, or more so, in the empty spaces between his fingers, he thinks this night with his mom just might be enough to hold off his loneliness, at least for a time.

He bites back a sigh and pushes the dread away, busying himself with digging through his wallet for his debit card. Sousuke frowns when his cell phone hums to life on the table and with both hands occupied, he nods in approval for his mom to pick up his mobile and tell him who’s calling.

She squints at the screen. “Who’s Rin?”

Sousuke’s head jerks up and he nearly doubles over the table to grab the phone but she pulls it away, looking just like Makoto, eyes glittering with a mischievous evil that’s rarely displayed – when it is, everyone needs to run for the hills, and Sousuke would be doing just that if it didn’t feel like his entire fucking life was on the other side of that phone line.

His mom pulls his mobile further away, mouth dropped into a Cheshire cat smile. “Is this a boy, Sou-chan?”

“Mom, give me the –”

“Is this your boy?”

He’s able to snatch the phone while she’s cackling. She hides her grin behind her hands before
gathering herself. “I’m sorry.” She sits up straighter, feigning composure. “Go ahead, answer. I am not even here.” Her eyes roam about innocently as she pretends to be fascinated with everything around her.

Sousuke glares at her flatly before he fumbles to answer the call, having trouble controlling his hands and maneuvering them around the phone to flip it open. He brings it to his ear and opens his mouth but he can’t find his voice, losing it somewhere in his throat. The line is quiet, a lull of breathing the only noise in his ear, in the entire room.

“Sousuke?”

Rin’s voice is fragile, painful to hear, like shards of glass that would drive into Sousuke’s palms – he’d clench his hand into a fist if he could hold it there, not caring about the pain, clinging to it because it would prove this is happening. Sousuke hears himself speaking with meaning instead of with the mechanical, vacant tone he’s grown accustomed to using. “Are you okay?”

Rin’s laugh is harsh but when Sousuke responds with tense silence, Rin’s answer becomes more breath than voice, like he doesn’t have the strength to admit this any louder: “No.”

That one word carries such a weight that Sousuke can’t help but feel it sinking into his own bones. “Can you. Are you, uh. Busy or some shit?”

Sousuke grips the phone tighter. These two months have turned Rin into an irreversible scar and that question pries the healed edges open to fester inside, twisting him inside out. His confliction tangles further and his emotions run wild – he’s disgusted that everything he’s felt might get swept under the rug if he keeps this conversation going, he’s disgusted at himself for feeling anything so deeply at all. He’s usually good at weighing out his pros and cons under pressure, did it plenty of times on the battlefield and made it out alive. He considers what will cause the most damage: telling Rin he isn’t busy or hanging up.

He ponders what will happen if he chooses the latter and realizes that with the feelings stripped away, this call could be as simple as Rin needing help and not knowing who to go to. Sousuke can push his emotions down for that because he’d be feeling a lot worse about everything if he ended this call and that had been the innocent reason for it. He can just pretend this is a late-as-shit routine call and he’s on the clock and he doesn’t even know Rin.

Yeah fucking right. Idiot.

Either way, he gives in. “I’m –”

Sousuke looks up at his mom hesitantly and he must convey what’s going on through his gaze for she shakes her head and mouths, “No, you aren’t busy at all.”

He sits back, surprised by her reaction. She sighs and rubs at her temple with one hand and uses the other to point at him tensely. “Sou-chan. Precious. You or Mako could bring home a stripper at this point and I would be ecstatic.”

He stares.

She blinks.
Then she throws her arms out, “You know what?! I love strippers! Great exercise, empowerment, yes.”

“Oh my god,” Sousuke’s whisper pitches into a laugh of complete exasperation when she digs through her purse to throw the tab and a bit too much tip on the table. “Ah, no,” he coughs into the receiver as she takes his left arm to drag him out of the restaurant. “No, I’m not busy. I don’t think.” He pulls the phone away to grunt when she swats at him.

“Oh,” Rin says slowly. “Uh. Okay. Should I – do you want to…” He groans, blush practically tangible in his voice, “Do you wanna fuckin’ meet me somewhere or something?”

“Yes,” Sousuke responds, knowing he probably spoke too quickly but not caring because there’s not one ounce of hesitance in that desire. He fights a grimace because he should at least be cautious – Rin confirmed all his suspicions about gang involvement the last time they saw one another. That would make any sane person go ahead and presume that this is a trap because Sousuke’s definitely got a target on his back if Rin’s told his boss what he knows.

But no matter what the reason of this call is, chances are that the tremble of Rin’s voice isn’t an act of bribery and Sousuke knows enough about fear to know when it’s real. Of course, Rin could be scared for a number of reasons, but the fact that he called Sousuke to convey it is enough to make him ask, “Where do you want to meet?”

“I don’t care, you pick.”

It’s not as if that changes anything but it does make Sousuke feel a little better because if this were a trap, Rin more than likely wouldn’t have let him pick a location because he’d already have one in mind with an ambush waiting there. Sousuke searches his memory for places, not wanting a crowded area like a restaurant but not exactly liking the idea of a secluded area, either. He recalls his usual commute to work and decides, “The pier, I guess?”

“Romantic,” his mom mouths with an impressed lift of her brows and a nudge to his ribs.

Sousuke tries to scrub the blush off his face because that’s not what he had been going for at all, but Rin replies, “Yeah, I’ll be there in a minute.” He swallows. “Thanks.”

Rin hangs up before he can respond. Sousuke lowers the phone and stares at the black screen before flipping his mobile shut.

His mom beams at him, leaning up on her toes as he bows for her to place a kiss against his forehead. She smooths his hair down from where the wind ruffled it. “Stop looking at me like that, it’s no big deal. I want you to go. I’ll get a cab.” He opens his mouth and she interrupts him flatly, “I still have the mace, Sousuke. And the black belt.”

“Sorry. Love you.”

“I love you. Remember that. And that safe sex is the best sex.”

“MOM.”

“Okay, okay! Jeez, you’re worse than Mako.”
It’s a good thing that most of the commuters have already gone home because Sousuke’s mind is filled with too many thoughts to let him focus on driving as much as he needs to. The roads are dark by the time he makes it to the pier, forest shadows lifting into a cloud of sea mist that no headlights break through. He parks the squad car in the bike lane, assured by the sparse traffic that it won’t be an issue.

Sousuke steps out of the vehicle and chills rush across his skin. His shoulder’s response to the cold air is an involuntary clench of muscles, ligaments drawing tight over the right side of his torso from his back to his pec, but then the wind lulls into a warm, salty breeze and that dulls the ache into something bearable.

The pier is an ancient structure, one that smells of damp wood and rust. The railing has been stripped by long abuse from salt water; the boards under Sousuke’s feet are soft and the grooves between them are logged with sand and syringes. But the pier has survived far worse storms than the one brewing in the city’s drug empire, so it’s unlikely that any amount of stray needles will be too much weight for it to carry.

The seagulls and crickets become a far echo when Sousuke notices the sportbike propped against the railing. Plenty of bikerheads would think of the cycle as a work of art but to him it’s just a fucking pain in the ass he’s accustomed to chasing down with his sirens blaring. A chase with anything that can hit 185 miles per hour in a matter of seconds ends with Sousuke empty handed and forced to have an embarrassing conversation with Seijuro, one that the bastard is too busy laughing his ass off to contribute to.

But with the motor silent, Sousuke can see the bike’s appeal, he supposes. Moonlight is spilling over the black paint and glowing on the rims, but he’s more interested in the person that’s leaning against the bike than anything else right now.

Rin’s propped up against the bike, his head ducked and his eyes closed. The long line of his body is slouched, ankle bobbing in a habitual gesture Sousuke never forgot – he even remembers that the action happens more when he’s agitated and not as much when he’s this tired.

All of Rin’s little things, the passing details, have been electrified lifelines for the last two months, like livewires Sousuke knew he needed to let go of but kept clinging to regardless. It’s invigorating to see them reborn before his eyes in ways like how Rin changes his hair with the weather, drawing it up into a tie when it’s warmer or leaving it down to shadow his face when the air is cooler, like in this instance.

Sousuke’s shoe crunches down on glass and Rin jerks awake, hand digging deeper into his pocket where his fingers shape around what Sousuke thinks is either the handle of a knife or the grip of a handgun. Rin’s eyes are wide and dilated with a sudden rush of adrenaline and that makes Sousuke want to repeat the first words he ever said to him, “I’m not going to hurt you, you’re safe with me,” but before he can, recognition creeps over Rin’s face. His skin warms with a blush of embarrassment and the color deepens when Sousuke steps forward.

He leans against the railing beside the bike, a respectable distance away but not far enough to hide that Rin exudes the heat of sex sweat. It heightens the aroma of his perfume, roses mixed with cigar smoke. “Long night?”

Rin exhales a swirl of frost. “Slow and hard and not in the good way.” He arches a brow to pair with the flat set of his eyes.
Sousuke grins and duck his head in response. Rin comes over to stand beside him, though he faces the waves while Sousuke has his back to the water, their shoulders almost brushing. Rin stares down at his boots before gazing out at the ocean. “I’m so bad at this.”

“At what?”

Rin smiles a bit before turning to him, his voice falling to a whisper. “You.”

Sousuke’s mouth parts, almost dropping open before he catches himself. Rin kicks at the broken glass and it gives a delicate chime as he toes it into a pile of green, blue, and brown shards. Rin’s ankle snaps up a few times – he’s getting worked up about something. “Bad at lots of shit, actually. Real good at letting people down, though.” He works his jaw before swallowing. “Especially the people that matter.”

Sousuke tries to keep up but his own confusion is getting in the way and he shakes his head. “What’s going on? What the hell happened?”

Rin’s answering silence irritates him because he deserves an explanation after all that he’s suffered over this. Okay, maybe he doesn’t – it’s not like there were salaried obligations involved like there would have been if they were partners on a real operation – but Sousuke wouldn’t have had to feel so much if this had just been a professional relationship.

He turns away to put his hands on his hips, mist damp on his shirt. He tries to compose himself but then he looks back at Rin and can’t help that his voice goes hoarse as he snaps, “What the fuck could’ve happened to make you finally –” Come back, he wants to say, but his arrogance gets the best of him and refuses to let him speak.

Rin cranes back with a noise of disbelief. His embittered laugh goes high as he shakes his head, teeth eating at the snarl of his lips. “Don’t even fucking try to go there.” Sousuke gives him an exasperated look and a growl tears through Rin’s voice, but it’s raw. “You have no idea what –” His mouth pulls into a line and by the way he lifts his chin and hunches in on himself at the same time, it appears that he’s in a similar battle with his own pride.

Rin rolls his eyes and that makes Rin shove him. He grits his teeth when his back hits the railing, cold metal digging into him as Rin’s hand cage him on either side. Their bodies are coiled tight, muscles rigid and standing out, and Sousuke’s glare is ice where Rin’s is fire. “Look asshole,” he snaps. “The last time I saw you I was… I was just…” His hands go white-knuckled on the siding before he tears them away to drag them through his hair.

Sousuke’s scoff throws into a shout, “What?”

Rin’s body tenses before he whips around in an eruption of vehemence. “I was scared, okay? Okay?! I was fucking terrified!”

“*You* were terrified?”

Rin freezes and so does Sousuke. He recovers quicker, sagging against the railing with a curse of defeat. He doesn’t want to meet Rin’s gaze but the boy gets in his face, his voice strained so much that it quivers, “What did you say?”

Sousuke slowly meets his eyes and Rin steps back – he never thought he was a physically expressive person but what he’s feeling must all be there on his face. He wishes he could get away with that and
not have to say anything but he knows that he isn’t the only one here who deserves an explanation. “I did everything you asked. Never called, never went back to Samezuka.” His mind starts racing, flashing with images, and the grief of those memories is so heavy that he feels it in his very soul. “Even though I have done nothing but drown in relay overdoses and gang fights these last two months. It’s all getting worse every day, all the innocent casualties, the dealers and prostitutes that aren’t even old enough to drive –”

“Sousuke –”

“I’ve had to go to their homes and look their parents in the face and say yeah, I found your kid and…” He squeezes his eyes shut against the watery burn but his voice gives it all away. “And I wish to God that I hadn’t.”

Sousuke opens his eyes to see that Rin has bowed his head in shame – the sight leaves his anger impossible to cling to. Sousuke reaches out and touches Rin’s face with fingers that have worked together to do appalling things and have no business being anywhere near something as soft and lush as Rin’s skin.

At the brush of his hand, Rin chokes on a gasp and his eyes fly open to stare up at Sousuke in shock. “I just needed to know you were okay,” he whispers. “That would have made this all bearable.”

“Made what bearable?”

Sousuke’s smile is exasperated. “You. Dumbass.”

Rin’s brows jump and press together, his breath shuddering away. Sousuke sweeps his thumb over his cheek, daring to ghost over the cushion of his lips. Rin’s eyes squeeze shut like the touch hurts him but then he tucks his face deeper into Sousuke’s hand, using it as a hiding place, as if it’s safe.

Sousuke doesn’t understand how Rin can have that kind of faith in him even though he’s trusted the boy since they met with handcuffs between them and an equal amount of shadows haunting their eyes. Sousuke’s been able to see Rin from the start but then his palm slides over the back of Sousuke’s hand, over the one still cupped to his cheek, and when Sousuke feels fingers slide through the empty spaces between his, he realizes that Rin has been able to see him the entire time too.

He hears the boy speaking but something has changed inside of Sousuke, allowing him to feel the bass of that voice in the hum of his blood and the thrum of his heart. “It was my sister who I let down,” Rin says. “I couldn’t take her trick-or-treating tonight.”

Sousuke feels Rin’s lips shake against his thumb. “I’ve let her down so many times before but this meant a lot to her. It was all for a client and he was so late that I could’ve taken her and been back in time, that’s how late he was, I mean what the fuck am I even doing?”

Rin desperately searches Sousuke’s face for the answer but before he can even think of something to say, Rin’s voice pitches and breaks. “Sousuke, I don’t know how to do anything else, even the people that are capable of more don’t think they are in this city, how…” Rin’s eyes shine in the dock lights. “How am I supposed to keep Gou from thinking she’s got to do what I’m doing to make it?”

Sousuke’s heart rips down the middle, anguish flowing out at the realization that Rin has had to live every day of his life with this fear. His own distress is nothing in comparison and he doesn’t know what kind of comfort he could offer other than resting his forehead against the boy’s, because what truth does he have to speak against the reality that so many of the city’s youth are facing?
Despite that Sousuke remains quiet, his gesture seems to have conveyed the pain he shares with Rin, for he croaks, “Why do you still give a shit? How do you keep going?” Quiet, desperate, “Tell me.”

Sousuke leans back, lifting Rin’s face up with a gentle press of his thumb beneath his jaw. “Because someone should have given a shit about me. And someone should have given a shit about you.” He smears away the dampness on Rin’s cheeks. “You care about your sister, I know you do. No matter how you feel about yourself or what you’re doing, you know how you feel about her, right? And what you want for her?”

Rin’s nod turns into a shrug. “Yeah, but I’m not helping her cause by being what I am.” He squeezes Sousuke’s wrist before stepping away to gather himself. He leans against the railing and his eyes lull shut at the crash of waves, his expression one that Sousuke’s seen people wear at the sight of home and family. The fact that Rin can find comfort in those treacherous waters speaks volumes of what he and the rest of Iwatobi have been through.

“My friends look up to me for some reason,” Rin says all of a sudden.

Sousuke can think of plenty of reasons why they would do that and the boy provides another reason when he turns to him and says, “So this is me doing what’s right for them.”

Sousuke leans forward, listening avidly. Rin wraps his arms around himself before crossing them, restless with stress. “I was scared when I first got that they’re depending on me. Still am, but I panicked. Thought the only way to protect them was by keeping our heads down. But I’m hurting them by letting them do that and I’m hurting Gou, too.”

Rin relaxes and smiles softly, eyes vacant on the ground. “Nothing’s ever mattered to me when it comes to providing for her. Never cared about how many nights I gotta spend on my back or knees or at the wrong ends of knives and guns. She’s what made me realize this is so much bigger than me and my friends. If we keep going like we are, not only is it going to kill us –” Sousuke flinches. “But it’ll also kill any future this city has.”

Rin wipes his eyes before he focuses them, pushing his grief aside. “We’ve been in gang wars before but it’s never been like this. Relay’s in short supply and high demand and that’s got dealers attacking dealers for product in broad daylight, not caring about what kind of scene they cause. You wouldn’t believe what a nightmare it’s been.”

Sousuke snorts. “Think I got an idea since that shit comes to me through paperwork and body bags.”

Rin grimaces and scrubs his neck rather sheepishly.

Sousuke says, “Anyone got hurt yet? Any of your people.”

Rin’s face is strained with worry. “Not yet. We’ve switched it up and tried to have at least two people on one route – whether it’s a dealer’s or a callgirl’s or a rentboy’s – that way there’s back up if someone needs it.” His frame droops in exhaustion. “Means everyone’s pulling triples, finishing their shifts just to jump on someone else’s, but there’s more than enough volunteers to go around, no one’s complaining because we all get that it’s necessary now.”

Sousuke’s eyes narrow. “Your boss make you do that?”

Rin shakes his head. “She doesn’t even know we do it. Haru came to us and suggested it was the
best way to keep us all protected.”

Sousuke’s confusion shifts to surprise.

Rin reads the incredulity on his face and sighs. “You don’t know Haru. You didn’t know that kid in
the shack you raided five years ago.”

Sousuke steps back without realizing it – maybe he was going to try and run but he’s frozen on
the spot. Fuck, he’s a fucking idiot, he should have known Haru was going to tell Rin. Sousuke never
thought he could feel worse about that night but this moment has proved him to be a fool and now all
he wants to do is hide.

“Hey, shh.” He jerks when Rin’s hand runs over that length of his arm, rubbing up and down,
smoothing out the wrinkles of his sleeve with absent care and squeezing in understanding. Sousuke
almost wrenches away but then Rin tips his head and smiles sadly through his hair. “No matter what
happened, I’m glad you were there that night.” His eyes turn haunted in the gaps between the
strands. “He was living in hell. You got him out of there. You saved his life.” He brings Sousuke’s
hand up and brushes his lips down the side of his hand, over his wrist and against his palm. “Thank
you.”

His breath leaves him in a rush. “I don’t see it like that at all.”

Rin shrugs, wind pushing his hair back to show Sousuke his gentle smirk. “Haru doesn’t either but
it’s the truth. The two of you have more shit in common than you think.” Rin’s smirk widens at
Sousuke’s silence. “He gives a shit despite how mean his mug is. That’s something you have in
common.”

Sousuke’s eye roll turns into a glare when Rin kicks his ankle. “Gang members don’t usually look
out for each other,” Sousuke says with a stubborn cross of his arms. “Every experience I’ve had with
them is about climbing to the top and not caring who gets in the way.” That’s the kind of person
Sousuke’s expected Haru to be this whole time.

“And that is how the other gangs work,” Rin agrees. “But not Freebird. That’s why we’re at the top
– because we’re watching each other’s backs instead of stabbing them. Saves a lot of time.”

Sousuke just shakes his head, eyes sliding away.

Rin groans. “Why can’t you believe that?”

Sousuke chooses his words carefully, muscles drawing tighter. “I know enough about the streets to
know that’s not how they work.”

“You know that from being a cop?”

Sousuke smiles despite himself. “I know that from being on them, Rin.”

Rin doesn’t look that surprised – in fact, he looks smug. “I fuckin’ knew it.” He shoves Sousuke in
the chest with a triumphant grin. “Nobody walks around like that without spending a few nights out
here. I knew it.”

Sousuke shoves Rin back with his own grin. “Nobody walks around like what?”
Rin’s brow hikes up before his eyes fall. He then looks up through his lashes, the heat of his gaze moving over Sousuke’s body like spilled wax.

Rin steps into him, pushing him back against the railing and keeping him there with the press of his hips. Rin leans into him with a thoughtful purse of his mouth, searching his face. Then he stills and whispers, “Like you've seen so much death that when it finally came after you and looked you in the eye, you just had to laugh your ass off.”

Sousuke responds by dragging the hem of his shirt up his stomach. Rin blinks down at his exposed skin in surprise, eyes widening when he notices the raised slash across his abdomen. It’s only a few inches long, not too deep and most definitely not his worst scar, but it was his first one. “Got strung out on coke. Wanted more. Didn’t have the money. Tried to jump a guy and he jumped me.”

Rin’s eyes flicker to Sousuke’s lips before he cranes back in realization. “That’s why you always taste like coffee, isn’t it? It’s caffeine. Helps you fight it.”

Sousuke grimaces. He had hoped Rin wouldn’t catch on to that so quickly. “I drink it more out of habit than anything. I got clean a little before I turned nineteen so the urge isn’t that strong anymore.”

“But I’m not wrong either.” Rin glances up at him playfully from under the cover of his hair.

Sousuke rolls his eyes before he sober up. “I definitely wasn’t laughing about it then but eventually, it did change how I carry myself.” He watches Rin’s fingers move over his skin, his voice falling quieter. “It happened after I thought I had… It happened five years ago.”

Rin’s hand goes still. He looks up at Sousuke with dread, eyes pleading, and Sousuke confirms his suspicion by saying, “Thought Haru died when he jumped. Didn’t know how to handle it.”

Rin closes his eyes. He then takes a deep breath and surprises Sousuke when he tugs the collar of his shirt aside, stretching his neck out to reveal the ink across his left shoulder. Sousuke looks closer and see’s that the lines of the tattoo are actually little twigs stemming from a cherry blossom branch, the flowers withered, their petals black and frail. Rin guides Sousuke’s hand to the branch and presses his fingers into the skin until he realizes that there is a scar under the ink.

“That was my first,” Rin says. Sousuke’s fingers move to trace the branch and Rin tenses, probably not used to the wound getting so much attention since he went through so much trouble to hide it, but he gradually relaxes under Sousuke’s touch. “Happened before I met Haru but I got it just a few blocks from here.”

“What happened?”

“You won’t believe me.”

Sousuke arches a daring brow and Rin smirks. “Man picked me up and wanted some ass so I gave it to him even though he was a total diva. His phone kept going off and he kept bitching that he needed this to be quick, so naturally, I was a bitch and took my time. Turns out he was trying to get home to his wife for dinner but she ended up finding us in his car.”

Sousuke’s eyes widen and Rin nods around a grimace. “I remember that she smelled good, like baked chicken, which had weirded me out before she came at me with this huge, greasy knife – biggest thing I’ve ever been poked with.” Sousuke kicks his ankle but Rin beams with pride at coming up with such an awful punch line. “She sliced me up real good but ended up driving off with
him so maybe they worked it out. Heard her say something about cutting his dick off though, so I hope that’s what happened.”

Rin snorts a laugh and Sousuke isn’t sure, but the noise might be a little bitter. “This skinny ass named Nakagawa found me. We had brawled over corners before, always fought over business. I thought the guy hated me, I sure as shit hated him, at least until he brought me to the motel he was living out of and kept me from bleeding out.”

Rin’s smile grows sad. “His boyfriend stole a bottle of whiskey for me to drink while they stitched me up. That was Kazuki.”

Sousuke’s eyes move up from the tattoo to look at Rin. “I read his file. He was strong.”

“He was,” Rin agrees softly. “In a lot of ways.” He looks a little better when Sousuke moves his hand up to gently press the tension from his neck. “Physical strength isn’t enough out here, we have to be strong in every aspect. The scar was keeping me from doing that. It’s real nasty under the ink, I thought I was ugly, put myself down – I needed my confidence back somehow.”

Rin glances down at his tattoo. “I knew this older kid…” His voice deepens with anger but there’s hurt in his eyes. “Named Natsuya. He dealed me pills sometimes to help me zone out on rents. He had come back from juvie with a tattoo kit. I was way too young to get one done legally so I let him do it. Thing got infected a few times but it’s been touched up a bunch since then, so it turned out okay.”

Sousuke nods in agreement at the intricate leaves and buds. “Why a cherry blossom?”

Rin stiffens a little, lips parting silently. Sousuke’s about to apologize for asking something so personal before Rin mumbles, “My dad planted a tree in our backyard. It was like, our thing. We took care of it together. He said cherry blossoms mean rebirth and all that shit, so.” He smiles and looks so young. “Guess I’m still holding out for that.”

The warmth in Sousuke’s chest increases tenfold at witnessing Rin’s unending stream of hope and when the boy says, “You left your lights on,” Sousuke wonders who he’s talking to until it registers that he’s the only fucking idiot out here.

Rin follows him to the squad car and Sousuke opens the door and leans into the cab to turn the lights off. He straightens up and steps back outside to prop against the hood, Rin coming forward to stand in front of his open knees. Sousuke watches moonlight play in his hair and says, “I want you to know something.”

Rin bops one shoulder in a shrug, waiting for him to continue.

“You said you wanted me to get out while I still had a chance – I’ve been in this since I first put on my badge. Okay?”

Rin crosses his arms stubbornly before he sighs and gives an accepting bow of his head. Sousuke nods back. “I’ve learned a lot wearing that uniform,” he says. “It isn’t going to have a place on every step of this mission but I’ll carry the principle of it whether I’m wearing it or not – more to being a cop than that anyway. The number of late nights at the station or out here on the road have never mattered to me because I’ve always known it was all for a bigger purpose.”

Sousuke tries not to falter. “It’s been harder to think that way lately. And… I just wanted to say that
I… don’t know how you keep going after everything you’ve been through but if you can then I want to be able to do the same thing.”

Rin’s brows go high and crease. “You’re strong too.” Sousuke looks away but turns back when Rin steps between his knees and kicks one open wider insistently. “You are.”

“How can you know that?”

Rin bends down, the ends of his hair tickling Sousuke’s cheek. “I don’t need to know how. I see it here.” He brushes his thumbs under Sousuke’s eyes. “I feel it here.” The tips of his fingers drag down his bottom lip. “And here.” He slides his fingers over Sousuke’s wrists until they’re resting in his palms.

Their clothes and hair move with the breeze and their proximity is comforting but at the same time, all of these points of contact are making Sousuke’s heart race.

That dizzying rush is nothing compared to when Rin whispers, “I don’t mind coffee that much when it tastes like you.” He mouths for words before his throat closes up. “Never thought I’d be able to be okay with it.” He shudders and Sousuke moves his hands over the chills that gather on his arms.

Sousuke straightens his legs until he’s standing up and they lean into each other like magnets drawing together from an incredible distance apart. Sousuke’s hand slides over Rin’s shoulder at the same time he feels fingers winding into the back of his shirt in a desperate fist. Sousuke dips his head and pulls Rin’s collar aside enough to expose his left shoulder, and when his lips brush the scar there,
everything breaks.

They collide in an explosion of movement, Rin’s arms flying around Sousuke’s neck to drag his head down, and the touch of his lips hits Sousuke like a shot of vodka he wants poured all over, everywhere, unending.

Already it’s more tongue than lips, no time for hesitant touches in their race to feel every inch of one another. Rin smears delirious kisses across his jaw, his cheek, his chin, and Sousuke tips the boy’s head back to kiss him hard enough to make him sway. Even in this state he keeps his hands over Rin’s shirt, but the boy takes Sousuke’s fingers and slides them beneath the fabric. His skin is damp and warm, making Sousuke’s hands move with primitive hunger to feel as much of him as possible, memorizing the fit of his waist, the shape of his hips, the curve of his back.

Rin opens Sousuke’s mouth with his own while turning him around to reverse their positions. Their lips part only for Rin to spread out on the hood, legs sprawled open, chest expanding so strongly that his back arches off the car. “Fuck,” Sousuke breathes, letting Rin wind his fingers through his belt loops to draw him into the cradle of his thighs and pull him down for an aggressive kiss.

The friction of their jeans is a little miserable, buttons and zippers catching while denim shifts roughly, but that doesn’t stop them from moving against one another. The contact is so much that Sousuke doesn’t know where his body ends and Rin’s begins, lungs swelling into Sousuke’s where they’re pressed together.

Rin’s teeth graze his bottom lip before he licks at the tingling skin with a slow curl of his tongue, his piercing dragging along. Sousuke gives him a punishing bite that makes Rin laugh, but the sound breaks apart when Sousuke pins their intertwined hands over his head. He uses the new position to dip to Rin’s neck, where he tastes the taunt muscles of his throat through kisses. Rin’s head thunks against the hood, his moan sounding so good that Sousuke has to lean up and steal it from his mouth.

Rin’s limbs eventually go warm and loose from where they were drawn tight with manic need. Sousuke’s body does the same, letting him relax completely into the frame under his. He pulls back to breathe, but is reduced to a panting mess as he takes in the sight beneath him, Rin’s hair thrown in a wild halo around his face, his skin glowing with a flush. He’s staring at Sousuke and making him whisper, “What is it?”

Rin licks his lips before they wobble into a smile. “I don’t get to kiss a lot. I just wanna do it for a while. Is that… is that okay?” He leans up on an elbow, trying to get comfortable, and when the shift in position causes his body to slide down the inclined hood, Sousuke catches him by drawing his knee higher over his waist. Rin smirks at the action before Sousuke’s answering silence to the question makes him freeze.

“Yes, it’s okay,” Sousuke rushes, head spinning as he tries to break through the fog and understand. His eyes widen when he realizes that Rin’s probably never had the freedom of just kissing someone without the action being forced into something more. That makes his own mouth move softer against Rin’s, savoring each pull of teeth and brush of tongue. Then Sousuke grins. “Yeah, it’s okay. It’s fifty degrees out here anyway.”

“You implorer of utter catshit –” Rin heels him in the ass but he’s laughing right along with Sousuke. “Your dick is hard as rock, excuse the shit out of me if I assumed you’d wanna do something about it.”

“Your dick is hard too.”
“No it’s not.”

“Mmhmm. I feel it.”

“It’s not.”

“It –”

In a motion that rips the breath from Sousuke’s lungs, Rin uses his legs to twist Sousuke’s hips around until his body is forced to follow the action and land him on his back.

Maybe Rin wanted Sousuke to consider this new position unfortunate but that’s a bit difficult to achieve with the ass that’s pinned his hips and the thighs bearing down on his abdomen. Rin crawls over him and stretches out slowly, covering Sousuke with his shadow and stealing his heart in a single whisper. “Don’t you ever stop kissing me.”

He surges up to meet his open mouth with his own, the clash of their lips a bruising force. Rin’s moan hums and shakes, and there’s something so vulnerable in the noise that Sousuke can’t help but hold him closer, kiss him sweeter.

After a while, Rin sprawls out beside him to catch his breath and how that led to them lying on the hood of Sousuke’s car and watching the stars until three in the morning, he doesn’t know, but he doesn’t wish to ever make sense of that night. Rin tells him about anything he can think of between kisses, from his love of swimming to his hate of studded belts, and Sousuke talks more than he ever has at once and the feeling is invigorating in all the ways it’s supposed to be miserable.

Rin pulls back from a kiss to gaze up at him with eyes that are bright where they were once dark and tired, and Sousuke knows that the sight is gorgeous, but what he doesn’t know is that Rin has found freedom in the cage of his arms.
Chapter End Notes

First SouRin artwork by bakapandy & second set of artwork by donguris. Thank y'all so much!
An Atlas of Scars

Chapter Notes

EWoAT has finally, finally been beta read. My thanks goes out to everyone who has volunteered their time to edit this monster of a fic:

-saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter)
-pikamouse | (tumblr)
-sierrasuke (twitter | tumblr)
I also personally recommend their latest fic. It's Sousuke/Haru for my multi-shippers and I am so damn envious of the writing style. It's effortless and very submersible. It's called Where the City Meets the Sea
-burlesquecomposer (tumblr | archive of our own)
-Leighton Newton / ln770 (tumblr)
This chapter specifically was beta'd by saltyaf, pikamouse, and ln770. *hugs so hard*
More love to bakapandy for this moving piece from Chapter Ten and also to niansue for this haunting depiction of Miho!
And lastly, thank YOU! I'm glad you're here and hope you enjoy. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"He's kind of quiet but his body ain't

We spent the days dreamin' and the nights awake

Doin' things we know we shouldn't do

I didn't care

The heart was there

In those eyes of sky and ocean blue."

Ryn Weaver - "Pierre"

As far as tradition goes, Iwatobi has its own set of unspoken rules that are to be followed when certain dates roll around. These days might often go unnoticed in other places, but it seems that the last day of commercial fishing season is a time that demands celebration in Iwatobi.

Makoto knew that he was living in a coastal city with strong roots to the sea, but he had no idea that the commencement of this day would be so intense. The teachers change how they run their
classrooms: Nagisa’s students use green yarn to make seaweed crowns and when Makoto questions this, Nagisa responds in his most serious tone that, “Today is an exception to the usual lesson plans; today, we are to teach the babies about their ancient heritage in new and fun ways!”

Makoto’s confusion only increases as the day goes on. He hears the music director guiding the kids through old-timey hymns with lyrics that act as prayers for mariners to have a safe journey home. His own students come back from the library and tell him the Iwatobi legends they read about, from the tales of brave sailors and the pirates they battled right in the local harbor, to the story of the ever-elusive selkies that are said to still roam these very seas.

Needless to say, Makoto is very much a fish out of water by the end of the school day.

He gets no further understanding as the evening progresses, because stepping off of the campus grounds reveals that most places have closed early, save for the bars and restaurants. These are so packed that the lines of people tangle with the rows of street vendors and the bustling crowds, who are racing for the beach to enjoy the heat wave that has recently smothered Iwatobi.

The soup kitchen is a sanctuary from the horde of people. When Makoto follows Nagisa and Rei into the building, he hopes that his sigh of relief isn’t too loud. The cafeteria is empty, so quiet that their footsteps echo and Makoto is surprised that he doesn’t see Gou at her customary corner table. He doesn’t hear Rin coming around the corner to greet them with his customary smirk, either.

A roar erupts from the kitchen so loud and unexpected that Makoto chokes on an inhale. An explosion of orange and teal bursts into the cafeteria – when the orange blur tears free, Makoto realizes it’s Asahi. He’s now poised on the floor with a broomstick – which he holds like a spear – and points at another boy, who has a mop directed at Asahi in a similar fashion. “Give it back,” the smaller boy demands, pointy shoulders and teal hair rising in indignation, “Haru said you’re the one stuck with mopping the bathrooms!”

Makoto’s heart jumps at the mention of the person who has not left his mind for even a minute of the day. He swears even a week after Halloween, a week too busy to allow him to see Haru, he can remember the exact shape of his lips and feel them so exceptionally in his dreams that the sensation follows him into those first delirious moments of waking up.

“Ikuya,” Asahi says, and that name sparks up a dull bulb somewhere in Makoto’s head. It appears that Rei has a similar epiphany, for his glasses flash as he narrows his eyes. “It was two outta three on rock-paper-scissors, I won fair and –”

“You can’t just say…” Ikuya gathers a shock of hair to make it stand up on the top of his head, and Makoto realizes that he’s imitating Asahi when his voice roughens with an earnestness the guy has put into every word Makoto’s ever heard him speak. “Rock ain’t rock in my religion dude, it’s regarded with fabled supremacy dude, therefore it reigns foremost high and beats everything, dude. That’s bullshit!”

Asahi scoffs, throwing his hands around and calling up to the ceiling, “Well how-dee-doo, I must have just crawled right up into my third eye and not been here when Nao just got cool with Ikuya having a potty mouth. Fuck me.” He turns to address the rest of the room. “Evening, Makoto.” He nods at Rei and Nagisa. “Accompanying entities.”

Ikuya throws his mop down and screams, “Haru! Tell Asahi he’s stuck with mopping!”

Asahi launches his broom and takes a running leap at Ikuya with a cry of, “You’re about to get stuck
“Knock it off.”

Makoto’s not even the one in trouble and that tone of voice gives him tremors of secondhand anxiousness. Asahi freezes mid-air and Ikuya goes still with his fist only inches from Asahi’s crotch. Haru emerges from the shadows of the kitchen, bringing with him a radiating chill of displeasure. His eyes are narrowed but that glare falters when he looks at Makoto – his answering smile makes the boy duck his head to hide a blush. Haru recovers best he can, crossing his arms at the guilty parties and demanding, “What is it now?”

“Asahi said –”

“Ikuya said –”

“Never mind,” Haru sighs. He acknowledges the others. “Makoto, Nagisa, Rei – this is Asahi and Ikuya.” His eyes go flat. “They ‘help out’ sometimes.”

Rei’s brows jump as he looks at the smallest boy. “Ikuya? Are you Kirishima Natsuya’s…?”

Ikuya looks years younger in the surprise that takes over his face. He has no hope of finding a mask to wear in the tense silence, seeming as if each passing second is like another wall closing in on him. Ikuya swallows in an attempt to compose his voice, but his tone is colored in deep red rage. “No.”

Ikuya picks up the mop and disappears into the bathroom without another word.

Rei’s expression is a mix of distress and guilt before turning into all-out surprise when Asahi throws an arm around his shoulder. “Don’t feel bad, man. The Kirishimas got more drama than a van fulla drag queens.”

“…oh,” Rei says, voice shriveling away.

Haru bows his head to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Asahi, go help Rei and Nagisa set up for their meeting.”

“Yeah bud,” Asahi nods. “Just let me check out the office and –”

“You smoke one more of Nitori-sama’s incense sticks and you get stuck with talking to Ikuya and mopping.”

Asahi purses his lips and rolls them. Smacks them. Nagisa smirks and he and Rei lead him to the back room without another word of protest from the redhead.

“Makoto.”

He takes a moment to appreciate how his name sounds when Haru says it, his voice the most tempting blend of deep and soft. Play it cool. Makoto clears his throat and sniffs before he regards the boy casually, feigning indifference up until he goes to lean his elbow on the table and misses it. He almost lurches to the floor, where he would have never picked himself up from if he had actually fallen. Which he didn’t. He almost fell. That counts for like, double suave, right? The fact that he caught himself? Right?
Haru shakes his head with a strained face, surely trying his hardest not to show any indication of humor and crush Makoto’s pride. Haru’s eyes wander to Makoto’s mouth and the boy inhales sharply before looking away to see that the retreating party of Asahi, Rei, and Nagisa is still in earshot. Haru’s voice is oddly rough as he says, “There’s a thing. On the top shelf. In the pantry. You’re tall.”

Makoto blinks and cranes back. “Oh. Okay. Yeah, of course.”

Haru turns back to him and just stares for a second, brow arching as he rubs his lips against his own hand. He then gestures for Makoto to follow him into the kitchen, seeming impatient all of a sudden.

Makoto trails after him through the shadows, squinting in the dark before he’s guided by the hanging bulb in the pantry. He breathes in the aroma of spices and wheat as he steps inside the musty warmth and looks over the shelves, which are thrown in a dull glow by the swaying light. Makoto puts his hands on his hips and looks the top shelf over. “So what is it exactly you need – hmph!”

Makoto is not one to appreciate being body-slammed, much less into a concrete wall – in fact, he has even less appreciation for it when the action is performed with enough power to make things fall off the shelves and tear the breath from his lungs, but having a pair of lips on his own makes the experience somewhat bearable. Maybe even awesome.

Makoto is so surprised that he’s thrown out of his body and it feels like he’s floating, grounded only to Haru’s mouth. Haru’s breath rasps into a growl and okay, their first kiss was great, but that sound makes Makoto leave behind all the hesitance that kiss was shaped from and instead he lets this new, blazing electricity guide their lips. Haru’s mouth is warm and Makoto deepens the kiss to taste more of that heat, and this feels so good that his heart is aching because it’s on the verge of bursting open.

Haru rubs his thumbs over Makoto’s exposed forearms, tracing the ridges of muscles before hooking under his rolled up sleeves so he can draw Makoto’s arms around him. Makoto is now holding Haru, pressing them together from hips to heart, navel to knees, and the contact eases the boy into a relaxed state, his lips now taking Makoto’s in gentle, lingering clutches.
They part with breathless grins, struggling to keep quiet with their intakes so exerted and loud in the dark. Haru sets Makoto’s glasses back up on the perch of his nose from where they fell off and Makoto kisses him in gratitude, feeling the boy’s back arch just a bit under his hands. “Hi,” Makoto whispers, smiling against his mouth. “I missed you.”

“Did you now,” Haru murmurs, tongue grazing Makoto’s lips as he speaks.

“Mmhmm.” Makoto presses kisses against the upturned corner of Haru’s mouth and makes that smile deepen with every peck until Haru’s forced to turn away and hide his face, but even then Makoto can’t stop – he moves his lips over Haru’s cheek and feels the shape of his mirroring smile when they kiss again. “Did you miss me?”

Haru pulls back and his eyes tell Makoto everything he can’t yet say with his voice. Makoto’s breath leaves him in a rush, emotions swelling in a wave of unbelievable happiness that only grows stronger as their lips meet again.

When their kiss comes to an inevitable, remorseful end, Makoto leans back to study Haru; he notices that he has been rid of the dark circles under his eyes and the shadows that once filled the valleys of gaunt cheeks. “Are you feeling better?”

Haru makes a face and shrugs. “Mostly.” Makoto hadn’t noticed him tug down his sleeve to hide the cotton ball taped to the crook of his elbow. Makoto can, however, feel the radiating heat of Haru’s skin, but he has no idea that the almost-feverish warmth is due to the syrupy, nauseating trek of transfusion blood working its way through Haru’s veins.
“Surprised you made it through the crowds,” Haru mumbles. He bends down to pick up what fell from the shelves when he threw Makoto against them, and though the boy is not stumbling around in embarrassment at this, Makoto has to be thankful for the shadows that cover his blush.

He lets Haru take items from the cradle of his arms so he can begin the ritual of placing things together or apart, moving them to a certain shelf before he stares at them for a few seconds and changes his mind. Makoto represses a smile at Haru’s look of concentration, but then he frowns when he recalls the confusion that followed him through the crowds. “I don’t really understand what this is all about – the celebration, I mean.”

Haru pauses, hand wrapped around a can of chili, only inches from setting it down. Makoto tries not to squirm under his stare. “I mean if that’s… that’s what this is, right?”

Haru’s eyes flash in realization. “Oh. You’re not from here.” His hands move deftly along the shelves, the clatter of aluminum and plastic filling the silence. He takes a roll of paper towels from Makoto and asks, “You don’t have days like this where you come from?”

Makoto shakes his head. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands now that they’re free, so he chooses to wiggle them into his pockets. “No. I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s…”

“Weird?”

Makoto’s inhale breaks into a cough. “Ah. Well.” He crosses his arms, can’t find the right way to position them as Haru inclines his head. “A little.”

Haru watches him for a second. “Hmm.”

He turns away without another word and is headed for the broom in all reality, but Makoto, being Makoto, thinks he’s hurt the boy or at least offended him beyond fixable measures. This leads him to lunge in front of Haru with a desperate wave of his hands. “Not that it’s a bad weird! Just… different… weird.”

Haru lifts his brows as he lowers his chin to rest against the broom handle.

Makoto groans and hides his face with a hand, wishing to be as small as the dust at their feet. A peek through his fingers reveals Haru’s smirk and in a rare wave of boldness, Makoto draws him in by the back of the neck to kiss it away. Haru is surprised at first but his gasp falls into a sigh when Makoto cards his fingers through black strands; he smells divine, like dark grapes and just the right amount of musk.

There’s a soft bite of teeth in Makoto’s upper lip before his bottom one is coaxed open with a heavy drag of tongue. When Makoto presses Haru against the wall in another wave of boldness that is losing its rarity, Haru struggles to keep himself upright – one hand is tight on the broom and the other is pressed against Makoto’s chest, over his racing heart. Haru’s fingers climb up Makoto’s shoulder, his throat, and finds the back of his head to get lost in the strands. Then he pulls just hard enough to make Makoto crane back with a wince twisted into a smile and a giggle of, “Ow, stoop.”

Haru rolls his eyes but the action is as gentle as his grin. “I have to finish my work now.” He soothes the ache in Makoto’s scalp with a rub of his fingers before letting go.

Makoto flops back against the wall, sulking. Haru remains focused on the task of sweeping, no
matter how many times Makoto sighs in a useless attempt to get his attention. Then he perks up and says, “You never told me what today means.” There, that should give him a little bit of the spotlight.

“You’re going to think it’s even weirder if I try to explain it.”

Makoto gives him an expectant look either way.

Haru gives in with a sigh, his expression somber as he moves the broom across the floor. The rasp of straw against hardwood is the only noise until his voice lulls into the air. “Leaving harbor is still just as dangerous as it was hundreds of years ago because the ocean hasn’t gotten any weaker. Doesn’t matter how advanced the equipment is or how strong you think the boat might be. Ocean’s stronger. Bigger. It’s never let Iwatobi forget that.” The shadows across Haru’s face appear a little darker as he says this, but then he smiles and the room itself seems to brighten. “Rin’s dad was a fisherman. He was crazy. Ruthless in the water, out for blood when it came to the payload. The guys at the dock don’t even know Rin’s name, they just call him ‘Shark’s boy’.”

“You sound really fond of him. Rin’s dad, I mean.”

The light in Haru’s eyes dims and his voice is weighted with grief. “Lots of people were.” Haru hesitates, eyeing Makoto cautiously like he’s wondering if he can be trusted with something so tender yet heavy. Makoto’s got endless smiles if they’ll encourage Haru to open up, and the one he flashes him seems to work, for Haru continues. “He was still able to be a dad to so many of us even when he was sick. But back before the cancer, he went out to sea this one time – ship went out and he was the only thing that came back, hanging on to a piece of drift wood. Had a broken back, lost three fingers to hypothermia, lost friends he had been boating with since high school, but he never saw it as the ocean took any of that from him. He saw it as the ocean allowed him to live.”

Makoto’s jaw drops but just Haru shrugs. “That’s probably strange to you but that kind of disposition is the only hope people around here have. Nobody from here is scared of the water because it gives us jobs, a way to eat if all else fails. It provides for us. Even if it’s the most dangerous place in the world, it’s home. So today we remember what the ocean has taken but also what it’s brought.”

Makoto raises his brows as he takes all this information in. “Wow. I didn’t know it had that kind of meaning.” He’ll never be able to think that ocean can give him something instead of taking everything away, but he can at least accept Haru’s opinion of it. He nods to himself. “I get it a little more now. Thank you.” Another thought strikes him and he asks, “Are Rin and Gou off celebrating?”

Haru glares down at a cluster of dust that’s stuck to the hardwood. He moves the broom over it in strokes so calculated that Makoto has to bite his lip to keep from grinning. “Gou’s spending the night at a friend’s house. The friend’s being raised by her grandmother – I think that’s the only reason Rin approved; no guys around. Shigino’s helped a lot, more than anything else, but…” His hand tightens on the broom handle. “Can’t be too careful.”

“It’s okay to take things slow,” Makoto says.

Haru sags in defeat. “Me and Rin are just as scared as she is,” he confesses. “That’s not hard to see.”

“It’s not a bad thing, either. You love her – that’s not hard to see.” Makoto absentely looks him over, trying to find physical similarities between him and Rin, anything that might indicate that they’re related somehow, maybe cousins, but Makoto finds no such evidence.
Screw it, Haru’s had his tongue down Makoto’s throat – that should make it okay for him to ask, “What are you to Rin and Gou if they’re not from here and you’re not related?”

The broom goes still. Haru is looking down at the floor but his ocean eyes are elsewhere, borne back into the past, almost as distant as his voice. “They’re just… family. That’s the best word for it even though blood can’t make what we have.”

Makoto understands that. He saw enough blood on the battlefield to know that it doesn’t have a lot of meaning in terms of who is going to have your back or who is going to die for you. He would die for Sousuke because he doesn’t need a biological connection to know that he would do the same.

“But anyway,” Haru says, pulling Makoto from his thoughts. “Rin wants to go out and celebrate tonight like everyone else. I’m here to invite you, Nagisa, and Rei along. It was Rin’s idea.”

Makoto’s loneliness is overwhelming before Haru’s words sink in and draw it out. In its place is a sense of security, a warmth that refuses to let him keep the smile off his face because he, an outsider, or at least the new guy, has been thought of in such a way.

“Rin was going to be here to invite you guys,” Haru says. “But I needed to talk to you first.” He puts the broom up and turns to Makoto.

Makoto is suddenly nervous but he tries to quiet the voices of negativity in his mind by speaking. “All right. What is it?”

There’s no particular expression on Haru’s face. “The place is loud and crowded. I don’t think you like that.” He doesn’t say this accusingly, nor does he add a pointed look to the statement. He just says it. Blankly. No emotion of sympathy until he adds, “I don’t either.”

Makoto had grown tense but when Haru admits this, everything softens to an ache. Haru’s own walls come down when he meets Makoto’s stare with a look of exhaustion, the kind that’s laced with shame for being so tired over something so trivial.

It’s clear that Haru doesn’t want to go out tonight and Makoto can very much relate to pushing his own discomforts aside to please people, but Haru isn’t led by that same desire. Makoto can tell that he’s going because he doesn’t want acknowledgement of his hesitancy. His fear.

Makoto’s voice is hushed in the wake of Haru’s anxiousness. “Are you still going to go?”

Haru nods around a sigh.

Makoto nods back. “Then I’m sure I’ll have a great time no matter what.”

Haru inhales sharply before holding his breath. When he finds that Makoto’s expression is sincere, he exhaled and takes on a muted look of self-loathing. “You’re going to be sorry if that’s what you’re counting on.” *If you’re counting on me.*

“I haven’t been sorry yet,” Makoto retorts with a lift of his chin, ready to defend all the good Haru has made him feel.

The firm line of Haru’s mouth twists into a bitter smile. *You will.*

No one has ever been more wrong about anything in the history of everything, Makoto is sure.
He doesn’t want Haru to feel badly about himself. Makoto’s therapist told him that receiving praise or just general support can lift someone’s spirits without them even realizing it, though this exercise has never done much for himself in terms of his own internalized hate.

Try, his mom told him. Just try.

“Well, maybe… maybe I can at least try to, I don’t know, kind of help you through tonight? Somehow.” Makoto brushes his hair over his ear in a subconscious effort to hide his hearing aid. He crosses his stump and prosthetic behind his real leg, not feeling capable of helping but knowing that he wants to. His laugh is withering. “I’m not a lot of fun though, I’d rather be at home by myself than anywhere else.” He’s so undeserving of each time he has stepped out of his house and smiled all because of this boy. “I don’t know why you even…” Makoto’s throat closes up.

Haru is careful in lifting a hand, as if any rustle of clothing might scare Makoto – it honestly could when he’s in such a vulnerable state of mind.

Makoto’s eyelids flutter shut as Haru’s fingers glide through his hair and push some strands behind his ear. His deaf ear.

Makoto’s eyes fly open.

His hearing aid makes the shift of Haru’s hand muffled and loud at the same time, but that discomfort is nothing compared to the ringing and rush of blood in his ears. Haru doesn’t touch the device directly but his eyes lock onto it and they’re not wide with surprise.

Haru already knew it was there.

But that doesn’t make sense, why wouldn’t he have asked Makoto about having a hearing aid? Where were the prying questions that would have delved like a knife, asking if he was born that way or if it’s got something to do with the burns he tries to hide? Did it hurt? What’s it feel like? Can you even hear me?

Makoto would pull away if he wasn’t chained down by absolute terror. “You knew I had a hearing aid?”

The tremble of his whisper makes Haru step away, giving him much needed space to breathe. “Your hair covers it usually,” Haru explains. “But I felt it on Halloween. When you kissed me. I moved my hand up and my glove got caught. You didn’t notice.”

Makoto’s disbelief is reeling. Haru kissed him again after that? He wanted to kiss him? “But… you didn’t ask about it.”

Haru frowns. “Why would I?”

Makoto’s voice is filled with all of the hurt he has pushed down each time his handicap was inquired about by others. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Haru’s eyes narrow as they dart over Makoto’s face. “You don’t owe anyone shit, Makoto.” His voice goes quiet as he adds, “My aunt told me that. She said the world doesn’t owe me anything, but I don’t owe it anything either.”
And now all Makoto wants to do is sweep Haru up in a hug because the boy’s expression might be neutral but his grief is a force in the air, a powerful but useless storm, unable to strike anything back to life.

Makoto takes Haru’s face in his hands and it’s at this proximity that he sees his skin is an atlas of scars that act as landmarks, or maybe they are all connected in some intricate, unseeable way like constellations; either way, they are everywhere, from the stretch of his throat to the expanse of his cheeks. Some of them are carved through the paleness like long, muddy rivers while others are circular and small like moon phases of red half-crescents and dark eclipses.

Makoto wants to discover all of these scars but for now, he’ll acknowledge Haru’s internal wounds by pressing a kiss to his forehead. Makoto’s never done that to anyone and the action steadies him as much as it does Haru, grounding him in the realization that there are delicate parts of this boy that must be handled with care. Makoto accepts this because he thinks that every one of Haru’s broken pieces would match up with his own like a puzzle.

Makoto pulls away but Haru follows him. “I, um.” His hands flutter over Makoto’s chest before clenching in his shirt, and his voice is small, but it resonates louder than any other Makoto has ever heard. “I think I’ll be okay tonight too.”

He can’t help but grin. “Are you sure? Do you think you’ll even be able to enjoy yourself?”

Haru’s answering smirk is wicked as he pushes forward and Makoto’s back hits the wall with just a bit more force than necessary. “I’m good at finding ways to keep myself entertained.”

Makoto loves the contrast of Haru’s pale skin when he rests his arms over his own, which fell victim to the Middle Eastern sun; it filled his pores and drew out a golden tone that never really left.

Makoto breathes in the boy’s exhales and he’s feeling drunk but he still can’t help himself. “Yeah? Are you sure?”

“You’re an ass,” Haru sighs before their mouths meet.

They’re too wrapped up in each other to hear the rubber boots squeaking through the kitchen. Not even when someone lets out a muted string of curses after stubbing their toe on a crate do they realize nothing in the world matters outside their little space until the innocent bystander makes it into the pantry and sighs, “Look Haru, I gotta know if Natsuya is – dogshit, what the fuck?!”

Makoto squawks when Haru bites down on his tongue and shoves him away; thankfully, he’s caught by a very kind wall before losing his balance and hitting an even more considerate floor, where he lands in an awkward pile of limbs and a billow of dust.

Meanwhile, Haru looks like he was just electrocuted, hair a mess from Makoto’s hands, clothes askew, eyes almost as wide as Ikuya’s. The poor kid has one hand over his mouth and the other covering his heart.

Haru smooths down his hair with a grimace. “What is it, Ikuya?”

“I don’t remember,” he whispers.

“Something about Natsuya,” Makoto muffled from beneath the mountain of cardboard boxes that
broke his fall and also buried him.

“Damn it,” Haru sighs. Makoto hears feet moving in what he hopes is his direction, and that’s confirmed when a box is moved to reveal Haru. He helps Makoto up while Ikuya remains where he’s sprawled over a post, looking faint and more than a little dramatic.

When Makoto is back on his feet, Haru puts his hands on his hips as he regards Ikuya, which is apparently profoundly offending because the kid snaps, “Don’t act like I’m the one that just got caught making out in a broom closet!”

“Pantry,” Haru says flatly. “The correct term is pantry.” He can’t unearth a fuck to give about being caught but Makoto’s sure that his own face is beet-red with embarrassment.

Ikuya gives him a dry look as he blows some strands of hair out of his face. “Whatever.” He flips his bangs out of the way. “Look, I can’t stay if Natsuya’s coming to this meeting thing. I don’t wanna see him.”

Haru stands up to his full height. “Your mom wants you here tonight. You’re staying.” He isn’t wavering in the slightest.

Ikuya rolls his eyes impatiently. “I don’t even know why she wants me volunteering, it’s not changing anything. Not like there’s a bunch of good influences around here.”

Haru gives Ikuya a look that Makoto can’t decipher. He at least knows there is a new tension in the air, humming and drawn tight like the wires of an electric fence. Haru’s chin is tilted the barest inch toward Makoto and Ikuya’s eyes flicker between them before he falls silent, appearing regretful of his words.

“You can go wait in the office if you don’t want to see Natsuya,” Haru says. “But you are staying.”

Ikuya drops his head. “Yeah. Okay.” He looks very much like a puppy left out in the rain with his pouting and rubber boots. His eyes wander up to meet Makoto’s before his fists clench in the most heartfelt way and he cries out in a wobbling baritone, “Just so you know, I’ll kick your ass if you hurt him!”

Ikuya stumbles away in a hasty retreat before Makoto can respond.

He comes down from his surprise when a faucet splutters to life. Haru has stepped out into the kitchen and is now hunched over the sink to let the scalding water hiss over the dishes while he meshes his head repeatedly against the nearest support beam.

Makoto is laughing as he steps into the hot fog of water vapor. He nudges Haru with his shoulder, unconcerned that his clothes are getting damp. “Don’t be mad, that was pretty adorable.”

Haru’s brows lift as he opens the soap bottle, which fills the air with the scent of crisp lemon. “He doesn’t know?”
Makoto shakes his head. He didn’t tell anyone about the Halloween kiss other than his mom. Well actually, he didn’t really have to say anything; one look at him had her squealing and jumping around so loudly that he had to hush her before she could wake up Ren and Ran. He and his mom spent the rest of that night stealing from the twins’ candy bags and gushing over Haru.

Makoto didn’t get to bed until four in the morning, which was when he looked out of his bedroom window to catch Sousuke pulling up to his own house. Mom had said something about a boy calling, so Makoto assumed Sousuke had gone off for one of his usual one night stands.

But then Sousuke stumbled out of the car, almost falling into an ant bed because he was damn near swaying, and the dreamy look on his face didn’t match up with the no-strings-attached theory at all.

Makoto remembers staring at him through the window, overcome by the most uprooting sense of disbelief and softly whispering, “What the fuck,” before passing out. Unfortunately, he had been too tired the next day to remember that Sousuke needed to be called out and embarrassed over looking like the physical representation of every two star romantic comedy ever.

Haru turns the faucet off. He wipes his hands slowly with a towel and when in the world, in the name of all that is righteous, did his fingers get so long? Makoto tries not to drool over the simple ritual of drying hands before Haru speaks, his voice curiously distant. “So if I told Nagisa you had to miss the meeting because I need your help with more… shelf things… he’d think it was just shelf things?”

Makoto’s mind, bless it, thinks that Haru’s request for tall person assistance is wholly pure, as innocent as a newborn lamb, until the boy looks him over and makes his neurons fry. A flush climbs up Haru’s neck as his eyes climb Makoto’s frame and that’s what makes him realize that ‘shelf things’ actually translates to making out in dark places for an entire hour.

The heat in the air might have dispelled, but there’s now plenty of it singing through Makoto’s veins. “Yes. Shelf things sound good. Really good.”

And he’s already leaning in but Haru puts a hand on his chest to stop him. “I have to ask you one more thing about the place we’re all going after the meeting.”

“Sure.” Anything, he would literally say yes to anything if it could get his lips just one inch closer.

Haru stares at him with eyes that are focused in the deepest, most grave look of seriousness.

“What’s your opinion on strippers?”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork by bakapandy

Chapter Explanations:

Haru being abnormally warm: Iron transfusions can make you cold, very cold. You can
have unstoppable tremors, grow pale, and also taste metal for a few hours after the procedure is completed. Blood transfusions can make you hot. With that comes waves of nausea and the possibility of throwing up from their intensity. You'll most likely have a fever and be a walking furnace for a few hours. Haru has already gone through the aftermath of his iron transfusion and is now going through the symptoms of the blood transfusion. All the symptoms I described can be doubled or even tripled in their severity if iron and blood transfusions are done in the same day, which Haru usually does. BUT KISSES MAKE EVERYTHING BETTER.
Heathens Take It Slow: Part I

Chapter Notes

*thugisa's 50% off voice* what's up sluts guess who just got out of prison

No, not really, but hi. Sorry about the prolonged delay; long story short, my whole entire life got uprooted and I had to transfer to a new college and move to a new city. It's been one of the most overwhelming times of my life, but everything is pretty settled now and I'm slowly but surely thriving on this new adventure. :) So thank you for your patience.

Shout out to niansue for more Miho sketches, which give me so much inspiration for her character.

Also, Sousuke and Rin now have their own individual playlists on 8tracks. Sousuke | Rin

saltyaf, you are an absolute life-saver and one of the best betas ever. (saltyaf's archive of our own)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Just because we check the guns at the door

Doesn't mean our brains will change from hand grenades

You lovin' on the psychopath sitting next to you

You lovin' on the murderer sitting next to you

You lovin' on the freakshow sitting next to you

You think, "How did I get here, sitting next to you?"

But after all I've said, please don't forget

All my friends are heathens, take it slow

Wait for them to ask you who you know

Please don't make any sudden moves

You don't know the half of the abuse."

twenty one pilots: "Heathens"

Touch is a strange thing.
One of the few times Haru has known it to be used for good was as a baby, when he could not fall asleep unless he had his fingers wrapped around Mori’s pinkie. He has seen physical contact used as an extension not only of love, but fear, in the way Nao once pulled Natsuya from a streetfight by carding his fingers through bloody strands of hair, his thumb smearing a line of red as he traced Natsuya’s snarl away.

Haru has witnessed Aki use her hands to show care by sewing the rips and tears in her friends’ clothes. When she presents a repaired garment, her response to gratitude is brushing the person’s face with her fingers and wishing that she could do more.

Nakagawa uses touch to get what he wants, whether it be slow caresses for money or his fists to prove a point.

Rin knows that Haru doesn’t like touch, but there was a time when it was the only way to show what they were both feeling. It was the day they stood in the living room of the beach cabin for the first time, right after they had been given the keys. The home might have been empty, but it was full of sound as Gou spun in circles to laugh at the ceiling fans, the windows, everything that was different from the foster center she had feared that she would never leave. She raced through the cabin to see every inch of it, and her giggles had possessed so much wild joy that neither Haru nor Rin could speak, their throats were so tight. Instead of talking, Rin wrapped an arm around Haru’s shoulders and squeezed earnestly; the action allowed his emotions to resonate louder than his voice could carry.

Even though Haru’s friends have shown him that not all touch is to be feared, he continues to refrain from it if there is an alternative to it. He has met the end of a fist far too many times to think that when someone is reaching out to him, it is not to hurt him.

It’s just instinct – a response that was ingrained into the deepest parts of him at a young age, as long as he can remember. His dad never touched him unless it was to leave a scar. His mom used her hands to tie off his arm and swap syringes, but that had hurt Haru in another way, under the skin.

Right now, Haru is doing everything he can to not touch anyone, though that is impossible when there are too many people around who don’t think about how their proximity might be the most terrifying thing in the world. Everyone around him looks different and yet the same, anxiety making him think that every gaze is blue and all expanses of skin have turned pale like his dad’s, or maybe his mom’s, or perhaps his own.

Distantly, he knows that there are people he recognizes in the crowd and tries to mentally recite their names over the flashing neon panic in his mind: *Asahi, Ikuya, run, run, run, Nagisa, hide, hide, hide, Rei, get out, get out, Makoto.*

Haru is drowning in a sea of people but when fingers brush his own, he finds that he might be able to keep breathing for a little while.

He is not holding hands with Makoto but their fingers find each other every time the crowd threatens to separate them on their way to Samezuka. The fleeting contact makes Haru uneasy in the most addictive way, as if he is doing something *crazy* just by touching someone.

He will not admit that this realization makes him ache with sadness under the layers of disgust and self-loathing. Even with his fucked up past, he should not feel so nervous at the prospect of touching Makoto – they just spent the last hour touching and kissing and making Haru *need* things he never has before.
It’s a new breed of anxiety - this contact - despite that Makoto’s hand is a grounding weight and his fingers are firm and concrete when nothing else around Haru is. He’d like to hide himself in the space between their palms, but that is not possible. He wants to get out of here but even if he tries to bolt, there is no exit to this maze of people, and he cannot remember how to breathe.

Makoto tugs at his wrist a little and Haru looks at him with eyes that are glazed and unfocused. Makoto tugs again and the gentle action flips a switch in Haru, opens his lungs up and allows him to take a breath, if only because Makoto would like him to and isn’t forcing it with a fist.

Haru looks down at Makoto’s hand. He’s not reaching forward, nor making Haru move any faster than he’s comfortable with. His hand isn’t even turned over with his palm up; it’s just there. Waiting.

Makoto is wanting Haru to use touch to assure that he is okay. This concept is very foreign and he isn’t even sure if he’s doing this right, but he lets the tips of his fingers hook around Makoto’s, and when their fingers are curled together, he pulls just enough, hoping that will convey how thankful he is. Makoto’s thumb brushes his knuckles as he offers a quiet smile, seeming to understand without the need for words.

Which is good, because Haru is speechless.

They continue walking and Haru’s eyes fall to study Makoto’s gait. He’s beginning to favor his left side – each time he walks on his right leg, his face strains as he tries to hold back a grimace. Makoto shakes his head at Haru’s look of concern and gives yet another endless smile, but Haru’s response is a flat glare.

“It’s not that bad,” Makoto sighs, swinging their joined hands a little. Haru would like to set fire to each fluttering butterfly that erupts in his stomach. “I don’t need to sit down.”

“I’ll make you.”

Makoto’s smirk is paired with a blush. “You already made me sit down once.”

Forcing him to sit on the edge of the sink so Haru could stand between his knees instead of lifting up on his tip toes to kiss him is hardly the same thing. He turns away to hide the color rushing over his cheeks and Makoto chuckles.

Thankfully, the busy streets have the rest of their company too preoccupied to notice Haru and Makoto holding hands. After walking exactly eight steps, Nagisa jumped on Rei’s back to offer himself a piggyback ride; Rei might have broken out into a sweat with the added weight, but his eyes follow Nagisa’s finger each time he points at something excitedly, and their voices are as soft as their smiles, content in their own little world of each other.

They had interesting responses to Haru’s question about strippers, which he inquired back at the soup kitchen. Nagisa hadn’t missed a beat before gushing about how he had wanted to take a pole dancing class for like, ever. Rei tried to splutter some kind of reply but he froze when Nagisa leaned into his space and purred, “You think I’d be a beautiful stripper, don’t you Rei-chan?”

Before Rei could melt into the floor from the heat of his blush, Nagisa flipped his hair and announced, “I want to go to the strip club, so Rei-chan is going!”

When Haru had asked Makoto his opinion on the subject of exotic dancers, he’d had to assure him
that he wasn’t asking because he was one, though Haru might have let the silence drag on for a little longer than necessary. He’d just enjoyed Makoto’s expression of awkwardness and vague arousal way too much to not bask in it for a few seconds.

Makoto confessed that he never understood why stripping was controversial. He admitted this with a shrug as he rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s just a job. It’s not like it’s hurting anyone.” He sighed. “I don’t really get why it’s such a big deal. There are worse things people can do.”

Makoto had looked a little haunted after saying that, but Haru was too swept up in his words to notice. It concerned him how much of a fucking turn on it was that Makoto did not have the same traditional, heated opinion Haru had heard so many times before. He couldn’t fathom that he was in the same space as someone so considerate, and had to press Makoto up against the wall and kiss him hard just to convince himself that he was real.

And right now, Haru is once again swept up in a pleading hope that begs for just one thing in his life to be genuine. He tries his best not to look over at Makoto because he knows he will end up staring in dazed wonderment.

Cloud Nine is a short trip, unfortunately – Asahi makes sure of that. He’s had to go through the rows of street vendors twice for food since they left the soup kitchen. Ikuya had to find a porter potty and got lost but luckily, Asahi found him by screeching some bird calls and causing everyone within a two mile radius to look in their direction. This embarrassed Ikuya so much that he tried to run the other way when Haru and the rest of the group spotted him. Asahi ended up tackling him and Haru was so tired of dealing with their mortifying antics that he was livid, but he grew even more upset at the fact that Makoto just smirked at his look of fury – this made Haru want to kiss him senseless and also beat the shit out of him.

The atmosphere changes as they enter the red light district. The smells of fried food and sunscreen give way for the aroma of beer foam and fog machines. Even the heat in the air is different, warming Haru’s blood to a singing hum. Women stand at club entrances, wearing netted stockings and dark lipstick; others lean over balconies with cleavage spilling over, their eye shadow shimmering in the fading light. There is so much flashing light inside the bars that the streets are left draped in intimate shadows, the alleys filled with yawning darkness, save for the pinpoints of lit blunts and cellphone screens.

Haru and the rest of Freebird have always breathed a little easier once they step into the shadows of the red light district, for darkness is a part of all of them, and it’s something they don’t have to hide here. These clubs are filled with everything society glorifies and shuns at the same time – Haru resonates with that a lot, being a dealer.

Samezuka holds an entirely different atmosphere than the rest of the clubs; it makes one feel as though time has stopped, or perhaps gone back a few hundred years, if the lacy ironwork and gothic steeples are anything to go by. The building has a ghost-like presence, something that brings out a morbid curiosity in someone, daring them to come closer.

Or maybe run in the other direction. Makoto jerks to a stop, his fist tight in the back of Haru’s shirt and locking him in place. Haru turns to question him and Makoto flusters, trying to laugh as he smooths out the wrinkles he made in the denim vest. “Sorry! This, ah – this just…” The club’s red searchlights move over the lenses of his glasses as his eyes widen. “This isn’t like… a haunted house or something, right?”

Haru follows Makoto’s gaze to the art piece above the entrance. The stone serpents have evening
moisture dripping from their fangs as their tangled forms writhe, and Makoto is trying to hide the fact that he’s trembling like a rattler. “I designed that,” Haru says.

Makoto’s voice is a few (dozen) octaves higher. “You did?”

Haru nods in complete seriousness. Miho had bought Samezuka awhile before he met her, but he had been eager to prove himself and offered to help with the remodel. Fuck, he was an idiot. Still is.

Makoto quickly raises his hands and waves them until they almost blur. “I didn’t mean I don’t…! I don’t mean it’s – it looks bad or anything! It seems –” Haru smiles a bit too softly as Makoto struggles for the words. “It’s… very intricate,” he stresses, brows lifted as high as they’ll go. “Lots of patience involved, I’m sure! You know, I can’t think of anyone I know who would have the patience to think of something on that scale, I mean, really –”

Haru makes a face. “It’s kind of overboard to me. But that’s what the owner wanted, so.” He rolls his lips into a line and busies himself with catching up to Asahi as Makoto stumbles along.

“Oh,” he says, voice quiet, eyes bright. “So that’s what you do then? You’re an artist of some kind?” He laughs rather bashfully, rolling a sleeve up to busy his nervous hands. A muscled forearm is exposed and the sight of it makes Haru angry at himself for being afraid to touch something that he wants so much. “I just realized I don’t know where you work.”

Haru’s entire body seizes, his heart clenching so tightly that it stops beating. His insides are lost to numbness and his thoughts are no longer racing; there is so much hysteria screaming through him that his brain is left deathly silent.

“Haru?”

His dad’s voice is a whisper in his own mouth, one that he cannot speak past the embers lodged in his throat and the cigarette ashes burning into his tongue. *Eyes wide open, boy. Dealer’s gotta be in control of everything around him. Gotta be able to have a gun pointed at your head and not even blink.*

Haru doesn’t have a problem keeping cool in the face of danger – he doesn’t have any fear left to feel in the wake of such.

But a tiny little match stick of hesitation erupts in his stomach when he meets Makoto’s concerned eyes.

For the first time in his life, Haru almost can’t bring himself to lie despite that lies are instinct, easy, easier than keeping himself breathing. But overthinking is one of his strongest natures and Haru will not be able to back up a lie about having some nine to five job because he doesn’t know the first thing about a legitimate occupation.

So the truth turns in on itself, reshapes and stretches. “I work at Samezuka.”

Makoto inclines his head. “Doing what?”

“Whatever needs doing.” Dealing, killing, dancing on the ends of Miho’s puppet strings – these are just some of the tasks he’s forced to do, but it’s the duties he takes upon himself that have become a few of his proudest moments: covering for a bartender after his girlfriend suddenly went into labor, looking at a dancer’s phone as she scrolled through pictures so he could give his opinion on which
puppy to get her son, stacking chairs, wiping down the bar – all these situations are mediocre in reality, but they are real world tasks Haru truly never thought he would be smart enough to accomplish.

He shrugs to himself, looking away as worry presses in on his chest. “I guess I’m just doing a bunch of odd jobs right now.” He’s heard people on television use that term. Odd jobs. He thinks it might translate to not being employed anywhere solid and just doing what it takes to make ends meet. That’s the best term he can use, even if it’s still embarrassing. He supposes it’ll gain a better reaction than if he said, **oh, I deal for a living. No, not cards, the real shit, the hard shit. The illegal shit.**

He doesn’t realize that his distress has become a force in the air, but it’s one that is easily dispelled by Makoto’s lips against his cheek in the softest of kisses. Haru’s eyes flutter closed as he is overwhelmed by the feeling of just being **so tired**, and leans into Makoto without realizing it. He lingers for a moment more before pulling away, and Haru is dazed as he blinks at him, not comprehending how Makoto’s smile can be so understanding as he murmurs, **“That’s okay, Haru.”**

He isn’t so sure about that, but having Makoto believe the lie brings him a relief he didn’t know he needed so badly.

Asahi calls for them to hurry up and when he and Haru bypass the entrance of Samezuka, Rei frowns. “Do we not go in that way?”

**“We don’t,”** Asahi smirks.

They walk around the building and step into an alley only to reach a dead end very quickly. The brick wall is covered in layers of vines and withered ivy, but when Haru gently moves the purple strands back, a gate is revealed. He pushes it open and steps inside the passage, followed by everyone else. It’s narrow, but Haru is saved from claustrophobia when he looks up at the rectangle of open night sky above them.

They are in a secret garden untouched by the garbage littering the streets outside. The aroma of rich earth is a soothing contrast to the city smog, and dewy grass sticks to Haru’s sneakers as he walks. Statues line the brick walls, pieces that Miho wanted destroyed, for they are either not provocative enough or have smiles that are too kind. Haru and his friends hid the statues here, and now they hold flowerpots in their hands and have flowerbeds growing at their feet.

**“Wow,”** Nagisa breathes at the sight. Even Ikuya looks impressed, which is something to be proud of.

**“What is this place?”** Makoto asks quietly, not wanting to disturb the tranquility of the oasis.

**“Our friend Aki started the whole thing,”** Haru explains. **“She found a wildflower on the cliffs. Brought it here.”** He toes at the grass, exposing moist dirt. **“There wasn’t anything out here back then. Just the passage – no grass.”**

**“The passage was just for smoke breaks back then,”** Asahi adds. **“Aki wanted to spruce up the place and put the flower out here. Other workers started taking care of it and wanted more flowers, so this is what happened!”**

Some of the dancers are using their break time to rest on the far bench and breathe in the cool, sweet air. There is a cook from the Samezuka restaurant in the produce section of the garden, her eyes intent as she makes the decision on which head of lettuce to take back to the kitchen. There is a dog
lapping at a small fountain and she rushes over to them so quickly that she trips over her own feet. Ikuya sucks in a breath and hides from the dog behind Asahi without realizing he’s got pride. Luckily, the dog has gained most of the attention.

“Hi, Winnie.” Asahi coos as he crouches down to rub her belly, which is considerably more plump since Rin found the stray hit by a car and left to die right in front of Samezuka. Haru didn’t realize how much Gou had rubbed off on her brother until he found out that Rin had let the puppy stay in the garden even after she healed up. Now Winnie is a sort of mascot for the place; she gets played with by the dancers, fed scraps by the cooks, and has even been found in Rin’s room during thunderstorms.

At the end of the passage is a staircase made of mismatched wood, acting as a side entrance to the club. Nakagawa is sprawled at the bottom of the steps, his arms glistening with cooling sweat, tank top heavy with it. In one hand is a cigarette, withered down to the pinch of his fingers; in his other hand is a drink, but he is only staring down at his reflection in the liquor. Drops of condensation curl around his knuckles as his fingers tighten around the glass, eyes distant and dark where they were once filled with hazel warmth.

Seeing Nakagawa in such a state is common these days, but that doesn’t make the sight any less reeling. His face twitches into a startled glare when he notices Makoto, Rei, and Nagisa being toured around the garden, a place that no outsiders have ever seen.

Haru moves to step around Nakagawa, but he blocks the trek of his grimy converse with a heavy boot, one that has someone’s blood still caked into the dark leather of the steel toe. Nakagawa didn’t get so disturbingly violent until a few weeks ago, when he realized that grief can be numbed by another kind of pain, but now he is trying to pick a fight that he is going to lose. “What have you done, Haru?”

Haru looks him dead in the eye, arching a brow and daring Nakagawa to do something about the tension thickening in the air. “Rin and I invited them. Now move.”

Nakagawa’s hands tighten into fists while Haru’s remain in his pockets, just as ready. Back at the soup kitchen, he and Makoto decided with hushed laughter that tonight they were having their very first date at a strip club, and Haru will be damned if he’s going to let anything ruin it.

Nakagawa scoffs. “God, you’re all out of your minds. Are you out of your fucking mind, Haru?”

Haru doesn’t step back when he gets in his space, voice even. “No, but you are if you come any closer.”

Nakagawa’s brief smirk is one of fond disgust. He steps back with a sigh, flopping against the wall. “Nitori’s got his boyfriend in there, it’s got me on edge. Guy’s a cop. A rookie, but whatever. They’re all the same.”

Haru spitefully wishes that were true, but if Rin’s attitude toward Yamazaki is anything to go on, then that isn’t the case anymore. “What made you suddenly start giving a shit about all this?”

Nakagawa cranes back in surprise, but it needed to be said. There’s even more where that came from, right on the tip of Haru’s tongue, all of it fueled by irritation and anger at himself for letting his friend get this way. Instead of saying anything else, he falls silent. Voicing his frustration won’t do any good right now, especially not when Nakagawa is standing in front of the steps Kazuki used to sit on when waiting for him to get off work.
Haru chooses his next words carefully. “Ai is the smartest person I know. He wouldn’t let us be put at risk. I trust him with that, so he isn’t an issue.”

Nakagawa glances down at the steps before looking away. “Something happened at the hospital last night. Nitori was there.” Nakagawa must recognize his look of alarm, for his voice is a touch softer. “He’s okay. Well, physically. He’s fucked up about it, but…” His eyes fall to his forearm, where a bullet scar is covered by a tattoo of red lips. When Nakagawa got shot, it was Nitori who stitched the wound with trembling fingers and saved his arm. “He’s pretty gutsy for a sitting duck. He’ll be fine.”

Haru glances back to the group, making sure they’re still occupied, before turning back to Nakagawa. “What happened?”

He takes a deep swallow of his drink. “The two guys that took Rin, the ones that drugged him – they got in a fight at the jail, got sent to the hospital.” His brows lift into a vaguely impressed look. “Someone went in there and turned them inside out. Gutted ‘em like hogs at a barbeque shack.”

“Good.” Haru’s growl is pulled from the bottom of his chest, from the darkest part of himself where he buried his rage; it is now burning through him like a forest fire that is too satisfying to try and stop. The pleasure he finds in the news of the brutal murders is fueled by the countless nights he has stayed up with Rin after he awoke from nightmares, memories of what those men did to him. Haru had never felt so useless in his life, sitting on the edge of the tub to offer towels and glasses of water each time Rin grew so sickened by the memories that he had to hunch over the toilet and puke until there was nothing left but dry heaves and wracking sobs.

Haru’s only remorse for the yakuza is that he was not the one to tear them apart.

Rin and Nakagawa might have their differences on the subject of what happened to him, but the brief look Nakagawa gives Haru says that he has also gained a morbid satisfaction with the men receiving a small fraction of the torture they deserved. “The guy Nitori found had his guts spilled all over the floor. Said there wasn’t a block of tile that wasn’t covered in blood. It was definitely a crime of passion. The gory stuff was pointless; the guy had his throat cut and probably died pretty quickly.”

Drowning in his own blood. Choking on it. Haru would have gotten more pleasure if Nakagawa had described it like that.

“And the one we ambushed at the ambulance –” Nakagawa would have said this with hesitation if he were who he used to be, but now his face is blank, eyes empty; no remorse for almost killing someone. “Room was trashed like there had been a serious struggle. Blood everywhere, windows broken, bed was thrown over on its side. But there was no butcher and no yakuza.”

“What?”

Nakagawa shakes his head, taking a long drag of his cigarette before his voice rasps through the smoke. “They still ain’t found the guy.”

The dancers who were sitting on the bench come between Haru and Nakagawa to head back inside, but Haru cannot even lift his head to see if he recognizes their faces. With his eyes cast down, he watches their high heels sink into the mud with a thick, wet sound that makes him think about Kazuki getting stabbed, making him wonder if it sounded anything like that, forcing him to ask himself which one of his friends will be next if he can’t come up with a plan of action right now –
“Freebird’s together here at Samezuka tonight,” Nakagawa says, watching his face with a bitter look of understanding. “We got the numbers and home field advantage. No one’s gonna try anything.” He toes out his cigarette in disgust. “Not tonight, at least. But we’re not the ones you should be worried about.”

Something unspoken lingers after he says this and Haru can’t decipher it. “What should I be worried about, then?”

Nakagawa pours his gold liquor out into a rose bush. His tired eyes are knowing as they shift to Makoto, then back to Haru, who freezes on the spot.

Nakagawa’s smile is like a crack in his mask, as broken as his whisper.

“You should be worried about having someone to lose.”

He steps back into the building, leaving Haru in the dying sunlight.

He is silently fuming, resenting Nakagawa’s words, for they have watered a seed planted in Haru’s brain – it’s a fear he cannot uproot no matter how many nightmares he’s spent clawing through black dirt soaked in blood. He has tried to pretend it meant nothing, but now he’s wondering if the red belongs to him, his friends, or Makoto.

“Haru?”

He wonders how someone can put so much emotion into a word spoken so softly. Into his name, of all things to say. He turns to Makoto, who is close enough to let Haru stand in his shadow; it is a warm darkness he does not want to leave, especially when fingers brush the inside of his wrist to pull him closer. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he says. Makoto gives him a flat look and he sighs. “I’ll be fine.” You make me fine.

He look for any physical signs of anxiousness and finds that Makoto is not fidgeting, though he is a little tense. “You good?”

Makoto’s spine straightens up, realizing he’s caught. He drops in defeat and lets out a breath. “Does it make me an alcoholic if I say that I’ll probably be better after one or two drinks?”

“One or two? That it?” He shrugs. “Even if it does, I’ll still get drunk with you.”

Makoto’s smile curves into a smirk. “That it?”


“On what?”

“If you think you’re not gonna blush the whole time.”

Makoto looks like he’s trying his hardest, but a rosy hue still blooms over his cheeks. Haru turns away with a miniscule upturn of his nose, pleased with himself for causing such a reaction.

Winnie retreats to her doghouse and Asahi breaks in front of Haru to get to the top of the stairs first. He wraps a fist around the door with a grin stretched wide. “Welcome to Samezuka.”
He pushes open the door and they’re hit by a wave of heat; it floats through the air like a sigh, curling and slow, lingering on their skin. They step into a stone tunnel and though there isn’t much to look at, everyone shares a feeling of being watched, or at least being followed by something.

Dust trails after them once they step through it and the overhead fluorescent lights flicker with every beat of their hearts. The shadows move when nothing else is, and from the darkness comes a whisper or maybe a thousand, each voice one of lustrous fire. Nagisa raises his brow at this but Rei is left speechless, struggling to find a logical explanation for what he’s hearing. Asahi smirks at their reactions as he moves his fingers over the walls, which are unusually warm to the touch; Ikuya watches the action nervously and keeps his hands firmly in his pockets. Haru gently pulls Makoto’s hand from the death-grip it has on his vest and holds his hand to guide him.

The hallway comes out at the entrance of the restaurant, which is straight ahead. To the right is the front of the building and to the left is the club. Asahi races into the flashing lights with a wild holler and Haru can’t help but get swept up in the sight before them, admitting that it leaves him dazed, maybe even in awe.

Samezuka is possessed by a chaos that leaves everyone writhing – not even the loyal ticking of the clock can keep up with the primitive rush of desire in the air. Yet there is still, somehow, order in the wild, and Samezuka has found a way to dance on the thread between ecstasy and insanity.

The dancers are the rulers of this aching kingdom and they are worshipped on platforms and stages, manipulating the madness with sways of their hips. They move with a grace that only snakes can possess, crawling, rattling, poised to strike, eat, take – yet they are ethereal in their ability to pull the last bit of money from a man’s pocket without even asking for it.

Nagisa’s sudden shout is bursting with triumph. “I KNEW IT!”

Haru follows his eyes to the main stage, where the air is hazy with smoke and obscured by strobe lights, but Rin’s form is unmistakable. His confidence is an exuding force that demands all attention at all times, but most especially at Samezuka.

Makoto stares in what might be considered horror. “I pegged him as a sales associate,” he whispers.

“Why?” Haru asks.

“Wily. Subtle, not subtle. Smiles a lot.” Haru rolls his eyes and puts a drink in his hand. “Oh, thank you.” He downs half of it in five seconds. Rei finishes his off in half the time.

Haru is curious. “What’d you peg me as?”

Makoto’s face is already flushed from the alcohol, his grin loose. “Really cute.”

Haru frowns as he feels his face heat.

Asahi’s shout breaks over the music. “Hey Haru, look who I found!”

He grunts when someone collides with him and a wet smack lands on his cheek. Aki pulls back with a big smile, genuinely overjoyed to see him. “Haru, hi!”

“Aki.” She’s usually dressed in a skirt but there’s no skin showing tonight, the hem of the garment
brushing the tops of her loafers. Her long sleeve shirt is buttoned firmly all the way up to the collar, and this tells Haru that she wasn’t working tonight and only came to the club to celebrate; Aki actually hates dressing provocatively and usually doesn’t when she isn’t on the clock.

Another girl slinks over and Ikuya yanks the back of Asahi’s shirt to furiously whisper, “You didn’t tell me she was going to be here!”

Asahi hisses like a cat and slaps Ikuya’s hand away. “I didn’t know I was supposed to?”

It’s Nii who is beside Aki and she acts as a contrast to her peachy shades and pleated fabrics. Nii’s corset is red leather and black lace, drawn so tight over her body that her hip bones could cut a man. Her braids are clipped in miniature skeleton hands and they draw the locks out of her face. She looks bored to death as she leans her weight on one side to chip at her black nail polish, and Ikuya stares as if the action is the most entrancing thing he’s ever seen.

Oh hell. Haru blindly grabs a drink and swallows whatever was left in a glass at the edge of the bar.

Aki has seen Makoto, Nagisa, and Rei at the soup kitchen before, but now she takes the time to give them a proper hello. Nii just stares with a pierced brow arched high, remembering that she met the newcomers at Seven Tears, but she’s still wondering where the fuck Rin and Haru found such normal looking people. Aki takes Haru’s hand. “Come on, I’ll show you where we’re sitting. Rin and Naka have to cash out before they can join us.”

Booths and tables line the walls and act as a lounge area, where the music isn’t so loud and people don’t have to shout to talk. Bartenders head over there by weaving across the dancefloor with trays of drinks held high over their heads, their center of balance immaculate. A shock of bright hair catches Haru’s eye, orange and messy, belonging to a younger guy at a far table; he has his mouth against Nitori’s ear and is making him giggle.

Nao is at the other end of the table and regards the group’s approach with a kind smile. Ikuya is hesitant as he moves to sit next to him but Nao’s smile widens as he nods, and the boy breathes a sigh of relief. He flops down and looks much more comfortable, at least until Nii sprawls in the chair beside him and his face turns as red as her corset.

Haru slips into the booth next to Nitori and Makoto files in after. Nagisa takes advantage of Rei being too tipsy to be embarrassed and sits in his lap, but even now that there is extra space Makoto’s thigh is still pressed right up against Haru’s. It flexes and shifts, making him feel like he just drank a whole gallon of tequila instead of only one glass. When a bartender comes by, he orders a bottle because it will be the only thing that gets him through this dizzying proximity.

Asahi demands that Haru introduce everyone and he struggles to do so with Makoto’s body heat enveloping him, but he survives the pleasantries without stuttering. When he ends on Makoto’s name, Nitori’s boyfriend gasps and points. “Hey, I know you! You’re my mentor’s brother! He showed me a picture of you and the twins! And your mom, just —” He fans himself. “Wow.”

Nagisa sprawls over the table, almost spilling his pink cocktail. “Riiiiight?”

Makoto cranes back a little, expression hard to distinguish. “You’re that Momo?”

As the guy laughs, closed eyes crinkling as he tips his head. “And I’m his boyfriend.” He pats Nitori’s cheek and the simple action leaves Ai breathless and flustered. Momotarou crosses his arms with a lift of his chin, his loud voice booming with pride. “Yamazaki-senpai probably went on and
on about how great I am at this cop thing, right?”

Makoto stiffens. “Er. Yes! That is exactly what he told me!” Haru, Nagisa, and Rei give him flat
looks and he somehow kicks all three of them under the table.

The bartender comes back with their orders and the drinks start flowing, which allows conversation
to preoccupy the group so Haru can quietly speak to Nitori. “I’m sorry for what happened at the
hospital. You didn’t have to come tonight if you didn’t feel up for it.”

Everything about Nitori is strained from his eyes to his smile, but he still looks no less grateful for
Haru’s concern. “Thank you. I thought about staying home but…” He scoots a little closer to
Momotarou, who is too busy talking shit about Sousuke with Makoto to notice. “I didn’t want…
what happened… to have so much control over me. Looking forward to tonight was the only thing
that got me through those graveyard shifts.” He uses both hands to take a sip of his drink, which is so
strong that Haru’s eyes sting when he smells it. “I tried to come by myself.” His fingers shake around
his glass before he hides them under the table. “But Momo had already been with me since the rest of
the police showed up last night. I didn’t want any of you to have to walk me, so I had hoped it would
be okay if he just…” His rambling leaves him too exhausted to finish.

Haru shakes his head sympathetically. “It’s fine, Ai.” More gently, he says, “If he can keep you safe,
then that’s all that matters to us.”

Nitori laughs. “Tell that to Rin-senpai.”

“Tell me what?”

Nagisa throws himself at Rin, hanging off his neck like a monkey. “Rin-Rin, that was amazing! You
move like a right, natural woman!”

Nakagawa’s brows crease in disturbance from where he’s taken a seat beside Aki, whose head is
dipped with Asahi’s in silent laughter. Rin pats Nagisa’s head, beaming. “That means a lot, Nagisa.”
He pulls up a chair at the end of the booth and flops in it with a tired huff, reaching for the bourbon
and Coke Haru knew to order for him. He makes a noise that borders inappropriate as he takes a
gracious sip and his voice is thick with relaxation when he finally comes up for air. “So, what’ve you
mud sticks been up to without my entertainment?”

“It’s sticks in the mud,” Nakagawa corrects like a right, natural bitch.

“I know you are but what am – oww, shitass!”

Nakagawa leans back and taps the fist Nii offers him while Rin rubs at the new slap mark on his
forehead.

Asahi stands up with an air of purpose, which is impressive given the amount of Hippie Juice he’s
ingested. “I have an idea! Ikuya, come with me – I need your hands.” He drags him away by the ear
toward the bar and Haru has a distant feeling of motherly concern as he watches them go, wondering
what priceless things they’ll break and whose toys they’re going to steal. But Makoto’s hand is on
his back, moving in sweet, tender circles and this keeps Haru grounded in his seat. Oh well.

Asahi returns with something sloshing around in the cradle of his arms and Ikuya trails behind him
with a stack of cups. Asahi slams a bottle down in the middle of the table; there are fanged mermaids
carved into the aged magnum and the alcohol inside of it is so dark that Nao leans forward to read
the label in concern. He then cranes back so far that he almost falls out of his chair. “Asahi, this is a hundred years old! Where did you get this?!”

Nakagawa’s scowl lifts into a smirk when he recognizes the bottle. “That’s Samezuka Firespit.” Aki waves her hands and gags while Rin licks his lips in excitement.

At the rest of the group’s confusion, Asahi stands on his seat with a grand air, holding the bottle out for them to peer up at in varying degrees of nervousness. “Deep underground, under this very floor, are the Samezuka cellars.” He voice falls into a dramatic whisper. “And in these cellars are said to be skeletons and ghosts and the lingerings of the plaguuueee!”

When his theatrics are met with silence, he straightens up and grins as he pops his temple against the cork. “Among the ash heaps, hundreds of bottles just like this one were found. Nobody knows who made them, nobody even knows what’s in them – only that it’ll fuck your ass sideways. So! Who’s first?” Rin thrusts his cup forward.

Nao goes to protest but Asahi waves him off. “Don’t worry, we’ll play a drinking game to level it out! How about Never Have I Ever? Great way to learn about new people!” He gives a thumbs up to the newcomers and Haru bites back a grin at Makoto’s look of dread.

After all the cups are poured and ready to go, Ikuya chews on his lip. “Uh. I haven’t played this – in a while,” he adds quickly, puffing out his chest and making Nao smile, all pitying and fond.

“We go around the table saying things we have or haven’t done,” Aki explains. “If you have done the thing, you drink. If you haven’t, you don’t drink. Like this: never have I ever worked as a stripper.”

Rin, Nakagawa, and Aki take a drink, and their reactions are instantaneous. Nakagawa’s chest hiccups like he’s trying not to vomit, Aki splutters like she’s drowning, and Rin breaks out in a pouring sweat. “See?” Aki coughs, eyes watering. “Like that, just like that!”

Ikuya stares down at his drink as if something is about to come crawling out of it.

Okay, great!” Asahi points at Rei. “You, new guy, you go first.”

Rei flusters under everyone’s attention, struggling to adjust his glasses. “Ah, a-all right. Never…” He chews on his lip before straightening, his glasses flashing with a victorious light. “Never have I ever looked at the moon and thought it looked like a schistocyte!”

Haru feels like a special breed of dumbass before he realizes that everyone else looks as lost as he feels, and that feeling intensifies when both Nitori and Nao drink. “Med School,” they intone with haunted looks.

“My turn,” Nagisa announces, shifting thoughtfully on Rei’s lap, causing Rei to take another drink without prompting. “Never have I ever had a one night stand and…” He grins as the anticipation builds. “Did it again with the same person.” He clinks glasses with Rei before drinking.

Haru is surprised to see Nitori blushing into his cup while Momo snickers into his own glass.

Rin narrows his eyes and crosses his arms at them. Knowing where this is going, Haru tries to kick him under the table but ends up ramming Asahi’s crotch instead. He hunches over so deeply that his forehead hits the table before he kicks back and accidentally hoofs Ikuya, which starts a war. Haru
draws his legs up into the safety of the booth and holding himself up is a nauseating task when he’s this drunk. He doesn’t realize just how buzzed he is until he settles his tired legs over Makoto’s lap, but either way, Makoto doesn’t seem to mind; his long, thick fingers learn Haru’s calf before they curl around to the back of his knee.

All of a sudden, the warmth of traitorous laughter spikes through Haru, and he drives his toe into Makoto’s stomach before a giggle can dare to escape his mouth. Makoto’s grunt is paired with wild confusion, at least until he recognizes Haru’s strained look and dawning realization lights his eyes. “Are you ticklish?” he whispers, almost reverent.

“No.”

Makoto purses his lips around a grin and silently turns away, letting Haru know without words that the lie isn’t believed. But even so, Makoto settles on rubbing Haru’s ankle, tracing the delicate bones with infinite care. Haru gets so wrapped up in the sensation that he barely notices Rin ask, “How did you meet Ai, Momotarou?” He takes a casual sip of his drink even though he’s radiating almost as much protectiveness as he does around Gou.

Momo’s face is completely serious. “We had a one night stand at a party when he was twenty and I was seventeen.”

Nitori chokes on his drink and Rin’s goes spraying over the table.

“It was at a college party I wasn’t supposed to be at.” Momo rubs his chin thoughtfully while using his other hand to pat Nitori on the back as he coughs up his lungs. “So he didn’t know how young I was the first time.” He smirks and ducks his eyes. “He knew the second time, though.”

“Momo,” Nitori groans into his hands.

Momotarou looks up through his lashes. “Yes, senpai?”

“Oh my god, do not do that right now!”

Rin eventually hacks up his voice. “That was two years ago! Where was I when all this was going on?!”

“Have you seen Seijuro Mikoshiba,” Nitori cries, borderline hysterical. “He would’ve punted me over the nearest mountain if he found out this started when Momo was seventeen! I didn’t tell anyone!”

Momotarou makes a face. “Pretty sure Sei heard us a few times anyway, Ai.”

“Stop that!”

“Wait!” Asahi throws his arms out. “That’s a good one! Never have I ever been walked in on while doing the sex! Bottoms up, Nii.”

“Fuck you,” she growls into her cup.

Ikuya stares at Nao accusingly and this gains everyone’s attention. Haru might even hear a glass hit the floor and shatter. Nao winces before taking a drink, and the table bursts into galling shouts and wolf whistles. Laughter erupts as Asahi bellows, “Ikuya got the Team Dad Speciaaaaaal!”
“I told Natsuya I thought I heard someone, for the record,” Nao says. “And you were supposed to be at school that day, Ikuya.”

“So were you guys.”

Nao’s mouth firms into a line before he submissively takes another drink, making Ikuya nod with an approving huff.

Nii takes a turn. “Never have I ever played strip poker.”

Nagisa picks up his glass, so tipsy that he almost spills the whole thing, but then he levels himself to point accusingly at Makoto with his free hand. Makoto sinks down in his seat and hides his blush by dipping his head to take a swig of his drink. Haru leans back in surprise and Makoto explains himself after he’s done choking on liquid fire. “College,” he coughs. “College wasn’t a good time for good decisions.”

Nagisa looks thoughtful underneath the glowing flush. “Pretty sure I still have pictures on my phone. Here, hold my drink Rei-chan –”

Makoto’s voice is shrill. “That isn’t necessary, Nagisa! Lord.” He pouts and traces the shape of Haru’s knee under the table. Haru nudges him with a smirk that freezes in place when Makoto’s touch falls light on the back of his knee. Without warning, Makoto digs his fingers in, and Haru’s spine snaps straight with his teeth gritted behind a smile he can’t control, one that feels big and full on his face. He can’t help but huff a soft laugh, and the sensation is foreign yet not unwelcomed, odd as it makes him feel; he’s warm but not hot, electrified yet fuzzy.

Makoto sounds dazed, his voice thick as it falls to a hopeless whisper. “God, I love your laugh.”

Haru falters, confused all of a sudden. Is Makoto using touch with the hope it will make him smile? Is he doing this to pleasure him in a way that isn’t sexual? Just simply wanting to make Haru feel good with no personal gain in mind?

Looking at Makoto proves that he does get something out of seeing Haru happy, his smile holding a warmth that Haru wants to take and hold against his own mouth so no one will get the chance to steal it.

“Oi, Haru. Your turn.”

That playful tone makes dread sink into him as he turns to Rin. His smirk is wide and showing all of his teeth; he swipes his tongue ring against the back of his incisors in an act of innocent curiosity.

Much like Makoto with Nagisa, Haru didn’t tell Rin about the Halloween kiss.

Well. Not explicitly, anyway.

Haru had stayed up texting Makoto until four in the morning after Halloween night, thumbs ridden with spasming cramps from tapping out so many replies – but he had not cared at all. He was lying on the couch when the front door burst open with a grand air and Rin stepped into the house, his neck covered in an array of hickeys, which was odd to see after a rent – it was usually finger imprints or bites. What was even stranger was that Rin’s lips were swollen as if he had been kissing a lot, bruised like he had been mouthed at rigorously and passionately and hard.
But what threw Haru way off was that Rin sprawled on the cushion beside him and groaned, “Get me a bottle of wine, you vicious bitch. I’m in love.”

Haru had not only been staying up to text Makoto. He had waited up for Rin because he had a rent scheduled that night, and his blissed out expression was no indicator that he had been anywhere near Samezuka. Haru’s tone was accusing. “Where have you been?” Young man.

Rin scoffed at his sour voice. “Puh-lease.” He rolled over to kick his boots off with a yawn. “Your ass is way too dry to be riding my dick like this.”

Haru looked up at the ceiling as he rolled his lips in, not replying. Something in the following silence made Rin slowly turn back over and though Haru did not meet his eyes, he could feel Rin’s gaze piercing in. “Wait,” he whispered. “Wait!”

Rin sat up abruptly, pillows flying as he jerked Haru around by the shoulders to look at his face. Rin’s eyes were sharp and able to see something under Haru’s skin – something that made him crane back with a mixed look of alarm and enlightenment. “Your ass isn’t dry!”

“In what way?” Haru replied, very dryly.

“Your ass looks assiduously fucked.”

“But I didn’t fuck tonight.”

“No like, you got emotionally fucked. Taken care of. Dicked down in the love tank.” Rin hugged a pillow to his chest and nuzzled at it with a little smile.

Haru’s stomach dropped in the most pleasant way as his phone vibrated between his hands. “Yeah,” he conceded. “Guess so.”

But now, as he faces Rin’s smirk from across a table full of expectant people, Haru is feeling fucked in the worst of ways.

He hesitantly glances at Makoto and receives a warm squeeze to his ankle in response.

You know what? Fuck it.

“Never have I ever kissed anyone at this table.”

Rin splutters, not expecting Haru to just go for it. Probably thought he would turn away and feign indifference and yeah, Haru might really want to do that, but he isn’t falling to pieces for the first time in months and it’s all at the hands of Makoto, who deserves to be kissed endlessly for that, probably by someone who can do it sweeter and better than Haru can. But he’s not going to worry about that right now; instead he takes a big gulp of his drink and the table is completely still and quiet when he sets his cup down.

Everyone tries to connect the dots or more so, who’s been connected with Haru’s mouth. Besides the established couples, there are five people who have picked up their drink. Rin is one of them and he’s mouthing to himself as he counts heads. “Do I have to take a drink for every person I’ve kissed?”
Nakagawa snorts. “Guess you’ll be needing a refill, then.” He dodges the fist thrown his way and takes a drink, causing a full-body shudder to wrack his frame. “My kiss was with Rin,” he chokes.

“Mine too,” Aki says.

“Mine too,” Asahi says.

“You cockbite, I’ve never kissed you before in my life!”

“Not yet~”

The very air freezes when Makoto sets his glass down from taking a drink.

Haru can practically hear the lightbulbs frying in everyone’s heads as they look between him and Makoto. All at once they are blinded by the dawning light of realization and gaze at Makoto as though he is a holy entity, one that is to be respected with the gravest reverence. “Wow,” Asahi breathes, prepared to give hero worship. “What’s that like?”

Makoto searches for the words and ends up with two: “The best.”

That statement might be simple, but it’s the way Makoto says it that leaves Haru trying to remember the last time anyone said something about him with so much adoration in their voice, leaving it soft yet heavy.

Aki is beaming, proud that Haru has finally put himself out there romantically, but Nitori and Nao regard him with knowing smiles as if none of this surprises them. Nakagawa’s eyes soften for the briefest second and that means a lot, even if he ends up looking away.

Nagisa doesn’t look surprised in the least, and this speaks volumes of his true character. Haru expected him to be immature and obnoxious the second he found out but it’s clear that Nagisa has known about Makoto and Haru’s mouths having relations for a while. Haru didn’t understand how deeply Nagisa cared about Makoto’s happiness until this very moment.

Rin leans back to regard Haru and Makoto and his expression is one that affects Haru greater than any other emotion shown at the table. Every stitch through skin, every stolen bottle of tequila, every sleepless night of coffee and cigarettes, every laugh and cry has joined to make one single declaration shine in Rin’s eyes.

You know no one will ever be good enough for you, right? Not to me.

Haru is left speechless and winded because while he always knew what his friends meant to him, he never realized just what his happiness means to his friends.

Rin shifts his gaze to Makoto and gives a little salute with a wink. He hums into a bottle of bourbon, laugh drowning in a stream of liquid gold.

The group finishes off the bottle of Firespit with slurred questions that don’t even make any sense, but everyone uses them as excuses to take another drink. Someone puts another bottle of something in front of Haru and when he comes up for air, he notices that there aren’t as many people around him anymore. Momotarou whispered something in Nitori’s ear and his lips were so loose that he ended up trailing a line of open-mouthed kisses down his neck. After that, they stumbled off to the bathroom together. Nagisa demanded Rei to go dance with him. Rin had been complaining about
“needing some dick” and received a solemn nod of understanding from Asahi, but before he could hit him with the “so what should we do about that, Big Red,” Rin’s phone buzzed and he sprinted toward the exit so fast that his chair roled. Nakagawa had the decency to go smoke a joint with Asahi after that blow.

Haru isn’t sure about everyone else, but all that he’s really concerned with is the person beside him. Makoto’s hands are getting bolder, shaping to the curve of Haru’s thigh in a way he knows will leave Makoto mortified if he remembers it in the morning. Haru will probably be embarrassed when he remembers how his own fingers are playing with the hem of Makoto’s flannel and how his eyes can’t help but trace the dips of muscles, the curves of endless smiles.

Makoto’s gaze roams his throat, or more so, one side of his neck. “You like my tattoo,” Haru says.

“Yes,” Makoto admits. Haru’s eyes lull shut when fingertips trace the sharp line of his collarbone. “I don’t think I even noticed tattoos until I realized you had one.”

The residual burn of rum is suddenly nothing compared to the heat pooling inside him. Haru opens his eyes to look over planes and ridges and not enough skin. “Do you have any?”

Makoto grimaces and shakes his head. “No, I don’t like needles. But I like them on you. Tattoos I mean. Not needles.” A red hue glows over his flush and Haru bites his lip around a smirk. Makoto tries to shove him but they’re both boneless from the buzz. “Stop that.” His voice is strained with too much repressed laughter to be taken seriously.

Haru suddenly needs to kiss him so he does. He hears a flirty whistle and gropes for a drink to throw but ends up shooting a bird in the general direction of the person.

He doesn’t know how he ends up straddling Makoto’s thighs but he’s got immense gratitude for however it went down because being held in someone’s lap when they’re kissing him with so much devotion to the act makes Haru relive every white-hot spark of pleasure he had in his high fantasies.

He can’t even comprehend that he can feel this good in real life. He knows that he’d never have the confidence to be in this position if he were sober, but he’s not on the needle and he’s coherent enough to kiss back and know what he wants – he just doesn’t know how to ask for it.

He mouths for the words against Makoto’s skin, lips trembling as he kisses the curve of his jaw and presses slower ones against the spot just under his ear. “Make me.” His whisper is a plea for so much more than what words can say. Make me feel. Make me stop feeling.

Makoto seems to understand the language Haru is speaking; one of too little words and too much pain. He shapes his jaw and kisses him in a way that makes everything fall away until Haru’s thoughts are left in still silence for the first time since he got clean.

Samezuka is a jungle and anyone there is subject to become an animal by the end of the night, for neither logic nor reason can survive in a land where losing inhibitions is encouraged on primitive, subconscious levels.

Primitive desire is easy to pull out of someone. It doesn’t take a professional dancer up on a stage to do it; Rin found out a long time ago that a lot of effort isn’t as necessary to seduce someone as first assumed. He can cut the time of it in half when he’s in black latex and nothing else, but it wasn’t
much harder when he was fourteen in an old snapback and sneakers.

The subconscious aspect of making someone lose control – that’s a little more difficult, or at least more expensive. Flashing lights and floor-to-ceiling speakers don’t come cheap, but something about them makes people want to run wild, for whatever reason.

It’s all in the name of seduction, but not just in sexual lure. Bringing someone over to the bar means they’ll buy drinks, playing good music makes them dance and stay longer. Rin acts like he genuinely cares about his clients by making conversation after a rent, which also causes the appointments to go over the hour mark and jacks the rate up. Enticing the men to feel good about themselves in more ways than one means they’ll want to come back and spend more money.

Rin’s got seduction down to a science, an art form, a nature. His blood is hot at all hours of the day because his body has taught itself to be ready for sex at any time – even though he doesn’t enjoy it very much these days. He can’t even remember the last time a man made him come; he’s gotten way too good at faking it to remember what it’s like.

Needless to say, Rin never thought anyone would be able to seduce him.

Until now.

Rin’s phone had vibrated at the table from receiving a text message. What are you doing?

He was so drunk that he could hardly remember how to put letters into words and space them out to make a sentence. needing u.

The response was quick. Are you at Samezuka?

Rin replied. Yes.

Come outside. It’s too crowded to get in.

He’s now stepping around the human wall that is Tomo, one of the club bouncers that greets Rin with a smile too gentle for three hundred pounds worth of muscle. He lets him out into the street with a drawl of, “Out ya go, darlin’,” and continues with crowd control.

Sousuke isn’t among the bustling array of people, he’s standing at the corner of the club with his back to Rin, and no man that has ever paid to have him affected him like this sight: a profile of chiseled lines, blue eyes layered in shadow, leather jacket covering an expanse of tan skin where Rin wants to suck bruises to life, draw splotches of purple and blue over red, ruptured vessels. His fingers ache to claw shoulders that are thick with muscle and he wants to score marks down the valley between them. He needs to feel those long, broad thighs under washed-out denim that is wrinkled carelessly so, effortlessly so.
The roughest, hardest sex of his life is nothing compared to how Sousuke has kissed him so softly. His hands could hold Rin down, yet instead he lets him twine their fingers together. There is no pressure to fuck even though Sousuke clearly wants him, and Rin has ached to believe in people like that, but in the depths of his thoughts he is always waiting for Sousuke to force him onto his back.

Yet that has not happened. Sousuke has had him alone on multiple occasions, in places where no one would hear a struggle or at least not give a shit if one occurred. He could have ruined Rin’s life in so many ways by arresting him or giving him more nightmares to keep him up at night.

But all he has given Rin are dreams.

He is not surprised when Sousuke turns around with no prompting, no verbal call or any indication that Rin is even there except for the heavy weight of his gaze. Sousuke’s eyes roam in a similar fashion despite that Rin is not much of a sight to see with his tights tucked into his combat boots and one strap of his tank top falling down a shoulder, yet the longer Sousuke’s eyes move over his body, the wider his pupils expand, until there is only a thin ring of blue shining at the edges.

A burning streak of possessiveness forces Rin to drag him around to the side alley so that no one will get to watch their mouths collide. Sousuke’s lips are a familiar shape, and Rin never thought that he would get to kiss the same person enough times to grow accustomed to their mouth, but he has learned Sousuke’s kisses and what kind he likes to receive. Even in a drunken haze, Rin can still use his tongue ring to make Sousuke’s fingers dig into the muscles of his ass with unchecked fever; he knows what gets a flush rushing under his skin and what can get him so swept up that he forgets to breathe between kisses.

But Sousuke knows how to make Rin shatter.
It is a slow, delicate art, the first bite of teeth driving the first crack into the glass foundation of Rin’s self. A murmuring growl presses in until it feels like Rin’s very chest is imploding, and when a hand cards through his hair to cradle the back of his head instead of pulling at the strands with deliberate cruelty and vicious, awful passion, Rin feels broken in the most complete way, as if all his cracks have come to light and Sousuke is delving between the rifts to see his darkness.

Sousuke’s thick limbs draw taunt as he hauls Rin up onto a crate to let him sit on the edge. Rin’s legs find his hips, wrapping tight and welcoming the heavy press of his body. There are fingers under Rin’s shirt and they gently outline the gem at his navel as Rin whispers filthy promises against Sousuke’s ear – though they are more like sweet nothings because his voice is fragile under the weight of adoration he holds for this man.

Teeth and tongue love on Rin’s neck as his hands crawl under Sousuke’s shirt, where the space between fabric and skin is damp with heat. He uses the tips of his nails to trace the shape of Sousuke’s abs and they contract as he inhales sharply. Rin reaches the wide expanse of his chest where he can feel Sousuke’s heartbeat everywhere, in every inch of skin, his pulse is racing so fast.

Rin eats at his throat while twisting a hand under Sousuke’s shirt to pull the collar down, and this allows the cold press of his tongue ring to reach the valley between Sousuke’s pecs.

Sousuke hunches over as the breath is ripped from his lungs, bowing over Rin to gasp against his hair. He is laughing, as hoarse as he sounds. “Pervert,” he whispers.

Rin murmurs against his skin, tasting the warmth of it. “Does that mean you want me to stop?” He patiently waits for a reply even as he steals the voice from Sousuke’s mouth by trailing his lips further down in a line of slow, heavy kisses.

Sousuke’s pulse accelerates and that answers for him. Rin’s hands continue to roam, palms open, fingers spread wide over Sousuke’s back until they touch the blunt leather straps wrapped around his shoulders.

It’s a gun holster.

Rin blinks slowly, brows creasing. A cold feeling bursts through the pool of heat inside him and he isn’t feeling as drunk when he leans back to stare. “Sousuke, is…”

Sousuke looks away, yet he cannot help but hold Rin a little tighter. “Yeah. Yeah, something’s wrong.”

Rin’s look of panic causes him to shake his head. “Nothing immediate, you’re fine.” He smooths his thumb over Rin’s cheek to further reassure him, and Rin sinks into his palm with relief. Sousuke’s smile grows sheepish. “And the holster is empty. It’s just… kind of a habit. Comforting, even though nothing’s there.”

Rin frowns, tugging at the leather strap. “You put it on under your clothes every day?”

“No, I’m not that weird,” Sousuke huffs with a roll of his eyes. Rin kisses his cheek to make his blush deepen and smiles at Sousuke’s scowl. “I worked today. That’s why I’m wearing my holster.”

Rin realizes all at once that Sousuke’s exhausted. He’s hunched over to rest all his weight on his palms, which are pressed against the crate on either side of Rin. There was so much coffee on
Sousuke’s breath that Rin can taste it when he licks his own lips.

Sousuke asks, “Did you hear about what happened at the hospital?”

Rin’s very cells freeze. The quick jerk of his hiked brow is the only motion his body is capable of. “About the yakuza.” There’s no note of fear or anger in his voice. There’s nothing.

But under his skin there is too much. He wants to be relieved, but all he can think about is that one of those men is under the same sky as him; breathing, thinking, able to find him again.

In the back of his mind, Rin wants to be found. He might even stay up at night with white mugs of black coffee and think about looking for the guy. If he went out and did that, he wouldn’t eat or sleep until there was blood under his fingernails, ten red crescents that act as ten pieces of evidence that say he has freed himself from fear.

Rin hates thinking this way, he hates it. Even if the yakuza deserves to die in every way possible, physically and emotionally by a thousand different methods of torture –

He squeezes his eyes shut as tightly as he can. Stop. Stop it. Stop thinking like this.

The yakuza has turned Rin into a vessel of fear that pretends to be made of stone instead of glass, like Nakagawa. Like killing can bring bravery and birth new life someone. Rin doesn’t have to go on a rampage to know that it won’t help him sleep better at night; he just wishes someone could understand his raging need to take back what has been stolen from him too many times to count.

“I went looking for him.”

Rin’s eyes snap open and his voice is no longer blank – it’s breathless with shock. “What?”

Sousuke’s head is dropped to watch his thumb run over a tear in Rin’s shirt. “We had orders to, me and Seijuro. But I –” His jaw tightens over the rest of the sentence and only when Rin puts a hand on his chest does Sousuke start breathing again, his exhale rolling into a growl. “I wouldn’t have followed protocol if we found him.”

Rin shakes his head quickly, using his hands to force their gazes together. “You can’t be that way,” he whispers, voice weak with pleading. “Not even for me.” Don’t be like me.

Sousuke just watches him for a moment, eyes darting over his face. He breathes a laugh against Rin’s palm, placing a kiss at the center. “Especially for you.” He nuzzles into his hand before leaning back to focus. “I’ve been on this for almost twenty four hours, going between the hospital, the streets, the station.”

Rin gives an admonishing tsk, massaging his fingers through Sousuke’s hair. His groan is faint as he drops his head to give Rin better access and he enjoys the touch for a brief moment before muttering, “I got off the clock, still couldn’t find the yakuza.” He looks up with a roguish grin on his face. “But Seijuro did.”

“Where?” He doesn’t want that question answered for a few reasons but needs to know for even more.

“Sei stayed behind at the station after I left,” Sousuke says. “He was looking through some video feed from around the city and thinks he saw the yakuza headed for the red light district.”
Rin’s hearing muffles under a loud ringing in his ears. His emotions narrow into a tunnel of focus dedicated to one single purpose: survival.

He eases off the crate and the rasp of concrete under his boots is loud and sharp in his head. His eyes instinctually go to the mouth of the alley to keep watch. They then go to the tops of the buildings around them, any windows, vehicles, everywhere at once. “Is Seijuro around?”

“He was supposed to meet me here,” Sousuke says, checking his phone with a frustrated look that’s edged with panic. “He showed the feed to his superiors and they didn’t buy it, so he sent me here and was supposed to be here but now I –” He puts the phone to his ear and after a few moments, he snaps it shut with a deep breath. “I can’t even get a hold of him.”

“You think he’s in trouble?”

“It’s definitely a possibility.”

Rin memorizes each face of every person that walks by the alley, trying to remember the features of the yakuza but drawing a blank. “I don’t even remember what the man looks like.” He can’t stop thinking about his attackers, yet he can’t even put a face to them when it might mean life or death for him, his friends, Sousuke.

Sousuke nudges him with something and Rin looks down at the folder he’s offering. He takes it with fingers that tremble and he insists to himself that it’s only an adrenaline rush.

Sousuke is harder to fool, and takes his wrist gently. “You don’t have to.”

Rin’s smile is heavy on his face. “I do, though.” He opens the folder and the first picture sends bile rolling up his throat. He swallows down the acidic taste and levels himself.

The photograph is of a bare-chested man on a gurney. Rin recognizes the Y shaped incision in his torso. “This is an autopsy,” he realizes.

“It’s the man that was murdered at the hospital last night.”

He doesn’t even have a stomach. It’s just a gaping hole of bones and stringy meat hanging off them. Rin tries to remind himself that he’s seen worse, but he’s having trouble being convinced.

“Look at the left side of his chest,” Sousuke says. Rin takes a deep breath and does so. There’s a paw print tattoo over the man’s heart, etched in red ink and faded as though an animal stepped through a pool of blood and walked over his skin.

Rin frowns, eyes narrowing. “A wolf print?”

“I thought it was a bear because of the claws.”

Rin studies the curved nails. “No, there are only four toes here. Bears have five.” Sousuke frowns at him and Rin shrugs sheepishly. “My sister likes animals.”

Sousuke flips the picture over to reveal another one, which is a mugshot. “This is the guy that escaped the hospital last night. See if that’s the same tattoo on his bicep.”
It’s a bit difficult to tell with the poor quality of the black and white photograph, but sure enough, stamped across the man’s arm is the same faded paw print. “What’re you getting at?”

“Most gangs in Iwatobi use animal codenames and corresponding tattoos, don’t they?” Sousuke nods at the black feathers curling over Rin’s shoulders, indicating the raven on his back.

Rin freezes in realization and slowly looks from the photo to Sousuke. “Yeah… but I’ve never seen this tattoo.” He pauses in thought. “It could definitely be a gang, but if it is then it’s not a big one. I’ve never seen anyone with this mark even throughout the relay war. Most of our competition has been from Diamond Back – they use snake tattoos. No one with a wolf print has ever been a threat to Freebird.”

“Until now,” Sousuke says with a lift of his brows. “You told me that Haru said the yakuza he cornered at the ambulance –the same man that escaped the hospital last night – targeted you and Kazuki specifically. He knew you were both in Freebird and how to find you.”

Rin’s heartbeat starts pounding in his throat, distress swelling there until he’s too weak to even swallow. He startles when Sousuke touches him, their fingers tangled loosely. His expression is resolute. “I don’t want them to find you again.”

Rin’s laugh is thick with tears. “You can’t stop that from happening, baby.”

“Then let me be there if they do. I won’t need a gun to get my point across.”

Rin searches his face for any sign of hesitancy and panics when he finds none. “You can still get out of this. You can still go and –”

The pressure of Sousuke’s mouth is an unyielding force, one that has Rin’s hands twisting in his shirt to pull him closer even though he knows he should be pushing him away. Sousuke leans back to frame Rin’s face and rest their foreheads together. “I can’t leave you,” Sousuke whispers, his voice quiet yet resonating in the very warmth of Rin’s blood.

He has one last attempt. “Would you leave if I let you fuck me?”

Sousuke grins. “You’d have to leave to get rid of me if I got to fuck you.”

Rin drops his head in defeat only to have Sousuke’s fingers bring his chin back up. “As fucking amazing as I know that would be,” he begins, drawing a little smile over Rin’s mouth. “I’m not even here for that.” He nudges his ankle. “This whole thing is bigger than me and you, right?”

Rin sighs in acceptance, nodding. He takes Sousuke’s hand to lead him out of the alley and into the street. “Where’re we going?” Sousuke asks.


“And this is my mom,” Makoto says, pointing accordingly at the photo on his cell phone screen.

Haru takes a few big gulps of watered down beer, quick enough to make his head spin, before studying the woman. “She looks just like you.” A lot in the face, more so in the eyes, but especially in the smile.
“My sister looks exactly like her.” Makoto leans back more into the cushioned booth, his body shifting against Haru’s. They’re close together but he’s not sitting in his lap anymore because neither of them realized how much stamina kissing while drunk takes. Haru is glad to not be the only one out of practice.

Makoto got a text from his mom a minute ago and that’s what led to the slideshow. The next picture reveals that Ran does indeed look the most like their mom, more so than Ren. All the Tachibana children look so alike that Haru feels the tables turning and asks, “Where’s Yamazaki come in?”

Makoto stiffens, looking at a loss for words until a shadow lurks over him.

“What the hell do you mean, where do I come in?”

Haru is sure he’s fallen into some kind of alcoholic psychosis and is hallucinating, at least until he sees that Makoto is wearing a similar expression of surprise. This tells him that this is all happening and it really is Sousuke standing right in front of them, so close that Haru can make out every crease of his scowl and feel the heat of his glare as he eyes the nonexistent space between Haru and Makoto, which Haru makes even smaller just out of spite.

A muscle ticks in Sousuke’s jaw but before fists can start flying, Rin jumps on his toes so his head can pop over Sousuke’s shoulder. “Hey, look who I found! Small world and all that shit!”

Sousuke sits down at the other side of the table and everyone tries not to squirm under the pressure of his and Haru’s glaring match. Rin clears his throat and they both look away, turning their narrowed eyes to the floor. “Everyone, this is Makoto’s brother! Say hi!”

The group does so, but they can tell something deeper than just an innocent run in is going on. Nagisa and Rei would be a great help to dispelling the tension but they’re still M.I.A and so are Momotarou with Nitori. Luckily, Asahi’s too high to recognize Sousuke from the ambulance ambush, but Nii and Nao are not. Their drinks sit forgotten on the table and their spines are rigid straight. Nii’s arms cross casually but her hand is flattened against her side, over a blade that she’s ready to throw in Sousuke’s face if Haru gives the slightest signal to do so. Nao has no weapons on him but he’s watching Sousuke’s every move and waiting for Haru to give an order, one that he’s ready to follow no matter what it is.

Ikuya finally gets a good look at Sousuke and hunches over the table to quickly flip his hood up and hide his face. Haru assumes Ikuya remembers Sousuke from being arrested, the frantic dart of his eyes making it clear that he knows there is a policeman at the table.

Ikuya’s reaction sends out red flags to Aki, Nakagawa, and eventually, Asahi, because living in constant danger has the ability to pour acid over a drunken haze and cut razor-sharp focus through a foggy brain.

Makoto might not know what’s going on but it’s obvious that he feel the tension humming in the air. He frowns to himself before tipping his head at Sousuke. “What’re you doing here?”

Sousuke’s voice drips so much sarcasm that it’s a wonder he doesn’t drown in it. “They have great chips here.” Makoto rolls his eyes and Sousuke does the same. “What do you think I’m doing here?” He gestures vaguely, hand swirling through the smoky residue from a fog machine. “Sei was supposed to meet me here. Wanted to celebrate a promotion.”

Makoto leans back and crosses his arms, leveling Sousuke with an unimpressed look.
Sousuke remains calm. “Why would I lie?”

Makoto’s eyes move from Sousuke to Rin, causing Haru’s gaze to do the same. He’s left reeling at the fact that even when inebriated, Makoto is catching on to everything lightyears faster than him.

In that moment he realizes that he has vastly underestimated Makoto, but he has no idea by just how much until a man gets up from a nearby table and walks over, wringing a cap between his hands. His voice is a heavy wobble of nervousness. “Excuse me?” Everyone turns but his eyes are locked on Makoto. “Hi.” He sounds breathless. “Sorry to bother you but I think – no, I’m pretty sure we’ve met before.”

Makoto doesn’t look annoyed, though his smile is confused as he shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t seem to remember –”

“Are you Corporal Tachibana?”

Makoto inhales sharply and doesn’t breathe again. His entire being has taken on the stillness of a cornered animal; raging panic heating the air even as ice locks his bones into place. His eyes are hopeless and distant as he releases a sharp jet of air through his nose. He forces a smile, one so pained that Haru’s heartstrings break all at once. “I used to be.”

The man’s dark eyes light up with joy. “I knew that was you!” He runs a hand up through his buzzed hair, unable to keep still. “We were in basic training together but didn’t talk much, and even when we got shipped out to Iraq, I didn’t serve under your command. I was under Sergeant Yamazaki’s orders for my first few months.”

Haru can practically hear Rin’s brain scrambling to lock too many puzzle pieces together and even when it all clicks and comes out to make perfect sense, he still looks disbelieving – or like he doesn’t want to believe that Sousuke has seen horrors none of them can imagine.

Sousuke’s eyes look a thousand years old in their graveness. “Mochizuki.”

The sight of Sousuke leaves the man starstruck. “S-Sir! It’s… oh my god, this is – it’s such an honor to see you again!” Mochizuki smooths a hand over his dog tags bashfully. “Sorry I didn’t recognize you at first; hard to put a name to most people out of the uniform sometimes.” He soberes up. “Hard to recognize myself without it, most of the time.”

Sousuke dips a hand under his collar and pulls out a chain, dog tags flashing between his fingers. “I know the feeling.” Rin stares at the two pieces of busted aluminum before Sousuke tucks them back under his shirt. “Your girlfriend have that baby, Mochizuki?”

Sousuke remembering such an essential detail of his life almost brings the man to tears. “Yeah, she did. We broke up but I get to see her a lot – my daughter, I mean. She’s way prettier than the sonogram I showed you.”

Sousuke inclines his head. “You doing good, then?” The sincerity is heavy in his voice, which surprises Haru.

Mochizuki opens his mouth but goes rigid. He falls lax with a sigh. “Good days and bad days, you know?”
Sousuke curves a hard smirk. “Yeah, I know.”

Mochizuki’s head dips in a shallow nod. “Either way, I’m glad to be alive.” He hesitantly turns his eyes to Makoto. “But I almost wasn’t. Got shot in the gut in Baghdad. Thought that was it for me, I was hurt real bad. I was more risk than reward at that point but… but someone came back for me. Saved my life.”

Makoto’s brows crease in deep thought before he looks up, voice faint. “Oh. That was you?”

“Yes,” Mochizuki laughs. He rubs the back of his neck, trying to find his voice. “I never got to thank you.” He swallows thickly. “My kid, she just – she really needs me.”

Though Makoto looks on the verge of getting sick, he pushes his own discomfort away to take Mochizuki’s hand and squeeze it. “You were absolutely worth the risk, Mochizuki.”

Some sort of understanding passes between their eyes, one that no one around them can ever hope to grasp. “I prayed for you guys,” Mochizuki rasps, looking between Makoto and Sousuke. “A bunch of us from VA prayed every day, while you two were –”

“Thank you,” Sousuke says in a breathless rush, hurrying to cut Mochizuki off. “You didn’t have to do that.”

He shrugs, unaware of Sousuke finding Makoto’s eyes and holding them firmly. “I did, though,” Mochizuki says. “All of us fighting the same war, right?”

“Right,” Makoto whispers. He looks away from Sousuke and drops his eyes to the safety of his lap. Haru reaches for him under the table and he flinches away, looking shameful and sorry, but hurt still burns through Haru’s chest.

Mochizuki bows his head respectfully at Sousuke and Makoto. “Come by the VA office sometime. I know there are a lot of people you could inspire.”

“Sounds good,” Sousuke says, muscles drawing tight with the anticipation of this conversation being over. “Thank you, Mochizuki.”

The man thanks them both again before parting, and the breath that both Sousuke and Makoto let out is heavy with a weight Haru never expected them to bear.

Nobody knows what to say until Nagisa staggers back from the bathroom with Rei, who intones that Nagisa got sick and needs to be taken home. Makoto jumps on the opportunity to leave, not even looking at Haru as he steps out of the booth and trails behind them. Sousuke doesn’t look surprised. Haru, on the other hand, is about to go after Makoto in an aching fury until Rin whispers, “Sousuke, is that –”

Haru follows Rin’s eyes to a table across the floor. There is a group of men and women gathered to one corner of the space and though there are a good number of them sitting together, no one is talking or even looking at each other. Eyes are turned to entrances, exits, and Haru’s table.

No one in the group is dressed for a club. They hold an ancient presence, as powerful and mysterious as wolves. Every exposed arm and leg has a scar to bear, and every expanse of skin is grimy with dirt. Jeans are smeared with mud and dried pollen; skirt hems are frayed into tangled strings. Everyone has on a pair of weathered boots with grass clinging to the leather and Haru wracks his
brain to think of all the major places in the city that have grass, thinking only of the park, but these people don’t seem like the type to go to a place like that. They look like they have never even been out in public, their bodies clenching rigid-tense every time someone comes too close to their table. This is odd because they can all clearly hold their own in a fight; their frames are sculpted from a life of manual labor, from scrapping with their bare hands.

Haru looks over the features of the group, trying to find anyone he might recognize from a rival gang, but doesn’t come up with anything until he looks over a burly man at the end of the table. His nervousness is more recognizable than his face, which is twisted up just like it was when he was thrown up against an ambulance with a blade against his neck.

The bottom of Haru’s stomach drops out. Coldness spreads. Dread sinks into his bones. The world takes on a new vividness, though it feels as though he’s viewing everything from a distance.

From across the table, Rin meets his eyes.

_We’re being ambushed._

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork by orcatsu
Yall. This chapter was so intense to write. I had "Agni Kai" from the A:TLA soundtrack playing on repeat the whole time and now I hear it in my sleep.

In more interesting news, someone wrote a fic about my fic and I have yet to get over it. It's based in the two month skip mentioned in The Dynamite in My Chains (Chapter Nine) and truly, what is described in this fic is what basically happened in my mind. Please give it a read and shower the author with much deserved love. : "Lighters" by fallenkings | breathless-with-words

This incredible person made an entire kpop playlist based on EWOAtT and I am so in love with it. Listen Here | thanks to flytotherain for creating this!

Another amazing human being made another EWOAtT playlist and deserves some loving as well. Listen Here | thanks to wolfgirl-post for creating this!

laceprincedraws did this gripping depiction of Rin and Sousuke from "Heathens Take It Slow: Part I." Thank you, it's gorgeous. <3

And lastly, I created some ewoatt!haru, ewoatt!makoharu, and ewoatt!sourin playlists on 8tracks. Listen Here

Thank you to saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter) for being such an awesome beta reader!

!!PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE!! make sure to read the warning below. Thank you and enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Why'd you come, you knew you should have stayed
I tried to warn you just to stay away
And now they're outside ready to bust
It looks like you might be one of us."

twenty one pilots: "Heathens"

**WARNING:** This chapter contains graphic depictions of fight sequences. I don't glamorize drug use in this fic and gang violence is no exception. It is extremely explicit. Proceed with caution.

Haru meets the yakuza’s eyes without hesitation even as he feels death at his back, hot fingers
trailing down his spine from under his skin. He does not shut his eyes to pretend this is all a dream. His dad taught him one thing in his whole life, and that was to always keep his eyes open, be aware, be in control. Meeting the yakuza’s gaze is a simple action, but with one pitying shake of his head, Haru is no longer the one being ambushed – the yakuza is now frozen in place. He is so shocked that Haru can practically taste it.

It leaves him hungry. It leaves him viciously, manically infuriated that anyone ever thought they could threaten him and his friends.

The warm alcohol in his veins sears into hissing ice. His focus is sharp as a blade and borderline terrifying. He sits back and casually slips his hands into his pockets, mouth barely moving. “Table Four has us surrounded.”

Nobody moves; everyone stills. Nao’s brow hikes up the barest inch. “Is it Diamond Back?”

“I don’t think so,” Haru says. “The yakuza that took Rin and killed Kazuki is with them.”

He knows that he did not have to say that so bluntly, but he did it on purpose because it chases the fear from his friends’ eyes. Their faces are determined and their wills are now strong as iron.

But maybe one of them is too strong.

The empty glass in Nakagawa’s hand explodes as his fingers clench into a fist. Haru is the only one at the table who does not flinch. He touches Nakagawa’s hand, the one twinkling red with glass and blood, and Nakagawa jerks like a wounded animal. Haru knows that fearful beasts are not rational creatures, so he speaks carefully. “Nakagawa, I promise that he’ll die tonight. By your hand or mine, it will happen.”

It is not even a voice that comes out of Nakagawa’s mouth – if grief was a sound instead of a feeling, it would be that. “Mine.”

Haru bows his head in a gentle nod. “Sure.” He has only precious seconds to drain the vengeance that is boiling over in Nakagawa, so he is forced to use his last resort, where Nakagawa’s glass heart is most fragile. “But you have to wait until Aki gets out of here.”

All at once, Nakagawa’s mask shatters because Aki never wore one around him, didn’t looked at him differently no matter how many times he brought her shirts to wash the blood out of. “You know she doesn’t like to fight,” Haru says. “You can keep her safe by not causing a scene and giving us the time to get her out of here.”

She shamed them all for thinking of Nakagawa as anything other than hurt, in pain, and it is for this reason that Naka sits back and nods with all the patience in the world. Aki takes his hand and brushes the glass from his palm before wrapping it in a napkin with an appreciative squeeze.

Haru leans back, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of disbelief around him. Nao turns to the youngest at the table. “Ikuya, you have to get out of here, too.”

He snaps around, hood falling to reveal narrowed eyes with a red flash circling amber irises. “Why, cause Natsuya might be sad for three whole minutes if something happens to me?”

Nao does not waver in the slightest. “I want you alive whether Natsuya is or not.” This stills Ikuya to the very core.
Haru glances at Aki, who is visibly nervous, but her sense of motherly protectiveness proves to be stronger than her fear as she takes Ikuya’s hand. “We’ll get out through the tunnels.”

Ikuya snatches his hand back to slam it on the table. “I don’t need to run away!”

Asahi surprises everyone by gripping Ikuya’s shoulder, though nobody is more stunned than Ikuya himself. “Aki’s risking her life by trying to get you out of here.” When Ikuya still looks like he wants to argue, Asahi braces his hand on his other shoulder and does not even try to fight the tremor in his voice. “This shit ain’t fun, Ikuya. Why do you think Natsuya got out of it?”

Ikuya’s scoff is weak. “It’s not like anyone’s really gonna get hurt.” He looks around for confirmation but everyone is silent, heads bowed and grim. Ikuya’s brows crease over wide eyes, and he thinks for a moment before hesitantly putting his hand back in Aki’s.

Haru is more than a little relieved, but he does not have time to be swept up in the feeling. “Asahi, can you get them to the tunnels?”

Asahi nods firmly, taking on an expression of stoic determination.

“There’s guns in my room,” Nakagawa says all of a sudden. “Take them.” He looks like he wants to do more, or at least say something more, but a hopeless twist of his mouth is enough to let Aki know that he has always thought she was too good for this life. She cups his cheek before slipping away with Asahi and Ikuya.

A woman from the yakuza’s table gets up to follow them, but Haru stares her down in an outright dare to try it. She eases back down in her seat and Haru can barely hear Rin’s voice over all the scenarios running through his head. “Sousuke, you could die if you stay.” Each word is heavy with truth.

“So could you,” Yamazaki says, calm as an empty blue sky. “So I’m staying.”

Nao leans forward as if fascinated. He levels his gaze with Yamazaki and inclines his head. “Rin,” he calls almost cheerfully. “I can tell you know that this gentleman is a cop.”

Haru grabs Nakagawa before he can dive across the table. Nii helps him force Nakagawa back in his seat but she freezes when he grits, “Did you know, Haru?”

Haru can do nothing but let his mouth firm into a line.

Nii sinks back in her chair. “You lied to us?” Her voice is as quiet as he has ever heard it.

“No.” Haru is disgusted at the mere thought of doing something like that.

“If anyone lied to you, then it was me,” Rin confesses, drawing their attention to him. “Sousuke had orders to arrest me and let me go.”

“What are you talking about?” Nakagawa shoves Nii away when she tries to restrain him again. “Cops don’t do that, they piss on us!”

Yamazaki does not even try to combat that statement, which surprises Haru.
Rin bristles, hostility coming off him in waves. “He’s also leading the relay investigation that’s got half your competition off the streets, Naka.”

Nakagawa does not falter. “A cop,” he whispers, “is a cop, is a cop, is a cop.”

“Shouta,” Nao says, and that one word is spoken so gravely that it silences him. Nao looks at Yamazaki and tips his head politely, though the action is as strained as his voice. “I understand that this isn’t the time or the place for the two of you to explain yourselves. However, I would like to know for the sake of myself and my friends if we need to be watching your back or our own.”

Sousuke shakes his head in confusion. “You don’t owe me anything.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Fuzzkill,” Nii snaps, nails dragging under the edge of the table with hunger to end all this fucking talking. “You’re one of us if they say you are.” She nods at Rin and Haru and the fact that it can be that simple makes Yamazaki crane back.

Nakagawa scoffs in disgust. “You’re full of shit, Nii.”

“We’re all going to be full of bullets in less than a minute if we don’t settle this right now.” Nao glances at the yakuza’s table before his gaze moves back to Yamazaki, watching him like a hawk. “Haru, please give me something. Quickly, now.”

Rin turns to Haru, silently pleading, but Haru is caught up in the rage he has built around the image of Yamazaki for so many years. The only reason he is even letting him sit here with breath in his lungs is Rin – that is it, that is the only reason.

Haru does not understand their dynamic at all – he cannot comprehend how they got passed the titles of policeman and rentboy – but he doesn’t have time to mull it over. He can let Yamazaki live, but he’s not about to tell his friends to die for him.

Yamazaki studies Haru’s expression and seems to understand, somehow. “I’ll give you something,” he says to Nao. “Don’t go out of your way to help me.”

“Perfect,” Haru says, not exactly satisfied but accepting of that answer. Rin looks away, not objecting but not looking pleased, either.

Haru turns to Nii. “I need your help.”

“Anything.” Her battle lust is a tangible heat around her.

“Come with me to the bar; Nitori and Momotarou are over there. I’m going to walk them out but you stay and let the bartenders know what’s going on, get word out to the dancers.” He glances over her clothes, knowing that she does not wear a skirt unless it’s to cover a thigh holster – he does not have to ask if the concealed weapon is loaded and at the ready. “You’ll have a clear shot from the bar if anything happens.”

Yamazaki frowns at them before realization hits him like a baseball bat. “You’re just gonna open fire on all these people that don’t have a fucking thing to do with this?”

“You don’t have a fucking thing to do with this,” Haru snaps before he can stop himself, losing the grip he had on his rising panic.
Nii’s bloodthirst eases just enough for her to tell Yamazaki, “I won’t shoot unless they do.”

Yamazaki shakes his head, not satisfied with that in the least. “There has to be a way to get everyone out of here.”

“Yeah, a shooting,” Nakagawa says dryly, receiving a look of fury from Sousuke.

Rin holds up a hand to stop a fight from breaking out. “Haru, please just get Ai out of here. I’ll handle this.” Nao nods in agreement, ready to back him up.

With that, Haru and Nii weave through the crowded dance floor, his bones rendered to the consistency of pudding when he feels too many sets of eyes following him. Nitori spots Haru and Nii and one look at their faces has him turning to whine something in Momotarou’s ear. Nitori’s fingers clench in Momotarou’s shirt so tightly that his knuckles are white from the need to keep him safe, but the younger boy doesn’t notice and goes easily. Haru is immensely thankful to the gods of youth and raging hormones.

Nii sprawls over a bar stool, facing the crowd as she gives Haru the smallest nod. He follows Nitori and Momotarou at a distance but then Nitori looks back at him, about to come unhinged with worry. Haru shakes his head with a reassurance he frankly does not feel, but he is convincing enough for Nitori to exit the building with Momotarou.

Haru freezes when he notices the person waiting outside the bathroom. Makoto did not even notice Nitori and Momotarou leaving; his head is bowed to the floor, eyes vacant. He looks alone in every sense of the word and that makes Haru’s feet move of their own accord.

He does not reach out as much as he needs to for the sake of his own nerves. Haru stands at a respectable distance away even though it is like resisting a magnetic pull. “Makoto?”

His head snaps up and their gazes lock, both sets of eyes wide. Makoto is quick to look back down. “Oh, sorry. I was thinking.”

“It’s okay.”

“Nagisa’s feeling sick again. Rei’s in the bathroom with him.”

“Oh.”

His insides squirm from the awkwardness. He tries to think of something comforting to say but does not even know what is really going on. “Are you okay?” He hopes that’s all right to even ask. Is he overstepping his bounds? What even are his bounds? What even are him and Makoto? Haru does not have a right to know anything about him but Makoto keeps making him want things, need things, like for him to be okay and here and closer, please –

Makoto sighs, eyes squeezing shut. Haru’s about to apologize for whatever he did wrong before Makoto shakes his head. “I wasn’t ready for you to know.”

Haru blinks. “Know what?”

Makoto laughs, a bitter sound. “About me being in the army.”

Haru cranes back a little, not exactly understanding why that should matter to him. He considers the
duties of a soldier and realizes that Makoto might have been given objectives that were difficult for his gentle heart to follow through on, but Haru cannot see why that would be a reason for them to break up.

Wait, what?

Haru exhales in frustration, scrubbing the blush off his face. “Look,” he says. “It surprised me but it doesn’t make any difference to me, either.”

Makoto hesitantly meets his gaze. “You don’t know –”

“Makoto, I don’t care.”

His genuine sincerity leaves Makoto gaping in shock. “I really don’t,” Haru sighs. “I’m already over whatever you aren’t. Seriously.” He is done with this conversation. Makoto is the physical representation of storybook kindness and has done the impossible – made Haru want to be touched. For that, nothing can mark him as anything less than perfect.

Makoto is looking at Haru like he is not even a person anymore; it is as though he is someone greater than who he really is, someone who has also done the impossible. Makoto shakes his head to clear it but still sounds dazed when he speaks. “You can’t imagine what it means, you… you saying that.”

They stare at each other for all of two seconds before their bodies have to find each other. A word as simple as **hug** cannot describe the embrace of Makoto’s arms. Haru feels so safe that it surpasses definition. He should not feel protected at all, given what is awaiting him back in the club, yet he is sure that nothing can hurt him with his ear pressed against Makoto’s heart. “I was awful to you back there,” Makoto whispers against his hair, lips brushing his forehead and lingering. “I’m sorry.”

Haru’s breath leaves him in a rush. “God, don’t be, just give me a few seconds of this.” He keeps his eyes screwed shut, focusing on every point of contact they are sharing.

Every passing moment is selfish of Haru – he allows himself half a minute before pulling away, just far enough to let their lips meet softly. He wants to be aggressive and feel as much as he can, but it is over too soon for that, and as much as it hurts to do so, Haru has to accept this.

Makoto frowns, tugging him a little closer when he tries to step away. “Are you all right? You look…”

Haru pulls back, shaking his head in a fog. “Just tired. I’ll text you later.”

Makoto knows Haru is lying but he lets him, understanding that he is not ready to unlock some secrets just yet. Nagisa wobbles out of the bathroom with Rei barely keeping him upright, and Haru tells Nagisa he hopes he feels better, which earns him a weak salute of thanks.

Haru leans up for Makoto to bring him close and kiss his cheek, lingering for seconds more precious than diamonds. Then he watches them go and forces himself to turn back toward the club when all he wants to do is run out the door.

He sees Rin and Nakagawa back on stage for the high vantage point; Nii is still at the bar and Nao is with her. No one from the yakuza’s table has moved and while they hold an air of collectiveness about themselves, Haru can tell it’s strained – their eyes are darting and the whispers among the table are clipped hisses.
Haru steps to the mouth of the corridor, where Yamazaki is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed tightly. His gaze is not on the threat of the yakuza, but on Rin.

“'You’re going to get in the way,'” Haru says with a vehemence he does not have to hold back when it’s just the two of them. “If you think you care so much then you should leave.” Rin’s been through enough and lost enough. If Yamazaki gets hurt, there is no telling what kind of person Rin will be on the other side of that - it will definitely be someone worse than whoever Nakagawa has become.

Yamazaki does not even look at him. “I hope you just told Makoto that. It’s about as true for him as it is for me.” A smirk twitches at his mouth. “I know you’ve got your hand around a knife. Use it on someone else.”

“You saying you don’t deserve it?”

Sousuke breathes a laugh. “No. We both do, I’m sure.” His eyes soften on Rin. “But he doesn’t.”

Haru clenches his jaw, falling silent.

“Neither do any of these innocent people here,” Sousuke says, nodding at the crowd.

“My friends are my priority. I can’t save everyo—”

A wailing siren drowns out his voice.

Haru squints through the pulsing red light to watch Yamazaki take his hand off the fire alarm. He purses his lips. Folds his hands in his pockets. “I’ll be at the front helping with crowd control.” With that, he turns and leaves, but not before casting Haru a look of smug satisfaction as a stampede of people rush the corridor.

Haru gasps a curse and flattens against the wall to avoid being trampled. A slow, infuriated breath hisses through his teeth, blowing his bangs up before they fall right back in his face.

The club is barren within seconds, Haru and his friends the only ones left to watch the yakuza’s people rise in tandem. The tension beating into the air sucks every ounce of oxygen out, leaving the room dry, airless.

Spine rigid, Haru walks into the open area, his eyes following every twitching finger and shifting muscle. He comes to a stop a few feet away from the table and the group stares at him in varying degrees of surprise at his forwardness. Haru lifts his chin, red lights moving over the dark hollows of his cheeks. “You can tell us why you’re here now…” He holds their gazes, voice as sure as death. “Or later, if there’s any of you left.”

He looks to the yakuza, assuming he will be the one speaking for his people, but instead of replying he reaches in his jacket. Nii tenses but Nao pats her wrist to calm her down and she refrains from taking out her own weapon.

The man points a gun at Haru’s head.

He arches an unimpressed brow and holds back a tired eye roll because how predicable.

“You ain’t runnin’ the show this time,” the man hisses.
Haru inclines his head with a smirk. “No, not me.” The edges of his mouth cut diamond-sharp, his blue eyes burning like volcanic lakes, hot and glassy with hungry fire. “It’s my best friend who owes you a kick in the balls.”

In the two seconds it took the man to aim his weapon at Haru, Rin took a running leap at the nearest pole and swung around it to launch himself at the yakuza. Rin collides with his shoulders, but moves with an absolute knowledge of his own body and how to maneuver it in the awkward position, steadying his foot on the man’s hip so he can wrap a leg around his neck. Rin vices his thighs around the man’s throat and with a mighty forward swing of momentum, flips the yakuza on his back. He crashes into a table, the force of the action splitting it in half; a sharp crack of wood resounds through the air. Or maybe the sound is the crack of bones, or the tearing of everyone’s minds as chaos spills over, hot in their veins and flowing red through the club.

Rin now has the man pinned with his own gun pressed between his eyes. His voice is soft, low, and not his own.

“Remember me, bitch?”

Before Rin can make the choice to shoot or not, a woman pulls out another handgun with her finger already squeezing around the trigger. Nii fires at the gun and sends it flying out of the woman’s hand. The shot catches Haru’s veins on fire, burning him up with the raging horror that these people could land a bullet in any of his friends. The blazing fury chases his cold fear away as the room collides in a frantic melee.

A man three times Haru’s size comes at him with a knife poised, but Haru makes his bulk a disadvantage by slipping away quicker than he can follow. He kicks the man in the side of the knee and he loses his balance just enough for Haru to use his weight against him, gravity doing most of the work as he shoves him into the bar. The glass top shatters, driving a shout from the man as he springs his leg out. The kick lands in Haru’s gut and the world rushes by him before he crashes to the floor, bones grinding, organs twisting.

He opens his eyes and lurches to the side before a woman can throw a chair down on his face. The seat splinters with a loud crack but her strength isn’t given justice until she pins Haru and swings at his head with a broken leg from the chair – it feels like his wrist almost breaks on impact when it collides with the metal.

Eyes lit with manic fire, she uses one hand to choke him with the chair leg and uses her free hand to slash a knife at his face. Haru shoves the chair leg up into her chest to stop the blade from hitting his heart. The knife meets the metal in a flash of sparks and slips, carving a red line through the skin of his collarbone. The wound is deep and might not be fatal, but the burn is annoying, and that irritation fuels his strength. He reaches up to knot a fist in the woman’s buzzed hair and yanks her head down. The rest of her body follows and he shoves her off, grabbing the chair leg to hit her in the jaw and knock her out with a little more force than necessary.

As soon as he stumbles to his feet, Rin cries out. “Haru, watch -”

He hits the floor as the unforgettable melody of gunfire rents the air in two. From beneath a table,
Haru watches Nakagawa use a man as a shield and bile rolls up his throat. He waits for Nii to start firing back but a man has her pinned to the floor, and her weapon is off to the side, mangled and useless. The man’s hands wrap around Nii’s throat, draining the color from her face and springing tears into her wide eyes, but then he is hit by a bullet from his own people and slumps to the floor, killed instantly. Nao dives to the ground and uses himself to protect Nii from the shower of bullets, arm torn from the socket but still capable of saving her life as much as the action physically pains him.

The bullets cease when Rin shouts, and the sound makes Haru race to escape the safety of the table and into the fight.

A younger guy swings a fist at Nakagawa’s back, but Haru stops it by grabbing his wrist and twisting hard enough to curl his entire body around until he drops in a trembling heap. Haru finds Rin bleeding but continuing to fight with deadly speed and accuracy. From the sharp tear in his bicep, it looks like he was grazed by a bullet; Haru does not realize that he was as well until he straightens his fingers from a fist and finds them sticky and red. He does not even feel it – he is energized yet completely numb.

Another man charges Haru but staggers when Rin jumps on his back. He has a wire twisted between his fingers and he loops it over the man’s neck to lean back and draw it taunt, forcing his head up and exposing his neck. Haru punches the man in the throat, knocking his feet – and breath – out from under him.

Rin’s back finds Haru’s as they are attacked. The act of fighting takes so much effort that his fury soon overpowers his fear; when the woman he fought comes back for him with her knife raised, he doesn’t step away to dodge the attack. Instead he waits until the very last moment when death is so close that he can taste it, and with one hand at the inside of her elbow and the other at the outside of her wrist, Haru bends the woman’s arm to redirect the knife into her own gut.

She lets out a startled cry and freezes, but somehow remains standing. She wavers on her feet, gaze vacantly moving over Haru’s face, and when their blue eyes lock, she sees something in them that makes her breathe a laugh as if this all makes sense now. At his wild confusion, she bears her wrist to him, revealing a paw print tattoo as she grins with a mouth full of rotted teeth. “Bloodhound,” she whispers.

Disturbed, Haru doesn’t stick around to watch her die. Instead, he finds Nakagawa pinning the yakuza and using his bare hands to avenge Kazuki, but then the man blindly grabs a handful of glass shards and rakes them into Nakagawa’s face. He hurtles back with a scream that drives through Haru’s heart and sends him and Rin running over in a blind rage.

The man shoves Nakagawa off and hauls himself up, legs kicking into a run. Daggers whistle overhead and land in his shoulder but he does not falter; two more of Nii’s blades fly through the air only to land in the wall beside his head. He disappears and several of his people follow suit, some of them limping while others are not the least bit winded as they escape.

Nii’s shout is raw. “They’re headed for the exit!”

“Rin, Haru, go!” Nao cracks a bottle over his nearest attacker’s head, leg springing out to kick the man into the next one. “We’ll catch up!”

Haru and Rin slip on pools of blood on their way out. They reek of fear-sweat and waver on their feet. Muffled movement echoes through the corridor and they chase after the sound only to find that
the back door of the club is still locked with no sign of forced exit.

Heads spinning, they whip around in every direction, looking up and down with bloodshot eyes that are dilated and wide. Haru’s gaze locks on the line of statues against the far wall. The arms and heads of the figures have been turned at odd angles in a sequence that only a handful of living people know. When the combination is done a certain way, the wall will give to reveal itself as a pocket door, which has been left wide open to unveil the passageway behind it.

Haru’s blood freezes. “Asahi forgot to shut the door to the tunnels. They’re in there with them.”

His eyes meet Rin’s for only one horrified moment before they race into the dark without hesitation.

“**Asahi, look out!”**

Aki’s shrill cry drives through his heart, and he might be too weak to stand given that his ribs have been kicked to the consistency of sand, but her voice gives him the strength to wrap his arms around the legs of the prick headed for her and Ikuya. The man kicks stinging dust into Asahi’s eyes but the only thing he feels is the radiating terror from the people he is supposed to be protecting. With that acting as what is left of his will to fight, he sinks his teeth into the man’s calf, not letting go no matter how loudly he screams.

This dude tastes like a mouthful of blue cheese. Or organic deodorant. He could really go for that last thing right now; he personally smells like a raw steak. Kind of feels like one too, given that his muscles have been reduced to swollen mush. He could go for a steak right now, actually. Or maybe the guns Bitchagawa had in his room –

A crowbar slams down on Asahi’s hip, the pain so overwhelming that for one terrifying moment, he blacks out.

The shock of a fist coming down on his head jars him back into consciousness, which allows him finish that thought. Nakagawa’s room had indeed been loaded – like, undead apocalypse, World War III, Black Friday loaded – and stocked full of guns, but it was also stocked full of people who had gotten to those weapons before Asahi did.

Most of the guns have been compromised, as Nao would smartly say. Or in Asahi’s own words, beat to fucking high hell. That handy-dandy crowbar had been his baby before a guy took it to relive his Little League glory days and took a home run swing at Asahi’s face.

He never even liked baseball. Baseball pants yeah, hell yeah. But not the sport.

Asahi’s thoughts do not pull themselves out of this figurative toilet bowl of literal shit as a boot stomps on his middle, ringing his insides out like a sponge. Shit, shit, everything’s gone to shit, and Asahi cannot even die with a mouth full of liquor. Instead it’s blood, and the consistency of that is shit and it tastes of pure fucking shit.

He tries to think of things that taste good. Big Macs. Blue Dream. The ice cream he and his sister used to steal from the corner store. He is just now realizing how much he misses annoying the piss out of Sango by using her hair gel or falling asleep when they have stayed up until two in the morning to make plans to egg the house that belongs to her girlfriend’s shitty parents. He should have returned his sister’s call this morning.
He gets beat until he cannot even remember the word ice cream. He tries to think of other things that taste sweet, things that have sugar in them.

The crowbar hits his jaw and a sugary laugh echoes through his head. Asahi laughs back, his fingers gliding through pink hair, curling around the stands as he looks up into crinkled eyes.

The image of Kisumi Shigino fades when everything goes quiet and still.

In the following silence, Asahi thinks he is still being hit like a screen door in a hurricane until he realizes that’s just how hard his head is throbbing. His cry of relief comes out as a gurgling wheeze. He rolls to the side and buries his head in the very real, very soft lap he is being cradled in.

There is a lot of dirt in his eyes but he does not need to see Aki to know it’s her that’s holding him. She is crying, and the sound of it hurts worse than anything else because no one in the world is good enough for Aki Yazaki’s tears. “Asahi, say something to me!”

He tries to say, “I’m okay,” but it just sounds like rocks in a blender. He spits out a gob of blood, swallows some more, and takes enough air into his aching lungs to properly speak. “You okay?” He cracks open his eyes and though the world is blurry and dark, he can tell that the outlines of Aki and Ikuya are moving, alive.

Aki brushes a stray tooth off Asahi’s chin. “Yeah, I’m okay. Thanks to you. You and –”

Asahi slowly looks to the side, where his attackers are face down in the dirt. He rolls his head to find Ikuya crouched next to him. “You do that, kid?”

Ikuya nods. “Threw a brick. Well, a few of them. I missed the first couple of times.” He glances at the men. “They’re still breathing, though.”

Asahi is glad of that, even though those assholes turned him into a piñata. He is getting to the point where he would rather die than kill. “That’s some David and Goliath shit, Ikuya.”

He smirks. “Thanks. You look like roadkill right now.”

Asahi scoffs. “You always look like roadkill.” He shifts and swears that his bones are eating themselves.

He suddenly hears running, feet tearing up the distance and skidding to a stop very close to his head. “Asahi!”

He cannot remember the last time he heard Haru’s voice filled with so much open fear. Asahi wants to tell him that everything’s fine, but he’s getting really sleepy.

“No, no, no, no.” Rin? “Asahi, c’mon, you gotta stand up.” His perfume is intense when he is this close; it’s sweet and lulling Asahi further down into darkness.

He is having a lot of trouble keeping his feet under him until a voice breaks through the fog in his mind. “Asahi,” Haru says, voice strained. “We all promised Nao we wouldn’t go to sleep if we ever get hurt. You have to stay awake. You know how scary Nao gets when he’s upset.”

It is for this reason that Asahi manages to stay upright by leaning on the wall behind him. He opens his eyes, blinking them until his vision clears and he can recognize everyone around him. Haru and
Rin, Ikuya and Aki, they are all here, all safe. They are a beautiful sight to see, but some people are missing. Asahi cannot breathe. “Where’s...?"

“Everyone’s alive,” Rin assures.

That’s good to know, but that doesn’t mean everyone’s okay. Asahi insists, “But where are they?”

Before anyone can answer, muffled footsteps echo through the space, getting louder, closer. Rin and Haru look ready to fight like dogs but the number of footsteps indicate that they are likely outnumbered; maybe they would have a chance if Asahi was still in commission but he can barely keep himself upright. Any attempts he makes to defend himself or the others are going to fail epically.

Their only hope is ducking behind a collapsed wall to hide. Asahi and Ikuya are tucked against the wall behind a crouching Haru and lack of space sends Rin and Aki to the other side of the rubble.

Their stalkers are three of the yakuza’s men. They bring with them the hot stench of sweat and prowl around the mountain of rock with the vigor of starved predators. In one of the men’s fists is an axe he retrieved from under the fire alarm. He sniffs the air and freezes, the curved blade of his weapon flashing in the weak light. He follows the smell around the rubble and pauses to sniff again, mere inches from discovering Haru, Asahi, and Ikuya.

Haru is the most capable fighter of the three, but right now, he is a wounded animal, rabid at the prospect of anyone hurting his friends. That anger will make him sloppy, his injuries will make him weak, and he will try to protect his friends before defending himself – that will make failure inevitable.

Aki watches Rin squeeze his eyes shut in dread and she takes his hand. He looks at her and she smiles sadly, daring to brush her thumb over his swollen lip. He blinks at her retreating hand, not understanding.

It hits him all at once and he lurches forward, but he is not quick enough to stop her from stumbling out of their hiding place and into the men’s line of sight.

With a roaring cackle, they take after her with a victorious burst of speed. They chase her into the nearest tunnel but do not yet realize that she is leading them into an inescapable maze that never ends. The darkness swallows her up, pulling her deeper until there is nothing left of her, no breathless heaving, and no ginger braid to be seen in the dying light. It is as if she never even existed; all that remains of Aki Yazaki is the overwhelming gratitude and grief she is left in her friends’ hearts.

It is a grief Rin cannot accept. “No!” He lurches to his feet to chase after her but then a man tears through the dark and sails by him, a trail of blood in his wake. He is intent on escaping rather than fighting but the sight of him has every muscle in Rin’s body coiling tight until the tension explodes and he dives forward, climbing the man’s back to wrap his legs around his neck.

Rin’s body lurches around and twists.

The man’s neck breaks with a thick crack and he drops, leaving Rin hunched over his dead body.

Haru drags Rin up into a stand and they whip around as a shout stretches through the darkness. The voice reaches out to them again: “Run! Fucking run!”
It is Nakagawa. The weak lighting from the entrance helps them make out his silhouette and the shadows trailing behind him: they are Nii and Nao, staggering, almost too slow to outrun the attackers chasing them.

A sickening realization occurs to Haru: they cannot come back the way they came. He stares wide-eyed at the three passageways behind him, which branch out into three more, and from there, three more, to become an endless array of twists, turns, and dead ends they have not yet mapped out.

They do not have time for that and everyone knows it. Primitive instinct leaves their minds blank, as dark as the maze before them, save for the one thought screaming through their entire beings.

Run.

Haru helps Asahi get on Rin’s back. Nao takes Ikuya’s sleeve. Nii launches daggers and Nakagawa hurls bricks to buy them a head start.

The darkness stretches on forever but it does not act as a cover to hide them. All movement amplifies in the tight space, bouncing off the walls and festering in their heads to disorient them.

Ikuya might be the youngest of them all, but he has not yet built up the stamina that running for your life takes. He falls back in no time at all, delirious from losing so much energy in such a short amount of time.

He does not realize his sleeve has slipped from Nao’s grip and neither does the older boy. Ikuya runs into the wrong tunnel but does not know it until everything is quiet; the drag of his tired feet and the wheeze of his lungs echo in the silence. When he spins around and sees no one, panic sets in quick and hard, demanding every inch of his body to start quivering. He tries to run back the way he thinks he came but he cannot even find left and right. Up and down don’t even have meaning as his anxiety spikes higher, high as the ceiling he’s running across, as crazed as the faces laughing at him from the dirt.

Ikuya meets the dead end of a tunnel and his pride cannot be found in the dark. He can admit that he wishes Natsuya were with him, but he’s never going to see his brother again; he’s never going to see anyone ever again, he’s going to die down here where no one will ever find him –

He turns around just in time to see the crowbar being swung at his head.

Time freezes. Natsuya is standing in front of him, younger, maybe thirteen. Ikuya feels smaller than ever until his brother squeezes his shoulder. “You just gotta try again. C’mon, I know you can do it.”

Natsuya steps back and positions his arms up, elbows together, fists at the ready. “So Dad comes home drunk and wants to start shit with Mom. He comes at you like this. You can’t get a punch in right now as much as you want to. He’s gonna swing at you and – yeah, just like that, Ikuya! You drop!”

Time starts moving again, and Ikuya’s body knows to drop before he even realizes he has done it. The crowbar hits the wall and throws chunks of stone with the force of the blow.

The man rears the crowbar back but before he can bust Ikuya’s skull in two, a furious shout erupts from the distance.

Nii pounces on the man, her eyes and teeth flashing. Ikuya ducks, expecting her to have a weapon to
fire, but Nii has no gun nor any clear objective other than saving him.

The man drops the crowbar to grab Nii by the head and flip her. She hits the ground, limbs sprawled open, and the position exposes her torso for him to kick her in the pelvis. Nii’s throat clenches tight enough for veins to pop because she refuses to give him the satisfaction of hearing her cry out. She is too weak to curl in on herself and shield the next kick to her ribs, and the smallest of whimpers moves through her. “Poor lil’ birdie,” he coos, nudging her cheek with his boot. “Don’t ya wanna sing? Oh, I’m gonna make you sing –”

Ikuya hits him in the back of the head with the crowbar.

A curious expression takes over the man’s face as he sways. Ikuya pushes him and he lands on his face with no indication of moving any time soon.

Nii’s eyes flash like the blade she is pulling out. She scrambles onto the man’s back and Ikuya does not protest, but he cannot make himself watch as she kills him.

When it is over, he and Nii fall on their asses with the weight of their exhaustion. Sweat gleams on the column of her throat and he smears droplets from his lashes, making his eyes sting. He swallows, trying to level out his breathing, but his voice still quivers. “Where are the others?”

Nii’s hand trembles away from her rib and curls into a fist. “Got separated.”

He tries to tell himself he at least has a better chance of surviving the tunnels with Nii. He envies how steady she can look wiping the red from her blade. “Where did you learn to do that?”

She pauses. “What? Kill?”

He nods.

Nii flicks the knife clean, voice clipped. “My grandmother.”

“...What?”

Nii smirks to herself as she loots the man’s pockets for anything that can be used as a weapon. “She did stuff for the government back in the day. It really fucked her up. Settling in the outskirts of Iwatobi didn’t help.” She rolls her lips into a line. “Said I had to learn how to fend for myself. Which I did, but –” A shadow haunts her face. “She took it too far. Fucked me up. Made things that are supposed to hurt… not hurt, and things that should feel good… not good.” She clears her throat but her voice is still rough. “It’s not any of your business, anyway. What’s it matter? Came in handy, didn’t it?”

Ikuya studies her, eyes narrowing at the youthful roundness of her cheeks. She has hidden it well, but her makeup is ruined and that has revealed her secret. “You’re my age.”

The brief look she gives him makes Ikuya wonder if he is about to meet the end of her dagger. “What are you, twelve?”

He straightens with righteous indignation. “Fifteen.” Well. In a few months, but he could pass for it. Hopefully.

Nii levels him with a stare that he does not break. This surprises her. “You’re not a lot like Natsuya.”
He wants to take that as a compliment, but a hidden part of him is ashamed because he has always idolized his big brother.

“That’s a good thing,” Nii assures. “You have a shit ton of your own weaknesses but also your own strengths.”

“What does that even mean?”

Nii cuts him a grin, her eyes twinkling with a mischievous light – a youthfulness she has never experienced until now. “Means you might be a shrimp, but at least you get to say you’ve made it this far without your punk ass brother.”

Ikuya is thankful for the shadows because they hide his blush. “What are you, twelve?”

“I’m sixteen.” Her tired smirk is one of defeat as he gapes at her. “But nobody knows. So if you tell anyone, I’ll have to kill you.” Ikuya does not know if she is joking or not, but either way, he takes the hand she offers him. “Let’s go find the others. Keep up this time.”

Aki runs until her loafers slip off. She keeps stumbling along, rocks driving bruises into the soles of her feet. She does not feel it at all; she cannot even feel her legs anymore. There are only a few things left to feel when someone is as spent as she is – her heartbeat is throbbing in her fingertips and her lungs are on fire. She is still holding onto a degree of fear as the yakuza’s men gain on her. But above all else, she feels relieved that someone as deficient as her could give her friends a little chance of survival.

The tunnel meets a dead end and the sight of it is not as terrible as she thought it would be, though it does make her sad. Her pursuers corner her easily because she’s not running despite that death has always terrified her and this scenario is obviously, where it leads.

Her knees give out and she slumps against the wall, hot and light-headed. She fights the building panic by trying to remember those Bible verses her mom used to make her recite – something about there being no greater honor than someone laying down their life for their friends.

Does that mean she will get to see Hitomu? He is the only reason she has ever been all right with dying.

Footsteps get louder, closer, and Aki looks to the mouth of the tunnel. At the crest of the archway is the bust of a woman. She sits over the passage with the regal power of a queen, her shoulders broad and pushed back, her head lifted high. Aki holds her gaze, wishing to look that commanding and possess a glare that could turn these men to stone.

But that is not who she is; not even in her last moments can she pull out the courage. The men’s laughter makes her curl in on herself and she tries to convince herself that she is already dead so she will not feel it when it actually happens.

She wants to hold her baby. She wants someone to hold her. Her mind drifts, lulling away to a warm, safe embrace, and the image she comes up with overwhelms her with disbelief.

It is not Rin’s arms that she is in.
She hardly knows Seijuro yet here she is, pretending that he is the one with her as death reaches out with claws outstretched.

Aki hears whispering. A thousand voices behind the tunnel walls, in the air, in her own body. They are the same whispers she hears in the quiet of her rent room, voices that bring her dreams of women in the same bed she uses with her clients. She swears she has even heard them under the mattress when someone is on it with her.

The ghostly presence has always brought her a cold comfort but never like this.

A crack bursts to life under the woman’s bust. With every step the men come closer, the rift drives deeper, gliding along the stones until the wall is covered in a black spider web of fractures.

The men step under the archway to kill Aki and the tunnel collapses.

Her scream is lost in the avalanche of rocks, dust filling her eyes and lungs. Everything around her is caving in and she waits to be crushed but death never comes.

Not for her, at least.

The men are buried in stone, flattened until there is nothing left but red smears for the worms to roll in. Their cries are swallowed by whispers that are hot with a fury that is thousands of years old.

Silence weighs heavily in the air, so much pressure that her ears pop. She coughs as the dust settles, tasting it from the back of her throat to between her teeth. Aki looks up to see that the woman at the archway somehow sits prouder with a mountain of rubble beneath her.

Aki falls back with a breathless cry. “Thank you.”

The sculpture does not move but all at once, the whispers shoot down the next tunnel.

From that same tunnel, a shout rips the air in half. “Aki!”

Nakagawa’s voice spurs her back to life, throwing her to a stand. She fights her way across the rubble, delighted to feel the burning cut of rocks across her soles, clinging to every sensation she is alive to feel. “Shouta. Shouta!”

“Aki!”

He collides with her so hard that their arms around each other are the only thing keeping them standing. Nakagawa’s hands tremble as they vice around Aki and her heart aches for him more than ever before when he rocks her back and forth. “God girl, you’re fuckin’ crazy,” Nakagawa whispers, voice raw under the fury. He tucks his face against hers and breathes hard. “Don’t ever do that again.”

The prospect of losing someone else has left his fears wide open. “Oh, Shouta.” She pushes his hair back to look straight into his eyes. Everyone else is forced to look away from his piercing gaze but Aki does not even flinch as he stares back at her. “You trust me, don’t you?”

He nods hesitantly, stray pieces of glass falling out of his cheek and leaving red dots in their wake. She brushes them away to cup his face. “Then know that I’m telling the truth when I say that we’re all going home tonight. I promise.”
A distant gunshot breaks the silence, shuddering across the walls. All at once, Aki and Nakagawa are panting, lungs struggling to keep up with the adrenaline burning through them. The realization that one of their friends could be hurt steadies them, and Nakagawa takes her hand as they race to find the direction of the sound.

They freeze when they notice a dot of light, glowing and wavering a few hundred yards away. Aki and Nakagawa run for it like their lives depend on it, knowing that it is the exit to the tunnels.

Their hearts can barely take it when they reach the tunnel with overhead fluorescent lights burning in their watering eyes. This is the only section of the maze that includes fluorescent lighting because it acts as a short guide to the exit.

Nakagawa jerks Aki to a stop and presses her back against the wall, using his body to shield her from what is ahead. She peeks over his shoulder and covers her mouth to hold in a gasp.

Nao is backed into a corner, surrounded by a group of men that are at least twice his size and emitting double hostility. Nao does not flinch when they come closer, aiming a stolen gun at the nearest one. His right arm hangs uselessly at his side, the pain so much that Aki and Nakagawa can hear his teeth grinding.

Nao finds their eyes and is careful that no emotion show on his face; he does not dare give their position away and put them in jeopardy, no matter how badly he needs their help.

A giant saunters forward, boots dragging through the dirt, seeming to be unconcerned with the bullet embedded in his shoulder. Nao points the gun at him in a silent threat to shoot him again, but the man just hums a laugh. “How many bullets ya think’s left in there, ah? Not near enough to be takin’ down no four people.”

“I have all I need,” Nao says. “One.”

The man takes one more step forward and Nao sighs. “Duck, Naka.”

Nakagawa wrenches Aki to the ground as a bullet tears through the fluorescent lights, killing them in a shower of sparks, bulbs frying with an electric hiss. The dark is filled up with solid objects colliding and he and Aki cannot figure out if it is stones of bones they hear breaking. They know the distinct sound of the ruckus that comes with a fight, but they are unfamiliar with it being over so quickly. They are left in absolute silence for ten seconds before Nakagawa curses up a storm and fumbles for his cigarette lighter. He flicks it to life and he and Aki stop dead in their tracks.

Every attacker has been compromised. One has been thrown down the tunnel, dirt split in a line from his dive landing. Another man is caught up in an overhead light that is hanging by a wire thread – he groans and the light falls in a deafening crash. Ears ringing, Nakagawa and Aki find the rest of the men in various states of defeat, sprawled out in unconsciousness.

Nao is unscathed and shrugging. “I warned them.”

Aki’s jaw drops. Nakagawa’s right eye spasms.

From the depths of the underground, they hear shouting – familiar voices that are seeking out the
pinpoint of light that leads to freedom. Recognition dawns on their faces and Nakagawa rears back with his hands cupped around his mouth. “Rin! Rin, over here!”

An echo rips down the stones. “Naka?!”

“This way, dumbass!”

They are left with horrifying silence for the next minute.

Then Rin is stumbling out of the tunnel to the far left, and it’s only after he’s looked at them long enough to prove that they are real that his arms fall from where he had a gun aimed at the ready. Asahi is perched on Rin’s back and slipping to the side, but Haru is there to dive forward and catch him. Everyone is rendered motionless as they look at each other, unable to do anything but stare. And then they are overwhelmed with a relief that is almost painful as they rush together.

Nakagawa helps Haru keep Asahi standing as Nao assesses his injuries. Rin catches Aki in an embrace, but already they can both tell something is different. She does not feel the need to lean up and give him a kiss; he is no longer a slave to the insistence that he should accept one. Rin had his own brush with death tonight, and Aki already knows that it was not her nor any other woman Rin thought of in those moments. Though he and Aki are happy to see each other alive, there is no desire to press closer and force feelings neither of them feel anymore – not after tonight. And that is okay.

It looks like it brings Nao physical pain to see Asahi in the state he is in, but he keeps an air of professionalism, as he looks him over. He announces that Asahi has to get to a hospital as soon as possible, but he expects him to make it out all right after a long recovery. Asahi smears a kiss on his cheek and whispers about alpacas in response.

They all turn as one when they hear something from the far right tunnel. Pulled from the shadows are Nii and Ikuya; the boy stumbles over to the group while Nii follows at a slower pace, her muscles heavy with a tension that’s ready to snap. The sight of her friends takes away her illusion of self-possession and it finally registers that she is covered in blood that is not her own. She will not get over this night for a long time but no one is going to ask her to, and that makes her happy to tap the fist Nakagawa offers her and hug Aki back and beam when Haru offers her a proud nod of his head.

But then a figure tears through the dark, rushing by them to get to the exit. They catch a fleeting glance of his profile and that is all it takes for Nakagawa to race after him – it is the yakuza.

The group chases them, overhead lights zipping by quick enough to blur, pebbles flying out from under their feet. They gasp as one when the yakuza rushes up the escape ladder and pushes the manhole cover aside, a pillar of light shining down on him. He clambers out with Nakagawa hot on his heels.

Haru takes Asahi from Rin so he can get a head start up the ladder and uses one hand to climb while the other hand keeps Asahi’s wrists locked around his neck. Asahi is dead weight and Haru’s muscles are drawing taunt, but he forces himself to climb into the damp heat above, the humidity of a storm thick in the air.

Haru looks up through a sheet of rain as he watches Rin climb through the manhole. He waits for him to reappear and help with Asahi, but there is nothing but empty sky through the opening.

A clap of thunder shudders through the pavement as Haru slaps his hand down on it. He hauls himself up through the manhole and into the narrow alleyway behind Samezuka, his friends
following his lead. Nii helps Asahi off Haru’s back but he is hardly relieved; rain has drenched his clothes and left them heavy, bloodstains fading into pink blooms over his shirt.

Haru squints through the fog that has settled heavily in the air. Rin’s back is to him, as is Nakagawa’s, and both of them exhibit a shock that has Haru’s eyes widening as they lock on Yamazaki and the yakuza.

Haru recognizes Yamazaki’s physical body but he does not think that is who is occupying the frame right now. Haru thought he had seen Yamazaki at his most frightening five years ago, but that was nothing compared to this.

One hand is casually tucked into the pocket of his jacket. The other is viced around the yakuza’s throat to pin him against the alley wall and lift him high, his toes dancing to find ground. He has no choice but to meet Yamazaki’s eyes, which have become the portals to hell.

Yamazaki’s voice is quiet but it rivals the storm around them. “You have one chance to tell me everything – who your boss is, how you found your targets – anything I want to know. If I ask you how many times you pissed today, you are going to tell me in fucking excruciating detail.” His hand closes around the man’s neck tight enough to make ligaments spasm. “You flinch, you even think about hesitating, and that’s it. And I don’t mean I’ll do it quickly –” Ice claws down Haru’s back as Sousuke smirks, teeth flashing as lightning splits down the sky. “I mean slowly. I will draw it out for as many nights as you have kept people up from the things you’ve done. All that time will be for them. But the starvation, the agony – that will all be for me. You’ll be begging me to let my dog eat you alive by the time it’s over.”
Haru can read people well enough to know that Yamazaki is serious. He speaks without the slightest waver of hesitation; he is ready for blood on his hands, all for Rin. This man tried to kill Rin, did kill him in a few aspects other than physically, and Yamazaki is ready to return the favor in more ways than one.

Haru cannot help but feel his approval for him solidify.

“Gah –” The yakuza tries to speak but Sousuke’s chokehold prohibits this. He barely loosens the slack, allowing only the shallowest of breaths. The man’s coughs fall into wheezes. “Gah – got approached by… someone sayin’ they could make our gang stronger.” His whole body trembles under the weight of Yamazaki’s glare. “We shouldn’t of listened. We was better off on our own, away from all this. But we got greedy. Wanted more power.” His voice is sharp with loathing bitterness. “We used to run Iwatobi, now nobody would even know who we was if we told ‘em. My boss knew that, started makin’ demands nobody had rights to and got our hands tied.”

Yamazaki hand clenches until the vessels in the man’s eyes pop. “Elaborate.”

The man rasps, “Even after we got… got our asses handed to us… they sayin’ we can’t stop ‘til it’s done.” His eyes skitter to Haru and Rin. “‘Til all of you dead.”
Everyone stares as Nakagawa’s body freezes with a realization, coiling tight enough to make his voice quiver. “So Kazuki wasn’t enough?”

The beat of silence is all it takes for Nakagawa take off with a roar. Yamazaki slips out of the way as Nakagawa collides with the yakuza, throwing him to the ground hard enough to make him roll backwards. Nakagawa is on him faster than eyes can follow, blood splattering the concrete as he beats into his head. “How? How did you find him?!”

Rin goes to stop Nakagawa but knowing how dangerous that would be, Haru grabs his elbow, stilling him with a look. Think about Gou.

Rin stays back but does not hesitate in aiming his gun at the man.

A whisper cuts through the tension. “Sn…itch.”

Nakagawa falters but then his face is shadowing over once more. He goes to land another hit, but Haru stops him by rendering every ounce of menace he possesses into his voice: “Wait.”

That breaks through Nakagawa’s fog long enough to let the man choke, “There’s a snitch… snitch in the… p-police department.”

The words echo in Haru’s head, billowing through his frame like smoke. He feels rain in his hair but the heat of a fire is on his skin, too close to the flames that are consuming the shack in front of him. Colors dance in the flames as they meld with the spilled chemicals his dad dumped on the floor. There are neon flashes of purple, golden green, and then teal, the exact shade of Yamazaki’s eyes.

Haru’s gaze wanders to him and finds that his own face is as shocked as it was five years ago, when they watched that house burn to a crisp. Haru feels as inadequate now as he did back then – he cannot tell if Yamazaki’s surprise is genuine or not.

But that thought slips away along with the rest of his entire mind when the yakuza shoves Nakagawa off and scrambles to his feet.

The world moves in slow motion, blurring, colors stretching like water paints. Haru is not fast enough to catch the man, the tattered edge of his shirt slipping through his fingers. Nobody has the agility to stop him but that is not the thought screaming through Haru’s head.

It is that the yakuza is headed for Yamazaki with a knife poised. Every fight Haru has ever witnessed flashes behind his eyes because he has seen this attack a thousand times, and not once has anyone ever been able to dodge it.

Yamazaki is not fast enough to deflect the blade aimed for his heart, but the bullet that rips through the yakuza’s skull is.

The shot leaves Haru’s ears ringing at a fever pitch. Water droplets slip from his lashes, but his face is too numb to feel them against his skin. The lull of rain comes back to life and beating thunder takes the place of his pulse, which has stopped.

Rin still has the gun aimed despite that the last bullet has been fired. Rain has drenched his hair and the flowing lines of water are the only thing moving in the alley. His eyes are shadowed but the visible line of his mouth is firm and resolute even as Nakagawa lunges at him.
Rin lets Nakagawa shove him into the brick wall, not flinching even as he shouts in his face. “He was about to tell me who it is! Why couldn’t you have just –”

Aki’s composure shatters in a million pieces that Haru swears he can see twinkling on the ground like broken glass. She yanks Nakagawa back by the shoulders and pulls him off Rin, but Nakagawa whips around and inadvertently throws her. She rolls across the concrete and lands in a sprawl, her wide eyes brimmed with tears as a cut bursts to life over her lip.

Nakagawa mouths for words, stumbling backwards until he hits the wall, cornering himself.

An engine roars to life at the mouth of the alley. Haru turns to see a van caked in mud, feathers caught in the grill, headlights searing into his eyes. From the back window, the woman he stabbed holds his gaze and winks before the van takes off into the night.

Nakagawa starts running, mounting his sportsbike parked at the corner of the alley. The engine ignites with a monstrous snarl that drowns out his friends’ shouts. Tires spin, rainwater spiking through the air, and the bike gains the traction to take off after the van.

The sound of flooded engines gives way for the wail of sirens getting closer and closer. Jaw grinding, Haru pushes himself to his feet and meets the faces looking to him for orders. “Rin and I will go after Nakagawa. The rest of you get Asahi to the hospital.”

Only under this much stress does Nii defy his command. “You’re outnumbered.”

“We only have Rin’s bike and Nao’s van,” Haru says. “There’s about to be police everywhere, there’s no time to argue.”

Nao tries to wrap Asahi’s arm around his shoulder but Asahi is swaying too much, losing the will to stay awake, and this causes him to voice his worry. “He needs to get to the hospital fast; I don’t know how I’m going to get through all the police cars in time. The only thing they’d give way for is –”

Haru frowns at him before stilling. He slowly turns to Yamazaki.

“Another police car,” Nao breathes.

Nii grabs Asahi before he can hit the ground. “Are we going to forget what the dead guy at his feet just said?”

Haru almost staggers back with the wave of fury Rin emits, but it is Nao who resolves the issue. “Nii, it’s a chance you’re right against a confirmation that Asahi’s going to have irreversible damage if he doesn’t get to the hospital.”

Before Nii can let out a furious shout, Yamazaki speaks. “I’ll get him there. Just go.”

They turn to Haru but he looks away, eyes burning a hole in the ground. His hands tighten into fists and he nods once.

Nii and Nao maneuver Asahi over to him, Ikuya stumbling behind with his hands open and useless. He numbly helps Aki up and the turn of events has left her just as spaced out. Haru and Rin are already jogging over to the motorbike, which is tucked behind the dumpster.
Yamazaki grabs Rin’s fingers, stopping him, and though neither of them speak, their eyes say a thousand words. Rin kisses Sousuke’s hand with quick pecks of his lips before running after Haru to the bike.

Rin throws a leg over the seat and situates himself in front of Haru, who winds his fists in the back of Rin’s shirt for stability. The bike comes to life with a hungry growl that rolls up Haru’s spine. With his fingers wrapped around the handlebars, Rin rips his fist over the throttle and the tires spin, discharging fumes of burning rubber. The exhaust pipe sears Haru’s calf as smoke pours out, and then the bike is tearing through the asphalt as several hundred pounds of metal scream into drive.

Wind blasts them and rain beats into their skin like hot needles. Iwatobi is a disorienting contrast of black sky and flashing traffic signs; they are lost in a red sea of taillights, speeding through a maze of vehicles that never ends.

Rin takes his turn to cross at an intersection but Haru’s hand flies over his to squeeze the break, lurching the bike to a stop before they can be run over by the van forcing its way through traffic. Horns blare as the van bursts through the congestion, followed by a sportsbike going fast enough to leave a streak of light hanging in the air.

Rin leaves steaming tire tracks in the asphalt as the bike does a diamond-sharp turn to chase after Nakagawa. They speed through red lights and stop signs, the slipstreams of passing cars hitting so powerfully that the bike wobbles. Haru squeezes Rin’s right hip in a signal to look right. When he does, the bike surges to eighty miles an hour to speed closer to Nakagawa.

Haru gets close enough to reach out for him but a gunshot has both their bikes fishtailing. Haru whirls his head around and through the sheets of rain, he makes out two cars that are in a similar state of decline as the van – mud caked on the tires, grass stains on the hoods. The man hanging out one of the passenger windows shoots at them again but Rin swerves, causing the rain of bullets to hit the back of the van. One of the tires pop with a loud crack and the van lurches into the next lane of traffic; it hits the guardrail in an explosion of sparks before swaying back into the road and accelerating.

Nakagawa and Rin’s bikes level side by side. Haru shouts with a vehemence that can be heard over the thunder, “Get the fuck out of here!”

Nakagawa hollers, “You know they won’t stop!”

Rin’s muscles go rigid under Haru’s hands.

Nakagawa shakes his head, wet hair splaying across his forehead. “I’ll take care of the cars! Go kill those bastards before they kill any more of us!”

He squeezes the break and spins the bike around on the back tire. With a heavy twist on the throttle, the bike races toward the cars without hesitation.

Rin is not speeding up or slowing down. “You wanna do this?”

Nakagawa’s words pour over Haru’s brain like gasoline, setting fire to his grief and turning it into something there is not even a name for. “Yeah.” His body offers him once last ounce of adrenaline and pours it into his veins, heat screaming through his blood. “Let’s do this.”

They pull up to the back corner of the van and Haru reaches around Rin to the glove compartment,
where he pulls out a can topped with a silver pin. The storm is too intense for him to get a clear shot at one of the van’s windows, so they will have to use alternative methods to get the can in the cab.

Haru tucks the can in his vest and pulls his legs up in the seat to crouch, his grip on Rin’s shoulders the only thing keeping him balanced. “Get closer.”

Rin’s shoulders tighten with nerves and the bike scoots a bare inch forward.

“Closer.”

Rin turns to frown at him in confusion and goes to say something, but Haru just rolls his eyes and reaches over to tear his fist down the throttle. Rin squawks as the bike goes sailing into the van, but Haru is silent with focus. His eyes lock on the cargo bars at the top of the van and he throws himself into a jump.

He wraps his hands around the bars and the rest of his body lands on the side of the vehicle with enough force to crack a rib. He pushes the splintering burn from his mind and tries to will breath back into his lungs. A hand comes through the back window and grabs his ankle but he drives his other foot through the glass and connects with someone’s face, which is beyond satisfying.

Haru hauls himself up on top of the van and just when he is starting to feel victorious, Rin shouts for him. A strange instinct tells him to look up instead of behind, and he drops just before an overpass can cut him in half.

His hands scramble for purchase as the van weaves back in forth in an attempt to throw him off. He grabs hold of the cargo bars and looks back to see that one of the cars is gaining on Rin – the other is missing, along with Nakagawa.

The car gets side by side with Rin but instead of firing a shot, the driver cuts the wheel. The car lurches into Rin’s lane and forces him into the next one, which is occupied by a transfer truck. The semi’s horn drowns out Haru’s involuntary noise of panic, but his voice dies in his throat as Rin dips the bike under the truck’s trailer. The bike is almost parallel with the ground as it spins in a tight circle to keep low, and just before Rin can be crushed by the massive tires, he comes up on the other side of the trailer, safe in an empty lane of road.

Rin lets out a victory shout and rears the bike up on its back tire with boyish excitement. He holds his tongue between his teeth with a devilish smirk as he accelerates to meet the van’s pace.

However, the car speeds up right along with them, and this time there is a gun aimed. The only thing Haru can be content about is that the weapon is not aimed at Rin, but himself. He has nowhere to take cover on top of the van, and has no choice but to freeze up.

A hulking shape slams into the side of the car with the power of a bomb detonation. The offending driver cuts the wheel around and around until the weight of the larger vehicle pushes the car into the guardrail. The car breaks through it and rolls down the cliff only to be swallowed by the black ocean below.

The larger vehicle turns out to be another van, and Haru can barely believe it when he meets Nao’s smirk through the windshield. Nii is perched on the edge of the passenger’s window with a fist in the air and she is roaring right along with Rin. Ikuya is also leaning out of a window, but he is just puking. Aki is sitting with him and rubbing his back with a fond, exasperated smile.
Haru steadies himself and uses the cargo bars to climb across the top of the van. He reaches into his vest and takes out the can, using his teeth to rip the pin out. Then he leans down and smashes the can against the driver’s window, beating into it until it shatters. He ignores the bite of glass in his palm and tosses the can inside the cab.

The smoke bomb hisses to life and a thick cloud fills the space. The driver immediately loses control of the vehicle, but he is attempting to keep it steady with sharp cuts of the wheel and forceful pushes to the breaks. These tactics are no substitute for sight, and the van inches closer and closer to the guardrail before connecting with it as if magnetized.

Haru jumps off the van before the guardrail snaps, sending it down the cliff to hit the waves like they are made of concrete.

Haru does not feel like he is floating. The weight of gravity is the heaviest thing imaginable but the action of Rin outstretching his hand to him is rooted deeper than the laws of nature, and Haru grabs it.

He collides with the bike so hard that it dips low to the side, but Rin lurches it back into its correct position before they can turn into roadkill. Haru’s eyes fall to the pavement, where red and blue flashes stretch down the road; the wail of sirens spirals through the air.

“Oh shit,” Rin whispers when he looks back. “That’s not Sousuke’s car, his hood is dented in!”

Haru’s confusion is strong enough to momentarily break through his panic. “How do you know that? Did he hit something?”

Rin stiffens. He clears his throat. “Ah. Yeah, kind of.” He throws a nasty smirk at Haru, who responds by slapping him in the head with every last ounce of strength he possesses. “Ow!”

“Drive, idiot!”

Rin takes the nearest exit only to find out that was probably the biggest mistake of their lives. They’re near the outskirts, meaning that while there’s less traffic, the roads are shit and not even a light post can be found for miles. Out here, forests grow until tree roots break through the asphalt, and the bike goes airborne when they hit a particularly large stock of bark.

Haru spots something in their path and does not mean for his voice to come out so shrill. “WATCH THE DEER!”

Rin curses and swerves. The bike dips dangerously close to the side of the road, which is nothing but open air. Haru can smell the ocean below; hear it roar louder than the thunder above.

The police are gaining on them; there are at least four cars in pursuit. Haru weighs his options, staring through the trees and wondering how pathetic a foot chase would be when he and Rin are this exhausted.

There is a sharp curve ahead, a ninety-degree angle that has no safety rail at the edge. Two more squad cars drive around the bend and now there are police both in front of Haru and Rin and behind them. They now have nowhere to run.

But they can swim.
It is not adrenaline that surges through him – it is probably full-blown insanity. Haru takes a deep breath that does nothing to calm his nerves, and wraps his arms around Rin as tightly as possible. “Go straight.”

“Straight to the left, you mean. Around the curb.”

“No, drive straight off the cliff.” His voice has never been more serious in his twenty-three years.

Rin’s reaction is curiously delayed, Haru’s words so beyond his stress levels that he stays blank for several seconds. And then his left eye twitches. In a sudden flurry of movement, Rin whips his head around. “Are you half past crazy?!?” he shouts right in Haru’s ear, as if that could wake up some sense in him.

But Rin loses his grasp on all logic when he realizes that they are surrounded and running out of road, running out of options. The wind is blasting trees down; the bike tires are losing traction as rain floods the ground. The road beyond the curb is already blocked, and if Rin slows down even a breath, they will be run over by the police cars behind them.

His fists go white-knuckled on the handlebars. Haru squeezes him a fraction tighter. “I bet I can beat you in a race to the shore.”

Rin scoffs. “As if.”

All meters max out as he guns it.

The bike surges faster and a climbing pressure speeds through Haru’s body. The world rushes by in a dizzying blur that leaves his mind wavering like heat over asphalt. Red and blue lights fade from the edges of his vision, the scream of sirens drowned out by crashing waves. Rin does not let up on the throttle even as the pavement shrinks away, narrowing, disappearing, falling into open air.

Haru is not sure of the exact moment they leave ground; the bike picked up enough momentum to shoot straight for several yards, and he can almost convince himself that they will hang suspended like this forever.
But then reality crashes down, hitting them like a slap, throwing the bike one way and them somewhere else. Neither Haru nor Rin have the voice to scream as they free fall. It is as though all their insides have rushed up into their chest and are lodged in their throats. Wind blasts their faces, searing their skin. Haru thinks that the world below is just pitch black nothingness until he hears tearing metal when the bike hits the rocks.

Haru and Rin hit the water like an explosion. The impact is so strong that for a moment, Haru blacks out. The undertow swallows them immediately, engulfing them in a dark world of muffled silence. Haru’s arms and legs start moving before he is even fully conscious; it is an ingrained sense of how the waves move, how to move with them, through them, up and across and –

He breaks the surface with a noise that cannot even be classified. His lungs pull in as much air as physically possible and the rush leaves him disoriented. He cannot see through the storm to find the shore but the ocean guides him there; he follows blindly, without hesitation, and that trust is what allows the waves to push him up onto land. He can scarcely comprehend it when he feels broken shells scraping into his knees and palms as he crawls up the shore.

He collapses on the sand as if it is his own bed. It does not register that his body is trembling cold; he is so unhinged that he might be convinced that he is in a safe place, maybe in Makoto’s arms or back at the cabin.

However, Makoto is not here, and Haru would hear Rin cooking dinner for Gou if he were at the cabin. Rin is not in the safe haven of his mind nor is he anywhere on the shore.

Haru stares out at the water and lunges to his feet only to hit the ground, too drained to even stand. He tries to shout but the voice is ripped from his throat when a figure rushes by him and dives in the water.

Haru’s eyes triple in size. “S…Sousuke?”

He squints through the mist to try to see anything but there is too much movement in the sea, waves swallowing entire islands of rocks. Lightening tears across the sky and when the light catches on a head of maroon hair, Haru would have wept if he had the strength.

Yamazaki trudges up the shore with Rin too still in his arms. Haru’s relief burns into the most overwhelming sense of panic as Sousuke falls to his knees, lowering Rin to the sand with infinite care. Rin’s hair is splayed in his face and Haru knows how much he hates it when it gets wet like that, but Rin doesn’t reach up to push it back. Rin is not even breathing.

Haru dives forward but Yamazaki holds a hand up, ignoring how it shakes. Yamazaki presses his ear to Rin’s chest, then his mouth, fingers pinching Rin’s wrist. He leans over Rin and with one hand over the other on top of his chest, he gives a few forceful compressions, going off some pattern he is mouthing to himself. Yamazaki stops to tilt Rin’s head back and lift his chin; he pinches his nose closed and takes a breath before covering Rin’s mouth with his own.

Haru does not know what the hell he is doing until Rin’s chest rises, lungs expanding with the life Yamazaki is breathing back into them.

And then Rin chokes, lurching away to spit out a mouthful of water and blood. It is disgusting and also the best thing Haru has ever seen.

Rin is a shaking mess, instinctually curling into Yamazaki for warmth. Yamazaki takes him in his
arms without hesitation, bringing him as close as possible to shield him from the rain. He presses his face against Rin’s and he responds by hushing him softly and nudging back. The action is somehow more intimate than a kiss, almost as passionate as the determination Yamazaki had when he lunged into the water.

Rin blinks over at Haru, his voice scratchy. “Did I win?”

Haru breathes a soundless laugh, too weak to make any noise. “You kicked my ass.”

A smile wobbles over Rin’s mouth.

“Oi, they’re over there!”

Haru turns at the sound of Nii’s voice and sees Nao’s van parked at the edge of the beach. Haru and Yamazaki share a look before their eyes skitter away, narrowing into glares as they climb the shore.

Nao looks Rin over, gently asking him things like the date, his name, how many fingers he is holding up. Ikuya looks around before gathering the strength to meet Yamazaki’s gaze. “Where’s Asahi?”

“At the hospital.”

Aki cranes back before she can stop herself. “You… you got him there that fast?”

Yamazaki turns away with a frown and a blush. “I said I would.”

Ikuya is still looking over the beach with a nervous frown. “But where’s…?”

Haru counts heads and comes up one short.

In the distance, tires skid across the road, grappling for traction, screaming for it. Then there is a collision, one so powerful that it rocks the ground with shockwaves that quiver up to the trees and drop pinecones. Haru’s heart stops when he hears tearing metal, shattering glass, and then utter silence.

He and his friends share a look before all but running down the road, limping, staggering, and a breath away from collapsing entirely. Yamazaki is the only one who takes pause to reach in his car and tuck something in the waistband of his pants.

Haru gasps when his foot crunches down on a shard, and he follows the path of broken glass to the side of the road, where a car is wrapped around a tree. It is one of the cars that chased him and Rin on the highway. Red leaves spiral down into the smoke cloud rising from the hood, tree limbs falling over the vehicle in a lush blanket of green. A glance inside the cab reveals that there are no survivors.

“Maybe they saw a deer,” Rin mumbles.

Haru shakes his head, unable to catch his breath. His gaze lands on a flash of metal and he turns, his entire being gripped by fear. Aki follows his eyes and her voice splits through the air, cracking, breaking his heart in two. “Naka!”

His sportsbike lies on the road as nothing more than a twisted crumble of metal. Nakagawa was thrown some hundred yards down the road and is sprawled across the sun-faded pavement. Haru rushes over to see that Nakagawa’s chest is moving up and down; he’s too relieved to notice that his
breaths are coming too fast and shallow.

Nakagawa’s friends huddle around him with eyes that are trained to find injuries. There are cuts and scrapes but nothing fatal, however Nakagawa is falling a shade paler with each passing second, and his darting eyes are unfocused like nothing Haru has ever seen.

However, it looks like Nao has seen something like this. With a sickened look, he leans over Nakagawa and pulls his leather jacket back, the action underlined with an odd, sticky sound. Then Nao slides his tank top up – the black fabric is drenched in what Haru assumes is rainwater, but the wound in Nakagawa’s stomach says otherwise.

He has been shot.

Nakagawa is lying in a pool of blood that is expanding quicker than Haru can even think of what to say or do. Without even knowing it, he sheds his jacket and thrusts it at Nao. “Stop the bleeding.”

Nao does not take the jacket. He does not even move as he stares down at Nakagawa, and the stray tear that slips down his eye makes Haru’s arm fall limp.

Nii grabs the jacket and presses it hard against Nakagawa’s middle, her breath coming out too fast. “Nao, you have to stop this.” He does not move and her voice comes out as a bawl. “Nao, do something!”

“He can't, girl. Quit yelling.”

They all stare down at Nakagawa. Aki rests his head in her lap, frantically carding her hands through his hair. Nakagawa leans into her touch and lets out a shuddering breath, his mask falling away as if it never even existed. He looks young and scared but also, somehow, accepting. “Sorry, Haru. For not listening. I just…” He swallows, mouth fumbling into a sad smile. “I didn't want anyone else to die.”

Rin’s voice is so raw that it almost comes out as a scream. “That doesn’t mean you have to!”

Nakagawa grasps his hand in a vice, squeezing with every ounce of life he has left in him. Rin breaks, wracking with sobs as he presses his face to Nakagawa’s neck, twisting his fists in his shirt like that will somehow keep him there. Nakagawa sighs and nuzzles his hair. “You gotta stop crying.”

“I’m not – I'm not crying…”

Nakagawa huffs a laugh and closes his eyes, a lone tear racing down his cheek.

Haru lowers himself to the pavement and takes Nakagawa’s hand, flinching at the chill. Nakagawa’s eyes are almost entirely vacant, but they roam over to Haru and lock with his gaze. “You saved our lives tonight. We are all... going to be fine, okay?” He fights to keep his voice steady and confidently speak the words that will give Nakagawa his first sense of peace in the last moments of his life.

Nakagawa squeezes his hand – he took Haru’s words for truth. “You…” His voice is slurring, lulling away. “You oughta stay with that… that guy.” Haru rears back but Nakagawa just curls one final smirk. “'Cause it’s… r-r-really worth it.”

Nakagawa tips his head back to let the rain cool his face, ears flexed to take in the humming swell of a thousand cricket chirps; they drown out the noise of the city, all the sirens and screams. The night is
peaceful, and in this minute, safe. Nakagawa takes it as his final one.

He gasps at the last second, his eyes wide on something that no one else can see. His last breath is one that flies apart with joy. “Minami…”

Haru squeezes his hand. He does not squeeze back.

Aki’s scream is a far off echo. Even the sight of Rin holding Nakagawa’s body is distant to Haru’s eyes. He feels like he is watching everything from inside his own head – or maybe he is standing outside his own body. He does not remember what it is like to be inside his own bones or what anything feels like outside this hopelessness.

Something hits the ground behind him.

It is the driver of the crashed car. He is dragging himself across the pavement, crawling for the woods.

Haru stumbles to his feet, chin up too far, head tipped, shoes dragging the ground. He is wavering, walking more sideways that forward, but he has a need demanding to be satisfied, one that is greater than food, water, or air, burning madder than a fire.

He pauses when he notices Yamazaki off to the side, watching him. Their gazes lock and something passes between their eyes.

Yamazaki’s mouth firms into a line and he looks away even as he pulls his handgun from the waistband of his pants. He outstretches the weapon to Haru, who snatches it with manic greed.

Haru stands over the yakuza’s man but nothing passes between their eyes when they lock. Haru feels nothing. He does not feel the kickback of the gun when it fires. He does not even feel crazy as he keeps firing over and over, again and again until the gun is as empty as his heart.

Hot droplets of splattered blood roll down his face as he clicks the trigger uselessly. His eyes catch on the man’s arm, where the outline of a clawed paw print is inked into his skin.

From the cliffs of the outskirts, he hears a wolf throw its head back to the moon and cry out. Another howl pierces the night, and with every one that follows, he squeezes the trigger again, not caring when he passes a hundred times.

The number does not matter. The odds do not matter. He is going to kill them all.

_Bloodhound._

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork of Sousuke and the yakuza by miss-seira; Rin and Haru on the motorcycle by laceprincedraws
Hi everyone, I hope you're enjoying this lovely October and I hope you enjoy this chapter. I had to continue with fanart appreciation in the end notes of this chapter since I started using links to direct you to them and I ran out of room.

But firstly, a big thanks to my beta reader! <3 thank you saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter)

Thank you italian-hetalian for this lovely ewoatt!sourin aesthetic!

And stampeatsfood for this beautiful fanart of Rin, I really love it <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"All you have is your fire,

And the place you need to reach.

Don't you ever tame your demons

But always keep 'em on a leash."

"Arsonist's Lullaby" by Hozier
The sun never comes up.

Perhaps it rises on another part of the world, somewhere that deserves to be rid of darkness, but the only light in Iwatobi is born from red and blue sirens. There is no warmth to be found; fog settles heavily in the air as the ocean pulls in a cold front that lays a sheet of ice over the city. The morning birds are silent, tucked away in their nests to hide from the wailing ambulances and police cars.

Most of the streets are vacant, given that a temporary state of emergency has been issued for Iwatobi and staying indoors was advised until further notice. As Haru walks the empty road, he wonders if the gold line in the middle could substitute for a yellow brick road that would lead him to an emerald castle, or maybe just somewhere safe. Both options sound equally impossible.

A couple is guiding Haru down the road and he follows them as they walk a few feet ahead of him. He watches them move into each other like lazy magnets, arms brushing, elbows bumping, Kazuki’s giggle echoing through the fog as Nakagawa ducks his head and smirks at him.

Haru wavers on his feet and finds himself sprawled in the dewy grass before he even realizes he sat down. With each inhale he takes, darkness eats at the edges of his vision; with every exhale, the world blanches white. “Hey,” Kazuki calls, voice muffled under the ringing in Haru’s ears. “We’re almost there. C’mon, it’s just a little farther!”

Haru is too tired to respond.

Kazuki sighs, foot bobbing anxiously. “You can’t stay out here in the cold, Haru. We’re taking you
somewhere safe! Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Doesn’t sound real,” Haru whispers.

Nakagawa nuzzles Kazuki’s temple, taking in the scent of his hair and letting out a sigh. Kazuki leans into Nakagawa and smiles slow, as if they have all the time in the world, but not even that is enough to keep the underlying impatience from his voice. “C’mon Haru, we’ve got places to be.”

Haru stumbles after them, oblivious that his bloody shoeprints leave a trail behind him.

Kazuki and Nakagawa take him to a neighborhood that probably does not have traffic even when the city alarms are not going off in the distance. The rows of cottages hold a peaceful atmosphere about themselves, a warm sort of silence. The only sounds around Haru are the creaking of porch swings, the rustle of wind through the fallen leaves, and white noise from a television inside the house that Kazuki and Nakagawa are standing in front of. “Okay,” Kazuki says, perking up and beaming at Haru. “We can leave you here.”

Haru blinks, eyelids heavy with drowsiness. “You’re not coming in?”

Kazuki shakes his head happily as he intertwines his fingers with Nakagawa’s. “Like I said, we got places to be.” He swings their joined hands back and forth.

Nakagawa rolls his eyes at the action. “I never missed the sappy shit, you know.” He lifts their joined hands to press slow kisses down Kazuki’s wrist as he says this, their eyes locked in a reverent stare.

The sight of his friends suddenly leaves Haru unnerved, his stomach dropping into an empty, cold pit. Nakagawa’s mouth unlatches from Kazuki’s neck so he can say, “You’re in shock. And going out of your fucking mind, but what else is new?”

Haru’s legs shake. “Oh.” He hesitates before stepping up to the front door, knocking on it weakly. He glances back at his friends, not sure what to say. “See you around, then.”

Nakagawa inclines his head rather sadly. “See you soon, Haru.”

Haru stares after them as Kazuki guides Nakagawa into a cloud of fog that glows under a streetlight – Haru does not realize that the streetlight is out, the bulb dark.

Nakagawa tugs Kazuki to a stop, dancing on the verge of being afraid of what’s on the other side of the fog. But Kazuki just turns around to reveal a smile that is so heavy and brings both of Nakagawa's hands to his face, fingers trembling over his mouth, sweeping through his hair. The touch drains all tension from Nakagawa’s body as his eyes fall closed.

Just as Kazuki leans up to kiss his parted lips, the fog wraps them in a silky sheet that fades away with the most peaceful sigh. Haru stares out at the empty road with a strange sense of loss, one that his traumatized mind cannot logically place.

“Haru?!”

He jerks around, startled by the amount of panic racing through that voice. Haru’s eyes struggle to adjust to the light that spills through the open doorway but even when his vision clears, he has trouble comprehending the sight before him.
Everything about Makoto is… broken. His skin is pale where it is supposed to be tan, eyes wet and red where they should be dry and white. There are cracks in the foundation of him, where he has always carried an air of steadiness. Something has broken Makoto, left him as fragile as shards of glass that Haru can crush in his palm. He did not realize just how much of Makoto’s heart he held in his hands until Makoto pulls him against his chest, where it is beating hot and hard, all for Haru.

His eyes roam over Makoto’s bicep to peer at the television, where the news is rolling footage of a building that is drowning in a sea of people. The area is taped off – on one side, officers and investigators haul gurneys into ambulances, dump body bags into CSI vans. At the other, a crowd of spectators watch the scene through the screens of their camera phones, some of their faces twisted in morbid fascination while others stare in horror.

Haru recognizes the building as Samezuka, and only then does it all come back to him in a sickening lurch.

He turns his back on the television screen, hiding from the images by burying his face in Makoto’s neck and squeezing his eyes shut tightly enough to hurt. Haru claws him closer, nails digging in because he is waiting for something to take him away. Makoto is just as desperate to keep Haru against him, his muscles shaking under the weight of relief that comes from just hearing him breathe.

Makoto’s voice is a rasp from crying very hard, hysterically, words tight like he is balancing on the edge of a breakdown. “They said there was a shooting, then they thought it was a terrorist attack or some kind of – a gang war or something –” Stress pitches his voice higher, making it quiver. “But they were sure that a lot of people were dead.”

Images flash through Haru’s mind, lodging a pained groan in his throat, chest hiccupping. “Shh, shh,” Makoto whispers over and over, as ceaseless as the patterns his hands rub into Haru’s back. Makoto shakes his head, brows high and creased. “I called you a thousand times but you never answered, I thought – I thought you were –” He closes his eyes like he does not have the strength to ever see the rest of that sentence as a reality. Instead he takes Haru’s face in his hands and kisses him hard.

Makoto’s mouth hits Haru like an electric shock, the bodily jolt of a defibrillator, the screaming realization that he is truly alive. He flares to life, fists twisting in Makoto’s shirt to yank him closer and lick the taste of salt from his lips, teeth drawing across skin to leave a mark and give proof that he was here. Makoto builds a fire inside Haru, smothering the cold horror still heavy in his bones. He kisses him in a way that lets him feel not only the grief Makoto has endured, but also an outpouring of emotions that he has not yet voiced, and Haru matches those unspoken feelings with reverence. Their hands frame each other’s faces, moving through hair, shaping jaws as their mouths meet again and again like every kiss will be the very last one.

They part with the need to breathe but Makoto’s proximity is even more overwhelming than the urge Haru has to draw air into his lungs. He cannot tell who is shaking harder or squeezing each other tighter. Makoto rests his cheek against Haru’s, speaking against his ear with an honesty so raw that it is painful to hear. “I have never been so scared in my whole life.”

Haru tastes fear-sweat as he rains kisses over Makoto’s throat. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers against skin, clinging to the sensation of a heartbeat thrumming against his mouth. He kisses Makoto’s pulse point, breath leaving him in a rush.

“Don’t be sorry,” Makoto hurries, pulling back to look at Haru almost in admonishment. “It’s not like it’s your f–”
Makoto’s voice dies in his throat as quickly as the joy on his face falls into absolute horror. Only now does it appear like he can see Haru for what he truly is, rather than just a breathing person. Makoto staggers back on instinct, but even though his mind is screaming at him to get away, he never lets go of Haru’s hand, despite the contact leaving his fingers red and sticky.

“Haru,” Makoto whispers. “Why are you covered in blood?”

Haru looks down at himself. Bruises are blooming, wounds opened up like roses; wind-burns color the snow of his skin in pink petals. Mud is crusted at the hairs of his arms and he reeks of gasoline and salt. There is a lot of blood, yes, but it is not the sight of it that terrifies him so much – it is the realization that he does not know if more of the blood belongs to him or Nakagawa.

Haru sways dangerously and Makoto maneuvers him over to the couch with soft spoken words of encouragement. He sits down, but his body is hardly relieved. Dying adrenaline has left him on fire. His veins are livewires, buzzing as heat screams through him. His body is shaking to keep making energy because he cannot convince himself that he is out of danger.

Haru is not even aware of Makoto crouched before him; all he can see are memories so awful that they should only exist as nightmares. But Makoto’s voice remains gentle when nothing else is. “Can you tell me how badly you’re hurt?”

Haru is not in pain, but this numbness is worse than anything he has ever felt. It seizes his bones and a film tightens over his skin, constricting him until he cannot even move. His lungs are locked in vices that are getting tighter and tighter, springing tears into his eyes.

He is not aware that he is hyperventilating until Makoto tells him that he is, and offers him a safe resting place, that being an embrace.

Damning his pride, Haru is quick to crawl into Makoto’s lap, arms and legs wrapping around shoulders and hips to revel in the strength of his body. It acts as a wall between Haru and the television screen, the rest of the outside world. Makoto curls over him protectively, encompassing his senses until he is grounded in the space they have created between them.

He takes Haru’s hand to place it over his chest, tightly interlocking their fingers as he does so. Makoto’s heartbeat is a strong thrum through Haru’s hand and he is surprised at how calm the rhythm is. It dawns on him that even though Makoto’s face is strained with worry, something has taught him how to level himself in dire situations. Yamazaki’s dogtags flash through Haru’s mind, the clanking of aluminum echoing through his head.

Keeping Haru’s hand on his chest, Makoto mirrors the action, fingers resting over the pulsing fire of Haru’s skin. “Your heart is beating too fast,” Makoto says, voice as soft as his gaze. “Do you want to try and slow it down to match mine?”

Haru’s throat is too tight to let him even utter a sound, but he jerks a nod, one so broken that Makoto’s face crumbles as he pushes Haru’s hair back to kiss his forehead. “It’s not your fault for feeling however you do, all right? Anyone would be overwhelmed after what you went through. This is all supposed to happen. It’s completely normal.”

Normal. Haru looks up with a hopeful sort of hesitancy and Makoto sighs. “Yeah, I know how you feel.” His eyes skitter away, and Haru watches himself blink in the lenses of Makoto’s glasses. “There were, um… situations… back in – in Iraq that…” He swallows. “My brain wasn’t strong
enough to handle them. So I freaked out a lot, over there.” He meets Haru’s gaze, smile shamed. “I still can’t handle a lot of stuff now, if I’m being honest.” He tips him a knowing look. “So I’m not going to tell you to just ‘let it go’ or ‘take a deep breath’ because I know how infuriating that is. But please, don’t feel like you’re crazy or wrong or anything like that. You just have to feel it – let it go through you. It’ll only hurt worse if you keep trying to fight it like this. Your teeth are clenched so hard that I can hear them grinding.”

Makoto rubs his thumb over the hinge of Haru’s jaw, coaxing it to relax. Relief spreads through his muscles and his pulse lulls slower, making Makoto beam when he feels it through his hand. “You’re doing so good, Haru, you’re incredible. You’re doing everything right.”

Oh, his voice is a balm, the hum of it resounding through his chest and up into Haru’s palm. More tension eases away when lips press to his temple, brushing the softest of kisses there. Makoto sighs, resting his face against Haru’s. “I don’t want you to feel alone,” he confesses so quietly. “I know what that feels like, and I know what it’s like to go through something that just… takes away your ability to ever be completely okay again.” He suddenly looks up at Haru with a breathless smile. “But ever since I met you, I – sometimes I feel even better than okay.” He laughs as color floods his cheeks. “Even though I get so nervous when I see you. Like, I can’t even breathe with it.”

Haru’s pulse jumps, but this time it is for good reasons.

“And I just – I really adore you, okay? This won’t change that.” He tucks his face against Haru’s shoulder, letting him feel the heat of a blush, the curve of a smile. “I doubt anything ever will.”

The warmth of those words blooms through him, a rosy haze overlaying his thoughts. Makoto rocks him back and forth, keeping one hand over Haru’s heart while the other rubs the ache out of his back. His touch silences the screams of Haru’s mind and, in exhaustion, his head falls to the crook of Makoto’s neck where it is soft and dark and the safest place he has ever laid his head.

His heart soars into a realization, one that he never thought anyone in the world could make him have.

His body clenches in shock, arms tightening around Makoto to make sure that he is solid and real, but even when Makoto responds by pulling him closer, Haru has to cover his mouth with a trembling hand in the utmost disbelief. His head bows and tears shine at the ends of his bangs. When he finds his voice, it is overcome by twenty-three years worth of waiting for a feeling he never thought he would have.

“I feel safe with you.”

His eyes flutter closed as Makoto smiles against his temple. “I feel safe with you, too.” He whispers this like it is the most wonderful secret ever told.

They fall into silence as Haru tries to gather his bearings. Makoto remains a steady presence, playing with Haru’s hair, murmuring praises, and rubbing away the chills that gather on his arms. After a while, Haru’s heartbeat falls into rhythm with Makoto’s, and Makoto beams when he feels it through his hand. “Feel a little better?”

Haru nods, neck muscles aching from the tiny action. Makoto looks him over with a strained face, eyes darting to assess too many injuries. He opens his mouth but Haru already knows what he is going to say. “No. I am not going to the hospital.”
Makoto rolls his lips into a thoughtful line and inclines his head. “May I ask why?” He doesn’t sound upset, just curious.

Haru goes to speak but has to clench his throat to keep in a pained noise. Now that the shock has faded away, his body is letting the severity of his injuries be known. Everything is burning - the red river carved under his collarbone, his hand, where a bullet grazed the spaces between his fingers. Bruises are pulsing, bones are cracked, muscles are shredded, but his mind is the true casualty of this night and it is overthinking like never before.

He avoids the hospital because the staff knows that bodily harm is in the job description for a drug dealer – it is a workplace hazard for someone who makes a living on the streets. Even if Haru tried to convince the nurses that he was jumped out of nowhere, out of the blue, the police would still show up to write a report. Iwatobi cops are known for stereotyping and they would profile him as a dealer in no time at all.

Haru can admit that he looks pretty shady, but what makes him appear even more disturbing is that Haruka Nanase is supposed to be dead, at least according to a statement made by the police department five years ago. He still has the newspaper clipping that states Hakai Nanase died on the scene of a house explosion and “it was believed” that Haruka Nanase committed suicide by jumping off a cliff not far from their home.

Haru did have a new identity fabricated for emergencies but he has never used it – he is too paranoid to even get a bank account. He’s never signed for anything, not even the beach cabin; Rin’s name is the only one on the lease.

But what breaks through Haru’s hesitation is that he has a solid alibi this time. Two police officers (Yamazaki and Momotarou) saw him at Samezuka before the shooting occurred. It is doubtful that Momotarou will think that Haru was part of the shooting – if he has been dating Nitori for two years and has not yet realized he is associated with Iwatobi’s most powerful crime collude, then he will not make the connection with Haru.

But Yamazaki is still an issue. Whether or not he is the snitch in the police department, he could give Haru away if he simply wanted to.

What blurs the lines is the fact that Yamazaki fought through a storming ocean for Rin. Even if he thought he needed Rin to ultimately take down Freebird, he risked his life to save his. He even saved Asahi’s life by personally making sure he got to the hospital.

But he did not hesitate in offering Haru his gun to kill the yakuza’s man back at the outskirts.

So Yamazaki does have a sense of right and wrong, but knows that it is not as easy to distinguish as black and white. Something has bled his world grey, someone has changed his entire view of the justice system. It was clear that Yamazaki was a determined man five years ago, but now he has a raging aspiration for more.

So it all comes down to this: what does Yamazaki want more than anything else in the world?

It is Rin.

Haru knows that without the shadow of a doubt. Even if Yamazaki is some kind of double agent, Rin’s got the son of a bitch wrapped around his finger and holds his entire heart in his hands.
Something else Haru knows without the shadow of a doubt? Yamazaki is in possession of the world’s greatest treasure, and that is every last ounce of love that Rin’s bruised, bloody heart has left to give.

But will that be enough to make Yamazaki want to keep Rin happy by keeping Haru out of prison?

Makoto pulls him from his thoughts with a gentle squeeze to his hand. “I’ll be with you the whole time, if you want me to. You don’t have to do any of this by yourself.”

Haru looks down to avoid his gaze and watches his own fingers nervously twist the hem of Makoto’s flannel. “I’m not going to want to talk about what happened.”

It takes Makoto a second to translate the meaning of his words. “You’re worried about being questioned? By the police or something?”

Haru looks up through his bangs, using them as a shield, and nods hesitantly.

Makoto brushes Haru’s hair aside so their eyes can meet. “You don’t have to talk to anyone you don’t want to.”

Haru turns away, hair falling back over his face. “They’ll say otherwise.”

Makoto leans over into Haru’s field of vision, his expression on the verge of looking exasperated. “Then I’ll say you don’t have to.”

Haru turns to him, surprised by his firm tone, but Makoto just shrugs like this is the simplest thing in the world. “You’ve been through enough. The rest should be as painless as possible.”

Haru bites his lip and copper floods his mouth as a cut bursts open under his teeth. Air trembles up his throat but he completely loses his breath when Makoto smiles at him. “I’ll even make you hot chocolate afterwards.”

Haru looks up with wide eyes, his voice small. “With marshmallows?”

“Toasted marshmallows,” Makoto promises.

“As many as I want?”

“I will give you whatever you want.”

Haru levels himself, focusing all his worries on the steady beat of Makoto’s heart under his hand. “…okay.”

Sousuke is on his fifth cup of coffee when he gets the text from Makoto.

_Haru showed up at my house about an hour ago. He didn’t remember how he got there. I took him to urgent care instead of the hospital because we would have had to pass Samezuka and I think that would be too much for him._

Sousuke backpedals into his car as a gurney sails by, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. Good idea, he responds, stomach churning.
His phone buzzes again. *Are you still okay?*

He can practically hear the strain in Makoto’s voice. Sousuke almost smiles, definitely gives a fond roll of his eyes. *I’m fine. Now go take care of your boyfriend.*

Makoto does not respond, but Sousuke swears he can feel the heat of his blush across the many miles between them.

He pockets his phone and takes a breath. He had stepped out of Samezuka to get some air but he really should have appreciated the solemn silence of a crime scene, because the streets are flooded with noise. Behind the caution tape, reporters question the crowd and they offer theories, as well as their own history with the club. The fear wobbling through their voices is what makes guilt fester inside Sousuke until it is eating him alive. A news chopper hangs low in the sky, blasting wind in his face and rustling the body bags around him, which sends ice clawing down his back. A bar across the street has a radio playing, violins dry and sharp in the burning grey light of dawn. It’s all too much.

Something bumps his calf and Sousuke looks down at Echo as she snuggles her head against his leg again. He offers her a grin and she responds by sneezing at the smell of his coffee.

Echo had been with Miss Tsukino during the night but the wonderful woman had known that Sousuke would need his partner’s presence after she called him and found out that Sousuke had been at Samezuka when the shooting occurred. She took it upon herself to drive Echo into the chaos of downtown and even brought Sousuke a cup of coffee in a thermos with a hugging mother and baby whale painted on the side. It all makes him really need to hear his mom’s voice, but he knows that at this time of morning, she is busy getting the twins ready for school and he does not want to make that any harder than it already is. He will call her when they both have the time to break down.

Sousuke jerks when a hand claps down on his right shoulder, fire screaming through the muscles so intensely that he almost vomits right where he stands. He turns, ready to blindly lash out, but the sight of Corro forces Sousuke to level himself.

Corro has one hand on Sousuke’s shoulder and the other outstretched to offer a protein bar. He blinks down at it before reaching out. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Corro pulls back and Sousuke discreetly rests his weight on the squad car as his knees jerk with aftershocks of pain from his shoulder. Corro looks him over with his mouth firmed into a line. “You doin’ all right, kid?”

Sousuke nods. “Fine.” He keeps his response clipped so his exhaustion will not have as much of a chance to bleed into his voice.

Corro purses his lips to fight an unimpressed smirk, but does not call Sousuke out on his lie. They stand in silence for a time and Sousuke appreciates Corro’s presence, if only because it acts as a wall between him and the long black bags strapped onto gurneys just a few feet away.

Corro sighs, pulling at Sousuke’s attention. His face is strained as he gazes at Samezuka. “I got a press conference in an hour,” Corro explains. He tips his head thoughtfully but looks at a loss. “Don’t know what I’m supposed to say about all this.” He breathes a laugh, his smile tight. “Well, let me rephrase that. They already have a speech written out for me to read, but what I mean is that I don’t know what to do.” He nods his head firmly but his voice is nowhere near as strong as the
action. “There, that sounds about right.”

Sousuke cranes back in surprise and Echo mirrors the action, beaming up at him when he glares down at her. Corro rolls his eyes at Sousuke and smirks tiredly. “Sorry, I shouldn’t be throwing all this at you. I just needed to be honest for a second.”

Sousuke is quick to shake his head. “No, it’s fine.” He hesitates for a moment. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who is…”

Corro doesn’t even blink. “Up to your balls in what the fuck?”

Sousuke nods intelligently. “Yeah, that.” Echo nods along and he stares down at his coffee as he contemplates throwing it in his own face.

Corro sighs as he surveys the area. “I want all this to stop.” A hand waves around to signify the chaos as a whole. “My daughter called me from her tennis match a little while ago. She heard her friends talking about what happened here and she was bawling her eyes out because she was so scared for me.”

Sousuke frowns. “She didn’t already know about the shooting? I’m sure that’s all they’re talking about on the news.” Which is why he does not prefer to voluntarily watch that shit. He ate it up before Iraq but now he personalizes everything and he cannot listen to a report without thinking that there is too much wrong to ever be made right. The news makes him so fucking sad.

Corro shakes his head with a sort of exasperated grin. “We don’t watch the news in my house. I’d rather keep them sheltered as possible. I –” His eyes lock on something in the distance and his face falls into an expression that Sousuke saw Makoto’s mom wear every day during their recovery after captivity.

She tried to explain it to him but struggled for the words. “I keep looking at Makoto that way because I’ve realized that no matter how hard I try, the world won’t let me keep my son safe.” She wiped her eyes and offered Sousuke a sad smile. “You’ll know exactly what I’m talking about when you have your own baby. You’ll feel a degree of it every day. But when something like this happens…”

Corro watches in horror as a teenager is brought out on a padded gurney, sheets stained red. Sousuke recognizes the boy as a member of the yakuza’s gang, but right now he is nothing more than a child, crying away the grime on his face as he is hauled up into an ambulance.

“When something like this happens, you can’t help but feel like the weakest, most inadequate piece of shit that ever lived because you could not keep your son safe.”

Corro squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a sharp jet of air through his nose. “Gangs are impossible to control. You can’t ever trust anyone associated with them, as much as you want to.”

Sousuke frowns in confusion, but wipes his expression clean when Corro turns to him. “Has someone been by to question you yet?”

He stiffens. “Beg your pardon, Sir?”

Corro rolls his eyes, smirking in amusement at how uptight Sousuke is. “Not as a suspect,” he explains. “Just as a witness.”
“Oh.” Sousuke’s heart rushes up his throat and Corro’s eyes dart to the quick twitch of his pulse point. Sousuke shifts the collar of his jacket to hide it. “No, I haven’t been questioned yet.”

Corro pulls a clipboard from the inside of his own jacket and arches a brow. “Wanna get it over with?”

Sousuke’s teeth anxiously tap together. Echo’s ears flicker at the sound and her hairs stand up on end. He tries to lessen the mounting tension in the air by clearing his throat. “I don’t know how much help I’ll be, Sir.”

Corro shrugs easily. “Momotarou didn’t give much information either.” His expression falls into one of honest apology. “I really don’t even want to do this with you. You should be at home or the hospital or… anywhere but here. If you’d rather do this another time you can just drop by my office after you’ve had time to get yourself together.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather get it over with.” That is nowhere near the truth but leaving everyone time to get suspicious of his silence would be worse than trying to meet Corro’s piercing eyes.

They set up the paperwork across the hood of the squad car, where Corro pauses. “Why is your hood dented in?”

“My boyfriend jumped me and we ended up on top of it.”

Corro blinks once. Twice.

“I’ll pay out of pocket to get it fixed,” Sousuke assures.

Corro stares at him for another moment before shrugging and turning back to his folders. “All right then.”

Sousuke silently prepares himself for the interview, downing the rest of his coffee and resting a lot of his weight on Echo’s side to ground himself. He’s trudged through this procedure enough times to already know what type of questions he’s going to be asked, so he has figured out the kind of picture he is going to have to paint.

The kind of lie he is going to have to tell.

Corro starts with the basics, otherwise known as all the stuff that would put Sousuke to sleep if he were the one asking the questions. Corro looks up with a completely straight face and says, “What was your reason for going to Samezuka?”

Sousuke gives him an exhausted look and Corro’s brows jump as he grins. “Pleasure then.” He scrawls this out before putting his hands on his hips with a focused air of professionalism. “So I’ve gathered that most of the people seemed to be out of the building when the shooting started. A lot of witnesses claimed that they heard the fire alarm go off and that’s what made them book it.”

Sousuke nods. He already knows that his fingerprints will not show up when the investigators do a brush of the fire alarm – he used his sleeve to cover his hand when he pulled it. Aki has already assured Sousuke that the security cameras have been wiped and the yakuza’s body has been disposed of, so at least he’s in the clear for those incidents.
“Most people were outside when they heard gunshots from inside,” Corro assesses from his previous notes. “Where were you at the time?”

Sousuke’s gaze is as firm as his voice. “I was at the front of the building helping with crowd control.”

Corro nods in agreement while fluttering through another notebook. “The bouncers confirmed that. One guy, Tomo, he said you helped out a lot.” He leans over another file, pen at the ready. “So then what happened?”

“I heard gunshots inside so I went back into the building.”

Corro snorts as he writes this down. “Of course.” His smirk is one of genuine pride. “Wouldn’t expect anything less of you, throwing yourself to the wolves like that.”

Sousuke blushed and looked away, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I went back into Samezuka and made it to the heart of the building. Most people were dead. But then I found this redheaded guy and he –” His breath hitched.

Corro leaned over and squeezed Sousuke’s left shoulder. “It’s all right, son. Take your time with it.”

He swallowed, shaking his head to clear it. “He just looked… innocent.” He opens his mouth to say more but closes it as his throat worked around the taste of bile. Whoever attacked Asahi had the clear intention of killing him. His body looked like a busted plum, skin beat purple with bruises.

Sousuke went back to the hospital about an hour ago to check on Asahi, but the visit did nothing to make him feel better about the situation. Nii was backed into the corner of his room like an animal, Ikuya couldn’t sit still from his place at the end of Asahi’s bed, and Nao was a mess of nerves, pacing by the window. He was on the phone with Asahi’s sister, who sounded hysterical even from where Sousuke was standing across the room.

Asahi sobbed every time he moved, but that was not nearly as heartbreaking as when he asked where the rest of his friends were. He said friends like it held the meaning of family.

Nao had been tired and was not thinking clearly when he told Asahi that Rin and Aki were back at Samezuka and Haru had said that he was going home when Nao dropped them off at the club.

Nii gasped when she realized Nao’s mistake, and Sousuke swears his entire being froze when Asahi whispered, “But where’s… Naka?”

Nao broke under the weight of Asahi’s stare. “He’s with Kazuki.”

Asahi started crying and Sousuke had to excuse himself after that.

“So that’s why you took him to the hospital,” Corro says. “Because he looked like an innocent bystander.” His eyes open wider with understanding. “Just looked like he didn’t deserve it.”

Sousuke shrugs, head nodding before he even realizes it.

“All right, son. You’re doing good, we’re almost done.” Corro writes down a few more notes before pausing. “The boy, did he say anything at all?”
“The redheaded boy,” Corro explains. “The one you took to the hospital.”

Sousuke hardly relaxes after the clarification. “He mumbled a lot but none of it made sense. I tried to keep him talking but he was having a lot of trouble.” He kept whispering kiss me, kiss me, then Sousuke understood the mantra as a name: Kisumi. “I think he got hit in the head a lot.”

“Yeah, I do too. That’s why I think he was targeted.”

Sousuke blinks calmly. “I don’t understand.”

Corro pockets one of his hands and purses his lips as he squints down at his notes. He shakes his head in puzzlement. “It just seems kind of personal, beating someone up like that rather than just shooting them.” He suddenly looks up at Sousuke, who has to stop himself from stumbling backward, Corro’s gaze is so piercing. “I’m assuming there was no one with you last night, since you went out of your way to help a stranger like that.”

“My brother was there,” Sousuke says without thinking. “And two of our friends, then I saw Momo and his boyfriend. But they all left before the shooting started.”

“…then why did you stay?”

Sousuke inhales sharply.

Corro waves a hand, gathering up his folders in the clipboard. “Never mind, don’t worry about it. I shouldn’t even be asking that, I just got curious.” He flashes Sousuke a genuine smile of appreciation. “Thank you, you did great.”

Sousuke bites the inside of his lip and bows his head in a nod. When he stretches his neck back out, Corro narrows his eyes at him. “Oh, it looks like you have a bruise.”

Sousuke follows Corro’s gaze and cups a hand to the side of his throat, where a patch of skin is hot and pulsing. He feels the indentions of teeth and tries not to look into the alley right behind Corro, where Rin’s tongue ring dragged along his neck to map out a spot to sink his teeth in and suck.

Sousuke catches the ice pack thrown at him on instinct. Corro pulls away from the back doors of the ambulance parked beside them and levels his gaze with Sousuke. “You gotta be more careful, son.”

Sousuke lifts his chin and nods curtly. “Yes Sir.”

Corro studies him in silence for a moment.

Then everyone’s attention turns to the squad car rounding the corner. The driver hurries the vehicle to a stop but one of the front tires jumps the curb. Seijuro staggers out of the car, oblivious that he leaves the driver’s door wide open and the sirens flashing. He slowly spins around to take in the scene with wide-eyed terror, jaw slack, palms open like he cannot physically grasp the situation.

Corro approaches Seijuro and speaks close to his ear. Seijuro’s eyes move up from the ground to lock with Sousuke’s gaze, and he blinks at Corro’s words before nodding a response to whatever he said. Sousuke’s stomach drops.
Corro is ushered into an SUV that is headed to the press conference, and Sousuke takes the opportunity to force Seijuro back into the driver’s seat of his car. Sousuke slams the door shut, working his jaw as he rounds the vehicle and lets himself and Echo into the cab, clicking the lock shut before slowly turning to Seijuro. “Where in the hell were you?”

Seijuro sags into his seat, bowing his head. “I’m sorry. I got caught up at the station.”

That answer is so infuriating that heat comes off Sousuke in waves, the air thickening with suffocating tension. Echo whines and crawls in the back seat to curl up in the floorboard. Sousuke leans over into Seijuro, his voice so tight that it quivers. “You voluntarily made the decision to leave your phone behind right after you tell me there is a murderer walking the streets?”

“I didn’t –” Seijuro drags a hand up through his hair but clenches it into a frustrated fist. “I just thought it was him, I didn’t know for sure –”

“You told me you knew for sure.”

“That was before I showed it to everyone else and they said –” In an explosion of anger, his arm lashes out and he hits the side of the door hard enough for the entire vehicle to lurch with the action. “They said it was nothing, I just –” His voice cuts off and he mouths for words that Sousuke already knows without having to hear them.

He cranes back. “You went with what everyone else said rather than your gut feeling.”

Sousuke is so maddened by the silence that he can barely keep ahold of himself. “You passed the sighting off and you tried to forget about it.”

Seijuro’s eyes redden with unshed tears, his voice hollow. “I had no idea this would happen.”

Sousuke slams a fist down on the dashboard. “You didn’t want to believe this would happen!” The windows tremble in the wake of his fury. “You can’t just look away and pretend this isn’t happening, it is happening, whether we’ve got the balls for it or not.”

Seijuro squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath, brows creasing. But no matter how hard he tries, he cannot keep the tremor from his voice. “I didn’t know Momo was here last night.”

Sousuke lets go of the anger as much as he wishes to cling to it because he knows where Seijuro is going with this – his voice is a hysterical whisper. “If he had waited even a minute longer to leave, then he would have been –”

“Stop it.” Sousuke wraps an arm around Seijuro’s shoulders to give him an earnest shake. “You can’t think about it like that, Sei. You can’t.”

“Mom made me promise her one thing.” Seijuro’s body wracks to keep the grief inside of him, but it comes pouring out in his voice. “Take care of Momotarou.” A laugh bursts from his chest, but it seems to hurt. “She said that back when I was a teenager. I was such a bad kid Sousuke, holy shit, I almost drove her insane.” He leans heavily on the arm wrapped around him. “She finally said that I could do whatever the fuck I wanted but that I had to realize that I was throwing away Momo’s life too. She knew that if she lost me, she’d lose him too because he looked up to me so much.” His breathing shudders, pitches. “But no one ever realized that – that if something happened to Momo
“Stop, Seijuro,” Sousuke whispers. His heart aches in his chest, too tight, too full of understanding. “What you need to focus on is that nothing happened to him. Even if you had come last night there still would have been a shooting. If you were there, Momo might have left earlier or later but it doesn’t matter because it did not happen.”

Seijuro still looks like he is holding himself accountable, and that draws the words out of Sousuke’s mouth as painful as they are.

“My entire team died for my mistake back in Iraq.”

Seijuro cranes to stare at him, shaking his head to stop Sousuke, but he lifts a hand to silence any protests. “I’m alive.” He huffs. “They’re not.”

*Squad 112 has been compromised. Squad 112 has been compromised. Squad 112 has been compromised.*

It echoes through his thoughts every minute of the day. “Makoto’s alive but… but he’s not.” He bites his lip before it falls open, his eyes glazing over for a moment. “I know that you’re going to blame yourself for what could have happened, but know that it’s going to take away from the time you have with Momo now.”

Seijuro breathes hard, closing his eyes tightly. He nods to himself. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Sousuke nods and sits back in his seat, crossing his arms a little too tightly, struggling to keep himself together. Echo hops between the front seats and crawls in his lap so he can bury his hands in her fur. He ignores his legs going numb under seventy-five pounds worth of fluff and muscle.

They take a few minutes for Seijuro to clear his head. After a more few deep breaths, he asks, “Your boy okay? Any of his people get hurt?”

Sousuke’s heart burns with regret. “Yeah, another rentboy.”

“Is he…?”

Sousuke nods, sinking back into the headrest. Grief is exhausting on top of being awake for thirty plus hours, but he knows that the sorrow will not allow him to find sleep – just tossing and turning. Even when he gets home, he will stay awake until he has no choice but to pass out; that way he will be too tired to have nightmares.

“Yes…” Seijuro shakes his head in disbelief as body bag after body bag goes into a CSI van. “Freebird did all that?”

*There’s a snitch in the police department.*

“There’s no telling who is to blame just yet. We’ll have to read the assessment after the press conference,” Sousuke says, voice clipped.

“What about your boy, then? I know you wouldn’t be able to keep it together if something happened to him, no offense.”
Sousuke shrugs a little, words vague. “Everyone is hurt in their own way, after last night.” He looks through the frost-crusted window to stare at the club. Rin is inside but Sousuke has not approached him, fearful of everyone’s suspicion. A cautiousness laced between him and Rin when the word snitch hit the air and that has created a strain about themselves. Though Sousuke doubts that Rin thinks he is a traitor, the prospect of one has left a lot to talk about, but that subject was hard to approach when Rin was being questioned as a representative of Samezuka’s owner. But even after that, Sousuke could not gather the strength to face Rin when the opportunity presented itself. He left him alone in the alley garden to nurse yet another cup of reeking black coffee as he dialed relative after relative on Nakagawa’s behalf.

Sousuke narrows his eyes at Seijuro but looks away before he can catch him. He opens the passenger’s door and says, “C’mon, I know something that will make you feel better.”

Seijuro makes a confused noise but follows him out of the car, both of them zipping up their navy jackets as chills rush over their skin. They step into Samezuka with latex gloves on, tight around their wrists. The crime lab has taken out all of the bodies, but the stench of death still festers in the air. Seijuro’s tan fades green. “I don’t feel much better, Yamazaki.”

They step into a cleared area, that being the restaurant. Sousuke yanks off his gloves and pockets them. His eyes scan the bar before finding what he was looking for, and he regards Seijuro as his gaze locks on the person behind the counter. “What I meant to say was that I know someone you could make feel better.” Seijuro ducks his head, nervously meeting Sousuke’s eyes. “She asked me about you.”

Seijuro perks up, eyes brightening. “Really?”

Sousuke nods while he watches Aki hand out cups of coffee and water to officers. Her hair is still damp from the rain, strands as dark as the circles under her eyes. She’s changed out of her ruined clothes and into some warm sweats that are too big for her. Sousuke thinks he has seen Rin wearing her leggings as well as the long sleeve shirt, but he knows for a fact that her boots belonged to Nakagawa.

They look too heavy for her slim legs to carry, so large that they reach her knee caps. There’s a single red shoelace among the black ones. Sousuke remembers that he noticed a single red shoelace in Kazuki’s boots back at the morgue. Aki told Sousuke that the couple had split the pair of laces because Kazuki believed in the red string of fate between lovers; wearing the laces were about as romantic as Nakagawa would ever get.

But what truly personalizes the boots is the blood Aki scrubbed at until her fingers were raw and there were more tears in the bar sink than soapy water.

Aki’s heart is broken over Nakagawa so Sousuke could not understand why she would not just go home. But then he watched her take over the phone calls to Nakagawa’s family while pouring coffee for officers and comforting a dancer who was petrified to tears over what happened last night. Aki is the motherly figure of the group and that means there are times when she has to be everyone’s backbone – this is one of those times.

Sousuke underestimated her. What she lacks in physical ability, she makes up for in emotional strength, and that is what is keeping what is left of Freebird alive right now. She is also versatile; though she cannot physically defend her friends, she figured out a way to protect them by pulling Sousuke aside a few hours ago and telling him, “I’m going to find out if Seijuro is the snitch.”
Her straightforwardness threw him out of his own body, and he was left struggling to find his voice. “You don’t… uh. Have to do that? You shouldn’t be worried about that right now.”

She ignored his concern. “Has Rin told you much about our boss?” Sousuke shook his head and she had to take a moment to prepare herself to speak on the subject of their pimp. “She taught us everything we know.” A shadow haunted her face. “But the most important skill I ever learned from her was how to read people.” She lifted her chin higher than he had ever seen it go. “You’re who you say you are. I can tell.”

He was dumbfounded. Ecstatic, but dumbfounded. “How can you tell?”

Her smile was shaped by gratitude for Sousuke. “Rin.” He was rendered speechless and she took it as an opportunity to explain herself. “Rin trusts you, so I trust you. He has impossible skills in judgment whether or not he has been emotionally compromised.” She looked Sousuke over. “I don’t think you’re the kind of person who gets emotionally compromised very easily. Not romantically, anyway.”

He snorted. “No, not really.”

“But your heart is very compromised at the moment, yes?”

Silence.

Aki allowed a brief smile as he looked away to blush. “I get attached easily,” she admitted. “But even if I really care about someone, I know when they’re lying to me. So I don’t think Seijuro is a double agent but because of… my feelings, I want to take a little more time to make sure.”

Sousuke did not realize just how compromising Aki’s feelings were until she looks up from the bar. She does not even acknowledge him; she is rendered oblivious to everyone around her as Seijuro approaches, his feet moving of their own accord.

Sousuke tries not to look nauseated.

Echo lifts a judgmental eye ridge at him before lolling her head around to find something that will curb her boredom. Her eyes lock on an object behind her and the rest of her body whips around to confront whatever has got her suddenly barking her head off.

“Inside voices,” Sousuke hisses, his glare more confused than one of real heat. He follows the point of her nose and horror slowly dawns on his face.

There is a puppy at the other side of the restaurant’s glass doors. A real, actual puppy. She is standing up with her front paws against the glass and she tips her head at Echo, ears flopping with the action. A group of cops open the doors wide open and Sousuke snaps, “Echo La Rue, don’t you d–” but she dives through the men’s legs and takes off after the puppy like a heat-seeking missile.

Sousuke’s sigh is so deep that it brushes his very soul.

He forces a strained smile of apology as he steps around the amused officers. He walks down the hallway and all he has to do to locate Echo is follow the mirrors along the wall when they shake with her gallop.

He rounds a corner with his reprimanding speech hot on the tip of his tongue, but his voice dies in
The puppy snuggles deeper into the cradle of Rin’s arms, eyes twinkling mischievously. Echo crouches and a playful growl rolls through the floor, but it cuts short when Sousuke steps behind her. She slowly turns around, eyes wide with an innocence that Makoto would definitely fall for, but not Sousuke. He crosses his arms at her. “We are at work. We do not play at work.”

Her head drops with an exaggerated whine. He is not impressed.

Rin watches their exchange with a gentle smile; Sousuke can make out the curve of it from where he has tucked his face against the puppy’s head. Rin asks, “Is she yours?”

Sousuke has to take a second to level himself at hearing him speak. The walls are padded velvet and the acoustics make Rin’s voice sound intimately close, despite that they are standing feet away from each other. Every noise he makes is so intense in this space – the rustle of his clothes is loud as though he is right up against Sousuke, so acute that he can practically feel teasing fingers glide under his shirt. Rin’s breathing is raspy with the beginnings of a cold brought on by almost drowning. His throat sounds like it is aching for rest, which Sousuke cannot blame him for, given that he was on the phone with Nakagawa’s family for so long.

Sousuke’s own voice is sober. “Yeah, she’s mine. Her name is Echo.”

Rin tips his head at the Shephard and she mirrors the action. His eyes narrow on her vest before widening, her badge glowing in the low lighting of the corridor. “Is she a police dog?”

Sousuke’s mouth kicks up into a grin. “A Sergeant Major, actually.”

Rin lifts his brows, impressed. Echo circles him, sniffing the ground at his feet and the air around him. Then she catches a scent on him and freezes all at once before staring at Sousuke, looking positively scandalized.

Echo sniffs up Rin’s calf, nosing his open hand before trotting over to Sousuke to smell his fingers. She looks between them with narrowed eyes and it clicks. “Oh,” Sousuke realizes, voice strangled. He rubs the back of his neck to shit. “Uh, she. She smells me. On you.”

Color fills the hollows of Rin’s cheeks. “Oh.”

“She was… confused, at first. I think. Yeah.”

Rin looks down at the puppy in his arms. She is out cold, tongue lolled out of her mouth, plump belly rolling around as her legs kick in her sleep. “Is that why she ran after Winnie? Because she probably smells like me?”

Sousuke rolls his eyes at Echo. “I think that was because she hasn’t spent a lot of her life around other dogs.” There were a handful of other explosive detection canines in Iraq, but Echo watched most of them die in the line of duty. “She’s got it in her head that dogs are a rarity, so she thinks it’s really special to see one.”

Rin’s eyes are wide with sadness. He crouches and Echo glances at Sousuke, who gives her a nudge of encouragement to wander over. Rin props Winnie up on his leg, stirring her awake. “This is Winnie. You’re a lot bigger than her but you’re both alike because she doesn’t spend much time around other dogs, either.” He leans forward with an exaggerated whisper. “They’re not very nice to
her because she’s so little.

Echo huffs and stomps her front paws. Rin nods in agreement, “Yes that is very mean of them.” Sousuke bites his lip around a grin as Rin plops Winnie down in front of Echo. “But she’s actually a really sweet girl.” He tips his head, hair falling over his crinkled eyes. “I think you are too.”

Sousuke can feel his heart melting on a physical level.

Winnie sprawls over on her back as Echo leans down to sniff her. The pup yips in Echo’s face and licks her nose, which startles her a little, but not as much as when Winnie chases her around Sousuke’s legs until both dogs topple over each other. Echo gives chase again and Rin takes Sousuke’s hand to pull him out of the line of fire.

Sousuke goes to thank him, but chokes on his own voice when Rin doesn’t let his hand go.

They are close enough for Rin’s breaths to hit Sousuke’s throat, making it tighten with chills. Rin’s hand is damp with heat and the air around him is thick with humidity, probably from a recent shower. Sousuke refrains from brushing a wet strand of hair away from his face.

He looks him over and notices that this is one of the few times he has seen Rin out of his work clothes, or at least not wearing all black. His leg muscles are usually accentuated by tight leather, but his curves are shapeless in a pair of grey sweatpants. His combat boots have been exchanged for bare feet, and Sousuke does not know why in the hell he finds it so adorable that Rin has his toenails painted (black, of course). He is wearing a red tank top that exposes the incredible expanse of his arms, but Sousuke almost wishes he were covered up so he wouldn’t have to see the bruises and scrapes.

But fuck, he’s perfect. Even exhausted and reeking of peroxide, Sousuke just wants him closer.

Rin stares down at their joined hands, face unreadable. “Do you have a minute to talk?”

Sousuke swallows so thickly that the action is audible. He nods in response, unable to trust his voice.

Rin guides him down the wing that he and Seijuro were denied entry on the excuse of it being “under construction.” The corridor is sparsely furnished, so the journey is relatively boring until they reach the door at the end. Beside it is a pedestal that presents the bust of a woman, and though she is crafted from stone, there is a seam in a lock of her hair that allows Rin to twirl the strand around his finger until they hear the door latch click open. He offers Sousuke’s incredulous look a shy smile before guiding him through the doorway and down a spiral staircase.

Sousuke’s ears pop as they descend, and he realizes that they are going underground. They reach the bottom and step into another corridor, though this one is not barren and cold like the forbidden wing; it is adorned in marble and gold, like the milk and honey of the Promised Land. The tile floor glows under a row of chandeliers that lead Rin and Sousuke down the hallway. Extravagant double doors line the walls and Rin picks a set out, twisting the knobs to throw them open.

Curtains billow out, the fabric lulling a rosy aroma into Sousuke’s blood. Rin walks in calmly, used to the sight before him, but Sousuke is left staggering in disbelief at everything around him.

The room is spacious, but still manages to hold an intimacy, recessed lighting coating all surfaces in warmed amber. A fire dances behind a stretch of glass and the tension eases out of Sousuke’s shoulder as heat lavishes his wind-chilled skin. The scents of cinnamon cigars and red wine linger in
the mahogany walls. His eyes roam over the mirrored ceiling and lock on the reflection of a bed.

It is out of a fucking dream, dressed in layers of silk that glide over the comforter like liquid gold. He imagines that the fire has warmed the sprawling mattress lying under a mountain of pillows. The headboard is a glass box; inside of it is a waterfall that expands across the length of the glass.

But what makes the bed and the rest of the room seem so much like a fantasy is that Rin moves across the white fur rug to sit on the mattress and look up at Sousuke, waiting.

The sounds of the waterfall and crackling fire sharpen to a muffled ring.

Rin leans back on his hands and his shirt rides up to expose his lower abs, showing the red twinkle of a belly button ring and black ink tattoos that are hot and glossy in the firelight. A tank top strap falls down his shoulder to cup a rounded bicep and expose his skin to Sousuke’s eyes – all while Rin’s gaze moves over him and makes his body heat under chills.

Then their eyes lock and Sousuke has suddenly never been more nervous in his entire life.

Rin looks away as he inhales hard through his nose. He grabs a pillow and tucks it between his crossed legs, trying not to squirm under Sousuke’s stare. “Will you sit with me?”

He is almost relieved.

Sousuke slips his jacket off as he comes over and eases down on the bed, sighing as he sinks into the mattress. He can only imagine what it would be like to sleep on this lavish thing. Or not sleep.

He casually pulls a pillow over his lap before he can really make an ass of himself. His eyes dart to find something that will turn his thoughts to something other than Rin’s proximity, but the room in itself makes Sousuke startle with a thought. “Is this…”

Rin’s smirk is degraded. “Where I get rented out?”

Sousuke grimaces. “Yeah, that.”

“Not what you were expecting?”

He never took the time to picture it because he did not want to think about Rin being with anyone else. Despite this, he shakes his head.

“Being a rentboy isn’t all about sex,” Rin says. “Contrary to popular belief. Not only is someone buying my body –” Sousuke flinches at that. “But they’re buying my ability to make them relax in every sense of the word.”

Sousuke concedes with a nod, looking about the room. “Guess the atmosphere makes sense then.” He chews at his upper lip, daring to glance in Rin’s direction. “How are you feeling?”

Rin’s eyes are distant, vacant on the wall. He shakes his head with a nauseated look, hugging his pillow closer, too tightly.

Sousuke sighs, dropping his head with exhaustion heavy in his whisper. “Me too.”

Rin looks like he is making his heart break, voice ultimately shattered. “Why did you jump in the
water for me, Sousuke? That was so stupid of you.”

Sousuke jerks around, heart lashing out in a blind fury. “You drove a bike off a cliff and you’re calling me s-”

But Rin isn’t afraid of him even in a heated moment like this, and his glare alone is a force powerful enough to make Sousuke cower down for the first time in his life. “Answer my question.” Under the angry redness of his skin, his face is devastated, like the prospect of something happening to Sousuke is worse than something happening to himself.

Sousuke knows the feeling.

Water is still clogging his ears and his clothes reek of salt, but those discomforts do not change anything, much like how the risk of saving Rin’s life meant nothing to Sousuke. “Because you saved my life even after you found out that I could be betraying you.”

Rin is visibly shocked that he put it so bluntly, but it had to be said. The tension is hanging in the air between them, building a wall that Sousuke will tear down with his bare hands if only Rin will let him.

He startles as Rin breathes a laugh. He watches him bow to hide his face in his hands, closing them into fists as he rocks himself back and forth. He sniffs.

Sousuke breaks, letting out a defeated sigh. “Damn it, Rin.” He grabs him by the biceps to pull him onto his lap, wrapping his arms around Rin’s waist and bowing to rest his head against his shoulder. Rin curls around Sousuke, overcome with the raw need to have him close.
Their intertwined fingers steady Rin enough to speak. “When I first told Haru I wanted to work with you to bring down relay, he said something like…” He rolls his lips to try and stop them from trembling but he fails because Sousuke’s thumbs are ceaseless in smoothing over his tears again and again as they fall. “He said that I needed to be ready to face a showdown between Freebird and the police department. I didn’t understand what he meant, really.” Rin smiles despite himself. “But Haru knows me better than I know myself. He knew I had a hungry heart when I met you.”

Sousuke’s lungs contract, but he cannot pull air inside.

“He knew that I’d get attached,” Rin says. “And he didn’t want me to because… in the streets, attachments are like ropes. Nooses. When everything around us is so bad, we start holding onto good things like lifelines when they’re really suicide.” He swallows. “And I figured that out, when the yakuza said there was a snitch.”

The blood freezes in Sousuke’s veins.

Rin stares up at him so sadly. “I tied my own noose falling for you.” He takes a deep breath. “But then the yakuza came at you and I realized that I did not give one single fuck.”

Sousuke’s mind goes blank.

And then he is consumed by the most ravaging sense of happiness, body on fire with it, devouring Rin’s mouth with a hunger he meets like he is starved for Sousuke’s kisses.

Rin whispers into his mouth, “We’ll find out who the snitch is. We’ll find out whoever it is because I know it’s not you.”

Sousuke’s heart swells and that passion drives their lips harder together. Their touches are restless, hands manic to find bare skin. Sousuke reaches around to draw Rin’s hair out of its tie, carding the strands free, sighing at the fragrance of lavender shampoo. Rin is not wearing a piercing and when it is not there to drive Sousuke mad, he can revel in the softness of his tongue as it drags over the hollow of his throat. He brings Rin’s head back up to shape his jaw and open it for a kiss that has Rin’s thighs clenching his waist, hips rolling as Sousuke brings a deep, primitive need to the surface.

Rin moves into him until he is so weak with desire that he cannot force enough strength into his bones to keep sitting up straight. He kicks his shoes off as his back sinks into the mattress with the boy’s weight bearing down on him – he is heavy with muscles that contract under Sousuke’s touch. He dips a hand under the back of Rin’s shirt, then his whole arm, fingers and nails leaving a trail of heat in their wake. Rin lifts his head against Sousuke’s neck and when a moan reverberates through the teeth in Sousuke’s skin, he flips them.

Rin hits the mattress, thighs already spread for Sousuke’s hips to sink between his legs. Sousuke frames his face and kisses him with tender sweetness even as he grinds Rin into the mattress with a strength that leaves him whimpering. He arches up each time Sousuke draws back, desperate for friction. Fingers massage into Rin’s back before hands wander higher, hiking his shirt up to expose a rippling stomach. Sousuke’s thumb traces the red script at his hip but Rin is quick to draw him away from the tattoo of Hitomu’s name. He reaches under Sousuke’s shirt and distracts him with a long drag of nails over his bare back, pulling his shirt over his head. Sousuke sits back on his heels to roll the fabric off his raised elbows, meeting Rin’s eyes as he does so.

Sousuke is naked from the waist up and covered in war. His tan skin is blemished with dark
indentions that Rin recognizes as bullet scars. Where his muscles should have defined seams, there are clusters of burned skin that fill hollows and blur the line of his neat, straight abs. His waist is thick and strong, and Rin wants to touch him so badly that he does not even acknowledge the inverted lines of stab wounds. Sousuke’s dog tags hang between wide pectorals, and Rin is entranced by watching his chest move as he breathes.

He cannot help but falter when he notices Sousuke’s right shoulder. He finds himself sitting up abruptly, brain scrambling to figure out what could have created the thick rope of scar connecting Sousuke’s arm to his shoulder. Rin trails his fingers down the raised skin in confusion. It looks like the surgery was done messily with ineffective equipment in a short amount of time, so not only does it seem as though the injury was painful, but the procedure to heal it was agonizing as well.

Despite this, Sousuke does not hang his head in shame of his body. His chin is lifted high, though his muscles strain with tension as he waits for Rin’s reaction.

Rin does not miss a beat in pulling off his tank top and lying back against the pillows with outstretched arms. “Come here, baby,” he whispers.

Sousuke is on him quicker than lightning, striking heat into his veins, frying his composure. Rin puts meaning into every brush of tongue and nip of teeth, but then Sousuke pulls back to look at him and nothing in the world makes sense anymore.

He has never felt more naked in his life under Sousuke’s stare. It is like Sousuke wants to feel more
than bare skin – he wants the heart underneath. He wants to see Rin coming undone not only by the pleasure his body can give him, but the trust that brought them together in the first place.

Sousuke wants to make love to him.

This is the one thing that Rin has never even come close to doing.

He does not know how to handle this. He has fucked every kind of person and should know how to respond but this… this is…

Panic sets in. Sousuke presses his lips to Rin’s neck and he stretches it out for better access automatically, but he can already feel his body locking like a cage that no one, not even himself, holds the key to.

It is not as though anyone has ever needed a key. They just force their way into him.

But Rin wants to find a key to give to Sousuke, he does, he just… he does not even know how this kind of thing works.

Rin tries to push his fears away, forcing himself to meet the roll of Sousuke’s hips, which feels good, truthfully, especially when he can already know the shape of Sousuke’s cock before he is even inside him – that way he can figure out where it is most sensitive and –

No, no, no, Rin does not want to try and calculate any part of what they have. He does not have to be that way with Sousuke.

But Rin cannot calm his nerves. He does not understand how his cock can be so impossibly wet and hard even as he is overcome by the heaviest sense of dread.

Sousuke’s weight is suddenly suffocating where it was once grounding. Rin’s skin is still feverish but ice is heavy in his bones.

“… said, can you hear me?”

Rin’s eyelids flutter, gaze unfocused. “Hmm?”

Sousuke narrows his eyes and crawls off to sit back on his heels and study Rin. There is still a bulge at the front of Sousuke’s slacks, so heavy that his zipper slipped open, but that is the furthest thing from his mind as he turns all his focus on Rin.

It takes him a full ten minutes to come back to himself. Sousuke waits for him to grow back into his own skin, pulling himself out of the back of his mind, where he was hiding.

When Rin is conscious of the mattress under his back and the man sitting over him, he is overcome by the worst feeling of embarrassment. Sousuke is not fazed by it; his voice is not the least bit upset, only concerned. “Are you back now?”

Rin’s voice is hoarse, words barely distinguishable over the scratchiness. “Where did I go?”

Sousuke shakes his head, the blue of his eyes glowing in the low light. “I’m not sure, but it wasn’t… here.” He looks him over. “Do you have PTSD?”
Rin frowns, mouth wobbling as aftershocks of panic race through him.

“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” Sousuke explains. “I’m pretty sure you just dissociated and that’s a symptom of it.”

Rin sits up, busying himself with putting on his shirt. His eyes burn with humiliated tears. “It wasn’t an issue before now.”

Sousuke scoffs in disbelief and Rin flinches at the sound. Sousuke waves one hand and tries to maneuver his shirt back on with the other. “Sorry, I don’t mean it like – I just…” He gets the hem down his stomach before dragging his hands through hair that is thick with sweat. “People shouldn’t be inside you when you aren’t even there.”

Rin just stares at him like he is the stupid one.

Sousuke blinks in confusion before he cranes back sharply. “You expected me to just… do that?”

“What the fuck else were you supposed to do,” Rin snaps, praying that the hoarseness of his voice will be mistaken for anger instead of sadness.

Sousuke’s breath leaves him in a rush like Rin just punched him in the stomach. He shakes his head, looking like his heart is broken as his brows go high and crease. “Rin… God, no. That’s not what I want to do with you.”

Rin curls in on himself, feeling small and inadequate. He has truly never felt more lost in his life. “Then what do you want to do? I’ve done everything.”

Sousuke looks at him with an unwavering stare. “Do you come?”

Rin opens his mouth but no words come out. He can’t even will air into his lungs – only tears into his eyes.

He is already beyond humiliated so he goes ahead and pulls Sousuke to him because this cannot get any worse. Sousuke sighs, using one hand to rub the shivers out of Rin’s body while the other hand pulls the covers over them. “I would want that,” Sousuke whispers. “Not for my pride but for you to feel good.”

“But why?” Rin begs to know.

Sousuke tips Rin’s face up to frown at him in confusion. “Why do I want you to feel good?”

“No, I – well, I don’t…” His tears burn with frustration and worsen when Sousuke wraps his arms around him. “I fuck for a living, why… how could I do that and then be like this when I finally, finally want to fuck someone?” He can feel how hot Sousuke’s skin still is, and that leaves him sickened with disgust in himself that he cannot do anything to dispel the heat.

Sousuke stills. “I think you just answered your own question.”

Rin just cries.

Sousuke looks like he is blaming himself for this, voice shamed. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have kissed you in the first place. You don’t need to feel pressured.”
Rin startles him by shaking his head quickly, smearing his tears away, eyes wide and earnest. “No, no, I wanted to kiss you, I want to have sex with you, I do.”

“I believe you,” Sousuke assures. “I do, all right? I’m not put off, my pride is fine.” He frames Rin’s face, smearing away moisture as he levels their gazes. “You haven’t disappointed me.”

Rin’s eyes drop to Sousuke’s lap. “I shouldn’t leave you like this.”

Sousuke grabs Rin’s outstretched hand before he can touch him. “Blue balls is not a life-or-death medical condition that has to have attention, contrary to popular belief. I’m fine.”

“But I want to,” Rin pleads, gripping Sousuke’s arms and shaking them earnestly.

“I don’t want to right now. Not when you’re like this.” Sousuke pries Rin’s hands off of him and brings them to his mouth, kisses so sweet that they bring more tears to Rin’s eyes. “You don’t have to do that for me. I’m not going anywhere.” He dares to kiss Rin’s mouth, slow, tasting like salt. “You have to know that I’ll do anything you want. Whatever you need.”

“What do you need?”

“You,” he responds simply.

Rin’s voice is miserable. “I don’t know if you can have me in the way that you want me.”

Sousuke breathes a laugh and shakes his head. His mouth is lined with exhaustion and his eyes are so heavy, but even as tired as he is, he is firm and steady in his words. “I want you in every way. Or any way that you’ll have me.”

“That won’t keep you here forever,” Rin promises.

Sousuke goes absolutely still. “Is that what you want?”

Rin bites his lower lip, but it trembles open when he takes a gasp for air, and he nods, begging, pleading.

Sousuke smiles at him hopelessly. “I want that too,” he whispers.

Rin sniffs, hugging himself. He cannot meet Sousuke’s gaze, this request is so stupid. His whisper is impossibly small. “Can I sleep with you? Just… just sleep.”

Sousuke does not reply. Instead, he eases down the pillows as he pulls the covers over the two of them. He does not urge Rin to stop lying on top of him; instead his arms draw the boy even tighter against him. Rin reaches his arms around Sousuke’s neck, closing his eyes as the warmth of blankets and heartbeats and unconditional love send him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Haru artwork by fisticles and SouRin + Sousuke is by bakapandy. Thank y’all so much!
Fanart thank you's continued:

for miss-seira for this absolutely insane comic from chapter thirteen, it is so intense and gripping, i can't even believe it! And laceprinctedraws for two amazing pieces based off of the last chapter! they're as lovely as you, thank you so much first one | second one

and last but not least brickerbeetle for this entrancing depiction of ewoatt!haru. he is too freaking pretty.
Hi everyone! Sorry for the wait. School, work, and life has had me scrambling for the last few weeks. Plus I had surgery and the recovery has been a little more grueling than I expected, but everything has settled down and I finally have this chapter done. It's one of my favorites (which has noooothing to do with explicit sexual content) so I hope you enjoy.

Saltyaf, thank you for being a beta, soundboard, and all around awesome person.

A big thank you to starshi / orcatsu for their four incredible pieces of fanart, including the first MakoHaru scene in Chapter Two, the Chapter Nine MakoHaru kiss, headshots of ewoat!sourin, and a piece of Makoto and his prosthetic that brought me to tears, it is so heart wrenching. You are such an amazing person and talented artist, thank you so much!

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areyousanta did three works, including really intense depictions of Rin and Haru fighting in Chapter Thirteen as well as one of Sousuke, and a fluffy, adorable piece of MomoTori which I LOVE LOVE LOOOOVE.

the incredible donguris did a portrait of Aki and she is a mirror image of what I always picture when writing her, your talent is unreal, thank you so much!

niansue also did a depiction of MakoHaru from this chapter's tumblr preview and I will never get enough of your art style, like, ever, you're seriously amazing. ^.^

and last but not least the lovely laceprince / laceprincedraws did two pieces of fanart on tumblr, one being MakoHaru from this chapter's preview and another of Sousuke and baby Echo. <3 THANK YOU <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I found God, I found him in a lover

When his hair falls in his face, and his hands so cold they shake

But with his educated eyes, and his head between my thighs,

I found a savior."
The ride back from Urgent Care is uneventful. The cab of Makoto’s pickup is filled with silence; not a peaceful kind, given the situation, but Haru feels blessed to have any sort of quiet in the wake of last night.

The back seat is spacious enough for him to lie across and even the passenger’s seat has enough room to curl up in. Despite this, Haru squeezes himself into the tightest space available and that is the middle seat in the front cab – Makoto accepts this as Haru’s designated place only after watching him strap the seatbelt around his hips securely. He maneuvers his vehicle fairly well with someone leched to his side and proves to be skilled at driving with one hand on the wheel and the other laced with Haru’s. He puts an arm around him eventually, mindful of his bandages and stitches and all the pain he is holding behind clenched teeth. Makoto rubs his neck in patterns that work well with the heavy fog of pain pills, and the darkness behind Haru’s eyelids swallows him whole all at once.

Haru has awful dreams that startle him awake with his lungs swelling into his bruised ribs. He comes up crying, calling out for Mori, but Makoto is there before his tears can even roll off his chin. His presence is so reassuring that it sends Haru back to sleep before he even realizes that he woke up.

The next time he stirs, he becomes conscious of his surroundings. With his eyes still too heavy to open just yet, he gathers that he is not in Makoto’s truck, but in a bed. The mattress underneath him is uncomfortably warm from his body heat, which is heightened from a fever, but the pillows are just cool enough to balance it out. Haru opens his eyes and blinks to adjust to the soft darkness of the room. Before anything else, he has to locate doors and windows for exits, and anything that can be used as a weapon. But once he is done – and has determined that he is not in any immediate danger – he allows himself to take in the details of the area around him. He is alone in the room and the space itself is non-threatening. In fact, it’s… pretty cozy.

He uses the next few seconds to gather his strength before he forces himself upright and takes to studying the quilt tucked around his legs. It looks like it was made by hand with an incredible amount of love. Haru is awed by whoever stitched the hundreds of patches together and marvels at all the different shades of green. They remind him of the lush forests of the outskirts, where nature ran wild. That is one of the only things he misses about his home, and allowing himself to think about it brings him a bitter sort of comfort.

Haru notices that some quilt patches have a strange design on them, like pixelated camouflage. He recognizes them as pieces of a military uniform and caresses them with such adoration that it practically pours out of the tips of his fingers.

Haru pulls the quilt around his shoulders as he eases off the bed. He can stand, but not with a straight spine; he walks hunched over so his bruised ribs will not be further irritated. He slowly pads around the room, wiggling his cold toes in the floral rug and almost smiling down at the faded sunflowers. At the far wall is a bookshelf filled to the brim – even the bottom shelves are maxed out with teaching aids and handbooks overflowing with notes and pens that bookmark important pages. The top shelves hold volumes of classic literature that are worn and well-loved. Haru recognizes some titles as his own personal favorites that he discovered in the library free bin when he was homeless. Makoto having such great taste in books makes him a thousand times more attractive to Haru for some reason.

He looks over at a bulletin board where photographs are tacked around school flyers and a calendar three months behind the current date. He finds one of Makoto, Nagisa, and Rei in graduation robes,
sporting the most relieved smiles Haru has ever seen – he assumes this photo was taken at the end of college. He notices another photograph, yellowed at the edges and crinkled; the date in the corner reveals that the photo was taken four years ago. It displays a beach, and Makoto is standing in the water with his twin siblings, shorts rolled up past his knees.

Haru lurches forward and narrows his eyes on Makoto’s right leg. He looks for scars, bruising, anything that might give him a clue of what is wrong with it, but the limb seems normal enough. In fact his legs make Haru's want to tremble – his calves are thick with muscle, skin warm with a healthy tan.

Haru leans back and frowns. So does this mean that Makoto’s leg was injured recently? Has it even healed? Is it even capable of getting better?

He turns away from the photograph, burning with self-loathing. After all the reassurance Makoto has given him, Haru cannot help but want to give out a comfort that he did not even know he had to offer. But he is not brave enough to bring the injury up in conversation. He thinks this is because a deeper part of him knows that Makoto is not brave enough to bring it up either. Not yet, anyway.

Haru is not patient in the slightest, but he is firm in the resolution that he will wait for however long it takes for Makoto to be okay with the injury – with himself.

With a newfound steadiness, Haru continues his journey around the room. He finds it odd that Makoto has his high school and college certificates on display but no documents of military accomplishment, though he has a feeling that this was done purposely. He doesn’t think that Makoto wants to be reminded of his time in service in any way at all – his reaction to Mochizuki was a clear indication of that. Makoto never even gave Haru a hint that he used to be in the military. It is like he has been running from the prospect of it. It is as if he has been running from so many things.

Wait a minute.

Haru narrows his eyes at the calendar three months behind. He trails his fingers down the curtains that have been drawn over the window for so long, blocking out the light of the outside world, that they have gathered dust. He notices paint samples taped to the wall, bright colors that bring life to the dark grey background, but they are also covered in a layer of dust. Haru tries to pass this all off as overthinking on his part, though he cannot help but bite his lip at the nightstand.

He begs for his train of thought to be wrong; he would give anything to be wrong.

Hesitantly, he wanders over to the nightstand and pulls open the drawer. Surely enough, orange pill bottles roll to the front, and he does not have to read the labels to know that they are antidepressants – the signs and clues are everywhere in the room.

Haru’s eyes fall shut under the weight of defeat. He forces them open to read the labels with waves of nausea rolling through him. He finds expired prescriptions of Zoloft and Prozac, as well as a full bottle of Paxil that has directions to take two pills a day, which has clearly not been happening. He finds pain killers, the kind that make serious money in the streets – prescriptions for Xanax and Valium with dosages high enough to make Haru’s eyes widen in distress. A part of him is glad to find the bottles full because these medications can be addictive, but a bigger part of him is scared shitless that a person, his person, is battling enough pain to need these at hand.

With an aching heart, he closes the drawer and sinks down onto the bed. He takes a deep breath that cuts short when the back of his foot brushes something cold under the bed – something made of
Cautiously, Haru hooks his ankle around the object and draws out a set of crutches from under the bed. His eyes wander to the quilt’s military patches then dart back to the crutches, back and forth, back and forth, until he freezes with a realization.

Haru’s ears flex as the floorboards creak, and he manages to push the crutches out of sight just before the bedroom door eases open. Makoto peeks his head around the door and perks up when Haru blinks at him. “Oh hi,” he breathes, delighted at the mere sight of him. “You’re awake. Can I come in?”

Haru rolls his eyes, the familiarity of exasperation overcoming his stress. “It’s your room.”

Makoto gives a fond roll of his own eyes and steps inside, boots moving silently across the carpet. Haru tries to find a reason why he would be wearing shoes in his own house, but the cold metal at the back of his heel spikes through his concentration. And then all sense of logic takes a running leap out of the window when Makoto presents him with a steaming mug of hot cocoa.

The aroma of chocolatey warmth has him ready to lose his mind. “Careful,” Makoto laughs as Haru eagerly reaches out a bit too quickly. “Here.” He folds the quilt over Haru’s hands to cushion them from the heat as he offers him the mug.

Haru takes a sip and warmth hugs him from the inside out. He can physically feel the kid inside of him awakening, anxious to drink up all the sweetness he never had when his body was still small, his sadness still young. Makoto perches beside Haru, who throws some of the quilt around his shoulders to share it with him. Haru snuggles close to greedily take in the body heat that Makoto is more than happy to give, leaning back against the headboard to situate Haru more comfortably. Haru draws his knees up and tucks himself into Makoto’s side, where his frame is sturdy and his muscles are hardest. Being pressed right up against such an unyielding force should not be comfortable but his flannel is soft, cushioning the solidness of his body, which becomes supple under Haru’s touch. Makoto’s body responds to him so strongly that it is as if he can pull a lifetime of tension out of him with a mere brush of his fingers.
Makoto pecks his forehead, tenderly brushing his lips over a line of stitches before whispering, “How do you feel?”

Haru studies him; he wants to ask that question himself, but resists. “Sore,” he admits, despite that the hot cocoa is soothing his aching bones more and more with each sip. “How long was I out?”

Makoto shrugs, the tips of his fingers playing in the spaces between Haru’s. “About three hours. I don’t think you slept very deeply, though.” He hesitates. “You woke up a few times.”

Haru frowns into the mug. “I don’t remember that at all.”

Makoto shrugs again, his smile heavy from weariness. “Maybe you slept deeper than I thought, then.” His voice is rough with exhaustion, but he is still in distress over thinking he lost Haru; that much is clear by the way his hand is on Haru’s thigh, not resting there but holding onto him.

“I’m sorry,” Haru blurts, making Makoto crane back in surprise. Haru drops his head in shame, looking down at the sunflowers instead of meeting Makoto’s wide eyes. “You shouldn’t be going through any of this. It’s way more than what you asked for.” He rolls his lips in to hold the taste of their kiss inside, afraid that it will be the last one.

He gasps when fingers brush his cheek, imploring him to face Makoto. His brows are creased with concern but his smile is so exasperated that it could almost be considered amused. “What did I ask for, Haru?”

His lips part silently, the sudden magnitude of Makoto’s gaze rendering him speechless. Their heads are tucked close, shoulders hunched together under the quilt, and the intimacy of the moment along with the raw sincerity in Makoto’s voice leaves him aching. “I asked for you,” Makoto whispers. “That means all of you. Not just the good parts.”
“But look what I’ve done to you.” Haru runs his thumb over the lines of exhaustion in his face, shaking his head hopelessly. “You cried over me, I hurt you –”

Makoto’s scoff is made tender by a laugh. “Haru, you are so worth crying over.” He ducks to meet Haru’s eyes under the protective shield of his bangs. “And you are also worth all the overpriced deluxe packages of hot chocolate in the world.”

Haru meets his smile with a blush, shyly urging him to continue. “This whole situation with you made me realize that no one should have to go through anything alone,” Makoto admits. He sighs, but manages to squeeze Haru’s thigh in reassurance. “I think I’ll always have a hard time with letting people in, especially the ones closest to me, but… I’m ready to try, I think.” He forces himself to find the courage it takes to meet Haru’s eyes. “Because I want all of you. Not just the good parts.”

He stares at Makoto for all of three seconds before crashing into his mouth. Light flares behind his eyes as the kiss deepens, and a rush of emotions strips away all the gentleness their previous kisses were shaped from. Makoto steals the taste of chocolate from Haru’s tongue, building a fever in his bruises, sweeping chills over his arms. They break apart, lurching into each other with labored breath. Haru presses his forehead against Makoto’s. “Then you should know that I want your bad parts,” he whispers, shaking his head in delirium from the rush of endorphins that come from just being looked at by him. “Even if you don’t want them, I do.”

He touches Makoto’s thigh with the tips of his fingers, making a journey down his right leg to grip his knee and emphasize his words. Bones shift under his hand as Makoto tries to pull away but Haru’s gaze locks him in place. “I want you too. In lots of ways.” He moves his hand up Makoto’s thigh with an insistence that makes the muscles under his fingers jump in surprise.

Makoto stares at him in disbelief, raising his brows as a flush colors his throat. “That makes me unbelievably happy, but I don’t think you’re thinking it through.”

Haru looks him over, not comprehending. At first he assumed that Makoto was simply humble about his own attractiveness, but now it seems like he does not even understand just how good he looks. His body is sculpted from enduring hard labor but that strength isn’t just skin deep; he manages to hold a steadiness about himself in a world falling apart, and that draws Haru in like an inescapable magnet he does not want to fight anymore.

The crutches brush the back of his heel. He glances down at Makoto’s right leg and then at his nervous expression.

Haru edges closer to him, carefully placing a hand on his arm. “Look at me? Please.” He is patient for their gazes to meet and shakes his head when they do. “I don’t care. Maybe I should,” he concedes, making Makoto clench hard as glass and just as breakable. “But there is nothing that could make me want you more or less than I do right now.” He inclines his head. “I’m sorry if that bothers you.”
Makoto lets out a sharp jet of air through his nose, smile twisting bitterly. His eyes water behind his glasses. “You can’t say that when you still don’t know.”

Haru’s voice is so pleading that it borders on desperate. “Then just tell me.”

Makoto stares at him hopelessly, eyes squeezing shut when Haru smears a tear away with his thumb. He trembles out a sigh. “I have a… my leg, it’s a…” His throat clenches like he cannot physically allow himself to get the words out. Instead, he reaches down and rolls the right leg of his pants up. Haru looks down.

He does not outwardly react. His body remains perfectly still, his face completely blank as he stares down at the rod acting as Makoto’s calf. The silence builds a pressure in the air, tension mounting as Haru’s lips part. He carefully looks up, voice neutral. “It’s a prosthetic?”

Makoto bows his head in a shamed nod. His face is drained pale and he looks seconds away from fainting or getting sick. Haru looks back down at the artificial limb and tries to keep himself composed but his voice breaks. “Does it hurt?”

Makoto’s sob bursts into a laugh of disbelief. Haru cups his face and he rests all the weight of his head in his hand. “No.” His tears are hot as they slide into the creases of Haru’s palm. “Just when I push myself too hard.”

Haru feels the presence of the orange bottles in the drawer only a few feet away. “Okay. We’ll work on that, then.” He leans over to roll Makoto’s pants leg back down with the upmost gentleness, brushing away the wrinkles in the fabric. He pecks his kneecap on the way back up to look at him. “Thank you for showing me.”

Makoto blinks at him, delirious with shock. “That’s – that’s it? That’s all…” He shakes his head, desperately confused. “How can you just accept it like that?”

Haru rubs his arm self-consciously. “I don’t know. My dad lost his leg too. Maybe that has something to do with it.” He flinches, gripping his shirt over his heart as it clenches. “No, that’s not why. This is nothing like that.” He dares to meet Makoto’s gaze, venturing to cup his feverish, damp cheek. Haru brings him closer, listening to him gasp for breath. “This is you,” he whispers. “So it’s fine. It doesn’t change anything.” He leans up and kisses Makoto’s forehead.

He breaks and Haru lets him, settling into his lap for Makoto to bury his face in his chest. Haru wraps his arms around him, tucking his face against his hair and inhaling deeply, eyes lulling closed as relief washes over them both. Makoto kisses his throat, so much adoration pouring from his lips that Haru’s body sings with warmth. “I never thought I’d find you,” Makoto rasps. “Not ever.”

Haru hides his smile against the top of his head. “I know the feeling.”

They take a minute to curl up in each other, their heartbeats falling into a shared cadence of peacefulness. Haru breaks the silence with a quiet voice. “Did you lose it in the army?”

Makoto nods, seeming sad but no longer afraid of admitting his past. “Yeah.” His smile is one of chagrin. “I’m still getting used to it. Still pretending it didn’t happen, as impossible as it is.” He hesitates but grows encouraged by Haru’s open expression. “Sometimes it feels like it’s still there.” He worries his lip as he studies Haru’s reaction, but all he does is incline his head for more. Makoto
stares down at his right calf with a vague look of nausea. “The, um – the part where there’s nothing there, where the rod is – sometimes my brain thinks that it’s hurting even when that’s not possible. It’s really weird.” He breathes a laugh, looking a little faint. “Sorry, I’ve never told anyone that. It sounds even weirder, hearing it out loud.”

Haru shakes his head. “It’s not weird. My dad said the same thing.”

Makoto watches him carefully, voice tentative. “Did he lose his leg in the army too?”

Haru looks away, struggling to clear his throat. “No, nothing – nothing like that.” It was from shooting up with a dirty needle, but he can’t make it through that confession right now. “He didn’t have a prosthetic. He had a cane but he didn’t use it much.”

Makoto frowns, brows creasing. “Then how did he get around?”

Haru looks down, tracing the lines of Makoto’s flannel to steady himself. His shrug is as vague as his words. “I usually brought him whatever he needed.”

Makoto studies him with uncertainty. “Is he…?”

Memories swarm him and Haru squeezes his fist over his stomach as nausea rolls through him, bile lurching up his throat. He holds his breath but lets it out in a laugh when Makoto rains panicked kisses over his face. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have –”

Haru pushes his fretting hands away gently. “It’s just a question.” He says this even with bitterness tight in his chest. Only with a hand twisted in the blankets does he find the steadiness to keep talking. “Yeah, he’s dead.” He wants to stop right there but grief overwhelms him and the reason for it comes rushing out of his mouth. “My mom is too.”

He had hoped the bluntness of his answer would end the conversation but it actually opens up a whole new can of worms – that much is clear in the way Makoto’s lips part with a thousand questions perched on the tip of his tongue. But he recognizes Haru’s look of dread and settles for holding his hand instead of smothering him with a hug. “I’m sorry, Haru.”

“I’m not,” he says, too quickly to be believed.

Makoto purses his lips. “It sounds like you miss your mom.” He dares to lift a brow. “Maybe just a little?”

Haru opens his mouth but it firms into a line as he looks away. He gazes out the frosty window, disgusted with his conflicting feelings. Killing, lying, and stealing are tough things to go to bed with, but missing his mother is the most sickening thing Haru has ever done. “It’s so fucked up,” he whispers.

Makoto leans into his field of vision, blocking his view with a pointed look. “Every family is fucked up to varying degrees.”

Haru pins him with an unwavering stare. “Mine was fucked up to the nth degree. Trust me.”

His graveness makes Makoto sober up and this time, Haru gives in to his embrace. He inhales against Makoto’s shirt, his detergent sweet like vanilla, his natural scent something stronger, warm like a campfire and as soothing as morning dew after a long night. Haru chases his fingers across the
Makoto smiles. “My mom made it. I’ve had it forever. It started out as a baby blanket but she adds to it every few years so now it’s this heavy thing.” Haru looks over the patches with curious intrigue and Makoto chuckles. He points to a denim patch. “That’s a piece of my granddad’s overalls. It makes me sneeze because it still smells like hay and my allergies hate me.”

Haru picks up where he left off with his hot chocolate and hides his smile behind the lip of his mug. He watches Makoto point to two white patches with marker scribbles drawn on them. “My younger brother and sister did those. I’m still not sure what they were trying to draw – they were like, five, I think? I can’t believe it hasn’t faded yet.”

Haru tucks his head in the crook of Makoto’s neck and makes him explain a number of patches over the next hour. Makoto distinguishes pieces from his first cat’s bed, his mother’s gardening apron, the skirt of the family Christmas tree, but falters when Haru points to the military patches. “Are those yours?”

Makoto runs his fingers over the uniform squares. “No. They were my dad’s.” Haru’s lips part in question but Makoto is already nodding, voice as sad as his expression. “Yeah, he passed away. In the army.”

Haru studies him. “Is he why you joined?”

Makoto shrugs hopelessly. “Yeah, for the most part.” His laugh is hollow. “Even though our relationship was…”

Haru knows the torment in his eyes all too well. “Fucked up?”

Makoto flashes him a smirk, arching a brow. “Your honesty is lovely. It saves a lot of time.” He kisses Haru’s blushing cheek and pulls back with a sigh of defeat. “Don’t get me wrong, I loved him a lot. I know he loved me, too. But even if our relationship wasn’t necessarily bad, it was…” His hands clench into fists that fall open under Haru’s concerned touches. “It just… wasn’t enough. He was away so much of the time but I still always felt his absence. I never got used to him being gone.”

Haru might not understand where Makoto is coming from but he listens with everything he has.

“I did learn a lot from him being gone, though,” Makoto admits. “Having to be the man of the house’ or whatever.” He glances up at the ceiling with a brief look of nostalgia. “This one time when I was about twelve, the air conditioning in my mom’s car messed up. I was so determined to fix it that I stayed under the hood until I had made more problems than I could fix.” He smirks. “But the air conditioning started working again.”

Haru rolls his eyes and shoves him, but the battle ends with him getting snuggled into Makoto’s chest, where he begrudgingly accepts defeat. He digs through the attic of his own memories, slowly drawing away cobwebs and groping through the dark. “I was the only one in the house who knew how to turn on the stove. It was so annoying.”

“What, for cooking?”

He shrugs. “Cooking, heat, whatever. Lighting cigarettes.” His restless hands play with the hem of Makoto’s flannel. “Growing up was… hard. So I get it – having to figure out how to do everything on your own.”
Makoto pulls him close, hands warm over Haru’s back. “It was always such a relief when Dad would come home. Took a lot of the burden off me.” His eyes fall half-lidded as Haru runs a hand up through his hair, voice thickening with relaxation. “Mmm. I used to think about him staying forever but I always knew he was happier overseas.” Haru lifts his brows and Makoto winces. “Maybe happier isn’t the right word. It was like… he had a stronger purpose overseas?” He sighs. “I’m sorry, it’s hard to describe it to people outside of military families.”

Haru thinks it over with a concentrated frown. “Is it that you needed him to be there for you more than he was?” He did not expect his own heart to resonate with his words but it aches in his chest.

Makoto is silent as he looks out the window, gripping Haru a fraction tighter. When he finds his voice, it is fragile. “I never could wrap my head around how he wanted to be out there in hell on Earth more than with the people who loved him.” Haru follows his gaze to the house at the other side of the backyard fence. “Sousuke’s the same way,” Makoto whispers. “I can’t understand it.”

Haru looks away from the house to meet Makoto’s eyes with a bit of guilt. “Chaos is easier for some people.”

The light in Makoto’s eyes dims even further. “That’s true, but then it gets to the point where people can’t function without it. Sousuke’s like that. Dad was like that. He was still a good man,” he is quick to add. “And he had a big impact on who I am, but that need he had, it changed us. I guess that was a good thing in it’s own way, though. I eventually stopped wanting his approval so badly that I tried to be like him even when it felt wrong.”

Haru Mulls over his words until it all clicks together. “Did he know you’re gay?”

Makoto lifts his chin; not with pride, but acceptance of his shame. “I never gave him a single hint.”

Haru does not hesitate in embracing him with both his arms and legs, hoping that he wakes up the past version of Makoto’s self so he can feel the acceptance he always deserved. Makoto holds him just as passionately but his voice is weak. “My mom knew. She always knew and she never cared. But she didn’t tell Dad. Looking back on it now, I think he would have still loved me if he found out.” He swallows. “But that doesn’t mean I’d have the guts to even make a sound if I were given the chance to tell him now.”

Haru squeezes him tight. “He didn’t deserve you.”

Makoto suddenly gazes at him with enough devotion to fill the entire room with warmth. “But if I got to say I was with you, I think that would change everything.” His smirk is languid. “I’d talk for days and days…”

“Embarrassing,” Haru hisses, body seizing when Makoto cuts him off with a kiss. His mouth renders Haru’s muscles to the consistency of liquid gold and relaxes him beyond belief.

Makoto props his head on Haru’s shoulder and quietly asks, “Did your dad know?”

Haru pauses in tracing Makoto’s bottom lip, fingers starting to tremble. “Yes.” The way he says this one word reveals how badly that situation turned out.

Makoto draws his body flush until their shared heat is stronger than the ice clawing down Haru’s back. “He didn’t deserve you.”
“I know,” Haru sighs. “I know that now.” But the scars are still there. The memories are always there, and he feels himself falling into them like darkness. Desperate to escape them, Haru blurts, “Do you have a bathtub?”

Makoto blinks. “Uh, yes? Would you... like to use it?”

“Please,” Haru says, standing up and holding a hand out for him to take.

He knows that things are so inevitably fucked when Makoto leaves him in the hall bathroom with white towels.

This is not the first time Haru has scrubbed battle-grime from his body; it is for this reason that he and Rin only have black towels at the beach cabin. Dark fabric hides the red stains so they will not have to be acknowledged. Stains on white towels demand attention; all that thick crimson and faded pink over a white expanse of cloth that is too much like a pale expanse of skin.

Haru thinks about Nakagawa’s gunshot wound and quickly fills the tub with water, hot steam billowing through the air, enough to choke on. Tears and water bleed together as Haru sinks his head under the surface to revel in the muffled silence. When his lungs are seconds from bursting, he comes up for air and opens his eyes – only after his vision clears does he realize that everything would be so much easier if he just drowned.

Red swirls through the water like it is caught between sheets of glass, like bad heroin choking a syringe, and that thought sends him into the most intense heroin withdrawal of his life.

“No,” Haru begs whoever will listen, good or evil, ready to give up whatever is left of his soul if that’s what relief will cost him. “Not here, please, not here.” He buries his face in shaking hands, claws his fingers down the back of his neck to force himself into feeling grounded. The itch in his veins eats him alive. A knife drives along the edge of his thoughts, fraying his concentration. His body jerks with every heartbeat. He is trembling for the fix that he has ran and hid from for far too long.

Haru gets out of the tub only to curl over the floor, weak with a lust he denies more and more with every vengeful flare of want. His nail claw through that damned white towel until he is stuck to it by ten red, sticky crescents. He rocks back and forth through wave after wave, squeezing his eyes shut against tears of exhaustion.

Haru gropes for the clean clothes Makoto left for him and holds them over his face, hugging them to him. He finds comfort in the warm scent, enough of it to maneuver his limbs into the boxers and cotton pants, then the orange and yellow shirt that drapes heavily over his frail frame. He twists his fists up in the hem to stop his hands from shaking and hunches over as he pads through the house.

Distantly, he knows that he is safe here, but his fragile state of mind, combined with being in a new place, has Haru on edge. He wanders through the hallway, carpet soft under his bare feet before his trauma tries to convince him that it is slick with blood and that there is glass crunching under his feet. He flinches when the air conditioner hums to life like the distant roar of a police car – a sign to run, hide, or die trying.

He finds the bedroom door open and notices Makoto standing at his dresser. The sight of him pulls Haru out of the darkness of his thoughts only to throw him into a whole new whirlwind.
Makoto has his back to Haru. His sweatpants are stretched low over the defined cut of his hips and Haru bites his lip as he imagines just how wide he would have to spread his legs to accommodate them. Makoto’s feet are bare – one is made of bones and skin while the other has been crafted from carbon fiber and rubbery synthetic. His arms are raised with a shirt twisted in them and his back is exposed to Haru’s wide, watering eyes.

Fire has turned Makoto inside out. Burns cover him in white patches, clumps of black tar, and raw pink scars that reek of ointment. His muscles clench in spasms as he struggles to get the shirt over his head and Haru catches Makoto’s wince in the mirror before their eyes lock.

Makoto freezes in place – Haru has never seen anyone go so still, like the blood has stalled in their veins all at once. That green, piercing gaze renders Haru’s pulse motionless and seizes his lungs in vices. But Haru’s feet move of their own accord and he lets himself be guided across the floor to his axis and only point of steadiness, that being Makoto.

Makoto’s face washes a shade of green as he approaches, it flushes blue as he holds his breath in anticipation, and Haru savors the redness that erupts when he draws Makoto’s back into his chest to hug him around the middle. His fingers rest in the spaces between Makoto’s ribs and they contract as he gasps. Haru presses his forehead between his shoulders and feels a heartbeat racing through them. He parts his lips against the back of Makoto’s neck to taste the heat of his skin, teeth grazing down the first knob of his spine. Makoto sways back against him, his sigh heavy and breathless.

Haru turns him around, backing him up against the dresser as he does so. He studies Makoto’s expression as he frames his face and starts a journey down his feverish shoulders, chills bursting to life under his fingertips. Haru makes his way down to the shirt twisted through Makoto’s forearms and watches him closely. Makoto looks conflicted, almost tormented, so instead of pulling the shirt off, Haru moves to help him maneuver it over his head.

But then Makoto gently pushes Haru’s hands away and all on his own, he takes a deep breath and pushes the shirt off to let it flutter to the ground.

He stands before Haru exposed in more ways than one, carrying the weight of tremendous vulnerability in his heavy shoulders. He is visibly fighting with himself as he struggles to meet Haru’s gaze, but the boy steps forward easily enough, confident in his desires if nothing else. He cups Makoto’s face, imploring him to lift his head ever so sadly. “I’m sorry,” Makoto whispers. “That it isn’t what you deserve.” He breathes hard and looks away.

Haru takes his hand and holds it to his heart. Makoto stares at him in gaping shock but Haru is unwavering. “Do you feel that?”

Makoto swallows, eyes darting over his face. “It’s…it’s calm.”

Haru’s breath leaves him in a rush as he nods. “It knows what it wants.” He tightens his fist over Makoto’s. “You shouldn’t question it.”

Makoto’s hand falls away to shape his jaw and cradle his face in reverent awe. With the utmost gentleness, he presses the boy between the wall and the hard plane of his body, one arm leaning over Haru’s head while the other hand flattens over his heart. Haru’s hand flies over Makoto’s as his pulse jumps in response to him dipping down to graze their cheeks together, the tenderness of the action obscured by the heat singing between them. Makoto’s voice is thick and deep as if intoxicated by nothing more than the sight of Haru. “Tell me what it wants.”
Haru’s eyes flutter closed, lips kicking up into a breathless smirk against Makoto’s ear. “It wants you to stop talking.”

Makoto laughs against his mouth in a kiss that makes light curl down Haru’s back. Makoto draws him close, the heavy heat of him burning the cold horror out, melting away frigid indifference, fingertips dripping down the valley of Haru’s spine to turn him as pliant as hot wax. The room flushes ten shades darker as a tongue brushes the seam of his lips and when he parts them, everything falls under a smoky haze and their mouths collide with an urgency like the room is on fire.

Haru cannot catch his breath; each inhale is tighter than the last one and every exhale shakes apart as he fails to keep up with his racing pulse. He claws Makoto closer, scoring white streaks down his tan shoulders as tension builds between them. The harder Haru tries to hold onto his control, the more it slips through his fingers; the more he tries to grasp it, the weaker he becomes until he is as fragile as glass and ready to break.

Haru is the one that pulls Makoto toward the bed. Makoto goes a little more than willingly, tripping over Haru’s feet in his elated disbelief, but at least the mattress is soft when Haru lands on it. “Sorry,” Makoto laughs, the sound of him reverberating straight through Haru when they are so close like this. Makoto is on top of him and it is too much in all the right ways, in ways that have never felt good to Haru before. Now it is as though he needs to carry as much of Makoto’s weight as possible, let it press him into the bed and make him be present to feel things he did not think were possible when sober.

That thought makes him remember how many times he has fucked someone while high. The sight of heroin still hits him with a wave of lust to this day, but back when he was still using, it used to render him manic with desire. It is a thing of fantasies, drawing the plunger up as blood spirals inside the syringe like a red twister. After a good hit, he used to go to the nearest person and beg like a man with a gun to his head and the fuck would be just as desperate, leaving him clawing at the edge of sanity and watching it dance away. When his addiction got really bad, heroin went from making him go numb to making him go mad for closeness; the need would drive him out of his own mind and boil over, spilling out of every pore and festering in his veins to make them throb.

Countless needles have nudged under Haru’s skin and thrusted into the most vital part of him but never before has he trusted anyone enough to let them inside him. He remembers what it was like to spread his arm out for the needle prick and knows that he would spread his legs for Makoto if he would give him that fix. Haru has only ever topped before but he is ready to change that. Judging by the way Makoto is staring down at him like he is the drug of choice, it seems like he might go along with the idea.

Makoto trails his lips across Haru’s wrist and down his trembling arm to leave a wet kiss at the inside of his elbow. He has the nerve to do all of this with shyness, eyes round under his lashes and the lenses of his glasses. Haru snatches the damned things off and bites at Makoto’s smile, capturing the shape of it to memory. Without even being conscious of it, Haru’s body rolls into a grind that Makoto falls into helplessly, hands moving under Haru’s shirt and shaping to the curve of his back. He arches, chills rising in the valley of his spine as fingers rasp along. His lips learn the curve of Makoto earlobe, the underside of his chin. Haru latches onto his throat to cage in the noise that tries to escape his mouth when their hips meet with a friction so satisfying that it lights all of his veins on fire at once.

Makoto’s mouth is flush with Haru’s ear and he listens to his breathing hitch with the shift of their bodies, the sound of him drowned out by the curse Haru hisses as pressure aches inside of him.
Makoto takes Haru’s knee in hand and draws it over his hip, changing the angle, making everything so much more intense that Makoto startles, eyes widening with boyish surprise. Haru does not know why but he cannot help but laugh at his expression, breathless and hoarse with warmth humming all over him. Makoto hugs him to his heart and nuzzles up for a slow kiss. “So rude, Haru-chan,” he whispers, their mouths curved into matching smiles that fall apart with gasps and shivers.

Haru is becoming addicted to everything about being intimate with Makoto. His kisses give him a high that will not leave a scar but leaves his whole heart branded with light. He can physically feel fondness swelling to an overwhelming degree each time he catches Makoto’s half-lidded eyes watching him, making sure he is okay and still enjoying this. Haru is doing more than enjoying it – he is chasing after Makoto’s mouth like a starved dog, eating the affection up like it is pomegranate seeds sent to lure him into darkness. That is how he has always regarded intimacy – cold and hopeless, inevitable. Frightening, but a necessary evil to gratify a primitive need that felt unnatural until now.

So when Haru’s shirt gets hiked up by wandering hands, being exposed is an exhilarating concept until he meets Makoto’s gaze.

Those eyes soften and with just one look, he tears down walls Haru has spent his entire life building through a vicious cycle of anxiety and nightmares and withdrawals and memories. The greenness of those eyes is vibrant like a summer drenched in warmth, love, and that essential thing about sunshine that will make people wither away and die if they do not get enough of it.

Haru knows that Makoto’s eyes are not so bright because he has never seen darkness; that is the very reason why they shine with so much passion. His sincerity is not brought on by oblivious innocence; it is from seeing so much, too much, that he had to make the choice whether to die out like a flame in a dark room or burn bright enough to eat his cage up with light.

So it is not a question of whether Makoto will be strong enough to handle the track marks and cigarette burns under Haru’s shirt.

It is the realization that Haru is not strong enough to see any small amount of light leave those eyes out of sadness for him.

He sits up like he is lurching awake from a nightmare, body clenched like the slightest movement will make him fall apart. Only when Makoto frames his face does Haru bow his head to rest the weight of it in those palms, falling exhausted under a rush of emotions. He uses one hand to squeeze Makoto’s wrist reassuringly and uses the other to pull the hem of his shirt down until the fabric is stretched tight. He takes a breath to level himself but the peppermint scent of Makoto’s shampoo does more to calm him down than the intake of air. “Sorry,” he whispers, the words of an apology jumbling in his mouth, threatening to spill over his lips.

Makoto has distress screaming off him, hands hovering over Haru but afraid to touch him. “What did I do? Whatever it was, I won’t do it again ever, not ever, I’m so –”

Warmth blooms through Haru in response to his concern. “It’s fine. You’re perfect.”

Makoto’s eyes triple in size, the heat of his blush coming off him in waves, but he gathers the composure needed to shake his head with a firm expression. “We can stop if you need to. Or just if you want to –”

Haru kisses the voice from his mouth. Through parted lips he inhales Makoto’s sigh of relief,
drawing the taste of it into his body as he is cradled in a gentle hug. Haru’s mouth is taken in soft, lingering clutches and those kisses gradually settle his racing heart. He leans back to regard Makoto, but remains in the warmth of their embrace. “Thank you. I mean it, thank you.” Haru’s eyes dart over his face, swallowing heavily in the tense silence. “But I don’t want to stop.” It is a quiet plea, one he would only utter for someone like this, who is staring down at him in broken joy and holding him like the fragile thing he truly is.

Makoto’s brow twitches up, face twisted in an incredulous look of disbelief even as his voice tightens with restrained hope. “You… you want to…”

“Yes.”

Makoto’s voice falls to a whisper. “With me? Of all the people you could have?”

Haru does not waver. “With you more than anyone else.”

Makoto cranes back, struggling to comprehend just how much seriousness he put into that one sentence. He looks away and clears his throat but his mouth is so dry that it sounds like rocks in a blender. The following quiet has Haru overanalyzing each moment of silence. “You don’t… do you not want to?”

That question does away with what is left of Makoto’s sanity – Haru swears he can see it crashing right out the window. “Do I not want to?” His voice rises with shrill pitch so quickly that it knocks Haru back, his eyes wide as he blinks up from the pillows. Makoto scoffs and flops back on his heels, bowing to groan into his hands. “Haru.” His voice is muffled and hopeless. “I want you so much that I think I might sincerely die from it.”

Haru perks up, smile jumping to life. “Really?”

Makoto throws a pillow at him and misses. “Don’t smile about that! I mean how could you think I don’t –” He shakes his head, hand caught in his hair like he is trying to make sense of the most impossible thing ever presented to him, though he lacks the words to convey this maddening confusion. “How… how can you even?”

Haru frowns as the heat of a blush takes his face. “You’re the one not even saying anything.”

Makoto’s groan as the heat of a blush takes his face. “You’re the one not even saying anything.”

Makoto throws a pillow at him and misses. “Don’t smile about that! I mean how could you think I don’t –” He shakes his head, hand caught in his hair like he is trying to make sense of the most impossible thing ever presented to him, though he lacks the words to convey this maddening confusion. “How… how can you even?”

“Because I am very rightfully speechless.”

Haru’s piercing stare sober’s him up. Makoto sighs, taking his hands to squeeze them reassuringly. “I’m sorry. I just…” He rolls his lips into a line as he glances back at his right leg and this time, Haru is the one who squeezes his hands. “My leg, it – it hasn’t left me with a lot of options for meeting someone.” Haru disagrees with this – anyone who wouldn’t want Makoto for the sole reason of his amputation shouldn’t be in a thousand mile radius of him anyway – but he remains silent, hearing him out. “So sex has been on the back burner a long time.” A laugh sweeps through Makoto, as soft as his blush. “But then I met you and the prospect of it turned into something it had never been before.” Haru smirks despite himself. “But I never thought for a minute that you’d actually want it with me.” Makoto winces with a guilty rub to the back of his neck. “Well no, I did think about it. A lot. Still do. Like, when I really shouldn’t be. But anyway. Sorry, this is all just really crazy and your hands are so nice.”

“It’s fine. Thank you. Rin has a set of hand lotions from France he thinks I don’t know about.”
Makoto rolls his eyes and grins, nudging Haru’s forehead with his own. Haru cards his fingers through hazel strands as a thumb drags patterns over his cheek. Their gazes lock when Makoto’s thumb moves to his bottom lip, which he pulls down to kiss Haru with an invigorated heat, one that leaves him panting and shaking. Makoto leans back to speak but Haru chases after him with vehemence, stealing the words from his mouth, making them quiver apart in a moan. Only after Makoto has kissed his lips swollen does Haru allow him to pull away, just enough for Makoto to stare at him with eyes that are as dazed as his voice. “I want you so much that I can barely breathe with it.”

Haru’s lungs swell for air but Makoto’s words leave him so full that no air can find him.

But then Makoto looks him over, crossing his arms as his voice falls flat. “However, you seem to be forgetting that you have bruised ribs, thirty three stitches over the entirety of your body, a sprained wrist, three hours of sleep, nothing in your stomach but pain pills and hot chocolate, and – oh my god, are you seriously pouting right now?”

“You’re being judgmental.”

“No, I’m saying that we’re going to end up on *Sex Sent Me to the ER* if we do this right now.”

Haru flops back on the bed in defeat, crossing his arms with a glare. Makoto arches a brow and offers him up a smirk. Haru throws a pillow at his face. “So nothing? We can’t do anything?”

Makoto falters in shaking the feathers from his hair. “Um… well, I mean, I…”

He falls short as their eyes roam over each other, Haru’s restless fingers play in the creases of the sheets as Makoto struggles to take a breath. “Try with me,” Haru whispers.

“Haru…”

“Please.”

The weight of that one word is heavy, but Makoto takes it on with a resolution that falters only when he regards his own scars, the sight of them burning him with inadequacy. His whisper is a trembling thing. “How can you be so sure?”

The windows quiver in a rumble of thunder and the sound of rain pours over the tense silence. Their gazes lock as Haru sits up slowly, unwinding his calves from where they were wrapped around the backs of Makoto’s knees. Haru reaches out and flattens his palms against Makoto’s abdomen, making his muscles jump and his spine snap straight. Gentle shadows roam across Makoto’s skin with Haru’s fingers as the wind pulls at tree limbs outside the window.

He takes a moment to acknowledge Makoto’s wounds, the ones across his skin as well as the heart underneath. There is an entry wound low on his stomach that surely resulted in long months of grueling rehabilitation. Haru bows his head and presses his lips against it, allowing himself the softest of smiles as Makoto gasps. He leans back and finds another bullet scar quickly, but this blossoming flower of disfigurement is revealed to be an exit wound from getting shot in the back, the bullet tearing through every layer of skin, muscle, and bone to leave a recovery of agony behind. Haru aches at the horrible thought of that and rests his forehead against Makoto’s stomach to taste this wound through kisses, feeling a hand rest in his hair and start to shake.
His mouth adds fever to burns, lips tracing red rivers and white strikes of stab wounds. Then he lets Makoto take his face in his hands to tip his head back for a kiss so earnest that it makes Haru realize that he will never be able to understand the gravity of what he just did. But even so, he has to make one last effort to cast his devotion in unyielding gold by finding where Makoto’s calf is tucked under his thigh and holding him there.

His fingers find the top of the prosthetic, the bulky socket that interlocks the artificial limb with the stump. Where others have been repulsed, Haru welcomes how the artificial limb feels, learning the shape of it as his heart locks in allegiance with it, with a loyalty that can only be classified as loving. He accepts this feeling as his own.

Then he touches the stump and Makoto definitely feels that – not like the hesitant brush that it is but like an electric shock, eyes flying open so fast that Haru immediately knows that nobody else has ever touched Makoto here. Not his mother, not Nagisa, not Yamazaki, barely even himself.

Haru’s voice falls like the rain, washing away the drought that Makoto’s heart has had to endure for so long. “How I feel about you – all of you – is the only thing I am sure of.”

Haru lies back on his elbows, thankful for the shadows that hide his anxious expression, though he is sure that the pounding of his heart is audible in the following quiet. Makoto stares down at him, looking like he is physically trying to keep the blush off his face, but color rises up his throat as he swallows. He tries to apologize with a smile so infuriatingly handsome that Haru goes to push him in the stomach but Makoto manages to grab him around the ankle and stop him with a laugh that makes Haru have to fight one.

But the sound of it dies out as their gazes lock and heat pulses between them, air thickening with it. Makoto meets his eyes as he stretches Haru’s leg up over his shoulder, making him grab the sheets a little tighter as his pants leg slides down to bunch at his knee, exposing his calf to the glowing grey sunlight through the window. Makoto uses the tips of his fingers to trace the hollow of his ankle, the ridges of muscles that clench in anticipation. During his wandering he finds where the exhaust pipe of Rin’s bike seared Haru’s calf, the skin pink with a fever that shoots up a dozen degrees when Makoto brushes his lips there.

He kisses each and every bruise smeared across the paleness like dark watercolors and under the worship of Makoto’s mouth, Haru tips his head back into the pillows with a shaky hum. Tension eases out of him even as pressure builds, swelling into something painful as Makoto’s tongue finds the crease of his knee. One slow drag of teeth is all it takes for Haru to pull his pants leg up his thigh with both hands fisted in the fabric, exposing more skin for bites softened by sweeps of tongue and sucking kisses that leave new bruises in their wake.

Makoto’s other hand pushes the opposite pants leg up, fingers rough under fabric, squeezing into the flesh of his inner thigh. Dizziness swarms Haru, pinpricks of light crackling in his vision. He reaches out and Makoto’s hand is there, always there, fingers lacing with his, grounding him like being in the eye of the storm. Haru tugs him up and over him, gasping into Makoto’s mouth when he gets pressed tightly between the hard line of his body and the soft mattress. Makoto’s lungs swell into his and Haru can feel a racing pulse against his own, can feel just how badly Makoto wants him when their hips lock. Seeing the greenness of those half-lidded eyes get eaten up by black lust gives Haru the confidence to reach down, his own desire building as his fingers move closer to where they need to be.

Makoto’s face twists like Haru brushing his cock actually pains him and holy shit, it probably does if his heavy hardness is anything to go by. But then his grimace unwinds into a breathless look as Haru
shapes his hand to him, finding the base of the shaft to drag his palm up and feel his control tear itself to pieces as he discovers the length of him. Even through pants and boxers Haru can feel Makoto’s pulse throbbing through his cock, the heat of him leaving his palm warm.

The entire room burns black when Makoto reaches between Haru’s legs and squeezes gently. He tries to keep it together but then Makoto’s mouth is hot and wet on his throat, licking away what is left of Haru’s composure.

He does, however, take a moment to heel Makoto in the ass. “I can feel you smirking.” His voice is not as steady as he would like it to be.

Luckily, Makoto’s isn’t either, rasping a laugh that draws the stability out of Haru’s spine. “You were doing the same thing when you grabbed me.”

Oh. Well, either way.

Their mouths meet, arms caught between hips, hands dipped between legs. Haru’s boxers are a wet mess of precome, which is pretty embarrassing, but the soft cotton confinement is shielding the naked feel of Makoto’s rough hands, so he spreads his thighs for hesitant fingers and nods at Makoto’s questioning glance.

Makoto does not do anything right away. He leans down to open Haru’s lips slowly, slipping under the hem of his shirt to explore his skin but not moving to take the garment off, noting the underlying tension in Haru’s muscles. “It’s okay,” Makoto whispers, rubbing his hip. His palm spreads wide to climb Haru’s torso, dragging a trail of heat up his body. Haru’s brows go high and crease when fingers brush the waistband of his pants, his entire body straining for Makoto’s touch, arching as a mouth teases his earlobe and whispers against it, “You’re so beautiful, Haru. In ways that no one else is.”

“Haruka.”

Makoto stiffens, leaning up to blink down at him. “Sorry?”

Haru falters. Only a handful of people alive know his first name. Why was he suddenly taken by the impulse to tell Makoto?

But then he meets that soft gaze and finds the answer there, in the realization that Makoto has stared all his faults in the face with no hesitation. He knows all at once that he can trust Makoto with this piece of himself – who he once was, who he still is, as hard as he tries to fight it. He does not want to anymore – no longer has to when Makoto is staring down at him with enough adoration to draw the voice out of his mouth. “My name is Haruka.”

He has not said his own name out loud for so long that it comes out fragile, revealing the severity of what he is giving to Makoto. His mouth parts, inspiration lighting his eyes. “Haruka,” he breathes. Haru watches how his lips shape around the word, trying to find logic in how hearing such a simple mix of syllables and letters can be made so charming when Makoto says it. “Haruka,” he kisses against his throat, voice overflowing with as much wonderment as the fingers spilling down Haru’s stomach. Haru is not as patient in exploring and untangles Makoto’s drawstring to drive his hand between Makoto’s legs, breaking that voice as he finds a naked cock, “Oh god, Haruka.”

Haru holds the weight of it in his palm, taking pleasure in how heavy it is for him. He rolls his fingers into the silky skin of the shaft, feeling out bulging veins and creases. He fists the head, warm
precome spilling between his fingers as Makoto hunches over him to curl into the touch. His eyes roll back and clench shut when Haru strokes him in slow, tight pumps, spreading a glistening sheen for his hand to slip through.

Makoto’s fingers dip into Haru’s pants and finally having him get a hand around him is so satisfying that Haru has to bury his face in the pillows as a moan builds in his throat. He can feel every individual finger curl around him and each microscopic addition of pressure as that hand curls tighter and tighter, until he is thrusting up into a fist.

A thumb rasps against the head of his cock, teasing under the ridge before rubbing it raw, making Haru’s fist pump quicker between Makoto’s legs. Both of their rhythms lose their pattern as the pleasure builds. Makoto is holding all his weight up on one arm that is shaking, so Haru nudges him to lie on his side and rolls over to face him. Makoto pillows an arm under Haru’s head, spurring him to lift a thigh over his hip to squeeze him closer. Haru grinds into the hand around him as Makoto swells in his palm and squeezes through his fist.

Their kiss is desperate, lips parted for gasps, hunger stinging their tongues. Heat pulses through Haru, throbbing hard enough to leave his bones humming with each wave of pleasure. He presses his forehead to Makoto’s and wraps his free arm around his neck to bring him close, thigh tightening over his hip. Haru loses himself in the feeling of his skin, how the very warmth of it changes as he surges into his hand. Haru holds him when his muscles clench and listens to his body, letting it tell him how to twist his wrist and which way to sweep his thumb. Haru kisses him hard until Makoto’s hips are doing more work than his hand, and breaks away to press his mouth flush with his ear, breathing the words that shatter him: “Come for me.”

Makoto does, right on the spot, right into his hand with his teeth in Haru’s neck to muffle the sound that rolls through him, a sound so good that it has Haru ready to curl out of his own skin. He pumps Makoto through the climax, drawing it out, rebuilding it just to break it and leave him shaking in his arms.

Then Makoto sighs, long and low, and it is the most satisfied noise he has ever heard. Haru can feel himself beaming on a physical level, eyes wide as they dart across Makoto’s face. His eyes are closed, throat flushing with every inhale, and he falls dazed with each exhale. Haru cannot help but drag his fingers through hazel strands that are thick with sweat, his heart dropping when Makoto leans into the touch to smother his palm with kisses.

Then Makoto’s eyes open and Haru’s heart lurches up his throat; the look he pins him with has Haru trembling long before their mouths find each other. Makoto presses him onto his back and grunts as nails dig into the firm skin of his biceps. Makoto settles between his legs and the weight of him has Haru throwing his head back to hiss through his teeth, the friction against his cock is so raw, so good, but it isn’t enough.

He whimpers when Makoto eases up. “I know, I got you,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to Haru’s bottom lip before smearing one over his chin and down the length of his neck. Makoto’s tongue plays in the hollow of his collarbones, making Haru hunch his shoulders as his breathing falters. He rocks under the hands that shape his hips, quickly nodding his consent to Makoto’s hesitant look and the wandering fingers under his shirt.

Makoto pushes the hem up just enough to expose his stomach but his fingers keep moving under the fabric to sweep over Haru’s chest. A thumb rasps over his nipple and he jerks, eyes screwing shut as his mouth flies open, no sound coming out. But then Makoto’s tongue dips into his navel and that pulls a moan out of the deepest part of Haru’s chest, pressure drawing tight across his hips. Those
lips trail lower and a distant part of him realizes what is about to happen but nothing can prepare him for the moment Makoto takes his cock into his mouth.

The pleasure is shocking, driving Haru’s nails into the sheets as a hum bursts to life at the base of his spine and makes the room shake. His world is narrowed down to the wet heat wrapped around him so tightly that it stops his heart. Makoto eases up, pulling suction over his cock so slowly that it draws the very soul from his body. Makoto swallows him back down and Haru is seconds from crying. He croaks after his voice, “Don’t stop, don’t stop.” and wraps his legs around Makoto’s head, fists knotting in his hair. Makoto situates his thighs before grabbing them to pull Haru closer and take him far back in his throat. Haru’s fingers tremble through his hair, hot shivers wracking his frame as vibrations hum up his cock.

Then he makes the deathly mistake of looking down. Meeting Makoto’s eyes when his mouth is stretched around his cock, lips raw from the friction of going up and down, does Haru in. He scrambles for Makoto’s hands, which are already reaching up, ready to catch him, and their fingers squeeze together hard as the pressure breaks. “Oh fuck, fuck, fuck…” It hits Haru sharp and hot, legs clenching around Makoto’s head as his hips roll into his mouth. Tension that has lingered in his body for years lets go all at once, leaving him boneless. He sinks into the mattress, gasping with each aftershock of pleasure that sparks through him like a weak flame trying to stay alive. He came so hard that his ears are left ringing and Makoto’s shifting is muffled but Haru feels it, inside his own chest and the very air around them.

He blinks down at Makoto and finds him still between his legs, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. They surge into each other and Haru kisses the bitter taste from Makoto’s lips, losing himself in the damp heat of his mouth. The fire cools and their mouths softly open and pressed closed. Makoto cradles the back of Haru’s head as he eases down over the pillows and sinks into them, exhausted. He maneuvers his shaky, heavy arms around Makoto’s neck and throws a thigh back over his hip, sighing as hands move under the back of his shirt to hug him close. Haru holds onto him, trying to convey so much with only touch, but Makoto understands and kisses his forehead. “Rest, Haruka.”

Makoto’s hands teach him how to relax and for the first time in twenty-three years, Haruka closes his eyes and learns what true rest is.

Sousuke wakes to a phone ringing and the warm weight against his side leaves him in a flash.

He is fully conscious in two seconds, eyes opening to find Rin scrambling for the nightstand. He yanks his cell phone from its charger and the bowl of rice it was nestled in goes toppling over. Rin brings the phone to his face but then he hesitates, skin washing over with a nauseous tint. He is wearing the expression of someone who is too used to getting bad news and Rin looks like he is trying to figure out if he can physically handle being told that anything else has gone wrong.

Sousuke sits up to cup the back of Rin’s neck, massaging the tension from his muscles. He presses his forehead to his temple, letting him know that he is not alone, not physically or in any other aspect – not anymore, not ever again.

Rin takes a deep breath and answers. “Hello?”

A muffled response has the shadows on his face breaking into beaming light. “Hi baby,” he laughs. “I miss you, too.” He ducks his head to lean into the phone, everything about him suddenly soft. “You having fun?” His smile becomes impossibly gentler. “Good. Ready for me to come get you?”
There is a reply, one that makes Rin inhale sharply and freeze. He reaches back to squeeze his fingers through Sousuke’s shirt. “Don’t be scared, they’re just sirens. They’re just cars.” Rin swallows, shaking his head at whatever was just asked. “No, I’m fine, Gou. Yes, Haru’s okay too. He’s at home, waiting on you. No, I just… I just miss you really bad.” Rin smears a hand over his eyes, lashes spikey with tears. Sousuke rubs his back and he leans into the touch. “I’m on my way, okay? All right. I love you, too.”

He hangs up and tosses the phone across the bed. He hunches over his crossed legs, bowing his head into his hands. “That was my sister. She’s at a friend’s house.”

“Oh.” Sousuke hesitates, the hand on Rin’s back faltering. “Is… she’s okay, right?”

“Yeah,” Rin assures, smiling tiredly at Sousuke, appreciating the concern in his voice. “I don’t think she knows what’s happened but she heard police cars and got scared.”

Sousuke inclines his head carefully, studying Rin’s expression. “How do you keep her from…” He gives a vague gesture around the room. “All this?”

He breathes a laugh, working through the tangles in his hair. “I don’t.” Sousuke’s eyes widen and Rin grimaces. “I mean I do, as much as I can. But she’s smart. She hears things people don’t tell her.” He levels their gazes. “Gou can tell when Haru is lying. Especially when he’s lying for me. She’s so amazing.” Rin looks down to trace the little heart at the crease of his thumb and index finger. It looks like it was hand-drawn with the wobbly attentiveness of a child, but something about it made Rin want to memorialize it into his skin. “One day I won’t have to lie to her anymore.” He sighs, bringing the fist up to rest his mouth against it. “But that day needs to come soon because I’m running out of stories to tell and she’s heard almost all of them.”

Sousuke takes his free hand in understanding. His own hand is two times bigger and three times rougher than Rin’s but their fingers have somehow always fit comfortably. Rin’s eyes dart up to lock with his before skittering away, causing Sousuke to frown. “What is it?”

Rin nervously meets his gaze before looking down at their joined hands, his eyes reddening with unshed tears. “Do you still want me?”

Shock flares through Sousuke. His thoughts race in an uncontrollable panic as they always do when Rin is crying. Every instinct he has narrows down to the sole purpose of making the tears stop but even when he smears them away, more of them come, and he finds the reason why when he recognizes the humiliation on Rin’s face. It is the same expression he wore just hours ago, when he could not go all the way with Sousuke.

With an aching heart, he reaches out and holds Rin’s face in his hands. “Of course I still want you,” he whispers reverently, brows creased over impassioned eyes. “I don’t know how to stop wanting you.” Sousuke brushes warm moisture away from Rin’s cheeks, hesitating to lean forward, but it is Rin who surges into him and takes his bottom lip between the seam of his own. Sousuke breathes a sigh of relief into his mouth, kissing the taste of salt away. A thought strikes him and he leans back out of Rin’s space, his voice wavering with nervousness. “Does that scare you? That I want you?”

“No, god no,” Rin lunges, eyes wide and relieved. “No, that makes me happy.” His breathless smile turns shy. “Really happy.”

“Well good,” Sousuke nods, squeezing his hands. “But what made you think I didn’t?”
Rin’s smile trembles apart as he looks away. “Nothing, you didn’t do anything. I just. You don’t think I’m – that I’m leading you on or… or something?”

Sousuke’s rubbing hand stills and his brow arches in genuine confusion. “How?”

“That I’m not leading you on.” Rin’s eyes flicker to his lips, anxious fingers crawling over the sheets. “Kissing you.”

Sousuke shakes his head as gently as he physically can, aware that Rin is watching his every move and waiting for him to falter, trying to find a crack in his demeanor. Sousuke doesn’t take it personally because catching someone in a lie has probably saved Rin’s life a number of times – he also knows how difficult it is going to be for Rin to stop leaning on a survival mechanism so heavily. Sousuke still relies on his tactical training just to get through a fucking crowd at the grocery store. He knows how it is, so Rin sizing him up does not offend him. “You are not leading me on,” Sousuke says. “You can kiss me or not kiss me as much as you want to. Be a flirt or be an ass or whatever you want.”


Rin steadies himself with a nod. It’s a weak nod, tentative, but the intense set of his eyes proves that he wants to be firm in this. “I’ll try.” He opens his mouth to speak, but all that comes out is a frustrated sigh. Sousuke coaxes the words out of him with a patient, open expression. “I’m so… so mad at myself,” Rin whispers, head bowed in shame. “I trust you so much. I want you so bad. I’m not scared of you. I don’t know what I’m scared of.”

Sousuke goes deep into his thoughts, trying to remember bits and pieces of the lectures his therapists have used on him. He has forgotten most of them – he’s a pretty good listener, but not when someone is trying to tell him everything that is wrong with him. However, a few sentences stood out from hours upon hours of sitting in offices with overbearing scented candles and shitty leather couches, so he digs through the memories of lack-luster speeches if only for Rin. “Maybe you’re not scared of what might happen, but what happened to you.”

Rin blinks up at him and Sousuke tries to put all that into real words instead of the vague, indefinite meanings his doctors used. “If someone has used sex to hurt you before,” – and Sousuke had better never fucking find them – “then it probably affects how you view sex now. Does that make sense?”

Rin’s smile is twisted with bitterness. “It makes a lot of sense. Too much.”

That makes Sousuke sadder than anything in his life, but finding something Rin resonates with is a start, at least.

Rin looks away, fidgeting. “I think something else that has to do with it is that I don’t know how to do…” He nods down at their joined hands. “Whatever we are.”

Sousuke squints, trying to understand. “You don’t know how to do a partnership?” He cranes back a little. “Wait, have you ever been in a real relationship?”

“…define that.”

“Like, with consent and support and not the whole… sex for money… uh, ordeal. Have you been in
that kind of relationship?”

“Well yeah,” Rin bites, brow hiking with irritation.

Sousuke sees right through him. “How many?”

Rin scoffs, flipping his hair. Sousuke isn’t fazed and that much is clear in his piercing stare. Rin shifts restlessly, unable to meet his gaze. He gives up with a sigh. “Fucking fine, one. One, okay?”

Now Sousuke is having trouble meeting his eyes, looking down. “Well I’ve never been in one either, if that makes you feel any better.”

Rin yanks Sousuke’s face up, mushing his cheeks with a reverent stare. “What?” he breathes. “How?”

He shrugs easily. “Never found anybody worth the effort.”

Rin blinks several times, then shoves Sousuke when he laughs at his blush. They both sober up as Rin recalls his one relationship. “Mine was with a girl. But we were both stupid.” His eyes are lost to memories, voice absent. “But even that relationship was – it wasn’t normal. We were homeless teenagers. Scared as shit. I was a rentboy, she was a callgirl, so we were never really loyal but sex wasn’t special to us either, so the whole thing was messed up. I guess I’ve never been in a ‘real’ relationship, now that I’m saying it all out loud – the situation I’m talking about, that was with Aki.”

Sousuke raises his brows. “Oh. I – wait, really?”

Rin tips his head in confusion. “Yeah?”

“You just act so easy around each other. There’s no resentment at all.”

Rin snorts. “It wasn’t always like that. We went through… a lot.” He says this with unfathomable depth and is forced to shake his head to clear it. “She deserves someone who will treat her like a fucking queen but that’s not me. I love her, I do, but just as a friend. I’m not what she needs. She’s not what I need.”

Sousuke speaks without thinking it through. “What do you need?”

Rin leans back on his hands with a coy tip of his head, hair slipping over his shy smile. He stretches forward with the languid grace of a cat and crawls into Sousuke’s lap, making his heart falter. Rin hums a laugh against his ear, lips parting to breathe, “You.” He brushes Sousuke’s earlobe, lingering, murmuring against it. “I need to be able to feel you…” Another slow kiss. “And touch you…” One more, two more, too many. “And do things…” He draws the word out in a way that makes chills rush up Sousuke’s arms. “Lots of things,” he whispers with an evasive sort of playfulness.

Rin’s body is supple under Sousuke’s touch, muscles relaxed. There is no hesitancy in their kiss but no rush, either. It’s slow warmth like a sunrise, heavy and light at the same time – easy. Natural.

But then Rin’s phone rings and Sousuke is yet again reminded that the world is not perfect, no matter how hard those kisses try to prove otherwise. Rin sighs, taking Sousuke on the lips once more, and then just one more time, before pulling away to answer it. “Yeah?” A muffled reply has him slipping
away to pace the floor. “Nii, how’s Asahi?”

Sousuke tries to find his shoes while Rin and Nii talk. He blinks over at the fireplace and realizes that Echo is sprawled out in front of it, gnawing on one of his field boots. Winnie is pulling the other boot through the doggie door cut into the wall but she freezes when her eyes lock with Sousuke. He heaves a tired sigh and forces himself up off the bed.

Sousuke wrestles one shoe from Echo and gets Winnie’s after she dives under the bed and leaves it under there, making him fucking crawl after it. He’s putting on his jacket when Rin puts Nii on speaker and sets the phone on a shelf so he can strip his tank top. He pulls it off gingerly, wincing as pulled muscles strain. Sousuke watches him slide a barbell through his tongue and clasp a line of studs up the curve of his ears. Nii is talking shit about the hospital cafeteria when Rin slips a gun holster over his back, the raven across his shoulders glaring at Sousuke as he does so. As he nestles a glock into both side pouches, Sousuke’s eyes roam down long seams of muscle, over the fit of his waist and the flare of his hips. He makes the fascinating discovery that Rin’s back dimples are pierced with diamonds and he has a tattoo across his lower back written in dark, sensuous cursive, right between where someone’s hands would grab his hips from behind: Lucky You.

Rin looks over his shoulder, tracing his smirk with his tongue ring as he rolls his sweatpants down and steps out of them.

Of course he doesn’t wear underwear. Of course.

In other news, Sousuke’s creativity has really gone to shit because seeing Rin naked from the back is better than all his wet dreams and fantasies combined. He’s all firm skin and long limbs, tight muscles and tattoo ink. If he has got any body fat then it all went to his ass. How in the hell he works it into those latex tights he uses for pole dancing, Sousuke doesn’t know – he may have to turn to spiritual guidance for that answer.

Sousuke notices a black bow tattooed on the back of either thigh before jeans cover them up. He meets Rin’s eyes in the closet mirror, knowing fully well that he looks like a kicked puppy but not having the pride to give a damn about it. Rin just bites his lip around a smile and bends over to pull on his combat boots, dropping a knife in each of them. He straightens and something about the way he slips into a silk shirt is as alluring as the prospect of him taking it off. Then he holds the phone close but keeps the speaker on for Sousuke to hear.

Sousuke is just trying to get his mind right by looking through his own cell phone when Nii says, “Rin, I tried to call Haru and his phone is dead.”

Rin freezes, eyes wide and unblinking on the wall.

“I called the cabin and he didn’t answer there, either.”

“Um.” Sousuke’s voice is loud and awkward in the silence. Rin turns and Sousuke rubs the back of his neck as he glances down at his message inbox. “He’s actually with Makoto.”

In total synchronization with an equal amount of bombarding shock, Rin and Nii shout, “What?”

Sousuke grimaces at the loudness, Echo flicking her ears in annoyance. “He showed up at Makoto’s house but he convinced him to go to Urgent Care.”

Rin stares with his jaw dropped. “No one’s ever been able to convince him to go to the hospital,” he
breathe, awed by Makoto.

“They went back to Mako’s after that,” Sousuke adds, glancing down at his phone screen. “He said that Haru was asleep. That was about two hours ago, but he’ll probably stay asleep for a while.”

Rin’s back hits the wall with the weight of his relief. He drags a hand up through his hair, letting out a deep breath. “Okay, he’s safe then. He needs some time away from all this, I’m not gonna bother them for a while.” He pulls the phone away from his face, chewing on his lip with an anxious look.

Sousuke ventures over, nudging Rin with a brow raised in question. He looks up at him with dread. “I’m scared he’s gonna start having a withdrawal,” he whispers. “He always does when everything goes to shit.”

“Makoto can handle it if happens,” Sousuke assures. “He’s dealt with worse. Trust me.”

Rin nods, using his firm expression as a source of strength.

Nii says, “But how’re you gonna pick up Gou now? Haru can’t meet you to walk with you. You can’t be walking alone right now – I’ll come meet you at Samezuka.”

“You aren’t walking alone right now either, Nii,” Nao calls from the background. “Your clothes are covered in blood, if you’ve forgotten.”

“I can steal a backless dress and be sexy like Asahi,” Nii jokes. Asahi gives a weak laugh in response and it is such a beautiful sound that Rin hugs himself around the middle with a watery smile.

He levels himself to focus. “I can walk alone this time. I have the most weapons out of all of us right now.”

Ikuya speaks up. “But you’ll be walking alone with Gou.”

Rin curses under his breath, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Sousuke quietly tells him, “I would go with you but you said that police cars scare her, so I don’t think that would be much help.”

“Thank you though,” Rin whispers, leaning up on his tip toes to kiss his cheek. He remains in the circle of Sousuke’s arms as he tries to think everything through. “Nao, do you and Ikuya need escorts home?”

“We’ll stay with Asahi tonight,” Nao says. “Ikuya’s mom is working late anyway. So the only thing to worry about is getting Gou home.”

Rin purses his lips in thought, eyes darting before they freeze. He takes a deep breath and looks up at Sousuke almost nervously, like he is about to ask the world of him. “Could you take me to the hospital and pick up Nii there, then drop us off around Gou’s friend’s house so we can walk her home?”

Sousuke realizes something in this moment: that Rin is trusting him not only with his own life, but Nii’s. One of his friends. A part of his family. It is clear that Freebird has a bond like none other, and they are opening it up to Sousuke. “Yes,” he says without hesitation.
Rin sags in relief, hugging him tightly. “Fucking light of my life,” he whispers against his neck, kisses loving and so earnest, making warmth bloom through Sousuke. Rin leans back to tell Nii the plan, which she resentfully agrees to, but Sousuke is going to take the challenge of earning Nii’s trust head on.

Just as Rin is about to hang up, Asahi chokes out, “Lemme talk, Nii.” Muffled movement indicates Nii going over to hand him the phone. “Hey, Rosetop.”

Rin squeezes his eyes shut before the tears can fall, his smile wobbling. “Hey, Asahi. How’re you?”

Asahi chuckles, rough and dry. “Like I’d give up at least four fingers if someone would sneak me a pack of cigarettes.”

Rin laughs, dazed and exhausted. “I know what you mean. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Asahi grins. He goes to say something else but he sniffs, and then he cannot stop. His voice strains as he struggles to hold back tears. “I just wanted to ask you when the funeral is. I want to be there.”

Rin goes to answer but has to cover his mouth with a hand, throat clenched to keep a sob down. He inhales, but cannot catch his breath around the lump in his throat. He shatters all at once, burying his face into Sousuke’s chest to muffle his weeping, body wracking in his fierce hold.

Rin leans back and Sousuke can physically see him forcing his emotions down to bring the phone back to his face. “Three days,” he tells Asahi, resting his head against Sousuke’s heart. “It was supposed to only be two but Kazuki’s mom has to take a long flight to get here. Naka’s sister is in the same boat – she’s gonna have to find someone to watch her kids or bring them all on the plane with her.” His voice falls apart with stress. “And then there’s Naka’s grandma, she raised his crazy ass but she’s been in and out of the hospital for so long, I don’t – I don’t know if she’ll make it through this. So that worries me about the extra day, but.” He wipes his eyes. “Fuck, we all need it.”

Asahi’s voice is raw. “Yeah. I’ll be out by then.”

“Please don’t push yourself. We really need you.”

“I really need y’all,” Asahi retorts. “So you gotta be careful too, okay?”

Rin nods around a sigh of acceptance. “I’ll try, Asahi.”

“Oh, and um…” He clears his throat rather nervously. “Could you tell Tall, Dark, and Broody thanks for the ride? His car smelled really nice. Like a really clean dog.”

Rin laughs at Sousuke’s blush. “I’ll tell him.”

They say their parting words and Rin hangs up. Sousuke whistles for Echo after she and Winnie have their even more emotional goodbyes. Only when he assures her that she can see the puppy again does Echo follow him and Rin out of the rent room and into the hallway.

As soon as they step into the corridor, the double doors across the hall open up and another couple steps out. Seijuro and Aki are wrapped up in each other, dazed and disheveled, until they notice Rin and Sousuke and freeze like two deer in the path of an 80,000 pound semi-truck.
Seijuro’s hands fly off Aki’s ass and she yanks her fingers out from under his shirt. She scrubs furiously at the drying sweat on her face as he makes work of zipping up his fly, cursing colorfully when it gets stuck. Then the four of them are left in awkward silence as Echo pants loudly in the quiet.

Rin rolls his lips. Pops them. He sweeps an arm out in a grand gesture for Seijuro and Aki to walk ahead and they do so with ducked heads and quick feet.

Rin and Sousuke follow behind in a bit of a stupor, but then Aki glances back at Sousuke and her eyes are firm as they assure, “Seijuro isn’t the snitch.”

He cannot remember the last time he was so relieved.

Haru is not exactly awake when he nuzzles into the chest beneath him; it is just a deeper, primitive part of him stirred to find more warmth. But a more conscious part of him becomes cognate as a hand cards through his hair and he realizes that Makoto is awake.

Haru opens his eyes, blinking away the sleepy haze. His body is still heavy, weighed down under a blanket of fatigue, but under his throbbing stitches and pulsing bruises, he feels good. The rush of endorphins from earlier have left him supple and boneless in Makoto’s arms.

Haru leans up and folds his forearms under his chin to prop his head. He is sprawled on top of Makoto and face to face with him, close enough to look through every shade of green in his crinkled eyes. “Hi,” Makoto whispers.

“Hi,” Haru whispers back, not wishing to disturb their quiet. The only sounds in the world are the whistle of wind, the rustle of fallen leaves, and the gentle, evening song from tired birds.

Makoto asks, “You okay?”

Haru tucks wads of the quilt under his chin and gives him a frown that is dangerously close to pout territory. “Why’re you awake?”

He feels a wave of tension go down Makoto’s body. “Oh, I was – reading. And waiting up for Sousuke,” he hurries, gesturing toward the window. Haru follows his gaze to the house through the open backyard fence but sees no car in the driveway. “He still isn’t home yet.” Makoto sounds victorious for coming up with this excuse.

Haru is not impressed, and his flat stare indicates as much. “Have you even been asleep?”

Makoto opens his mouth but ends up having to look away, chewing on his bottom lip. Haru narrows his eyes and leans forward, slipping his arms around Makoto’s neck to guide their mouths together and gently pull his bottom lip out from under his teeth by sucking it, wet and soft. He brushes his tongue over the indentions left behind and Makoto sighs in defeat. “I don’t do good with sleep,” he admits against his mouth.

Haru pulls away in confusion and Makoto grimaces. “I mean I have… nightmares. And stuff.” His voice is so small.

Understanding sweeps through Haru. “Oh.” He shifts, trying to figure out what to say, but then his
leg lines up with Makoto’s right one. The prosthetic isn’t there, and the two of them seem to realize it at the same time. Makoto sits up so quickly that it almost sends Haru rolling off the bed before Makoto sweeps him up in his arms. “I’m sorry! I just – I can’t wear it to bed. I can put it back on if it’s… too weird.”

Haru’s voice is muffled, his face smooshed into Makoto’s chest. “You just said you can’t wear it to bed.”

“Well – well yeah, but if –”

“Makoto.” Haru grabs the fretting hands as he sits up, shaking his head with every ounce of gentleness he possesses. “It’s not weird. It’s fine.”

Makoto sags in relief, head bowing. With a pained heart, Haru ghosts his fingers over the darkness around his eyes. “You need to go to sleep. Don’t worry about nightmares. I can handle them.”

It looks like Makoto wants to believe him but there is still fear straining in his muscles. Haru lies on his back, snuggling into the pillows and patting his chest. With a look that is beyond thankful, Makoto crawls over him, wrapping him up in a grateful hug and burying his face against Haru’s heart. Haru lifts his knees to situate Makoto between his legs and shuts his eyes as he rubs his back, sweeping over rough burn patches and thick scars. “Thank you,” Makoto whispers, receiving a kiss to the top of his head in response. He sighs. “I really hope this works.”

“I’ll wake you up with a blowjob if you go to sleep.”

Makoto freezes, eyes going wide before squeezing shut earnestly. Haru breathes a laugh and smiles against his hair, brushing through the strands until Makoto’s breathing evens out. His warmth brings Haru a comfort like none other until his thoughts start to wander. He worries about Asahi and stress builds a headache between his eyes as he thinks about the rest of his friends. Rin is Freebird’s second in command and that is a task he has always taken on with ferocity and passion, but the loss of Nakagawa has surely made the duty of looking after everyone else impossibly harder.

Haru tucks his face against Makoto’s and closes his eyes, Nakagawa’s voice echoing through his head. “You oughta stay with that guy, cause it’s really worth it.”

He holds Makoto tighter as grief swells in his throat, building a lump. This is not the first instance that Haru has wanted to stop all this – the danger, the dealing, the running – but with Makoto in his arms, the need for a change grows, and something about the way he breathes helps Haru focus, making him understand that he has got to get a fucking grip and fix this no matter what it costs.

Even if it costs his pride.

His gaze roams over to the window. He stares out at Sousuke’s house and narrows his eyes.

Sousuke drives the squad car with Rin riding shotgun, Echo sprawled across Nii’s lap in the backseat. The girl rubs through her fur and stares down like she’s mystified, so shocked that an animal just knows when a human needs affection. This is not Echo’s first rodeo – she knows that the silence is the cab is heavy and stress is practically humming in the air.

Holding hands while driving is an action that Sousuke did not expect to be so comforting, but just feeling Rin’s thumb move over his knuckles as he weaves through traffic is
The contact gives him enough energy to follow Rin’s directions to the neighborhood where Gou’s friend lives, and he manages to park at a corner lot without jumping the curb, which is a nice change.

Nii offers Sousuke a sarcastic salute before exiting the squad car, but she is appreciative enough to give him and Rin a quick minute of privacy. Her door slams shut and Rin immediately winds his arms around Sousuke’s neck to pull him into a kiss. The press of his mouth leaves Sousuke warm despite that the windshield is frosted over. “Thank you so much,” Rin whispers.

Sousuke squeezes his thigh, brows creased. “You don’t have to thank me for this.”

Rin leans back, his smile heavy with exhaustion and fucking incredible. “But I want to.”

Sousuke rolls his eyes and smiles against the laugh Rin presses into his lips. They break apart for Rin to squeeze him a fraction tighter, breathing hard. “God, I don’t want to be away from you. Please be safe.”

“I will,” Sousuke assures, kissing his shoulder and noting that the cherry blossom tattoo tastes no different than the rest of his skin – it is very literally a part of him. “Let me know when you get home.”

Rin nods, tucking their faces together, eyes lulling closed. Sousuke can practically hear the seconds ticking by and his distress climbs with each passing moment, the prospect of letting Rin go is awful and inevitable. But they have to part to work toward a day when they won’t have to ever again.

Rin kisses him one final time, letting him taste an aching sigh. “Bye, baby,” he whispers, forced to leave the warmth of Sousuke’s embrace and get out of the car to endure the cold.

The ride back home sucks nuts. It is too quiet in the cab, even though the only thing he is missing is hearing Rin breathe beside him. Sousuke’s hand feels too big, too empty as he turns the steering wheel into his driveway and twists the key out of the ignition. His head falls back against the seat and he lets out a deep sigh, eyes falling shut.

Sousuke gathers his notebooks of interrogations and evidence reports before hauling himself out of the car and trudging up the driveway. Echo is yawning beside him when he fishes his keys out of his pockets to open the door. She freezes all at once, pupils dilating with a rush of adrenaline that hits her terrifyingly fast.

Echo jumps in front of Sousuke before he can reach the front door, blocking his path – it is a move that has saved his life numerous times. He frowns at her, ready to reprehend her for trying to play when he is this tired, but then he recognizes the crazed look in her eyes.

He slowly moves his gaze up to the house.

Someone is inside. Echo knows it.

Cautiously, he approaches the front door but sees no sign of forced entry. His front windows are all intact, too.

Sousuke weighs his options. Standard procedure would be to call the station for back up, but that would mean waiting out here in the cold, and Sousuke’s not one to be told that he can’t go into his own fucking house, especially on a mere three hours of sleep, but even more so when this
godforsaken world just took Rin out of his arms.

So with one hand secure on his holster, he unlocks the door and steps inside.

There is no immediate threat in the living room. It is dark, but Sousuke’s body has trained itself how to feel danger in the air, and there is nothing. Just flashes from the muted television and empty shadows.

But then his insides run cold under the weight of a stare.

Sousuke turns to the kitchen, Echo’s growl rolling through the floor and up his legs, sending chills through them. His gaze lands on the kitchen table, and he is borne back five years into the past, when he was the one sitting down and this boy was the one standing up to hand him a bag of drugs and did it like he hated Sousuke enough to want to skin him raw and eat him alive.

Haru flicks a lighter, burns a cigarette to life, and meets Sousuke’s eyes in silence.
Tension settles heavily in the air, the silence thick and suffocating. The blue of Haru’s eyes glows in the darkness and Sousuke vaguely looks around to make sure nothing is missing – his purple heart is still displayed on the mantle, as is the shadow box holding his dress uniform pins. The shitty yard sale television is still there, which is actually sort of a disappointment because he wants to get rid of the thing, he has just been too lazy to move 400 pounds from the living room to the dumpster. Then his eyes anxiously search for – and find – his Xbox, because those 3 a.m. Call of Duty missions with Ren honestly mean the world to him.

Other than that, he really does not have much worth stealing. His couch could probably be considered an antique – it smells like one, anyway. There is a stash of money under some floorboards and a few (dozen) guns stored around the house. Sousuke mentally goes down the list of weapons he has and stiffens when he realizes that Haru is sitting at the kitchen table, and taped to the bottom of that table is a loaded handgun. Though come to think of it, Haru probably does not need a gun to kill anyone – his glare in itself could render someone’s bones to ice. Not Sousuke, but. Someone else, probably. Not him though. Definitely not.

A growl rolls through Echo and Haru does not even blink, which is rather disappointing. Sousuke takes it upon himself to get a reaction out of him by snapping, “What the fuck are you doing in my house?”

Haru is not affected by the heat pouring from his voice. He takes another calm pull of his cigarette, the end glowing as angry and red as Sousuke feels. “We need to talk.”

This is true, but as Sousuke previously stated, he is not in the mood for being told what he needs to do. “Get out.”

“No.”
Oh, this son of a bitch just knows how to get under someone’s skin without even trying. Sousuke works his jaw, fists clenching. “How’d you get in here?”

Haru curves a smirk, a slow, sharp thing. It is terrifying. “A window.”

“Which one?” It doesn’t really matter; he’s barring all of them when this is over, but just to have a specific point to focus his frustration –

“Bathroom. You’ve got hair trimmings in your sink, by the way. It’s gross.”

Sousuke is reeling in disbelief for a lot of reasons, but most especially because, “That window is three feet by three feet. It’s not physically possible for someone to –”

“It is, and I did it, and it is done.” Haru levels their gazes. “Now we need to talk.”

Sousuke’s muscles clench tight enough to shake. The jet of air he lets out through his nose is hot. He walks back to the door, toes off his shoes and pulls off his jacket, shoving it down on the rack. Echo whines, quivering under the tension in the air until he strokes her flattened ears. “Go to bed, La La,” he whispers, resorting to the nickname he used when training her as a puppy to calm her down. She listens to him, but doesn’t go to his bedroom, where she always sleeps – she stomps over to the couch and curls up under it, her eyes like daggers as they keep watch on Haru. Sousuke sighs in acceptance.

He keeps his holster on because ha, hell no. His steps are heavy across the floor despite that he took his boots off; the weight of exhaustion is loaded but his body pushes forward with stubborn grit and underlying caution as he reaches the kitchen.

Sousuke drops his files and notebooks on the table. Haru stiffens, but his face remains neutral; at least until Sousuke opens the fridge and ducks his head inside. Haru scoffs, “What are you doing?”

Sousuke rears around, face twisted in exasperated frustration. “Can I get a beer in my own fucking house? Fuck.” His sigh is fuming but he chokes on it when he reaches into the bottom drawer and finds it empty.

Haru’s voice is smug. “I’m not stupid.”

Sousuke turns around and stands up to his full height, but Haru does not cower down in his shadow. Darkness is very much a part of him – that is clear by the way he relaxes in that silhouette even as Sousuke’s voice makes the windows shake. “You took one of my guns?”

“I relocated it,” Haru corrects with an arched brow. “Mind you, I had no idea how you’d react and I knew that you’d have a gun on you already.”

“Well, he has a point. Too bad Sousuke doesn’t give a shit. “Where is it?”

“With the other hundred in your bedroom.”

Sousuke throws his hands up and snatches a beer out of the fridge, slamming it shut. He rips the beer top off with nothing more than a twist of his fingers. It’s sharp and it hurts, but the burn fuels the fire raging through him. Not that it matters much because he just ends up slouching down in the chair across from Haru and taking a long swig. He wipes his scowl and crosses his arms. “You better start talking.”
Haru looks intrigued. “Or what?”

“Or,” Sousuke draws out, voice just as bitchy as Haru’s expression, “I still got a bunch of guns within arm’s length and I’m a little stressed. You do the math.” He sits back with a satisfied swig of his beer. Then he pauses. “Wait, how did you even know I live here?”

He finds the answer in Haru’s choice of clothing – namely, his shirt. It’s Makoto’s. Sousuke finds several other versions of the answer in the array of hickeys across Haru’s neck, bruises fading from light to dark and more than likely also from Makoto.

God, fucking gross. Sousuke takes his biggest swig of beer yet to drown out that mental image. He has a lot of love for his brother, but not for the idea of him being with the prick sitting across the table.

His mouth firms into a line against the lip of the bottle. “What do you want?”

Haru leans forward in a way that makes Sousuke crane back – his eyes are anxious, more emotional than he has ever seen them. His voice is strained to hold back grief but Sousuke hears it. He feels it. “I need to know whatever you’ve found out about the Bloodhounds.”

“The what?”

“The gang, the gang I don’t know shit about,” Haru snaps, the pitch of his voice climbing with stress, fingers clenching over the edge of the table. “I need to know if you’ve found out anything.” He looks away from Sousuke’s wide eyes and sinks back in his chair with a sigh. He steadies himself and meets his gaze. “I’ll cooperate. I will listen. Just tell me what you know.” He swallows. “They killed my friend.”

Sousuke wishes that he didn’t understand the look in Haru’s eyes so much. He finishes his beer off to buy the time to gather his thoughts and sets the empty bottle down with a resounding thud. Then he opens up a folder and slides a photograph across the table.

Haru picks it up with eyes that move over the picture hungrily, eating up every detail. “That’s the van that Nakagawa chased,” Sousuke says. “It was pulled out of the ocean a few hours ago. Waves had already pushed it pretty close to shore in the outskirts.” He scrubs his face in frustration, trying to put some feeling back into it; he is so tired. “Investigators found a set of footprints going up the beach.” He reaches over to the wall and flicks on the kitchen light, wincing as the brightness spikes a headache to life. He ignores it in favor of hunching over another photograph with Haru. “Size seven, woman’s boot.”

Haru stares down at the picture of tracks in disbelief. He does not seem to be conscious of his hand moving up to his collarbone, where a long cut has been stitched shut. “There was a woman at Samezuka,” Haru says. “She attacked me. I saw her leave. I think that’s her.”

“You hear her say anything?”

“She showed me her tattoo –”

“A bloody paw print?”

“Yes. This was after I stabbed her, but she showed me her tattoo and said Bloodhound. I – what are
you digging through your fridge for now?”

“Those were a few really loaded sentences. I gotta have another beer, hang on.”

Haru pinches the bridge of his nose in exasperation, waiting for Sousuke to take a good five swallows before continuing. “Were there any more tracks?”

Sousuke shakes his head and it spins a little, but not enough. “No, not yet. They lost her trail in the woods.”

Haru takes a long pull of his cigarette and breathes out the stench of smoke. His brows are pinched together, eyes clenched shut in irritation. “The yakuza said that they were approached by someone who could make their gang stronger. That isn’t making sense to me because there’s only one way to become the top gang in Iwatobi.”

Sousuke doesn’t have to mull it over for long. “It’s whoever sells the most relay.”

Haru bows his head in a grave nod, taking another drag.

Sousuke rolls his shoulder into his hand. Stress has left it pulsing with every heartbeat and the fact that he forgot to turn the heat on before he left the house for work doesn’t help anything. He misses the fireplace in Rin’s room, he misses his warm lips and the heat of his whispers. Sousuke tries to level himself, but the buzz from the alcohol doesn’t do much to help him because his thoughts always take a dive into the gutter whenever he gets tipsy. It’s even worse when he can still feel the burning streaks Rin’s nails left in his back. He relies on every ounce of professionalism he possesses to stay focused. “Rin told me that most of your competition comes from Diamond Back.”

Haru shrugs around a nod, confused by the sudden change in subject.

Sousuke leans forward, driven by a hunch. “If the Bloodhounds want more power then shouldn’t they go after the gang who is controlling the relay war?”

“There’s no official score,” Haru says. “And it’s not just a power struggle between Freebird and Diamond Back. There’s also Rough Rabbit and Honeyblade.”

The bird, the snake, the rabbit, and cat. Sousuke knows enough about the Iwatobi drug empire to recognize these gangs and their corresponding symbols. Now there’s the Bloodhounds’ wolf to add to the mix. But he has seen one animal symbol more than others. “Freebird doesn’t usually go poking in another gang’s business. The same can be said for everyone else. Except for…” He raises his brows.

Haru’s eyes flash. “Diamond Back.”

“Right,” Sousuke nods. “Diamond Back is obviously the biggest threat to everyone – no matter who has control of the relay war, Diamond Back is always the one coming for them first. So why are the Bloodhounds coming after you?”

Haru pauses long enough for his thoughts to get on the same wavelength as Sousuke’s. “You think it’s personal.” He shakes his head at Sousuke’s nod. “It can’t be – I’ve never heard of them before and I’ve been in this my whole life.”

“It has to be,” Sousuke insists. “The yakuza said that they’re being forced into taking down Freebird.
They can’t stop until all of you are dead. This can’t *not* be personal.”

Haru rests his forehead against his fist, staring down at the carton of cigarettes on the table. “I don’t know what they could want from any of us personally. Power isn’t personal. It impacts everyone. What could they want to take from us individually?”

Sousuke tries to rub the ache out of his neck and fails. “Either way, I don’t think you should be expecting any more spontaneous attacks for a while. The yakuza said that the gang has their hands tied. Whoever is controlling them has to have their hands tied now, too.”

Haru leans over the table with piercing focus. “How do you figure?”

“Whoever that unknown source is has hooks in the police department. So after what happened at Samezuka, they’re going to have to be more careful.” He frowns at his own words, squinting at the coffee stains across the tablecloth, the little shreds in the fabric from Echo’s claws when she tries to scramble up on the table to steal food. “If they’re in the police department then are they threatening the gang with incarceration? Saying that they’ll all go to prison if the lot of you aren’t killed?”

Haru purses his lips in thought, rolling the cigarette between two fingers. “That usually doesn’t work. The threat of getting caught is always there.” He shrugs. “Hearing that threat verbally doesn’t do shit. You feel it everywhere you go.” He blurs, realizing that he said all of that rather unconsciously, and hurries to get back on topic. “The Bloodhounds didn’t look like the kind of people to be easily intimidated. They have the numbers and ability to fight whatever comes at them.” Then he stills.

Sousuke blinks at him, unnerved by his stare. “What?”

Haru presses the cigarette down on the carton, smothering the embers into ashes. “The gang isn’t being threatened.” He meets Sousuke’s gaze, as sure as the electrified buzz in the air. “They’re being offered something.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s the only thing that works,” Haru insists. “You think I had something to lose when I started working for my boss?”

He sits there like he is expecting an answer, so Sousuke shakes his head, though the action is stiff. Haru snorts, rolling his eyes with the most bitter of smirks. “Don’t look so shitless, I know what I look like. It’s easy to see.”

“So it was easy for your boss to see it then?”

Haru breathes a laugh, but he doesn’t take the bait. He just looks tired, his body weighed down with the same kind of exhaustion that Rin is forced to carry. “None of us had anything. Then she came along and…” His eyes are wide, voice dying. He looks young in the worst of ways. “When you’re that alone, the prospect of gaining something sounds like *everything*. When you haven’t eaten for days and she offers you nothing more than a fucking hamburger, you’re going to do whatever she wants.” He breathes hard and looks away, rolling his fists up in the hem of Makoto’s shirt. “That’s how she got me and Rin.”

Sousuke’s heart clenches.

“She couldn’t threaten us into joining her,” Haru says. “So she got us to join her at our own free
will.” His face twists in self-loathing.

Sousuke inclines his head. “You can’t keep thinking that what you do to survive defines you.”

Haru jerks his head up, teeth gritted as a muscle ticks in his jaw, but Sousuke is unwavering. “Rin is the same way. You’re both caught between a rock and a hard place and it’s all closing in on you. You’re forgetting that anyone would make the same batshit-crazy choices as you if they were in your situation.”

Haru’s glare could cut diamonds. The sharp flick of his lighter and the hiss of a cigarette burning to life are amplified in the tense silence. His voice is threatening. “Don’t act like you know me.”

“I’m not,” Sousuke assures with a shake of his head. “I don’t know you.” He shrugs hopelessly. “But I love Rin.”

Haru chokes on his cigarette. He full on suffocates, coughing himself right out of his chair and falling to the floor to hack the smoke out of his clogged lungs. Sousuke presses his fingers to his temple and leans against them. With a flat stare, he watches grey puffs shoot through the air like the little engine that just can’t. He takes a reflective sip of his beer before folding his hands over the bottle, propping it up on his stomach as he waits for Haru to finish with his coughing fit.

He is left panting in the aftermath, and his eyes are bloodshot with tears when he stares up at Sousuke. “What –” Cough. Splutter. Over-dramatic inhale. “What did you say?”

Sousuke arches a brow, unimpressed. “Really? You’re that surprised?”

“Fucking duh,” Haru snaps, voice raw.

Sousuke shakes his head and reaches over to the fridge as Haru crawls back into his chair. He tosses Haru a beer, and he catches it mere centimeters before it can bust his nose in two. Infuriated, he goes to shout something else at him but Sousuke waves his voice away. “Drink the beer, it sounds like you deepthraoted a chainsaw.”

“I didn’t, but your brother di–”

Sousuke’s already choking on his beer, hunched over to cough it out of his mouth and nose. When he comes up for air, Haru is taking a long, satisfied sip of his drink and delicately tapping cigarette ashes into the bottle cap. Sousuke truly hates him. With sincerity. Passion. Everything he has. Haru just smiles.

Sousuke wipes the spit off his mouth and points at him. “Now you owe me one.”

A pretentious lift of a brow. “Oh?”

“Yes.” He settles back into his chair and soberes up. His mouth opens to speak but the words catch in his throat, making Haru stiffen. Sousuke slowly looks up, his aching heart opened raw. “I really do love Rin.”

Haru’s reaction is better this time around. He doesn’t look happy, but his scowl is muted. He silently inclines his head for Sousuke to continue, which makes him want to fly apart with joy. “But I don’t think I should tell him because that would… I think it would pressure him.”
Haru nods, his eyes wide with sincerity. “Yes, it would.” He pauses, tapping more ashes out as he thinks. “But he also might need to hear it.” He shrugs. “I don’t know. I hope you didn’t tell me all that for advice.”

“How.”

Haru rests the cigarette over the bottle cap and crosses his arms a little uncomfortably. “Well. It would make him happy but… that urge to make you happy –” He raises his brows with a pointed look. “That will be hard for him to ignore. He might feel obligated to do things he isn’t ready for but I don’t know, I can’t tell you.” He’s seriously being honest.

Sousuke sighs. “Then I won’t tell him. Not now, anyway.” He hesitantly ventures for more. “Would you tell me what to look out for? With… with what I should or shouldn’t do, or –” He drags a hand up through his hair in a frustrated gesture he learned from Makoto. “Tell me what to look out for,” he finishes miserably. “Please.”

Haru isn’t a very emotionally expressive person but in this moment, he cannot keep the surprise off his face. His mouth is parted in disbelief, brows climbing toward his hairline. He composes himself as he clears his throat and takes a quiet sip of his beer. He thinks hard. “What do you already know?”

Sousuke shrugs. “I just found out he has PTSD.”

“And depression,” Haru adds with fierce protection in his eyes. “Very chronic, very concealed depression. He will try to hide it from you. But sometimes you have to let him. Give him the dignity of that choice. He’s dealt with it his whole life, he knows what he needs. Don’t forget that.”

Sousuke is quick to nod his head.

Haru leans back, eyes vacant on the floor, voice absent. “But if he breaks down in front of you…” He pins Sousuke with a threatening glare. “Know what that means. Know what he is trusting you with.”

Sousuke nods once more without hesitation.

Haru lifts the cigarette and takes a drag, washes it down with a swig of beer. “About the PTSD – he doesn’t have the standard triggers. He thrives in crowds. He loves loud places.” He takes a deep breath. “But there are certain things that you can’t ask about. He cannot be set back at a time like this. Overthinking in a moment that he needs to be concentrated will get him killed.”

“I understand. Tell me.”

Haru levels their gazes. “Don’t ask about his mom.”

“Why?”

Haru’s forehead drops to the table in defeat and Sousuke winces, waving an arm. “Sorry, I just… if it hurts him, I want to know why.” Not a very good excuse, but it’s true.

“I know,” Haru says, shocking Sousuke. “I know how that feels.” He rolls his hands up in the hem of Makoto’s shirt again, seeking comfort through the absent-minded habit, and Sousuke realizes that Haru is not talking about Rin being hurt. Haru sighs. “Rin’s stuff, it’s… heavy. Really heavy. She has a lot to do with why he’s the way he is in certain situations.” His words are vague but he nods at
Sousuke’s raised brow. “That’s why you can’t ask about her.”

“All right. What else?”

“Don’t ask about work.” He crosses his arms and lifts his chin. “I don’t know how you feel about what he does and I don’t really care. Either way, he can’t stop just because he has feelings for you.” Sousuke kind of wants to be jealous about that, but then Haru shuts that feeling down with only a few sentences. “Our boss knows how to kill people and keep their heart beating. Rin won’t be an exception if she finds out about what the two of you are doing.”

Sousuke’s hands work into fists. “You should let me kill her.”

“You should let that go,” Haru responds easily, taking a cool sip of his beer. “Because I’m going to kill her.” He says this with an air of nonchalance, but the gravity of his words is so heavy that they are as sure as death.

Sousuke thinks about Rin and red flashes through his mind – cursive script that Sousuke has tried to touch but always gets his hand pulled away from. “What about Hitomu?”

Haru does not say anything, but he does not have to. The look in his eyes says how badly Sousuke just fucked up. “If you give half a shit about Rin,” he utters, voice too calm, too steady. Too quiet. “You will never, ever ask about Hitomu. You find a way to deal with that curiosity on your own. Don’t bring it up with him.”

Sousuke is floored, trying to think of anyone who could have had such an impact on Rin. He knows that it is not his dad’s name, so is it a brother? An uncle? Cousin? Another fallen friend? Is it a sort of memorial? It has to be.

But Haru’s expression silences these thoughts and he lets them fade away with a nod.

Haru nods back. “Now you tell me about Makoto.” Sousuke blinks, mouth parted rather stupidly, but Haru is not fazed. “Tell me what not to say around him.”

Sousuke shuts his mouth before he can sit there gapping like a fish any longer. He rubs the back of his neck, shrugging. “He won’t really let you know if what you say bothers him.”

Haru’s head lulls to the side, voice falling flat. “That’s the best you can do?”

Sousuke rubs at his aching, tired eyes. He crosses his arms in thought. “What I mean is that he keeps a lot of stuff inside.” He regards Haru somberly. “I’m sure you know that by now.”

Haru nods in silence.

Sousuke’s eyes wander over to the mantle, where all his military achievements are set on display for the world to see. Makoto’s mantle is bare of such evidence and his uniform is tucked in a box in the furthest corner of his closet. “A topic to avoid would be his time in the service.”

“I already know about… his injury.”

Sousuke’s mouth pauses inches from the lip of his bottle. “Are you serious?”

Haru tips his head in confusion, so much like how Rin does. “Yeah?”
Sousuke sets the bottle down heavily, shaking his head to clear it. “That’s big. That’s… really big.”

Haru nods gravely. “I know. But it doesn’t change anything. It’s like he expected me to be scared of it. I really don’t care about it.” He rubs over a dark bruise on his neck almost fondly. “But I know that he does, so. I’m just trying to be there for him.” He shrugs, looking at a loss.

Meanwhile, Sousuke cannot believe that these words are coming out of this person’s mouth. He recognized that Haru cared deeply about his friends, but he had no idea that he was capable of wearing such an expression of devotion and adoration at the same time, for the same person, with so much feeling.

He finishes his beer in one long swig. Maybe he’ll pass out and forget about how crazy this night has been. But then a thought hits him and it breaks through the haze. “If he brings up his time in the military, just let him talk.” Anger builds in his chest, burning in the deepest parts of his muscles. “Lots of people think that they can relate to what it’s like over there and there’s just – there’s no equivalent. Don’t act like there is.”

Haru accepts this with a bow of his head.

Sousuke thinks that’s it until it strikes him all at once and his insides run cold. He leans forward. “Haru.” The boy leans back, surprised by the severity in his expression. “You can never, ever bring up the ocean.”

Haru blinks. “Why?”

“Don’t ask why.” Don’t even ask me why. Sousuke can’t stand to think about it. It makes his self-loathing climb to a dangerous point. “Just know that he can’t be around water. Don’t watch anything about the ocean on television, don’t bring it up in conversation. Don’t.” His voice is edged with desperation. “I am asking you not to.”

Haru looks down, eyes wide and sad under creased brows, but nods hesitantly. “Okay.”

Sousuke looks across the folders, desperate for a change in topic. “You’re sure you’ve never heard of these people before?”

Haru blinks, struggling to keep up with the sudden shift in gears, but he manages to shake his head.

Sousuke sighs and tries something else. “Being the leader of Freebird, you have to have connections. Do you think you might at least know someone who knows more than you do?”

Haru stiffens.

Sousuke’s eyes widen. “You do,” he breathes.

Haru scowls against his cigarette. His shrug is mocking. “He’s the ex-leader of Rough Rabbit. Former member of Freebird.” He breathes his smoke out in a bitter laugh. “Honeyblade and Diamond Back would beat each other bloody for the chance to have his head.”

Sousuke stares, jaw dropped. He throws his hands up. “Then what the hell? Why haven’t you talked to him?”
“Because I really,” disgust drips from his voice, acidic, “really hate him.”

Sousuke is not the least bit concerned with that drama. He rolls his eyes as he rises from his chair and snatches up his two empty beer bottles. “Get your shit together and get over it.” He heads over to the trashcan and does not even stumble when the waves of Haru’s fury hit him.

Sousuke disposes the trash and turns to see Haru rising from the table. He opens his mouth but Sousuke cuts him off dryly, “Yes, you can go out the front door. Shit.” He rolls his eyes and shakes his head as he turns back to the sink.

He hears the knob turn and the door creak open, but Sousuke does not know what drives him into speaking. “Haru.”

He does not turn to look at him but Sousuke feels his gaze. His hands clutch the edge of the counter, eyes squeezing shut. He takes a deep breath and swallows. “I didn’t want you to jump that night.”

In the stunned silence, neither of them say anything. When Haru finds his voice, it is filled with five years worth of anger. “You didn’t give me a choice.”

Sousuke accepts those feelings, lets the heat of them wash over him. “I know. But I didn’t want it to be that way.”

Haru’s quietness is almost understanding. His sigh is one of acceptance, and then the door shuts softly.

Sousuke brushes Haru’s cigarette ashes off the table. They are warm from once being red, angry embers, but they do not stain his hand black with soot as he sweeps them away – they break into pieces, then smaller pieces, until there is nothing left but the smell of smoke lingering in the air. This is the first time in five years that Sousuke has been able to smell smoke and not think about that shack burning to the ground.

The smell fades away like it never even existed and he grabs another beer on the way to bed.

Haru finishes his cigarette on Makoto’s porch swing. He listens to the crickets as they hum loud enough to make the air quiver and it is impossible to think straight. His phone is clutched between his hands, the screen so bright that his eyes ache in the night. He stares down at that phone, at that contact name, until a blue tint crawls down his fingers and he stops feeling cold, starts going numb.

And then he gets his shit together and gets over it.

Haru dials the number and puts the phone to his ear. He takes a deep breath and lets out his hurt in a forgiving sigh. “Natsuya, it’s Nanase.”
Like Real People Do

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to Niansue for THREE incredible awesome amaztastic pieces of fanart– One depiction was an alternate take of Haru's window escapades from the previous chapter, and it had me rolling. The other two pieces are double sided key chains of Haru, as well as Miho, and they are both the most creative things ever. Thank you so much!

Saltyaf, thank you for the beta! (archive of our own | twitter)

Please read the warnings below and enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**WARNINGS:** Mentions of past rape and sexual abuse in Rin's scene with Kisumi.

"I will not ask you where you came from

I will not ask and neither should you

Honey, just put your sweet lips on my lips

We should just kiss like real people do."

"Like Real People Do" by Hozier

A heat wave rises with the morning sun. The frost on the grass melts into dew and light slices through the clouds like blades of honey. The hesitant birds venture from their dark nests and Iwatobi’s people force themselves from their homes as the citywide lockdown is lifted.

Iwatobi mourns for Samezuka as one. People take detours on their way to work to stop by flower shops and place bouquets at the club’s entrance. Others show respect through Iwatobi’s ancient tradition of gathering seashells to honor the dead, and they scatter them among the flowers. A member of Rough Rabbit leaves a toy bunny at the doorway and Diamond Back sets up lavish wreaths mounted on high stands. Some girls from Honeyblade scatter cat teeth among the broken sea shells, then they set Diamond Back’s wreaths ablaze, leaving the air smelling like a forest fire. The mementos from the gangs are not gestures of their solidarity with Freebird; they symbolize their awareness of an unknown group in their midst, and send a clear message to the Bloodhounds: that they will not bow out to Freebird’s attackers.

Makoto’s house is quiet with darkness, nothing like the rest of the town where fearful whispers are trembling through the air like livewires. He feels safe, even as heavy tension settles between the rest of Iwatobi’s people. Everything around him is soft – blankets, sheets, sighs, lips.

Even as he hangs in the balance between reality and sleep, Makoto leans into the soft pressure
against his mouth, presses harder and tastes smoke. It is dark and heavy, nothing like the smoke that comes from a candle or campfire. Makoto has never tasted smoke in a kiss, but knows that these are Haru’s lips on his. Even half asleep, he knows. Never could he forget the ridges of Haru’s lower lip, the chapped grooves from nervous presses of teeth and the bite of dry, winter wind. Moans hum through teeth as hands wander. Haru breathes through his nose until fingers card through his hair, then Makoto is breathing in his exhales, catching them in his own lungs.

Haru nudges Makoto onto his back and straddles his hips, friction striking his senses awake. Makoto’s eyes flutter open only to roll back when Haru’s mouth finds his throat, eating at it with lazy drags of teeth and gentle sucks over the bruises from last night. He guides Makoto’s hands under his shirt, into the space between fabric and skin that is damp with heat. Makoto’s fingers dance over a rolling waist and squeeze into the flesh of grinding hips. He rubs his thumbs into the hollows of hipbones before his fist twists in Haru’s shirt to pull him closer.

But Haru does not lean up to kiss him – instead his lips fall down his chest. His mouth trails a line down Makoto’s clenched abs, distracting him from the hands that are opening his thighs. The waistband of his pants is tugged down and realization spikes through Makoto just before the head of his cock is drenched in wet heat.

His senses scream to life, eyes flying open and tripling in size, his lungs caught in vice grips. He stares at the scene between his legs in disbelief – and maybe a little elation – but then Haru dips down to take him deeper, and Makoto’s head snaps back with a choked sound. Mentally repeating a mantra of don’t come, don’t come, do not come, he gathers the courage to look back down, and of course, Haru has absolutely no hesitation in meeting Makoto’s gaze as he drags his tongue up the shaft of his cock. No qualms. Like, none. There is no uncertainty in locking eyes, even as he laps at the head’s slit for precome.

Not only is Makoto about to come after literally just ten seconds of getting head, but he is also about to die.

Haru mouths up and down the side of the shaft, his breaths hot and ragged as they fall from swollen lips. Makoto can’t help but reach down to tangle his fingers in the black silk of his hair, heart ready to melt out of every pore when blue eyes crinkle at him.

Haru gets back to work of drawing the will to live out of Makoto, and he swears that the whole galaxy turns inside out when he swallows him down. Makoto tries to last, really. He tries with all the earnest sincerity he possesses, but in all honesty, he could probably come if Haru just stared at him from across the room long enough. On that mortifying note of defeat, Makoto looks down and gives in to the silent demands of Haru’s eyes, thrust up, not that much, just like that, move like that, come for me, come for me –

Coiled heat springs free and fire wraps around every single vertebra. Makoto’s muscles seize tightly enough to ache and his body rolls with the waves of pleasure. A guttural sound rips up his throat, tearing through his clenched teeth, but it fades into a sigh when a soothing hand rubs over his cheek.

His eyes flutter open. Haru is lying on top of him, stretched out like a cat in sunshine, his chin propped up on his arms and his calves swaying back and forth in the air. The blue of his gaze is warm somehow, standing out against dark lips and flushed cheeks.

Makoto clears his throat but his voice is croaking. It’s also half-muffled because he doesn’t have his hearing aid in. “Sorry, I – probably should have, um. Warned you. Somehow. Sorry.” He doesn’t know a lot about blowjob etiquette, but he doubts that Haru was as hungry to taste his release as
Makoto was for his.

But Haru doesn’t even bat a lash. “I wanted it.” His voice is a hoarse rasp, and he probably didn’t mean for it to sound so sensual, but god, it’s like a crackling fire.

“Oh.” Makoto’s own voice is strangled.

Haru arches a brow, eyes glittering like the sharpest of diamonds, and smirks.

Makoto smacks his ass. “Stop messing with me.” He rolls them over, trapping Haru under him and pecking his lips over and over again until he is laughing.

The kiss deepens but under the dull buzz of pleasure, Makoto tastes ashes. He cranes back, brows pinched together into a cautious expression. “What’s in your mouth?”

Haru tips his head. “My tongue. Your tongue, a second ago.”

Makoto is not even fazed. He tries to sit up, shifting his weight onto his left knee because it is hard to keep his balance when he isn’t wearing his prosthetic under the right knee. He looks down at the boy and crosses his arms. “You taste like cigarettes.”

Haru has the decency to look flustered while he also sits up. He turns away from Makoto’s disapproving stare. “I don’t smoke every day.”

“That doesn’t make it any better for you.”

Haru breathes out through his nose, mouth firmed into a line. “Yeah.” His voice is one of defeated acceptance. “I know.” His fingers wrestle against his temple, stress taut in every line of his body.

Repressing a sigh, Makoto takes Haru’s hand and brings it to his lips. “I don’t mean to sound condescending. It’s just that it isn’t good for you.” His mouth brushes knuckles back and forth. “And I want you for a long time.”

Haru tenses in surprise. The color that rises in his face is unlike any other shade he has ever worn; it is a rosy hue as tender as petals. His stitches are a black line over the paleness of his cheek, his love bites are sweet pink and lavender, and there are red scrapes and cuts tearing through his arms. He is gorgeous; even with smoke on his breath and dark circles around his tired eyes, he is gorgeous. “I just do it when I feel overwhelmed,” Haru admits.

Makoto inclines his head with understanding because even if cigarettes aren’t his particular vice, he gets that everyone needs a way to take the edge off. “Well then.” He warms one of Haru’s cold hands between his, imploring, “What’re you overwhelmed about?”

Haru looks down, fingers stroking Makoto’s palm. His bangs fall into his eyes before Makoto can see the tears shining in them. “I have to go to a funeral.”

Makoto startles, heart twisting. “What? For who?”

He watches Haru work his throat, hears him swallow in the tense silence. “Nakagawa got shot in the attack.”

Makoto’s brain scrambles to recognize that name and a face flashes behind his eyes – the sickening
realization pulls his gut inside out. Nakagawa was the guy from Samezuka who had worn a default scowl like Haru often does, but his was harder to meet. Only with Rin’s and Aki’s arms around his shoulders did Nakagawa look like a good person.

But it still breaks Makoto’s heart. He has been to war and seen the most earnest and passionate soldiers lose their lives right beside assholes that ran after the chaos with a death wish. But a righteousness inside Makoto still says that no matter what, no matter who Nakagawa was – no matter what the world turned him into – he did not deserve to die like that. If common sense cannot tell someone to not go shoot up a club, then divine intervention should be there in its place, but that’s… it gets harder to believe in every time he turns on the news.

It’s just not supposed to be this way outside of a war zone. He should not be holding Haru’s hand and feel the pulsing heat where a bullet grazed his fingers. It’s not fair, it isn’t right, it is not supposed to be this way. “Haruka,” Makoto whispers, voice heavy with grief. He takes Haru into his arms, wrapping him up in all the comfort that he needed when his own friends died on the battlefield. He recognizes the need to feel someone’s heartbeat in the wake of death and lets Haru bury his face against his chest. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, oh my god, I’m sorry.” Makoto breathes an endless stream of nonsense against his hair, despite knowing that there are no words to convey what either of them are feeling.

A thought strikes him and Makoto dips down to brush Haru’s bangs aside, meeting his red-rimmed eyes. “Do you need me to go with you? To the funeral.”

Haru’s lips open in a silent plea, his head almost dipping into a nod before he catches himself. “You might be at work. I don’t know what day it’ll be.”

“I don’t care what day it is,” Makoto says in a gentle voice with a firm shake of his head. “If you need me, I’ll be there.” Haru hesitates and Makoto smiles, cupping his cheek. “I have plenty of sick days left, I promise. It’s no big deal.”

Haru rests his head in his palm, sagging in relief. “Okay. Then… yes. Please come.”

“Of course,” Makoto says, closing his eyes against the kiss Haru presses into his jaw.

They rest their foreheads together with sighs. “I need to go home,” Haru mumbles. “And be there for Rin. Nakagawa is –” His breath hitches. “Was.” He swallows. “He was like a brother to Rin.”

Makoto does feel a pang of disappointment that he will be leaving, but he is quickly taken by an even stronger sense of understanding. “All right, then. I’ll drive you home.”

“You don’t have to,” Haru blurts. Makoto blinks in surprise and the boy stiffens. “Asahi’s sister is in town. She can pick me up, it’s fine.”

Makoto studies his expression, watches it strain. “Are you sure?”

Haru nods quickly. “Yeah. My neighborhood is kind of…” He bites his lip. “Sandy. It’s bad for tires.”


Haru nods a little reluctantly. Of course, there is no way he could understand Makoto’s conflict over the ocean, but his gaze could almost be considered knowing as he regards Makoto’s nauseous
expression.

He turns away and busies himself with putting on his artificial limb. He digs through the nightstand drawer and pulls out a handful of socks that are of different thickness and material, including wool, cotton, and nylon. Because his stump can change in size and shape depending on how swollen it is, he sometimes has to add or take off socks during the day for the prosthetic to be comfortable. Finding that his stump is about its normal size, he picks out one cotton sock and pulls it up what is left of his calf, until it is snug under his knee.

Haru watches curiously, face blank of judgment, but Makoto’s mind is still reeling too much to notice. There are two pieces to his artificial limb. The first is the inner socket, which he pushes onto his stump and shifts until the small depression fits just under his kneecap. Then he puts a nylon sock over the socket so that the liner can slide into the outer socket that makes up what’s missing of his leg. After those two pieces are secure, he settles his heavy, right foot against the floor and rests his elbows on his knees.

Haru’s voice is cautious. “Mako…?”

“I haven’t been to the ocean in more than a year.”

The fearful part of Makoto is relieved that he has been away from the water for so long, but the rest of him is aching with sadness. “Has it really been that long?” he whispers to himself.

Haru’s hand rubs his back, unsure of what to say. His eyes flicker to the photograph on the wall of the twins at the beach. “Did you go a lot when you were younger?”

Makoto follows his gaze to the picture and nods. “Yeah. I loved it. It was… it meant the world to me.” His eyes are distant with nostalgia. “I was on the swim team in high school and everything.” He shakes his head in a daze.

Haru reaches over to the nightstand and gives Makoto his glasses. He puts them on numbly, moving robotically even as he leans into the kiss that Haru presses against his cheek. “Sango can come get me.”

Makoto takes a deep breath. “I think…” His pulse is racing with the strangest exhilaration. “I think I want to try.” The words are drawn out of him by memories of salt in his hair, sunshine everywhere, even behind his eyelids. The pull of the waves was so strong yet so much more gentle than the rest of the world. He had forgotten those good times. What made him remember them, he isn’t sure. Maybe it was the time he took away from the water.

Or maybe it is the ruthless demand that he will have something good again, that nobody can take away or shoot down.

Haru is staring at him with wide eyes that somehow know the leap of faith Makoto is taking. He asks, “Are you sure?”

Makoto chuckles. “No, not at all. But I still want to.”

“Don’t do it for me.”

“I’m not,” Makoto says, more firm in this reassurance than anything in his life. “I’m doing it for me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t need your help to do it.”
Haru takes his hand without hesitation, resolution firing in his eyes. “Then let’s go.”

Anticipation builds in the silence of the truck’s cab. Makoto is going back and forth between timid curiosity and absolute terror. He wants to speed up the drive despite that with every mile the tires eat up, he wants to put three more in between himself and the water. But not even then can he make himself turn the truck around.

Haru sits in the passenger’s seat instead of leeched to Makoto’s side. His feet are crossed in Makoto’s lap and he lets him rub his ankles whenever he craves the reassurance of touch.

A tunnel swallows them up in darkness, overhead lights flashing by in streaks of gold. Then they breach the exit and sunlight floods in. Out of the corners of his eyes, Makoto recognizes the deep blue of the ocean on either side of the road. Sunlight burns on the surface of the waves, the heat pinning him down like a bug under a microscope.

But god, god, he can’t help but look.

He glances out of his window just quickly enough to take in the blue shades that color the stretch of water. He remembers his father once telling him that in heaven, there are colors we don’t even have names for, and that always reminded Makoto of the ocean because he could never put the beauty of it into words.

Even now, as he tightens his hands on the wheel so that they will stop shaking, he thinks that.

He keeps his eyes firmly straight ahead, not brave enough to push his luck with one more glance at the ocean. Haru lets down the passenger-side window and a warm breeze dances through his hair. He inhales deeper as the thick, invigorating scent of saltwater lulls through the air and humidity drenches the cab. His eyes close into the most peaceful expression that is more relaxed than the one he wore in sleep, and Makoto is yet again faced with another sight that he will never have the words for.

He follows Haru’s directions to a row of pastel cabins. He parks on the side of the road, in front of a house that is lined with stripped, peach paint. The home is small in a cozy kind of way – it looks like a safe haven, and judging by the longing in Haru’s gaze, that is exactly what it is. The window boxes are not filled with flowers, but seashells that have probably been gathered on walks down the beach. Sandy flip flops are lined up along the porch, big ones made of black leather and tiny ones made of plastic and glitter. The mailbox has been painted by Gou’s sloppy hands; Makoto recognizes her artwork. Swimming together along the side of the box is a blue dolphin, a black shark, and another little shark that is painted pink.

Makoto cuts the engine and he and Haru listen to the world outside the cab. Seagulls coast through the sky as boats hum through the distant sea. Makoto cannot see the water because the cabins are set on an elevated piece of land and the shore is a few hundred yards down the beach. It is a safe distance, one that allows Makoto to feel the elements of the ocean without having to face it. That is cowardly and makes him feel pathetic, but those emotions are not too strong because he is just so relieved that he can even have this.

Haru leans over, smelling like saltwater and smoke as he pulls Makoto into a kiss. It is an action of finality – a goodbye kiss. It leaves his chest hurting and he drives their lips harder together. Haru squeezes his hand through Makoto’s shirt, right over his heart, as though he can hear its call. The
boy’s lips are rough, but his last kiss is soft. “You’ll be okay?”

Makoto nods, hugging him close. Haru’s cold hands slip under the back of his shirt to soak up the heat of his skin, and Makoto sighs against his neck. “I’ll explain everything, I promise. About the – me and the water. Soon, okay?”

“You don’t have to.”

“I need to.”


Makoto beams and holds him close for just one more minute. His body aches with worry. “Please be safe. Call me if you need anything.”

“You too.” Haru lets him kiss his forehead.

Then he steps out of the cab, feeling like he just left everything good about himself inside the pickup as it drives off.

Emptiness echoes through Haru, but warmth swells inside of him as he turns to regard the cabin. He limps over to the door, fire raking through his ribs, and unlocks it to quietly step inside.

The house is cool and dark, a breath of fresh air even though it is indoors. The scent of cherry blossom air fresheners and Gou’s cotton candy perfume gives him a headache, but even so, he breathes in deeply for more. Haru turns to re-lock the door and makes sure that the aluminum baseball bat is still sitting in the corner. He reassures himself that a loaded handgun is hidden behind the picture in the doorway before something on the couch catches his eye.

The box spring has been let out from under the couch cushions, and Rin and Gou are asleep under an excessive number of blankets. His hand is curled protectively around the back of her head without being conscious of it, and she turns into his warmth even in sleep. A pair of Nintendos lies at the end of the mattress, and the smell of pizza drifts in from the kitchen – it has Haru’s stomach curling in on itself, starved.

He toes off his Converse and goes to the kitchen without even a rustle of clothing. Haru devours two slices of cold pizza so quickly that he doesn’t even know what toppings they had on them, then his exhaustion hits him all at once. He drags his feet down the hallway toward his bedroom and gets a hand around the doorknob, then he stills. That hollow feeling aches inside of him, tugging him back through the cabin to the living room.

He approaches the couch and pulls the covers back, slipping into the free space on the other side of Gou. The box spring cuts into his back, and he can’t even get a pillow out from under Rin’s big fucking head, but in all truth, it’s perfect. The mattress is dipped with weight, letting Haru know that he is not alone, and a pattern of breaths makes sure that the silence does not get too overwhelming. The blankets are warm with body heat, his heart warm with love, and he closes his eyes.

A few hours later, Haru wakes under a stare. His eyes open to find Rin watching him as he combs a hand through Gou’s hair. His face is strained with worry, gaze darting over Haru’s stitches. “I’m fine,” he whispers. He nods at the bandage on Rin’s bicep, then nods down at Gou, who is still asleep. “What did you tell her happened?”
Rin bows his head to watch his fingers move through her hair, expression twisted in self-loathing. Haru understands the burden of lying to Gou – feels the weight of it in his bones every day. “I wrecked my bike,” Rin whispers. “You were with me.” It was smart of him to think of an excuse for Haru’s injuries as well.

Gou shivers, and Haru pulls the blankets up over her shoulders as Rin leans down to kiss her forehead, hushing her gently. Her breathing evens out once more, and Rin looks up with hard, watery eyes as he nods toward the door. Haru nods in response and they ease off the bed to head for the back porch.

From the pocket of his denim vest, Haru pulls out a black pack of white cigarettes, and Rin sits across the patio table with a white mug of black coffee. The heat of the day bakes into their scalps, the sun searing-white over the ocean, but the beach is empty and quiet. Haru exhales smoke as Rin drinks through the steam of his mug. They gather their thoughts in silence, the roll of the waves acting as their only comfort.

Rin says, “Nii went with me to pick up Gou. Sango came and took Nii home before you got here. She said she’s gonna babysit Gou while we’re at the funeral.”

Haru swallows down the lump in his throat. “How’re you doing, Rin?”

Rin opens his mouth to speak, but it trembles shut and firms into a line. He shakes his head once, then quickly, his brows high and creased. Haru reaches over and wraps an arm around his neck to pull him close, and Rin bows his head against his shoulder. He does not protest the tears that leave his vest damp and his heart twisting. “He was changing,” Rin sobs. “He was getting better, Haru, I saw it…”

“I know.” Haru’s head falls against Rin’s shoulder. He pushes into it, squeezes his eyes shut. “I know.”

“I should have – should’ve fuckin’ done more… I should have been there for him… why weren’t we there for Kazuki, Haru, I should’ve…”

“We all should have.”

“I’m scared.”

“So am I.”

They stay like that for a while, trying to catch their breath. Haru tucks his whisper against Rin’s shirt. “I’m so scared. But this is still Nakagawa and Kazuki’s fight. And ours.” He levels their gazes. “We are still those kids that met on the street. That rentboy and that crackhead, starved out of their minds, and ready to burn the whole fucking world down. This has always been our fight.” Rin’s gaze hardens with determination. Haru almost falters, “The only difference now is that I have more to fight for, and so do you. We have to keep going.”

Rin takes a deep breath and nods, squeezing him close in thanks. He then sits back and wipes his eyes as Haru asks, “Is Nii okay?”

A shadow haunts Rin's face. “She started doin’ that cornered animal shit. Eyes dilated and went all
black like a bear’s. But Aki should be at home with her now. She’ll take care of her.”

Aki and Nii live together, and it’s a blessing for so many reasons. Haru nods. “Did Sango say how Asahi’s doing?”

Rin pulls his calves up into the chair to tuck his feet under his crossed legs. His joints crack loudly enough to make Haru wince. “He’s gonna be released later today. Nao and Sango’s gonna stay with him for a few days and help ‘im out.”

Haru sags in his chair, relief washing over him. Asahi, Nao, and Sango will benefit from that exchange – Asahi will need the help getting around, Sango shouldn’t be staying by herself when the city’s in this much turmoil, and Nao doesn’t need to be homeless on the streets period, but especially with this unknown threat lurking around.

Haru regards Rin with an exhausted expression of gratitude. He opens his mouth, but Rin waves a hand through the air to cut him off. “I’m Second in Command, Haru – it’s the one job that I don’t hate. So, don’t thank me.” He hesitates. “You hear from Miho yet?”

“No.” Stress is tight in Haru’s voice.

“Don’t worry about it, Haru.” Rin sets his cup down firmly beside the ashtray on the table between them. “I know it’s catshit, but everything’s too much right now. We gotta calm down first.”

Haru sighs in acceptance, too tired to argue, and flicks another cigarette to life. Rin watches his fingers shake, studies the paleness around his bruises, and narrows his eyes. “You had a withdrawal.” It isn’t a question.

Buried pain rages to the surface of his skin, but it fades away as memories of a warm bed and an even warmer embrace take hold. The memories are in soft focus, like movies from the 70’s, filled with gentle static. “Yeah. It went away, though.”

Rin’s brows crease, mouth twisted in confusion. “How?”

Haru gazes out at the shore, feeling betrayed by it. He does not know how to feel at peace with the water when it has brought someone he cares about so much confliction. “Makoto.”

He startles when Rin chuckles, drowning the sound in his mug. He eases back in his seat and beams in his own quiet way. “I’m fuckin’ happy for you.” There is so much raw sincerity in Rin’s voice that it makes Haru’s throat close up again.

“I don’t deserve him,” he says, blue eyes hopeless as they meet the endless hope of red.

“You do,” Rin sighs. Gou’s kitten stumbles around the cabin, sunlight tinting his black fur white at the ends. He comes over and paws at Rin’s anklet as he says, “He’ll make you believe it one day, I know he will. The guy’s an angel.”

Haru hikes a brow because while that might be true, he does not know if he has the faith to believe in the impossible – in him ever thinking that he is good enough for Makoto.

“Percy,” Rin coos, picking up the kitten to nuzzle against his face. Gou named him Poseidon for his love of chasing the waves and running back up the shore before the water can touch him.
Haru watches Rin, studying his smile. “Does Yamazaki make you happy?”

Rin tenses up as he waits for Haru’s scowl to appear, but it does not. His face is stoic, cigarette laying between two fingers with the smoke dancing calm and silent. He is actually taking the situation between him and Sousuke seriously.

Heart soaring, Rin lunges over the table with the most earnest, wide eyes. “Yes. Yes Haru, he makes me so happy.” His lashes spike with tears as he laughs. “He makes me want a baby again.”

Haru turns his head to give Rin the privacy of crying, but he has to smear his thumb under his own burning eyes. He takes a steadying pull of smoke, heaving it out in a sigh. “You haven’t talked about him in years - Hitomu.”

He turns back to see Rin’s smile shaking at the edges. “I think about him a lot more now. In a good way, if that makes sense. Like, it still makes me so sad, but now I can be happy to have had time with him. I was lucky.”

“Hitomu was lucky to have you and Aki,” Haru says without faltering.

Rin scoffs, the noise harsh with shame. “He was lucky to be born to a rentboy and a callgirl? Haru, we didn’t have nothing.”

Haru leans forward, making Rin crane back in surprise. “He was lucky to have a dad that was starving and scared but still wanted him. He was lucky to have a mom I watched sing to her stomach on street corners.”

Rin looks away to blink his tears back. He sets Poseidon down to wrap his arms around his middle. “We almost fucked at Samezuka. Me and Sousuke. I couldn’t do it.”

Haru flashes hot and he recalls where each individual weapon is placed throughout the house and which ones will cause the most pain. “Did he pressure you?”

“No.” Rin hurries to shake his head. Haru crosses one leg over the other with a hard nod. “I think it’s because there’s feelings involved that I couldn’t… handle it. But now, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to fix this – how to fix me.”

Haru takes a thoughtful drag. “You could talk to Shigino.”

Rin pauses with the mug inches from his mouth. “Why?”

Haru straightens his leg out for Poseidon to climb up his thigh and curl in his lap. “He’s helping Gou. You two went through a lot of the same things.”

Rin sets the mug down numbly, his eyes lighting with hope. “You think he’d do it?”

Haru tips his head for Poseidon to snuggle into his neck. “I don’t see why he wouldn’t. You’ve been friends for years.” The kitten swats at his cigarette and Haru yanks it back with a daring glare.

Rin bites his lip, anticipation rising in his chest. “I guess it couldn’t hurt.”

“Good luck.” Haru stands up, much to Poseidon’s indigation. The kitten dives back around the house and Rin and Haru hear seagulls squawking before they watch them race up through the air to
escape Poseidon’s claws. “I’m going back to sleep,” Haru says.

Rin nods, biting back a grimace when his neck strains with the action. A thought strikes him. “Wait, I forgot to tell you.” He takes his phone out of his pocket and goes through his inbox to show Haru a text.

He reaches for the phone with a look of dread and reads the message. “This is from Chigusa?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s telling you she’s been claimed by Honeyblade. I thought Freebird claimed her.”

“That was never official.”

Haru shakes his head in frustration. “She’s been seen with us and Aki enough for it to go without saying.”

Rin inclines his head. “That’s probably why Nadia took her on.” The leader of Honeyblade rarely ventures from her gang’s territory, but she has eyes and ears everywhere.

Haru tenses. “They’ll try to get information about us out of her.”

“Yeah,” Rin says. “But Nadia isn’t gonna hurt her. She might if Chigusa were older, but,” he sighs, raking a hand through his hair. “This is the one time when being young is her advantage. You know that Nadia takes care of the younger ones; Chigusa won’t have to be a callgirl anymore. This might be the safest thing for her right now.” Honeyblade is an all-girls gang, so at least Chigusa will be around people who understand her situation.

Haru doesn’t show any signs of agreement, but he does give Rin’s phone back without throwing it halfway across the beach, which is something. “Keep her number. If anything changes, we’re getting her back. If she tells you she wants to leave Honeyblade, then we’re making that happen. She can’t get hurt.” Haru steps halfway through the sliding glass door and pauses, fingers tight on the doorframe. His head is bowed, voice low. “I’m not going to another funeral, Rin. Not after Nakagawa’s.”

“I’m not either.”

Haru’s fingers squeeze a fraction tighter, almost like he is holding back on saying something else. But then he lets go, and closes the door behind him.

Later that day, Rin leaves Haru and Gou at the cabin to go talk to Kisumi.

They meet at a coffee shop, which Rin has mixed feelings about. He wants to wrap his hands around yet another cup of black coffee just to give his twitchy fingers something to do, but he does not know how productive this conversation will be if he pours caffeine over anxiety. So, he buys Kisumi’s overpriced, half-sweet, non-fat caramel bitchshit cortado, and settles for an ice water. A swallow of the drink leaves his tongue ring cold in his mouth and it is a grounding sensation.

At least this conversation is happening in an environment he enjoys. The shop is crowded, but he likes that because it gives him people to look at when he needs to keep his nervous eyes busy. The air is warm with the aroma of brown sugar, and acoustic songs are lulling from the overhead
speakers. So, everything is fine. Everything is fine.

Rin is good at hiding anxiousness and bruises. His smile does not even shake at the edges as he tugs his long sleeves over his hands, bandages shifting under the fabric. He tastes make up when he talks since he covered his busted lip in just the right amount of foundation and tinted chapstick to balance out all the shades.

Kisumi beams with his own picture-perfect smile as he asks, “So, what’s up?”

Rin’s brows jump in a flash of bitter amusement before he smooths out his expression, but Kisumi catches the falter. However, he remains silent, lips pursed behind his cup as Rin fumbles for the words. “Uh, well.” He rubs the back of his neck with worry. “You sure I’m not holding you up or anything?”

Kisumi gives a roll of his eyes so dramatic that his head lolls with the action. “Rin, no. Do you know how many field trips you’ve chaperoned with me? Honey, we’ve been to war together.” He pats Rin’s arm on the table. “Having a little chit-chat does not even pay the taxes on the debt I owe you.”

Rin ducks his head with a laugh. “The aquarium was the worst one.”

“Do not even.” Kisumi’s brows are raised high, finger tense as it points to the heavens for strength. “If I ev-er have three children puke on me in one day ever again, I will die right then and there. I promise.” His face is serious.

Rin scoffs, taking an unimpressed sip of his drink. “At least your best friend didn’t take a fucking swan dive for the dolphin exhibit.”

“Oh my god, I loove Haru,” Kisumi groans around a laugh that gets louder when Rin puts a hand over his face in defeat. Kisumi’s eyes dance in magenta glitter. “What other adults can you imagine doing such a thing? He’s such an inspiration.”

Rin stares at him in vague disgust and Kisumi throws out one last giggle before straightening his posture, sobering up. “Now then, darling,” he sighs. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Rin’s eyes drop to watch his water ripple from the bustle of the coffee shop. He licks his lips, so nervous that his tongue ring almost snags between his front teeth. “I really don’t know where to start.” His voice is clear with honest sincerity.

But Kisumi’s reassurance is twice as genuine. “Don’t think of this as a therapy session because it’s not. You don’t have to say things a certain way.” His smile is a bit exasperated. “It’s not like a normal doctor’s visit. You don’t come in, tell me all your symptoms, then get a clear diagnosis, prescription, and a high ass bill.” Rin breathes a laugh. “It’s just not that simple.”

“Why’d you want to become a counselor then?”

Kisumi’s smile remains poised, despite that his mouth tries to pull into a line. “My mom has chronic depression. She’s lovely,” he is quick to assure. “She’s a beautiful person, but…sometimes, she just has trouble finding a reason to take care of herself.” He arches a brow with warmth in his smirk. “That’s why I have Hayato. Not because she would abandon him, but simply due to the fact that we all agreed living with me might be best for him – and she wants what is best for him.”
“Oh.” Rin blushes, touched to hear such a personal story. “I had no idea that was the reason why.”

Kisumi shrugs, tearing open a sugar packet to delicately stir the specks into his coffee. “He still sees her all the time. She still lights up around him, but –” He lets a jet of air out through his nose, and it is the only sign of frustration that he allows himself. “That’s what confused me so much about her. So, it made me want to learn more about depression, but then I got diagnosed with it – don’t look so worried Rin, I get by just fine. I have a good prescription and a premium membership with the yoga studio, and that’s all it takes for me, most of the time.” His expression crumbles. “But then I got worried about Hayato having it, so I wanted to be able to notice the early signs of it in him. That’s what made me want to become a counselor.” He flips his hair and beams. “And that’s little ol’ me.”

Rin is comforted by the fact that he is not the only one sharing such personal information. “Thank you for telling me all that.”

Kisumi drops him a playful wink and Rin chuckles, but the sound of it fades into pensive silence. He is thankful that Kisumi gives him the time to collect his thoughts, scrolling through his phone so Rin won’t feel pressured under the weight of his stare. A few minutes later, Rin begins with slow caution. “I met someone.”

Kisumi puts his phone away and perks up. “That’s good!”

Rin is quick to nod, but his head starts dipping to the side, shoulders curling in. “I’ve never been in a serious relationship before, but I know that I love him a lot. I just – I hooked up a lot before him.” That is not a complete lie – he simply didn’t add in an exchange of money being involved. Also, the fact that he is still having sex with multiple people, clients, but Sousuke knows that, and they have both realized that there is nothing they can do to change that situation just yet. “But like, I can’t…” He squeezes his hands into fists under the table. “Even though I have sex a lot, I freaked out when I tried it with him.” He sits back in his chair, exhausted from so few words, cheeks burning from a hot rush of adrenaline.

But Kisumi is unfazed, expression poised in professionalism. “First of all, having sex with someone you love is always more nerve-wracking than with someone you don’t know.”

“Yes,” Rin stresses with wide-eyed relief that he has found someone who finally gets it.

“Yes,” Kisumi nods, smiling in understanding. “It’s supposed to be that way.” He hesitates. “To an extent.”

Rin frowns. “What do you mean?”

Kisumi glances down to pause, then speaks carefully. “I think that, perhaps, it might be more difficult for you to accept those kinds of emotions?”

Rin inhales sharply, pinned on the spot.

Kisumi’s smile is sad. “I have seen you pour out love like it is not the most valuable thing in the world. You give it out to everyone around you. You’re passionate without forgiveness of such. You give people life, you give them so much, Rin.” He leans forward with his brows raised. “But you may not be comfortable with receiving the same magnitude of emotion, not because you don’t need it, or you don’t want it, but plainly because you aren’t used to it.”

Rin swallows down the lump in his throat but cannot trust his voice. He nods silently.
Kisumi bows his head to sigh. “I’ve learned about the environment you grew up in through Gou. From what she remembers, I’ve gathered that the only time you received love as a child was when you fought for it, but even then, what you got in return…” He takes a steady breath to meet Rin’s eyes. “Was not love.”

His hands crawl down his knees with worry. “Do you think that I can’t love someone the right way because of that?” Fear grips his heart.

“No,” Kisumi says, chin lifting with sureness. “I understand why you would think that, but no.” He leans back to take a thoughtful sip of his drink. “Don’t get me wrong, some people can turn out that way. Sometimes, a response to trauma is falling into it and continuing with the vicious cycle.” His smile is proud of Rin. “But that is not your case. Others learn from it. They see the worst that life has to offer and realize what they should not be doing with their time alive.” He reaches over and touches Rin’s shoulder, his whisper raw with sincerity, “You learned not to be like your mother.”

Rin’s smile is twisted in bitterness, his shining eyes cut sharp. “I feel as pathetic as her sometimes.”

“And I feel as pathetic as my mother sometimes,” Kisumi admits, his mask of stoicism falling into an open look of exhaustion. He sweeps it up into a smile that cannot hold out – it is breaking apart with emotion. “Your mother taught you what not to do when raising a child. Rin, I will never know where you found the strength to take on something like that, but you and Haru have put your souls into that girl, and it shows. It shows,” he whispers, ducking down to meet Rin’s eyes under hair that has tears shining on the ends. Kisumi squeezes his shoulder earnestly. “What you have put yourself through to take care of your sister is the highest form of love. I know that you’re capable of showing that to other people in different forms.”

Rin tries to breathe under the weight of the world on his shoulders. “Thank you,” he says, voice heavy with an appreciation that he could never truly put into words. Kisumi pats his shoulder and sits back in his chair, letting Rin compose himself. “So, what do you think I should do?”

Kisumi thumbs the edge of his coffee lid, deep in his own mind. His voice ventures gradually. “Do you think that you might already know the reason why you have trouble with the physical side of intimacy?”

Rin tenses. Kisumi arches a brow.

Rin parts his lips. “I - yeah. I do.” Panic surges into numbness – then into an acceptance that was brought on by the exhaustion of carrying anger for so long. “My… Kisumi, I’m trusting you with this.”

“I’ll honor that trust with everything I have.”

“My mom’s boyfriend raped me when I was a kid.” He feels like he is talking about someone else, or that it happened in another lifetime. “He did it a few times. But it’s happened a few times since then, by different people.” He does not know where he finds the voice to keep talking. “With Dai, we didn’t have anywhere else to go, other than his place. Mom said that I couldn’t make him mad, so when he started… I knew that if I said anything about it, that he would get mad, and then we’d be – we wouldn’t have… anywhere to… So, I didn’t say anything,” he hisses, brows creased over a vehement expression that falls into horror. “But I always thought that it was my fault because I knew what was happening and didn’t stop it -”
“You couldn’t,” Kisumi says. “You were a kid.”

Rin opens his mouth -

“You were a kid.”

He closes it firmly.

Kisumi takes a deep breath but it shudders away. “I’m sorry. I’ve never been in that situation, so I can only say how I feel, being on the outside and looking in. But I think that it’s his fault. It’s your mom’s fault for putting that kind of pressure on you. You are the victim any way I look at this. But you are also the survivor. Each and every time it happened after that, you are the survivor.”

Rin stares at him, thunderstruck. “From what I’ve seen with these types of cases,” Kisumi begins, “the healing process often starts with yourself. Now, what I mean by that is that you’re going to have to reclaim your body for yourself before you can share it with someone else.”

Rin leans forward intently, tears forgotten. “How?” His fists clench in desperation to know, fire surging through him.

“My professional suggestion would be to get a psychiatrist that specializes in sexual abuse. Or a support group filled with people who have been through what you have.” His head hangs with the weight of grief. “There are so many of those people, Rin – all of them going through what you are. You are not alone in anything that you have felt throughout these years.” He turns away to sigh. “I had a friend in college that was already a counselor, but she was going back for her doctorate. When she was growing up, she went through a situation similar to yours. She went to therapy for years, and said that their advice was infallible; they got her through a lot of dark times.”

He regards Rin. “But she also emphasized how much of a personal journey the healing process is. You need to understand that what happened was not your fault, no matter how much the world tries to tell you otherwise. You have to appreciate your body – you need to respect what it has survived and honor its strength. Treat yourself. Learn yourself, whatever that means to you. Understand that what you do with your body is your choice, and be with someone that understands that as well.”

“Sousuke does understand.” Rin means that with every last ounce of sincerity he has. “He’s been…”

He struggles to take a breath around the tightness in his throat. “He’s been so patient.”

“That’s good,” Kisumi says. “Although his support will not be the defining factor of your healing process, he will be a very important presence.” He finishes off his drink and sets the cup down with purpose. “A piece of advice I would give to you as a couple would be that you need to have an open conversation about the physical side of your relationship. Like, is he willing to stop if you can’t keep going? Are you okay with the things that he might want you to do? You both need to make those boundaries clear.” Kisumi’s smile is edged with an apology. “I know how impossible this is going to sound, but a relationship is all about trust. If you love each other and he has promised to work with your issues, then you need to have an amount of trust in him that he won’t hurt you.”

Rin takes in all this information until it fills every inch of him with determination. “Okay. I’ll do all that. I’ll do everything.”

Kisumi thumps a sugar packet at him, his smirk knowing. “Don’t try to do it all at once. I’ve seen you hand out snacks after a soccer game. You can’t just throw it all up in the air and expect things to fall into place.”
“Oh my god,” Rin groans, making Kisumi throw his head back to laugh. “I said there was a fucking bee flying around me – that’s why I threw them.”

Kisumi can barely get his voice out around his howling. “You think that makes it better?”

“You are literally the most –”

“Careful Rin-Rin, there’s a bee behind you –”

“STOP IT.”

Asahi’s apartment is probably what the inside of a genie lamp looks like. Amber lamps turn the shadows red until the overhead lights are flipped on by the trio stepping through the front door. There are satin pillows everywhere and oriental rugs cover the floors. In the middle of the living area is a coffee table that is cluttered with rainbow sticks of incense, bowls of crystals and stones, and a hookah bong with four pipes.

Melted candles are stuck to the window frames and dream catchers hang from the horns of a cow skull mounted above the television. Against the far wall is a row of dead succulents, as well as a line of hanging lamps that fill the apartment with sweltering heat. Under the lamps are pot plants, the five-pointed leaves sticky with crystals. In the corner of the room is a glass container that houses Asahi’s albino Ball Python named Nymphadora. Yellow diamonds cover the white of her scales and her red eyes blink curiously at the apartment invaders.

The walls are covered in tapestries – ones that are tie-dyed, others that display nature scenes or mandalas, and then of course, there is Nao’s personal favorite to hate, the one that is printed with eyeballs that watch him help Asahi onto the couch, Sango taking up the rear.

Once Asahi is chowing down on a burger that will settle his stomach for his pain pills, Nao and Sango get to cleaning up the apartment. They turn off the heat lamps and open up all the windows to dispel their excessive warmth, but not after hiding the pot plants in the closet so that their heavy stench will not catch the attention of the entire block. Sango pinches one of the leaves between her fingers, licks the stickiness away. “You makin’ Blue Dream, Asahi?”

“Purple Trainwreck,” he chews proudly around a mouthful of fries. Nao would roll his eyes if only he had two to do such. The names of different kinds of pot are nothing short of ridiculous.

He washes the dishes as Sango takes out a reeking bag of trash, muttering an interesting set of curses as she does so. She just finished her studies from a university a few cities over, but is moving back to Iwatobi to become an art teacher. Nao recalls that before she finished school, she vehemently swore that she would never waste her life as a teacher, but it was actually her Iwatobian roots that ended up drawing her to the idea. Sango was smart enough to realize that the future of this city depends on its children and who their role models are. Nao would have never guessed that she would make such a mature decision about what to do with her life, but he is proud of her, and she will soon be interning under the art teacher at the nicer elementary school, a man named Mr. Hazuki.

After eating through a few delivery pizzas, Nao, Asahi, and Sango are flipping through the TV channels with exhaustion weighing down on them. Nao is curled up against the armrest and is honestly tired, but so many thoughts are racing through his mind that stress has left his head pounding, and he cannot fall asleep.
His phone buzzes in his pocket and he tucks it into his lap to look down at the blurry screen. He blinks away the sleepy haze and makes out a name that has his heart lurching: Natsuya.

With a shaking thumb, Nao opens the message and squints down at the attached picture.

It is a boat dock. Not for the fishermen and shrimping vessels, but yachts. Sailboats. Gold-plated jet skis. The sunset has colored the ocean in a tangerine so vibrant that Nao can almost taste the sweetness. Lavender streaks the speedboats looming over the water. In the back of his mind, he hears the echoes of champagne glasses clicking together, laughter, and the swell of violins.

And then he remembers Natsuya, sprawled across the deck of one of those yachts with Nao in his arms and a billion stars hanging over them.

The text message reads, *Remember this place, little dove?*

Nao’s smile hurts, but even so, it stretches out like a noose.

He sends back, *that’s where you asked me to marry you.*

He turns his phone off and levels himself, forcing his heart to still from its wild spin. He cannot throw himself into this like he did the first time. Natsuya has not even seen him – a few phone calls and text messages is the only contact they have had since he came back into town.

Nao tries to tell himself that he knows Natsuya and that he won’t care about his eye. But then he remembers brown curls between his fingers and a mouth flush with his ear, words that were heavy with passion for how beautiful Nao once was.

His dreams fall into nightmares when he finally falls asleep.

Sango crashes after that. Asahi makes sure that both of them are taking deep, even breaths before he tip-toes over to the front door. He eases it open and gives Nymphadora a stern look to not be a snitch as he escapes to the streets.

When he reaches the sidewalk, he breathes in the fresh air. Well, as fresh as it can get in the inner city. Right now, it’s like, food carts dripping with grease, engine exhaust, and sun-ripe garbage, but Asahi’s just thrilled that he has a sense of smell. That is the whole reason he is going out by himself for a few hours. He wants to smell and see as much as he can. He needs to feel alive right now.

He tries walking but it would be better classified as zombie-limping because well, he kind of needs to grow back half a rib, but that’s okay. At least his face doesn’t look so bad anymore – the swelling has gone down and the tooth he lost was one of his back ones. His insides still feel like half-dried glue, mushy and thick, and he still has a headache from the concussion, but at least he can feel something, even if it is pain.

He heads for his favorite coffee shop and hesitates when he sees how crowded it is. He can’t handle being around a lot of people – he can enjoy it in a club setting if only because he can act stupid there and it’s like, okay, because everyone’s shitfaced and won’t remember it. Casual settings put too much pressure on him – real people put too much pressure on him. They are nothing like Asahi and his friends. Real people get to walk down the street without watching their backs. They worry about taxes, not trying to pick out a jacket that doesn’t have any blood in it.
Real people won’t have to stand over Nakagawa’s coffin like Asahi will.

They will be out at normal places like coffee shops, and going on dates, and being with people that make them feel good about themselves. Asahi’s friends deserve people who will make them feel good. He hopes that Makoto guy makes Haru smile, even if nobody else in the world ever witnesses it. He even hopes that Tall, Dark, and Broody will make Rin’s eyes light up like they did before all of this.

So, needless to say, Asahi’s a little worried about being around regular, real people. However, his caffeine addiction overpowers his anxiety, so he steps inside with a smile that freezes in place when he looks over in the corner.

At a table, all alone, is Kisumi. The artful sweep of his hair is particularly voluminous this evening. His skin is like that of a porcelain doll, so clean that Asahi would be scared to touch it, afraid to get it dirty. His white capris are tight everywhere except for where they are ripped at his knees. His legs are long and Asahi has witnessed how flexible they can be when spread over a yoga mat.

He stares at Kisumi and is hit with the realization that he is just so much… more than Asahi. His skin is dark, and blemished with discoloration and birthmarks and there are stab wounds under his shirt that he can’t even make himself look at. He could never sit in a crowded place like this and look so at ease; he would be fidgeting and his muscles would be so tense that they would ache.

But a closer look reveals that Kisumi is not sitting there so nonchalantly. Yes, he is propping his chin up on his fist and scrolling through his phone with an air of boredom, but his eyes are, without a doubt, sad.

That is the only thing that gives Asahi the courage to weave through the tables and stand right before him. Kisumi does not look up from his phone, so Asahi clears his throat, wincing when he does it too hard. Kisumi looks up, hair sweeping with the action, sweeping the air right out of Asahi’s lungs. Recognition dawns on Kisumi’s face, followed by horror. “Asahi! What happened to you?”

Oh, yeah. His arm is in a sling.

His insides itch, panic squirming, crawling through his stomach. “I was…” He steadies himself, admitting that yes, this loud place is awful, but he will never have to be in those endless tunnels again. “It’s a long story. I’m okay, though.” He perks up, meaning that.

Yet Kisumi hardly looks relieved as he sits up straight with creased brows. “What’re you doing here?”

Asahi’s tongue feels too big for his mouth. Seconds tick by, each moment tenser than the last. They are moments that Asahi is not supposed be alive to have, and he drops his head with a sigh. “You’ve been nice to me and I’ve been immature. I’m sorry.”

Kisumi inclines his head. “That’s very sweet of you. Did you come all the way here to tell me that?”

“Y-Yeah,” Asahi says, trying to speak around his heart in his throat. “Well, yeah, but no. I also wanted to – to tell you that I think you’re really pretty. And. That I want to get to – toknowyoubetter!”

He’s half way toward accepting defeat when he notices Kisumi freeze to the very core.
And then Asahi is blessed with the sight of getting to watch him blush.

Kisumi folds a hand over his rosy cheek in disbelief. Then he composes himself to purse his lips around a challenging smirk. His eyes are smoldering as they roam up and down Asahi, and he uses his foot to push out the chair across from him. He tips his head, coy, inviting.

Asahi tries to sit down without his ass missing the chair entirely. He takes a deep breath to gather the courage it takes to meet Kisumi’s gaze. “So, uh. How’re you? You looked sad when I walked in.”

The light in his eyes dims. “Oh.” He sighs, snuggling his arms around his middle. “I met a friend here earlier.” Kisumi opens his lips before closing them, at a loss for words. “This Earth is just so awful sometimes, you know?” His laugh is sharp, nowhere near humored.

Asahi’s shoulders sag under the weight of the world. “Yeah. It sucks sometimes.” He beams and it feels so good to smile. “Not all the time, though.”

Kisumi blinks, hair fluffing across his eyes. Then he smiles all sugar-sweet. “You’re cute.”

The blood explodes in Asahi’s veins. But it’s okay. “So are you.”

He does not know how long they sit there in the corner talking. Distantly, Asahi hears the conversations in the crowd break up, then die out, until it is just Kisumi’s laugh ringing through the air. They talk about coffee. They talk about art and alien theories. Asahi learns about Kisumi’s younger brother, who is away visiting cousins – Kisumi misses him a lot, that much is clear in his voice when he talks about him. They talk shit about their yoga instructor. Asahi goes on about how much he loves his sister and his friends, and in turn, Kisumi tells him all about his best friend, Nagisa, who was actually the blond guy that Haru and Rin brought with them to Samezuka. He is ecstatic to find out that Kisumi teaches at Gou’s school and from there they somehow get into the 411 picture slideshow Kisumi has on his phone of his poodle.

And every second of it is perfect.

The shop closes for the night and Asahi offers to walk Kisumi home, to which he obliges by lacing his fingers together over Asahi’s bent elbow. He considers it a victory that he does not get drunk off of Kisumi’s cologne.

He directs Asahi to a line of brownstones and ends their journey at one with a red door. Kisumi smiles up at him with evening heat flushing his cheeks. “I had fun with you.”

Asahi straightens his legs so they won’t buckle. “I had fun with you, too.”

The neighborhood is quiet, the distant roar of traffic humming through the sidewalk. Porch lights warm the shadows with gold and hanging ferns scent the air with damp soil. Such small details are overwhelming to Asahi after what he has been through, but none of it compares to Kisumi tipped his head up the barest inch – it is a very meaningful and significant inch.

His chest clenches. He swears that his heartbeat is audible in the silence, and he cannot step forward as much as he desperately wants to.

Kisumi notices the panic lighting Asahi’s eyes. He does not know what tells him to reach up and cup Asahi’s cheek, but he does it without prompting, and finds himself marveling. Asahi rests the weight of his head in Kisumi’s palm, squeezing his eyes shut; he had needed the reassurance of touch so
badly after everything that has happened. Kisumi leans forward to taste the heat of his breath, smiling into Asahi’s wide eyes. “It’s okay,” he whispers.

Asahi’s free hand ventures to cup Kisumi’s cheek, freezing when a mouth presses against his thumb. Something about the tenderness of the action has Asahi surging forward to find out that the cushion of Kisumi’s lips feels just as plush as it looks. It’s like brushing his mouth over a flower that is blooming, parting, tasting so sweet. Oxygen floods every pore, lighting Asahi’s skin on fire. His veins are heavy with gold and his heart soars out of his chest until he swears it hits the stars. His pulse is racing in his fingers and toes, pounding through the street. He feels alive.

Is this what real people do? Is this how they feel all the time?

Asahi forgets to be timid about cupping the back of Kisumi’s head to lose his fingers in his hair. A warm tongue finds the seam of his lips and squeezes in. Asahi surges into Kisumi and his back hits the door but he hums in pleasure, making Asahi’s body flash hot. He pulls back before his inhibitions can fall victim to the heat, but he stays in the circle of Kisumi’s arms. Asahi rests his forehead against Kisumi’s pounding temple, breathing hard. He whispers, “Kisumi.”

He looks up with a breathless smile, hugging Asahi tighter. “Hmm?”

Kisumi is surprised when he levels their gazes. “You can’t forget, okay? That there’s good in the world.”
“I know that the world is scary,” Asahi says. “And that it smells bad, and most people are shit, but you’re not like that. So, please remember that there are good people, even if it’s just you.” His nerves are catching up with him, he cannot get another word out – he hopes that Kisumi understands.

He finds that answer in the kiss that Kisumi sears into his mouth, passion tight in his fists as they squeeze through Asahi’s shirt. He gasps when Kisumi starts loving on his throat, all playful flicks and wet kisses. “Mm, did you want to come up for coffee?”

Asahi frowns and pulls back. “It’s –” He looks up at the dark sky. “Kisumi, it’s nighttime.” His brows are creased in concern. “You shouldn’t be drinking coffee this late.”

Kisumi’s smile strains. “Asahi, coffee doesn’t mean coffee.”

Asahi’s face twists in frustrated confusion. “Huh? What’s it mean, then?”

Kisumi’s smile pulls tighter. “It’s just a way to get you inside~”

“…inside what?”

Asahi startles when the back of his head hits the door in defeat. Kisumi quickly composes himself,
hands fluttering. “Never mind, you’re still recovering,” he sighs, adjusting the strap of his sling with the utmost gentleness. “Surely you need to get home and rest. That wouldn’t happen if you stayed, oh no, not at all…” He continues mumbling to himself even as Asahi tips his head, struggling to understand. Kisumi just beams and presses a sweet kiss to the underside of his jaw. “Thank you for walking me home like such a gentleman.” He clears his throat with pointed purpose. “I expect at least three ‘good morning, beautiful’ text messages with an excessive amount of heart emojis by ten a.m. Ta!”

He skips through the front door and shuts it in Asahi’s face.

He frowns down at the pavement, squinting in deep thought. “I feel like I missed something,” he says with uncertainty.

A little frog stares up at him from the sidewalk, blinking its fat, glossy eyes before croaking in agreement and hopping into some bushes.

Asahi just squints harder.

Rin tries to make sense of Kisumi’s advice.

It does not take him long to realize that when he thinks of “treating himself,” his mind immediately goes to steak. So, he gets three of those on the way home, and also a tub of ice cream, which Haru and Gou eat all by themselves while he’s cooking dinner. But Gou gives him some pixie sticks from her secret stash in return for the betrayal, so he forgives her. But not Haru. He can choke.

After devouring his dinner of steak, potatoes, steamed vegetables, and a sizable glass of wine, Rin is tired. But he sets to do the dishes anyway – at least until he realizes that they are out of dishwashing soap. Haru offers to go get some at the corner store; Gou tags along because she wants to get Poseidon a collar. The store is just down the beach, the shore is crowded from the recent heat wave, and Rin knows that Haru is more than capable of protecting Gou, so he bids them goodbye until the near future.

He has filled up his last glass of sweet, red wine and disposed of the empty bottle when he decides to take a bath. His glass clouds with condensation as steam pours out of the faucet with the water, thickening the air with the most pleasant haze – or maybe that is just his buzz. Either way.

He strips and eases down into the tub. His muscles contract in the hot water, then relax until he is boneless. He pours in oils that turn the water into liquid silk and stain it pink. He coats his limbs in a thick lather of soap that melts into the heat of his skin. The lights are low, drenching his body in warm amber. The cabin is quiet enough to let him hear the lull of waves through the open window, and in the silence, he mulls over Kisumi’s words. Honor your body, respect it.

Rin swivels his wine around in the glass as he looks down at himself through the rosy water. He likes how his body looks. It took hard work for every cord of muscle and he had to endure years of scrubbing his skin raw to gain such a smooth finish. He studies his tattoos, tracing the skull with a mouthful of roses on his thigh, the shark jaw opened up around the inside of an elbow, the typography across his forearm that reads, out of the ashes I rise with my red hair, and I eat men like air.

Rin wonders if he would be able to handle looking down and seeing scars in the place of his tattoos. Maybe in the back of his mind, Miho’s order to get his wounds inked over was a private,
overwhelming relief. His fingers dance over his shoulder, down the cherry blossom branch, and a rope of scar tissue meets his touch, the creases thick and squishy. He rips his hand away like he’s been burned, it just feels so… nasty.

Rin levels himself and thinks back to Kisumi’s words, considering.

Hesitantly, he presses into the wound again. The scar does not give – it has closed up and will never reopen. His skin wove itself back together, ligaments finding each other, reaching, healing. He remembers hot blood pouring between his fingers and pauses to take a deep swallow of his wine. He can admit that sticky red feels worse than a nasty scar. Still, he does not know if he could handle seeing his naked wounds every day because they are reminders of how he has been hurt. But at least now, he realizes that they are also a sign that he has healed.

He sinks deeper into the tub, the piercings in his back dimples scraping against the porcelain. He looks over himself to see if there is anything else he has not been appreciating. He likes having strong limbs and a mind that knows how to calculate a fight. He can run fast and dance a rhythm well. This body has made a way of life for himself and his sister, no matter how tough that road has been.

Rin takes a thoughtful sip of his drink and stiffens when his teeth click against the glass. Without even thinking, he wrenches back and rolls his lips in to hide his teeth despite that there is no one else in the room with him. He scowls in disgust at himself, working a hand through his damp hair.

Mockingly, he trails his tongue ring under the sharp edges of his teeth. There are times that he flashes them because he knows it draws in a morbid fascination. Other times he gets so upset with someone that he bares them without forgiveness because deep down, he hopes it scares the person into leaving him alone. Other times, he will forget that his teeth are different from the norm, at least until he is talking with a stranger and their eyes dart between his lips.

He could get them capped if he wanted to – he has the money for it – but he fucking refuses. If they are scary, then fine. If they are just a kink to some people, fine. But they are his. He has had them his whole life, they have provided themselves as weapons, and Gou thinks they are so cool that she wishes she had them. They are as much of a part of him as his hair, what makes him happy, or the very heart in his chest.

Plus, Sousuke likes them.

The water temperature shoots up a dozen degrees. Rin’s skin tingles when he thinks about the sounds that Sousuke makes with teeth in his throat. He likes biting him just deeply enough to leave a mark, and then press his cool tongue ring into the pulsing indentions. He cannot begin to explain what it means that Sousuke even trusts him so close to his pulse point.

The room is too big, as hollow as his chest.

He reaches over to pick up his phone on a stack of towels and scrolls through his contacts to hit send. The back of his neck curves to the lip of the tub as he waits, eyes lulling shut.

Someone picks up and there is rustling before, “Hello?”

Chills rise under the heat of Rin’s skin. Sousuke’s voice is heavy with sleep, rasping along a slow, deep cadence. “Hey,” Rin sighs, his smile curving the softness of his tone.
Sousuke inhales sharply, pausing for a second. Rin swears that he can feel the heat of his blush across the distance, and bites his lip around a coy grin. Sousuke clears his throat. “Hey. How’re you?”

“I’m good. Were you already asleep?”

There is shifting, and then Sousuke makes a noise like an old man easing out of bed. It’s adorable. “I just woke up, actually.”

Rin’s brows crease together as he glances over at the window, moonlight glowing between the blinds. “You slept all day?”

“Yes,” Sousuke says proudly. “And now I’m letting Echo out before she busts through a wall.”

Rin giggles, the sound bouncing off the wine glass he lifts to his mouth. “She’s probably been bored to death with you asleep all day.” Sousuke yawns with exaggeration and Rin drags a hand over his stupid, blushing face.

“Nah, she was tired, too,” Sousuke says. “But now she’s got way too much energy. She’s running in circles right now, and – yep, she just went over to Makoto’s. She’s got this trench under the fence she uses. She’ll probably spend the night with him.” Rin hears the sure sound of a door closing firmly, then the click of a lock. Then another lock. And another.

He rolls his eyes with a fond sort of exasperation. “What are you gonna do all by yourself?”

Sousuke flops down on something, grunting. “I’m gonna lie here in this bed until I can find the motivation to take a shower.” Rin laughs and a tired smile curves Sousuke’s voice. “How do you feel? Are you sore?”

Rin stretches, grimacing as his muscles burn in protest. “Yeah, a little. I’m sleepy. Didn’t do too much today, either.”

“You need to rest, Rin.”

Rin makes a face and Sousuke chuckles like he can see it. “So, you really didn’t do anything today?”

“I met a friend for coffee,” Rin says, snuggling deeper into the blanket of steam. “We talked about some heavy shit and it was exhausting, but… it helped.”

“That’s good.”

They fall into a nice silence, Rin’s eyes closing so he can focus on Sousuke’s breathing. Raspy inhale, pause, heavy exhale. He might be getting sick, or maybe he just needs another day of rest. Probably both – he has run himself ragged over the spectacle that is Rin’s life. “Sousuke?”

“Mm?”

He holds the wine glass close to his chest as if it will act as guarded protection over his heart. “What do you like about me?” He tries to sound nonchalant, but the question is so weighed that his voice trembles through the words.
Sousuke’s breathing stills. He pauses for a moment, then his murmur is curling into Rin’s ear. “I like your smile. I like how it turns into a smirk so I can see your teeth. And how you’ll smile at anyone in the room and mean it.”

Rin is shocked at the resolution of his voice – he means every word without wavering.

“I like your hair, and the way it looks tangled, but I can always get my fingers through it. And you just – you have this drive that I’ve never even seen before, and you never let hope go.” Sousuke takes a deep breath as if to level himself. “I love – that.”

Rin’s veins light up. “You do?”

“Yeah.”

He finishes off his wine and as soon as he swallows that last drop, his voice starts dripping like melted wax. “I like you, too.”

Sousuke is smirking, he hears it. “Thanks.”

The words fall right off of Rin’s tongue, “I really like your eyes. Everything about ‘em.”

Sousuke stumbles for the first time. “O-Oh.”

Rin is not sure when his free hand began shaping to the swell of his hip and roaming down the curve of his thigh. His head tips back, throat stretching into an exposed curve. “I love the way you look at me.”

Sousuke’s breath leaves him in a startled rush, but Rin does not stop; he rushes through his emotions. “I can’t stop thinking about you. I feel like I’m going crazy. All that matters to me is what you might be doing, or what we could do together… what I’d do to you, what I’d let you do to me –”

Sousuke is urgent. “Rin, what’re you doing right now?”

He pauses, blinking down at the water. “I’m. Taking a bath?”

Dead silence. The weight of it is like cinder blocks.

“…Sou?”

“You.” His voice is in the throes of torment. “You’ve been naked this whole time?”

Oh. It clicks.

Rin licks over his smirk. “Mmmhmm. I’m all wet and everything~”

Sousuke sounds like he is dying. “Have you been drinking?”

“Maaaybe.”

“Please don’t drown.”

Rin’s laugh rings true through the room. “Sousuke, I have wine with baths all the time. Do you not?”
“No,” Sousuke snorts. “I get bored just sitting there.”

Rin’s toes curl with his smirk. “Well, I’m not bored right now.” His cock twitches between the squeeze of his thighs, and he rubs his legs together with more friction.

Sousuke inhales. Swallows. “What are you then?”

God, his voice is so good – deep enough to make Rin’s bones hum. A wave rushes through him, making his stomach clench. His voice falls to a secretive whisper. “I’m thinkin’ about how good we’d be together on that bed, or in this tub.” Sousuke stops breathing entirely. “Do you ever think about it, Sousuke?”

“Fuck,” he scoffs in disbelief. “Are you kidding me?”

“I wanna hear it, baby.”

That makes Sousuke lose his voice for another minute. Then he finds it, lets it out in a reverent whisper. “Yes. Yes, you’re the only thing I think about. Even when I’m asleep, you’re there.”

Rin has not felt such a flare of pride in a long time. A pulse throbs down the length of his cock, his veins thrumming like harp strings. “What do we do when you’re asleep? Tell me…”

There is a rustle of clothing and then Sousuke’s voice is no longer steady; there is a growl building in the back of his throat. “Sometimes you’re fucking down on my lap. Or you’re under me and begging for it. But I always give you whatever you want.”

Rin imagines how wide he would have to spread his thighs to accommodate the expanse of Sousuke’s hips. That thick waist would also fit so nicely between the circle of his legs. “I really want you on top of me right now,” Rin breathes, free hand dipping down, skin twitching under restless fingers. “And I really, really need to come around your cock, Sousuke.”

Sousuke’s breath falls heavier. “I know you’d feel incredible. I know you’d be fucking perfect.”

Rin’s dick surges in his hand. Burning shivers wrack his spine. “You’re so quiet most of the time…” His fingers trace the underside of his cockhead, teasing. “But when you squeeze inside me –” Sousuke muffles a curse against something. “And when I ride you for hours before I finally let you come – ah – I promise, you’ll scream.” His hand moves quicker, working heavy pressure up and down. “God, fuck,” he whines, frustration hot on his skin. “I want you inside me so bad…”

“Rin,” Sousuke murmurs, so tender and sweet that it makes his hips ache. “I’d make it so good for you. I’ve never wanted anything so much.” Heat rises in his words. “I’d put everything I am into making you feel good.” Behind gritted teeth, his voice goes to pieces. “You should always feel good -”

“Sousuke,” Rin whimpers, his hand losing rhythm. “Sousuke, Sousuke –” His head is spinning, the room teetering on edge. Sousuke’s breathing crests with Rin’s rolling hips, and hearing his name muffled against a pillow has Rin’s vision searing white, until he does not know if his eyes are open or closed. He fucks into his hand, surging higher, and then all the tension leaves his body in a rush.

They do nothing but pant across the line for a while. Aftershocks jerk Rin’s limbs as a victorious smile twitches over his mouth. “Hey, Sousuke.”
Sousuke’s voice is nothing but a rasp. “Mmn?”

Rin cannot even contain himself, he is ready to fly apart with joy. His whisper is ecstatic. “That’s the first time in years that another man made me come.”

Rustled movement stills. Sousuke’s voice is tight with restrained pride. “But I… I wasn’t even there, Rin.”

Rin shakes his head happily. “Nope, it’s still your fault! Thank you.”

Sousuke chuckles in defeat. “You’re welcome.” His breath hitches and his voice falls. “I miss you.”

Rin squeezes a fist over his heart. “I miss you, too.” He freezes all at once, eyes spiraling wide. “Wait, did you come? You came too, right?” He is earnest in this worry.

Sousuke coughs around a laugh. “Yeah, I did. And now I’m gross and finally motivated to go take a shower.”


“You get more sleep,” Sousuke retorts. “Promise me.”

Rin’s mouth lifts into the sweetest curve. “Promise.”

They say their goodbyes, and Rin makes work of trying to drag himself out of the tub when he is walking on air and three sheets to the wind.

Haru and Gou come back safe and sound. Rin does the dishes, tucks his sister in, but pauses in front of Haru’s door on the way to his own bedroom.

He looks through the crack and finds him curled up on the mattress with a pillow hugged to his middle. The dim light of a cellphone screen is pressed against his ear, and he is speaking with a softness that Rin has never heard from him. Haru pauses for a response, and tucks the phone into his shoulder as he hides his smile against the pillow. Rin discreetly wipes a speck of dust out of his eye, and heads for his room.

He flops down on his bed and sprawls out. He can hardly keep his eyes open, but all the empty space around him keeps his mind awake, and he thinks about the person who should be occupying the rest of the mattress.

He tucks a pillow under his chin to scroll through his phone, and opens up a text message to Sousuke. He writes, Sweet dreams.

After a few minutes of no response, his heart deflates. He sighs, and pulls the covers up over his head, curling into himself.

Then his phone buzzes.

The covers soar through the air and flop against the opposite wall, he kicks them off with so much force. Rin scrambles over to the nightstand, and brings the screen half an inch from his face.
The reply is simple.

&lt;3

Rin’s heart swells in his throat, butterflies filling up his lungs. He flops back on the bed with fingers clenched into his chest, and stares up at the ceiling with wide eyes.

And then he rolls over into the mattress, hugs a pillow to his face, and his happiness explodes into a scream.

Chapter End Notes

Kisumi and Asahi artwork by the ever-wonderful Row-Chan!

Rin's typography tattoo: "Out of the ashes I rise with my red hair, and I eat men like air," is a Sylvia Plath quote. She's incredible.

I wish you so many wonderful things in the new year! I can't believe I've been working on this fic for almost an entire trip around the sun. That's unbelievable. Thank you for being here, and have an awesome holiday season!
happy early new year! *salutes*
	hank you so much to fran and saltyaf for the beta reading! Fran's instagram | twitter | & another thank you to fran for the heart-breakingly sweet depiction of ewoatt!haru, which is on the linked instagram page, which you should go follow | And thank you Saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter)

a big shout out to YouSayTron for this fucking gift to humanity, also known as an adorable depiction of sousuke and echo that i promise, i will never get over.

overjoyed to have two more fanworks from areyousanta, this one being rin and haru looking so adorable, as well as this one, which is a depiction from the previous chapter of haru getting starry eyed over talking on the phone with mako. thank you a lot!

and we have another too-awesome fanmix, this one being from professor-scooby and being filled up with the best imagine dragon songs. i had it on replay throughout this chapter, you were such an inspiration!

lastly, this chapter song gets me so emotional, but this rework is super intense and i also listened to it quite a lot this time around.

"If one heart can mend another, only then can we begin

So won't you hold on a little longer

Don't let them get away

They'll be no rest for the wicked

There's no song for the choir

There's no hope for the weary

If you let them win without a fight."

"No Rest for the Wicked" by Lykke Li

The ocean is black under a starless sky. Lightning blanches the storm clouds white as the waves tear into each other with a roar that is passionate, scared, sentient. The overcast hides the moon tonight – without its presence, the ocean rushes up the shore with the panic of a racing heart. It forgets how to be without the moon’s guiding light – without its other half.

Haru knows the feeling.
He cannot think of anything that he would not do to be under Makoto’s hands instead of standing on the edge of this dock. He shrugs Mori’s bag over his shoulder and flicks a cigarette to life, sucks it into himself until it feels like there are flames in the pit of his gut. Warmth works its way up his throat, smoothing him out, making the edges of his mind not so sharp. He breathes out and the smoke burns his tired eyes; he can hardly keep them open in this early hour of the morning.

The rain hits like bullets and drenches his legskins as the weight of the world presses down on him. The waves are rising, spilling over the dock and turning his pale feet blue, but he does not fear the storm. However, he can admit that he is afraid of the day that will come with the sunrise.

His funeral clothes are in the back of his closet for a reason: he cannot stand the sight of them. They act as a full-bodied mask of acceptance because there is just something about the façade of a pressed button up that makes people think that he’s got his shit together.

But in all truth, he does not have any part of himself together. Like the ocean, Haru is angry and tired, and wants nothing more than to be bathed in the light of his own beacon of hope, but that does not happen. Instead he becomes more like the sky, dark, empty, hot.

Light breaks through the fog and a horn rips the air in two, shuddering through the water. The barge is a looming silhouette over the ocean, a shadow that Haru dives into.

Miho calls a meeting before Nakagawa’s funeral.

Haru startles when another chair goes sailing through the air and splits against the floor. Miho’s shout is still bouncing off the walls when he squeezes a fist into Rin’s blazer in a silent warning to keep his fury caged behind his gritted teeth. The material knotted in Haru’s fingers is dark silk that hides the holster underneath. He presses his knuckles against the outline of Rin’s glock, if only for his own comfort, before letting go.

Miho smashes another chair and one of her guards approaches her, caution drawing tight through his muscles, but it is that hesitancy that makes him too slow to dodge the bullet she fires at him. Even after his skull cracks against the concrete floor, she keeps firing, and Aki holds onto Haru’s elbow a fraction tighter with each shot. Aki’s body still carries injuries from the Samezuka attack – bruises have put color into her cheeks and there are bandages under her lace sleeves. Her eyes are wide and wet under the shadow of her veil, but Nii’s eyes are unblinking even as blood splatters her dress, a profusion of velvet and leather. Asahi goes to her, moving stiffly in his suit because no one told him that he was not supposed to tuck his jacket into his dress pants with his undershirt. He holds Nii’s hand, tries to squeeze warmth back into her cold fingers, but she does not show any emotion until Miho turns her back to her – her eyes burn like blue fire despite that she is not wearing her glowing contacts.

When the gun chamber is at long last empty, the man’s remains are oozing down every wall. Nao keeps his gaze firmly on the ceiling as he adjusts the lavender tie he borrowed from Nitori. Haru scowls at the blood splatter on Mori’s bag, which is hiked up over his shoulder. It is heavy with contents, damp from his morning swim, and now, stained forever. He clenches his hand into a fist that he wants to beat into Miho’s head, the walls, the floor, and Nakagawa’s headstone. He is burning with anger, but then his insides run cold as Miho turns around.

She is not hidden in the shadows for this meeting and there is no microphone present to distort her voice. The heat of the overhead lights pours over her like hellfire. She is wearing a fur coat over
lingerie – a silk gown that drags a trail of red across the floor as she saunters closer. She smears blood and lipstick across her cheek when she wipes her face and then she licks the crimson from her teeth. Her voice is pitched high like the sharpest tip of a diamond raking through glass. “If I had wanted you to cause a scene that would turn the whole world on its head…” Against the table, her nails thump a pattern that echoes in the tense silence. “Then I would have strung you all up in this basement by your toes, your fingers, your ears, your tongues…” She starts laughing and nausea rolls through Haru. “Then starved you into eating each other alive, watched you fight to get a lick of rats or roaches –” Her voice crests in volume, in madness. “And then shot every one of you dead like the mess you left in Samezuka!”

Her scream jars Haru’s bones. She is breathing hard enough to make it feel like she is sucking all of the oxygen out of the room. Being in the suburban house’s underground basement means that the air is already thick enough, but heat is raging from Miho, and it sinks Haru’s lungs in bubbling lead. “You unleashed a gang war in our base of operations! You let the police know! You jeopardized our cliental, you – how dare you threaten everything that I’ve worked for?! You pissed on every single order I have ever given you, orders that I am going to write into your skin with branding rods, orders that you were given to only gut someone in the street if I say gut them in the street!”

Aki’s patience breaks. “What would you have had us do? They ambushed us; we had no choice but to fight back.”

Ice spikes through Haru as sweat rolls down his back. Aki stares Miho down in loathing disgust as she prowls over and does not even flinch when the woman pinches her chin between two sharp nails. “I know,” Miho says, “that you and Rin are no longer physically capable of having children, but if you ever raise your voice at me like that again, I will kill you in a way that will hurt just as much as when… oh, what did you call the little bastard? Hitomu?”

Haru grabs Rin’s hand on its way to his gun, but the glare that Aki sends Miho forces the woman an involuntary step back. Aki’s voice is raw with vehement passion. “Don’t you ever put my son’s name in your mouth.”

Miho’s eyes glitter like embers. She tucks her fingers into Aki’s collar and rips it down, strings fraying, buttons skittering across the floor, and exposing a wealth of flesh. But Aki’s chin lifts higher with each inch of skin that is bared and Miho pulls her collar aside to see the tattoo across her heart. It is a dove, and Miho’s fingers trace the bird’s plush chest. “You aren’t a bird, Zaki-chan,” she sighs. “You can’t fly away. Is that what you were trying to do when you kept renting through your pregnancy?”

Aki looks away but Miho squeezes her nails into her throat, making her choke on an inhale. Aki meets her eyes without wavering, which takes a strength that Haru is not capable of. Miho breathes, “Don’t you remember the pregnancy you hid from me? That betrayal is why I made sure you would never be able to have another child, and you doomed Rin to that same punishment by making him keep your dirty…” She digs deeper into the girl’s throat. “Little…” Blood vessels pop in Aki’s eyes. “Secret.”

“Miho,” Haru gasps. “Please.” Aki gags and he flinches. “She’s still valuable to you! Please.” Miho will not kill Aki, he knows that; her talent is the only thing that can rebuild the cliental that was ripped away with Nakagawa’s last breath. However, Miho knows how to kill someone but keep their heart beating. She knows how to torture people without leaving so much as a bruise on their skin.

Haru opens his mouth, about to fall on his knees and offer himself in Aki’s place, but Miho lets her neck go. She cards through ginger hair as the girl wavers on her feet. “You act like such a motherly
figure, but even when you finally had a baby in your belly, you kept working and not resting.” She says this with pouting pity, then smacks Aki’s cheek, right over a bruise, and laughs. “You killed that baby yourself, girl. Stop blaming me for it. You stressed yourself into an early labor that he had no hope of surviving. Do you remember that Rin almost died, he was renting himself out for you so much? His body shut down, do you remember that, Zaki-chan? You had him working so hard to build a future for you that he didn’t even have the time to fucking see that you were killing his son! Your son. Did you both work so hard because you truly believed that if you tried hard enough, you could dream an escape into existence?” She laughs at their gall and shoves Aki away in disgust.

She hits the floor, throat clenched to hold down a cry, and wraps her arms around her bare chest in fuming silence. There is no disgust in Rin’s eyes as he goes to her, crouching down to lift her up with cherishing gentleness. He shrugs off his blazer and drapes it over her, and she stares at him with enough sorrow to make every part of Haru ache. But Rin shakes his head firmly in a promise that there was nothing to ever forgive, and that will never change. Haru knows that Rin holds no hidden resentment toward Aki and that those swift hours of rocking Hitomu in his arms were the best hours of his life, even when that tiny baby gave that last, smiling yawn.

Hitomu had to have felt so loved and safe pressed against Rin’s heart. He never opened his eyes, never had to see life’s horrors. He never had to hear a gunshot, just everyone crying and laughing, so in love with everything about him. He never felt cold – Aki’s face was flushed, warm against his. He had the perfect little life. And Haru knows that Hitomu saved Rin’s life even if so much of himself died with that baby.

But Haru is seeing so much of Rin be reborn. He recalls their conversation on the cabin’s back porch a few days ago, and remembers that he was so struck by the light in Rin’s eyes as he said that Yamazaki made him want a baby again. Even if it is no longer physically possible for Rin to do so, Sousuke is helping him forgive himself and he does not even know it, but despite this, Haru will never have the words for how thankful for that he is.

He looks around the room and the Freebird members outside of his circle of friends are staring at Miho with so much fear that the very air shakes with their horror. Their eyes have finally opened to what form she can take, and they will never be able to turn away from the sight and forget about it. Haru never thought he could be more afraid of her until she pulls out another handgun and aims it at Nao.

Haru would lunge forward if his feet did not weight a thousand pounds. Nao lifts his fingers the barest inch, a sign for his friends to remain calm despite that he is defenseless. His arm that was pulled from the socket is reset, but is now trapped in a sling.

Mockingly, Miho nudges the tip of the gun under Nao’s eyepatch. “Natsuya is back, is he not?”

Nao opens his mouth and she cocks the gun, chamber shifting, bullet ready for shooting. “Don’t fucking answer that,” she says.

His teeth grind together, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

Miho ghosts the gun’s tip across Nao’s lashes and his throat clenches. “Was Natsuya at Samezuka, Nao?”

“No.” He does not falter, but Miho purses her lips and presses the gun harder into his cheek. Nao’s breath hitches and a hand flies up in surrender. “No.”
She hums a laugh at his expense and her eyes trace the sparrow inked in his lifted hand. She nudges it with her weapon. “Get that covered up.” She never wants to see it again because Natsuya has the same tattoo.

Nao’s silence is defiant. Miho raises her brows in challenge and Nao bows his head in acceptance before she tips his chin up with the gun. “If you have had contact with him,” she whispers, “then you will find out if his eyes taste like yours.” Nao swallows thickly but Miho just smiles. “Do you know how badly I want him dead? I would almost sink to using you as a means to find him, but… well, look at you, lovebird.” She pouts as she adjusts the strap of his eyepatch. “Nat-chan would run to the furthest corner of the earth if he caught sight of you! That would make finding him so I can spill his guts across his mother’s doorstep that much harder for me.” She caresses his cheek and Haru watches chills burst to life under her touch. “You understand, don’t you? Why I can’t use you?”

Nao’s eye is hard and watery as he looks away. He nods once.

Miho pulls away and his legs give out for him to fall to his knees. Haru goes to him with everyone’s gaze heavy on his shoulder blades, Miho’s eyes piercing into the back of his neck. Haru ignores it, defies it, and crouches to wrap an arm around Nao’s neck. In turn, the boy presses his face into Haru’s shoulder, trying to hide his entire being in the small, dark space. “Shh, I got you,” Haru promises. “I got you.” Nao makes a choked sound.

Miho rolls her eyes with boredom and tucks the gun into her coat pocket. Her voice rings true through the room, her presence demanding attention and fear. “Five members of Freebird have run since the Samezuka attack. It is as though they have vanished.” Everyone glances among themselves and Haru and Rin narrow their eyes at each other in confusion.

“They were not strong in the ranks,” Miho adds. “But finding them has proven to be… an odd sort of challenge.” She saunters through the pool of red around the guard and the heat of that blood drips in her voice. “I have a hard time with grudges; an even harder time with forgiveness.” She stands before everyone and somehow levels her gaze with every person in the room. “Getting killed is an unforgivable weakness. Nakagawa is a shining example of this failure.”

Aki grabs the back of Rin’s shirt before he can move to tear the woman to pieces, but her own muscles are shaking as she fights the urge to unleash her pent up rage.

“But running away from Freebird is the ultimate betrayal,” Miho continues. “I have provided a way of life for you; the safest way to deal and fuck and kill. When you throw that all away, you are dead to me. That’s why I have no remorse in hunting you down and making you pay for wasting my time.” She absently traces a design of a sparrow against the tabletop. “There has only been one member of Freebird to ever truly escape me, but I promise you…” She cuts a nail through the neck of the invisible bird. “I will find him, and I will show you what I do to people like him. Then I will find these other five members and make a show of them, one by one, in a way that will prove to you, and Rough Rabbit, and Diamond Back, and Honeyblade, and all of Iwatobi, and all of these Bloodhounds…” Her fists clench with such determination that her nails dig into her palms and cut them open. “I am not one to be betrayed.” She steadies herself. “Now, Haruka. Your bag, if you please?”

Haru hesitates but Nao nods in assurance. Aki comes over to help him stand on shaking legs, then Haru approaches Miho to offer his bag. He does not flinch when her cold fingers brush his. “Thank you,” she simpers.
With every fiber of his being, Haru wants to watch her burn alive.

Miho dumps the bag’s contents out on the table and sorts through them. From there, she calls the names of the lower ranks, and Haru does not blame them for going up to the table like doomed souls to a hanging noose.

Nii is called up and gets LSD, shrooms, and ecstasy. Asahi loads up on weed and pills. Nao receives his prescriptions and antibiotics, and Haru gets everything that he should not be in a five-mile radius with: meth, speed, cocaine, and heroin.

Rin and Aki are given their lists of Samezuka clients for the week, and after that, Miho departs, the lingering aroma of her perfume hanging over the stench of death.

Haru’s eyes dart across the floor as his mind races. He is so deep in his thoughts that he does not notice his friends approach him. Rin gets in his face, passion driving through his voice. “It’s impossible, right?”

“Yes,” Haru nods, not questioning Rin’s ability to read his mind.

But Nii does. “What’s impossible?”

“Ain’t no way five low-ballers got out from under Miho,” Rin says. He crosses his arms restlessly and bobs his ankle. “It’s impossible, she would’ve already found them.”

Asahi nervously rubs at the strap of his sling. “That mean they got killed?”

“She still would have already found them,” Aki says, shaking her head in frustration and pulling Rin’s blazer tighter around herself. “Whether it was at random or at the hands of another gang, they couldn’t just disappear without a trace. The only reason Natsuya was able to do it was because Nao –” She takes a deep breath and looks away. “Nao helped him.”

Haru watches Nao across the room; he is approaching the trashcan against the far wall. He bites back a grimace as he shrugs his sling off before tossing it into the can and shutting it firmly. His shoulders are squared, his back muscles hardening when he turns to regard his friends with a stoic expression. “We will figure it all out.” He does not waver in this vow. “But for the time being, we need to be there for Nakagawa.”

Haru gives a resolute nod. “Nao’s right. We should go.”

Rin’s phone buzzes. He takes it out of his pocket with a look of dread that lifts into surprise. “Sousuke says that he and Seijuro were assigned to watch over the funeral. They just escorted Naka’s family to the church and were ordered to guard the service because his killers are ‘supposedly’ still at large. Corro is supposed to give a speech. It’s gonna be televised and everything.”

Haru looks over at his friends. “Everyone armed?”

They nod in varying degrees of nervousness at the sudden question. He offers no explanation before guiding them out of the basement and into the light of day.
Haru has not been inside many churches during his twenty-three years, but this place is something else. He did not even know that Nakagawa was religious, but as it turns out, he spent a lot of time in this very cathedral as a child – though not so much afterwards. Haru wonders if he ever sat in this exact pew or if, as a boy, he snuggled into the velvet cushioning and gazed up at the grand chandeliers in wonder – they cast looming shadows over the congregation like a dark cloud.

Haru’s eyes are pulsing with his heartbeat and he has a headache from crying. He tiredly watches the stained-glass windows throw prisms across his skin, but then he sees fingers reach over to intertwine with his. Haru looks up at Makoto with so much gratitude and in exhaustion, he rests his head against Makoto’s lips as he kisses his forehead. Makoto leans back to regard the preacher, who is weeping through a memorial service that Haru is too traumatized to even comprehend.

He does not remember much of Corro’s speech, but he can feel his presence in the front row, hear him give an earnest amen after verses are shared, and Haru watches him nod his head solemnly every few minutes.

Haru glances back at the church’s front doors, where Sousuke stands at one side of the entrance and Seijuro is positioned at the other. Seijuro stands with a rigid spine and clasped hands as he scans the crowd, but his gaze flickers to the back of Aki’s head every few minutes and lingers before going back to surveying the area.

Yamazaki is not as focused. His gaze never moves from Rin, who is hunched over beside Haru and covering his mouth to repress his sobs. It looks like not being able to comfort Rin brings Yamazaki a physical agony; his entire body strains as he fights the need to take him into his arms.

It comes time for everyone to see Nakagawa one last time. The old woman at the piano lulls through a finalizing hymn that makes the walls close in, pressure bearing down on Haru’s heart. He is not ready for this to be the final time that light touches Nakagawa’s face. He cannot walk down the aisle and face that coffin.

But need for some sort of closure flares through him, driving his legs into a stand, and the realization that his friends are looking to him as their source of strength helps him remember how to walk. Asahi stays in the pew with Nitori, wipes his eyes with a firm shake of his head. “I don’t – I can’t remember him like that.” He nods at the coffin and quickly turns away. “I gotta stay, I'm sorry, I can’t –” Nii ruffles his hair and hushes him before Nitori puts a hand on his shoulder and nods at Haru in reassurance to go.

After Nakagawa’s family says their last goodbyes to their son, brother, uncle, cousin, or future-in-law, Haru leads the line toward the casket. He cannot feel his feet, his legs, nor anything else, but he knows when Rin stumbles behind him. Haru turns to see his body lurching to move forward, but he is frozen in place. He is staring over Haru’s shoulder with wide eyes as his lips tremble open. “I can’t…”

Haru reaches out to him, his arm stretching through space as it has with bullets singing between them, with blood on both their hands, with track marks on his arms and bruises on Rin’s. Haru opens his palm and meets red eyes without faltering, heart roaring with the vow that he will not let Rin face anything alone.

Rin takes his hand, and the touch is enough encouragement to pull him down the aisle.

Nakagawa does not look peaceful – Hitomu had looked peaceful – but Nakagawa just looks… empty, and everyone else thinks the same thing. Even so, Aki leans down to cup one cheek and
press her lips against the other. She whispers through a sob, “I love you, I love you so much…”

Nao bows his head at Nakagawa, but cannot find his voice through his tears. Nii’s face is streaked with mascara as she taps her fist against Nakagawa’s hand. “Fly high, red bird,” she breathes.

Haru keeps an arm secure around Rin’s back as they stand over the coffin, and he does not know who is leaning on each other more. Shame pulls Haru’s gut inside out. He is so sick with himself that bile lurches up his throat. He wants to apologize because this is all his fault, somehow, it is. He wants to tell Nakagawa that he would take his place if he could, but even if he spoke these confessions out loud, Nakagawa would not hear them because he is not here. Even if he was, he would not have time for that shit.

So Haru says what Nakagawa would want to hear, and every word is spoken with the gravest truth. “I’m going to end this, Naka. No matter what, I will end this.”

Everyone’s eyes are firm with that resolution.

Rin brushes Nakagawa’s hair back and takes a shuddering breath. “Kazuki will find you. He will.”

Grief swells in Haru’s throat. “We’ll all find you,” he rasps. “We’ll all be together again one day, okay?” He flinches when a hot tear rolls down his face. “Naka, I’m so –” He turns away and hides his face in Rin’s shoulder, feels a hand card through his hair and another rub his back, another squeeze his shoulder, and two more take his shaking hand.

They gather themselves and go back to the pews. Haru ignores the weight of Corro’s stare on his back.

The horizon line stretches apart as heat carves the air in two. The breeze carries the scent of new dirt and perfume, greasy stone and rust. The cemetery is a haunting mix of old and new; children’s slabs from the 1800s are right beside the memorials of grandfathers buried as early as last week. Statues guard the various tombs -- angels for the resting mothers, and mermaids for the restless sailors. The sculptures would burn a finger to the touch, they have been out in the afternoon sun for so long.

Even the shade under this willow tree is smothering. Despite this, Nao suffers in silence. He watches from afar as his friends sprinkle dirt over Nakagawa’s casket, but he has to turn away from the sight, and his back falls against the tree trunk. He hunches over and veils the grief on his face by covering it with a hand. He wishes to hide his entire being in the darkness of his palm; he would love nothing more than to curl up in that shoveled pit and be buried under six feet of dirt. But even so, he wants to rip that coffin open with his bare hands and scream at Nakagawa until he wakes up. He quickly rebukes that thought because bringing Nakagawa back into the world of the living would be an unforgivable act of selfishness -- he has finally found a way to escape Miho’s clutches like he always said he would.

Nao is so vile with envy of him that he might get sick from the intensity of it.

Yet jealously cannot make him fool himself. When these tears have dried up, he will surely fly apart from joy because he knows that wherever Nakagawa is, Kazuki is with him.

He wonders if all soulmates are reunited in death, even if one of them is repulsed by the other. Nao is not thinking of Nakagawa and Kazuki hating one another, nor is he thinking of anyone that he is disgusted by. No, repulsion is the last thing that comes to mind when he imagines his other half.
Natsuya is a man who evokes many feelings; a labyrinth of affections that would drip off of Nao’s tongue like honey if only he could whisper them against Natsuya’s throat, his lips, and into the musk of his curls. But what silences those sweet nothings is the fear that Natsuya will be repulsed by Nao’s appearance and everything else about him.

Shame tells him that his affections would not be matched. Humiliation insists that Natsuya could never look Nao in the eye when there is only one green orb to meet his piercing gaze.

And yet Nao’s foolish heart still aches for him, so much so that he begins to weep. His fist squeezes over his chest, which feels like an empty cell. His veins are the bars of a cage, his limbs are chains, his mind a heavy shackle. The weight of himself is too much to bear any longer. How he wishes it were as easy as dying to find relief, but he knows that he would feel much heavier with six feet of dirt poured over him.

Nao just wishes his heart did not feel so hollow.

He is too busy trying to compose himself to notice the rustle from the nearby clearing. There is a shift in the air; an aroma lulls through the warm breeze, a familiar scent that as of late, Nao has only smelt in dreams that make him wake up crying out in loneliness. The moss of the willow trees billows out, throwing shadows into distortion, but Nao does not have to see – he knows who is standing before him. Even in death, he would know.

His heartbeat overpowers every other sound in the near vicinity, and he swears that it pulses through the ground. In this dusty amber light, the world is drenched in gold – the kind that money cannot buy. The kind that warms over a moment and turns it into a priceless and invaluable stretch of time, a miracle.

Nao takes him in with remorseless greed. Hidden strength is compressed into those lean muscles. Corded ligaments act as steel bands beneath his skin, which feels like a rock warmed by the sun, Nao remembers. His jawline could cut a heart open right down the middle, but that would not stop anyone from tearing their chest open to present their life force to him. That face is sculpted from tanned plains and dark shadows. And then there are his eyes; they are what always captivated Nao the most. He meets their intensity without wavering, without hesitation to let them devour him. Those irises are colored with just enough marigold to be endearing, and just enough heated red to leave Nao wanting to burn.

Natsuya’s whisper is breathless. “Nao?” His shock hits the air like a livewire, and Nao is electrified. His breath leaves him in a rush. “Natsuya.”

The hum of cicadas jars Nao’s thoughts. His mind is blank, as empty as the cloudless sky, his skin hotter than the sun. Natsuya stands paralyzed in a similar state, his throat working to swallow. He is dressed in black jeans that hug the rebuilt muscles of his thighs and calves, and he fills out his white tee nicely, strongly. He is in the prime of his twenty-four years, his skin radiating a healthy glow that Natsuya has never seen him wear. There was once an atlas of red dots mapping out his arms, but the canvas of his limbs has been wiped clean – there are no more track marks, no bruises from street fights over heroin. Nao’s voice is high with politeness, but he is dazed from the sight before him. “I’m certainly glad to see you again.”

Natsuya tenses, a peachy hue warming his cheeks. His lips part before he quickly closes his mouth to bow his head respectfully. “I’m – I’m certainly glad to see you as well.”
Still such a gentleman, if only for Nao.

He clears his throat and clasps his fingers together so that they will stop shaking. “What are you doing here?”

Natsuya gazes at the funeral procession some hundred yards away. “I wanted to pay my respects to Nakagawa.” He works his jaw, looking down in shame. “Even though… he didn’t like me very much in the end. I needed to reconcile somehow, I suppose.” With anxiousness, he slowly turns back to regard Nao. “You fought in the ambush as well, I’m sure.” He frowns at his eyepatch. “Nao, were you hurt?”

He lets out an exasperated laugh. “You’re as dense as ever. It’s almost a comfort.”

He had hoped that Natsuya would laugh as well, in the way that he used to with a hand rubbing the back of his neck accompanied by a bashful smile, but instead he steps closer, drawn in by the longing in Nao’s voice. Nao stiffens, vocal cords seizing, his mouth as dry as the air around them. Natsuya comes forward until Nao can feel his heat, and it soothes his aching bones. He smells so good, so familiar, that it is as though he carries his own paradise in the air around him.

Nao takes in all six feet of him, but Natsuya falters when their gazes lock. “The privilege of comforting you would be my greatest honor, but I don’t deserve to touch you.”

Nao’s heart stops. Oh, how could he have ever forgotten Natsuya’s way with words? It was that charm that helped him sneak into high society when he had been born from nothing. That vocabulary is what led him to Nao’s circle – or at least, what had been his circle before the drugs, before Miho, before… life. Natsuya’s sweet-as-wine charisma was what made Nao disgusted with him at first, until Natsuya used it on him, and then only him.

Natsuya shakes his head in disbelief, almost in frustration. “How you have even allowed me to look at you and hear your voice, I can’t…”

“Natsuya,” Nao breathes, stunned out of his own mind.

Nao startles when Natsuya falls to his knees, bowing to him. He is slumped in defeat, laid out in surrender. His fingers dig into the soil as his jaw tightens into a look of self-loathing. “I do not deserve your forgiveness. You owe me nothing, not even remorse if you choose to strike me down right here.” His smile is hopeless. “I would still only think good things of you.” His face crumbles as he rests his forehead against Nao’s thigh. “You have granted me the most painful longing that I have ever had the pleasure to suffer.”

Nao wavers on his feet, forced to steady his hands on Natsuya’s head. He squeezes through rampant curls, trying to say so much with only his fingers. Natsuya nuzzles up into his hand, delirious from the mere touch. He draws Nao’s fingers to his lips and presses a kiss to the back of his hand with the devotion of worship.

Nao strokes his cheek and that breaks Natsuya. Every persona he took to climb ladders vanishes. All the facades he uses to seem like more than he is are gone. The sun that Freebird once turned to for light is nowhere to be found. Iwatobi’s golden boy is weeping and staring up at Nao like a beggar in the dirt to a king. “Nao, I’m sorry. If I could curl up on one of the graves and die, I would. I will never forgive myself for leaving you alone and making you feel like less than the best thing that ever happened me.” He smoothes Nao’s palm with kisses; he cannot stop worshiping him with his lips. “You were there for my family when I wasn’t. You protected Ikuya –”
“Think nothing of that,” Nao admonishes, smearing his tears away.

Natsuya scoffs. “I think the world of it.” His fingers trace the sparrow at the crease of Nao’s forefinger and thumb. The same bird is inked into Natsuya’s hand. “I owe you a debt that I could never repay, but – but I will try to until my bones are dust, if that is what you want.” He tenses with dread. “Or if you would rather me leave… if you don’t wish to see me ever again, I will go this hour and –”

“No,” Nao rushes, heart lurching up his throat. “No.”

A spark of hope lights Natsuya’s eyes. “Then… what do you wish for? Tell me, tell me and it’s yours.”

Nao stares at him in disbelieving silence. He eases down to his knees to level with his face, and Natsuya’s breath is damp with heat, all menthol smoke and cinnamon gum. Nao looks through every copper fleck in his eyes, thumbing the tiny gold hoop in Natsuya’s right ear. “I want to know what you want.”

Natsuya’s face strains with suppressed emotion. He dares to take Nao’s hand, carefully, and with grave reverence. Nao blinks down at his pale fingers and Natsuya’s summer skin. His veins are dark where Natsuya’s are light – he is cold everywhere that he is warm.

At least until Natsuya speaks and lights him on fire.

His brows crease as he shakes his head. “Surely,” he breathes. “Surely you must know… that my affections for you have not changed, but grown.”

The words merge together in Nao’s brain to create one shining realization.

Natsuya swallows thickly. “But if your feelings have changed, little dove, then please tell me so at once. I’ll be forever silenced.”

Nao does not say anything as he stares up at him, waiting, needing.

Natsuya leans closer, their bangs tangling. They are breathless as their foreheads rest together. “I love you, Nao.” Against his ear, he whispers a secret. “Nao Kirishima.”

It has been so long since he heard his legal name, but he still remembers every detail of that undisclosed ceremony and their wedding night. That love had been theirs, and nobody else in the world deserved to know about it. Wedding bands were traded for sparrows and the title of husband was saved for private moments that could never be taken away.

They were not engaged for three years – they have been married for three years.

“I loved you before we were born,” Natsuya murmurs with his lips against Nao’s cheek. “And if there is a life after this one, I will love you then.” He levels their gazes, smiling only for Nao. “I am disgusted with everything in this world but yourself. I wish to never be parted from you from this day on. If you would have me, if – please, have me.”

Nao looks toward their friends across the yard. He watches them comfort each other through embraces, quiet words, and shared cigarettes. “I want what is best for them.”
Natsuya’s brows scrunch in the most endearing confusion before he follows Nao’s gaze, and his eyes fill with longing.

“As you’ve told me many times before,” Nao says. “I’m too much like the moon to be the only thing in their sky.”

He has been enlightenment in their difficult times, a guiding presence to help keep them in motion, but he cannot teach them how to slow down and bask in the day’s warmth – he cannot make them realize that there is more to life than this nightmare they are trapped in. “I’m not on drugs anymore,” Nao sighs. “I have not used anything since you left. Yet I’m still under Miho’s thumb.” He does not have Natsuya’s courage to run, but even if he did, he would never leave his friends. However, they need to witness some sort of bravery; they need hope, which Nao does not have to offer. He is cast in his own shadows too deeply to lead them from darkness.

Natsuya freezes. “You’re… you got clean?”

Nao nods, chewing on his lip to hide a shy smile. He laughs when Natsuya sweeps him up in his arms to smother his face with kisses. Nao frames his face and gasps when he finds his mouth. “Shh,” Natsuya hushes, hands delicate on the sides of his throat, thumbs tipping Nao’s jaw up to part his lips with his own. Natsuya kisses in a way that is barely controllable. It is not for the faint of heart and it takes stamina of both lungs and lust, because one inhale of his exhale has Nao quivering. His hands are already roaming under Natsuya’s shirt to feel the warmth of his honey skin and revel in the protective strength in his frame. He knows every inch of this body, can feel out scars across his back from memory alone, but Natsuya remembers just how to purr against Nao’s throat and make him contemplate darning this dry spell under a fucking tree in a graveyard when it’s ninety degrees outside.

They’ve done it under worse conditions.

Despite this, he pulls away. Nao smiles as he thumbs at Natsuya’s pout. “You’ll have to work a lot harder for it after leaving me alone for so long.”

Natsuya’s face hardens with the stoic determination of a soldier and Nao laughs, but the sound dies out as Nakagawa’s casket is lowered into the ground. Natsuya hushes him and cups his cheek to turn his face away. Nao buries his face against his chest, caught between the insistence that he needs to console his friends and the realization that he has not let himself be comforted through this entire ordeal.

He has given his friends’ hearts protection, gave them shadows to hide in, but that is not enough. “They need the sun,” Nao whispers. “They need light. They need you, Natsuya.”

His sigh is full of yearning. “I need them, too. But how could they ever trust me again?”

Nao pauses to think. “They are rightfully angry with you. They have every reason to be cautious – and you will respect those feelings – but they still love you.” He weaves through dark curls. “As I still love you.”

Overcome, Natsuya brings Nao’s hand to his lips and kisses the sparrow. Nao ushers him to a stand, ignoring how his sore muscles burn in protest of the action. “Now is not the time to ask them for forgiveness. Give them time. Go be with Ikuya and your mom; they need you the most right now.”
Natsuya nods with strengthened resolve. He kisses Nao fiercely, with a passion that can barely be restrained. “I love you,” Natsuya rasps. “Nobody has ever loved anyone else as much as I love you.”

“I know,” Nao smiles. “Now go. Make it all right. I know you can.”

Nakagawa’s family takes their leave from the graveyard. The sun bakes into tombstones and black limousines but Haru is cold – fragile. He is so drained that Makoto’s arms around him are the only thing keeping him upright. His eyes lulled shut a while ago, but Makoto’s hands continue to rub soothing patterns against his aching back. “Thank you for being here,” Haru whispers.

Makoto makes an admonishing sound. “You’re my boyfriend. These sorts of things should be thankless.”

Haru smiles, lifting his tired eyes. “When were you going to tell me that I’m your boyfriend?”

“It’s obvious,” Nii scoffs from her place in the grass. Aki gives her a reprimanding look and begins a lecture about not getting her dress dirty while Asahi and Nitori smirk at Haru.

He rolls his eyes and turns back to Makoto, who is beaming. Haru strokes through his hair. “Did you ever return that call?” He remembers Makoto’s phone vibrating in the church.

“Yeah,” he says. “It was my neighbor, Miss Tsukino. She just wanted to know when I was going to pick up Sousuke’s dog. She gets antsy when they are apart.”

Haru nods. “You can go ahead. I’ll be okay.” He tips his head back for Makoto to shape his jaw and kiss him. He has grown so comfortable in receiving the affection that he winds his arms around his neck to bring him closer.

Awareness creeps over Haru’s skin and he opens his eyes to look over Makoto’s shoulder. Sousuke stares back flatly. Haru flips him off and he rolls his eyes back to the folder Seijuro is showing him.

Makoto takes his leave and Haru is once more devoured inside out by emptiness. It aches harder each time he and Makoto part; it is beginning to be a pain too great to bear.

Nevertheless, he declines the cigarette Asahi offers him.

Seijuro and Aki walk down one of hundreds of aisles lined with graves, leaving Sousuke alone by the squad car. On the journey to his truck, Makoto claps him on the left shoulder, but Sousuke does not look at him. Makoto follows his gaze to a fresh pile of dirt, which Rin is standing over. He nudges Sousuke forward and receives a frown of confusion in response. Makoto silently gives him a pointed look, brows raised with insistence. Sousuke sighs in understanding and squeezes Makoto’s hand on his shoulder, then starts walking.

The sun bakes into his scalp as he climbs the hill to close the hundred yards of distance between him and Rin. He is alone at Nakagawa’s burial site, the murmur of conversation slipping away as the muggy draft lifts his hair. Rin’s back is to him but it is hunched, and his head is bowed to the mountain of soil as he cries.

With an aching heart, Sousuke comes forward and hugs him from behind. Rin leans back against his chest and Sousuke intertwines their fingers, tucking their faces together. Rin lets himself be held,
allowing Sousuke to support his weight. He takes a shuddering breath. “Are you scared of dying?”

Sousuke brushes his lips against Rin’s hair, thinking. “I used to not be.”

“Not even in Iraq?”

He shrugs. “Not really. For most of my life, I never really thought I had a lot to live for.”

“Then what made you realize that you do? What happened?”

Sousuke presses a kiss to the top of his head before resting his chin there. “You.”

Rin turns to gaze at him and cups Sousuke’s cheek. He smiles when he leans into the touch and goes to say something, but then he looks over Sousuke’s shoulder and freezes.

His ears flex at the distant roar of several engines. Tires screech and the stench of rubber is intensified by the hot spell. The vehicles steadily increase in proximity and an impressive sound system has vibrations shooting up Sousuke’s legs. It sounds like… jazz music? That 1920’s swing shit? Saxophones and violins are layered indulgently, materializing the image of champagne flutes held in silk gloves and cigars pinched between jeweled fingers.

He turns to the edge of the cemetery where grass meets pavement, and the sight before him makes him briefly wonder if he is even conscious right now.

The circle of asphalt around the graveyard is packed with vintage vehicles – restored cars from the 30’s and 40’s with white leather seats and round headlights. There are cream colored Rolls Royce’s and blood red Duesenberg’s. Perched on the edge of an old Bugatti convertible are three girls dressed in gowns made of pearls – they throw their heads back to laugh with long, skinny cigarettes between their fingers. From the window of a Mercedes Roadster, a boy thrusts an actual fucking bottle of champagne in the air before spraying it everywhere in the near vicinity.

Sousuke has never seen anything so ridiculous in his entire life.

But Rin does not seem to find any part of the display funny. He seizes Sousuke’s hand like a vice grip and races down the hill, boots ripping up chunks of dirt as he screams, “Haru! It’s –” He swears as he hurdles over a row of slabs.

Haru jerks around at the panic in Rin’s voice and so does the rest of Freebird. They follow his gaze to the brigade of vehicles and Sousuke watches Haru’s back muscles go so tense that they strain against his shirt. Nii scrambles to her feet, her shout twisted in fury and shock. Aki yanks Seijuro behind the cover of a tomb and Nao stumbles out of the woods in disbelief of the sight before him. Asahi’s face hardens and he takes Nitori’s arm to pull the shorter boy behind him.

Tension layers over the humidity, suffocating. Adrenaline screams off of everyone with such ferocity that it threatens to set the air on fire.

Sousuke is reeling, he does not understand the sudden shift until he whirls around. The entire circle of asphalt is barricaded by vehicles; they have blocked off the exits and any hope of escape. The cemetery and everyone inside of it is surrounded.

Sousuke’s stomach drops. But this – how can these peppy fucks with their champagne and cigarettes be seen as anything even close to a threat? No, that is impossible, that is –
But then Sousuke takes a closer look at the cars and realizes that yes, this is an ambush.

The spokes of the tires are snakes. Vipers accent the doors and windows. The emblem perched on each hood is the head of a serpent with bared fangs.

“No,” Asahi whispers.

“It can’t be,” Nii snarls.

Rin cries out through the heat, “It’s—”

The driver’s door of a gray Rolls Royce opens.

Haru glares. “Diamond Back.”
We Want War: Part I

Chapter Notes

big thank you to areyousanta | thenaugtylist for two awesome pieces of ewoatt!fanart, one being of haru and one being a nsfw depiction of rin's chapter eighteen bath scene (°_3°) i love your work, you're incredible! <3

and thank you saltyaf, you literal gift to humanity, for being such an awesome beta reader. (archive of our own | twitter)

also, i made some profiles for a few of the gangs; they can be found here

this chapter was inspired by we want war by these new puritans, so if you need some mood music then holy shit this is the best thing to listen to. but since sousuke is such a big part of this chapter, i picked lyrics more fitting to his point of view in the chapter (song). maybe it's my love of southern gothic that thinks this song is so freaking cool, but it really spoke to me in terms of sousuke and what he's going through with rin and everything else. so i hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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If you fall,

Hold my hand, oh baby, it's a long way down to the bottom of the river

The wolves will chase you by the pale moonlight,

Drunk and driven by the devil's hunger

Now let that fever, make the water rise

Hold my hand, oh baby, it's a long way down,

A long way down.

"The Bottom Of The River" by Delta Rae

Iwatobi has its set of untouchables. There is a handful of people so rich that the police just can’t arrest them because money can buy anything, even a judge or an officer. Sousuke never believed that justice was blind, but he did not expect to witness an entire police force look away from something like the enigma of Diamond Back.

It is a secret society with origins dating back to the 1700’s, when Iwatobi’s harbors were still filled with ships. Throughout the centuries, Diamond Back made a name for itself by boasting extravagance through lavish parties – or passionate massacres if anyone threatened to take their wealth from them. They have always made their money through cold deception; they earn their riches with fangs poised to strike.
They do everything with a grand air, especially their crimes. Seijuro’s grandfather used to tell him horror stories about Diamond Back and in turn, Sei told Sousuke about an event from the 1970’s when the group dumped so many bodies into the ocean that it turned red.

A person can only become a member of Diamond Back if they are in possession of a fortune and are ambitious about embracing the very worst of human nature. It is not difficult to find people like that in Iwatobi; the city’s elite are born killers who know how to lie before they learn how to speak. They live with a silver spoon in one hand and a knife in the other.

And they are all right in front of Sousuke, almost a hundred of them, with eyes that slice into him until he feels like a black mouse caught in their throats.

The tension is suffocating; the humidity does not help. The buzz of insects is like a roar as silence crashes down. Sousuke’s skin is hot with adrenaline and sweat pours down his back like liquid fire. It does not matter that he is armed; he is being watched and even a twitch of his finger will be seen. He cannot even move his gaze to see what anyone in Freebird is thinking – he is being scrutinized by Diamond Back that intensely.

So, there is nothing that he or anyone else can do but watch as the driver’s door of a grey Rolls Royce opens.

A branding rod takes the place of Sousuke’s spine, burning with panic. He feels the soldier take over, draining the color from his vision, details sharpening with the ringing in his ears. A cane pushes against the ground and a man steps out of the car, the only color in the world being the emerald velvet of his suit. His hair is elegant sweeps of black, like raven wings. His presence is a force of nature, influencing the very ticking of time to slow down and appreciate him. His air of nobility is so dominant that Diamond Back’s extravagance pales in comparison.

Sousuke sees through the guy’s bullshit façade and pinpoints the details that nobody else can catch. The man’s face is straining as he bites back a grimace when he leans on his cane. He must have been injured because he is far too young to need a cane for old age – he appears to be only in his mid-twenties, at least under the exhaustion creasing his face. He has an intimidating build, yet he is pale under his natural tan, and Sousuke cannot decide if it is due to being tired or being sick.

Either way, he is not weak enough for Freebird to let their guard down.

The man takes his time in sauntering over, drawing out the tension to a restless thing, Sousuke’s whole body straining with it. He hears Haru’s nails squeeze into his palm as the man steps right up to him with an indulgent smile – a shit-eating grin. “Haru.”

His voice is nothing but growl. “Pietro.”

Pietro’s eyes narrow over a smirk – excited. “You look better than I thought you would.” His thick accent lavishes the curling syllables. “Have you heard the rumors? I expected to see your intestines coming out of your throat.” Pietro smirk deepens. “No matter. I still have a chance to see that.”

Haru arches a daring brow and Pietro hums a laugh. “You are as refreshing as ever, Haru.”

He is impatient. “What do you want?”

Pietro’s eyes go so cold that ice claws down Sousuke’s back. “You are also as foolish as ever,”
Pietro muses. His words drip poison and make Sousuke’s throat flood with acid. “You are in no place to make demands.”

Nii’s breath rolls into a snarl, but Nao twists a fist into the back of her dress to keep her from charging.

Pietro opens his left arm and tips his head back to take a deep inhale of afternoon sunshine. He sighs with a bitter sort of smile. “Today is a gift. I plan to take my time with it and you will as well.”

Sousuke listens to Rin’s teeth grinding.

Pietro folds his left hand over his cane and works it into the dirt. His right hand has stayed in his coat pocket this entire time, but Sousuke thinks that is due to him hanging onto a concealed weapon. “I understand that my sudden approach was not polite.” He sighs over at the fresh pile of dirt across the way. “But you cannot expect me to be remorseful about it, given that your Nakagawa killed so many of my Diamond Back –”

Nao steps out from behind Nii. “Pietro, stop.”

Pietro goes so still that the air freezes. His skin falls paler, like the blood is draining from his veins, evaporating. Nao is drawing the stoicism from him just by standing there. Diamond Back takes a collective gasp and floods with whispers and in turn, resentment comes off Nao in waves that sting Sousuke’s skin.

But then Pietro’s eyes change, glazing over with a warmth that Sousuke just recently became very familiar with.

Love.

Sousuke needs a drink for so many fucking reasons, but this discovery is now at the top of the list of reasons why.

He dares a glance at Seijuro, who is still hiding Aki in the shadow of a tomb. He and Sousuke look about three episodes behind on Iwatobi’s most popular soap opera which apparently, everyone else has seen because nobody looks the least bit surprised by Pietro’s reverent stare at Nao.

The leader of Diamond Back flicks his hand in a sharp gesture that has Sousuke tensing, ready to yank Rin behind him and use himself as a shield, but instead of attacking, the brigade of cars awakens. The air thickens with the stench of exhaust and burning rubber; engines turn over, flooding, then roaring to life as tires spin. As one, the cluster of vehicles races for the exit and in exactly ten seconds, the only trace left of their existence is fading smoke and lingering perfume.

Reeling, Sousuke’s wide eyes stare down at the steaming tire tracks on the pavement. He lifts his eyes to Pietro, who stands alone before Freebird. The man clears his throat, his smile rather bashful. “Forgive me, but I do not wish for them to see me suddenly mixing business with pleasure.”

Nao is vile with disgust. “What pleasure?”

Pietro parts his lips to speak, but they firm into a line and he bows his head – submissively? His whisper is hoarse with emotion, as aching as his smile. “You are a pleasure to see in any form.”

Nao’s anger is a fire that rivals the sun. “And you are no such thing.”
A muscle twitches in Pietro’s jaw as he arches a brow. “No?” His expression smooths over into a marble slate, completely devoid of warmth. His pout is mocking as he strolls closer, but Nao does not cower in the wake of his approach; his stance is hostile even when there is less than a foot of space between them. Pietro’s sigh is raspy, hungry, as he leans closer, mere inches between his smirk and Nao’s scowl. He murmurs, “You were not always so cruel to me. I recall a sweeter time, when you and I brought each other pleasures of all forms.”

Sousuke can see Nao’s disgust turning inward, becoming an expression of self-loathing on his face. “Surely,” Pietro breathes, “my memories of you do not deceive me – of you in my bed –”

“The bed Natsuya had me in.” Nao surges with a vehemence that forces Pietro to take a disbelieving step back. “Because of the home you made a prison.” Nao is angrier than Sousuke even knew he was capable of being. “You are the sickest, weakest person I have ever –”

Pietro takes a threatening step closer and as one, Freebird lurches forward with their guns aimed and ready to fire, but Nao calls, “Don’t.”

His friends stagger, arms flailing for balance, chests heaving with the rush of adrenaline. Haru keeps his pistol aimed with a steady hand; Asahi holds up his revolver with two hands that shake in barely-restrained panic, and Nitori’s fist is tight in the back of his shirt.

Nao is too calm in the wake of all this. He is draped in Pietro’s shadow, but his smile is ten times darker. “You can’t hurt me. Not anymore.”

The clouds churn and the sudden darkness over the humidity leaves everyone in a cold sweat. Pietro shakes his head at Nao, eyes wide and unblinking. “Oh,” he breathes. “How wrong you are, passero. There are too many ways that I could hurt you.”

Haru cocks his gun but Pietro does not even flinch at the sound. He falters only when Nao meets his stare, a dazed laugh sweeping from his lungs. “Yet I will not act on a single possibility because you are right – I am a weak man when it comes to you. I can admit that.” His eyes narrow and Sousuke hears Aki’s breath hitch. “But you are weak for pretending that you were not Diamond Back’s before Freebird’s.”

Sousuke follows Pietro’s gaze to Nao’s arm, where his sleeve is rolled up past the elbow to withstand the heat. There is a tattoo on Nao’s forearm – scales woven together by dark green ink to depict the outline of a snake.

Pietro glares into Nao’s eye. “I would also advise that you never, ever forget that you were mine before Natsuya’s.”

Nao’s silence is unforgiving and Pietro’s voice ravs with desperate grief. “It is pride that leaves you unable to confess that he was not worth it! Nothing can compare to what you gave up for him!”

Nao’s response is an unyielding glare and Pietro lashes out in a blind fury that slows the world down, colors and sounds stretching, distorting. Sousuke is distantly aware of Freebird lurching to defend Nao, but there is only one thing that has striking clarity in this moment.

Like a snake sheading its skin, Nao’s composure turns inside out and something else takes over. Everything about him sharpens – his glare, cheekbones, the ends of his hair, and shoulder blades. Shadows crawl out of the hollows of his cheeks. All this time, Sousuke thought that he was the
docile and innocent victim in all of this but that is no longer the case, *it never was.*

Nao is the snake in the grass, never opening his fangs until someone he loves gets stepped on. Only then does he swallow the culprit whole with no remorse.

Sousuke realizes that not only is Nao a true member of Diamond Back, but he is without a doubt the strongest of them all because nothing, not even the loss of wealth, status, or dignity, broke him. That resilience is what makes him seize Pietro’s wrist with venom dripping from his words. “I would like to remind you that the last time you laid a hand on me was the last time you had a hand.”

Sousuke’s eyes dart to Pietro’s right hand, which remains in his pocket. The realization wrenches through him in a sickening lurch.

Nao squeezes Pietro’s wrist tighter, nails flashing, veins bulging under pressure. “Lest you forget what Natsuya is capable of.” *Tighter.* “But I will not let you forget what I’m capable of and how many ways I will ruin your life if you don’t tell me why you are here.”

The wind echoes through the hollow sky as they stare each other down. “You have changed,” Pietro muses, almost sounding proud. “Valiance is most becoming in you.”

Nao lifts his chin as he drops Pietro’s wrist. “I know.”

Tension strains through the heat as Pietro regards Haru. He rests his weight on his cane and his exhaustion lines crease deeper. “I came to find out what you know about the group who attacked you. I believe they call themselves the Bloodhounds?”

Haru’s eyes dart to pick apart Pietro’s expression. “We wouldn’t be standing in this cemetery if I knew how to take them down.”

“They only killed one of your own,” Pietro counters, fist tightening on his cane. “They have taken more than twenty of mine.”

The weight of disbelieving silence drops like a cinder block.

Pietro rubs a hand down his face, stubble rasping. “Eleven hours ago, Diamond Back was lured into a chase that ended in the outskirts. The Bloodhounds drove them from the inner-city to the abandoned mills at the edge of the forest. Several of my dealers were killed, yet they had every speck of cocaine and heroin on their person when their bodies were found – only their relay had been taken.” Rage fires off in his voice. “They took a handful of my people captive, as well. The Bloodhounds sent a ransom for their lives in exchange for more relay. How the fuck else would I have even known the name the group if they had not contacted me?”

Haru studies him. “Did you see any of the Bloodhounds?”

“No in person,” Pietro says. “But I was shown security camera footage of the chase – various places throughout the city.”

Rin stiffens. “How could you have seen that footage?”

Pietro’s teeth flash, blinding white caught between a rotten peach smirk. “Because half of the police force is working for me.”
Sousuke’s blood freezes. He feels Rin’s eyes on him, but he and Seijuro are staring at each other with shock that falls into hopeless defeat.

Pietro continues with a victorious air, “I have one hand in their pockets and the other around their throats –”

“Well, uh,” Asahi blurts, coughing uncomfortably. He rubs the back of his neck with a pointed look. “Actually, you don’t. You can’t have two hands in anything because of the… you know, the –” He slices his fingers down his wrist, making a *crrrt* sound as he nods at the stump in Pietro’s pocket. “— thing.”

Pietro glares at him in fuming silence. Asahi whistles an innocent tune as he turns his fascination to a nearby anthill.

Haru pinches the bridge of his nose before returning his focus to Pietro. “You’re saying you’ve got cops on your payroll.”

Pietro’s exhale is hot with irritation. “Yes, but not as many since Corro’s administration. He is a challenge to work around. Very… aware, focused.” He scowls. “He is too satisfied with himself. He will not take money like the other officials; he wants the glory of saving Iwatobi. But the younger recruits, they are not as steady as him – working with something as big as Diamond Back gives them a sense of purpose. They are easier to sway.”

Pietro inclines his head to regard Sousuke, pinning him on the spot. All at once, Sousuke is aware of just how heavy his police vest is; the weight of his equipment doubles under Pietro’s stare. His badge flashes in the sunlight, striking Pietro’s crinkled eyes. “I see you have a way of *swaying* as well, Rin.”

Sousuke’s hand tightens over his holster as Rin tenses. Pietro’s laugh is one of elated disbelief. “How remarkable! This man has not once ripped his eyes away from you, Rin.” His smile is wistful. “Such loyalty cannot be bought, unfortunately. Lucky for me, most of Iwatobi’s police have a loyalty to greed, and I have been able to indulge that.”

Nii’s brows crease in thought. “What did you mean when you said that the Bloodhounds contacted you? Was it a man or a woman?”

Pietro scowls. “The Bloodhounds are led by a woman.” His expression darkens with building fury. “And if she is anything like Nadia –”

Haru steps forward. “What’d she look like? The woman, did you see her on the camera footage?”

Pietro studies the frantic light in his eyes. “Yes. She appears to be in her late twenties. Her hair is buzzed and she had the most entrancing blue eyes, like yours. She was exceptionally short but quite strong, though she had been previously wounded. She ran with a hand over her side.”

Haru’s exhale rushes away and Pietro’s satisfaction is a tangible heat in the air. “I told you it was them. Now I must know what you do.”

Haru scoffs. “No way in hell would I –”

“Haru,” Sousuke calls, hand flying out. “Wait.” Haru regards him coldly but Sousuke meets his piercing stare easily. “He has the resources to find out who the snitch is.”
Rin’s face lights with inspiration, his breath leaving him in excited bursts. Haru is gritting his teeth at the fact that Sousuke just revealed such a secret to an enemy leader, who is curling another shit-eating grin. “You have a very dirty cop, Haru-chan.”

“Oh, fuck y—”

“The Bloodhounds have a collaborator in the police department,” Sousuke interrupts. Nitori grabs Nii’s arm before she can throw a knife in his face. Sousuke ignores the exchange to cross his arms at Pietro in challenge. “So, if you find out who the snitch is, you’ll find out how to take down the Bloodhounds.”

Haru’s voice is so strained that it almost splits apart. “Did you take even one fucking half of a second to realize that maybe the snitch is one of his snitches?”

Before Sousuke can ponder that, Pietro hums with interest. “So, I found a collaborator to find the Bloodhounds and had them take down my own gang?” His nostrils flare, patience breaking. “What would I gain from slaughtering my own people? What kind of message would I be sending to anyone other than myself?” His knuckles are white, tendons sharp through the skin. “The Bloodhounds think that they can threaten me. Toy with me.”

He rears up like a standing cobra and his next words prove that he is a monster in all his glory. “I will not waste product on anyone foolish enough to engage in a chase and get captured. I do not have grief for the members of Diamond Back that the Bloodhounds killed. I do not have the heart for it.” He glances at Nao, voice heavy with remorse. “I never did, as much as I wanted to. I have never been able to return the love that I have received.” He nods to himself. “That is my greatest shame, it always will be.” He laughs at the sun, voice mocking. “’Til death do I part.”

Nao’s thumb rubs over his bare ring finger, then his index finger curls into the crease of his hand, over a sparrow tattoo. He squeezes into it and looks away.

Pietro is burning with determination. “I will have the glory of taking down Freebird – the Bloodhounds came far too close to taking that goal as their own. And Corro will not get in the way of turning this drug empire into my monopoly; he will not stop me from finding your snitch.” He levels his gaze with Haru. “In turn, you will come to me and tell me anything you find out about the Bloodhounds.”

Rin slashes his blade and points it at Pietro. “We don’t owe you dogshit.”

“True, but we want the same things,” Pietro counters. “The goal we share can only be achieved through collaboration. Diamond Back’s strengths are your weaknesses. Your strengths are…” His pout is pitying. “Arguable. But you have your advantages. The Bloodhounds only took your Nakagawa – they took dozens of mine.”

“One of him was worth more than all of fucking Iwatobi,” Rin snaps.

Pietro humors him with a smile as if he is regarding a child. “You are a formidable enemy where those outskirt inbreeds are not, and you will find them without my help or not.”

He turns his back on them and starts down the path toward the gates, strolling away with his cane tapping along. He throws a wink and a smirk over his shoulder. “You will simply do it in half the time now.”
When he is gone, relief hits everyone with the force of a bullet. Haru is the only one who is still rigid, eyes darting across the ground as his mind races. Rin’s bobbing ankle goes to town and Sousuke brushes his fingers, jumping when Rin latches on. His desperate need for contact proves that Sousuke truly has no idea how wrong this exchange with Diamond Back could have gone. He squeezes their fingers tighter together, reveling in the pulse that beats against his own.

Seijuro and Aki come out of hiding and she rubs Nii’s back, helping her tense muscles go lax. Nao holds out a trembling hand to Asahi, who lights him a cigarette without hesitation.

A soft voice breaks the stillness. “He has cancer.”

Everyone turns to Nitori as he steps out from behind Asahi. He is wringing his suit jacket between anxious hands, but his expression is firm. “I watched over him at the hospital a few nights ago. He collapsed in his home and nobody was there to find him until the housekeepers showed up. He never woke up while I was with him; he was too weak. His paperwork said that he has aggressive sarcoma in his bones and connective tissue.”

Nao is pinching his cigarette too tightly. “But that’s – that’s still treatable.”

Nitori chews his lip. “He hasn’t been sick long, but… he stopped treatment and then it spread. First he quit radiation, then chemo, then… he’s got a few months left, Nao. I’m sorry.” He blinks back anxious tears at Rin. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know that was him when I was watching over him, I… I swear, I would have told you –”

Rin hushes him and ruffles his hair. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Ai. You just gave us the biggest advantage this drug war has ever seen, telling us that. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Haru says, sincerity deep in his voice.

Nitori sniffs and nods. When he wraps his arms around himself, Sousuke notices dark ink across the paleness of his skin. Over his forearm is the long, swooping neck of a bird, its wings outspread in elegance. A swan, he realizes.

Seven Tears is empty and dark. Sunshine occasionally passes through the windows, light pouring into glasses of beer and whiskey. A tattered mainsail canopies from the ceiling and drapes the funeral party in heavy shadows. The smell of smoke lingers on Nao’s suit as Nii digs the tip of a knife through the table’s wooden boards. Asahi is restlessly pacing the far wall, anxious fingers tangling in some frayed rope from a sailor’s knot display. Nitori calmly walks back and forth with him, offering his presence as comfort and nodding graciously at all of Asahi’s nervous mumbles.

Seijuro is slumped in his chair at the table and rubbing his aching temple with one hand – he uses the other to absenty stroke Aki’s hair. Her head rests on his shoulder, face buried in the crook of his neck to chase a few minutes of sleep. Haru is staring down at his plate of untouched food, everything about him weighed down. Sousuke and Rin are the only ones who ordered coffee and their porcelain mugs scrape together when they set them down on the table too close to each other. It is as though they are in a race to see who can pour the most caffeine over their stress, and they both stiffen at this realization before sharing tired smiles. Rin pecks his cheek and then his lips, the contact fleeting and urging their fingers to intertwine beneath the table as desire quietly builds. What they would do to be alone together after a day like this.
Nao’s cell phone buzzes on the table and everyone startles to life, an electric shock snapping their spines straight. Nao snatches up the phone and brings it to his ear. “Hello?” The responding voice is pitched with urgency, making his brows go high and crease with distress. “Natsuya, shh, shh, slow down!”

Sousuke hears Asahi stumble. He jumps when Nii’s knife splits through the wood and Seijuro looks up at the heavens in dread before swallowing his shot of vodka in one go.

Haru presses over the table. “Nao, what’s wrong?”

Nao ignores him to reply to Natsuya. “Yes, I’m fine. No, I’m at Seven Tears with everyone else. Yes, I… wait, what…? You what?” Seijuro nervously scrapes his chair away as infuriated heat builds in Nao’s cheeks. “What do you mean you don’t know where he is?” Sousuke cranes back, thankful that he is not the one at the other end of Nao’s anger. “No, I haven’t seen him! I brought him home to your mom barely two days ago! How can he be –”

Someone barrels through the restaurant’s entrance doors with a crash that makes Sousuke’s heart burst. Everyone lurches to their feet so quickly that chairs roll and in an explosion of movement, weapons are drawn, aimed for the head between two hands raised in surrender. The person at the end of everyone’s gun is a young male in his twenties, tall but hunched over to catch his breath. His curls splay across his forehead and his clothes are weighted with sweat that gleams at his throat and collarbones. He swallows his panting, eyes hard like garnets as he meets their stares.

Nao is the first to lower his gun. Rin’s weapon is still raised but his wide eyes are red-rimmed. Nii drops her gun, staggering backwards as she mouths for words. Aki comes out from behind Seijuro’s protective stance with a hand trembling over her mouth. Sousuke watches in confusion as Haru holsters his gun back under his shirt, face stricken.

The guy drops his hands and smooths them down his jeans. He bows his head, eyes darting across the floor to find the words to say, but it is not his voice that breaks the silence – it is racing feet.

The guy almost collapses with the force of Asahi’s embrace. He is rigid in his hold, arms slack at his sides until Asahi squeezes some life back into him. The guy’s wet eyes clench shut and he wraps his arms around Asahi in the fiercest hug that Sousuke has ever seen. “Glad you’re back, Nat,” Asahi whispers. He pulls away, leaving Nat dazed.

Aki steps forward and Nat tenses as she draws near; he almost looks afraid of her. He is too shamed to meet her gaze when she cups his face to kiss his forehead. “Welcome home, Natsuya.”

Sousuke’s ears flex at the familiar name and realization strikes him when Nao approaches. There is no hesitation as he reaches up and Natsuya dips his head for the touch. Natsuya parts his mouth as Nao brushes his swollen lip, smearing red over bruised purple, like murder in a garden of lavender. “Fool,” Nao breathes with so much adoration that the very air simmers.

A disbelieving scoff. “So, that’s it?”

The group turns to Nii, whose face is twisted in betrayal at not only in Natsuya, but everyone around her. “All he’s gotta do is show up and we forget that he shit on us?”

Haru goes to reprimand her but Natsuya rushes, “No.” He shakes his head, meeting Nii’s glare head on. “Don’t forget any of it because I did shit on all of you, and you’re first in line to piss on my grave, Satomi, because you deserve it.”
Apparently, that was an apology in some kind of underlying phraseology that Nii understands because her crossed arms fall slack and she blinks. Then she sighs and props up against the table, lifting her brows with waning patience.

Natsuya takes a deep breath and addresses the room. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t the time or place to come back into the picture but I need to know if anyone’s seen Ikuya.”

Haru’s jaw drops. “You lost him?”

“Not the first time,” Rin snorts with a loud, judgmental sip of his drink.

“I didn’t lose him,” Natsuya almost shouts, stress so tight in his voice that it breaks at the end. He drags a hand through his hair and winces, fingers jerking away all sticky and red. Nao sighs and forces him down into the nearest chair. He pulls ice cubes out of an empty glass and wraps them in a napkin, which he presses gently against matted curls. Natsuya’s grimace unravels with relief and Nao asks, “What happened?”

“Some of Diamond Back jumped me on the way here,” Natsuya growls. “They really decked out the welcome wagon. Guess they missed me.” He levels his gaze with Haru. “Have you seen Ikuya? You’re the person he’d go to if something was wrong, second to Nao.”

Haru frowns in confusion. “No, I haven’t seen him – why do you think something’s wrong?”

Natsuya rests his elbows on his knees, heaving a sigh. “Ikuya usually disappears without a word but I knew something was off when he texted me first. He never texts first, and this message came out of the blue. He said that he wasn’t going to come home because he’s…” His fists clench and he looks away. “Ikuya’s been claimed by Rough Rabbit.”

Regret stings Sousuke. He did not know much about Ikuya – just what he read in his file when he was arrested for Corro’s interrogation – but it was easy to see that he was just a kid in way over his head. If a gang has claimed him then it will be impossible to get him off the streets now. Haru’s voice raws with the guilt burning through Sousuke. “We did everything we could, Natsuya, and so did you…”

Natsuya slashes a hand through the air with a frustrated noise. “No, you don’t get it! Rough Rabbit didn’t claim him. I had some contacts left in my phone – members that were part of the gang when I led it – none of them had seen Ikuya.”

Dread sinks into everyone’s bones.

Haru clutches the edge of the table with a startling burst of strength. His eyes are wide as they lock with Rin’s and something awful passes between their gazes. “Natsuya,” Haru says tensely. “Did you try calling Ikuya?”

“I – yeah? He never answered. Haru, what is it?”

Rin and Haru stare at each other in dawning horror.

Natsuya stands up, voice desperate. “Haru.”

“I got a text from Chigusa,” Rin intercepts, holding his hands up to calm Natsuya, but his fingers are
shaking with building panic. “She’s a callgirl we were looking out for. She said that she wouldn’t be seeing us anymore because she was claimed by Honeyblade. I can’t get her to return any of my calls.”

Aki shakes her head dazedly. “But Nadia wouldn’t take her phone; she wouldn’t make Chigusa break any ties.”

“Yeah, I know. None of it is adding up.” Rin cautiously puts a hand on Natsuya’s shoulder, making him jerk. “Nat, I think that…” He swallows. “I don’t know if that was Ikuya who texted you.”

Natsuya lets out a sharp jet of air through his nose. He turns away to pace, locking his fingers behind his neck. He scrubs a hand down his face and rubs at his eyes. “Who was it, then?” His voice holds the promise of pain.

Natsuya startles when Nao grabs his fingers, their sparrow tattoos meeting. “We don’t know, but we’re going to find out.” He turns to Haru – all of Freebird does, with the expectancy of instruction, discussion, hope. They have impossible conviction in their leader and Sousuke knows what kind of pressure that is. His soldiers in Iraq looked at him the same way.

Haru pulls the strength from somewhere, probably from the same place that helped him survive the outskirts. The boy is not Haru in this moment – he is Freebird’s kingpin. “We know that members of Freebird are missing and it’s too ironic that the Bloodhounds have taken members of Diamond Back captive.”

Sousuke’s train of thought crashes right into Haru’s. “You think that the Bloodhounds are behind Freebird’s disappearances.”

Haru nods. “Yes. And it’s too suspicious that Chigusa and Ikuya got claimed all of a sudden.”

“But they were claimed by Honeyblade and Rough Rabbit,” Rin counters. “We don’t know if they’ve had disappearances.”

“Rough Rabbit has,” Natsuya interjects. “Friend of mine said they had a handful of dealers not come back yesterday.”

Aki perks up. “So, that leaves Honeyblade. Even if they didn’t claim Chigusa, they may have seen her and know her last location.”

Nii weaves her blade through her fingers like liquid silver. “If all of this leads to the Bloodhounds then that means if we find Chigusa, we find Ikuya and everyone else that’s missing.” She thrusts her knife through the table with purpose. “Sounds like we’re gonna have to make a house call.”

Natsuya rears up to his full height, determination filling him. “I’m coming too. If this can lead to bringing Ikuya home then I have to go.”

Haru sighs. “Fine, then.” He arches a brow at Sousuke and Seijuro. “Neither of you have to come.”

Seijuro cocks his hip, eyes flat. “You forgetting that I’m also on this godforsaken relay investigation? And the fact that I went rogue with this asshole?” He points a thumb at Sousuke. “I’m the one who’s been stuck at a desk doing all the paperwork for his shootouts and car chases and that time he busted his balls on top of his squad car.”
Sousuke pinches the bridge of his nose. Hard. He grunts when Seijuro throws his arm – and all his weight – around him. “So, I’m gonna tag along and keep digging my own grave, thank you very much. What about you, Sou-chan?”

He shoves Seijuro off him. “Of course I’m going.” He palms his abused shoulder and stiffens under the weight of a stare. He looks up to find Natsuya gaping at his police badge.

Haru throws up a hand before Natsuya can say anything. “This is Yamazaki and Mikoshiba. They’ve been on our side for a while now.”

Natsuya parts his lips wider –

“They’ve proved themselves, Nat.”

Natsuya mouths for words with desperate gestures and Nao levels him with a sharp look of warning. Natsuya submits, flopping back into his chair with a stubborn sigh. He nods in acceptance.

Lastly, everyone regards Nitori, who blushes under the attention. “Um –” He wobbles a laugh with a nervous wave of his hands. “I actually have to work tonight, so I think I’ll sit this one out! I’ll get Momo to pick me up.” He takes out his phone with a sigh. “If he’ll answer.”

Seijuro bends down to meet his eyes intently. “He bein’ an ass to you?”

Nitori smiles at the protectiveness of his tone. “No, he’s just been… spacey. Occupied? He’s acting like he’s got so much on his mind but he won’t talk to me about any of it.” His laugh is heavy with self-loathing. “I shouldn’t complain – look at everything I’m lying to him about.” His mouth firms into a line as he turns away to bring the phone to his ear.

Rin pulls Sousuke aside as Haru and the others devise a plan. He holds Sousuke’s hands between them and meets his gaze with severity. “You don’t have to do this for me.”

“I’m not,” Sousuke assures with a squeeze of his fingers. “It’s not all about you and me, remember?”

Rin’s brows go high and crease, his body straining. “This is different.”

Sousuke cranes back at how stricken he is. Rin sighs, head bowing for his hair to shadow his face. “If you help us infiltrate Honeyblade, you won’t just be a double agent anymore. You’ll be one of us.”

Hearing the words with his own ears instead of keeping them inside his head is… different. The gravity of the situation bears down on him and dazedly, he wonders how he got here of all places – about to truly embody everything he vowed to fight against.

He should feel worse about the betrayal, but it was a desperate need to find purpose that drove him to becoming a cop and he never started making a difference until he took off that badge.

He is scared and stressed beyond any situation he has ever faced, but he knows that he was always meant to end up here, caught in the eye of the storm with Rin’s hands acting as his only anchor.

God, he wants to say it. I love you.

Never has his voice almost left him without his control. Not speaking brings him a physical pain –
his tongue is aching, teeth throbbing, mouth burning as the words lodge in his throat. He is not afraid of saying it; he is not scared of love like he once was. He is just really damn awkward in showing it and isn’t much better at accepting it. Not to mention that he lashes out when he cannot convey the extension of his feelings, but that does not mean he is afraid of them.

It was a long, hard journey for him to acknowledge that tenderness does not equal weakness. Echo was the first being in the world that Sousuke cared for with every inch of his heart – he loved her even during their first mission together, which they failed. They were separated from the rest of their team, they both got shot, and Echo ended up biting Sousuke. The pain was incomparable and he will always carry the scars where she tore into his arm, but that became the defining moment of their partnership when Sousuke realized that she lashed out in fear because she learned it from him.

But even so, Echo loved Sousuke enough to take that bullet for him and licked the wounds her own teeth inflicted. From that day on, she brought him through every battlefield life had to offer, and she was what helped him open his heart to Makoto’s family. For some reason, they gave a shit if he had not eaten breakfast or if he slept too long. He discovered that these were acts of love when he started making an effort to watch out for them in similar ways. They made Sousuke understand that holding people’s hearts in his hands requires tenderness, which he has dedicated himself to learning.

The Tachibanas have such a big piece of his heart – he wrestled them for it, but now he trusts them to safeguard every one of his vulnerabilities. Echo has another piece of his heart and he left one with his birth mother. The war destroyed so much of it.

But Rin gives Sousuke everything he has and Sousuke is ready to give Rin what is left of him.

But he just cannot ask Rin to take on something like that when they are about to dive head first into the unknown. So, he swallows around the lump in his throat and presses his lips to Rin’s forehead. “I’ve been with you from the start,” he assures. “I’m ready for this.”

Rin studies his expression, finding it resolute. He nods in hesitant acceptance before leaning up on his toes, arms hugging around Sousuke’s neck to draw him down into a firm kiss.

Sousuke hears Natsuya spluttering for words at the display and the sure sound of Nao’s hand whipping up the back of his head.

Hotel Mère de Feu was an elegant resort in the 1920’s that went bankrupt in the late 50’s. It was abandoned and fell into extreme disrepair, but a steady train of prospective buyers have toured the grounds for decades. Despite this, no one has ever come close to purchasing the hotel because it is said to be haunted.

Sousuke has read police files of real estate agents claiming to hear little girls laughing when touring the property. There are even reports of hearing a woman sobbing, while others claim to hear singing. One prospective buyer was even chased out of the hotel by an “apparition” of a screaming lady in a wedding gown.

On top of the unending list of repairs and strange activity, there is an odd abundance of cats roaming the hotel grounds.

Mère de Feu is a presence as night falls. It is a massive structure that climbs through the fog and takes
up an entire block of Iwatobi’s district of ruins from the Roaring Twenties. The hotel’s paint has been stripped away and left the exterior dark and cold. Balconies wrap around each story, though the railings have given way into open air. The windows are framed with lacy ironwork, but the glass is shattered and Sousuke’s heart clenches when shadows move inside the building.

On the other side of the street is a carousel that malfunctioned fifty years ago, and because the accident left many parents and children injured, the carousel was never formally repaired. Now, it is sunk in collapsed concrete and the saturated paint is washed out with the rusted gold. Despite that the carousel no longer works, Sousuke has talked with terrified people at the station who have heard it groaning to life in the dead of night, heard the music unwind and splutter as the platform lights flicker. He never believed the claims, but he can admit that he gets a little nervous when he ducks behind a horse frozen in mid-gallop and it shifts under his hand. The horse’s name is a faded scrawl along its sash: Romulus.

The rest of Freebird hides behind other horses, finned lions, winged elk, or chariots. Rin tucks beside Sousuke, their hip holsters brushing. Rin frowns at the hotel across the street, whispering, “I don’t even know what Mère de Feu means.”

“I think it’s something like Mother of Fire,” Sousuke mumbles as he rechecks the chamber of his Desert Eagle – his much-needed lucky charm.

He feels Rin’s stare and looks up, their noses brushing. Rin is blinking at him. Sousuke looks back down at his chamber as warmth flutters over his cheeks. “My birth mother was French.”

“Oh.” Rin nudges into Sousuke with grin, excited to know something new about him. “She taught you how to speak it?”

“Uh.” His voice is tense, not used to speaking on this subject. He clears his throat, holstering his magnum, adjusting his rifle strap. “Well, I was… kind of young. I’m not fluent in it, but.” He shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck. “I know enough, I guess.”

“Shh,” Haru hisses from a few rows down, behind a horse with a sash that reads Remus. “We’re going in.”

The purple and gold of the sunset melts down the skyline as Freebird makes their move. If anyone waltzed through the hotel’s entrance, it would mean a bullet to the face. On paper, Mère de Feu might have been abandoned for decades with “ghosts” as its only residents, but in Iwatobi’s drug empire, it is one of the most dangerous places in the city – it is Honeyblade’s base of operations.

Sousuke follows Freebird through the overgrown courtyard, hiding behind fountains overflowing with mud and briars. At the back of the building, they tear away vines to find cellar doors. With a bobby pin and stubborn grit, Aki picks the lock and Asahi pulls the chains aside to haul the doors open with a creak.

Cell phone screens and lighters guide the way into suffocating darkness. In the pitch black, Sousuke’s heart lodges in his throat and he swallows it back down as his eyes struggle to adjust. Captivity taught him how to use his other senses in the place of his sight – dust is making his sinuses ache and mold spikes a headache to life. His ears flex at the echo of dripping water. With his rifle aimed and tucked into his shoulder, he flicks on his scope light. There are piles of soiled furniture, velvet chairs and gutted mattresses that reek of musk. He points his light inside a rusty box spring and rat eyes flash, causing nausea to roll through him.
They find an elevator shaft and beside it, a staircase with the stench of mildew. They climb with hesitant steps, grimacing at every creak and groan. When Sousuke reaches the top, he swears that his eyebrows go straight into his hairline. He cranes his head all the way back, seeing that the building is hollowed out in the middle. The roof has fallen in and the pinpoint of stars shine from above. He looks back down, figuring that the space before him must have been the hotel lobby. Support beams have collapsed through the rotted walls. Bats screech from the rafters. Pieces of sheet music dance when wind howls through the floorboards.

Sousuke flinches when hot wax drips down his neck and looks up to see that the chandelier hanging over the lobby glows with oozing candles. He is convinced that the hotel is not abandoned at this point, but that realization spikes even higher when Seijuro steps on a champagne flute and Sousuke looks down. There are footprints in the soot and they are too small to be from anyone he is with. They are from a child’s shoes and pushed through the grime like they were dancing.

A high note pierces the air and screams through his blood.

Everyone aims their guns toward the sound, finding its source at a piano layered in dust. There is no one there, but Sousuke goes with Natsuya to venture closer, guns aimed at eye level. He shines his light on the keys, noticing fingerprints in the grime, and he presses his own fingers over them with nostalgia tight in his chest.

The keys at the other end of the piano slam down and Sousuke’s stomach drops straight through the floor. “The fuck,” Natsuya shouts, flying backwards into Nao, who eyes the piano nervously over Natsuya’s shoulder.

The keys thrum all the way down to where Sousuke’s fingers rest. He squints in thought and cautiously reaches behind the fall board, under the piano lid. Sharpness digs into his palm and he wrenches back as a shape lurches out of the piano – it claws up the curtains and hisses at Sousuke from the window pane.

He rubs his bitten hand and glares. “I hate cats.”

Rin is curling an amused smirk at him with gunfire erupts.

They hit the floor quicker than the next heartbeat, instinct and emotion fusing into one dangerous surge. It is not even a choice, yanking Rin under the piano to curl into him and act as a shield against the crossfire. Rin does not hesitate to force Sousuke’s face into his chest and wrap his arms tightly around his head to protect it. Their eyes squeeze shut, hearts racing against one another as they taste the same sickening fear in their mouths. Under muffled ringing is a burning streak of gunfire and screams as hot as blood, voices spilling with enough red heat to make Sousuke’s insides run cold.

Death is a familiar presence at his back, drenching him in a cold sweat, twisting through his spine and wrenching his gut. Sousuke has been close enough to death to sense it in the air before it even takes a soul, and he feels its approach. There is nothing he can do to stop it.

He has never been as afraid as he is in this moment, not for himself, but for the person in his arms.

Sousuke meets Rin’s gaze and it is too much like the first time they met; he is looking straight into Rin’s pain, the suffering that brought them together, and it is a thousand times worse than that day in the alley. Their lives are slipping right through their hands and in defiance, Rin twists his fingers in Sousuke’s hair until his scalp pulses, refusing to let him go. But this could be the very last waking breath they ever share, even though Sousuke so angrily knows that they both deserve better than
dying under a fucking piano in a firefight with dust and battle-heat festering in their lungs, with sweat spiking their lashes, splinters caught under their skin, and an unfair amount of words left unspoken on their tongues.

But there is no place better to die than in Rin’s arms because Sousuke swears that Heaven is trapped between their chests and the last bit of good in the world is in his eyes.

Sousuke parts his lips to speak –

“I love you, Sousuke,” Rin sobs, quick with panic but raw with the most impassioned and severe truth.

Those four words are what turn the most terrifying moment of Sousuke’s life into the best thing that has ever happened to him.

But it is over too quickly and reality crashes down with the body that hits the floor mere feet away from them. Sousuke and Rin scramble backward to hide from the approaching shadow. Neither of them know the man on the ground, but it looks like Natsuya is familiar with him. Sousuke’s gaze finds Natsuya hidden behind a toppled desk, his enraged eyes burning in the blackness, but Nao drapes over his back and wraps his arms around his neck before he can race off in a blind fury. Nao whispers against his ear with fervency, grounding him in the reality of the situation, pulling him out of his own darkness.

Sousuke cannot deny the relief that overwhelms him when his eyes find Haru’s. Asahi and Nii are with him, hidden under a fallen archway. Before he can try to look for anyone else, the man on the floor comes to life, coughing with red splattered around his mouth, his fingers squeezing into his stomach, where he was shot. The firefight left a hot stench in the air and Sousuke tightens his throat so he will not heave in the suffocating tension.

Several figures step into the light; others grapple down from the rafters, landing in a roll and prowling to their feet with their weapons at the ready. There are women of every age with faces full of wrinkles, freckles, or scars. There are girls in fishnets and thigh holsters, as well as tattooed women with rifles slung over their broad shoulders. They have blonde hair fine as corn silk, coarse curls, pale skin, dark skin, dreadlocks that are aged grey. Despite their physical differences, they all carry themselves with empowered confidence and share that liberated energy, feeding off each other and exuding even more of it in return.

Footsteps echo in the tense silence and Sousuke’s eyes narrow on a pair of six-inch heels and legs that are undeniably all-woman. They are stout with curves and she moves in a saunter, strength balanced in her wide hips and thighs. She carries her weight like a force of nature, unyielding. Sousuke can only see up to her waist but he can imagine her vile expression as she aims a pistol at the man on the floor and grits, “Where are my girls?”

The man’s eyes might be losing focus, but he cuts them into a glare. “We ain’t touched none of you fuckin’ bitches.”

The woman stiffens.

She fires a round into his knee and Sousuke does not know which is louder – the ringing bullets or the man’s shriek. He curls into himself, restless with pain, voice gurgling away. “We ain’t done shit! You the one – oh, fuuuck – you the… the fuckin’ one who t-t-took from Rough Rabbit!”
A pair of boots marches over, a girl’s. Her knife glows in the candlelight, but she pauses when the stout woman raises her hand, taking the burden of murder upon herself. She crouches over the man, revealing her face to Sousuke. Gold hoops slip through dark strands, her cheeks rounded but not soft – nothing about her is soft. Her jaw is as sharp as her brows, and she stares at the man with a festering resentment that bites the very air. Her sigh is paired with a curious head tilt. “I don’t know how any woman could ever have faith in men like you.” Her scowl twists in disgust as he writhes. “You never change. You had every advantage in every point in history, yet you always find a way to fuck it up. That’s the only dependable thing about men, really.”

She fists his shirt to yank him to her eye level. “I don’t steal girls. Not from the streets, not from the other gangs. It’s called consent, baby – fucking learn it. And your boys are the last thing I would ever risk my gang for. So, I didn’t take anyone from Rough Rabbit.” She tightens her hold. “But a lot of my girls have gone missing and Rough Rabbit comin’ in here with their dicks out and their guns blazing doesn’t help your case that much.”

A girl’s shout rips the air in two. “Nadia! There’s –”

It happens so fast that Sousuke can barely comprehend it. The woman looks up as another shot fires, followed by Seijuro’s shout, then dead silence hits like a punch in the gut.

Sousuke’s brain denies what the succession of noise means. His heart clenches, terror seizing him. Rin almost cannot claw Sousuke back as two girls drag Seijuro into the light, kicking, spitting, breathing. The girls force him down to his knees in front of Nadia, but Sousuke does not have long to be relieved. Seijuro has been shot, but it appears that he had just enough time to control where the bullet would hit. He was shot in the forearm, probably from throwing it over his face. That is a place in the body where the bullet can pass safely through without hitting a major artery, so Seijuro will live if they can get him to a hospital and if he can stop quirking a taunting brow at Nadia like he’s got a fucking death wish.

She eyes him with suspicion, using her gun to turn his jaw this way and that. Nadia nudges the dying man at her feet. “Is he with you?”

He gurgles, throat flooded with blood. She rolls her eyes and shoots him dead, then regards a stone-faced Seijuro. “Were you with him?”

Seijuro is still in his uniform slacks and field boots, but he stripped down to his white undershirt along with Sousuke back at Seven Tears, so while he does not give the full impression of a cop, he still looks too clean cut to be with Rough Rabbit. Despite this, he has no choice but to lie by scoffing, “Duh.”

Sousuke and Rin wrench their eyes away when Nadia pistol whips him. Seijuro roars a swear, hunching over as he claws into his busted temple. Nadia presses her gun against his bowed head and Rin does not stop Sousuke from gripping his holster tightly. “Oh well,” Nadia shrugs. “Even if you’re not with Rough Rabbit, you’re still a man. You’re all the same.”

She squeezes down on the trigger but just before it can fire, a person races out of the dark and crashes into Seijuro. “Don’t!”

Nadia lurches backward, steps echoing in the disbelieving silence. Honeyblade raises their weapons but Nadia raises her hand even faster, halting them. Aki presses her back harder into Seijuro’s chest, heaving in the quiet and tightening her hands on his biceps. “He’s mine. Don’t.”
Nadia narrows her eyes between them before realization strikes her. She sighs in disappointment before holstering her gun and judgmentally resting her weight on one hip. “What are you doin’ here, Yazaki?” Sousuke reels at how much softer her tone is.

“I can explain everything,” Aki hurries in a desperate surge. Seijuro is wavering, eyes fluttering in a daze, and Sousuke panics at how much blood is pooling around him. “I’ll explain everything, just let me get him out of here –”

“I can’t do that,” Nadia says with a pitying shake of her head.

Aki grits her jaw, eyes burning with frustrated tears. “I’ll stay. I know you want to recruit me from Freebird. I’ll stay with you if he can go, please.”

Nadia raises her brows with interest but before she can speak, someone scoffs. “No way in fuck.” Nii slinks out of the shadows to toss her weapons at Nadia’s feet and put a firm hand on Aki’s shoulder. “Aki isn’t staying in this dump.”

Nadia arches a brow in dark amusement. “You, then?”

“Got more of ‘em, Nadia,” another girl calls, pushing Nao forward with a rifle in his back. Another woman has Natsuya wrangled by his hair, but he is shooting threats at Nao’s handler like he has the strength of a hundred men – and he very well might, if the love and fear in his rage is anything to go by.

Nadia rears up with hunger. “Natsuya,” she hisses, fingers twitching toward her holster like they cannot help themselves.

Honeyblade gains a restless edge as they wait for orders. Nadia’s expression is composed as she reloads her gun, voice measured as she calls out, “Haru, I know you’re here. Come out. You too, Rin – you’re never far behind him.”

Haru comes out with a resolve like steel, rivaling Nadia’s calculating stare with Asahi following behind. Haru walks right up to her in a move that assures he will be the first one hit if she decides to start shooting – he puts his life on the line for his friends without wavering.

Rin tries to push Sousuke back under the piano when he goes to reveal himself, which is almost hilarious. Sousuke hovers at Rin’s back as Aki passes Seijuro off to Nao. She cautiously rises to her feet, hands raised in a placating gesture. “You know that I wouldn’t let Haru take any of your girls.” A darkness passes between her and Nadia’s eyes. “I’m telling the truth and you know it. We walked the streets together before all this.”

Nadia shrugs. “True, but you forget that Miho was mine before all this, too. She wouldn’t hesitate to take what isn’t hers.”

Aki buries her face in her hands for one overwhelmed moment, forcing herself to be steady. “Freebird has missing people, too. So do Rough Rabbit and Diamond Back.” Nadia leans back with thinning patience and Aki fumes a sigh. “It’s the Bloodhounds! The ones who attacked Freebird at Samezuka! They disappeared without a trace just like everyone’s missing members.” She dares to step closer, pleading. “Pietro came to us at Nakagawa’s funeral, Nadia. He said that the Bloodhounds contacted him with a relay ransom for his captured people.”

Nadia’s jaw tightens into a look of fury. She kicks a plate against the wall and it shatters, much like
“Then where’s my ransom?!” She is enraged with grief, her shout so loud that bats startle awake in the walls. “I’ll pay whatever they want! I’ll bring them the head of anyone in the world. They want relay, then I will give them all of it! Why haven’t they told me where my girls are?” She hugs herself to keep her body from collapsing in a trembling heap.

Understanding drags Aki to her like a magnet and when she takes Nadia’s hand, the woman’s face crumbles. “I’m supposed to keep them safe,” she chokes. “That’s all that matters, keeping them safe.”

Honeyblade comes to her with reassuring embraces and whispers. Aki says, “Freebird came here because we lost a callgirl. She’s only twelve.” That gains Nadia’s attention. “She wasn’t affiliated with Miho but we were looking out for her. She’s called Chigusa. She sent Rin a text a few days ago saying that you had claimed her.”

Nadia shakes her head. “I didn’t.”

Aki nods. “I didn’t think you did. But we wanted to know if any of your callgirls know her last location because we think the Bloodhounds took her.” Her voice dies to a rasp as she smears her eyes. “Please.”

Nadia gives her people a permitting nod. One girl with braids down to her knees saunters forward with crossed arms. “I was tryin’ to talk her into joinin’ Honeyblade, but she wouldn’t do it.” She scowls at Freebird with loathing. “Said all she had was Aki, Haru, and Rin – she didn’t wanna chance losin’ them.”

Sousuke is shocked when Haru looks away with watery eyes.

“The last time I seen her, she was leavin’ to do a rent in the outer district, not far from the outskirts.” She regards Nadia. “If we’re choosin’ to believe Aki, then maybe the Bloodhounds’ll send us a ransom soon.”

“But not,” an older woman snorts, hunching over her cane with a scowl. “I’ll bet the fattest part of my ass that Pietro didn’t give up an ounce of relay for his people. The Bloodhounds probably think that all of us are like that and won’t bother contacting us.”

Nadia shakes her head, quick with building adrenaline. “I’m not waiting around to find out. We’re going after Pietro – he’s the only one who’s had formal contact with the Bloodhounds.” She levels her gaze with Haru, pointing her knife at him. “You listen well, Nanase. I’ll let Freebird go this time because you got me one step closer to bringing my girls home.” Her blade flashes. “But if any of you ever come here again, I will hang you from these rafters to scare off the next real estate agent. Do you understand?”

Haru bristles at the threat, but Rin puts a firm hand on his shoulder and nods at Nadia. “Yes, we understand.”

She studies them in silence, pursing her lips. Nadia crooks her brow at Aki and Nii. “I don’t know how you stand it. You really should think about staying. We would never let Miho lay another finger on you.” Her scowl twists in disgust at Haru. “And there wouldn’t be anybody around to get you caught up in her mess.”

Before a fight can start, Aki laughs tiredly. She heaves one of Seijuro’s arms around her shoulders to help him stand, flashing a smile. “Thanks, but we’ve got our family and you have yours. We’ll be
with them when there is a Miho and when there isn’t one. We wouldn’t leave them for anything.”

Nii nods her affirmation. “Even if they are just a bunch of dumbasses.” She picks up her weapons to holster them and with a stone face, she pops her gum at Asahi’s look of betrayal.

They get Seijuro to the hospital in time.

He is a delirious, swearing mess when he is finally given his IV of fluids, or as Nitori kindly puts it, “A big dose of Shut Up.” He is a different person in his teal scrubs, someone in charge of an entire nursing unit, and has five different doctors from three different departments telling him how many impossible ways he’s going to have to stretch himself. Nitori works with strict efficiency, but he is laughing with Seijuro as he wheels him out of surgery and into his very crowded overnight room.

Momotarou rushes his brother, crushing his face into his chest and muffling his sobs of relief there. Sousuke will never get over the noise that Momotarou made on the phone when he called to tell him that Seijuro had been shot. Thankfully, Momo didn’t ask any questions; he was too scared to even think. Nitori steers the attention away from the embracing brothers as he exchanges Seijuro’s empty fluid bags for full ones. “We removed some pieces of shattered bone in surgery but there are a few bullet fragments I couldn’t get out without causing more damage. His scar tissue will build around them but that shouldn’t cause any lasting symptoms.” He quirks a smile at Aki, who is anxiously fisting her skirt. “Sei is scary tough. He’ll be fine. This isn’t the first time he’s been shot.”

Freebird makes their leave to give Seijuro some privacy, but when Aki leans down to hug him goodbye, he kisses her. Sousuke is pretty sure that the drugs have gone to his head because it is a deep kiss, thorough enough to make Aki fluster. All the blood rushes to her face when Seijuro thumbs her lip and smiles, all handsome and dazed. “Stay,” he rumbles in a deep purr.

Momotarou looks up from Nitori’s temple, where his forehead was resting. He stares at Aki with reverence and breathes, “Are you the stripper?”

So, that’s how Freebird ends up leaving Aki to explain that ordeal, which she does with blushing laughs and Seijuro’s hand in hers.

Freebird rests in the hospital lobby; stress has left them exhausted. Nii and Asahi go outside to smoke, which Haru is restless with the need to do, but he stays in his chair and flicks his lighter anxiously. Natsuya studies him from the couch he shares with Nao, who is curled up with his head in his lap. Natsuya pets him to sleep, playing with his hair while asking Haru, “Why aren’t you going to smoke?”

Haru stills, chewing on his lip. “My boyfriend wants me to stop.”

Natsuya cranes back. Way back. Then he resumes attention to Nao with a disbelieving smile and a shake of his head.

Meanwhile, Sousuke is pushing Rin against a wall of fuse boxes and catching handfuls of his ass and thigh when he jumps up. They kiss with a passion that makes their mouths ache, their breaths reduced to starved rasps. Their bodies move like liquid in the blue shadows and gold fluorescents. The heat of their skin pulses through the air, making their proximity in the cramped space so sensuous that they can barely think. Every one of Rin’s senses fills with Sousuke’s cologne and the pheromones in his own perfume light each of Sousuke’s veins on fire at once.
Something broke inside of them when they noticed this maintenance room and neither of them had the mind to care if anybody noticed their sudden disappearance. Almost dying did something to them; it made them half-wild and skin-hungry. Sousuke cannot fathom how close he was to never again feeling Rin’s teeth squeeze into his throat, deeper than ever before but still, somehow, delicate. Rin almost took his last breath without knowing what it was like for Sousuke to moan, “I love you,” against his lips, over and over until tears spring into Rin’s eyes, and it has never felt so good to cry.

Sousuke kisses the moisture from his face, their mouths crashing together like waves, warm and salty. Sousuke hikes Rin up onto the nearest shelf and makes him let out the most aching whine when Sousuke sucks his tongue between his lips. Rin grinds his cock into the hardness of his abs, whimpering as Sousuke rocks his hips into the cradle of his thighs.

They both realize just how uncontrollable the desire at hand is and Sousuke pushes away to study Rin with critical severity. Rin’s heart warms when he figures out why. “I’m all here,” he assures, wrapping his arms and legs tighter around Sousuke to hug him against his heart.

Sousuke is hesitant before Rin reaches out and opens his jaw to delve into his mouth. Sousuke presses him flush and the action drags their cocks together through their clothes – pleasure hits them like a shot of dope. “Fuck,” Rin groans, head thrown back, voice thick with satisfaction and so filthy that Sousuke almost comes right where he stands. Rin laces his fingers behind Sousuke’s neck to hang on for dear life as denim grinds into leather. “Shit, Sousuke, I love you – don’t stop.”

The room fills with the slick sounds of their kisses as they roll into each other. What is left of their energy goes into rutting fast and hard, like it can drive out the fear still heavy in their bones, and a manic need has Rin pushing Sousuke’s shirt up to expose the long, thick line of his abs, baring his chest to watch his holster strain as he breathes. Rin’s hands are learning seams of muscles and scars when Sousuke’s fingers dip into the back of Rin’s pants to knead the thick roundness of his ass. Rin dips closer to Sousuke’s chest and replaces his fingers with his mouth, tongue dragging to taste the
heat of his skin, piercing flicking against a nipple and hitting Sousuke like an electric shock – his head snaps back with a deep growl of pleasure.

Sousuke thrusts up against him with a strength that bounces Rin and makes him cry out so brokenly that Sousuke has to kiss him quiet. Rin meets his eyes as he lies back on his elbows and opens his legs in invitation, biting his lip around a smirk.

Sousuke complies.

He locks Rin’s knees around his elbows to yank him off the edge of the shelf and onto his dick. Rin meets his force with sensuous rolls of his hips, arching his back as Sousuke intertwines their fingers above his head. They keep giving each other desperate kisses even when lack of oxygen fizzles in their brains. Their grinding hikes Rin’s shirt up, pressing their bare stomachs together so tightly that they can feel the slide of sweat between them, and Sousuke groans as Rin’s belly button ring drags a slick trail of heat up and down his stomach.

Sousuke knows when his cock brushes Rin’s entrance through their clothes because his body seizes and the gasp he lets out has no air behind it. Sousuke pauses, waiting for his consenting nod before grounding sensation against his rim. “Holy –” Rin’s hands scramble against the wall for purchase, nails digging into the nearest surface as Sousuke spreads his legs wider for deeper thrusts. The layers of their clothes put even more friction against him and his rim starts flexing, trying in vain to catch Sousuke’s cockhead and pull him in where he is meant to be: inside.

Sousuke knocks the air out of Rin’s lungs with the next sweep of his hips and their urgency peaks. Sousuke puts everything he is into pleasuring Rin, and it does not take long for that effort to show results. Rin’s fingers clench into Sousuke’s skin when he comes and he drags red streaks down his back as he rides it out. Sousuke grinds him through it and satisfaction aches through Rin’s hips, light buzzing in his fingers and toes. He feels the burn of a scream in his throat then realizes that he brought Sousuke’s hand up to his mouth and wrapped his lips around two fingers to muffle himself.

Rin looks up through his lashes and pulls suction over Sousuke’s fingers as he draws them out, but then he swallows them back down, bobbing his head and making Sousuke hiss through gritted teeth. He is so close that Rin feels heat beating off his skin, his pulse twitching in his clenched muscles. They flip positions with Sousuke sitting up and Rin in his lap, settling over his cock with just enough weight to pinch the line between pain and pleasure. Rin starts to move, grinding the most satisfying pressure against Sousuke’s dick and whispering filthy promises in his ear as he brings his fingers back up to his tongue. Rin sucking on his fingers and begging for his come does Sousuke in – Rin is his lifeline in the sharp burst of heat that overwhelms him.

They pant in the silence, condensation dripping down the walls as outside noises break through the fog. They try to remember how to think, but they are so high on the endorphins burning up their veins. Sousuke hugs him close and Rin kisses his face so sweetly that his voice goes hoarse with emotion. “I love you, Rin.”

He feels Rin’s dick give a responsive surge to the words, feels him smile against his lips. “I love you too, baby.”

Sousuke pulls back to level their gazes. “I should have told you sooner, I just didn’t know if – I wasn’t sure if that’s what you needed to hear.” He hesitates. “Or if you felt it as much as I do.”

Rin crosses his arms and arches a brow over a smirk. “Who dragged you in here by your dick?”
Sousuke smirks back. “You did.” He casts his eyes away with a regretful sigh. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know what to do. I thought you felt the same but I still didn’t want to say it and make you feel like you… owed me something.”

“Thank you.” His sincerity makes Sousuke crane back a little and Rin smiles rather shyly. “I don’t know how I would have felt if you said it first,” he admits, absent-ly rubbing Sousuke’s forearms. He squeezes them earnestly. “But I really appreciate you giving me control over that.” He pecks Sousuke’s lips before giving him a punishing bite. “And for the record, I’ve loved you since the first time I kissed you, jackass. Don’t go around here acting like you’re the only one who’s been suffering.”

Sousuke chuckles and Rin blows a raspberry against his lips. “I don’t want you to hold anything else back, Sousuke.” Rin nuzzles against his forehead, their half-lidded eyes meeting. “Good or bad, don’t hold it back,” he whispers, framing Sousuke’s face with sweeping thumbs. “Please don’t keep something like that inside ever again. You don’t have to protect me from you. I love all of you.” A flush pulses down his throat. “I want all of you.”

“I want you too,” Sousuke assures, tucking a strand of hair behind Rin’s ear. “At your pace.”

Rin’s eyes are roaming over planes of muscle. “Could we… talk about it first? Later?” Anxiously, “Soon?”

Sousuke smirks faintly and kisses his forehead. “Whenever you want.”

“I really just want to clean up right now.”

They shift and both grimace at the mess left in their pants. “Yeah, okay,” Sousuke nods. “Cleaning up works.”

After a walk of shame to the bathroom, they feel a little better. Rin and Sousuke are hand-in-hand when they arrive at the hospital lobby and the air is quivering with stress as everyone gathers around. Natsuya’s eyes are bloodshot with exhaustion and he leans into Nao’s touch, all his strength dependent on it as he weaves through his curls. “You need to go home and rest.”

Natsuya’s shoulders are heavy with defeat and his head bows in shame. “I can’t face Mom. Ikuya’s her light Nao, you know that. I don’t know if –” His breath hitches. “She can’t handle being told he’s gone.” His fists clench, eyes squeezing shut. “I can’t handle it.”

“Natsuya –”

“I should have taught him more about fighting,” Natsuya says. “Mom didn’t want me to, but I should have done it behind her back.”

Asahi squints at the floor, brows creasing. “You know, that kind of makes me realize how easy it probably was for the Bloodhounds to take Ikuya and Chigusa – they ain’t fighters.”

Nao stares at him in strained disbelief, making Asahi blush and wave his hands. “What I’m sayin’ is that I don’t get how they could take people from the gangs – scrappers. There’s a reason somethin’ like this ain’t ever happened. Everyone knows how to throw down.” He shrugs. “I dunno, I mean maybe the Bloodhounds really are the strongest of us all, but it’s just… it’s trippin’ me up.”

Haru gives a hard nod, flicking his lighter stubbornly. “I’ve been wondering about that, too. Even the
kids from our gang that were taken had at least one murder under their belt.” His thumb scrapes raw against the lighter wheel. “It’s not adding up.”

Sousuke and Rin both tense as the same memory hits them at once. Outside of Seven Tears, circling around each other like prey, still unable to trust. They were trying so hard to understand how a streetfighter like Kazuki could get taken down so easily.

Sousuke’s head falls over the back of his chair, eyes closing with dread. “God, no.”

Rin is dazed. “It’s relay.” He scrubs his face, looking ten years older with graveness. “When it was used on me, I couldn’t fight back. I couldn’t move. All I could do was watch.” Grief haunts his face. “That’s how they took down Kazuki.”

Nii tightens her arms around her middle, trying to hold herself together. “That’s the only way they could’ve took down someone like Kazuki.”

Natsuya huffs a breath like he just got punched in the gut. “You… you mean they…” His distress is climbing, uncontrollable. “They used that shit on Ikuya?”

“We don’t know that,” Nao rushes, pleading, useless. Natsuya is already on his feet, jaw hard even when Nao seizes his wrist. “Where are you going?”

“Rough Rabbit,” Natsuya says. Before Nao can protest, Natsuya grasps his wrist. “Even if they haven’t seen Ikuya, they may have found out something new about their missing members. They might know something. And even if they don’t, I need to tell them that going after the other gangs is useless. More people will die if I don’t.” He and Nao look like they are falling apart. “Nao, please. I can’t stand by and watch this happen.”

Nao doesn’t let go. “You just escaped all this. This is Iwatobi – people here are always going to die violently for no reason at all.” Natsuya’s eyes widen in disbelief and Nao’s voice raws. “You don’t have to die like that. Ikuya won’t die like that, Natsuya, I’ll make sure of it because I’m stuck in this. You’re not anymore. So don’t do this, please.” A stray tear falls. “Please.”

Natsuya’s smile is pained. “You act like I got out on my own – as if I was brave enough for such.” He cups Nao’s cheek, smearing the tear away. “I would not have escaped without your help, your love. You were willing to die violently, for no reason at all other than giving me the chance at a better life.” He frames Nao’s face with reverence. “I’m going to get you that chance, Nao. I’m going to get it for Ikuya. But none of us will be left standing if this mindless killing does not stop.”

Haru rises to a stand with determination. “I’ll go with Natsuya to Rough Rabbit. I’ll watch his back.”

Asahi snorts, bouncing to his feet along with Nii. “Like you’re going without the rest of us.” Sousuke lets Rin’s hand drag him to his feet.

“Or me.” Nao takes Natsuya’s hand to pull himself up and silences the refusal on the tip of his tongue with a smile like moonlight. “We were together at the start of this and we’ll be together at its end. There’s no other way.”

Natsuya settles himself with a deep breath. “All right, dove.”
Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork by donguris
Iwatobi’s railway system is a world within itself. The trains deliver imports from the barges – they also happen to ship drugs across the city, but that was not until a few years ago, when railway workers began distributing product in boxcars. The scheme was eventually found out and the station used as a criminal base of operations was shut down. However, the abandoned space gave those workers a starting point to become one of the most untouchable, uncontrollable gangs in Iwatobi: Rough Rabbit.

Natsuya brings Freebird to the cliffs in the commercial fishing zone. In the distant water, the cargo port for the barges is so expansive that it looks like an island, stretching out in a long line of light against the night. The railways are suspended bridges between the cliffs, connected between them and tunneling through the rock to get to other areas of Iwatobi. Natsuya points to the highest bridge as it quivers in the wake of an oncoming train. “There,” he breathes. “That’s the way into Copper Gorge – the station Rough Rabbit uses as a base. The only way in is by pulling a lever in that tunnel because we had to create a new entrance after the old one caved in.”

The jump is impossible. The nearest bridge extends twenty feet overhead and the suspensions cannot be climbed; they are slick with ocean mist and rusted with salt. Haru asks, “How will you get across?”

Natsuya looks back toward the forest and perks up when he spots a pile of boulders in the nearby clearing. He jogs over and digs around the rock, babbling excitedly as he goes. “I used to work the railroads. My bosses didn’t care about safety regulations. They never wanted to stop a train for maintenance, so we learned how to work the trains while they were in motion.” He laughs triumphantly as he pulls something out of a hole in the ground, lifting it high to gleam in the moonlight. “This is how we did it!”

It is a harness of some sort – a very intimidating one. It is a full-body apparatus with straps that go around Natsuya’s thighs and arms, linking together at his hips to create a belt. The waist piece is decked out in grappling hooks with wire propellers. Natsuya laces his boots tighter, his chin shooting up with determination. “I’ll use this to get to the lever.”
Nii’s brows raise. “With grappling hooks?” She nods at the harness.

“Yes.”

Nao is faint with nausea as he takes Natsuya’s forearm in his hands, holding on just a bit too tightly. “You haven’t done this in a long time. Don’t you need to stretch or… maybe not do this –”

Natsuya silences him with his lips, wide hands taking Nao’s waist to pull him flush. It is an earnest kiss without hesitancy, like they remember doing it in another life or maybe even the beginning of time. Never before has there been two people so comfortable against one another.

“It will be well, love,” Natsuya promises, sweeping his fingers through lavender strands. They hold on to one more kiss then he goes to the cliff side. Nao takes a deep breath and wraps his arms around himself, smiling weakly when Asahi slings an arm around him in reassurance.

Natsuya stands at the edge and waits. His silhouette is dark against the fog, his stillness unwavering even when the earth begins to shake. Pebbles jump off the ground as dirt shudders apart. Rin grabs Sousuke’s arm when the mighty tremble almost knocks him off his feet. A horn crests, popping their ears, leaving them ringing as boulders tumble down the cliff side. The avalanche stings dust into their eyes but nobody can look away to blink as a white-hot beam of light bursts through the fog.

A train surges across the bridge, a hulking beast of reeking fumes and terrifying speed, the slipstream so powerful that it throws Freebird into a backward stumble.

But Natsuya is not moved. His legs tear into a run and he pushes through the wind, his teeth flashing in the moonlight as he smirks. When he kicks off the edge, it is one hundred percent clear that he is insane and always has been, but there is terrifying accuracy in how he does it. There is no room for error when jumping in front of a moving train, and Natsuya aims his jump just right, diving into that impossible split-second window of time and landing on top of a boxcar instead of being ripped apart under the wheels.

He rolls to his feet, arms and legs spread wide to keep balance. Standing still is not an option and he moves with the boxcar as it jolts, feet scrambling in a constant rhythm across the shuddering metal. Another train barrels across the next bridge and Natsuya takes a running leap for it.

But the distance is too much, the wind too powerful, and Nao’s cry is lost to the screaming horn as Natsuya falls through the fog.

A grappling hook whistles through the air and wraps around the tracks. The wire pulls taut and swings forward with enough momentum to throw Natsuya over the train, and his back breaks his fall on a tank car with such force that Freebird gives a collective wince. Natsuya scrambles upright, face strained to hold back a grimace, and he shrugs sheepishly at Nao’s look of fury.

Natsuya uses the grappling hooks with the next set of trains and bridges, climbing higher even as scrapes gather across his arms. The climbing takes great physical strength and unwavering balance but even though Natsuya is out of practice, he reaches the lever with all his limbs still intact, and his victorious howl is loud enough to overpower the trains.

He pulls it and steam hisses out of the rock formation he dug through earlier. Natsuya grapples back to the cliff side and stumbles into Nao’s arms reeking of soot and blood, jeans torn around a red line carving down his thigh. He is breathless, laughing like he is half-wild, but his pulse is racing under his bruises and he looks alive.
He looks like he is home as he leads Freebird over to the pile of boulders, his expression fond as he hauls a rock away. There is a hatch buried in the ground, the metal rusted over, but the latch is open and still steaming. A ladder stretches down into the thickest darkness imaginable and the heat of the earth billows through the opening.

Before anyone can speak on their hesitancy to climb down, shouts erupt overhead. With guns aimed and knives flashing, Freebird looks up to see a train surge across the bridge, and Asahi’s voice is pitched in distress. “Is that – are those people?”

Dots of color spot the train, moving across boxcars. They launch into a free fall and hair flares out, limbs spreading against the wind. Their grappling hooks are a blinding flash, wires twisting like snakes as the group surges through the air with bullets singing.

Haru hisses when one grazes his neck, melting the skin and almost setting his blood on fire. The air tears from his lungs when Rin yanks him to the ground, and they push Nii and Asahi down the ladder after Natsuya and Nao. Haru makes sure the darkness swallows Rin and Sousuke before he climbs down and pulls the door shut to shield them from a rain of gunfire.

At the bottom of the ladder, the heat is sweltering. Taking a breath is so strenuous that just inhaling leaves Haru exhausted. Sweat drenches their clothes in seconds and wax drips down the candles lining the walls. With their weapons at the ready, Freebird follows the light with rigid muscles. It is so quiet that Haru swears he can hear the blood clotting at his neck.

Then they hear the hatch open and shouts chase after them. Freebird barrels through the dark, forcing each other ahead so that the other person will not be hit by the spray of bullets. They race for the end of the passage and tear through it, hoping for sanctuary, but finding themselves in a trap instead.

With startled shouts, Freebird backs into a tight formation; they are surrounded at all angles. Haru’s eyes dart to find an escape but he is overwhelmed by the vastness of the space. They are in a monstrous cavern of hollow rock, trapped in the belly of the earth. A layer of red dirt coats all surfaces and expanses of skin – russet, red, copper, he realizes. This is Copper Gorge, the train station that collapsed and ended up underground. It is now a compound with dozens of abandoned trains rusting on forgotten tracks. Tents sit between boxcars in never-ending lines. Haru calculates that there are over a hundred people here and every one of them is wearing a harness like Natsuya’s and has a gun aimed at Freebird.

Haru has never seen Rough Rabbit in their natural setting. Now it makes sense why they are the most ruthless scrappers and the wild card of Iwatobi’s drug empire. Joining a gang is one thing, but living underground and slowly suffocating just to belong is a humbling and horrifying concept.

A young man steps forward, eyes narrowed behind the cracked lenses of his glasses. His dreads are swept up into a bun and sweat rolls down the thick column of his throat. Under his dusty clothes his build is intimidating, but his features look too soft to belong here. Nevertheless, his voice resounds. “This some sort of ambush?” he asks Freebird.

“No,” Haru says, tossing his gun at the man’s feet. His friends stare at him in shock before nervously following his lead. Sousuke is the most hesitant to give up his rifle but he slides it through the dirt after a nod from Rin.

The man at the front of Rough Rabbit frowns, lowering his own gun in confusion. He looks like he has no idea what to do next, or what to say, and Haru wonders why Rough Rabbit’s leader sent this
asshole to handle a situation as dire as intruders when he is not the one for the job. Haru may not know who the leader is, given that they are a constantly changing entity due to so much literal backstabbing in the ranks, but surely they know when to at least make an appearance.

“Freebird came with me,” Natsuya says, coming out from behind Haru and stepping into the line of fire. Nao grabs for Natsuya but his fingers slip through the back of his shirt.

Recognition dawns on the man’s face and he stumbles backward. The people of Rough Rabbit erupt in whispers until the air is quivering with excitement. Their dead eyes are suddenly bright with hope. A smile illuminates the man’s face and he spreads his arms wide. “Natsuya!”

Natsuya embraces the man with a laugh, a sound of honest delight. “Hakim, it’s good to see you. Can’t believe you’re the one running the show now.”

Haru and Rin turn to each other with brows creased in confusion, then their eyes widen. This man, this Hakim, is Rough Rabbit’s leader.

Hakim braces Natsuya’s shoulders with an earnest squeeze. “I haven’t seen you in so long – it’s been even longer since you were down here.” His smirk is lined with exhaustion. “Glad to see you’re doing good. Things here are…” He glances back at an array of cots among the tents. Men are being tended to, their wounds bleeding through towels, their cries twisting Haru’s gut inside out. He recognizes them as the men who infiltrated Honeyblade. Hakim sighs, wrenching his gaze away. “Things aren’t good here anymore, Nat.”

Natsuya bows his head. “I know.” Apology edges his tone like he does not know how to put it into words. Hakim smiles sadly, patting his back in understanding. Natsuya says, “Could we talk somewhere?”

Hakim tenses as he glances at Freebird. “You and I can, yes.”

Natsuya hesitates. “I’d like to bring my friends with us if that’s all right.”

“No,” a girl to the left shouts, her green eyes fierce against the dust embedded in her face. She cocks her gun and the sharp noise echoes through the cavern. “It’s one thing to let you in, Natsuya, asking us to trust Freebird is another.”

Natsuya smirks. “Asking me to trust you with my friends is another thing, Akane.”

She blushed, eyes blinking wide before she turns to Hakim. He nods in reassurance and she scowls at him, disapproving, then storms away with her knuckles white on her pistol.

Hakim clears his throat, smile straining. “Sorry about that. Please, all of you come with me.”

Hakim’s boxcar is cramped, a long but thin metal box. Freebird sits on an oriental rug caked in red clay, the smell of dirt overwhelming in the small space. The patches of clay across the floor indicate that the rug has been moved several times. The lone bookshelf is empty, as are the shelves. The space looks like a pathetic attempt at trying to make a home where you simply do not feel like you belong.

An electric stove warms up a pot and leaves the boxcar sweltering, but Hakim offers Freebird the stew and adds stale crackers to the bargain. After their day of funerals and fighting, they are starving.
and accept the offer. Haru is the only one who does not eat – anxiety is too tight in his throat to swallow anything down – but Hakim gives him a first aid kit for his bullet burn and Haru does accept that.

Nao dresses Haru’s wound but their ears are flexed to listen for oncoming attacks outside. Hakim notices the tension in the air and sighs. “I know it’s hard to believe but you are safe here.” He crosses his arms, considering. “Doesn’t mean that we all won’t be at each others’ throats on the flip side, but for now, it’s all good.” He breathes a laugh at Natsuya. “Honestly, I’m willing to listen to whatever you have to say even if you’re still with Freebird. I didn’t want this job but somebody had to do it, and I sure as shit am not doing it good. I need all the help I can get.”

Natsuya’s smile is pitying. “Why do you think I stepped down?”

Hakim arches a brow, smirking. “You took the fruit from the snake. You got wrapped up in Diamond Back’s little viper.” His gaze is sly on Nao, who smirks back.

Natsuya’s eyes are warm, his smile soft. “I still am. But I left for many reasons. Rough Rabbit is a war within itself, too much bloodshed in the ranks. Nobody hesitates to lie or kill in the name of shaping the gang to their liking.” His eyes cast to the floor, hand clenching into a rigorous fist. “I wanted more for Rough Rabbit because I knew there was more than greed in them. We worked the rails and died on the rails together, I knew them.”

He shakes his head with sorrow in his voice. “But we’ve all lost so much of ourselves to this fight. The relay war has pushed everyone to their limit. Every gang is desperate for it because whoever has the most relay –”

“Controls Iwatobi,” Hakim sighs.

Haru rises to a stand. “We think relay is being used to drug gang members so they can be taken.”

Hakim stares, arms falling numbly from where they were crossed. “That’s how my people went missing? That’s how…” He slowly turns to Natsuya, voice weighted with remorse. “Oh Natsuya, your brother…”

Natsuya grips his shoulder with an earnestness that startles Hakim. “Ikuya is still missing, as are your people.” He swallows, wavering with emotion. “Hakim, I need you to tell me anything you know about their disappearances.”

“I – I thought it was Honeyblade who took them –”

Natsuya shakes his head. “No, they didn’t. It wasn’t Freebird or Diamond Back either.”

Hakim’s reaction is delayed, then the horror hits him all at once. “You mean that gang everyone’s been screwing around about…?” He stares at Haru. “The people who attacked you at Samezuka, they’re – they’re real?”

The silence is enough.

Hakim covers his mouth with a disbelieving hand, eyes wide on the floor. He whispers, “How can a gang like that just show up out of nowhere? Then they just vanished, no trace. How can they do that?”

Nii pushes off the wall with her hands resting on her empty holsters, a gesture of habit. “We think their base is in the outskirts. Pietro ambushed us earlier today and said the Bloodhounds led Diamond
Back on a chase and cornered them in the forest. Slaughtered them.”

Hakim looks between Nii and Haru with narrowed eyes. “Aren’t you two from the outskirts?” He nods at Sousuke. “You are too, right?”

Sousuke tenses under everyone’s stare. “I’m not from Iwatobi.”

Hakim’s brows crease. “You sure? You got the eyes.”

Sousuke’s mouth parts but he is at a loss for words, and even more confused when Haru looks him over, considering.

Nii tips her head at him, voice trailing curiously. “He means outskirt eyes. People born in the woods got certain traits like that.” Her eyes are blue fire, the heat of a volcanic lake ready to set the world aflame. Haru’s eyes are equally intense but colder – vessels of darkness.

Sousuke’s eyes are even colder but in a different way, like ice in the sunlight. All three of them are beautiful and haunting in their own way, which is the forest, in essence.

Nii shrugs, kicking back in a chair. “But hell, it’s not like you don’t know where you’re from.”

Hakim resumes conversation with Natsuya, steering the room’s focus even though Sousuke never said anything. He is quiet, looking deeply concerned. Rin can practically hear his mind racing, and his gaze is intent on Sousuke’s face. “You said your mother was French,” he whispers.

Sousuke chews his lip. “Yeah. But that doesn’t mean I know where…”

Rin cranes back. “You don’t know where you’re from.”

Sousuke looks away with a deep breath. He shakes his head and squeezes Rin’s hand. “It doesn’t matter right now.” He turns his focus back to the conversation, despite that his mind will not keep quiet.

“I brought up you guys being from the outskirts because I was thinking that you might know where the Bloodhounds are holed up,” Hakim explains.

Nao purses his lips, glancing at Haru. “Aren’t the outskirts thousands of acres wide?” At his nod, Nao shakes his head at Hakim. “Most of that is uncharted forest. The Bloodhounds could be anywhere; going after them wouldn’t be safe.”

Hakim frowns. “So you haven’t looked?”

Haru’s pulse quickens. He has not been back to his home in the outskirts in five years, never went back after he washed up on shore. After his house exploded. After his mom died and his dad –

“I wonder why they’re leavin’ the woods,” Asahi ponders, silencing Haru’s thoughts. “I get that the relay war brought ‘em here, by why take people from other gangs?”

Natsuya shrugs. “Pit the gangs against each other? When our purpose is vengeance, relay is left for the taking.” He regards Hakim. “I wanted to come here and warn you not to attack any of the other gangs again. It’s useless bloodshed, and you need to stay focused on protecting your people.”
Hakim’s breath leaves him in an overwhelmed rush. “Natsuya, I can’t make Rough Rabbit stop fighting. They won’t listen to me.”

Natsuya shakes his head in frustration. “You don’t get to say that, Hakim, you’re their leader, you have to –”

“I can’t.”

His voice is torn apart with grief. Haru has never heard such a broken sound in his life. Hakim buries his face in his hand, cups the back of his neck in a desperate attempt to keep hanging on. “I’m like you,” he laughs bitterly. “I want what’s best for them. I want more for them because there is more in all of them.” His brows go high and crease, eyes squeezing shut. “But they can’t see their own potential. They don’t care about it. They want blood and power and just – that security it brings, being the strongest, I don’t know. Why can’t we just admit that we’re scared shitless? I can. They can’t. They won’t.”

Hakim gathers the strength to meet all the fury of Natsuya’s gaze. “Nat, I’ll put everything I am into trying to stop them, but you know how they are. I can’t save them if they don’t want to be saved.”

Natsuya looks away with a fuming sigh. He bows his head, accepting. “I know. Thank you for trying.” He steps away and Nao’s hand finds his like a magnet.

The weight of defeat is so heavy that rising to a stand is painful. Haru makes way for the door but he freezes as a rumble shudders through the boxcar. The noise could be passed off for a distant locomotive, but it is not like the building roar of a train, it is more like a –

The world rushes out from beneath them, heat blasting, metal screaming.

An explosion.

The blast throws the boxcar off the ground and across the cavern in a storm of red sparks. The landing is a gut-wrenching sound, thirty tons of metal peeling like butter, splitting against rock with a wail shrill enough to freeze blood.

The sensory overload of the crash makes Haru black out. Only the lurch of pain in his ribs can bring him back to life and he screams for air, lungs swelling against cracked bone. Red spikes his lashes, drips thick and hot in his eyes. He blinks away the blood and grits his teeth, leveling himself. He crawls through smoke and gropes through metal spikes until he finds warm flesh, feels a pulse racing through the fingers that wrap around his. His stomach lurches as he is hauled from the wreckage, and he wipes dust from his eyes to frantically meet Rin’s gaze.

“Easy, tiger,” Rin says, pushing him back down when he tries to scramble to his feet. “Think you finally broke that rib.” The white of one of Rin’s eyes is red, punctured, but he is looking Haru’s injuries over, so he can see out of it still. There is a cut on his cheek, tears in his shirt, but Sousuke is hovering at his back and something about the protectiveness of the action makes Haru realize that Sousuke took the force of the explosion for Rin, somehow – probably wrapped around him and held on for dear life. Haru nods at him and Sousuke nods back as he palms his shoulder.

Rin helps Haru stand as Nao carries Nii from the smoke, ash shifting through the air. Asahi staggers from the wreckage to help Nao ease her down to the ground, and Rin and Haru step closer to see that she is unconscious. Haru watches Nao check her over with his heart launched up his throat. “She’s breathing,” Nao finally says, keeping one hand pressed against his slashed bicep, the other on Nii’s
pulse point. “I think she just got knocked out.”

Asahi cries out in relief, burying his face in his hands. Three fingers were crushed, trembling and bruised black, but that looks like the extent of his injuries. Natsuya stumbles around the boxcar with embers eating up his shirt and he spits out a gob of blood. Members of Rough Rabbit rush to help Hakim, who is walking from the wreckage with a spasming ankle.

Haru’s skin prickles under the weight of a stare and he turns to the entrance of the cavern. “Fuck,” he breathes.

The rest of them turn to see a group of girls, one of them standing with a steaming rocket launcher perched on her shoulder. It is the girl with braids down to her knees from Honeyblade. Nadia is not with them, but her ferociousness burns in the girl’s eyes as she fires again.

They dive for cover as the second explosion hits the wall, an avalanche of rock breaking the ground. Haru lurches to his feet, his roar tearing through the fire. “We told you it wasn’t them! They’re not the ones who have your people!”

The girl slowly meets his eyes. Smiles. “I know.”

She fires again.

Haru dives under another boxcar with the others, tucking Nii between him and Asahi to shield her from the heat of the blast. “That was for the fourteen-year-old Rough Rabbit killed when they infiltrated our base,” the girl shouts.


Hakim watches his compound go up in flames, his people screaming, dying. “Give me a weapon.”

They tossed their guns at him earlier, but Haru gives him one of Nii’s blades eagerly, and Sousuke hands him a grenade from his belt.

Natsuya is the only one who tries to stop him, seizing his arm. “Hakim—”

“Let me go.”

Natsuya’s mouth firms into a line and he rips his hand away.

The girls pause in reloading the rocket launcher, their eyes set on Hakim as he staggers toward them. He tries to shout but his voice is wavering, pleading. “They didn’t know your people were innocent. Stop this! Nothing will come from this!”

It happens too quickly to comprehend. One of the girls already has a pistol in her hand and the shot is a blinding flash in the smoke.

The bullet lands in an arm. The next one lands in the heart, the left leg, the back.

Tears brim Hakim’s eyes as Akane sinks to her knees, Honeyblade’s bullets buried in her where they should be in him. Hakim slides to his knees and cups her face with trembling hands, his breath hot and loud, trying to talk to her but his voice is a terrified shout. She smiles tiredly as her voice slurs away. “You’re our man. What was I supposed to do?”
Akane wavers and Hakim lays her down gently, cupping the back of her head. Infuriated tears roll down his face as he closes her eyes and he does not even acknowledge Honeyblade as they surround him. He does not flinch when a girl aims a rifle at his head. “Any last words?”

He laughs and tips his head back. “Natsuya,” he calls. “Take care of them. Do what’s best for them. They’re yours.” He sighs and closes his eyes. “They’ve always been yours.”

His hands, clasped together, pull apart. In one open palm is a pin, the other, Sousuke’s grenade.

In the paralyzing silence, Haru’s stomach drops.

Then he surges around Nii, arms tangling with Asahi’s to keep her on the ground as sound and heat flare to life and the explosion hits. The boxcar lurches off the tracks and when it slams across the cavern, it is a distant echo to Haru’s ears. His breath is a slow rasp, the only sound in existence. The smoke is hot in the air, flames rolling over billowing tent flaps. He stares into Natsuya’s horror, his slack jaw and eyes spiraled wide, unseeing. He looks too young right now.

There is a woman trapped under a boxcar and her shout for Natsuya is what changes everything.

He stands, lifting his chin with determination and clenched fists. He does not look at Freebird when he says, “You have to go now. Nadia won’t be far behind.”

Nao stares at him in wide-eyed disbelief. “You –”

“I can’t leave them like this Nao,” Natsuya says, voice even and calm. No room for argument. “And you can’t stay. You must go.”

Nao is half-wild in his turmoil. “Natsuya –”

“You, go. For me, please go.”

They go.

Nao’s van is parked at its usual place, at the edge of a beach dotted with bonfires from the homeless. Tents billow in the ocean mist as a man rasps along with an old guitar at the shore. Moonlight plays in the flames as crashing waves and crackling embers lay over the silence of the group. Nao is quiet as he sterilizes wounds and wipes away blood clotted with soot. If anyone notices the way his hands shake, nobody comments on it.

Nii wakes up with a pounding headache and drowns her whimpers in a bottle of whiskey Asahi stole from the nearby convenient store. Nao picks bits of metal out of her scrapes and after Asahi’s crushed fingers are wrapped, Asahi holds his lighter up for Rin to stitch a deep, jagged cut down Sousuke’s back. Sousuke wraps his shirt around his hands and buries his face in it as Rin works the needle through, hushing Sousuke’s groans soothingly as he goes.

After Haru’s bullet burn is dressed, he goes to the shore. He uses the water to rub soot and blood away as the tide sinks his feet in the sand. It is usually a comforting sensation, being pulled away from the world, but after tonight, it is not enough. He is distraught enough to admit that he needs to be held by something more tangible than the water. Someone.
He hauls himself back up the beach to find Nao shivering for reasons that have nothing to do with the cold. Even so, Haru shrugs off his jacket and drapes it over his shoulders, if only for the comforting weight. Nao closes his eye. “Thank you,” he whispers.

In response, Haru sits beside him to block the sea mist, offering his presence because he has no words to offer right now, not when he needs them himself. Asahi swallows, peering at Nao nervously. “Do you think Natsuya’s…”

Nao opens his eye and lifts a brow. “Dead? No.” He stares into their bonfire, his voice as sure as the burn of the flames. “I would know. I would feel it. I’m just scared for him, is all.”

Asahi dares to put a hand on his shoulder. “Nao, he probably won’t accept—”

“Oh, he will.” Nao smirks tiredly. “He will be Rough Rabbit’s new leader, there’s no denying that.” He sighs. “Maybe he’ll be safer that way. I hope so, at least.” He shakes his head to clear it. “But nothing good will come from worrying about it. We should all try to get some rest. Asahi, Nii, we’ll go pick up Aki at the hospital and then I’ll drive you home.”

Rin ties off some gauze around his ankle and carefully rises to a stand with Sousuke’s hand steady on his waist. “I can take Rin home,” Sousuke says.

“Haru too,” Rin says.

He and Sousuke stare at Rin in varying degrees of strain, but Haru is too exhausted to fight against it. Apparently Sousuke is too.

The ride in the squad car is quiet, the air conditioner cooling their pulsing wounds. The only noise is the rasp of Sousuke’s thumb over Rin’s hand and the buzz of Haru’s phone, which comes over and over again.

Sousuke’s eyes flick over the rear view mirror and he inclines his head like he wants to ask something, but refrains. Rin notices the action and frowns back at Haru. “Who’re you texting?”

Haru does not even look up from the screen. “Makoto.”

Sousuke frowns at the clock. 2:48 a.m. “He shouldn’t be up right now,” he mumbles absently, not realizing he spoke out loud. He blushes under Rin and Haru’s stares and waves them off. “Nothing, it’s fine. I’ll just check on him after I drop you off.” He sighs, muttering to himself, “Not like it’ll do a lot of good.” His jaw squeezes a fraction tighter with self-loathing.

Rin looks between Sousuke, Haru, and the buzzing cell phone. He stares out the window as he thinks, oblivious to the rush of color and concrete outside the glass.

When Sousuke parks in front of the beach cabin, Rin turns around to meet Haru’s gaze. “I think you should spend the night with Mako.”

Haru arches a brow, eyes flat, and Rin realizes. “What the fuck, no,” he groans, thunking his head against the window. “I’m not saying it to get you laid, I mean—just. Like. Comfort and shit.” Haru opens his mouth but Rin cuts him off with an exasperated sigh. “Look, if you’re not gonna do it for yourself, do it for him. Go cuddle the shit out of that poor man.”

Haru hesitates and Rin smiles, reading the emotions on his face quicker than Sousuke can
comprehend. “Me and Gou will be fine.”

Haru glances at the old Buick in the driveway.

“Sango will be fine, too,” Rin assures. “She’s probably already asleep on the couch, it won’t hurt for her to stay the night.” He reaches out, nudging Haru’s knee insistently. “Just go take care of yourself, yeah?”

He holds his fist out expectantly and Haru sighs, tapping it with his scarred knuckles.

Rin beams. “Sousuke will take you!”

Haru tenses, raising his brows at Sousuke, who shrugs in defeat. Haru nods. “I need to see Gou really quick.”

Rin’s heart swells as Haru steps out of the car. In the soft interior light, Rin vacantly traces the back of Sousuke’s hand, so exhausted that he is absent of the action. “You doin’ okay?” Their gazes roam together and Rin gives him a look – he is talking about Sousuke not knowing where he is from.

Sousuke sighs, turning his hand over for Rin to trace the lines of his palm. His voice drifts against the background of crickets and wind chimes. “It’s not like I haven’t thought about it before.” He shrugs. “But it never really bothered me. I remembered my mom and that was enough.” He fumes a sigh. “That hurt enough.”

Rin brings his hand to his mouth and kisses it softly. “It’s bothering you now, though. Isn’t it?”

Sousuke breathes a laugh. “Not knowing was better than the thought of wondering if I’m from here. This place is hell on earth. It would explain a lot.” Rin tries to offer words of comfort by opening his mouth, but Sousuke sighs and squeezes his eyes shut tightly. “It shouldn’t matter. I’ve gone this long without knowing. I don’t want to think about it anymore.” Grief-stricken rage flies out of his mouth. “I don’t want to fucking care about her anymore.”

His mother. It feels like Rin’s heart is bleeding out. He cups Sousuke’s cheek and his head slumps in his palm, leaning into the touch. Rin presses a warm, slick kiss to his mouth because he doesn’t know what else to do, but Sousuke parts his lips with a starved sound, lust pooling with exhaustion, thick and hot in their guts. Rin straddles Sousuke with the steering wheel digging into his ass and his back hunched against the windshield. The noise of quick, wet kisses resounds in the cramped space as moans hum through the windows. Rin’s hips roll leisurely and he whimpers against Sousuke’s growl as hands shape his waist to drive him down harder. Suddenly there is condensation dripping down the windows, gasps fogging up the glass, fingers squeezing against leather seats, and too much sensation.

Rin has never come in less than two minutes, yet here he is with a wet lap and dazed eyes. Sousuke is in the same predicament, slumped back with a heaving chest, the thick column of his throat stretched out, the shape of Rin’s teeth dark in the skin. Sousuke levels himself with a deep breath. “I’m really not trying to pressure you or anything –”

Rin smirks. “But if we don’t bone you might actually die?”

“No, I will die.” Rin laughs and Sousuke grins at him. “But that’s okay,” he assures. “It’s been a good life. You rutting against me every chance you get is the best way to fucking go. Even if I’ve came in my pants twice today, I think I’m getting used to it.”
Rin rolls his eyes and smacks their lips together. “Goodnight, Sousuke.”

He steps out of the car just as Haru comes through the cabin’s front door. The porch light is weak against the night but Sousuke notices the shadow beside Haru, sees his hand engulf a smaller one. The shape launches at Rin with an echoing giggle that makes Sousuke inhale sharply, realization spiking through him. Rin sweeps his sister into a spinning embrace and playfully reprimands her for not being in bed. She responds with all the sass in the world, telling Rin that it is entirely his fault for being gone so long. Haru smiles at the exchange and she reaches out, hugging him and Rin with an arm wrapped around each of them, holding them together.

Sousuke now realizes why Rin is so strong, why he hopes, and why he dreams. He does it all for her.

Rin takes the girl inside before Haru ducks in the squad car, slumping in the passenger’s seat. Sousuke’s mouth flies open to say something desperate, but he fumbles, then he drives. The question prickles at the back of his throat and in the long wait at a red light, it bursts forth. “What is she like?”

Somehow, Haru knows. “Gou?” He flexes his foot against the dashboard and Sousuke would reprimand the hell out of him if he were not hanging onto his every word. “Spoiled,” he sighs. “But I have a lot to do with that. Rin is tough on her about studying but she’s one of the smartest kids in her class. She loves pancakes but only if they have blueberries on them.” He looks away. “She’s brave. There was a time when her and Rin were separated in foster care. She was all alone.”

Sousuke does not have to hear any more to know the agony of that situation. He spent most of his life in foster care and it was a nightmare even as an intimidating boy – he cannot believe such a young girl like Gou can still laugh so freely after going through that. Her happiness is a form of bravery, one that Sousuke never possessed.

He is feeling humble when he parks in his driveway. In the darkness of the cab, Haru levels their gazes. “I told Makoto I was already out tonight and a friend dropped me off. He doesn’t know it was you.”

Sousuke tenses. He did not even think about having to lie to Makoto. The thought makes his insides run cold because even such a simple lie is wrong after what they have been through together. What is a brother if he keeps secrets that make him someone else? How can he do that in the face of Makoto’s honesty?

Sousuke shakes his head. “Mako will find out on his own,” he promises. “He wants to see the good in people, and he’ll even look past the bad and pretend it isn’t there, but he knows when he’s being lied to. Keeping secrets was our job in the military.” Haru blinks, craning back, and Sousuke smirks despite himself. “See? You didn’t even know.”

“What did you do in the war?”

“Corporal Tachibana and I were in the Special Forces, Haru. Not to mention he minored in Psychology.” Sousuke crosses his arms, shoulder straining. “He’s the most perceptive person I’ve ever met, but I doubt he’ll try to put the pieces together because he won’t want to see that side of you. He’ll pretend it’s not there until he realizes he’s being lied to.” He scrubs a hand down his face, stubble rasping. “So we gotta find a way to tell him because I can’t keep a secret like this from him. Even if I could somehow get away with it, I wouldn’t do it.” He levels their gazes. “I’ll give you the chance to tell him first, but fucking do it. Or he’ll have to find out from me what you’re hiding – what
all of us are hiding.” His bond with Makoto is so deep that it is more than a lifeline, and Sousuke will devote his loyalty to his brother before the police force or any investigation.

Haru is not angry. He understands. “Okay.” They part ways, Sousuke numbly unlocking his front door as Haru steps through Makoto’s open one.

Haru walks inside and one inhale of the house has him sinking back against the door with a wave of relief. The home smells like old books, ferns, cinnamon, and sweet warmth – after a day of smelling gun fumes, ashes, and blood, the aromas of the house bring tears to Haru’s eyes.

He takes off his shoes and toes the clean carpet over and over because it is such a contrast to the dead grass at the cemetery. He has never been so overwhelmed by such little, beautiful sensation. Makoto could catch him crying at such and Haru knows he would not be thought of as weak. He has never been allowed to acknowledge such emotion, but now he can, and that makes the burn of tears feel victorious.

He walks through the house and even its darkness is gentle. He remembers every detail of Makoto’s bedroom, went over them in his mind throughout the day, thinking safe, safe, safe.

The bed is much smaller with Makoto sprawled across it, lying on his stomach. He’s wearing track pants and yes Lord, no shirt, just a wide expanse of thick muscles, white scars like lightning strikes, and the best back that has ever existed. Haru quietly sends a surge of gratitude to the divine.

A hulking shape drapes over Makoto’s back and Haru backpedals into the wall as Echo opens her eyes, molten gold burning through the shadows. Her growl is like that of a lion, lips curling over her teeth as she hunches over Makoto protectively. Haru almost shits himself but distantly, he is glad that someone watches over Makoto, even if they are about to rip into his throat.

Makoto cracks an eye open, scowling. “Coco, you’re rude.”

Echo’s growl pitches into a spoiled, exaggerated whine as though she’s trying to tell Makoto she was just messing with Haru and not preparing to paint the town red with his insides. She noses Makoto’s face, making him pout tiredly as she cuddles him.

Her head shoots up, ears flicking as she stares at Sousuke’s house through the window. Her tail wags so hard it blurs and eagerly, she steps across Makoto, making him wheeze under her weight, and gallops over to the patio door. She opens her mouth around the knob and twists her head to open the door. Once outside, she stands up on her back legs to push the door closed and bolts for Sousuke’s house, leaving Haru vaguely disturbed and impressed.

Makoto stretches, ligaments bulging, his tan skin radiant, green eyes like a forest sunset in the amber lamp light. He offers Haru a sleepy grin so handsome that he feels like he was just ravished where he stands. “It’s good to see you, Haruka,” Makoto murmurs.

The words do not even exist for Haru to explain what simply being in the room with him means. He unlatches his belt and peels off his slacks, satisfaction flaring off his skin; the weight of those funeral clothes was so awful. Makoto shifts and Haru hears blankets rustle – he aches to be hidden beneath them. “You want some tea or anything?” Makoto yawns.

Haru shakes his head and strips his jacket, bites back a grimace as he stretches to peel off his shirt. His ribs throb when he bends down to grab a wad of fabric from the laundry hamper. He reaches for one of Makoto’s t-shirts, the cotton stretched thin and faded, and the lingering warmth smells divine
in the fabric. Haru slips the shirt on and it grazes the tops of his thighs, sending a rush of chills down his legs.

He turns to Makoto, finding him much more awake as he regards Haru’s choice of sleepwear. Haru bites his lip around a smirk as Makoto’s gaze dips between his thighs, eyes tracing the shirt hem where it drapes over the curve of his ass. “Rude,” Makoto whispers to himself.

Haru flicks off the lamp light on the way to bed. In the dark, he hears Makoto shift to make room for him, pulling back the covers in welcome. Haru slips under the blankets, rolling to press his back against Makoto’s chest, his heart a warm throb against Haru’s shoulder. He snuggles down into the quilt, inhaling deeply as his anxiety quivers into nothingness. Makoto hugs him from behind, nose nuzzling his hair to breathe him in, and Haru wraps his arms around himself to lace their fingers together tightly. Makoto sighs, damp heat against Haru’s skin. “Thank you,” Makoto whispers. “For coming.”

Haru turns his head enough for their lips to close softly together. He sweeps through Makoto’s hair as he brushes his calf up and down his stump comfortably. “Did you have a nightmare?”

“No,” Makoto says. He swallows. “Not yet.”

Haru’s voice is hollow, his eyes vacant. “I had one. Today was one.”

Makoto makes a grieving sound, tucking their faces together. “It’s over.” With their heads so close it is like he can hear Haru’s thoughts, knows exactly what he needs to be whispered. “You’re safe, Haruka, I promise.”

“I only feel safe with you.”

Makoto smiles against the back of his neck. “Well, then.” He leans over to press delighted kisses across his face and Haru laughs against his mouth, the sound bouncing out of his chest like a bolt of light. Makoto grins into their kiss. “I guess we’ll have to stay like this forever, then.” He squeezes Haru tighter, tickling up his sides. “How am I supposed to let you go after you’ve said something like that?” He breathes secrets against his cheek. “When I feel the same way?”

“Don’t,” Haru whispers. Please, don’t let go.

Makoto’s lips find his forehead and Haru closes his eyes. “I won’t.” He breathes a dazed laugh. “I can’t.” He settles their bodies together as he traces Haru’s knuckles, then he hesitates a little, mouth brushing his ear. “Were you out so late because of Nakagawa?”

Haru cannot stop himself from stiffening and Makoto feels the wave of tension go down his body. Every lie builds up inside him, a cold weight sinking in his chest, threatening to tear from his skin. Even if he had the words to lie to Makoto, his heart is in his throat, not allowing him to speak them.

So he doesn’t. “No.”

Makoto’s confusion is a radiating force, his hands a restless worry over Haru’s skin. Only when his fingers catch against fresh stitches does he still, and the very air freezes with him.

This is it. This is the last time Haru will ever feel his warmth, this closeness he never thought he would crave. They did not get enough time together, only joined once in this bed despite how many times Haru dreamed of it.
He dreamed of Makoto before he even knew him, when heroin sang through his veins and pulled Makoto across the spectrum of fate and into his mind, making him feel safe in his darkest moments. He will always need Makoto.

He will always love Makoto.

Makoto sits up over him, his fingers touching what he knows. They learned each others bodies just days ago – the memory is fresh, a saturated color under their skin that only they can see. Makoto knows his bruises, which ones he got at Samezuka and the ones his own mouth sucked to life.

And then he touches the bandage on Haru’s throat. Behind the gauze, his pulse races under his bullet burn. Life itself shatters when he meets the terror in Makoto’s eyes. “Haruka…” His voice is a sorrowful rasp. “What did you do?”

Haru’s voice is swallowed by the tension. “What I’ve been doing.”

Makoto shakes his head, reeling. He turns away to sit on the edge of the bed with his back to Haru, elbows on his knees as he drags a hand over his face. Haru sits up but does not dare touch him, never deserved the privilege of that but especially not now. His lashes spike wetly. “Do you want me to leave?”


Haru’s breath leaves him in a sob of relief. He tries to inhale but choking, throat swelling from the panic of losing Makoto. Haru still can lose him and his very blood aches at the thought. He can’t breathe.

Makoto’s face crumbles and he takes Haru in his arms. They hold each other too tightly, feeling like they have been left out in a storm. “You have to breathe, Haruka.” He presses his hand over Haru’s heart and Haru touches Makoto’s chest with trembling fingers, remembering how this works, but not even the contact can help him at this point.

“Honey, look at me.” Haru’s eyes are wild but Makoto does not falter. “You mean the world to me right now as much as you did five minutes ago.” He rubs a thumb against Haru’s throat, where it swells painfully, and he gently works it into relaxation.

Makoto holds his eyes as he smears tears away. “I get that there’s a lot you haven’t told me, but we only got into a serious relationship a few hours ago. You weren’t obligated to tell me anything before that. And even now, you don’t have to spill it all at once.” He rests their foreheads together, a fierce press that puts Haru back into his body. “There are things I’m scared of telling you, too. About what I did in the war and what people did to me. I promise, you will look at me differently if I ever find a way to say it, so I just… haven’t said it.”

Haru focuses on Makoto’s heartbeat against his fingers, lets the rhythm ease his pulse slower. He sighs and Makoto rocks him back and forth, pressing kisses against his pounding temple. He learns how to breathe again, timid hiccups that stretch into deep lungfuls of air.

When the panic is over, Haru’s voice still quivers. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go?”

Makoto eases him under the covers with no hope of escape and pulls the blankets around his
shoulders. He lies down beside Haru, wrapping his arms around him once more, accepting.

There is a sad smile in Makoto’s whisper. “You should know that I want your bad parts.”

Haru remembers saying those words but hearing Makoto speak them makes him start crying again. Though this time, both of them are smiling with wet eyes. “Even if you don’t want them, I do.”

Makoto’s fingers are gentle against a line of fresh stitches. “We’ll talk in the morning. Please rest. You’re safe here. You are always safe here.” From yourself, from me, from everything in between.

Haru closes his eyes.

Even when the sun rises, Nao still has not slept.

He watches purple and gold drench the ocean, waves rolling through an orange twist and pink spirals. The water is a soothing warmth around his submerged legs. His bonfire crackles as sea foam hisses and he drowns himself in the quiet of the shore, hoping it will lull his racing thoughts to stillness.

He hears the sand shift and Nao has his pistol aimed quicker than the next heartbeat. Natsuya’s hands fly up just as he touches the trigger.

Nao stares, breathless, then he comes to life in a desperate lunge. Natsuya catches him and lifts Nao off the ground in his hold, hushing his guttural sound of relief. They wrap around each other tightly enough for bruises to erupt at every point of contact and Nao presses his face so deeply against Natsuya’s pulse point that he can taste it.

They rest their foreheads together, framing each others faces. “You’re all right?” Natsuya asks, eyes darting anxiously.

Nao nods even though he is wavering from exhaustion. He used to work in the medical field, so he knows how to be on his feet for days at a time, but something about this added emotional strain has him ready to collapse.

He pulls away to look Natsuya over, gaze falling to the red river in his thigh first. “Here, come with me.”

They sit in the back of the van with the doors open, the salt of the sea invigorating, giving Nao just enough energy to tend to Natsuya. He stitches his thigh and other scrapes from the railroads. He uses enough peroxide to leave the air fuming. As he wraps more injuries with gauze, Natsuya says, “I’m going to let you make the decision on what I should do about Rough Rabbit.”

Nao pauses. He eventually resumes his work. “That’s rather foolish. It’s clear what you want to do.”

He startles when Natsuya cups his cheek to level their gazes. “I want you to tell me what to do.” He sweeps through lavender strands and Nao leans into the touch despite himself. “You just got your husband back mere hours ago and now some lot is trying to take him away? You have every right to decide what you want.”

Nao sighs, putting his supplies away. He organizes to buy time then he sits back, adjusting his eye patch. “You know I don’t want you to do it.”
Those mere words make Natsuya’s face strain, struggling not to crumble. Nao smiles and takes his hand. “I only say that because I’m afraid and very selfish. You’re not. You’re the only one that can lead Rough Rabbit.” He takes a deep breath. “Natsuya, you have the potential to save their lives. Of course I’m going to tell you to do it. I wouldn’t be able to live with that guilt and neither would you.”

Natsuya lets out a breath, one of relief, Nao knows. “Thank you.” He kisses him.

They pull apart and Nao nods in acceptance before looking out at the water. He crosses his ankles and Natsuya pulls them into his lap, making Nao roll his eye with a smirk. His expression crumbles in record time when Natsuya kneads at the arch of his foot, and his spine snaps straight, his head thunking against the van with a groan that is loud, quivering, and honest. Natsuya laughs. “My poor darling,” he coos, thumb pressing into knotted tension with so much sweet force that Nao’s toes curl. “Walking around like this.”

“Your poor darling,” Nao breathes, relief trembling up his tendons. “Needs you to stop talking.”

Natsuya chuckles and does so. Nao does not fall asleep under the attention but his mind definitely goes somewhere other than the present. He has been so starved for touch that the massage intensifies with every brush of Natsuya’s fingers, sending Nao on a dazzling rush of pleasure. The world narrows down to his touches and absent humming. Sea mist cools Nao’s warming skin, but soon there is nothing that can be done for the heat singing through his veins. Only one thing can dispel the fire, but Nao does not want to extinguish it. He wants it to build, he wants to taste it.

Nao chews his lip. His gaze wanders over Natsuya’s naked torso, fresh bandages a blinding white contrast against his tan. Natsuya feels his stare and looks up, breath faltering. He holds Nao’s gaze as his hands roam up his thighs, and Natsuya squeezes into the flesh like he is remembering all the times Nao’s had his legs wrapped around his hips, his head.

Nao sits up, chest swelling, pores flooding with heat. His lips are dry as his mouth waters, and he licks his lips. Natsuya’s eyes follow the action and a shimmering peach hue fills his cheeks. Nao swallows. “I know I said that you should work for it, but I’ve come to realize that neither of us are guaranteed that kind of time.”


Nao laughs, latching onto Natsuya’s wild grin as he rolls them over and pulls the doors shut.
"Your heart's a vine that I've bled trying to climb

You're making a ruin of me

But like a knife in the woods

You hunt down the good in me."

"The Good In Me" by Jon Bellion

It is the dead of night and Haru does not know what woke him.

He fails to sink into the darkness behind his eyes, something insistent pushing at his consciousness. That same instinct has pulled him from sleep before, saved his life countless times, so he listens to the urge and opens his eyes. He takes in his surroundings, a distant streetlight outlining bookshelves and the thin shape of his legs beneath the covers. He inhales deeply, smelling for foreign aromas like an intruder’s body odor, ears flexing to listen for creaking floorboards or a humming engine outside. The house is quiet and there is nobody standing over him with a weapon, which is nice, but Haru is not alone in the room. He tastes Makoto’s warmth, would feel his presence even if he were not a dip in the mattress, but then a choked sound throws Haru into consciousness with screaming ferocity.

He sits up and turns to look down at Makoto. He seems to still be asleep but his eyes are squeezed shut too tightly, his features twisting around a dream. His chest hiccups, his throat clenched to keep the air in, and Haru realizes Makoto is holding his breath in his sleep.

He startles when the air comes out in a rush, only to be sucked back in so deeply that Makoto arches weakly. He holds in that breath and Haru watches, horrorstruck, as Makoto falls paler and paler.

Haru flares to life and jolts him, calling his name in a desperate rasp.

Makoto is not conscious when he grabs Haru’s wrist, nails squeezing into veins, a bruise erupting under the pressure, but Haru has had much worse than that small discomfort and does not let go. Haru stays, and he is there when Makoto’s eyes fly open – Haru meets his terror with unwavering blue steel.

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Makoto’s eyes are open but he is not here; he is still trapped in his nightmare. Fear wraps him around Haru, and something fierce and protective roars through him when Makoto buries his face in his
chest. He muffles a groan against Haru’s heart, body *deflating*, tension bleeding out under Haru’s caresses.

Makoto lets himself be held and hushed gently in the quiet, but all at once, he cups his hands over his mouth, breathing into them hard. Haru can hear the rasping strain of his lungs but he forces his voice to sound calm. “Tell me what to do, Makoto.”

Makoto gestures at the nightstand and his whisper is wrecked. “Xanax. Aspirin. Inderal.”

Haru opens the drawer and scrambles through orange bottles, eyes darting over labels. He finds the correct ones and assumes to only pour one of each into his palm, save for the two aspirins. He goes to get Makoto a glass of water but he has swallowed all the pills dry before he can do so.

Haru takes Makoto’s hand and holds it against his heart, then he mirrors the action. Makoto’s skin is flushed heat, his heartbeat on a race for its life – running from something. Haru whispers for him to keep breathing and praises every drag of air. Makoto is not panicked any longer, but his eyes are so haunted that staring into their darkness is worse than any physical pain Haru has ever endured.

Delicately, he frames Makoto face for their gazes to meet and keeps his voice soft. “Do you want to get up for a while? I could make you tea.” His thumbs stroke feverish cheeks as he waits.

Makoto blinks, recognition dawning on his face before he nods hesitantly. He looks away with a shame that Haru kisses away with his lips against Makoto’s forehead.

Makoto cannot stand up because his prosthetic is off, but he looks too distant to remember this. He is so absent in this moment that he does not react to Haru grabbing his artificial limb from under the bed. The prosthetic is much heavier than he expected and now it makes more sense why Makoto must maintain his build.

He does not even notice Haru line the prosthetic up with his stump, but even so, Haru puts every ounce of his focus into the task. With bare-minimum force, he pushes the first piece snug under Makoto’s knee. Then he slides the second outer socket over that piece and when they click together, Haru slumps with relief. With the utmost care, he guides the artificial foot down to the floor and holds both of Makoto’s hands to help him stand on wobbling knees. He helps him into an old college shirt and kisses his throbbing pulse point before taking to the hallway.

Their fingers stay intertwined on the way to the kitchen and they stand close enough to feel one anther’s warmth as Haru prepares the tea. Makoto told him during one late-night phone call that his mother *lives* for tea and that is where he got the habit of keeping a cabinet stocked with several different blends. The cluttered shelves are quite intimidating before a memory of Asahi comes to life. Haru remembers when Asahi was in college for botany and said that chamomile compounds bind to the same brain receptors as drugs like Valium; therefore, that is the blend Haru all but dives for.

They wander out to the cobblestone patio and the cool night is invigorating, the tea warming Haru where his insides had run cold. He snuggles into Makoto’s side on the porch swing with a quilt thrown over their legs. The rich smells of dewy earth and damp wood soothe them as a flock of seagulls pass by overhead. The night is bruised purple, morning light just starting to flare across the horizon line at this crisp five a.m. It is so blessedly calm that Haru could fall asleep sitting up – unconsciousness would relieve him from his burning ribs. But he keeps his eyes open and intent on Makoto’s face.

Eventually he speaks, his voice deep against the quiet of the morning. “I’m so, *so* sorry –”
“Stop,” Haru admonishes in a gentle whisper. “I’m fine.” He nuzzles into the softness of Makoto’s hair and lets him hide his face in the darkness of his neck, against his hawk tattoo. “I was just worried about you.” He chews his lip to hold in an anxious question. “What happens when nobody’s there to wake you up?”

Makoto leans back and takes a deep swallow of his drink, his throat aching for sure. “Luckily, that hasn’t happened too many times. I usually start making some sort of noise.” His face drains with nausea. “Sometimes I scream.”

Haru’s brows crease. “But you live alone.” He glances over the fence at Yamazaki’s roof. “Sousuke can’t hear you from all the way over there.”

“No, but Echo can.”

Haru cranes back and Makoto smiles tiredly. “She’s a light sleeper – her nerves are too bad to let her rest very deeply. She has PTSD too. She checks on Sousuke and I several times throughout the night.” He sighs over at the chew toys by the flowerbed. “That’s why we live so close to each other. Echo has to make sure the both of us are okay. She tunnels under the fence a few times a night just to lie beside me and make sure I’m breathing. If I’m not, she’ll either try to wake me or go get Sousuke.” He bows his head, weighted with remorse. “She sleeps on our backs because she thinks she needs guard us. She never really left the war.”

Haru almost cannot imagine that an animal thinks she needs to sacrifice herself like that. It is even more reeling that she makes that commitment every single night, never faltering in this vow, never resting. It is true love. Haru has got a newfound respect for that man-eater.

He studies Makoto. “That medication you asked for – do you always take those when you have nightmares?”

His features tighten as he glances away. “No.”

Haru crosses his arms. “But you’re supposed to, aren’t you?”

Makoto’s guilty withering is enough. “I only take medication in serious situations.”

Haru’s brow arches higher. “ Aren’t anti-depressants usually taken every day?”

Their voices are constricting, getting louder, cresting toward an argument. “Yes,” Makoto concedes. “But I don’t need them every day.”

“That doesn’t –” Haru levels himself with a deep breath. He listens to the breeze for a moment, surrenders as it lulls through his hair. Calmly, he asks, “Are you worried about the stigma or something? Is that why you’re not taking them?”

“I’m not worried about anything.” Defensive, desperate.

Haru shakes his head as gently as he can muster. “Getting help doesn’t make you weak, Makoto.”

Makoto tenses, eyes blinking wide. Haru locks their fingers together and Makoto’s walls crumble, his voice a tumbling rush. “I don’t want to be this way, you gotta understand that you didn’t know me before everything went bad, I was never like this before –”
“Like what?”

“Like I’m so needy and anxious and –” He shakes his head in frustration. “It’s like I have a completely different brain. My heart is the same, I can admit that much, but it changed everything about how I think.”

Haru’s tongue is heavy under the weight of so many questions. He dares to ask, “What do you mean ‘it’? What changed everything?

The very foundation of Makoto shakes. He watches Haru, searching for something – a reason not to tell him. Haru knows that defensiveness, that fear, and meets Makoto’s stare with an open expression of acceptance. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promises. “I’m with you.”

Makoto’s mouth rolls into a trembling line as he drags air through his nose. “If I’m holding my breath in my sleep, it’s because I think I’m drowning.” He stares down at his bare foot and prosthetic. “It happened in my last days as a soldier. During my final tour, we were after an enemy group. I can’t tell you what they were called – if I do, I’ll have to spend twenty months in federal prison with espionage charges because it’s classified.”

Haru’s pulse startles quicker, but he nods hesitantly for him to continue.

“They slaughtered dozens of soldiers. My friends,” Makoto says. “Sousuke and I got obsessed with taking them down, they were hurting so many people, Haruka. Our people and their own. It motivated us to go into the Special Forces and our team finally got the chance to take them down.” His hands clench, the frustration still too fresh. “It didn’t work. We were captured and sent to the coast of Iraq. They held us at ransom and when our superiors wouldn’t give, they…”

He sees it in Makoto’s eyes. Tortured us.

The grief threatens to leave Haru in a scream. A thousand degrees of rage smokes his own heart out of his body in pure hellfire, but he keeps every bit of it off his face. He nods for Makoto to continue, hiding his hands under the quilt so he will not see them ball into fists.

“You won’t get in trouble if I tell you what happened next but I don’t know if you want to hear it,” Makoto says. Quieter, “If you should hear it.”

Haru grabs his hand just a bit too tightly, bracing himself. “I do.” He does not, his gut is twisting inside out, but he has to know how to help Makoto.

“They took some of us to the coast,” Makoto says, clipped like a report summary. Taking the emotion out of it seems to be the only way he can say it. “Not Sousuke, though. He was recovering from… other stuff. But they tied our wrists and ankles, threw us in the water, and…” His breath leaves him in a rush of grief. “They started shooting, then they stopped, then for the next three hours I tried not to drown.”

Haru wills the burn from his eyes, meeting Makoto’s gaze without blinking, being strong for him because that is what he needs.

Makoto’s fingers quiver against Haru’s. “Being such a good swimmer was the only thing that saved me. I knew how to float on my back – for a while, at least. But then the others panicked and then I panicked, and…” He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. “I made it out of the water but it
feels like a lot of me didn’t.”

Haru does not breathe too deeply out of fear he will hiccup on a sob, but he dares to whisper, “Thank you for telling me.”

Makoto is so relieved by his cool response that he fights tears. Haru is strong enough to not need his reassurance after being told what happened to him. Makoto should not have to be the one offering comfort when he is the one who needs it, and Haru is the only person who has ever understood this. Makoto needs someone like a fortress with a cold exterior, open only to him and ready to protect his darkness – Haru is nothing but cold darkness, so this job was always meant for him.

Makoto lets out a breath like he has held it in for years. “How does it make you feel? Knowing what happened to me.”

Haru does not waver. “Like I’m sitting next to the strongest person who ever existed.”

Tears startle from Makoto’s eyes as he cranes back. Haru smiles sadly. “You think you’re weak, but I’ve seen weak people. You’re the farthest thing from them.”

Something about Makoto opening his heart pulled Haru’s apart in a crack now exposed to the light. Nauseous and exhilarated, he takes Makoto’s hand and presses it against a circular scar on his arm. Makoto frowns at the little red mark and Haru sees when he realizes someone burned the mark into his skin – this awful sound lurches through Makoto like his whole being is suddenly hollow.

Haru’s whisper is desperate. “Weak people hurt others, and they use excuses to do it.” He cups Makoto’s hand against another burn on his throat. “They’re nothing but pain but I know you’ve felt real pain, it’s why you don’t wish it on anyone else.” The world is a dizzying twist of memory and reality but he does not stop, a turmoil of emotion flying from his mouth. “You keep making me think of this book me and Rin found at the library when we were kids. It said something like, you can’t tell anyone when you’re in hell or they’ll think you’re crazy. Those who escape hell never talk about it.”

In a surge, he takes Makoto’s face in his hands to meet his wide eyes. “I know what that’s like,” Haru swears. “Even though nothing I’ve been through will ever compare to what you went through, and anyone who thinks they can compare is crazier than my fucking parents were, but I do know what it’s like when you can’t tell anyone what you’ve been through. When you’re scared you’ll scare them? When you think you’ll never find anyone who just… who gets it –”

“Oh, Haruka.” How can Makoto just know when he needs to be hugged, when he needs a heart to bury his face against? He feels Makoto smile against his neck, his lips soft against the first cigarette burn Haru ever felt. “Those who escape hell never talk about it,” he whispers through kisses. “And nothing much bothers them after that. And you don’t look behind you when the floor creaks.” His eyes glitter at Haru’s gasp. “Charles Bukowski. He gets it too.”

Haru’s smile is breathless. “And once you’ve been to hell and back, that’s enough.” He rests their foreheads together. “You’ve been through enough. You deserve everything you need.”

Makoto mouths around silence, lips shaping to words that he cannot speak. Haru frowns in confusion and rubs his thigh to coax the words from him, but Makoto pulls away from the touch with this strange mix of dread and anticipation in his eyes.

Haru squeezes his thigh with heavier insistence and some sound quivers in Makoto’s throat, fingers twisting through the quilt. Haru smiles a little hopelessly because Makoto’s nervousness has a
tendency to be endearing.

But then it’s suddenly not. Suddenly it’s Makoto pinning him with a stare, and nothing has ever held Haru down like those eyes – he has dodged bullets, lunged from knife points, swooped around fists, but his whole being stills for Makoto.

He feels words curling hot and dark in his blood. *You deserve everything you need.*

*I will give you anything you need.*

Heat sings between them and Makoto’s voice is sweet fire poured over Haru’s kerosene heart. “If I said I needed you,” Makoto starts. He is breathing harder but Haru has no idea where he is getting air from – his own lungs are nothing but aching pressure. “If I said I needed you to make me remember that I’m capable of feeling something other than –” *Loneliness, shame, bitter hope.* Haru recognizes all of it in his eyes. “If I needed someone to touch me –” Touch more than his body, every pain and piece of him. “And I needed it to be *you*…”

Makoto cannot even believe the words are flying out of his mouth, but the plea has built inside of him until it became a constant, silent scream consuming every ounce of hope he possessed. The hunger for reassurance has drained him over the past year, and the ache is still a warm taste in his mouth, but it is a fleeting sweetness, weakened by each day he pretended that he was not crying out for comfort in every way but physically.

He is crying out now, even if his voice is nothing but a whisper. “If I said I needed you, if I asked for you right now, what would you say?”

Haru does not falter. “I would say yes.”

There is a beat of silence, then disbelief crashes into such joy that the very night roars. Makoto has never felt such an overwhelming surge of happiness, like a fistful of light humming in his chest. His laugh is breathless. “You’d say yes?”

The porch light has gold melting into the blue of Haru’s eyes. He nods, rolling his lips in to hide a smile that is quickly bursting at the seams. “Yes,” he says, voice hitching in his throat, too exhilarated to even breathe. Makoto smothers his laugh with kisses, hauling the boy into his lap, and Haru’s whisper crests with pleading urgency. “*Yes, I’m saying yes –*”

Haru’s arms and legs wrap him in a vice as Makoto carries him back inside, and he makes such noises when pressed between the kitchen wall and the hard plane of Makoto’s body. Haru sounds like he is starving for something inside of him and wants to drag it out with his tongue.

Haru laughs when Makoto rams his knee into a door frame and Makoto smacks his ass, calls him rude, *vehemently,* but when Haru buries his laugh against his lips, Makoto’s heart swells, fit to burst.

He trips up again but the bed is there to catch him this time. They tangle in the sheets, twisting through blankets as Haru crawls over him. Their kisses are teasing flicks of tongue and bites like sharp bursts of light. Makoto squeezes into the firmness of Haru’s thighs and the roundness of his ass, feels nails rake trails of heat up his back. Makoto is nothing but an upsweep of emotion, his voice full of ache as he goes on about how beautiful Haru is, how much it hurt when they were in a room together and Makoto could not say it. Haru whimpers, each word making pressure throb deep inside him.
He pushes Makoto down and he scrambles backward on the mattress, air rushing out of the pillows when his head lands on them. Haru might be lean but he is solid weight, an intoxicating fuse of pulsing skin and flexing muscle. Makoto drags him down harder, opening his legs for Haru to grind between them. The sensation *shatters* them and their voices are love-wrecked rasps.

Makoto opens his eyes after a kiss to watch blue morning light play in the snow of Haru’s skin. His hair is the only reminiscent of the night, a silken darkness that Makoto must drag his fingers through. Haru nuzzles into the touch, lips smearing across his palm with damp breaths. The tenderness breaks Makoto’s heart in the sweetest way. “Haruka, I need…”

His throat swells, tightens, refuses to let him speak. Embarrassed heat pulses in his cheeks and he blinks away the frustrated, watery burn in his eyes. He does not know how to ask this. He does not even know why he is so ashamed to ask this. Insistence beats at him because *he* should be the one laying Haru down to take care of him, Makoto should not need reassurance, he has to get it together and forget that he needs this comfort so badly that he has cried himself to sleep almost every night since he moved to Iwatobi –

But Makoto cannot forget the ache because it has finally consumed him. At long last, he has nothing left to give.

Realization dawns on Haru’s face and a wave of tension goes down Makoto’s body because he is *terrified*, because Haru *knows* –

Makoto startles and tears scatter down his cheeks when Haru closes their lips together in a sweet, lingering press. He leans back to level their gazes and it is like he hits Makoto with lightning. “Are you asking for me inside you?"

He swallows down a hot rush of adrenaline. “I’m begging you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Haru is quick to assure, brows creased as he shakes his head. “But why…”

Makoto knows. *Why me?*

Haru looks away with his face shadowed in disgrace. “No, Makoto, I don’t deserve it.”

He feels a familiar surge of fond exasperation. “Haruka.” He gently takes Haru’s chin in hand for their eyes to meet, and Makoto smiles despite himself. “Contrary to the mental breakdown I’ve had tonight, I’m actually pretty aware of myself. I know what I need.”

“That’s not what I meant –”

“I know,” Makoto soothes. “But if I’m ever going to start taking care of myself and somehow make a life out of all *this* –” He sweeps a hand down his body, the scars, burns, and metal. “Then I think I should make an effort to have what I need.”

Haru’s face is stoic, but he chokes. “You think I can give you that?”

Makoto nods, eyes shy under his fringe.

Haru just stares – in disbelief, in awe. In love. He buries his face in his hand for one overwhelmed
moment. “Makoto,” he muffles, heavy and thick. “Please, are you sure?”

Makoto bows his head to kiss the back of Haru’s other hand. “Yes, love.”

Haru frames his face with reverence and Makoto would try to touch him again but he cannot move – he is frozen in anticipation even as the room quivers with it.

Haru is bound with conviction, his voice more certain than the rise of the sun. “I’ll take care of you.” The very air around him is impassioned. “I will, Makoto.”

And then they are kissing, wet and heavy, heat flaring up Makoto’s spine and twisting. The mattress swoops under their weight as Haru eases him down, cradling the back of his head. Need rushes off them in frenzied waves and their shivers melt together. Haru’s mouth is on Makoto's throat, tasting the heat of his skin, when he brushes the prosthetic. “Do you want to keep it on?”

Makoto scrambles up enough brain cells to remember how to nod. “Yeah, this time. For – oh –” His voice is nothing but a gasp as teeth slip over his earlobe. “For um, leverage or. Yeah, whatever.”

Haru smirks against his neck and in retaliation, Makoto rocks up into him with punishing force, dragging the length of Haru’s cock between the row of his abs. Haru wheezes and thrusts back down without control. Makoto loses himself in their motion, his fingers slipping under Haru’s shirt and making him freeze.

Makoto will never forget the panic in Haru’s eyes when he tried getting under his shirt the first time they were together, so he quickly draws back. “Sorry, I’m sorry!” He sits up with him and quickly smooths out the wrinkles in the shirt, fretting. “I didn’t mean to – you can keep it on! If you need to, or just if you want to. I don’t mind at all, I promise.” He tries to smile with reassurance but it is wobbly.

Haru looks at war with himself. The room is draped in shadow, but Makoto feels the conflict running through him. He leans in to kiss at Haru’s frown, pecking until his lips unravel in a sigh. “I don’t want to keep it on,” Haru starts. “But…” He looks down at himself with disgust and turns away – he thinks he has to keep the shirt on for Makoto.

Well, he will have none of that. Makoto hugs Haru close, smiling true. “Haruka, you’ve accepted so much of me.” A sleeve slips down Haru’s shoulder, exposing a muscled curve of bare skin, and Makoto’s kisses are soft against the flesh, tasting its warmth. “I adore you,” he exhales, breathes Haru with his inhale. “Every part of you. Even the parts you don’t let me see.”

Haru’s breath leaves him in an overflow. “Take – take yours off first.”

Makoto grins and complies, reaching over his head to drag his shirt off. He leans back on his hands and waits patiently.

Haru stares at his naked torso. Swallows. Then he brings Makoto’s hands between shirt and skin, into the space that is damp with heat. “You do it,” Haru says.

“I want you to keep it on if that’s what you need. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yeah. If it’s you.”

With emotion swelling in his throat, Makoto’s hands carefully start to roam. He licks into Haru’s
mouth as he learns the sweep of his hips, making sure that he can handle the touch before things go any further. Makoto leans back to study Haru’s face, watching expressions shape to his features in their own refrained way. The touch seems odd to him at first, his muscles drawn tightly against his frame, but he tries, bearing his throat for Makoto’s kisses to distract him. Under soft sweeps of tongue, Haru moans and falls supple. Makoto whispers, “You feel so good, Haruka. Are you all right?”

Haru’s lungs swell under Makoto’s hands. “It’s not bad, just… weird.” He breathes secrets against Makoto’s cheek. “I’ve never let anyone touch me like this.”

“What, during sex?”

Haru is silent.

Makoto cranes back and reels. “Nobody’s ever touched you here? Haru, are you –”

“No, I’m not a virgin,” he snorts with an exasperated roll of his eyes. “I just try to keep my shirt on.”

“Oh. Okay then.” Haru looks at him suspiciously and Makoto smirks. “What?”

“You know what.”

“No, I’m not a virgin,” he says. “But it’s been a while.” He does not care to elaborate on just how long ago that last boot camp romp was.

“You’ve bottomed before?”

“Mmhmm,” Makoto nods.

“And topped?”

“Yeah?”

His jealous pout is a little too endearing. Makoto smiles rather sadly as he nuzzles into Haru’s forehead. “I wish I hadn’t,” he sighs against his lips, a fleeting brush that Haru chases after. “I wish I had done everything with you first.”

He loses himself in their kiss and barely registers it when Haru lifts his arms expectantly. Makoto keeps their eyes locked but neither of them breathe as he slips the shirt over Haru’s head, and it is so pain-staking that it’s like peeling off a layer of skin – a layer of protection. Haru has nowhere to hide when the fabric is gone, so he surges into Makoto and clings to him even though it is his gaze that he is most afraid of.

Makoto holds him, eyes closing to revel in the bare feel of him. He has a sensory overload with so much skin against his own, and Haru jolts when they press together – Makoto’s eyes fly open because Haru might have had sex before, but he has never experienced the intimacy of naked touch. Reverently, Makoto runs his hands down the length of Haru’s back, tracing the arch of his spine. He feels alive in the primitive, most human part of himself as Haru’s skin gets warmer and warmer under his hands. Makoto noses Haru’s jaw, tipping it back to suck against his throat, and he learns the changing shapes of his muscles as they grind together.

They lean back from a kiss to catch their breaths, and that is when Makoto sees.
Haru’s chest is covered in those little red eclipses like an astronomy chart mapped across his skin. He finds clusters of tiny dots, so many of them that they could be linked into constellations. There are moon phases of bruises and shooting stars of stab wounds. Makoto was stabbed a lot in close combat, but those were quick, desperate strikes – it looks like someone dug a blade into Haru’s stomach and twisted, leaving behind a spiral of unnatural creases.

But even that is breathtaking. Makoto cannot fathom how much strength he is holding in his arms. Haru is such a vessel of power and elegance that Makoto wonders how it can all be contained in one body.

The silence is tense as Haru waits for a reaction. Carefully, Makoto reaches out and sweeps his hand across the expanse of his chest. Haru’s pecs flinch, and he strains not to curl in on himself, but he never pulls away, as difficult as it is to deny the instinct. His tight expression unravels as Makoto shapes his lips to every bruised rib.

Makoto leans back and traces a circular scar – a cigarette burn, he knows. Something about the way these marks turn Haru so vulnerable and small makes Makoto realize: “Your parents did this?”

Haru looks away and nods.

“When you were… how old were you when that started?”

Haru’s voice is distant. “Three.”

Makoto has not been truly enraged in a long time – not since the battlefield, where it was too easy to lose himself in the heat of a firefight – but never has he been so consumed by an emotion that he could feel his control slipping.

Makoto’s jaw tightens and Haru wraps his arms around himself anxiously, begging, “Say something.”

“I’m glad they’re dead.”

Because Makoto would have to kill them if they were not.

Haru is shocked, then relieved, head swooping down as he lets out a breath. Makoto composes himself and lifts Haru’s face to kiss his forehead, resting there for a moment. Gently, he pries Haru’s arms from around himself, exposing him once more, and Makoto stares at him with so much desire that heat pulses between them.

Haru lunges at him with a force that pushes Makoto down into the mattress. Their lips are a pull and tug for dominance as Haru squeezes Makoto’s cock through his track pants, making him hiss. Quickly, he arches his back for Haru to roll his pants and boxers down, and before Makoto can even take his next breath, his cock is swallowed in hot, wet pressure.

Under the burst of pleasure, his skin prickles with indignation. “Don’t just –” do that, he’d say if he were not choking on his own voice. Spontaneous bouts of head cannot be taken so lightly – Makoto’s going to have a heart attack if this keeps happening. But at least he will die happy, because Haru is putting every ounce of his strength into sucking Makoto off and meeting his eyes as he does it.
Haru’s fist works ruthless pressure over Makoto’s shaft, tasting his pulse by licking up a throbbing vein. Makoto’s hand flies over the base of his dick and squeezes because already, it’s too much. His cock is heavy and dripping in seconds. He does not even have the mind to be self-conscious about being laid out naked in front of someone – for once, it’s exhilarating because Haru is staring up from between his legs with lust shining through the darkness of his eyes.

Stubbornly, Makoto drives his heel into Haru’s shoulder to push him off because he is so over this no-stamina thing. Haru sits up and wipes the back of his hand with a smirk, which results in a pillow getting thrown at his face. Haru laughs, but the sound withers away when Makoto tugs his boxers down, pulls his dick out, and swallows it down in one smooth motion.

Haru curls in on himself and Makoto hums pleased vibrations around his shaft. He gets in three particularly hard sucks as he coats his fist with his own precome, then he presses two slick fingers against Haru’s rim, rubbing sensation against it.

Haru screams, “oh, you fucking –” but he has his head thrown back and he is grinning, eyes rolling back as he grinds along the slip-slide of Makoto’s fingers. Makoto suckles his tip and that is when Haru pulls him off, his cock springing free with a wet smack against his abs, and the sight makes the very deepest part of Makoto ache.

Haru says something, but Makoto just keeps staring between his legs. Haru says it again and Makoto blinks back into focus. “Huh?”

His voice is smug. “I asked if you have lube and condoms.”

Heat flashes off Makoto’s skin, visions and sensation taking over his mind. He clears his throat but his voice is still hoarse. “Um, I think Nagisa left some in the bathroom.”

Haru arches a brow with a smirk, and Makoto fumes a sigh, warmth flooding his cheeks to a nauseating degree. “I did not ask him for it. He piles it up in the vanity drawer every time he comes over. Doesn’t help that Sousuke does it too.”

Haru makes a face that Makoto is still laughing at when he comes back from the bathroom with plastic and foil in hand. He puts the items to the side and lies over Makoto, their bodies pressed together from navel to knees, hips to heart. Makoto helps him out of his boxers the rest of the way and Haru kisses him until he is delirious on the wet slide of their lips.

Haru presses kisses down the length of his torso and flattens out on the mattress. Haru cups the back of Makoto’s right knee and brushes his lips across his stump with the devotion of worship. Makoto is glad that there is just enough night left to hide the watery shine in his eyes.

Haru kisses across the charred skin, teasing higher and higher up his leg. He drags his tongue across the scored line of Makoto’s hip and flicks at his navel, making him arch. “That tickles,” Makoto laughs, feeling the shape of Haru’s grin when he gives his navel a playful suck. Makoto clenches his legs around Haru’s head and shouts laughter under the sweet torture, eventually tugging Haru by the hair when his lungs strain for air.

Makoto falls even more light-headed when Haru opens his mouth against his inner thigh and sucks. He moans when Haru bites down, leaving a crescent of bruises behind. His world becomes gentle presses of lips and tongue, hot breath over sweeps of saliva.

Then there is a slick press between his legs, and just that cool, fleeting brush of fingers against the
heat of him has Makoto’s throat tightening with such anticipation that he cannot even swallow. Haru rests his cheek against Makoto’s thigh, one hand thumbing his cockhead, the other tracing his entrance. He sucks sensation to the tip of Makoto’s cock and when his legs fall open, Haru drives into him, the stretch of two long fingers so good that Makoto does not even have the voice to scream, but his fingers squeeze through the sheets with a burst of strength so powerful that his knuckles crack.

Haru pulls out almost as quickly as he pushed in. “Are you okay?”

“How...” Haru slides back inside and Makoto arches against the intrusion, tightening around the shape of those fingers to keep them buried in the heat of him. Haru’s wrist twists and Makoto’s head snaps to the side to muffle a cry against the pillows. Haru flicks back and forth, the pads of his fingers dragging, searching, and when he finds that bundle of nerves inside he presses, and Makoto almost curls out of his own skin.

The third finger is a struggle, but when Haru opens his mouth around Makoto’s nipple, it slides in with no resistance at all. Haru helps maneuver his prosthetic for the leverage to rock down on his hand and he has to fist his own cock at the sight.

Seeing as Haru is up to his wrists in lube, Makoto helps him fumble with a condom, but it’s kind of a disaster from the start because his hands are trembling and his palms are sweaty, greasing up the foil until it will not open. Makoto struggles with it for at least two minutes out of spite, but it only takes Haru three seconds to rip the foil open with his teeth, which, by the way, if there was ever a sight that could make Makoto come untouched, it’s Haru pulling a foil apart with a slow drag of teeth, the condom a hard, insistent outline in the square.

But Makoto finds out that he is not the only one scared shitless when Haru eyes the pillows. He takes one and slips it under Makoto’s hips with the delicacy of someone handling a new spring daisy rather than six feet of pure muscle. Haru surges for one more pillow and tucks it under Makoto neatly, patient to smooth out the wrinkles and buy as much time as possible. He nervously glances at another pillow and Makoto shatters the tension with a laugh. “Haruka, I’ll be fine.”

Haru scowls, shadows falling away to reveal his blush. The saturated gold of sunrise plays in the darkness of his lashes and Makoto kisses him with so much taste in their mouths – fear, anticipation, nervousness, excitement. Makoto presses his lips against Haru’s bare chest, over his heart, and feels his pulse jump. “I want this with you,” he whispers. “It was always supposed to be with you.”

“It’s meaningless without you.”

“How...” Haru breathes, eyes closing. He holds himself up on a forearm, the rest of him weighing over Makoto, and the upward angle of Makoto’s hips presses them tighter together. Haru’s free hand strokes his cheek in dazed wonderment as Makoto frames his face, and their foreheads rest together as aching pressure splits Makoto.

Haru nudges deeper and even such a gentle action forces the air from Makoto’s lungs. He catches what breath he can and inhales deeply, leveling himself. His thighs shake as he opens them wider, shifting his hips to work Haru inside of him, but it is not a smooth glide. Even so, it’s not pain, it
doesn’t really hurt because Makoto’s body remembers the sensation even after so long, but the tightness is immense, and it’s a push his body is trying to refuse.

Haru worries over him with a constant flow of questions and kisses, closing their lips together, wrapping a fist around Makoto’s cock. Haru pumps him and that is when he opens up, pressure widening, taking him deeper, and Makoto swears that he has never felt as complete as he is right now, full of Haru.

He thumbs Makoto’s trembling bottom lip and he shapes a kiss to Haru’s finger. The colors of the sunrise drip down the walls, purple and gold melting over their bodies. Haru’s whisper is captivated. “You’re smiling.”

Makoto’s heart swells. “So are you.”

Haru breathes a laugh, dazed, gone, and somewhere in between kisses, he hilt Makoto in a warm, wet glide. Their voices break and they squeeze each other too tightly, faces twisted around grimaces that unravel breathlessly. Haru’s hips flex and plunge into the giving pressure, Makoto meeting him in a leisure grind. Their joining is an embrace in motion, a connection so powerful that the air simmers. Even the race of their hearts is synchronized as they melt into each other. Makoto can feel himself changing from the inside out, every thrust making him feel like an open nerve. Haru is so comfortable in Makoto’s skin, and it should be strange that he finally feels like himself when inside someone else, but that someone is Makoto, so it makes perfect sense to him.

Haru pins their joined hands over Makoto’s head, fingers laced together, then Haru’s hips snap into him, and the sensation is blinding. They close their eyes to revel in each other, light glowing brighter and brighter in front of their eyelids as the sun crests the horizon line. Morning warmth floods the room, amber pooling in sheens of sweat as they rock together, slick and raw. Their darkness is burned away by the heat they’ve created together, and they are so far past acceptance – they are part of each other now, not only physically, but in every sense of being joined, and neither of them is afraid of that anymore.

They move into each other with a rhythm more natural than the roll of ocean waves. Makoto arches up to guide the sweep of Haru’s hips, digging his heel into Haru’s back to push his cock so deep inside that Makoto can taste it. He throws his head back and purrs a curse in a way that makes Haru surge inside him, shocked, turned on within an inch of his life. They hold eye contact and it is almost as intimate as the way Haru takes him, and Makoto gives him everything he has. Haru finds heaven in the greeness of his eyes – he lets that gaze bore into what is left of his soul.

Their fingers squeeze tight together as Makoto comes hard between their bodies, and Haru holds him through it, swallowing Makoto’s cry in a deep kiss. Even when the rush is over, Makoto feels himself cresting high on something when Haru bows into him and muffles a broken sound against his throat. He realizes that it is only his heart soaring, and the feeling stays with him long after Haru slips from him. Even when they lose themselves in the tangle of sheets, Makoto still feels so connected that he swears he feels Haru’s pulse in the air.

They share drowsy kisses, their touches light, murmurs low. Morning warmth drapes them in languid relaxation, but eventually, the atmosphere is too much, and they are too hot and sticky to enjoy it. Haru suggests a bath but before Makoto can respond, Haru dives for the restroom, dragging him along by the hand.

Makoto has never had a bath with someone, but after some awkward situating of limbs and about two gallons of water sloshing out, he finds that it’s a pretty divine experience. Sunshine glows
through the steamy window and the bathroom is a world of swirling white. The heat of the water leaves them boneless against one another, their kisses a soft, wet press that echoes off the tiles. Haru straddles Makoto, thighs grazing the hard planes of his stomach, fingers kneading his broad shoulders. Makoto’s arms wrap around Haru’s naked back, hands dripping wet as they roam up and down.

Haru leans back from a kiss and blinks, water droplets flicking through his lashes. “Is your ass sore?”

“…okay, I know I said that your honesty is lovely, and it is, in the right context, but sometimes you really shouldn’t be so –”

“Makoto.”

He fumes a sigh and shifts, grimacing when an ache throbs between his legs. “It hurts a little, but it’s not a big deal.” He blushed, tracing the long, corded muscles of Haru’s thighs. “It’s… proof. You know?”

Haru smirks faintly, fitting his lips against a bullet scar on Makoto’s shoulder.

Makoto’s grin is wry. “Sousuke did that.”

Haru rears back. “Shot you?”

“It was an accident,” Makoto chuckles. “He just wasn’t the best shot right out of basic training. He was pretty nice to me after that. It’s kind of how we became friends.”

Haru grins and presents his thumb to Makoto, showing him the little white strikes of skin at the base. “I was helping Rin pierce his ear and he reared back when I tried to push the needle through. He pulled the thing right through my thumb.” Makoto hisses in sympathy. “He tried to work it out with another needle, so I ended up with two of them stuck in my thumb.”

“Good Lord,” Makoto says. “How’d you get them out?”

“Nao’s patience and a lot of tequila.”

Makoto startles a laugh and they fall into compatible silence, touches absent and sweet. Haru sweeps soap over Makoto’s chest, tracing scars through the foam. A strange curiosity prickles at him.

“What’s it like to be shot?”

Makoto purses his lips and shrugs, the water rippling. “It depends on a lot of things: how close range you are, what kind of bullet it is. How determined the other person is to kill you.”

“Are you a good shot?”

Makoto leans his elbow on the lip of the tub, rests his fist against his temple with a lazy grin and an arched brow. “Even after catching hot debris in my eyes and having to wear glasses, I can still hit a target from twenty football fields away. Well, with a scope, of course. I was a sniper.”

That confidence makes something insistent stir in Haru, leaves him itching to know more. The intrigue shows on his face and Makoto’s smirk twists. “There’s nothing like being shot – nothing can change everything so quickly. I’ve been shot nine times and there was only one that wasn’t traumatizing.” He takes Haru’s hand, their dripping fingers sliding across the outer edge of Makoto’s
skull. “When I was shot here, it was from far away and the bullet was narrow, so it slipped right through the tissue without leaving behind serious damage.” He grimaces. “Well, I still have headaches at times, but that’s hardly something to complain about.”

Haru stares. “You got shot in the head?”

Makoto smiles weakly. “Yes, but I’m fine, Haruka.” He stretches and winces, jaw tightening. “What’s worse is that I have seven pieces of shrapnel stuck between my vertebrae from where I caught part of a rocket grenade in my back.”

“Holy shit,” Haru breathes.

Makoto nods. “But even with that,” he says, voice perking up. “I have everything to be thankful for. You can’t feel pain unless you’re alive – I try to look at it that way.” He sighs. “It’s such an effort to keep a positive attitude now, but what I’ve gone through made me realize how important it is.”

At Haru’s interest, he tips his head in thought. “Getting shot makes you understand how breakable you and everyone else is. We’re all the same, in a sense, because a bullet can kill anyone.” The light in his eyes dims. “But you can tell the differences when someone’s fighting for their life. They’re… I don’t know, it’s like, their will to live is different. You can tell who wants to fight for the people they love, or their cause, or whatever.” He shakes his head with a vague look of nausea. “Every single time, all I could think about was my family. My Mom, Ren and Ran, Sousuke and Echo.” He sweeps Haru’s bangs back, his eyes falling half-lidded, his voice soft. “The person I was meant to be with.”

Haru’s heart swells until it threatens to burst.

“I was more scared of people having to miss me than of dying,” Makoto murmurs. Haru cups his cheek and Makoto inhales deeply against his palm, breathing him. “Love is the only thing that can separate life and death like that.”

They hold each other in the quiet and even though they are naked, they are exposed in more ways than one, open from the inside out like their scars. Makoto traces a jagged streak down Haru’s pec and gives him a once-over. “So you’ve never been shot, but I can see that you’ve been stabbed before.” He is not squeamish about this. Makoto is not afraid and he does not pity the truth – he is not running or recoiling even though he is figuring it all out like Sousuke said he would, putting the pieces together, making the connection between what Haru is not telling him and what his scars are saying.

He closes his eyes, taking a heavy lungful of damp air, clinging to the taste of Makoto on his tongue. “How much do you want to know?”

Pressed this closely, it is easy to feel the rigid fit of Makoto’s muscles. “What you’re keeping from me, is it the real reason why you showed up to my house covered in blood?”

His words strike Haru like a physical blow, but he does not flinch. “Yes.”

“Is that why you lied about where you work?”

His gut twists. “Yes.”

“Is that why you told me ‘a friend’ was dropping you off here last night when it was really
Sousuke?”

Haru’s eyes open wide but Makoto does not even blink. He crosses his arms tighter over his chest and waits. Haru swallows. “Yes.”

Makoto breaks their stare, conflict twisting his face. “It sounds like you’re trapped, Haruka.”

He nods without hesitation, because if there was ever a time to own his shit, it’s now. “I am. But I’m not the only one, so that’s why I’m doing this.”

Makoto breathes a laugh. “You sound like me. My friends were the whole reason I went after that group with Sousuke, even through we knew it was a suicide mission.” He takes a steadying breath. “All right, just… start slow.” His brow hitches, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “Because I’d like to know how you and Sousuke are both connected and why neither of you told me.”

Haru is such a mess of emotions that he begs to know, “Why do you even still care about me? When you know I’ve lied to you.”

Makoto tips his head, considering. “I don’t think you lied just to lie to me.” He kisses Haru’s trembling fingers and meets his eyes. “I think you were trying to protect me, Haruka, maybe in the only way you know how.” He holds his lips against Haru’s knuckles, thinking. “You have the potential to be forgiven if you’re honest with me now.” He raises his brows expectantly, giving Haru a chance because Makoto sees it in his eyes, that he wants to tell him, that he needs to.

Haru has never been more ready to fall at someone’s feet. It is for that reason that he finds the strength to speak. “I’ve wanted Iwatobi to change for a long time, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t part of the problem. I got used to the chaos, the fear.” He hunches deeper into himself. “I got scared. I even tried to make myself believe that was all that existed because…” He sighs and turns away. “I don’t know why.”

“Because it’s familiar.” Makoto cups water in his hand and glides it through Haru’s hair, pushing the strands back for their gazes to meet. “Living in fear is hell, but if it’s constant, then it’s familiar, and it’s not changing when everything else is. It’s safe in its own way.”

Haru never thought such could be put into words and hearing Makoto say it so simply makes his situation feel not as cataclysmic. He kisses him for that. “I could never convince myself completely that’s all there is because…” The emotions he keeps buried overflows. “Because there’s you, and Gou, and my friends, and there was Mori. There’s so much more than fear to all of them.”

Makoto smiles. “So you should know there’s more to you than fear.” Their lips touch and the soft sound of their kiss resounds in the quiet. “You’re the strongest person I know, Haruka.”

Haru closes his eyes, steeling himself. He opens them with resolution. “Me and Rin are working with Sousuke on his investigation.”

Makoto’s brows hit his hairline and he cranes back sharply. He blinks, alarm lighting his eyes. “How…” He looks away and rubs a hand over his face. “Well. Okay, that makes a little sense.” He strains a smirk and shrugs tightly. “Doesn’t mean I like it, but it makes sense.” He studies Haru. “But you and Rin aren’t cops.”

“No. We do what Sousuke isn’t allowed to do.”
Makoto narrows his eyes. “So you volunteered to go undercover in a way?” He grimaces at how he worded that and waves his hand. “And I get that what’s going on is nowhere near as clean-cut as that, but you get what I mean.”

“We were already involved in the situation, but yeah, we’re undercover in our own way.” From Miho, for sure. “But we’re all working toward the same goal.”

Makoto frowns in thought. “What’s the goal? What’s the investigation even for? I’ve never seen Sousuke so adamant about something.”

Haru hesitates. “Have you heard of relay?”

“It’s a drug, right? Rei talks about patients overdosing on it. He’s never seen anything like it.”

“He’s right,” Haru says. “It’s taking over Iwatobi. Our goal is to get relay off the streets and take down the gangs selling it.”

“Shit,” Makoto breathes. He looks overwhelmed and Haru hates himself for it. “Haruka, that’s –” a lot, too much. He sees it all in Makoto’s eyes. “Wait, Rin’s not lying about his feelings for Sousuke, is he? That’s not part of this, right? Because Sousuke’s not faking.”

Haru is quick to shake his head. “No, Rin isn’t lying. He’s in love with Sousuke. What they have…”

He sighs in defeat. “I can’t take any credit for how far we’ve come in this fight. None of it would have even started if they hadn’t wanted more for each other and Iwatobi.” He did not realize how much he owes the two of them until he voiced that.

Makoto sinks deeper into the water with relief. “Okay. Okay, good.” He gathers his thoughts, tipping his head over the lip of the tub, eyes darting over the ceiling. Haru wraps his arms around himself to keep his hands from fretting over him.

Eventually, Makoto pulls him close to draw strength from Haru’s presence, even though he is the source of the turmoil. Haru holds him just as fiercely, and Makoto sighs, “I think I’ve heard all I can handle for now. There’s a reason why I don’t ask Sousuke about work. I can’t handle knowing because I’ll drive myself insane thinking about it, I really will, Haruka.” His eyes are grave. “But please, don’t lie to me if I ask for more. I understand that you might come from a lifestyle where you’ve had no choice but to lie, and that breaks my heart,” his voice finally cracks. “But I want you to see that you don’t have to do that with me.” He rests their foreheads together. “Because I know who you are, and I know your heart.”

“It’s yours,” Haru says quicker than the next breath.

Makoto kisses him gently. “I know that, too. But until I ask for more… just don’t get me involved. Please, respect that boundary. I’m still going to be worried sick about you, but let me have what peace I can get.”

Haru’s lip quivers. “Makoto, I think we might need to –”

“If I wanted to break up with you,” Makoto says patiently. “I would do it, and that is the last thing I want.”

“But you should,” Haru insists even though the words drive a knife through his chest. “You deserve your peace.”
Makoto hums thoughtfully, fingers gliding across the surface of the water to trace shapes across Haru’s skin. “But even if we broke up, I’d still be involved because my brother is in this with you.” Makoto squeezes his eyes in dread of that thought. “Listen to me, Haruka. I’m not going to ask you to make promises because I know what it’s like to have a mission you need to finish.” He opens his eyes and they are saturated with honesty. “I don’t know if I’d be able to stay with you if I hadn’t been a soldier; I wouldn’t be able to understand.” He laughs to himself. “So, my mom was right. Sometimes we have to go through hell to find the person we’re meant to be and find the person we’re meant to be with.”

He takes Haru’s hands. “I will stay with you,” he vows, not wavering even when Haru starts to shake. “But I’m asking you to be careful. When you’ve got people waiting up on you, it changes the entire way you think in the heat of the moment, and I will be waiting for you. And I – oh Haruka, don’t cry.”

Makoto’s embrace is protective, drawing him near, pressing him close. It is possessive, separating Haru from the rest, and he lets himself be claimed as Makoto’s – not Miho’s, not Freebird’s, but only his. Makoto smears Haru’s tears away and levels their gazes. “Please finish this, because you deserve your peace, too.”

Haru disagrees with that, but at least he can admit that he wants peace, and the thought of securing a future with Makoto is the best motivation he has ever been hit with. They seal their resolution with a kiss that Haru feels in his bones even after they get out of the tub for Makoto to get ready for work.

Haru lounges on the kitchen counter, draped in one of Makoto’s flannels and a fresh pair of boxers, grinning as he watches him scramble through the house. Between shoving graded papers in a book bag and tugging some jeans on, Makoto dives back into the kitchen to kiss Haru, their lips sweetened by the taste of strawberries and orange juice. Under Haru’s gentle insistence, Makoto even takes all his medications and he is praised through adoring kisses.

Even if he is running late, they find the time to get wrapped up in each other to the point that Haru gets yanked to the edge of the counter with his legs wrapped around Makoto, his flannel open for wandering fingers. Their kisses are rough and desperate as Makoto’s hands sneak into Haru’s boxers, squeezing into the firmness of his ass, and if Haru plays dirty by driving his hand down the front of Makoto’s pants, then well, he never claimed to play fair.

Eventually, the morning fondling has to stop and Makoto must leave. He offers to drive Haru home but seeing as late as he is, Haru texts Nao to pick him up instead. Begrudgingly, he puts pants on and dresses to leave, but nobody can blame him if he ends up pressed against the side of Makoto’s truck with their mouths finding each other again and again. Tasting Makoto’s last kiss is a physical pain, even if he assures Haru that he’ll think of nothing but him today and call him tonight.

It is not until Makoto drives off that Haru notices Nao’s van parked at the corner of the block. He all but drags his feet, slumped over miserably as he goes to climb in the van, but upon opening the door he realizes that the cab is empty. Suspiciously, Haru glances around and makes his way to the back of the vehicle.

He opens the doors and slams them shut in a burst of alarm. He turns around and paces the street with his hands on his hips, head shaking in disbelief.

Natsuya throws the doors open and flails out of the van still trying to work his pants on, hopping on one foot as he blabbers apologies. Giggles crest the air and Natsuya launches a boot back into the
van. “Nao, stop laughing! Haru, I’m so sorry, we had no idea –”

“Haru’s seen far worse, Natsuya.” Nao slithers out, barefoot and buttoning a pair of shorts that Natsuya is way too interested in right now. Nao slips into one of Natsuya’s faded band shirts and his smile is more languid than it has been in years. “Sorry. You took a while. Everything all right?”

Without his control, Haru blushes, and Nao and Natsuya smirk at each other. “Shut up,” Haru grumbles, punching Natsuya in the gut when he asks for details and groaning into his hands when Nao asks about protection.

After a restless three hours of sleep, a phone call wakes Sousuke.

His fist crashes down on the nightstand with enough force to startle Echo awake. Still facedown in a pillow, he gropes for his phone and answers it with enough menace to make the very air tremble in fear. “Sergeant Yamazaki.”

Even if his voice is nothing but a growl, Momotarou sounds like he does not have the time to be afraid. “Yamazaki-senpai, I’m real sorry about calling you this early, but did Sei tell you anything about his plans for the station’s presentation at Iwatobi Academy?”

Sousuke cranes out of his pillow, bloodshot eyes narrowed. “The what?”

“The station’s got some kind of presentation scheduled at the elementary school today,” Momotarou explains. “You and Sei were signed up for it?”

Sousuke remembers in a sickening lurch.

“Son of a –” He rips free from the sheets and staggers over to the calendar on his wall. His eyes dart over the square dates and today is circled in red – he only uses red for days he hopes will never come.

Today, of course, is one of those days.

He fumes a sigh and drags a hand down his face, stubble rasping. “I’m sorry, Momo. I forgot it was today.”

“It’s fine!” Momotarou’s honesty is bright across the phone line. “I told Corro I’d go in Sei’s place, since he’s…” His sigh is frail. “You know, still in the hospital.”

Sousuke’s heart aches. “Sei hadn’t talked about it much, but I know he wanted to emphasize that the kids shouldn’t be scared of us – that was the overall message.” He rubs the back of his neck, feeling useless. “If that helps any.”

“It does,” Momotarou is quick to assure. “Okay, I can try something like that.” He takes a deep breath. “Wow, this is actually gonna be really nerve-wracking.”

“I’ll be with you,” Sousuke says. “I’m sure I’m still scheduled to go and so is Echo. You won’t be alone.”

“God, thank you,” Momotarou says, sincerity so deep in his voice that Sousuke forgets all about being woken up at the ass-crack of dawn. Well, for the most part.
Iwatobi Academy is intimidating for a number of reasons. For one, it is an immaculate campus with pedigree and preserved architecture and a whole bunch of other nonsense that does not mean fuck to Sousuke. Secondly, the place is swarmed like an ant farm threatening to bury him alive – he has seen better controlled chaos on the damn battlefield than this schoolyard.

And thirdly, most importantly, most intimidating: there are kids here. A terrifying concept and also, not Sousuke’s forte.

Luckily, he has the chance to corner Makoto in his classroom before the first bell rings. Sousuke frantically hisses, “You couldn’t have reminded me it was today?”

Makoto does not even look up from writing today’s lesson plan on the board. “I’m sure you’ll do fine,” he breezes, scrawling bright green against the white board. The marker drenches the room in a chemical smell that drives pressure between Sousuke’s eyes. He tries to blame the headache on the marker and not stress – his pride would suffer less if he pretends that he is not frantically, really fucking worried about making a good impression on these kids. They’re just kids, he tries to tell himself. They’re just the next generation. The future of Iwatobi.

Holy shit, he’s sweating.

“You’re good enough with the twins,” Makoto says. He pauses, his smirk curling in the tense silence. “Well. You got there eventually, at least.”

Sousuke just stares because really?

Makoto sighs, finishing up with the lesson plan to give Sousuke one of those blinding smiles and an overflow of reassurance. “You’ll be fine, Sousuke. I know it’s scary how impressionable kids are, but you’re not going to have much of a chance to screw things up – you said Momotarou’s doing most of the talking, plus…” He bends down to rub through Echo’s fur and she is boneless as she hits the floor for a belly rub. “You’ve got Coco with you, and I’m sure she’ll be the only thing the kids are concerned with today.”

Sousuke sighs and downs the rest of his thermos, the coffee sharp as battery acid. “Guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am,” Makoto sing-songs, rising to a stand. He leans back against his desk and regards Sousuke with crossed arms, watching him in pensive silence.

Sousuke stiffens. “What is it?”

Makoto shifts his weight off his prosthetic, studying him. “Haru told me about him and Rin being a part of your investigation.” He pins Sousuke with a rare glare, his voice striking like a blow. “Thanks for bringing him by last night, by the way. Echo busted your ass.”

Sousuke’s lips part as he mouths for the words. His lips firm into a line and at long last, he lets out a sharp jet of air through his nose. “I didn’t know how to bring up the investigation up with you, Mako –”

Makoto’s brow arches sharper, unimpressed.

Sousuke slumps in defeat. “I would’ve told you right away if you and Haru didn’t have…” He
represses a shudder. “Feelings for each other. I hated the guy at first —” Annoyance builds in Makoto’s set jaw. “— but you’ve been into him from the start, so I just…” He shrugs miserably. “I didn’t want to tell you about the investigation and mess up what you’ve found, fuck how I feel about him. You’ve found something in him worth you and I’ve watched it change him, so it never mattered that I didn’t like him.” He restlessly shifts his weight, adjusting his utility belt with heat in his cheeks. “It’s nice, seeing you happy. It’s been too long.”

Behind his glasses, Makoto’s eyes brim with tears. He wipes them away and beams. “It’s good seeing you happy, too. With Rin.”

Sousuke’s smile is bashful as he rubs the back of his neck. “Thanks.”

Makoto gives Sousuke’s left shoulder an earnest squeeze and levels their gazes. “You and Haru have to watch out for each other. Do it for me, yeah?”

Sousuke nods without hesitation. “Yeah.”

Turns out the presentation is not as intimidating as Sousuke first assumed – it is ten times worse.

He and Momotarou go to all the classrooms and stand in front of bright-eyed vessels of innocence so earnest in listening that Sousuke fumbles though the brief description of who he is and what he does. Thankfully, Momotarou loves children and knows how to speak with that overly-excited exaggeration that holds a kid’s attention. Echo enraptures every room she walks in, probably because she weighs more than most of the children and stands above their eye-level, so she is a welcome distraction.

They finish with Nagisa’s classroom and head for Makoto’s, the last of the day. Sousuke likes the space, appreciates the windows overlooking the soccer fields because he can set his gaze there instead of awkwardly staring into the bite-sized crowd. He gets away with that until the kids start asking questions and their interest is astonishing, overwhelming Sousuke in the best way because they give him that fit-to-burst feeling in his chest, like he is fulfilled, like he might finally be doing something right in his life.

He might even feel a little disappointed when the presentation is over. The children line up to give Echo treats on their way to the library, led by the pink-haired fiend that was hanging out in Nagisa’s room. A few students are intimidated by Echo, given her size, but all it takes is a few paw shakes to melt their hearts. He gives her the cue to cover her eyes and she plays peek-a-boo with one shy boy, which is not a true testament to her skill, but it breaks the ice.

The boy, Hayato, thanks Sousuke and a swish of maroon catches his eye.

Sousuke freezes.

Even if he had not seen her in Rin’s arms, he would know this is his sister. They are too much alike in the way she tips her head at Echo, bangs slipping over her eyes, and her gaze is softer but just as scrutinizing. At least their fashion sense is a bit different – Gou seems to actually have a color palette, inconsistent as it is with her yellow overalls and blue Converse like Haru’s. Her hair is tangled in a messy braid and Sousuke wonders if Rin’s hands weaved the strands together with the same delicacy he held her with last night.

“What did you say her name was?”
Sousuke startles from his reverie and blinks down at the girl. She blinks back.

“Uh. Echo,” he says. “She’s… Echo.”

Carefully, Gou glides her fingers through Echo’s coat and loses her hand in the rippling sea of black fur. Gou squints at her vest. “Is her last name La Rue? Do police dogs have last names?”

Sousuke breathes a laugh. “No. Leaving her name as Echo just seemed kind of plain. La Rue stands out more.”

“It’s pretty,” Gou says. She holds out her treats as Sousuke instructs, arms straight out, palms open. She is far less intimidated by Echo than the other kids were – brave, Haru had said, she’s brave.

Echo nibbles between Gou’s hands and she giggles. “Her tongue tickles.” She grins at Sousuke, not full-faced with all of her heart in it, but something tells him that Gou just is not capable of trusting people with those kinds of smiles after what she has gone through. Even so, he smiles back as gently as he can, and her grin crooks like Rin’s.

Echo sniffs the girl’s hair, then all at once she snuggles up to her, resting her head on Gou’s shoulder, and Sousuke chuckles because she looks ready to fly apart with joy. “She likes you,” he says.

Gou beams so hard she is fit to burst into light. She hugs Echo and there’s the freedom she deserves to feel. She leans back with a blush and bows quickly. “Thank you.”

Sousuke nods rather dumbly, not knowing what to say, and the next kid comes up.

When the room is empty of students, Momotarou collapses in the nearest miniature plastic chair and Sousuke slumps against the wall, reeling in silence. Makoto just smirks. “You both held up great today – kids take an endless amount of stamina.”

Momotarou stares at him in wonder. “How do you do it everyday?”


Momotarou chuckles. “That makes sense.” He stretches and yawns loudly as he scrolls through his phone. His thumb pauses and he stiffens. “Oh shit, I missed a call from Ai-chan.”

Sousuke frowns. “Everything okay?”

Momotarou sags lower in his chair and sighs. “Nah, but we’ll be fine. We just got in a fight last night.” He snorts to himself. “Nothing new.” He drags himself to his feet and redials the number, stepping out into the hallway.

Makoto and Sousuke share a questioning glance, their eyes following Momotarou out.

Haru does not realize just how much blood he lost at Samezuka and Rough Rabbit until he collapses later that day.

It’s not even that big of a deal, but as soon as Gou is picked up from school, she and Rin all but drag
Haru to the infusion center at the hospital. He is too drained to put up much of a fight, does not even flinch when the nurse sinks a needle into the crook of his elbow. Sweet warmth rushes through the IV and into his veins, sending Haru into dreams saturated in green and hazel, heat and sensation.

When Haru’s breathing evens out, Rin takes Gou to the cafeteria for a snack. The yawning space is a vessel of sound – bustling conversation, scraping silverware, and droning elevator music from the overhead speakers. The room is washed-out in the exhaustion of families and nurses.

One of those nurses is Nitori, who they find slumped over a table and glaring at an untouched salad, eyes darting in thought. Nitori forces a smile for Gou when she approaches, and he is earnest in returning her hug, but when she skips off to the bathroom and leaves him alone with Rin, he breaks. “I’m about two PICC lines away from losing it.” His eyes are wide and unseeing on the table. “I really am.”

Rin grimaces in apology and slumps down beside him. “What time did you come in?”

One of Nitori’s red-rimmed eyes twitches. “I never went home last night.” His voice is mockingly high and tight enough to snap. “Because I had to cover Ami’s shift since she’s got a ‘headache,’ then Mai couldn’t relieve me because she had to ‘watch her nephew,’ but I just looked at all three of her Facebook accounts, Rin-senpai, she checked in at Seven Tears and posted a picture of a strawberry daiquiri that should be mine, Rin-senpai –” He takes a deep breath. “I just clocked out and it was only because Rei finally came in. He said he’ll make sure I get my overtime pay and Mai will be reprimanded, but –” He wipes away tears of frustration. “I’m just so tired.”

Rin glances back at the desert bar. “You like lemon cake?”

“Yes,” Nitori whines, muffled against his hands.

“I’ll get you lemon cake,” Rin smirks, ruffling Nitori’s hair as he passes.

The sugar rush gives Nitori just enough energy to go on a tangent. “And Momo is so confusing, like –” He takes a furious chomp of cake, shaking his head in building fury. “He won’t tell me what’s got him so anxious all the time but then he asks me if I want kids? He is literally so unbelievably –” He bites down and Rin winces. “I mean I get that he’s stressed about Sei, I really do, and I’m trying to be there for him but he’s just…” He shoves the empty container away and buries his hands in his hair. “I know he needs me so much right now, but at the same time he’s pushing me away?” He scoffs a laugh. “I don’t know, I really wanted to believe he’s matured, but that’s not what’s going on right now.”

Rin dares to get a word in. “You don’t think he has?”

“I mean.” He shrugs, crossing his arms. “Yeah, he has in a lot of ways, especially if he’s talking about kids, but I think I’m figuring out that’s just who he is?” Angrily, he wipes at the shine in his eyes. “Like, he wouldn’t be able to be so happy and loving if he weren’t like that.” He sighs, dragging a napkin across his face, leaving it damp. “Loving someone is so crazy. As mad as I am, he’s the only thing I want right now. If we could find a way to just be, for just a single minute, it would be heaven. Literally, the first thing I’m going to say when I see him is ‘shut up and hold me, don’t think about it Momo, thinking isn’t what you’re good at, sweetie,’ like, I literally don’t even care, Rin-senpai –”

Rin grins behind his hand and lets Nitori’s voice rush along.
Echo half-drags Sousuke out of the hospital’s rehabilitation center after his appointment. When she pulls the leash, Sousuke’s shoulder aches in its restraint, the pain throbbing under his fingernails and turning the knobs of his spine into hot coals. His new brace is supposed to be easing the discomfort, but right now it’s just making everything worse by constricting the swelling muscle. He got through one set of rehabilitation exercises before the pain became unbearable – an x-ray of his shoulder proved that the boxcar crash at Rough Rabbit did more damage than he first assumed, but a few shredded tendons are the least of his problems right now.

But God, he is going to get an earful from his mom, he just knows it. Echo does not even seem to care about his impending doom, leading the way with her nose sliding across the floor. Sousuke frowns as she tugs him along on her hunt, pulling him into another searingly-white hallway and shooting her head up.

Sousuke follows the point of her nose and blinks. Gou blinks back.

He goes to say something, but he falls quiet because she looks like a cornered animal, ready to bolt at the softest sound. Her eyes are darting between both ends of the hallway – she’s lost, Sousuke realizes.

Pursing his lips in thought, he drops Echo’s leash. He nudges her forward and Echo approaches the girl with cautious steps, her head lowered submissively. Gou wobbles a smile and crouches to pet Echo. The texture of her fur is grounding, Sousuke knows, and he watches tension drop out of Gou’s shoulders. He inclines his head, voice calm and quiet. “Are you lost?”

Gou stiffens, curling in on herself defensively. “Why are you at a hospital?” Her voice is sharp as a knife point.

Sousuke’s brows jump. “I was in physical therapy.”

Her eyes narrow in suspicion – she does not trust sincerity. “What were you doing there?”

Sousuke cranes back a little, but he gets that she does not know him, that he’s guilty until proven innocent with her. After all, why would a stranger not be a liar?

He palms his shoulder. “Do you remember Mako – er, Mr. Tachibana – saying we’re brothers and that we were soldiers together?”

Hesitantly, Gou nods.

“I hurt my shoulder in Iraq. I have to get it checked out every now and then.”

She is not fazed. “It looks fine.” Before he can think of something to say to that, she asks, “And why did you bring your dog with you?”

“I take her to the cancer wing. The kids like her.”

Gou’s barriers drop at that, just a little, like she is peeking over the walls of her own fortress. She tugs her sleeves over her hands in an anxious gesture and mumbles, “I was trying to find the bathroom and got lost.”

“Okay,” Sousuke says. “Who were you with? Where were they last?”
“My brother’s in the cafeteria.”

The concept of Rin being in the hospital has his bones chilling. “Is he okay?”

Gou frowns. “Yeah? We’re here for Haru-chan.”

Well, that doesn’t make things much brighter, but Gou doesn’t look like she has been crying or anything like that, so maybe it is not as bad as it seems. “I can take you to the cafeteria,” Sousuke says.

Gou hesitates.

Sousuke shrugs. “Or I can just tell you how to get there and you can go by yourself. Doesn’t matter to me.”

It seems like Gou is more afraid of being left alone than left alone with Sousuke, so she gestures for him to walk. Echo trots between them, acting as a barrier, and Gou tangles her hands between the leash again and again. She glances at Sousuke out of the corner of her eye every now and then, but Sousuke looks ahead coolly, hands in his pockets as he keeps at a pace she can follow.

“Where did La Rue come from?”

He is a bit surprised at the question. “It’s French.” He shrugs. “It was pretty enough.”

Gou squints at Echo. “How old is she?”

Echo, along with her brothers and sisters, were observed as possibilities for military dogs at only six weeks old. She was the only one who made the cut, and at a year old, she and Sousuke began training together when he was twenty-one. “She’s three. Most service dogs keep working until they’re twelve, so she’s still got a lot to learn.” She is lucky to have even made it three years – if Sousuke did not take her after they were discharged, Echo probably would have been put down like most military dogs are when they’re no longer capable of serving. Those laws are finally changing, but Sousuke never would have risked such a thing. He does not think he or Echo could live without each other anyway. In all honesty, he dreads the day of her death more than his own.

“Wow,” Gou breathes, running her fingers across Echo’s police vest like she is mystified. “So she’s still kind of a puppy.”

Sousuke grins. “In a lot of ways, yeah.” He dares a glance at her. “Do you have a dog?”

“No,” she sighs, shoulders dropping. She perks up almost as quickly, smile jumping to life. “But I have a kitten! His name is Percy. He lets me put bows in his fur.”

Sousuke does not say anything, but he makes a face.

Gou groans. “Seriously? Why do people have to be either a dog person or a cat person?”

“I didn’t say I was a –”

“Your face did!”

Sousuke rolls his eyes. Under his breath, he grumbles, “They make me sneeze.”
Gou laughs as they step into the cafeteria and in the maze of tables, a head snaps around, maroon hair flaring out. Rin is so relieved at the sight of his sister that he sinks down into a chair, and a smaller boy pats Rin’s shoulder with a sympathetic smile – Sousuke recognizes him as Momotarou’s boyfriend.

Gou launches at Rin and he catches her in a tight embrace, breathing deeply against her hair. He leans back with his brows creased. “Gou, you had me ready to start screaming for you. Where’d you go?”

“I’m so sorry, Onii-chan,” she says, hugging her arms around his neck. “I got lost.” She perks up and points back. “But Echo found me.”

Rin’s brows crease deeper as he follows the point of her finger, then they shoot up into his hairline. Sousuke just kind of awkwardly shuffles from one foot to the other, feeling more than a little flustered.

Rin grins in disbelief and hikes Gou up on his hip to walk over. He arches a brow at his sister with a conspiring whisper. “Sousuke found you?”

Gou giggles behind her hand and nods. “You know him?”

“I do,” Rin says, looking at Sousuke with eyes half-lidded with fondness. He laughs as Gou swoops down to stroke Echo’s ears. “You got somewhere to be, Sousuke?”

Sousuke’s smile curls slowly. “No?”

Rin sways Gou back and forth, popping his hip in and out and lolling her around, turning her into a giggling mess. “I think Echo looks like she needs to run around some, and Gou keeps nudging me in the side, so I’m pretty sure that means she wants to run around too.”

Gou blushes, but her grin is so anxiously hopeful that Sousuke agrees.

This is how he ends up on a bench with Rin in the hospital garden outside the chapel. It is a space meant to be tranquil and give loved ones a quiet place to think. The grass is vibrant under the afternoon sun, but the chapel drapes Sousuke and Rin in cool shadow, sweet incense lulling through the gentle mist of the sprinklers.

Gou and Echo chase each other around the central fountain, the sound of water over rocks relaxing Sousuke so much that his only desire becomes pulling Rin close and falling asleep. But he settles for casually throwing an arm around his shoulder, twirling his finger around the short strands held by a tie. Rin snuggles deeper into Sousuke’s side and sighs, “You fucked your shoulder, didn’t you? At Rough Rabbit. That’s why you’re at the hospital.”

“It’s fine,” Sousuke is quick to assure. “Nothing new.”

Rin pinches him in the side stubbornly. “Pain is still pain.”

“The pain is fine,” Sousuke breezes.

Rin rolls his eyes, lips working into a scowl. “Haru insisted he was fine until the dumbass took a swan dive for the floor earlier today.”
“He all right?”

“Yeah.” Rin rubs the back of his neck and Sousuke pushes his hand away to knead at the tension. Rin shudders and his eyes roll closed. “He lost too much blood at Samezuka and Rough Rabbit. Not enough to kill him, obviously, but he’s got this… condition. His blood levels are already so low that losing just a little is mega-vicious. But after an infusion he should be fine; he’ll probably just sleep the rest of the day.”

Rin smiles as Gou balances pebbles on the tip of Echo’s nose, the dog rooted with stoic determination. “She told me cops came to school today, but I had no idea it was you.”

Sousuke nods. “She’s more perceptive than most adults are. She didn’t trust a word I said when I found her here.”

Rin bows his head. “That sounds like her.”

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing; it’s smart.”

“Yeah, but it’s sad at times, too.” Rin watches her with a growing smile and squeezes Sousuke’s arm. “You were perfect with her, though. I hope she warms up to you.”

“Me too,” Sousuke admits quietly.

Rin chews his lip and shifts to face him fully, and Sousuke frowns at his blush. “Are you off tomorrow?”

Sousuke blinks at the question, but nods his head. “Yeah. I’m off for the next two days.” A rarity that he does not know how to enjoy. He needs the rest, but his mind wanders to darker places if it has the time to do so. He feels like a special breed of fuck-up for dreading time off.

Rin’s eyes rake him. “Samezuka won’t reopen for a few more days. I’m free for a while.”

And suddenly off days are a whole universe of amazing, a handful of frozen time that Sousuke might not have to spend in the misery of an empty bed. He straightens up and it is a miracle his voice is composed. “Oh?”

Rin tucks his shy smile behind his raised knee and nods, eyes crinkling as the wind flutters through his hair. “I think…” Excitement rushes cherry-blossom pink through his cheeks. “I think we should try having sex.”

The air burns out of Sousuke’s lungs so fast that he damn near wheezes. “Oh?”

Rin bites his lip around a grin and nods.

“Oh.” Sousuke clears his throat, desperately clawing for brain cells. “You, uh. You wanted to talk about it first, right?”

Rin nods a little nervously. “Yeah. My friend that I met for coffee the other day, his job is kind of specializing in this sort of thing. He told me to be honest with you. So…” His expression opens up, his features sinking, but he smiles, even if it is broken. “I’m really fucking scared, Sousuke.”
Sousuke takes his hand without thought or consciousness of the action, and Rin’s smile grows heavier. “But I’m never gonna not be scared. My friend said that I should have a degree of trust in you and I have so much more than that for you.” His eyes brim with tears, he is so overwhelmed with what his heart is feeling. “I want to do this with you because you’re trying so hard to understand. Nobody’s ever put that kind of effort into me.”

Sousuke’s voice raws, brows furrowing. “It’s because you put that same effort into me.” His fingertip slides down the hollow of Rin’s cheekbone, the touch more delicate than he ever thought he was capable of. “It’s because I love you.”

Rin swallows. “I love you too, so much, but there may be only so much of myself, of… my body, that I can give you. I’m – I’m so sorry.”

“Please don’t be.” Sousuke squeezes his hand. “Growth makes demands. You don’t have to just close your eyes and dive into anything. It should be about taking one step out of your comfort zone, not twenty.”

Rin wraps Sousuke’s fist in both his hands and kisses it. “Thank you.”

Sousuke nods and they take back to watching Gou and Echo, who are entirely oblivious to them. Insistence beats at Sousuke, pushing his voice up his throat, and he tries to force it back down but the words fling out of his mouth. “Should we go on a date first or something?”

Rin’s eyes blink wide and his cheeks flood with color. “You want to go on a date?” He says it slowly, like it is an entirely foreign concept. And maybe like he has been dreaming of saying it since he was twelve years old.

They keep their gazes straight ahead because they are too flustered to look at each other. “Yeah,” Sousuke says.

Rin holds a hand over his mouth in disbelief, feels his pulse racing in his lips. “I… y-yeah. Sure.”

Sousuke goes boneless with relief as if they have not loved each other for months. They are as nervous as teenagers and about twice as ridiculous. At long last, Sousuke turns to capture Rin’s blush to memory. “Where do you want to go?”

Rin’s anxious fingers work into the holes in his jeans. “I don’t know.” He does not go on dates. His only real relationship was with Aki and their “dates” consisted of sharing the same street corner until one of them got picked up. He hardly considers his appointments as dates. Nobody ever asks what he wants.

Now that he is finally being asked, he cannot say a word because if he opens his mouth butterflies will come tumbling out, he fucking swears.

Sousuke smiles and Rin almost melts out of his own pores. “You like food?”

“Hell yeah,” Rin snaps, defensive now that Sousuke is watching him with half-lidded eyes like he is nothing short of adorable.


“Steak,” he says at once, because his excitement for a good steak is borderline sexual and he has
absolutely no shame in this.

Sousuke dips close enough for Rin to smell his aftershave, and the icy-hot sharpness has him ready to start squirming. “Then we’ll go eat steak.” Sousuke’s nose skims the line of Rin’s jaw and Rin inhales sharply when teeth graze his earlobe. “And then I’ll take you home,” Sousuke purrs.

Sweet hell, Rin is not going to make it until tomorrow with such anticipation rising in his chest. He sneaks a hand under Sousuke’s shirt and rakes a trail of heat down his naked back. “Yeah? Then what’ll you do?”

“Whatever the hell you want,” Sousuke croaks, his voice weak as a beast caught in a trap – that trap is Rin and Sousuke is done fighting. He wants to play.

So does Rin. Fire roars to life deep inside him – he lets it build, lets it burn, and smiles. “Sounds like a fuckin’ plan.”
Exorcism

Chapter Notes

this chapter is indulgent. this chapter is personal. this chapter almost equals the word count of chapter one (the longest chapter thus far) so saltyaf (archive of our own | twitter) deserves some serious praise for beta reading this puppy.

song inspiration is here, and this song inspired rin's character from the first day the idea of ewoatt came to me. fair warning, he is working through a lot of his trauma in this chapter. also, the tags have been updated. thank you!

"I'll reclaim my body and my soul
Banish the broken from my bones
You're no longer my religion
I take on a whole new energy
Manifest a better part of me
Gotta rid you from my system
It's time for an exorcism."

"Exorcism" by Clarity

There is no school the next day, but early rising is ingrained in Haru, so he is awake before the sun crests the horizon. His blood infusion left him lethargic and when he sits up in bed waves of nausea roll through him. He closes his eyes with dread, hoping he won’t have to dive for the bathroom like he did twice last night. After a few minutes of sitting in the cool dark, the sickness passes, and he heads for the kitchen.

Through the shadows of the hallway, he notices light glowing around the edges of Rin’s bedroom door. With a frown, Haru nudges the door open and stops dead in his tracks.

A bomb detonation would leave behind less of a mess than the scene before him. Every single article of Rin’s clothing is strewn about the room, shirts flung over the ceiling fan and lamps, thrown across curtain rods and the vanity. The floor is a sea of black fabric. Shoes, snapbacks, and belts sit in a mountainous pile on top of Rin’s bed.

Buried beneath the pile is Rin, sprawled out on his back with his eyes wide on the ceiling. “I have nothing to wear for my date.”

Haru stares.
Then, with a long-suffering sigh, he leaves to make the coffee.

So he manages to calm Rin down enough to eat breakfast. Or settle down enough to drink a few (four) cups of coffee and stare down at some toast like its existence just *offends* him. It’s a start, at least.

“*You have to eat,*” Haru says, delicately slipping a fork and knife through Gou’s leftover pancakes and savoring the refreshing taste of blueberry as she goes into the living room to watch cartoons.

There is a pause in the furious sawing of Rin’s nails across a file. Slowly, he looks up at Haru, and his facemask is caked over so he can’t really make much of an expression, but his eyes are flatter than roadkill. “*Haru,*” Rin scoffs, like he’s being the unbelievable one. “*You know I don’t have time to eat.*”

“What time even is your date?”

“He’s coming at like, five tonight, but –”

“*That’s eight hours from now.*”

“You’re ridiculous,” Rin says even as he dunks his head under the kitchen faucet to rinse out the egg whites he coated his hair in the night before. It was some crazy hair treatment he went through on his journey to make “two hours of sleep look fuckable.”

Haru pinches the bridge of his nose. “*Those eggs will fry in your hair if you have the water that hot.*”

“*TITS!*” Rin curses and Haru hears his head slam against the faucet. He pinches his nose harder.

Rin composes himself and finishes, wrapping his hair up in a towel with a fresh face. “*You don’t get it,*” he says. “*Not only do I have to get ready, but this house has gotta be immaculate. Beyond clean.*” He slices his hand out. “*This air? I want it glacier water pure.*”

Haru frowns. “*Why? You’re not having your date here. He’s just stopping by to pick you up.*”

Again, that look like Haru’s the idiot. “*It’s about first impressions.*”

“*…he’s known you for months.*”

He dodges the roll of paper towels that Rin launches at him. “*You are not this dense,*” Rin says. Haru throws the paper towels back at him and Rin hugs them to his middle nervously. “*Going to someone’s house is a completely different realm of getting to know someone.*” Everything about him suddenly freezes. “*Oh God, what is he even expecting? Haru, what’s he expecting?*”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs, breezing by Rin on his way to dump the dishes into the sink.

Rin shoots in front of him, close enough for Haru’s nose to burn with the scent of Nair, a dozen perfume samples, and electric anxiety. “*Text Makoto and ask him what Sousuke’s expecting.*”

“*Makoto’s probably asleep, Rin.*”
His phone vibrates on the table, calling his bluff. Rin crosses his arms, hip popping out with a raise of his brows.

Haru sighs. “Look, it’ll all be fine.” He dares to touch Rin’s forearm, which surprises him because Haru hardly ever initiates touch, but he knows that’s how Rin receives comfort best, so he tries. The effort steels Rin, if only a little, just enough to make him listen to what Haru says. “Me and Gou will worry about the house. You worry about you.” He grimaces. “I mean, don’t worry about you. Don’t worry about anything. Cause it’ll be fine.”

Rin considers, wringing his fingers together and looking away. “Yeah, okay.” His voice is softer, blessedly subdued, though he is still hesitant.

Haru arches a brow. “Do you think Sousuke is this nervous?”

Rin quirks a grin. “Thanks, Haru. I get what you’re saying.” He pats Haru’s shoulder on his way back to his bedroom, stretching leisurely as he calls, “I shouldn’t be worried because there’s no way Sousuke’s freaking out about any of this!”

Makoto’s front door flies open with the dramatics of a full-blown military invasion.

He lifts his eyes from the television as Sousuke bursts into the house with a frazzled cry of, “I’m freaking out, Makoto.”

Makoto blinks at him from the couch, at a loss for words because Sousuke looks like he just got electrocuted with his tugged hair and too-wide eyes. “Uh –”

“I’m freaking the fuck out.”

Makoto studies him. Realizes. Smiles. “Aw, is this about Rin?”

“Don’t you dare ‘aw’ me, Tachibana, I am your superior officer –”

Makoto nearly rolls his eyes into the back of his head. “You’re being dramatic.” He pats the couch cushion beside him and Sousuke slumps down in the chair across from him out of sheer spite, all crossed arms and pouts and furrowed brows. Makoto breathes a laugh. “It’s okay to be nervous for your date with Rin.”

“I never said I was nervous.”

Makoto slumps two fingers against his temple with an exhausted look.

Sousuke fumes a sigh, rubbing his hands down his thighs, the armrests of the chair, restless. “Look, I’m shit at this.”

Makoto nods solemnly. “True.”

“But I don’t want to be shit at this,” Sousuke insists. “It’s just that I – fuck, I don’t know anything about – about dates.” He shudders like the word makes his skin crawl. All at once, he lunges into Makoto’s space. “Help me do this right or I’ll tell Haru about Baghdad.”

The realest kind of panic races through Makoto. “Bullshit,” he says, bluffing, threatening, God, he
needs to grow just one menacing bone in his body right now. “We promised to never talk about Baghdad.”

“I can talk all I want about Baghdad,” Sousuke scoffs, leaning back with crossed arms and a smug smirk. “You chickened out of the blood oath.”

Makoto’s cry echoes through the house, “Who wouldn’t chicken out of a blood oath?!”

The shout wakes Echo up and she noses open his bedroom door, glaring sleepily. Makoto winces. “Sorry,” he tells her.

Echo comes out to sprawl across Sousuke’s lap and he glides his fingers through her fur, waiting for Makoto with that damned smirk.

He sighs and steeples his fingers, thinking. He rolls his lips in to hide a grin. “I know what to do.”

Casually, Makoto grabs his cell phone off the coffee table and dials a number. Sousuke narrows his gaze at the wicked sparkle in his eyes.

One ring later, there is an answer. “Mako-chan!”

Sousuke’s ears flex and horror dawns on his face. “You mother –”

He flares to life and lunges, but Makoto dives around the couch before he can be grabbed.

“Hey, Nagisa,” Makoto greets with all the delight in the world, hurdling over the kitchen island in a breeze. “Are you busy? Sousuke needs help with –” He dodges the spoon Sousuke launches at him in a flash of silver. “You see, tonight he’s got this thing –” Sousuke surges for him and Makoto whips a chair into his path. “And he really needs your help.”

“Oh,” Nagisa breathes, oblivious to the fact that Makoto is very much running for his life in his own house and loving every minute of it. “What kind of help does he need? And why is Echo barking her head off?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that! You see, he’s going –” Makoto wheezes under Sousuke’s weight as he’s tackled. “Hang on.” He snaps his head back into Sousuke’s chin, making him wrench away.

The split-second falter is enough time for Makoto to reverse their positions, or at least come out on top even if their limbs are tangled. “You see, Nagisa,” Makoto coughs, speaking around the heel shoved against his throat. “Sousuke here –” He tucks the phone between his ear and shoulder so both arms can pin Sousuke better, “— has got a date with Rin tonight and he’s a little stressed.”

Dead silence. Makoto’s grin nearly splits his face.

Nagisa’s voice is hardened with the resolution of a warrior going into his final battle. “I’m on my way.”

Nagisa has already hung up when Sousuke snatches the phone. He stares at the black screen for five whole seconds before attacking in wild fury, roaring, “Why did you do that?!”

“Listen,” Makoto says calmly from his spot pinned against the carpet. “Nagisa’s actually your best option because I’m really not the person to ask about dates.” Comfortingly, he pats the forearm digging into his collar. “Most of my dating I did in high school, and those weren’t elaborate because I was doing it behind my dad’s back, but even in college, I was pretty miserable at it.” His smirk curls slowly. “Nagisa, on the other hand…”
Sousuke mulls it over, unsympathetic that Makoto is trapped under more than six feet of pure muscle. “He had a reputation,” Makoto strains. “And it wasn’t a bad one.”

Eventually, Sousuke relents, and he eases off Makoto to flop back against the wall. Makoto sits up and beams. “He’ll take care of everything. You won’t have to worry about a thing when he’s done with you.”

“Nagisa is something to worry about,” Sousuke grumbles.

Makoto inclines his head. “True, but he’s willing to help.”


Makoto rolls his eyes in fond exasperation and pops to a stand, heading for the kitchen with Sousuke dragging his feet like a man headed for the guillotine.

Sousuke’s fingers are twitching around his second cup of coffee when Makoto’s front door flies open with a grand air. “Oh Sou-chaaan~”

“Kill me here,” Sousuke says to Makoto, grave and unwavering. “Do it now.”

Makoto grins behind his mug as Nagisa glides forth, breezing in with fabrics flowing from the cradle of his arms, bags hanging off his elbows, and he snuggles into Sousuke’s chest. “Look at our Sou-chan, Mako, going on his first date!”

“I never said it was my first –”

“And Mamibana made me promise her pictures when I’m through with you,” Nagisa says over him, brushing Sousuke off with a critical eye. “Now then. Have you made reservations for tonight?”

Sousuke cranes back. “Um, no. I haven’t, actually.”


“That’s fine,” Sousuke says. “Thanks for doing that.”

Makoto sends him a pointed look. Sousuke kicks him under the table.

“Of course,” Nagisa smiles. “Have you exfoliated?”

Sousuke stares. “Have I what?”

Someone staggers through the open door, hair product and cologne flying from the mountain of boxes in their arms. “Nagisa,” Rei calls, voice pitching high with distress when Echo tugs at his shirt, making him stumble. “I think this might be a little unnecessary –”

“Nonsense, Rei-chan,” Nagisa admonishes, placing a telltale brown paper bag up on the counter with a clang of glass. “Mako-chan, you’ll make the mimosas?”

He blinks at the clock on the wall. “Nagisa, it’s eleven a.m.”
It flies right over Nagisa’s head. “That late already?”

Makoto sighs in defeat and goes to the cabinet for glasses.

“Can he put vodka in mine,” Sousuke muffles, face buried in his hands. “Like, all of it? Can it just be a glass of vodka and we call it a mimosa?”

“Now, now, Sou-chan,” Nagisa coos, petting down Sousuke’s mess of a bedhead. “It’s perfectly natural to be intimidated by things like this, but alcohol will make you dehydrated and your skin wouldn’t like that, no, no. Matter of fact –” He snatches Sousuke’s coffee and pours it down the sink. “That will make your breath stink and we can’t have that either!”

Sousuke lets out a broken noise like his soul just went down the drain with that coffee.

Needless to say, Kisumi is a bit surprised when he gets a call from Haru.

He pauses mid-step in the tea aisle, market lights glaring across his phone screen. Shrugging to himself, he answers with an excited smile. “Hi, Haru!”

Haru’s response is nowhere near as vibrant. “Hey,” he drones. “Can you call Rin?”

Kisumi blinks. “Of course. Is everything all right?”

Haru snorts. “To a degree.” He sighs. “He just needs advice right now and I’m shit at it.”

Kisumi is taken back. “Oh. Well, all right then.”

“Thanks.”

Haru hangs up.

Kisumi looks at the black screen with flat eyes. He shakes his head and scrolls through his phone, continuing his walk through the store. His jaw clamps together when burning tension swells in his leg. He glares down at his knee brace, swearing that the thing weighs more than Hayato, and drags his leg along.

He dials Rin’s number and his discomfort makes way for concern when Rin answers – he sounds equally confused and relieved. “Kisumi, hi.”

“Afternoon, Rin,” Kisumi grins, resting his weight against a support beam. “Just checking up on you. How’re things?”

Rin’s voice travels nervously. “Ah, well… things are actually really good, but it’s all still kind of crazy…”

“Oh?”

“It’s, um – look, I really don’t wanna bother you on your day off –”

Kisumi scoffs. “You are quite the flatterer, thinking I have such an overblown schedule outside of
work. It’s what, two p.m.? I woke up like, thirty minutes ago, Rin. And I didn’t sleep so late because I was out last night – it’s because after midnight, I read at least four hours of the worst gay cowboy eBooks to ever exist, and I loved every second of it.”

Rin startles a laugh. “Why?”

Kisumi shrugs. “Reading saddle innuendos is better than facing my shit?” He does not handle his depression spikes well, even if he took the most mind-numbing course over the stuff to become a counselor. He will always be irrationally upset that anyone ever tried to give such torture a textbook definition, as if it’s so simple it can be put into words, a theory, a prognosis.

Rin makes a noise of agreement. “That makes sense.” He hesitates. “You’re sure I’m not bothering you?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Kisumi says earnestly, brows creasing. “You’re my friend, Rin. I called you because I wanted to.”

Rin lets out this breath like he has been holding it in for hours. “So, like, me and Sousuke have the next few days off and I told him I wanted to try finally having sex.”

Kisumi realizes. “Ah. You’re nervous.”

Rin scoffs. “More like scared out of my fucking ass.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“No,” Rin is quick to assure. “No, God, I want it.” He is earnest in this desire, exasperated that the need has not been met. “Kisumi, I think – it feels like my body will actually explode if this doesn’t happen. I mean, I’m dead serious, I’m actually getting worried that’s going to happen. We haven’t even fucked yet but it’s like…” He makes a frustrated noise and Kisumi hears feet pacing across the line. “It’s like, my skin isn’t skin if it’s not touching his? I know that’s completely batshit, but does it make a little sense?” He groans. “Please tell me it makes sense in some fucking universe.”

Kisumi chuckles. “It does, actually. You’re trying to say you don’t feel like you without him?”

“Yes! You’ve felt like that before?”

“Yeah.”

Rin waits. “Well, what happened with it?”

Kisumi’s tired eyes fall half-lidded. “I didn’t like it, personally.” It’s not healthy for hearts to be dependent on other hearts, especially when your other half just feels like picking the most random, complete sleaze from the shittiest bar in Iwatobi and banging them in your restored Victorian clawfoot tub. Those water stains are still all over the bathroom floor – they are one of the many reminders of Kisumi’s ex from two years ago.

And if he shows up in Kisumi’s mind during blue, sad patches like today, then whatever. Just whatever. Either way, he’s fine. Really.

He takes a quick breath and perks up. “But that’s just me. Needing someone is not a bad thing at all – it’s completely natural. It’s a symptom of being in love, that need to be close. There’s no rest from
it, especially if you’re about to sleep with the person.”

Rin flops down on something, grunting. “I think I’m figuring out how different it’s going to be with him.” He swallows. “What Sousuke wants, nobody’s ever wanted like this.”

“What do you mean?”

Rin’s voice is small. “Me. He wants me. Not just –”

Kisumi knows the rest of the sentence without having to hear it. My body.

He thinks for a moment, tracing the floor tiles with the side of his dainty flip-flop. “Well, I can tell you from personal and professional experience that there’s no way to prepare yourself.” He fumes a sigh. “Intimacy isn’t fucking, that’s why so many people are awful at it.” Himself included. “Intimacy is a bond; it’s not something you can have by yourself.”

He pushes his distant thoughts even further away, focusing on relieving the electric anxiety across the line. “But from what I’ve heard from you, your man has seen, known, and accepted you. He’s trying to take the next step by understanding.” He smirks faintly. “And I’m sure you’re not the only one freaking out. Opening your heart up is…” He purses his lips so they won’t twist into a bitter scowl. “It’s almost impossible to do it the right way.”

Rin sighs. “Believe me, I know.”

“The fact of the matter is that you’re trying – both of you, I think it’s safe to say. Just take your time tonight. Learning each other is a product of mistakes, small successes, and backsliding.” He winces in apology. “He’s not going to just touch you in a certain way and make it all fall away. I’m so sorry, I can’t tell you how much I wish it would be like that for you.”

“Thanks.”

“Try to notice when and why you pull back,” Kisumi continues. “If you’re deciding that you really want to be close and not withdraw, you’ll have to reach out even when your instinct is to pull back.” He walks through the candle aisle, letting the aromas of honey and apple wash over him. “Reclaiming your sexuality is slow, painstaking work. After what was done to you, sex, love, trust, and betrayal are linked in profound ways. Taking yourself back, it’s like – you’re driving the darkness out, and that light is pouring in, and it’s hot and consuming and always a little too bright.”

Rin’s voice crests with realization. “It’s like an exorcism.”

Kisumi considers. “Yes,” he agrees. “It’s a lot like that, but you’re letting go of all the bad and making way for love and support instead of the whole… you know, literal demon part. We’re just dealing with the figurative ones in this case.”

Rin chuckles, but the sound fades into a groan. “God, I feel like I’m gonna overwhelm him, Kisumi.”

Kisumi inclines his head, snagging a free sample of cheese from a produce stand. “That could happen,” he admits. He bites down and his eyes almost roll back because holy shit, he doesn’t divulge in the magnificence of carbs enough. He quickly rounds back to snatch another two samples and continues with the conversation. “But like, with you being open,” Kisumi chews. “That’ll give him the opportunity to talk about his fears, all his needs and wants. Just be willing to listen to him.
Don’t condemn him for wanting that connection with you.”

Rin sighs. “I don’t know why he’s waited this long.”

“Don’t say that,” Kisumi admonishes gently. “You’re worth waiting for and that’s what he’s done. He fell in love with you. You don’t have to throw up walls around him. That will make at least one part of this easier than it is with other people.”

Rin takes a sharp inhale, a realization. When he speaks, he sounds far more relaxed, if not dazed. “You’re really good at putting shit into words.”

A smile perks to life. “I’m just being honest.”

“Well, thanks,” Rin says. “I feel a lot better now.”

“Good,” Kisumi says, deep with sincerity. “Now, run along and enjoy those butterflies in your stomach. They’re supposed to make you feel good. Oh, and maybe take a nap.” He smirks. “You’ll probably be having a long night no matter which way it goes.”

“Shit, I know right?” Rin laughs along with him and takes a steadying breath. “Well, thanks, Kisumi. Really.”

Kisumi clutches his heart, overwhelmed by the gratitude. “Of course, Rin.”

They say their goodbyes and with his resolution in Rin, Kisumi marches around the corner of the next aisle only to stop dead in his tracks.

God, he has to chew his lip at the sight. Asahi stands in front of a rack of herbs, pants slung low, the scored line of his hip just barely exposed – enough to leave Kisumi feeling some seriously deep hunger. His fingers want to crawl between the rips in Asahi’s jeans to feel the heat of his skin. Kisumi watches him reach for some basil and his eyes trace a muscled forearm, such a contrast to his gentle, timid energy and the soft sweep of his hair under a backwards cap.

This anxious little deer is awe-inspiring and Kisumi didn’t even brush his hair this morning. He rolled out of bed, kissed Hayato on the cheek when their mom came to take him for the weekend, and then the pain in his leg burned to life. All he has on are some black leggings and an old sweater. He furiously brushes away Dodie’s fur sheddings – his poodle has absolutely no sympathy for cashmere or anything else in his closet.

Despite everything, Kisumi sidles up to Asahi and kisses him on the cheek to get his attention because life is short.

Asahi squawks and stumbles backward, throwing himself into a fighting stance. Recognition dawns with a blush across his face, and Kisumi bites his lip around a grin. “Hey, cutie.”

Dazedly, Asahi touches his kissed cheek. “Y-Yeah.” His wide eyes flicker over Kisumi’s face, gaze tracing the sweet curve of his nose and the cushion of his lips.

Kisumi enjoys the warmth building in his cheeks. He nods down at the basil in Asahi’s hands. “Whatcha doing?”
Asahi blinks down at the leaves in his open palm. “I, uh. Can’t really remember now.”

Kisumi laughs and so does Asahi, flustered and honest. It is such a fresh sound. “You have basil in your hand for some reason,” Kisumi reminds him.


“Shit, Asahi,” Kisumi hisses in sympathy. “How’d you do that?”

Asahi glances away. “It was an accident.”

“You get into those a lot, don’t you?”

Asahi levels their gazes startlingly fast. Before Kisumi can take his next breath, Asahi tangles his hand through his hair and surges against his mouth.

So, okay, Kisumi can admit that he’s done a lot of crazy shit when it comes to the collision of mouths, but getting tongued down at the market is a new one. He really should be concerned about what kind of scene they’re causing – this is the only place to get organic anything in Iwatobi, he cannot get kicked out of here – but his mind is pretty gone right now. Asahi is a divine kisser, earnest and deep, not hesitating to make Kisumi feel good. It is such a wonderful kiss that he feels truly alive for the first time in the past twelve lonely hours.

They pull apart to breathe and when Kisumi opens his eyes it’s like waking up – he feels invigorated and maybe a little too breathless. He grabs Asahi’s bicep to steady himself because his legs are nothing but raw energy. “What was that for?” he whispers, almost frantic to know.

Asahi grins smugly, his arms already so comfortable around Kisumi’s waist. “You like kissing a lot, don’t you? Kinda like how I get into accidents a lot?”

Kisumi cranes back in disbelief. This complete, incredible jackass. He elbows Asahi in the side, making him stagger back with a laugh. “Idiot,” Kisumi says fondly.

Asahi’s laugh dies out when his gaze lands on Kisumi’s knee brace. “What happened to you?”

“Oh.” He flusters, shifting. “I tore my ACL in college. No biggie, it just acts up sometimes.” He sighs and lugs his leg forward to tug the brace up a bit more. “I can’t stand this thing though. It’s miserable. I was here for medicine, but nothing I’ve tried ever helps the pain.”

Asahi purses his lips at the herbs. He grabs a bottle of pills, a vial of oil, and a container of preserved, tiny white flowers.

He puts the bottle in the basket clutched between Kisumi’s hands. “This is willow bark. Back in the day, people used to chew on it to relieve muscle pain. Now you can just take the pills, even if that’s nowhere near as metal.” He drops the vial of oil into the basket. “That’s wintergreen oil. It’s a natural pain reliever and acts a lot like aspirin.” Finally, the container of flowers. “And that’s valerian. It’ll help you sleep. I use it for anxiety, but it’ll work for you too.”

Kisumi blinks down at the basket, his heart fluttering oddly, damn near humming for some odd reason. “I… thank you. Where did you learn all that?”
Asahi rubs the back of his neck with a bashful smile. “I went to college for plant biology – botanical studies, or whatever.”

Kisumi cranes back. “Seriously? That’s so cool!”

Asahi rubs his arm shyly, chuckling. “Thanks.”

They walk together through the market with no intended purpose, just enjoying the fleeting sensation of their elbows and shoulders brushing. It is a companionable silence, but Kisumi has to ask, “What made you so interested in plants?”

“My mom’s a florist,” Asahi says. “She’s got a shop on 5th Street.”

Kisumi stares. “Shut up.” Asahi blinks and Kisumi surges into him. “Shut up! Are you serious? Your mom owns the Red Clove? I love that place!”

Asahi’s brows jump with his grin. “Yeah?”

“Duh. I live for those candles she makes. I love how she puts those little shreds of petals and stuff in the wax. It’s innovation at its finest.” He tips his head. “But why the Red Clove?”

“Oh, that.” He takes off his cap and pushes his hair back. Kisumi tries to pick his jaw off the floor before Asahi realizes it. “It’s because me and my sister have red hair, and clove symbolizes undying love, so the name was kind of a token to us.”

Kisumi’s heart swells. “That’s so sweet.”

Asahi ducks his head with a smirk and they continue their walk as Kisumi breaks the silence once more. “What did you do with it? Your degree, I mean.”

Asahi grimaces, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I didn’t finish. Life just…” He shrugs.

Kisumi understands. “Life got in the way?”

Asahi’s smile is sad. “Somethin’ like that, yeah. I keep saying I’m gonna go back, but I’ve always got an excuse for not making the registration date.”

Kisumi studies the downward turn of his lips, determined to make it go away. “Well, I still think you’re cool.” He smiles at Asahi’s blush of surprise. “And when the time is right to go back, you’ll go back. There’s no rush.”

Asahi’s face strains, maybe because he cannot believe what he is hearing, or maybe because he has needed to hear it for so long.

Oh, this precious boy. Kisumi cups his face and kisses his cheek again. A startled noise jumps in Kisumi’s throat when Asahi takes his lips, an earnest press trying to convey so much gratitude without words.

Kisumi understands, and he leans back with a dazed smile. “Pressure doesn’t really exist,” he whispers, brows raising. “We just think it does.”

He blinks down at the hand sliding through his own, staring as fingers lock with his. “It’s just for
“I’m trying,” she whines, flopping back on Rin’s carpet in a show of dramatics that she learned from him. “You take for-ev-er.”

“Because you keep moving!”

“Lies,” Gou huffs with a pout. She powers on her DS and gasps in excitement. “Haru-chan’s online.” She pinches her tongue between her teeth and smirks. “I’m gonna beat him at Mario Kart.”

Rin laughs, “He’s literally in the living room.”

“Shh,” Gou hisses, a wicked gleam in her eye. Rin smiles softly, tucking the memory away to save for darker times, and resumes painting her toenails.

He is lost in his thoughts as he finishes. He hears the Mario Kart race end and Haru groans from the living room as Gou shouts her victory. She sits up and wiggles her painted toes. “Thanks.” She tucks a pillow between her and Rin and pats it. “Here, I’ll do yours now.”

Rin holds out his hands and splays his fingers over the pillow as she shakes up his favorite bottle of polish, a shade black as death called Scaredy Matte. Gou leans over his hand, her brows furrowing as she concentrates on moving the brush in a smooth line up his nail. He chews his lip as he struggles for the right words, but she is the one who breaks the silence. “So, what’re you doing tonight?”

Rin tenses. Gou rolls her eyes. “You’ve been bobbing your ankle all day. You only do that when you’re freaking out over something.”

He chuckles despite himself. “I didn’t even notice I was doing it.”

“I notice everything~” Gou sing-songs, and she smiles with him.

Rin turns away, biting his lip to shit. His chest tightens and he releases the pressure in a sigh of defeat. “I have a date.”

Gou’s head jerks up. “Do you really?”

Rin smiles shyly and nods, but his expression quickly falls serious. “How does that make you feel?”

Her face twists in confusion. “Happy, duh.” Her brows are still creased as she goes back to sweeping the brush across Rin’s nail. “It’s with Sousuke, right?”

Rin exhales in disbelief and her eyes flash through her bangs. “I notice everything. I saw him kiss you in the hospital garden.”

“Sorry,” Rin says automatically.
“Don’t be,” she mumbles. She paints in silence, thinking.

After a minute, Rin’s nerves get the best of him. “Gou, please say something.”

She sighs and finishes up with his pinky nail, twisting the bottle closed. She hugs the pillow to her middle, another habit she learned from Rin, and bows her head. “I just… I worry about it,” she whispers against the fabric. “Us getting hurt again. Like we were.”

For a moment, Rin forgets that they are in Iwatobi, in a home that is safe, living a life surrounded by people who love them. They are sitting in the corner of a room much like they did when all they had was each other, when all Rin had was his embrace to shield Gou from their nightmare of a life. He remembers sitting like this, cornered like the scared animal he was, their mom’s drunken roar cutting deeper than the hunger pains and the dig of Gou’s nails in his arms.

Fierce protection surges through him, burning hotter than a fire. He smooths Gou’s bangs back and cups her cheeks to level their gazes. “You never have to worry about that,” he whispers, cradling her face with such adoration that his heart aches with it. “That’s over now. All that is gone. We won’t have to go through that ever again.” Quieter, softer, because they’re both still scared kids in their own ways, “Mom’s not getting out of prison for years, but even when she does, she won’t find us here. Dai will stay dead. They can’t hurt either of us anymore.” Sometimes they both need reminding of that.

Gou’s smile is broken and frustrated – a struggling hope. “I know, but that doesn’t mean I don’t think about it.”

He sighs and pulls away. “I know. I think about it too.” He closes his eyes.

They blink open when Gou takes his hands. She opens his fingers and he gasps when she traces the lines of his palms in a familiar pattern. She grins and his breath leaves him in a rush. “I can’t believe you remember that,” he says. “You were a baby.”

“Of course I still remember,” she says, sounding offended. She traces the lines of his knuckles across one finger. “This is how you taught me to count.”

She moves diagonally down his palm, tracing two creases connected by a shorter one, making a triangle. “That’s how you taught me shapes.” In a flash of movement, her hand darts out and her fingers drive into the inside of his elbow, making him shout laughter. “And that’s—” She digs deeper and he curls on floor, heaving from the deepest part of himself. “That’s how you were a buttface and tickled me into dropping the last juice box every time we ran out!”

At long last, she relents, but Rin is still laughing up at the ceiling when she stops. He is sprawled out exhausted on the carpet, but his voice is lighter than it has been in years. “You used to scream your head off when I did that, and you beat the crap out of me every time – tried to pull my hair out and everything.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have stolen my juice box.” She flops down beside him, arms crossed stubbornly even as a smile fights through her pout. “Do you remember that time Dad came home from fishing and told us he brought us a shark? Like, he said something like he had made a swimming pool out of the back of the truck and it was waiting for us to swim with it?”

Rin’s smile is heavy, but it hurts so good to relive that memory. “I remember. You were so
hysterical. Mom tried to take you outside to see the ‘shark’ and you wouldn’t let her put you down.” He startles a laugh, covering his hand with a face. “You wrapped your arms around her head and God, you were just bawling.”

“You were crying harder,” Gou retorts. Her face scrunches up and her voice wobbles into a deep baritone to imitate him. “Y-You have to take it back, Dad, take it back! H-He has shark friends and a shark family and he’s all alone! How could you?!”

He drops the pillow over her face and she sniggers, whipping it across his stomach and making him grunt laughter. With a sigh, she sits up and looks down at him with more gravity than a child should be capable of. “I think it’s time to stop worrying, Onii-chan.”

Rin’s smile slips away and he rises, staring at her with bangs in both their eyes – they have witnessed the same horrors and lived through them together. She takes his hands with startling seriousness. “It’s time for you to stop worrying about getting hurt again. It’s time to be happy now.”

She says it so simply, in the way that only children can. But her words have more meaning because she is wise beyond her years, and knows Rin’s struggles because she has been forced to share so many of them. She makes him meet her eyes and speaks with slow emphasis in every word. “You need to be happy with Sousuke. And if he makes you not happy, me and Haru-chan will put real sharks in his car.”

A laugh bursts forth as he smears the happiest tears away. She hugs him with all the strength in her body and he wraps his arms around her. “Thank you,” he whispers.

She hugs him even tighter in response.

Sousuke is still a mess of nerves as he drives to Rin’s house that evening. His fingers are restless on the steering wheel, foot bouncing, toes flexing, struggling to break in the leather Oxfords that Nagisa bought on his shopping spree with Sousuke’s credit card earlier that afternoon. Sousuke hates dress shoes – he’s been a size 14 since he was sixteen and they’ve never made fancy shoes wide enough for his feet.

Matter of fact, there is no fancy attire period that Sousuke feels comfortable in. Nagisa almost didn’t approve of him wearing jeans and the only reason Sousuke got away with it was because these new pants cost almost half of a house payment. But according to Nagisa, they fit him really good, and they’re tapered, whatever the hell that means. He hopes it’s a good thing.

He turns the wheel at an intersection and his shirtsleeve strains tightly around his bicep, which makes him fume a sigh. He told Nagisa his shirt size but he still got this button down at least a whole size too small, Nagisa’s excuse being “certain aesthetic advantages.”

Aesthetics aren’t going to mean fuck if buttons start popping. “That’s why you don’t button the top two,” Nagisa retorted as he unbuttoned them for Sousuke, giving him just enough air to keep him from fainting. “Beauty is pain, Sou-chan.” After that, he sprayed Sousuke’s chest with enough cologne to sear his eyes.

Luckily, the scent has faded but lingers just enough to capture interest, and he has learned how to breathe in the manageable constraints of the shirt. At least his blazer is the right size, and yeah, okay, he can admit that he looks damn good in that if nothing else. It’s a shade of navy that makes his tan look darker and his eyes seem deeper, plus the material drapes well and it is remarkably comfortable.
Nagisa even sorted through *textures* of blazers, choosing brushed wool because, “it’ll feel good under Rin’s hands.”

Makoto was not kidding when he said Nagisa would take care of *everything*. Sousuke’s sideburns have been narrowed sharply and he had a shave that left his jaw smooth as butter. Apparently, he’s just shit at the whole premise of grooming, at least to Nagisa’s standards, but that’s just another check mark on the unending list of things he took care of.

Sousuke owes him more than words can say because without Nagisa, he would not have the confidence to meet Haru’s scrutinizing gaze when he greets Sousuke at the front door.

It is baffling that Haru can look someone up and down when his hair is still a lazy mess at this hour of the evening. He is only wearing a pair of wrinkled sweats and an oversized shirt – one of Makoto’s, Sousuke recognizes. After a few seconds, Haru raises his brows in silent approval, and Sousuke does not even care why that gives him such relief.

Haru looks paler than usual and nauseous, which might explain why he took it easy today. “Heard you passed out,” Sousuke says.

Haru snorts. “That your way of asking if I’m okay?”

Sousuke shrugs and nods.

Haru crosses his arms in a subconscious effort to hide the band-aid at the crook of his elbow – it doesn’t work, but Sousuke does not call him out on it either. “Yeah, no big deal. Just left me tired as fuck.”

“Oh,” Sousuke says. “Um, good.”

Haru goes to say something else when Sousuke hears socks sliding across the floor and somebody crashes into Haru from behind. He grunts and stabilizes himself on the doorframe, looking over his shoulder with creased brows and a grin. Gou’s head pops around Haru and she rests her cheek against his side. “Hi,” she greets Sousuke.

A smile startles to life. “Hi.”

Her eyes dart outside. “Did you bring your dog?”

“No, she’s with my brother right now. Sorry.”

Gou flings herself into Haru with a dramatic groan and he rolls his eyes, sweeping her bangs back fondly. Gou’s shoulders perk up in a shrug. “Okay,” she sighs, reaching for Sousuke’s hand. “Come on, then.”

He blinks at the outstretched fingers, eyes flickering to Haru. He raises his brows in response, inclining his head toward Gou’s hand, but his eyes cut like ice – *she’s trying to trust you. Don’t you dare fuck it up.*

Carefully, Sousuke holds out his hand and lets Gou be the one to grasp his fingers. She pulls him into the cabin, saying, “You don’t gotta take off your shoes or anything, Onii-chan’s almost done getting ready.”
Sousuke nods along, not questioning that she makes the rules, and takes in his surroundings. Evening light coats all surfaces as the sunset reaches through the open windows. The taste of salt soaks the air, waves lulling through the silence. The cabin itself is small, but the open concept makes the space cozy rather than cramped. “This is our living room,” Gou says with a sweep of her arm.

There is no theme to the décor, but everything about this odd little family is worn and well-loved, including their home. The hardwood is salt-distressed; the paint on the walls is faded from the constant stream of ruthless sunlight off the ocean. Haru curls up on a deflating sofa and a muted flat screen plays what looks like a dolphin documentary. That kitten is somewhere around, Sousuke’s nose is already starting to itch, but luckily Haru finds the thing under the couch and holds it against his chest instead of letting it roam.

Gou guides Sousuke by the hand through the home, taking him down a hallway and pushing the first door open. “This is my room!”

It smells like that cotton candy perfume Ran wears, and Sousuke’s chest is tight with nostalgia as he glances around. The area is impressively clean to belong to a child. Even all the rooms in the nearby playhouse are tidy, with dolls dressed in their best attire and poised on the plastic furniture. On the far wall, there is a dreamcatcher of dangling seashells and Gou explains how Asahi helped her make it. She points out an overflowing toy box and the sparkly canopy draped over her bed, fit for a princess, and she says that Haru sewed it just for her.

Gou shows him a plush skeleton with heart eyes that Nii gave her for her birthday. She thrusts picture frames in Sousuke’s face, yellowed polaroids of her and Rin as children, newer photographs saturated in color and love, Gou dancing with Aki or reading with Nao. There is even one with Natsuya at a carnival with Gou propped on his hip after winning her the biggest teddy bear Sousuke has ever seen.

She shows Sousuke her final picture, handling the frame with delicacy. “This was my dad.”

In the photograph, a man stands in shallow water with a dock behind him, a lone boat tied to the posts. It is not the most impressive fishing vessel, but the man stands before it with pride both in the boat and the two children with him. Rin is perched on his shoulders, scrawny with his bare feet caked in dark sand. His hair flares with the wind and his face is twisted around the wildest laughter, still free, still allowed to be young. Gou is in the man’s arms and just a baby, but she is old enough to giggle at whatever Rin finds so wonderful.

Sousuke asks, “What were you laughing at?”

She shrugs. “Nothing, probably. Didn’t really need a reason to back then.”

His heart aches. “He looks proud of you,” he says, raising his brows with emphasis, because Sousuke did not have to meet this man to know he would be proud of his children.

Gou beams, hugging the picture to her chest. “I think so too.”

She leads Sousuke back into the living room and he feels it in the air when Rin approaches. He steps through the darkness of the hallway, his gaze a trail of warmth across Sousuke’s back. Sousuke turns, inhaling a perfume just subtle enough to make him breathe deeper for more, something coming alive in the deepest part of him.

He faces Rin and thought he knew hunger. He thought it could not get any worse than the spine-
hunching emptiness he’s felt before, but this sight leaves him too full, and it is worse than being
hollow. He is overwhelmed with such heat that it floods out of his pores.

Rin’s frame is lengthened in stiletto boots, posture balanced on heels sharp enough to cut throats. The
added height makes him appear leaner, so delicate and poised and coy. The boots contour to the
silhouette of his legs; Sousuke’s eyes trace the dainty sweep of his ankles, the muscled curves of his
thighs. His legs are sinfully long in black jeans, skin-tight like they were painted on. Sousuke has
seen those thighs kill men but his mouth wants between them.

There are slashes in Rin’s jeans exposing tan skin, tattoos, and netting. Rin is wearing stockings
under his clothes – lingerie. He is making sure Sousuke knows it before their clothes are even off,
and it is a tease, a touch without hands, a promise.

If that was not enough, the rest of him certainly is with that leather vest and mesh shirt. Sousuke is
accepting defeat when their gazes lock and Rin’s eyes are sharp with liner. Sousuke’s distress must
be plastered all over his face because Rin ducks his head with a shy smile, tucking some hair behind
an ear lined with studs.

From the couch, Haru clears his throat and Sousuke blurts, “Hi.” He swallows, opens his mouth,
finds it still dry, and swallows again. “You look beautiful.”

Rin’s cheeks flood with color. “You too.” He comes closer and Sousuke almost falls a step
backward because Rin is so much to take in, so sensual in the way he moves that Sousuke might
combust if he feels his heat.

He does not combust, but he comes close to it when Rin’s hands slip under his blazer and wrap him
in a fierce hug. He squeezes all his anxiety into Sousuke, his exhale shaking from so much. Sousuke
wraps an arm around his shoulders, tucking their faces together and closing his eyes in
understanding.

He opens them and leans down to kiss Rin without thinking about it, but he stops when a hand
flattens against his stomach. Rin’s eyes crinkle as they flicker to the living room, and Sousuke
follows his gaze to see Gou peeking over the back of the couch. Haru glances away from the
television, realizes what she is doing, and yanks her ankle. Gou yelps as he pulls her under the lip of
the couch and Rin laughs at them.

He says goodbye to his sister, picking her up and leveling their gazes to remind her what weekend
homework she is to finish and what time she should be in bed after letting Percy out and brushing her
teeth and –

“I know, Onii-chan,” Gou interrupts, smacking a kiss against his cheek. “Don’t worry, okay?”

He sighs and something passes between their eyes. Eventually, he nods to words unspoken, and
kisses her forehead.

Haru nods at them on the way out but as soon as Rin steps out the door, he shoots Sousuke a look of
fierce protection. Sousuke nods, understanding, promising, and Haru relaxes deeper into the couch
cushions.

Sousuke shuts the door and Gou sighs wistfully. “I can see what’s happening~”

Haru frowns. “What?”
At his obliviousness, she sings even louder. “And they don’t have a clue!”

“Who?”

She flings herself off the couch, sweeping herself up in a blanket dramatically. “They’ll fall in love and here’s the bottom line: our trio’s down to two!” Her legs tangle in the blanket and she hits the floor with a grunt.

Flatly, Haru stares at the mountain of fabric. “Are you singing Can You Feel the Love Tonight from The Lion King?”

“THE SWEET CARESS OF TWILIGHT –”

He sighs and turns the television up louder, bracing himself for a long night.

The rain comes when they arrive at Veleno, but the bad weather does not keep the evening rush away. Rain drips down the glass walls of the restaurant, leaving the air thick, warm, sensuous. Intimate shadows drape the space and candlelight ripples across glass tables. Vines rake the brick façades, bringing forth an invigorating, earthy aroma, and a waterfall pours from the domed ceiling into a central fountain.

Sousuke and Rin’s table is situated near the flooded balcony, raindrops flashing in the neon of downtown and drowning out the murmur of conversation. They sit across from each other in pin-cushion lounges and relax in the ambiance of clinging glass from the kitchen and saxophone from the overhead speakers.

Rin sits against the backdrop of the skyline, oblivious that his lashes are a luxurious stretch of shadow across his cheeks. He sweeps his hair to one side, exposing the smooth curve of his neck as he reads the wine list, and Sousuke cannot breathe.

He does not know where the ridiculous urge comes from, but he puts his phone on silent so Rin does not hear the camera shutter, and his need to see that picture every time he opens his phone is so insistent that he does not hesitate to make it his background. He was getting tired of the generic mountain range wallpaper that came with the phone, anyway.

And if he sends the picture to his mom, then well, his hand slipped. But he does have to fight a grin when she responds: an angel!!!!! You be a gentleman.

Sousuke cannot read fuck on the foreign menu, so he orders the same thing Rin does after he assures that it’s just steak. This makes Sousuke frown. “Why don’t they just call it steak then?”

Rin rolls his eyes and nudges him under the table. “Culture, babe.” He keeps their ankles locked after that.

The wine list looks like a random scramble of letters italicized to look fancy, but apparently, Rin knows his way around a wine rack and figures out what to pick – Sousuke knows better than to look at the price, just nods along to whatever Rin chooses because in all honesty, he needs a glass of something in his hand after the stress of today. He needs the alcohol even more when Rin takes the first sip of wine and it stains his lips red.
Sousuke is just getting used to the thick sweetness when Rin tugs at his vest, face flushed from the alcohol and rainy humidity. The drag of the zipper is sharp in the intimate quiet between them. It is harder for Sousuke to keep his gaze in check when he is drinking on an empty stomach, so his eyes follow the split of the vest zipper without his control. Rin smirks at him, tugging it down slower in a tease that leaves Sousuke aching. He pulls the zipper to the side, just enough to show Sousuke the muscled valley between his pecs, and Rin’s voice drips like hot wax. “See something you like?”

“I’d have to see more to know for sure.”

It’s bullshit and they both know it, but Rin grins. Finally, he shrugs the vest off the rest of the way and his body ripples under the mesh shirt. The dainty chain hanging off Rin’s throat trails down the length of his torso and wraps around his hips in one piece – the body chain shimmers when he shifts, giving erotic rhythm to the barest movements. His tattoos are glossy in the candlelight and a startling wave of lust hits Sousuke when he catches the flash of silver at Rin’s nipples.

Rin follows Sousuke’s reverent stare to his chest and laughs. “Oh, you didn’t know I had those pierced, did you?”

Indignation pricks under the rush of desire. “Pretty sure I’d remember them.”

Rin curls an evasive smile against his wine glass. “I don’t wear them as much as I used to. They catch on everything.”

The alcohol hits Sousuke all at once, mind crash-landing in the gutter as he thinks, I’d catch them on my tongue until you come, which is just fucking awful because who is he with that line, Seijuro?

Rin takes a deep swallow of his drink, eyes half-lidded. “I wanted to wear them tonight though.”

Sousuke smirks. “You trying to say I’m special?”

“Fuck off,” Rin laughs.

While he pecks at a salad that smells like a Venetian garden, Sousuke slathers butter over a breadstick, but pauses when Rin smiles dazedly. “I was like, acting strung out, I was so nervous about tonight.”

Sousuke nods. “Me too,” he chews.

“I feel better than I thought I would though.” He wipes his mouth on a cloth napkin and pushes his empty salad bowl away, leaning over the table to focus on Sousuke. The attention is gratifying – no phone out, no hesitancy in giving Sousuke every ounce of himself. “Were you freaking out today too?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he grumbles.

Rin grins. “You totally were, weren’t you?”

Sousuke huffs, pushing his bread aside to lean his elbows over the table. “Of course I was. Look at you.”

Rin’s eyes blink wide like that is surprising, which is almost frustrating, most definitely heartbreaking. He does not know this softness and frankly, Sousuke is quite unfamiliar with it
himself, but he learned it for Rin. Tonight is all about him, and Sousuke does not hesitate in showing it – the effort makes Rin fall supple, his voice the warmest murmur. “I’ve looked so forward to this.”

Sousuke’s brows crease. “What, eating?”

Rin smiles languidly. “No, this.” He squeezes their fingers together and Sousuke understands: Rin has waited so long for this connection with someone.

The connection is something Sousuke did not know he needed like air.

Rin takes a deep breath. “I think we should get our serious talk out of the way now instead of when I’m balls deep in my second bottle of wine and we’re not in the vicinity of a parallel surface.”

Sousuke blinks. “Sure.”

Rin nods to himself, restless fingers petting the hydrangeas at the table’s centerpiece. “So, what’re you expecting?” He swallows. “From me. Tonight.”

Sousuke acknowledges Rin’s anxiety, works with it instead of around it. He meets the apprehension in his eyes without wavering. “I’m not expecting a damn thing from you tonight.” He gives a considering head tilt. “I won’t lie – I’m going to do everything in my power to have you tonight.”

A flush pulses down Rin’s throat.

“But I don’t want it if you don’t,” Sousuke continues. “I’ll try to keep you comfortable and feeling safe, but if you can’t feel that way, I’ll do whatever you need me to do, whether it be to stop or leave or hold you. It doesn’t matter. I’ll do it.”

Rin looks away, but Sousuke cups his cheek for their eyes to meet. “Rin, we’ve found a way to survive the bloodiest gang war to ever hit Iwatobi. We’ll find a way to have sex, I’m sure of it.”

A smile perks to life and Rin nods a little more confidently. Sousuke says, “How about you tell me what you know you can’t do and we’ll go from there.”

Rin hesitates, lips parting. He has built a livelihood on renting out his body; he is not used to sexual limits, does not know what standard boundaries are.

Sousuke purses his lips. “Just tell me what you like or don’t like.” He hikes a brow. “You don’t have to be ashamed of anything.”

Rin pours the rest of the wine into his glass and takes a long drink. “I don’t like my wrists pinned. It brings up bad memories.” Sousuke nods without hesitating. “That being said, I don’t like getting tied up.”

“Okay.”

Rin’s eyes dart across his face. “Do you?”

Sousuke glances away but Rin takes his chin. “This isn’t all about me. If you like something, I want to know.” His smile twists. “Trust me, you can’t scare me.”

Sousuke shrugs. “Yeah, I like it every now and then.”
Rin’s mouth twitches into a smirk and he nods. “Okay, I won’t have a problem doing that. I’m way better at giving pleasure than receiving it.”

“Does that mean you like topping?”

Rin’s smirk deepens. “No, that means I top from the bottom.”

“Makes sense,” Sousuke drones into his glass.

Rin chuckles. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t like topping, I just.” He makes a face. “I’m bi, and I like topping with girls, but with guys, I gotta be in the mood for it and I’m usually not.” He studies Sousuke. “You like topping?”

Sousuke tries not to snort because that’s an understatement. “Yeah, I do.”

Rin’s eyes roam in a different way now. “You ever bottom?”

Sousuke grimaces, drowning those memories in his wine. “Yeah. Fucking awful.” Rin’s laugh echoes and Sousuke grins with exasperation. “Last time I tried, it took the guy a whole hour to get me off.”

Rin purrs, “It wouldn’t take me that long.” He caresses the hollow of Sousuke’s wrist, tracing a warm vein. “I could make you come screaming five times in an hour.” There is nothing coy about this statement – Rin is dead serious.

Well, seeing as his mere voice makes insistent heat stir in Sousuke, he does not doubt Rin’s abilities. He drops Sousuke a wink. “No pressure though. Just if you ever get the urge for some bomb dick, I’m totally there.”

“How sweet of you,” he says dryly.

Their main course arrives and they take a break from serious topics. Matter of fact, they take a break from all forms of communication because both are starving – they were too nervous to each much of anything today. Rin takes one bite of his steak and the noise he lets out is borderline orgasmic; Sousuke has a bite of his own steak and gets it.

They end up with empty plates and full stomachs. Sousuke reclines in his chair, satisfied and languid. His eyes slip shut as he waits for their server to return with his change, but they fly open when sudden pressure bears down on his cock.

Without so much as a coy flutter of lashes, Rin meets his wide-eyed stare. Sousuke’s jaw grits when the heel of Rin’s boot traces his length under the table – he knows just how to skirt the edge of too much and not enough at all.

Rin’s face flushes. “You ready to take me home?” His voice does not waver; it is as steady as his gaze.

Sousuke asks, “Are you?”

He swallows hard when the boot digs against his cock and Rin sounds as breathless as he feels. “Yes.”
Sousuke obliges.

Driving home is a ruthless game with no real winner.

Rain melts down the windshield, dripping in the rich, honeyed heat. The air is sultry – thick and wet. Traffic is at a standstill and this gives Sousuke the opportunity to watch the red shadows of taillights dance across Rin’s collarbones. Rin licks his lips, his tongue ring a white-hot flash against the glare of traffic lights.

The drag of Sousuke’s fingers up his thigh is the only noise in the pulsing heat of the cab. Rin keeps their gazes locked and spreads his legs for the touch, arching a brow in challenge. He chews his lip when Sousuke gropes the flesh of his inner thigh, grip firm but not confident enough to reach higher.

Rin presses Sousuke’s hand between his legs and the windshield floods with condensation almost instantly. His fingers scramble against the window and smear fog as Sousuke palms him roughly. Rin rips his zipper open and Sousuke’s hand is already there, but no fingers wrap around his cock to hurry up and get him off – Sousuke just touches, squeezing, fleeting, savoring the naked feel of Rin. He rides Sousuke’s hand and the damp warmth between Rin’s thighs is soaking into Sousuke’s pores when an insistent horn blares to life.

The two of them jump and see that traffic is rushing by – the squad car is the only thing blocking the roadways now. Rin positively cackles when Sousuke hits the gas too quickly and the car lurches; Sousuke’s grin is breathless as he drags a hand through his hair, feeling a bit high.

The rain is still going strong as they arrive at his house. Rin smiles when he sees the home is very much... *Sousuke*. The lawn is fucking immaculate to an exasperating degree, but that leaves Rin’s heart feeling oddly secure, knowing how well Sousuke takes care of what is his.

The home is a simple one-story cottage, no bigger than what is necessary. Stone siding compliments the grey paint, which is a little too dark for Rin’s taste, but everything under the storm seems brighter when Sousuke sweeps him up and kisses his feet out from under him. Rin wraps his arms and legs around Sousuke right there in the center of the lawn, in the middle of the pouring rain, oblivious that Haru could stand to kiss me in the rain every now and then.”

Makoto takes this moment to glance out his window in his own house.

His eyes fall flat and his voice is a dull sigh against his cell phone. “Are they always this dramatic?”

Haru does not need any clarification. “*Yes.*”

Makoto tilts his head at the scene, giving a considering swivel of his wine glass. “You know, you could stand to kiss me in the rain every now and then.”

“*Name the time and place.*”

Makoto’s heart flutters at that, but then he makes a face. “Are they even thinking about how sick they’re going to get? And what about... wait, where did Sousuke learn how to do *that*?”

Haru sounds nauseous. “*I don’t want to know.*”

“How in the – wow, Rin’s stronger than he looks. Sousuke just threw him up against the side of the house and he didn’t even flinch.”
“Turn away while you still can.”

“Oh gosh, now they’re – okay, yeah, no, I’m not watching this anymore.” He shudders and closes his curtains firmly. “Can’t even look out my own window in my own house, at least we’d be more considerate and –”

“Makoto,” Haru says suddenly. “Echo hasn’t barked for a while.”

He freezes. Slowly, he turns to the patio door to see it open and horror dawns on his face. “Shit.”

Meanwhile, Rin is laughing as Sousuke struggles to get the front door open, the key in one hand and Rin’s ass in the other. The latch clicks and they surge into the house, slamming against a wall in frantic passion, kissing with manic need.

Insistent scratching comes from outside and Rin laughs against Sousuke’s mouth. “I think Echo wants in.”

Sousuke does not even come up for air, pressing him into the wall with a bruising force that Rin lives for. “She’s fine.”

They fall back into their passion easily but Echo scratches louder with a dramatic whine. Sousuke sighs in defeat and Rin goes to unwind his legs from around him, but Sousuke sets him down on the couch instead. He stalks for the back door and throws it open, grumbling, “There, you cockblock.”

Echo is drenched and sashays in with a trail of muddy pawprints. She beams up at Sousuke and he scowls back, but his expression softens when she nuzzles his leg. He pats her ears, saying, “Look who came to see you.”

Echo whips around with so much excitement that the air quivers. She lunges at Rin and he laughs as she snuggles all over him. “Hi girl,” he coos, rubbing through the wet mess of her fur vigorously. “Such a pretty girl.” Echo is fit to burst into light under the attention, the goldness of her eyes alive. Sousuke smiles at the scene.

A thought strikes Rin and he grimaces. “I left my bag in the car.”

“I’ll go get it,” Sousuke says, throwing on a jacket before stepping back out into the storm.

Echo hops off the couch and Rin takes off his boots, looking about the room. He stands up to wander around, footsteps echoing in the distant patter of rain. Sousuke is not much of an interior designer, but the space is still personalized, maybe in a way that only Rin can see. He finds coffee rings on the side tables, the windowsills, and fireplace mantle. Across that same mantle are shadow boxes of military pins; Rin does not know what any of them mean, but he knows to be impressed by the number of them.

He notices a picture beside one box, a grungy photograph torn and caked with sand. It’s of Sousuke and Makoto in uniforms of pixelated camouflage, against a backdrop of endless desert. They look younger in a thousand different ways, ruthless and invincible and oblivious. Rin stares at the blue-eyed boy in the photograph, realizing that he has seen him still somewhere inside Sousuke – Rin touches the lost boy in the picture, sad and adoring.

He continues his journey throughout the house, smiling at everything he sees: the stack of
government conspiracy books in the hallway dresser to the antique rifle mounted on the kitchen wall. “Fuckin’ nerd,” Rin mumbles.

His grin slips away when he finds the bedroom. There is nothing specific about it that has Rin’s heart fluttering – the space is rather dull in all honesty – but the bed makes him falter. Slowly, Rin glides his hand up the navy comforter, his lips parting for breath. Fantasies race through his mind with such vividness that electric desire turns his veins into livewires, threatening to melt his very blood.

The front door opens and he jerks back to himself, cheeks burning, groin aching. Rin wanders back to the kitchen when the light flickers on and amber pours over Sousuke’s back as he shrugs off his jacket, wet shirt clinging to the flex of his muscles. Rin’s tongue dances behind his lips, hungry to trace the narrowing line from broad shoulders to slim waist. Sousuke turns, the ice of his blue eyes standing out against the gold shadows, and Rin clears his throat to steel himself. “Got your bag,” Sousuke says, flopping it on the counter.

“Thanks.”

Sousuke opens the back door for Echo and locks it firmly. “She should be good with Mako the rest of the night,” he mumbles to himself. He leans back against the island to study Rin, arms crossing, sleeves straining. Rin’s eyes follow as a bead of rainwater trickles down the opening of his button-up, disappearing between his pectorals. Sousuke curls an amused smirk. “You okay?”

Rin scowls, pretends it’s a scowl but it’s actually a pout. “Yeah. Why?”

“You’re hard as shit.”

He raises his brows with wide-eyed exaggeration. “Point?”

Sousuke laughs – God, he can laugh. “All right, well. I’m getting a drink.” He hadn’t been able to have much wine at the restaurant since he had to drive home. Rin had almost the whole bottle, but it’s burned off and now his nerves are coming back to him, not out of fear but anticipation. He is still learning how to be excited about things like this.

Rin sits up on the counter before his knees can start shaking. “Make me a drink,” he says.

Sousuke bends down to reach the lower cabinets and Rin admires his ass as he does it. “I don’t have wine,” Sousuke tells him. “There’s vodka and a little whiskey.”

Rin gags. “I hate vodka.”

Sousuke chuckles. “Whiskey, then.” He pours it up and offers it to Rin in a coffee mug, which is too adorable. “I don’t have fancy glassware, sorry.”

Rin rolls his eyes. “Like you need to impress me.” One swig tells him the alcohol is cheap, but it hits like a train in the way that only rotgut whiskey can. Comfortably, he wraps his legs around Sousuke to pull him closer, just holding them against one another. Sousuke swallows his vodka without so much as flinching, which is amazing and a little arousing, given that the mere smell of the drink has Rin’s eyes stinging.

Sousuke reaches out to settle a hand on Rin’s thigh, but before his fingers even touch his leg, his face twists. He sets his mug down harshly and palms his right shoulder, making Rin’s chest tighten with alarm. “Is it worse?”
“No,” Sousuke lies even as his eyes screw shut. “The buzz will help.”

Rin’s face twists. “That’s what you’re trusting to make the pain go away?”

Sousuke breathes a tight laugh. “There’s not much else that can be done, Rin.”

His hands twitch with the need to touch, to comfort. He perks up as an idea sparks to life. “I can give you a massage.”

Sousuke’s eyes blink open and he starts to shake his head, but Rin sees it on his face when he realizes that he does not have an excuse to push his needs aside any longer. Rin’s fingers shimmy Sousuke’s shirt out of his pants to untuck it. “Please?” Rin coos, already knowing he’ll get what he wants – what they both want.

Sousuke ends up face down on the couch with Rin straddling his ass like it’s the most comfortable seat in the world. He helps Sousuke out of his button up and undershirt and Rin takes a deep swallow of his drink as he appreciates that naked back, bronze skin shaping to thick planes and proud battle scars.

“I feel like I’m being gawked at,” Sousuke muffles against the couch.

“You are,” Rin assures with a solemn nod. He reaches for his bag, which he brought into the living room with them.

Sousuke hears a bottle uncap and flinches when liquid warmth pours over his back. “It’s just oil,” Rin laughs. “You don’t have to tense up so much.”

Sousuke hides his blush in the crook of his arm, grumbling, “You could’ve at least warned mmmm…” His voice melts away as Rin kneads the juncture of his neck and shoulder, digging into the tension vigorously. It hurts so divinely that Sousuke could climb the walls. “Fuck, that’s good,” he breathes, shoulders hunching, clenching, restless with how wonderful the naked touch feels.

Rin smiles, pushing the heels of his hands against Sousuke’s shoulder blades. “I think you might be a little skin hungry, Sousuke.” He presses his thumbs into knots of tension, working between every knob of his spine. Sousuke presses back against Rin’s touch, moans building in the back of his throat.

He is in bliss when the oil has diminished to a warm sheen. He flops over, boneless, and Rin laughs as Sousuke drags him down with him. “Thank you,” he murmurs, kissing lips that are wet with whiskey and upturned.

Rin leans back and snorts. “You needed that more than you’ll ever admit.” His fingertips dance across Sousuke’s right shoulder. “Feel better?”

“Worlds better,” Sousuke assures. Rin’s thigh wraps around his hip, their bodies tucked close in the warm, safe place they’ve created together. Rainfall patters over the silence of their absent touches. Rin’s thumb slides up Sousuke’s jaw, tracing the curve of his ear, circling the hollow of his temple. The quiet is so intimate that they fear their racing pulses are audible.

Sousuke’s thumb presses into the cushion of Rin’s bottom lip, lolling it open but not surging forward to take it. A breath apart, he whispers, “Can I take you to bed?”
White-hot shock lurches through him when Rin licks at his thumb, sucking it into his mouth before it drags down against his teeth, his grinning lower lip. “Yes.”

Their mouths surge together and Rin does not know how his back ends up on Sousuke’s mattress so quickly, but he does not have the brain capacity to question it. He gasps as Sousuke lunges over him, his weight pressing him into the bed. Rin spreads his thighs for the leverage to rock their hips together and they moan against each other’s lips, starved to devour.

The warmth of Sousuke’s bare skin leaves Rin’s fingers tingling and his own clothes are suddenly suffocating. He tightens his knees around Sousuke’s hips and wrenches him onto his back – from the perch of his hips, Rin shrugs his vest off. He feels the bulge in Sousuke’s jeans twitch in response, his cock an insistent, solid press that Rin grinds against. Sousuke’s hips lurch sharply, jolting Rin, face pinching. Rin understands; his own need is cresting into something painful.

But neither of them waited this long just for this to come down to a quick fuck, so very slowly, Rin lets his vest slip off his shoulders, loving how Sousuke watches it fall. He reaches over his head, ribs curving with planes of muscle, and pulls his shirt off. Sousuke’s eyes trace him like a physical caress and he sits up, hands reverent as they shape Rin’s waist. His head bows to trail kisses down his bare side and Rin hums, cupping the back of Sousuke’s head and kneading his scalp. Sousuke’s fingers play with the glittering body chain, entranced with it, then he carefully helps Rin out of it.

His fingers clench in Sousuke’s hair when his mouth opens around Rin’s nipple, sucking the firmness of his pec. Sousuke’s tongue traces the barbell, teeth tugging it with just enough force to make Rin arch with the motion. Sousuke sucks him raw and licks over the soreness before moving to the other nipple, and his warm tongue is such a contrast to the cool barbell that icy-hot pressure bursts through Rin.

Their lips find each other and Sousuke lays him down, settling his weight over Rin gently. “You feel so good,” Rin sighs, kisses sharp with alcohol and slow to savor each clutch of lips. The heat of sweat enhances Sousuke’s cologne and it drenches Rin’s senses, leaving him feeling more drunk on the smell than the whiskey.

“So do you,” Sousuke whispers, his kiss an earnest press. He sits back on his haunches, hands sweeping up Rin’s thighs and coming together at the button of his jeans. Rin’s hips flex for Sousuke to take his pants off, black denim giving way to black silk. Sousuke swallows, letting out a sharp jet of air through his nose, and his mind is nothing but hollow heat, desire pulsing stronger than his heartbeat.

A garter belt fits Rin’s waist, slimming it even further, and silk ties crisscross down his stomach to outline the ruby at his navel. His leg garters, the straps attaching the belt to the stockings, are leather with a metal heart at the center of each thigh. He wore underwear tonight – black, lacy boyshorts with a little bow on the front, the exact same shade of red as his belly ring because to Rin, aesthetic is everything. His cock strains so desperately against the material that there is sure to be a lacy pattern left on his shaft.

His stockings are tight netting with a covering of silk that makes his legs sinfully long. Sousuke’s hands run over Rin’s thighs, thumbing under his garter belt, groping the lacy material over his cock and ass. Rin leans up on his elbows, hair slipping over his eyes as he smiles. “You like?”

Their gazes lock and Rin gasps because Sousuke’s eyes bore into him, feasting on the wealth of skin and silk laid out before him, ready to devour it. Sousuke crawls over him, touches hungry like he is
trying to taste through his fingertips. “You’re fucking gorgeous,” he breathes. He holds Rin like a temple in his arms with the devotion of worship.

He licks a trail of heat up Rin’s throat, kisses open-mouthed and rough. Sousuke shakes his head in a daze, voice lost in the rush of desire. “You don’t know how Mako and his family had to fight for me.” He does not hold back any passion as their mouths meet, and Rin swallows every bit of it, teeth bared for it. “They fought tooth and nail to get me to open up. I still don’t know what they saw worth saving in me but they did it, and they’re my family, but you…”

Rin’s eyes widen at just how low Sousuke’s voice drops, how it makes the entire world universe narrow down into mere words. His only purpose becomes hearing what he has to say; he could nearly come from nothing more than that mouth pressed flush with his ear. “You didn’t even have to try,” Sousuke rasps, and Rin arches up toward his voice, whining for it. “You made me remember I had a fucking heart and you took it the moment I met you.”

Rin cups his cheek. “You’ve always had a heart, Sousuke.” His voice is sure, without a doubt. “You personalize everything and believe it or not, you care too much, but that’s what I love about you – you do it all in this quiet way nobody understands.” He sighs, hand flattening over the left side of Sousuke’s chest. “I think we both come from worlds where it’s dangerous to care like that.”

He frames Sousuke’s face. “But we’re out of that now. And this gang war will be over soon, one way or another, but I know that we’ll still be here. It’ll all work out. So for now, we can stop worrying. This is ours – we’ll fucking take it because we’ve earned it, and we’ll be happy now, and find a way to stay that way.”

Rin kisses him breathless, saying, “You don’t know how gone I am for you.” He sighs an unamused laugh. “I wasn’t always so fragile like this. I used to love sex. I loved it rough – feeling it.” He looks away, face shadowed with a haunted look. “But then, after so much of it…” He shrugs hopelessly. “It took a lot out of my body, but it took more out of me. I stopped feeling all of it – the pain, thank God.” His features sink in nausea. “But the pleasure too.”

He stares at Sousuke with such open adoration that he feels exposed from the inside out. “Then I met you. I started feeling all of it again. My heart hurts every second of the day, scared for you.”

Sousuke smiles brokenly and kisses his forehead. “I know the feeling.”

Rin leans forward, close enough for Sousuke to feel the heat of his breath. “You make me want it rough again,” he whispers, and he feels it in the air when Sousuke’s blood catches fire. “But you make me want it like I’ve never had it, too – with some fucking meaning to it.” Emotion twists his face. “I love you so much.”

Rin drags him in by his dog tags, their mouths colliding. He twists Sousuke onto his back once more and Rin loses his breath at how hard Sousuke is, the warmth of him soaking through their last layers of clothes. He flattens over Sousuke, teeth marking the thick column of his throat as his own. He gropes his pectorals, sliding his tongue up the valley between them.

His mouth hovers over a nipple and Sousuke arches up for it but Rin pulls back with a grin, teasing him with hot, wet breath. At long last, he bends down and his piercing is cool against the pulsing fire of Sousuke’s skin, creating an exhilarating sensation as his barbell laves one nipple, then the other, dipping back and forth indulgently.

He palms Sousuke through his jeans and Rin is so hungry for it that he could scream, but he takes a
breath to level himself, determined to enjoy the building tension. His head dips between Sousuke’s legs and Rin watches his eyes climb the arch of his spine as his ass raises, hips sweeping in a teasing circle that Sousuke’s gaze follows. Rin’s face nuzzles against the bulge in his jeans, Sousuke’s hardness against the softness of his cheek. “Can I,” Rin coos. “Please?”

Sousuke cranes back, every drop of blood rushing to his face. Then he nods stupidly and Rin’s smirk is wicked.

He starts by running his mouth over Sousuke’s stomach, a damp press of lips followed by a slow drag of tongue over his navel. Sousuke grunts, surprised at how good that feels. Rin sucks the flesh of his hip into his mouth, squeezing his teeth into it, just a little, and Sousuke’s pulse throbs under his tongue.

With his smirk intact, Rin clasps his fingers behind his back and his teeth take the button of Sousuke’s jeans, using his mouth in the place of his hands. With a practiced wrench of his head, the button pops open, and their eyes lock as Rin’s teeth pull the zipper down. It is tight over the outline of his cock, curving to its shape, and Rin understands the relieved sigh he hears.

He drags Sousuke’s jeans off, appreciating all the strength of those powerful thighs and the mussing of dark hair across them. Sousuke arches up to take off his black briefs but Rin pins his hips to stop him, drinking in the sight laid out beneath him. Sousuke’s torso is a long, solid stretch of pure muscle that flexes as he breathes, his bronze skin rippling like liquid gold.

His thighs are sprawled open for Rin’s face to bow between them, tongue curving up Sousuke’s length through his briefs. Sousuke’s throat clenches, teeth snapping together to cage in a moan. Rin laps at him again, taste buds flaring to life, saturated in damp warmth and clean musk. He kneads Sousuke’s balls, spreading his fingers wide for their thickness, tugging them just right to leave them pulsing.

“Rin,” Sousuke chokes – actually *chokes*.

Rin looks up through his lashes, eyes wide with innocence as he suckles the flare of Sousuke’s cockhead.

Sousuke’s chest hiccups on a gasp. “Please,” he whines, not hesitating to beg.

Rin grins.

He rolls Sousuke’s briefs down, black cotton giving way to tight, dark curls. His cock smacks against his abs, uncut with the foreskin straining over the bulging head, a bead of precome rolling down the thick shaft.

Rin salivates – borderline drools. He feels fucking deranged with the greed taking over.

His head surges between Sousuke’s legs, mouth lolling open with hunger on his tongue. Rin moans louder than Sousuke does when he sucks wetly against his cock, digging it against his stomach to knead the shaft with his lips. Rin’s tongue ring traces the seam of Sousuke’s balls, following a swollen vein all the way up to his cockhead. He breathes heat against the pulsing glans and Sousuke growls deeply enough for Rin to feel the vibrations of it through his shaft.

Rin sucks the creases of his foreskin between his lips, loud and filthy enough to make his own dick throb. His hands draw the foreskin down, cockhead popping free, and Rin’s tongue darts out before
his lips wrap around it – Sousuke’s head flops back with the heaviest, most satisfied noise. Rin inhales through his nose and sucks sensation to the head, his own hips fucking against the mattress at the taste.

Sousuke’s fingers latch to Rin’s hair, carding through the strands restlessly. Rin swallows him down and Sousuke’s fingers clench through his hair in a burst of strength that has Rin’s scalp prickling hot, feeding the rush of desire.

He fits his lips under the flared edges of Sousuke’s cockhead, tugging with his mouth, possessive of every sound he utters. Sousuke’s hips lurch but Rin pulls back teasingly, the only contact his tongue ring laving against the head’s slit – Rin looks up as he does it, brows high and creased with liner smudged around his eyes. Sousuke looks caught between divinity and the throes of torment.

The room heats with sweat, wet sounds, and rough breathing. Rin rolls the foreskin down to swallow Sousuke’s cock in one practiced motion and Sousuke lets out a noise like he was fucking shot. Rin relaxes around the pressure in his throat, adjusting to the weight of it. His lips wrap around his teeth, which doesn’t hurt either of them – Rin has air pockets in his lips from habitually rolling them in from anxiousness and his teeth fit there securely. He bobs his head, taking more of that thick girth, wanting it to fuck his voice hoarse. By instinct, the hand on the back of Rin’s head pulls him in deeper, but then Sousuke wrenches back with a breathless apology.

Rin pulls away to heave for breath, throat fluttering, lips aching from being stretched – he loves it. “Sousuke,” he croaks. “You can fuck my mouth, it’s fine.”

Sousuke’s face strains. “I’ll hurt you.”

“I’ll punch you if you hurt me,” Rin challenges, brows raised.

“You’d better,” Sousuke says.

Rin parts his lips against Sousuke’s cockhead, waiting. Sousuke’s mouth firms into a line and carefully, he pushes Rin’s head down, watching his expression for any discomfort, but Rin takes him so easily that Sousuke throws his head back to moan, “Oh, fuck yeah...” His chest heaves for breath, a shudder wracking his frame. “Shit, just like that Rin —”

Rin’s throat relaxes further, pressure widening, taking Sousuke deeper. He loses himself in the slick drag and the sweet ache of fingers tugging his hair. He can feel it in the air when Sousuke gets close and Rin pulls back with a speed that he cannot follow, too lost to the delirium of his pleasure.

Quickly, Rin’s fingers pinch the bottom of his tongue ring and twist. Vibrations flutter to life, rattling against his teeth. Just before Sousuke’s foreskin rolls up, Rin settles his tongue against his cockhead, the vibrating piercing jolting against him. Sousuke jerks up on his elbows as his foreskin closes over the head, Rin’s barbell caught in between and jarring him to the very bone.

It is too much sensation and Rin gulps his cock back down as he comes, pinning Sousuke’s wrists so he is left thrashing and fucking up into Rin’s mouth desperately. Rin takes everything he is given, swallowing the wet heat that floods his mouth.

Even when it is over, he sucks gently, pulling the tension out of the shaft, and Sousuke’s thrusts fall weaker and weaker until he is left boneless. Sousuke wills strength back into his limbs and rolls them over, kissing Rin with a passion that leaves him whimpering. His mouth throbs from the inside out but he deepens the kiss because he will never get enough of Sousuke, his very soul knows it.
Sousuke stares down at him with half-lidded eyes. “I love you.”

Rin laughs even as those words sing through his body. “Lots of guys say that after head.”

“I don’t,” Sousuke says. “Just to you.” He says it so blatantly and unabashed that Rin’s heart quickens. Sousuke sits up and Rin’s eyes roll closed when a hand caresses his leg. A thumb sweeps into the hollow of his ankle, nudging his legs apart, and Rin opens them the rest of the way. Sousuke’s voice strains. “Can I strip you?”

“Please,” he sighs.

Sousuke worships him, kissing him from his forehead to the arches of his feet. His fingers slip under the boyshorts and Rin shudders as a thumb skirts the edge of his cock.

But Sousuke does not take the underwear off. Instead, he trails a finger over the strap attaching the garter belt to the stockings. He snaps it and Rin’s dick surges, but he tries to pout at Sousuke for pulling such shit, which merely results in a playful smirk being tossed his way.

In a sort of apology that is everything but, Sousuke bends down and opens his mouth against the bare skin of Rin’s newly exposed thigh, tongue dragging to taste the heat of his skin. He peels the stocking down and the rasp of satin is loud in the silence, but not as loud as Sousuke’s exhalе. Shadows contour to the planes of Rin’s bare leg and he throws a thigh over Sousuke’s shoulder to drag him down for a kiss.

Sousuke kisses him swollen before his lips journey down Rin’s body, ending at the other garter strap. With his teeth, Sousuke slides the button up and out of its clasp and it’s the smoothest thing Rin’s ever fucking seen. Sousuke’s teeth tug the stocking off and then he leans up to trace Rin’s tongue with his own, a fleeting tease that he arches up for. Sousuke takes the opportunity to reach around Rin’s back and unclasp the garter belt, pulling it off with the boyshorts.

Rin is so used to keeping his eyes on the ceiling at this point but this time, he does not have the urge – he watches the desire pool black in Sousuke’s eyes as he strips him naked. Rin lets his eyes trace him like a physical caress and there is fear on his tongue, but he does not try to swallow it down. He does not hide from any of it because he does not have to hide from Sousuke.

“Rin,” he whispers, like that is the only word he can comprehend.

“Sousuke,” he says, because he understands.

Sousuke lies over him, his weight all-encompassing as he frames Rin’s face for a kiss, and Rin thrashes when their cocks slick together. Sousuke grinds down on him, giving him such satisfying pressure that Rin claws at the edge of the mattress. Sousuke’s tongue glides over his ear lobe, teeth grazing, breath shuddering. “Can you handle fingers?”

“Hell yeah,” Rin moans, making Sousuke chuckle. He leans over to the bedside table and Rin makes a face at the bottle he pulls out of a drawer. “You like that stuff?”

Sousuke’s brows crease. “Lube? Yeah.”

Rin almost fucking decks him. “I mean that kind of lube.”
“Oh.” Sousuke squints at the bottle. “Isn’t it all the same?”

“The same?” Rin sits up with urgency, hands fretting over him. “Sousuke, baby, you don’t know what you’re missing.” He hikes a smirk. “You wanna feel somethin’ real good?”

“I think you’ll feel damn good either way.”

Rin blushes and his foot shoves Sousuke’s hip. “Go get my bag.”

Sousuke groans and drags himself off the bed. He flops the bag down expectantly, but Rin pushes it back toward him. “Just pick something out of there.” He scowls at the lube left on the nightstand. “I hate that generic stuff. It’s tacky and cold as fuck. It’s like the shit doctors use.”

“Only you,” Sousuke sighs, digging through the bag, “could be such a diva about this sort of thing.”

Rin shakes his head, leaning back on his elbows. “You’ll see.”

In the mere ten seconds of silence between them, his nerves get the best of him. “Do you want me to do it?” Rin blurts. Sousuke looks up and raises a brow. “Prep myself or whatever.”

Sousuke blinks. “Do you want it to be that way?”

Rin shrugs because no, he doesn’t, but he always ends up having to do it. “That’s just what I’m used to.”

“If it’ll make you comfortable –”

Rin fumes a sigh. “It won’t.” He sits up and buries his flushed face in his damp hands for an overwhelmed moment. “I don’t know why I asked. I just don’t think I’ll – I don’t know if I can…” His legs tuck together and he hugs himself around the middle.

Calmly, Sousuke wipes away Rin’s tears of frustration. “You’re worried about not being able to come?”

Rin nods hesitantly. “I’m not as sensitive as I used to.” His face flashes hot. “Inside.”

Sousuke pulls the comforter over Rin to help him feel less exposed, which he is grateful for. “Do you think that might be because you’re used to your own touch?”

Rin’s smirk is degraded. “I’m seriously convinced that my prostate doesn’t even work anymore.”

“Hmm.” Sousuke takes a vial out of the bag. “We’ll see.”

Rin’s eyes narrow at the bottle’s label. It’s warming lubricant that tastes like hot buttered rum – it’s edible.

His blood catches fire.

Sousuke says, “Can I try with my fingers?”

Not trusting his voice, Rin takes off the comforter and spreads his legs a little too eagerly, which makes Sousuke curl the most handsome grin. He pours some lube in his palm and it’s liquid warmth
when his hand squeezes around Rin’s cock in a slow, wet drag. He moans, hips stuttering, and Sousuke massages his balls, making his voice crest louder.

His cock is throbbing by the time fingers tease his entrance and Rin stiffens on reflex, bracing for the thrust, but Sousuke does not push into him – he just rubs sensation against his rim in a touch that Rin chases after. Sousuke kisses up his jaw, his voice a soothing purr. “Does it feel all right?”

“Yeah – mmm…. ” His hands clench Sousuke’s biceps when the tip of a finger nudges inside, giving him just enough stretch to make him feel greedy. “More.”

He gasps when two fingers push inside and Rin’s body clamps down, shaping to the intrusion, tight and possessive. “God,” Sousuke breathes. “You’re like silk.”

He thrusts, and the first few drags are good, but Rin’s body starts preparing itself for what comes next, numbness prickling between his hips. In a frantic stream of thought, he tells himself that this is different – everything about being with Sousuke is different, from the way he locks their gazes before a rough thrust of fingers, constantly making sure he feels good and loved and safe.

But Rin’s body does not trust the sincerity. He worries if he should try and fake it – he’s built an entire career on faking it, he’s good at it – though he does not want to. But he can’t just lie on his back and take it, Sousuke deserves more than that, Rin doesn’t want him to think that he can’t –

Sousuke stills inside him and it is almost a relief when the pressure inside slides out. “You numb?”
At Rin’s blink, Sousuke says, “You stopped clenching around me.”

Sinking in dread, he looks away and nods. He closes his eyes when Sousuke pets his arm, asking, “Are you in any pain?”

“No.”

“Do you want to stop?”

His eyes flash open and he seizes Sousuke. “No.”

“All right, easy,” he soothes, kissing Rin’s trembling lower lip. “Easy. I’m not going anywhere.”

Rin steels himself and opens his thighs insistently. Sousuke meets his eyes as he presses back inside too gently, and cold tension builds in Rin’s stomach. Then, suddenly, it unravels into pure heat as Sousuke ruts into him.

The friction of his fingers with the warming lube makes heat flare to life inside of Rin – sensation, feeling. He does not think the pleasure can get more shocking but then Sousuke’s fingers curl into a bundle of nerves Rin did not think existed anymore.

Colors blotch his vision. Light sears his veins. A cry rockets from the bottom of his lungs and Sousuke breathes, “There.”

He swallows Rin’s shout in a kiss, but they keep coming with every twist of his fingers. He calls Sousuke’s name like it is the only word he knows, his nipples throbbing, dick surging. Sousuke massages his prostate, rubbing it raw, and just when Rin skirts the edge of soreness, his fingers wrench out. His insides are shocked by the withdrawal, eyes stinging, teeth gritting, and he is about to tear Sousuke apart when his head dips between Rin’s thighs to lick into him.
If Sousuke were not pinning his legs, Rin would have convulsed, but as it is, he can only claw through the pillows and scream into the mattress. Sousuke pushes his legs open until Rin’s hips ache, but it feels so good to be exposed like this to him, and Rin grabs his knees to pull them back and up. Sousuke laps over him diligently and curses rasp through Rin’s teeth. With pain-staking restraint, the tip of Sousuke’s tongue circles his rim in a tease that has Rin begging for the stretch.

“Sousuke, please, please,” he babbles.

All at once is the solid push, a glide wet enough to make it smooth, and Rin’s body opens for it. The feeling is like the peak of human existence, like this is the most sensation a body could ever contain. He has never felt as powerful as he does with Sousuke bowed between his legs, eyes closed with furrowed brows to revel in Rin.

His fingers are lost in the damp heat of Sousuke’s hair and Rin tugs it, surprised when Sousuke’s hips fuck against the mattress. He tugs again and Sousuke sucks his rim so hard that Rin forces his face against him, making Sousuke’s tongue stretch him deeply as possible before wrenching back. Sousuke gasps for breath, pupils blown so wide that his eyes are a black diamond glint.

His fingers drive back into Rin and he arches against the intrusion. “Yes, yes, yes,” he cries, seizing the headboard when Sousuke laps around where his fingers stretch him. Tension builds fast, rising up to meet the pleasure, and with a curl of fingers and tongue Rin comes, his cock pulsing uncontrolled.

His breathing is muffled to the static in his ears and he curls in on himself, but strong arms hold him as he quivers. A kiss presses against his slack lips and the first thing Rin registers is that Sousuke tastes fresh like mint and vodka. His eyes flutter open and Sousuke smirks softly. “Are you all right?”

Rin just stares and his smirk deepens. “Do you want some water?”

He nods to the nightstand and Rin lunges for the glass, swallowing the ice water so quickly that a headache rises between his eyes. His mug of whiskey is also there and Rin drowns it, the burn settling over the heat pooling in his belly like gasoline over fire.

He pulls Sousuke over him, surging against his mouth, grinding up against the rigid length of his cock – Rin might have just come but he is not far behind. “I’m ready,” he says.

Even though Sousuke is shaking for it, he asks, “Are you sure?”

Rin smiles, heart soaring to meet the desire rushing through him. “Yes.” He looks down at himself and for once, he feels connected to all his limbs, grounded in the weight of himself. “This was always supposed to be mine,” he whispers vehemently. “My body. I’ll make it mine, I will.”

Sousuke looks so proud that he has to kiss Rin. “The choice is yours too.”

“I choose you,” Rin says, framing Sousuke’s face to level their gazes. “It’s always been you.”

Sousuke smiles for him, a curve of lips so true that Rin will be the only one ever to witness it. He helps Sousuke with a condom, the peeling of latex overpowering every sound in the whole house. Rin presses the condom to the tip of Sousuke’s cock and stretches his lips over the latex, pushing it down with his mouth and rolling it to the base of his dick. Sousuke chokes on his own voice and Rin
He settles on his back, heart pounding in his throat. His fingers are a restless tremble but instead of bottling the energy up, he dispels it by kneading Sousuke’s shoulders, the touch relaxing them both. Sousuke settles between Rin’s legs, their bodies pressed together so tightly that their lungs swell together. “I love you,” Sousuke whispers. “I’ll love you ‘til I drop dead, no matter what.”

Rin’s smile wobbles. “I love you, too.”

Sousuke’s weight pins him and memories surface from the darkness of his mind, flashing before his eyes, but he bores into it. The fear rakes through him until he is on fire with it, letting it burn him clean. He wants every demon to be awake to see what he is doing and he can feel them jarring the cage of his mind uselessly because they cannot stop him anymore, can’t do a fucking thing to stop Rin from taking Sousuke inside when his hips push forward. He screams like a battle cry because he is done being at war with himself; he takes his body as a crown and lets it be worshipped.

Sousuke wrenches into him and Rin’s chest hunches on a sob because he can feel it, the stretch of his cock aching at the core of himself. His hardness is the only steadiness inside of Rin – his sanity melts to a primitive wavelength, mind hollow heat, hips lurching to take Sousuke deep enough to taste. Pleasure startles awake from where it’s slept in the pit of Rin’s belly for years. He cries out when Sousuke fucks into him because his length is endless, girth stretching Rin’s limits in a way that leaves him clawing for more.

Rin lifts a leg over Sousuke’s shoulder, making him growl at how much it tightens Rin up inside – he forms to every thrust like he was made for the shape of Sousuke’s cock. It’s a soaking plunge that has Sousuke grabbing the headboard for leverage, jaw gritting, hips diving to give Rin his all. Rin’s nails streak his back and Sousuke buries a groan against the thigh on his shoulder, biting into it.

Rin closes his eyes to revel in the long glide of thrusts, but the darkness has always been his sanctuary on rents and during rapes, and he forgets where he is. He goes so rigid that his bones ache, eyes shutting tighter to protect himself in any way that he can until someone whispers his name fervently, over and over to make his eyes flutter open.

It is only Sousuke there, nobody else, but Rin is trembling cold even though his cock is so hot and wet inside him. He leans into the hand on his cheek, hungry for the roughness of Sousuke’s palm, the familiar texture grounding. “It’s just me,” he coos, gentle because Rin is shattered glass that can break even further at any wrong move. “It’s just us here, Rin.”

Rin’s eyes are wide but he does not blink out of fear that Sousuke will disappear – he shakes his head like he knows. “I’m right here with you.” He is right here, inside, his heartbeat throbbing between Rin’s legs. “We’re at my house. It’s raining. We’ve had steak and got drunk and you almost made me wreck my car on the way home because you drive me so crazy.” Rin laughs despite himself, light butsting through his icy insides. “You’re right here with me and I’m having the best night of my miserable life so far.”

Rin matches his smile even though it’s weaker. He lets himself be held, Sousuke’s voice tucked against his ear. “Want me to pull out?”

“Stay,” he croaks, tightening around Sousuke to keep him buried in the heat of him.

Sousuke lets out a careful jet of air through his nose and keeps still. Rin steadies himself, taking in every detail of this moment and letting them consume him – the taste of Sousuke’s radiating warmth,
the protectiveness of his embrace, the coolness of his dog tags pressed between their chests. “Let’s keep going,” Rin says.

Sousuke nudges deeper and Rin’s body opens up as their foreheads press together. “It’s all okay,” Sousuke whispers. “Relax for me, sugar, it’s okay.”

Rin hugs his arms around Sousuke’s neck, letting him take control, take care of him. Out of reflex, he starts to close his eyes again, but Sousuke holds his cheek in hand to level their gazes. “Can you keep them open? You keep going back when you close your eyes.”

Rin’s mouth parts to respond but all that comes out is a moan as Sousuke’s cock slides in fluidly all the way down to the base. “Can you stay here with me, Rin? Please?”

“Yes,” Rin breathes, body pulling suction over Sousuke’s cock. “Yes, yes…” Sousuke grinds into the center of him, flexing in and out at a quickening pace. The eye contact exposes them down to their very souls and it is as intimate as the plunge of Sousuke’s hips between Rin’s legs.

He feels a tension building inside of him that he had forgotten – it is so unyielding that the breath is shocked from him. His muscles clench in anticipation as every inch of Sousuke lights him up from the inside out. Rin lets out a sob and Sousuke bows over, fucking into him vigorously with a passion nobody ever thought he was worth.

“That’s it, Rin,” he coaxes, cock driving into Rin as he spasms inside, overwhelmed with sensation. “Just like that, let it go, let me take it.” All of it, his pleasure, his pain. He pushes Rin’s legs back, stretching him further and Sousuke is so deep, the defined edges of his hips pressed against Rin’s ass. He wraps a fist around Rin’s cock, precome dripping down his fingers. “Give it to me.”

Rin cries out against each thrust and Sousuke’s impassioned kiss has pleasure ripping through him like a fragile tear of butterfly wings, cutting deeper, deeper to his core. Sharp heat zings along the edge of every bone. It crests high in his chest, lurching his back up off the bed like he and Sousuke can pour together like molten gold. He fucks down on his cock from root to tip, taking his pleasure, riding every last wave like a raw, open nerve until he drowns.

He collapses on the bed, every exhale a soft cry, shivers wracking his frame. His insides clench with his frantic heartbeat, squeezing Sousuke tight enough to make him see stars, but he sweeps Rin’s damp hair back and kisses his slack mouth, whispering how proud he is.

Rin gazes up at him, Sousuke’s rough breaths coming through the static in his ears, the pulse of rain over the house. Dazedly, Rin’s shaking fingers reach up to trace his face. “Sousuke,” he rasps. “You’ve been so good to me. You waited so long.”

In a flash of movement, Rin pins him on his back, hooks his teeth under the condom’s edge at the base and peels it off, then he sits on Sousuke’s naked cock in one smooth motion.

Sousuke screams.

There is no buffer between the heat, wetness, and texture, no barrier between the rawest, most emotional connection physically possible. The sensation of latex ribs is replaced by rippling walls and long, slick shaft. It’s like going from touching through clothes to skin-on-skin contact, and it is blinding.

Rin rides Sousuke in a quick circle, firming around his cock for their pulses to meld together.
Sousuke’s hips slam up into Rin with a force that rocks him but he goads Sousuke with filthy whines and laughing moans. His hands seize Rin’s hips to jerk him down and grind up into the hot, tight center of him. Rin’s gut swoops with the motion, spent cock twitching, thrusts driving invigored need through him.

Sousuke balances Rin on his hips to fuck shallow, driving his cockhead against the tight rim, but Rin feels too empty to let that go on and bounces down on him. Sousuke’s face twists like it might break and Rin bows with a hopeless gulp of air as wet heat pours forth, Sousuke’s come throbbing inside him, and Rin finds another peak so sharp and quick that he blacks out instantly.

He wakes long after daybreak. Shadows hang low in the bedroom, the afternoon sun warm across his bare back. He cannot feel his legs; they are lost in a tangle of sheets and limbs he never wants to unravel. His cheek nuzzles deeper into Sousuke’s chest and a satisfied purr is the last thing he hears before drifting once more.

Eventually he stretches awake, body bending in a feline curve. He is aching in the most satisfied way – he’s got one of those headaches that only comes from deep sleep and a downward glance shows bruises pushed into his hips and territorial love bites marking his thighs.

He rolls over and smirks at the teeth-shaped crescents in Sousuke’s throat. Rin traces his slack, parted lips, watching his naked chest swell for breath, brows twitching in sleep. His body is free of tension in this moment, features at ease. Elation comes with the memories of last night and Rin tucks his smile under the hem of the sheets, staring at Sousuke with eyes heavy and thick.

Rin would like to cuddle the shit out of him, but he does not want to wake Sousuke, so he presses a kiss against his forehead and slips from the bed without even a rustle of blankets.

He finds Sousuke’s button up by the couch and shrugs it on, working his way into the oversized sleeves, hem grazing the crease of his ass and thigh. He tucks his nose against the collar, inhaling the lingering scent of warm cedar cologne and post-barbershop crispness.

He pads to the kitchen and grimaces as tension swells in the back of his neck like it usually does after waking up. He sighs and rubs at it uselessly, freezing when a solid body presses into him from behind, all heavy muscles and sex-flushed heat.

Rin’s mouth waters and his throat dries in record time. Warm breath ghosts behind the shell of his ear and awareness hums through him with startling intensity. Fingers drag up through his hair and Sousuke cards the strands into one hand so he can part his lips against Rin’s bare neck. His mouth traces the smooth curve of his shoulder, tongue darting out, and Rin’s hands grip the counter to steady himself. Sousuke chuckles in a deep, sated rasp from sleep, and the noise has Rin swaying.

His hands settle on Rin’s waist over the shirt, fingers teasing between the opening. Sousuke’s kisses are wet and soft as they trail up to Rin’s ear. “You stole my shirt.” His hand dips between Rin’s legs, parting the shirt to cup his balls with a predatory rumble.

Rin bites his lip around a grin, the softness of his ass pressing against the hardness of Sousuke’s cock in a languid arch. “You want it back, baby?”

“Hardly,” Sousuke snorts and Rin laughs.

A hand pulls one side of the shirt collar down, exposing Rin’s left shoulder to open-mouthed kisses.
Sousuke’s lips trail across Rin’s back, hand pulling the other sleeve down to bite into the firmness of his right shoulder blade. Sousuke’s cock is a persistent weight against his back and Rin reaches around, fingers kneading the firmness of Sousuke’s ass insistently. He helps him drag off the jeans he slung on in the bedroom, just low enough for his dick to spring free.

Rin gasps when Sousuke parts him, cock nudging against where he is still wet and pink and ready. He slips inside with an endless glide that Rin lurches up on his toes to take. Rin bows to the pleasure, bending over the counter and gripping the edges white-knuckled.

Sousuke’s hands rub up his back in soothing patterns, breathless. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Rin whines, propping up on his elbows, shirt slipping down to expose the upper half of his naked back.

A smirk deepens Sousuke’s voice. “Not too sore?”

Rin arches a sly brow over his shoulder and puts all his strength into clenching around every inch of the length inside him. Sousuke wheezes and Rin smirks. “Stop talkin’ and make me sore.”

Sousuke purses his lips around a smirk and leans back, gripping Rin’s shoulder as he goes and pulling to deepen the arch of his back. The shift in balance means Rin has no center of gravity to brace for the thrust, but he moans for that plunge and the next one and next one. Sousuke bows over him and intertwinues their left hands, his right one tangles in Rin’s hair, tugging just hard enough to make his cock surge. Rin reaches back to knot his fist in Sousuke’s hair. With the next snap of his hips, Rin throws his face to the ceiling and curves the most satisfied grin as his eyes roll back.

One shower and three orgasms later, Rin sits at Sousuke’s kitchen table with damp hair, wearing clean sweats. His arms rest across his raised knees as he watches sunlight trace the aluminum pinched between his fingers. The rasp of the chain around his neck echoes as his mind drifts far from the present.

He remembers sitting at a table so much like this one with his dad beside him. Rin forgets how old he was, but he was still small enough for his dad to tower over him like something immovable; he never felt more protected than when he was draped in his dad’s shadow, and that was no different when Rin came home with his first black eye and a face full of tears.

His mom was outside on the phone, apologizing to the mother of the boy who had punched Rin – the boy that he had not hit back. The one-sided fight happened because Rin was too innocent to realize that he couldn’t kiss another boy just because he was in love with him.

His dad’s hands were rough as sandpaper, but they were impossibly gentle as they wiped Rin’s tears away. Rin begged to know what he had done wrong and his dad sighed, not out of shame but gut-deep sorrow. “Listen to me, Rin,” he said. “You’re different, okay?” His face crumbled with grief. “It used to be something only I knew, but now it’s out and life’s gonna be real hard for you sometimes, no matter what I’d give to change that.”

Rin had not cried at that because a deep part of him had always known his future would not be bright in any aspect, but especially romantically. His dad framed his face. “But no matter what, don’t you never forget that I got you, you hear? You remember that if you love a boy and he treats you bad that you can always come home to your daddy. And then,” he sighs forlornly, “when you find the right one, you can leave me all alone with my sad little boat and ride off into the sunset.”
Rin laughed wetly and his dad’s next words stayed with him for the rest of his life, fueling dreams that seemed hopeless until now. “All I’m askin’ is that you make sure he’s a good man because that’s what you deserve, so don’t you stop until you get that. I don’t care how many crazies like your momma you gotta go through.”

Rin giggled and his dad laughed with him, wrapping him up in an embrace that Rin feels in his bones to this day. “You’re my boy forever,” his dad whispered earnestly. “I just want you happy and want you with someone who makes you even happier. So when you find him and I ask you if you’re happy, you gotta be able to say yes and mean it Rin, you hear?”

Rin blinks back to himself as Echo leans against Sousuke’s legs and whines for the food he is cooking on the stove. He nudges her away with a laugh that has Rin’s heart racing.

Sousuke arches a brow over his shoulder. “You want coffee, Rin?”

*When I ask if you’re happy, you gotta be able to say yes and mean it, you hear?*

He smiles and tucks Sousuke’s dog tags back into his shirt. “Yes.”
Hello all! Sorry for the delay, I've had a much busier summer than previously anticipated, but here we are! So much has happened. For one, I started a new fic called "Coral and Bone." It's a Mermaid!AU about summer love, which is quite a contrast to EWOATT, but feel free to look it over if you'd like a lighter story for this summer!

Also, the fan thank you's are located in the bottom of the chapter notes since I had so much to say about each and every piece! And an endless stream of thank you's for each and every reader; it means the world that you're still liking the story. This chapter marks the beginning of EWOATT's final arc, which I hope you'll enjoy.

And thank you, saltyaf, for being the most amazing beta reader! (archive of our own | twitter)

**REMINDER:** this chapter begins on the night of Sousuke and Rin's date in Chapter 22.

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"Bring back the title

Got no one to lie to

There's no need to lie no more

Bring me a trial

Every move's vital

What you gon' die for

When every day you told lies?"

Halsey - "Lie"

---

A frigid chill pulls him from sleep as goosebumps shudder across his arms. His eyes fly open from a dream he can’t remember, bones aching from the cold.

Haru sits up on the couch and his ribs strain with the motion while he glances around the cabin. The windows are frosted over and wind howls through the floorboards; a gloomy, blue-darkness shadows the home. Winter has finally hit Iwatobi all at once, in a terrible cold snap that threatens to freeze his blood.

Haru glances to the other side of the couch and notices Gou quivering in her sleep. He drapes some more covers over her, petting through her hair as she snuggles into the blankets and falls into a
deeper sleep.

Restless and freezing, Haru hugs himself around the middle and rechecks the locks on the doors and windows. He goes to his room and finds the flannel he wore home from Makoto’s house, shrugging it on. The shirt drapes him in heavy comfort and he wanders back into the living room just as his cell phone vibrates to life.

He tenses, glancing over at the wall clock – 3 a.m. Bones sinking in dread, he looks at his phone screen. His thumb wavers over the screen to receive the call, as if it’s a choice, and he forces his voice not to waver as he answers. “Miho.”

“*Haruka*,” she purrs, ice clawing down his spine at the mere sound of her voice. “I’m glad I caught you. I’m sorry to call you so late – or early, rather – but I need a tiny favor.”

Loathing sets his veins on fire. “Where are you?”

“I’m safe, don’t worry –” Haru leans away from the phone to scoff in disgust. “I’m hiding out until things settle down, but you know there is no rest for the weary. I need you to sell the rest of your relay tonight.”

Haru claws desperately for an excuse. “I’ll be out of product, I won’t have anything to sell next week.”

A triumphant grin lights her tone. “I’ve already taken care of that. I contacted our supplier and they will have another shipment ready for you to retrieve sooner than expected.” Her voice tightens. “So there is no excuse. Get your relay sold tonight and wire my 70% of the profit.”

Haru glances over at the sweep of maroon hair on the couch, his heart twisting. Miho’s whisper cuts deeper than a knife. “*Do you need someone to watch Gou-chan for you?”*

Panic screams through him. “No,” he rushes, the heat of his defiance snuffed out and leaving him achingly hollow. “No, I’ll go. I’ll go.”

A smirk curls her voice. “You are remarkable, *Haruka*.”

She hangs up and he gropes for a stool, sinking over it and burying his face in his hands. His throat burns and itches for a cigarette, but he swallows the need down. Haru startles when his phone vibrates again, and he’s not expecting the name on the screen: SATOMI NII.

She does not sound groggy with sleep – her voice is filled with loathing. “Did Miho call you too?”

“Yeah.” He hurries into his room to change, yanking on some thick socks and a beanie. “Are me and you the only ones left with relay to sell?”

“A seemingly.”

She shimmies into some black jeans and his Converse. Adrenaline pumps hot and thick in his veins as he tucks a loaded Glock into the back of his pants. “Let’s try 4th Street together – you can’t be out on the streets alone right now.”

“Neither can you,” she retorts. “*So meet me on 4th and let’s get this over with.”*
Haru shrugs off Makoto’s flannel once they hang up, but he takes one last moment to inhale against the fabric. Calmness washes over him, putting him in that state of mind that’s perfect for the best sleep, but he has to exchange the shirt for a holster. He tucks a pistol into each side before rolling on two long sleeve shirts, then his denim vest. The material is crisp and stiff, a weight that grounds him in sickening reality. He meets his gaze in the bathroom mirror, his hawk tattoo stark against his pale skin, the blueness of his eyes standing out against the night. His features harden and he walks away.

In the living room, he sits with Mori’s old bag, which is heavy with product, and dials another number. He apologizes for waking Nao but when he explains the urgent situation and that someone needs to watch over Gou, Nao promises to be at the cabin in ten minutes.

He gets there in seven and a gust of wind slices through Haru when he opens the door for Nao, whose face is flushed red from the cold. Natsuya hesitantly ventures in behind him, but waits politely at the door. Nao winces in apology. “He was already with me –”

Haru nods his consent for Natsuya to step inside and truthfully, he breathes a little easier at his presence. Natsuya isn’t gripped by the same fear that has Haru and Nao by the throats; if Miho dared to show up at the cabin, Natsuya wouldn’t hesitate to shoot her on sight, and that’s the kind of reassurance Haru needs right now.

Natsuya smiles warmly at Gou asleep on the couch, the sight of her refueling everyone’s determination. They step into the kitchen and Nao warms his hands over a glowing stove burner as he whispers, “Is Rin not here?”

Haru shakes his head and dips into the fridge to pop open a Redbull, chugging it. The surge of energy leaves him restlessly shifting his weight. “He’s with Sousuke. I didn’t want to bother them.” Let them have what peace they can cling to, if only for a few more hours.

Nao bows his head in understanding and squeezes Haru’s shoulder. “You and Nii be careful.”

Haru slings his bag over his shoulder with a tired smirk. “We’ll be fine.”

They tumble behind the nearest car, gun shots shuddering up the alley’s brick walls, rocking Haru and Nii to the core. They catch themselves on their hands and the concrete drives bloody gouges into their palms; the pain is not only ignored, but completely unfelt as adrenaline puts them on an earth-shattering high. They aim their pistols over the car hood to fire their last rounds, the cold sticking their bloody hands to their guns. The jet-fast path of Haru’s bullet cuts short, nestling deep into something wet and soft – maybe a stomach or the flesh of a thigh. But the cry rings through the night and that gives him and Nii a few seconds to escape the alley before bullets start singing again.

Haru buries himself in the darkest part of his mind, in that burning pit where he can throw his emotions away. In times like these, he remembers that his heart is colder than any winter, and he relies on the heat of his rage to keep him from freezing to death. He survived winters in the outskirts for God’s sake, doped out of his mind with his toes bursting through worn shoes.

But this strange, cold pit in his stomach is not from the weather – it’s guilt. His self-loathing drives deeper with every shot he fires, but he has to keep himself and Nii alive because the streets have turned into a gang war and Iwatobi’s drug empire is finally crumbling from the inside out.

Haru comes back to himself in the junkyard of all places, hunkered under a truck with Nii, the soil
wet and chilly beneath them. The wind is haunting in the silence, the echo of crows muffled to Haru’s ears from so much gunfire. Though they are alone, neither he nor Nii have the courage to escape their hiding place just yet. He exhales a swirl of frost. “Are you okay?”

Nii scoots a little closer to him in the hope to find warmth, but Haru has none to offer. Her bangs stick to her forehead with cold sweat and her wide eyes are defeated as she watches the sunrise bleed white through piles of scrap metal. It casts them in a shadow – an inescapable darkness. “I think we’ve all gone crazy,” she whispers, her voice broken with vulnerability.

He looks at her and Nii’s eyes dart away, face hardening once more. “We got ambushed for our relay. I lost my bag.”

Luckily, Haru’s already completed his sales, so he has profit to send to Miho. He’ll have to cover Nii for losing her product with his own money to keep the girl’s head attached to her shoulders. “We’ll figure something out,” he says in a voice that doesn’t leave room for protest or argument.

She follows him out from under the truck and they check themselves over – there are the usual bruises and scrapes that they can’t seem to go a day without but other than that, they are all right. They will be all right.

To fill the haunting silence, Nii mumbles, “Everyone’s ranks were thinner, did you notice?”

Haru nods, shrugging Mori’s empty bag over his shoulder. “The Bloodhounds might’ve taken even more people. That’s probably why everyone’s going berserk.”

They limp toward the exit, frosty grass blades crunching under their shoes. That deep hole in his chest sinks deeper and he sighs in defeat. “I feel guilty.” The weight of Nii’s gaze presses down on him, but he can’t meet her eyes. “Do you ever feel that way?”

Her steps fall a little heavier. “No.”

Haru doesn’t want to confess to being weak because he knows how much Nii looks up to him, but he needs to speak about his emotional turmoil. Plus, Nii’s from the outskirts – she’s tough enough to hear it. “Normally, I can tune everything out and do my job. I’ve always been able to do that, but ever since —” His breath leaves him in a rush and he looks up at the sky hopelessly. “I shouldn’t be thinking about Makoto when I’m working, he’s apart from all this, he’s —”


Her dark outfit and pale skin are a black-and-white contrast; the only color to her is her eyes, the blueness warming with emotion. “The only time I ever feel guilty is when someone from Freebird gets hurt. I blame myself for it.” She shrugs. “I don’t have a Gou waiting on me at home and I don’t have a Makoto. If anyone should get hurt, then it’s me.”

Haru stops dead in his tracks, pinning Nii with his stare. “That is not true and you know it.” She lunges to interject and he says, “You know we need you.” He levels their gazes as he puts a hand on her shoulder. “You know we love you, Nii, all of us do.”

Her jaw tightens as her lashes spike wetly. Haru’s brows crease and he puts his other hand on her shoulder, whispering in frantic confusion, “Nii, what’s got into you?”

Her face crumbles and she sobs, “I miss Nakagawa.”
Understanding floods him, but then her voice burns with vehemence. “I miss Kazuki and I miss the life none of us will ever have. I’m fucking worried about Ikuya and you all deserve better than this.” She wipes furiously at her eyes, smearing mascara from two days ago. “Even I deserve better than this.”

Haru watches her struggle to reign in her grief and meets the anguish in her eyes without wavering. “You have to trust me,” he says, lifting his chin with sureness. “That I can end this.”

She narrows her eyes before they flare wide in realization. “Haru, it shouldn’t have to be you –” “We don’t know if it’ll come down to that.” To death.

But Nii’s expression is more sure than the rise of the sun. Haru turns away and busies himself by washing the blood from his hands in some icy water pooled in an imploded car hood. His hands are tinted blue when its over, but they’re clean and that’s all that matters. “Let’s focus on one thing at a time, okay?”

Nii’s eyes dart across the ground, stilling when Haru asks, “You headed home from here?” Slowly, she meets his eyes without faltering. “Yeah.”

They both glance up as a news chopper whirls overhead, headed for downtown. The wail of police sirens echo through the roar of morning traffic. “Cops are probably on 4th to clean up the mess, so we should be safe if we both stick to crowded streets.”

“I can walk you home, Nii.”

She smirks easily, already sauntering backward. “Nah, it’s cool. I’m just gonna catch a few minutes to myself before I get home and Aki starts asking questions.”

Haru gropes under his shirt for his holster and takes out a pistol, checking the chamber before turning on the safety and handing it to her. “There are a few bullets left in there. Don’t think twice.”

“You know I won’t,” she vows, tucking it inside her jacket.

They get to the sidewalk and Haru goes left while Nii walks right, but he turns when she calls, “Haru.”

Her back is to him, body caught in an eerie stillness as the wind tangles her black hair. Her voice is devoid of emotion. “You’ll tell Gou I love her?”

Haru blinks. “Yeah.”

She breathes a laugh but doesn’t turn to look at him. “Thanks.”

Haru watches her walk away with a strange tightness in his chest.

After he completes his dealing route, Haru drags his feet back to the cabin and the ocean is gray with winter, the clouds glowing white with the hidden sunrise. He scrubs his face, eyes burning with exhaustion as he keys open the front door.
Giggles and the sound of morning cartoons greet him; tension seeps away and his chest swells with warmth. He puts Mori’s bag on the coat rack and toes off his Converse as he takes in the sight before him; a blanket fort is left abandoned in the living room, along with the cartoons, so he follows the intoxicating scent of frying food to the kitchen.

Nao sits at the island with Poseidon in his lap, watching Natsuya cook at the stove with a gentle smile. Natsuya’s curls are a wild tumble from sleep, which was probably interrupted by Gou, who does not understand the glory of sleeping in. She’s at the island with Nao and telling Natsuya everything he missed while he was in rehab, sharing memories between chomps of blueberry pancake.

Haru steps closer and Nao arches a brow over a grin. “He remembered how much she liked them,” he mumbles, nodding to Gou’s pancakes. Haru smiles tiredly at that, blinking when Natsuya passes him an omelet the size of God. Hunger curls through him and he devours his food, letting Gou hang off his shoulders and nodding to everything she says about her morning with Nao and Natsuya as her sitters.

After breakfast, Gou leaves them alone in the kitchen to play with Percy in the living room. Gratefully, Haru bows his head at Nao and Natsuya. “Thank you for watching her, I’m sorry it was such short notice. Miho called last night about those deals and I didn’t know what to do.”

Nao waves the apology away and Natsuya offers a lazy grin, assuring, “She was a welcome distraction from everything going on.” He absentedly wipes the island down, his eyes lost to memories. “She’s nothing like Ikuya was as a kid. He slept ‘til noon, begged Mom to order a pizza, ate that, then went right back to sleep.”

Nao reaches over and touches his hand, making Natsuya deflate with a sigh. He brings Nao’s fingers to his lips and kisses them in appreciation before saying, “At Rough Rabbit, I found old blueprints to some more abandoned railways. Some older members remember there being a railroad in the outskirts, so I’m going to keep digging and try to find a map – see if we can’t make our own path through the woods and find these Bloodhounds and get my brother back.”

Haru lifts his chin with determination. “I’ll be right behind you. We all will.” Nao nods in agreement.

Natsuya and Nao leave after that, but not before Gou embraces them. Natsuya props her on his hip to kiss her cheek and says, “It was wonderful to see you again, Princess.”

She grips his leather jacket earnestly. “You won’t be gone forever again, will you?”

His face strains to repress emotion. “No.” A smile flutters about his mouth. “I’m here to stay.”

She beams and hugs them both once more.

Haru showers off the grime from the night, steam billowing off his skin, so good that he nearly falls asleep standing up. Afterwards, he puts on some sweats and immediately dives for Makoto’s flannel, heart aching with loneliness.

Haru shrugs on the shirt and thumbs through his phone, hesitating for a moment. He almost pours out his heart in the message, wanting to write I miss you, come see me, but instead settles for good morning.
The reply comes instantly. (つ﹏◕﹏◕)っ♥♥♥ Good morning!!!

“Oh God,” Haru whispers, clutching his heart out of fear that it might truly burst because that’s the cutest shit he’s ever seen. He flops back on his bed and takes a deep breath and maybe a few dozen screenshots of the message to save for darker times.

His phone buzzes another time. I missed waking up beside you.

Haru muffles his groan against a pillow, gripping his stomach so the butterflies will not tear free. He rolls over and stares up at the ceiling, stilling when an idea sparks to life.

Pursing his lips around a smirk, he opens the camera app and switches it to the front-facing camera. His face looks like death warmed over from lack of sleep, so he angles it lower and straightens his arm to lean further away from the phone. The wider shot gets the column of his throat and the sharp rise of his collar bones, Makoto’s flannel parted just enough to reveal the muscled valley between his pecs, which is still glistening from his shower. He doesn’t know what possess him to snap a picture and send it, but he goes along with it and adds the message, that make you feel better?

He chews his grinning lip when Makoto responds. Oh my god YOU made me trip over Echo and I landed on the bedroom floor but it was the best thing that’s ever happened to me I’m still texting from the floor I don’t even care. you’re everything. you are everything to me

Haru’s laugh rings through the room, his ears flexing as the cabin’s front door opens. He buttons the shirt and wanders down the hallway, recognizing the sounds of Rin’s gait and the cadence of Sousuke’s heavier steps. Gou’s taken to playing in her room, so Haru is the only one intruding as Rin kisses Sousuke goodbye at the door. They’re dazed and disheveled in a way that makes it painfully obvious that they just had a quickie in the car. They’re positively love drunk to the most disgusting degree.

Rin frames Sousuke’s face for one last kiss before closing the door and thudding back against it with a dreamy sigh. He notices Haru propped against the wall with his brow arched in question. “How’re things?”

Rin flings himself on the couch with the theatrics of a Disney princess. “Things are very good,” he purrs, fingers playing with the dog tag chain around his neck. His face flushes with memories, shuddering in delight. “Jesus wept, Haru, I’ve never had it like that before.”

Haru’s mouth firms into a line, features tightening and uncomfortable. Rin howls a laugh and Haru tries to be an adult about the situation, saying, “Well, I’m glad you’re happy.”

Rin snuggles a pillow to his chest. “I am, Haru. I really am.”

“That’s good.”

They bask in reflective silence until Rin breaks it with a firm voice. “I’m done being a rentboy.”

At first, Haru thinks he’s just voicing his frustration, but the resolve on Rin’s face makes Haru sit down next to him tensely. Rin does not waver. “I’m telling Miho I’m done.”

Haru chooses his words carefully. “You know this decision won’t only effect you.”

Gou’s voice echoes down the hallway, high-pitched and playful as she makes imaginary
conversation with Poseidon. Haru raises his brows insistently.

Rin sits up with a retort hot on his tongue and Haru interjects, “I know you wouldn’t put her in danger intentionally, that’s not what I’m saying.” He steadies a hand on Rin’s shoulder as his voice falls hushed. “You know that none of us can make a move like that without others getting hurt.” His fingers squeeze earnestly. “We’re going to be free, Rin. We’ll find our snitch, find the Bloodhounds, and then we’ll sit back and watch the war end itself. We just have to hold on a little while longer.”

Rin bows his head, more in defeat than acceptance. “Miho called me on the way here. Samezuka’s reopening early and I got a client tonight.”

Haru cranes back. “Why is she in such a hurry all of a sudden? She called me and Nii last night and told us to get our relay sold before morning.”

Realization snaps Rin’s spine straight. “She had you out there in that gang war? Shit, Haru, Sousuke got called in about that shooting downtown, that’s where he’s headed right now. Are you fucking okay?”


Emotion sinks into Rin’s features. “Thank you.” He rakes a hand through his hair, kicking off his boots to prop his feet up on the coffee table. He uses the remote to turn on the television and they watch the news in silence, their insides running cold as the news chopper narrows in on 4th Street. A sheet of red is frozen over the pavement. “Five people were killed last night,” Rin echoes from the report. “God,” he breathes. “Miho’s gotta be feeling the pressure. Everything’s about to hit the fan and she’s trying to rake up as much profit as she can before it does.” He crosses his arms and raises a pensive brow at Haru. “Were the Bloodhounds there last night?”

Haru shakes his head in a daze. “I don’t think so. I recognized some members of Diamond Back and Honeyblade…” He leans back into the cushions with disbelief. “I didn’t see anyone from Rough Rabbit.”

“That says a lot about Natsuya’s leadership – keeping them the hell off the streets is the best thing for them right now.” He purses his lips, stroking his chin suspiciously. “But it’s kind of weird that the Bloodhounds have a thing for kidnapping people and they weren’t there when two of Iwatobi’s biggest gangs were together in one place for the taking.”

Haru rubs his pulsing temple. “I don’t know why they weren’t there.”

Rin lets out a deep sigh. “Well, enough speculating. Not like we know shit anyway.” Haru breathes a laugh and Rin grins. “Why don’t you spend some time with Makoto today to get your mind off things?”

Haru’s heart flutters with warmth. “That would be… really nice.”

“It’s settled then.” Rin lies back down, not-so-subtly nudging Haru off the couch so he can stretch out. Haru rolls his eyes and gets up, pausing when Rin calls, “Can you get me that bag of frozen peas out of the fridge?”

Brows scrunched, Haru does so, and only realizes why when Rin sits up and tucks the bag under himself, sighing in relief. Haru scoffs. “Oh, whatever.”
“Excuse the hell out of me for taking *eight inches* up my *ass* –”

Haru walks down the hall and slams his bedroom door on *that* situation, ignoring Rin’s smug laugh.

Makoto happily agrees to come by the cabin and Haru’s anxiety spikes in the best of ways. He strokes his chin as he eyes the line of Converse down his closet wall, ranging from solid black to every shade of blue and a few other muted colors. Gou decides for him, choosing a pair of purple Converse that he hasn’t worn in a while.

When Sousuke comes by, Gou busies herself with Echo while he steps into the kitchen with Rin and Haru. “We got a few arrests and I did some interrogations.” He’s still in uniform, but his shirt is untucked and wrinkled and he looks haggard. “It looks like the shooting was a case of who could get the most relay off the bodies of dealers from different gangs.”

Haru scrubs a hand down his face, his voice a rasp from an oncoming cold due to the sudden change in weather. “The demand is getting higher than the supply. It doesn’t matter that everyone knows the Bloodhounds are to blame for the missing members. The only reason that even matters is because the gangs are losing the manpower to find more relay. Things won’t settle down until everyone regains their numbers.”

Rin lifts his chin. “That just makes our goal of finding the Bloodhounds more important.”

Sousuke nods. “Nothing we can do about it in broad daylight, though.” He sighs with an arm around Rin, hand rubbing his bare hip under his shirt.

Haru is surprised by Sousuke’s words and the newfound ease about him. The tension he carried in his frame is all but gone. Haru expected him to be more high-strung about finding the Bloodhounds, but the weight of the world is no longer on Sousuke’s shoulders. He’s ready to leave this life behind as much as Rin is and that steels Haru.

Rin and Gou depart with Sousuke and Echo, leaving Haru alone with his thoughts – his worries. At least until his phone buzzes and he glances down at the message from Makoto: *on my way*

Haru is just starting to smile when a phone call overtakes the message. The number is unknown. Suspicion prickles like the dance of spider legs across his skin. He doesn’t answer the call, but as soon as it goes to voicemail, his phone buzzes again with UNKNOWN still flashing across his screen.

Frowning, he answers, but does not speak. He focuses on listening and tenses when he hears the familiar sound of a scuffle. A hard slap makes him jump – he knows the distant noise of someone getting pistol-whipped and that was the hard smack of metal against a skull. A distorted voice drones across the line, a little breathless. “*Haruka Nanase – you are a busy man, so I will make this short.*”

Reeling, Haru can only listen. “*You’ll bring me the leader of Freebird in exchange for your Nii, do you understand?*”

Time slows from a wild blur to a sickening drag. Reality comes screaming back in when he hears Nii whimper, his blood catching on fire with rage. “I’ll make this short,” Haru retorts, *mocks,* voice low with the promise of pain. “If you hurt her, I’ll let her be the one to gut you in the street when I find
you."

The person startles a laugh, distorted like the crackle of fiery electricity. "You’re as entertaining as I knew you’d be."

Realization strikes him. “You’re the snitch in the police department.”

There is a surprised laugh. “Snitch?”

Haru’s voice is all growl. “Your yakuza confessed at Samezuka before we blew his brains across the pavement. You’re working with the Bloodhounds.”

“None of that matters now. I have Nii, and you have your kingpin, who I want alone.”

Fear knifes his gut. This person must not realize that they’re speaking to the kingpin. The other gangs know Miho as Freebird’s ultimate controller, but in terms of who runs things, it’s Haru. Miho will fall without him, but she won’t come out of hiding to save Nii. Haru is the girl’s only chance. “Let me talk to her.”

He hears movement. Nii’s words are thick from a mouth full of blood, voice twisted in rage and fear. “Don’t you give him shit, Haru –”

_Him._

Haru’s throat is tight with panic, but he levels himself. “Nii, I’m going to get you out of there –”

Her voice rolls into the growl of a wounded beast. “No!” She pants for breath, her gasps frantic in the wake of her oncoming doom. “Haru, it’s me or everyone else.” His brain aches with confusion until she rushes, “If you sacrifice yourself for me, Freebird will die and you know it.” He starts to interject and her voice raws with vehemence. “You know it!”

At long last, her courage dies out and he hears it in her words. “I’m sorry I lied and didn’t go home. I had to get that profit somehow because I wouldn’t have you taking the fall for it. I won’t let you take the fall for this, either.” She cries out against a slap, her voice cresting into a desperate scream as the phone is pulled away. “Give me the fucking dignity of my choice, Haru, don’t you let everyone die for me!”

He collapses on the floor, her scream tearing the strength from him. Entirely devoid of emotion, the voice drawls, “Well?”

Haru hesitates a moment too long, blinking as tears flick off his lashes. There is a sigh of defeat. “I didn’t want it to come to this.”

In the air, there is a pressure like the moment before a volcano blows, a power that rocks every molecule in his body. Then heat shoots through the frame of the cabin, the windows shattering in his face as the house explodes with the force of a meteorite.

He’s thrown, bone and muscle twisting in ways they were never meant to. The floorboards rip apart, wood melting, nails flying, and the roof blows off, fire billowing into the sky and burning it the color of hell-light. The cacophony of noise sounds like a song played backwards, warped into a narrow channel of sound. Only in this instance, that channel is a ball of fire devouring the first and last semblance of peace Haru has ever known.
Under the wreckage is a world of searing heat and muffled deafness. There is no air, no strength to be found, but light breaks through the darkness behind his eyes as debris is torn away. He hears a voice and convulses in recognition of his name, body writhing. Haru’s eyes open and he can’t focus properly because the world keeps blacking out, but he knows that it is Makoto’s arms around him, shielding him from the rain of ash.

At long last, his gaze focuses, and Makoto asks him questions, frantic ones, but Haru just stares in dazed confusion. He lifts a hand to smear away the soot on Makoto’s brows and pain blazes up his arm – that’s when he realizes that fire has turned it inside out.

He wrenches back and feels the burn of a scream in his throat, but can’t hear it over the muffled pounding in his ears. Makoto pins his thrashing frame with an embrace as Haru’s hearing slowly ebbs back to life. “Stop, stop, Haru! You’ll only make it worse!”

The distraught twist of emotion to his face makes Haru register who he is, staring as Makoto frames his face. “Look at me, Haruka, look at me,” he coos, following the wild dart of Haru’s bloodshot eyes. “I know it hurts, honey, I know –” his voice breaks with understanding, “but you have to try your best to stay still for them, okay? I won’t leave you, I swear to God, nothing in the world could ever take me from you.” His voice deepens with the most impassioned vow to ever be spoken.

Faces come into view, people in navy jackets with red crosses on the biceps. He flinches when a mask is settled over the lower half of his face. “Take a deep breath for me, sweetie,” a woman says, and Haru does because he doesn’t have a choice. “Good, one more. And another.”

Artificial oxygen makes him feel so full yet empty, but at least his lungs aren’t choked with smoke anymore. Awareness crawls back to him as his head rests in Makoto’s lap, fingers soothing as they card Haru’s hair back. Makoto’s voice ranges from an endless stream of praises to a slew of grief-stricken apologies when a paramedic runs cold water over Haru’s burned forearm, causing his face to twist around a relived wince. The man tells Haru that it’s only a second-degree burn, which makes Makoto deflate with thanks, even if Haru is too lost in shock to comprehend anything that’s going on.

When another paramedic sets his limp wrist, Haru’s focus sharpens with the throbbing ache. He blinks around, the world moving in slow-motion horror. His eyes lock on the pile of smoldering wreckage that used to be his house and it all comes back to him in a sickening lurch – the fire, the voice. Nii.

“Nii,” he chokes, lost to the wail of fire trucks. “Nii,” he tries again, throat swollen with so much emotion that it won’t let his voice escape. He’s restless with grief as his burn is dressed and held in place with tape, and after the paramedics nestle an oxygen tube in each nostril, they leave him alone with Makoto in the back of the ambulance.

Haru is lifeless on the gurney, not even responding as Makoto drapes a blanket over him – all Haru can do is stare, tears washing away the debris in his eyes. His voice is a rasp from the smoke. “You pulled me out of there.” It isn’t a question.

Makoto’s hand pauses in rubbing his cheek and Haru feels his fingers tremble. “The fire was still going when I got here. I couldn’t find you.” His features sink hopelessly, clothes reeking of ash that has stained him deeper than what eyes can see – it’s smothered all the light in his gaze. “I couldn’t find you,” Makoto whispers once more in the steely darkness of the ambulance, a cold morgue that he didn’t hesitate to follow Haru into. Makoto sits on his knees by the gurney and leans over to cling
to Haru, who made an army corporal, a decorated and respected soldier, surrender every ounce of his pride and strength in one fell swoop. “It was a thousand times worse than the fire that took my leg. I was caught in a flashback but as awful as it was… for once, the present was worst than the past.”

Haru claws him close and Makoto embraces him with a surge of possessiveness. He’s never been particularly unwilling to share, but right now he needs to cart Haru off to someplace quiet and secluded and kiss the breath from him. But it’s Haru who finds his lips in the steely shadows, breath rasping into a hungry growl as he licks warmth into Makoto’s mouth. He kisses Haru with a passion that makes his brows furrow to meet it, Makoto’s glasses meshing into the bridge of his nose, his oxygen tubes fumbling. Haru’s fingers ghost under Makoto’s shirt sleeves, feeling the rough, charred skin over his bicep. His forearm will heal into that same texture, but Haru doesn’t think he’ll find it as beautiful as Makoto’s scars. His voice crumbles. “You saved my life.”

Makoto breathes a laugh into the damp heat between their mouths. “You save mine every day.”

Haru rests their foreheads together, his face shattered in remorse. “What if you had been with me,” he croaks, voice strangled from the smoke. “You could have got hurt –”

“Oh, Haruka, don’t think like that.” Makoto presses an earnest kiss to his lips, then his mouth brushes Haru’s forehead with a softness that makes him ache from the inside out. “Just keep breathing for me, love, that’s all you have to do right now.”

Haru pulls him closer, absorbing everything about him, ignoring everything else. They stay like that until they hear a dog barking, and Haru looks out the back door windows to see Echo in her police vest, climbing the mountain of wreckage that used to be his house. Sousuke has her leash twisted through his fist.

Then the doors fly open, light flooding the ambulance as Rin tackles Haru for an embrace that hurts so good. Gou is crushed somewhere between them, along with Poseidon, who is covered in soot and meowing in annoyance. Haru pulls back and winces around a laugh as he strokes the kitten’s ears, then Gou’s hair.

The three of them stare at their crumbled home, watching it literally go up in smoke. Bitter acceptance hardens their eyes because times like these make a survivor’s resilience roar back to life – they have been pushed past their threshold of endurance before, but now they have each other to pull strength from.

Despite this, their grief is still so encompassing that they cannot even will tears into their eyes and their bodies do not have the power to even move, but somehow, Gou finds her voice. “We’ll be okay.” She nods to convince herself of her own words, but her sorrow catches up at her and a hollow sob catches in her throat. She lets Rin hold her before she pulls away, wiping stubbornly at her eyes and sniffing hard. “We’ll be okay,” she repeats, voice firmed with resolve, but her eyes are pleading for Rin and Haru to agree with her, to reassure her.

Rin frames her face to level their gazes, face set in conviction. “We’re going to be fine,” he vows. “All of us.” Haru nods to will away Gou’s anxious look.

The rest of Freebird shows up when Nao’s van comes barreling around the corner on two wheels, arriving not four minutes after Rin called to explain the situation. He parks among the maze of police cars and fire trucks before Aki stumbles out of the vehicle and flies into Haru’s arms, sobbing her relief. Asahi isn’t holding up much better, looking sick with horror when he sees Haru looking so
vulnerable and broken on a gurney. Natsuya is still with Nao – the whole family has come together in this time of need, at least it feels like it until Nao stiffens. “Where is Nii?”

Haru’s blood freezes. Aki leans back from hugging Rin to take out her phone, wiping her eyes as she does so. “She’s probably back at the apartment, sleeping.”

Nao arches a brow at Haru when he doesn’t say anything. “She was out with you last night, wasn’t she?”

Haru keeps his expression and voice in check. “Yeah, but she’s got to be exhausted.” He shakes his head at Aki when her call goes to voicemail. “Just let her sleep.”

Nao and Makoto’s gazes flicker to each other in confusion at Haru’s brusqueness, but neither of them call him out on it.

Echo barks three times in loud, urgent bursts as she paws at a stray floorboard. Sousuke bends down while putting on latex gloves and pries the floorboard back, frowning at the melted fuse box panel. Echo noses it and with careful hands, Sousuke maneuvers a piece of metal from the debris.

Seijuro steps out of his squad car and crouches beside Sousuke, squinting. “That’s a weird lookin’ bullet.”

“Son of a bitch,” Sousuke breathes, turning the bullet this way and that in the gray sunlight. He stands up and gestures sharply. “Mako!”

Startling a frown, Makoto comes over from the ambulance, tucking his fists into his army green jacket as the wind flutters through his hair. He meets Sousuke, the yellow caution tape between them, and Sousuke thrusts the bullet in his face, his voice low and rushed. Makoto’s eyes narrow behind his glasses and he studies the bullet, then freezes in realization. He nods, confirming whatever Sousuke’s wild speculation is.

Too nervous to sit still, Haru eases out of the ambulance to stand on wobbly knees with a blanket hunched over his shoulders. Makoto comes back to the group with his mouth firmed into a line, glancing around suspiciously, which makes Haru’s nerves quiver in all the wrong ways. “What is it?”

Makoto hesitates, eyes darting to Gou, and Aki takes the hint before guiding the girl to the paramedics so they can give Poseidon some water. Makoto regards Haru with his features strained. “Echo found a bullet in your fuse box. It’s an extreme version of a Radically Invasive Projectile – an exploding bullet.”

Rin wavers even as Asahi steadies him with an arm around his shoulder. Makoto dips his head, voice leveled. “I tested some prototypes right at the end of my last tour in the Special Forces. I tested how the bullet reacted as it passed through different mediums, studied the rate of failure at different zones along its axial length, measured the predictably of having it stay in one solid medium. Thing is, the bullets are still in testing, so the military isn’t using them, and Sousuke has never seen them used by the force before.” He shakes his head and adjusts the blanket around Haru’s shoulders with worry. “This bullet he found was ten times worse than anything I’d ever used.”

Asahi swallows. “How do they explode?”

“That’s a little complicated – even with my level of clearance, the specifics were vague. But the
bullets were meant to be used for, um… not buildings. Moving targets.” Meaning people. “If you’re shot with an R.I.P., it takes out your vital organs by opening separate wound channels, and, well…”

Nao pales as his medical knowledge fills in the blank spaces. “Your guts explode.”

“Right. So the fuse box acted as those, in this case.”

Seijuro rises up from where he was leaning into his squad car, cell phone tucked against his ear. He waves Sousuke over and mumbles something that makes him rake a hand down his face as he shakes his head. When Sousuke comes over to the group, he fumes a sigh. “Seijuro made a call. Not only were the bullets approved for police use, but that’s the only way they’re being distributed now. They’re not even in the military yet – army is still working on some different versions, so they’re not approved for use in the field yet. You can’t get these bullets at a regular gun-and-ammo shop.”

Makoto stills, his face draining pale. “So the only person who could’ve done it is a police officer.”

He eyes Haru warily, asking, “This is the part I didn’t want to know about, isn’t it?”

Haru gazes at him with open resolve. “I’ll tell you if that’s changed.”

Makoto’s muscles stiffen with conflict. He shakes his head with a sigh, hand rubbing soothing patterns across Haru’s back. “It can wait, but thank you.” Haru leans into the kiss he presses against his forehead.

The group turns at the sound of an oncoming car. The vehicle approaches the crime scene slowly and comes to a stop just close enough for Haru to make out the insignia on the side of the car, and his stomach drops.

The driver steps out, a woman whose steps echo through his head as the world falls into slow motion horror. The car’s insignia reads Iwatobi Foster Center and Haru recognizes the woman as Gou’s social worker.

Waves of nausea roll through him. Rin’s eyes light with the adrenaline of a gun battle and he instinctively pulls Gou a fraction closer – her fist is too tight, knotted in his shirt. With protection acting as his only strength, Haru goes to her and cups the back of her head, thumb stroking her temple, where her pulse is racing.

Haru remembers the woman’s name as Alisa and she’s wearing the same grey suit as the last time he saw her. She still holds the weight of the world in her shoulders and the same remorse in her dark eyes as she clasps her hands with a forced smile. “Hello, Gou,” she says, nodding to the others. Gou doesn’t smile back. “Rin, I’m so sorry about…” She glances in the direction of the house, but doesn’t directly look at the wreckage. “What happened. But I’m glad you’re all right, Haru.”

He nods faintly but doesn’t respond. Gou’s breaths come harder out of her nose, chest exerting with building panic. His hand smooths her hair again and her breaths lull slower.

Alisa doesn’t look like she wants to be here – her features sink in dread. “Rin, the police have confirmed this explosion as a deliberate attack. They have reason to believe you were… targeted.” She looks away from Rin’s piercing gaze, eyes moving to the ground as her mouth firms into a line. “Until this person is caught, no one can guarantee Gou’s safety.”

Rin stills to the point that Haru is sure his heart stops beating. “What are you saying?”
“The separation will be temporary,” Alisa assures, putting a firm hand on his shoulder, but Rin staggers back. She sighs in defeat, shaking her head. “I give you my word that she will not be put back into the system. She’ll only be at the foster center until the person is caught and you can assure me that you have somewhere safe to stay. Until then…” Her face sinks in regret. “She has to come with me, Rin.”

Numbness swells through Haru. Shock grips his senses, ears ringing at a fever pitch. His very life force, his motivation, everything he strives for, vanishes. He thought he knew hopelessness, but he has never felt as weak and pathetic as when Gou stares up at him and Rin, eyes begging for them to stop this – to be as strong and brave as she always thought they were, to be the idols worthy of the pedestals she put them on long ago.

Haru makes a last attempt to be what she deserves, saying to Alisa, “Gou wasn’t even home during the explosion. You can’t prove anyone was after her or Rin.”

Alisa inclines her head. “No, I can’t directly prove that, but her home was targeted.” He opens his mouth and she sees how desperate he is to sacrifice himself, so she cuts him off. “You can’t prove that anyone was solely after you either, Haru. There’s nothing any of us can do about the situation. Believe me.” She looks away and turns toward her car. “I’ll give you all a moment with her, but then we have to go.” She pauses in walking away. “I’m sorry.” Then she goes and doesn’t look back.

Rin’s eyes are wider than they have ever been. He’s not crying, he doesn’t retaliate, and it looks like everything inside of him is changing. Falling. If anyone is capable of dying from only a broken heart, it’s Rin, but nobody can pull strength out of empty spaces like him, and that is exactly what he does as he kneels down to Gou’s eye level.

She lets out a shuddering exhale, as though she held her breath throughout Alisa’s whole exchange. He takes her hands as the rest of the world falls away, narrowing down to only the two of them, because they were all each other had in the beginning and that is what it’s come back to at this end.

No, this isn’t the end, Haru vehemently tells himself, but everything about this moment is so final, from the swirling gray of the distant ocean, the crackle of dying flames from the wreckage, how Makoto’s hand is still on his back but he can’t feel it, can’t feel anything other than the most piercing sense of guilt.

Rin’s thumbs rub to warm Gou’s hands from the cold, and gradually, he finds his voice. “This won’t be like last time. You heard her, you’re not going back into the system. You’ll be right here in Iwatobi.” His voice breaks, just a hair-thin crack. “With me, still.”

Her face crumbles. “Where will you go?”

His eyes flood with tears that he blinks away fiercely as he adjusts her jacket. “Don’t worry about me.” He forces a smile that looks physically painful as he quickly braids her bangs back so they won’t stick to the dampness of her tear-stained face. “Even if I’m not with you, I’ll still be close. I’ll never leave you, Gou. I promised Dad I wouldn’t…” That hair-thin crack shatters, and if grief was a sound then it catches in his throat, as raw as a wounded animal bleeding out in front of this crowd of people who can’t do a damn thing about it.

“Onii-chan…” Rin doesn’t respond, bowing his head as tears drip off his nose, and Gou closes her eyes before they fly open with resolve. “Rin, look at me.”

Hopeless, his gaze tracks to her. Everything about her is crumbling, but even so, a broken smile takes
her face. “I’m smiling, see?” It takes all of her strength to keep smiling. “So you can’t stop smiling. We’re going to be okay. We always have.”

He holds her, enveloping her protectively as they rest their foreheads together. Haru isn’t sure who looks smaller in this moment, Rin or Gou, but they find the bravery in each other to pull away. Gou kisses Poseidon and holds him out to Rin. His heart shatters, Haru can see it in his expression, but he takes the kitten from a stone-faced Gou.

The girl turns to Haru and he sinks to his knees to embrace her. Against his ear, too quiet for anyone else to hear, she whispers, “It’s not your fault.”

Pain twists through him as he cups her cheek. “You’re the strongest person I know.” He levels their gazes, meeting all the fear hidden in the depths of her eyes. “You are strong enough for this – don’t lie to yourself. Don’t doubt it.”

His reassurance makes her gaze firm and she nods. He embraces her once more, breathing, “We’ll get you back no matter what.” She nods, knowing his voice as truth when nothing else is, and he speaks around the lump in his throat. “I love you.”

Tears spike her lashes. “I love you too, Haru-nii.”

Gou looks to the house, wrapping her arms around herself as she gathers her courage. She has a moment to herself as memories flood her eyes, gaze turning to the rest of Freebird. Then she looks away from them, the cabin, and steps over to her social worker.

Alisa smiles, tucking the phone away from her ear to say, “I’m just trying to find us a police escort, Gou –”

“I’ll take her.”

Surprised, Alisa turns to Sousuke with her brows raised. Gou all but runs to him and grabs his hand; Sousuke squeezes back fiercely. Gou blinks back tears, her voice firm as she tells Alisa, “I’ll ride with him.”

The woman considers, then nods slowly in a confused daze.

Like a funeral march, Gou walks over to the squad car and gets inside with Echo. Rin flinches when the door shuts and he’s still a crumpled heap on the ground, bowed over his knees. Sousuke walks over and crouches beside him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. Rin buries his face against his chest, body jolting with silent weeping, and Sousuke’s brows furrow over closed eyes as he whispers firmly against Rin’s ear, “You have to get up.”

Rin meets his eyes, drawing strength from his unwavering gaze. He lets Sousuke haul him up to stand on quivering knees and Rin leans on him, looking a thousand years old as he croaks, “Keep her safe.”

Sousuke cups his cheek, nods, then leaves.

The squad car goes with Alisa’s vehicle, leaving the group in the heaviest silence. Aki steps over to Rin and rubs his back, her face straining with urgency and conflict. Gently, she takes his elbow and whispers, “We have to go, Rin.”
Dazedly, Haru frowns. Aki is dressed in her work clothes, bare legs trembling in the cold, her dress tight and short under a lustrous fur coat. From the back of his mind, understanding races forth: Rin has a client waiting at Samezuka. Aki looks like she hates herself for having to remind Rin, but she’s also doing her best to keep him alive and not a victim of Miho’s wrath.

Haru steps forward with a thousand apologies heavy on his tongue. “Rin, I –”

Rin throws up a hand and it rips the voice straight from Haru’s throat. He leaves without another word and his silence cuts Haru deeper than a knife to the gut.

Distantly, he feels Makoto’s arm still around him, hears him murmuring about how Haru can’t blame himself. He blinks back to reality only when Nao pulls him away, his whisper rushed with urgency. “I just tried to call Nii. She’s not answering.”

The memory of her words strikes him back to life. It’s me or everyone else.

Nii was wrong. It’s always, always been Haru or everyone else.

He steels himself. “I’ll go look for her.”

Nao shakes his head rapidly. “Haru, you were just in an explosion –”

“I’m fine.” He shrugs off the blanket and tosses it back into the ambulance. Delicately, he takes off his oxygen mask and takes a lungful of smoky air. He breathes it out like he would cigarette smoke and meets Nao’s worried gaze. “I’m still our leader. I’m not leaving her out there alone.”

Nao’s brows go high and crease. “You just lost Gou.”

At long last, Haru’s voice breaks. “That’s why I can’t just sit here.”

Nao relents with a sigh, nodding. Quickly, they go over the plan with Asahi, and without faltering, Natsuya volunteers to go with Nao in search of Nii as well. That warms Haru’s heart in a moment when nothing else can.

He returns to Makoto, stepping into his embrace. Haru savors every beat of the heart under his cheek, the rise and fall of Makoto’s chest against his temple. “I need to be alone for a while.”

Makoto stiffens, leaning back as his eyes flare wide. “What? Haruka, you can barely stand –”

“I’m standing right now.”

Makoto mouths for words, then he scoffs. “Your house just exploded in an assassination attempt by a police officer. And with what just happened with Gou…” He shakes his head in remorse. “You’re not in your right mind, I’m sorry.”

Haru won’t argue with that, but that doesn’t change the fact that he must go right now. “Just for a while. Please.”

Hesitation chases conflict across Makoto’s face. “What if something happens to you?”

Haru doesn’t have it in him to come up with an excuse, so all he can do is let Makoto guide him over to his truck. Makoto glances around as he opens the door and leans over into the glove compartment.
He leans back and embraces Haru – he hugs back in confusion, stiffening when Makoto slips something into his back pocket. “That’s a Ruger LC380,” he breathes against Haru’s ear. “It’s one of the smallest carry options on the market, so it isn’t much fun to shoot, but my conscience is pretty fucked up right now and telling me to give it to you regardless of what you’re probably going to do with it.”

Haru stares in disbelief, making Makoto sigh and frame his face for a hard kiss. Their foreheads rest together as their eyes close to revel in each other. Makoto asks, “Will you need somewhere to stay when you come back?”

Haru strokes the sides of Makoto’s neck, tense and not wanting to ask such of him, but Makoto just smiles. “Would you be comfortable staying with me?”

“Of course I would,” Haru whispers, heart racing in delight at the thought of it. “But –”

“Really, Haruka, probably the only way I’ll get any sleep is if you’re there.” His voice is weighted in exhaustion and raw sincerity. “So please just come home to me when you’re finished with whatever you’re about to do.”

Haru freezes, speechless, before he surges against Makoto’s mouth. Makoto sighs against his mouth and cradles the back of Haru’s head, taking his lips in soft clutches of his own. Haru’s voice deepens with emotion as his fists knot in Makoto’s jacket. “I’ll come home to you,” he whispers.

When the police leave, Haru steps through the wreckage of the cabin, yellow ribbons of caution tape billowing in the wind. He digs for his phone and miraculously finds it in a pile of ash, the screen cracked and flickering. Haru stares down at the phone, startling when it vibrates to life. He answers it, breath rushing out in a swirl of frost. “Is she alive? Is Nii still alive?”

The voice warbles with electricity, a smirk curling the tone. “Yes. But you should be careful with that burn on your arm. Don’t let the tape peel away.”

Haru stares down at his wrapped arm, then toward the empty beach. He looks to the distant forest on the other side of the road and stares into the darkness of the trees with determination.

“I’ll come,” he vows. “Give me an address. I’ll bring you the leader of Freebird for Nii.”

Chapter End Notes

**Fan Thank You's:**

A massive thank you to **armlert** for a duel fanmix focusing on two different sides of ewoatt, **this** one focusing on the darker, sexual elements of the story and I had this baby on repeat throughout this chapter, including **the second mix**, focusing on the rare, bright moments of the story. Thank you so much for such creativity!

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Thank you to saedao for this depiction of Miho with her signature creepy smile!

And wow, wow, wow, thank you to Aileth for this haunting depiction of Halsey's "Gasoline," which was inspired by EWOATT. Thank you so much, I've listened to this countless times!
Reality is distorted at the edge of the forest, in the place between green-darkness and city lights. The tree line cages the sounds of the wilderness, while the noise of traffic bounces off of billboards and skyscrapers.

The voice tells Haru to go to the space in between all of this, to the grey strip of abandoned land where the old mills decay in their own personal graveyard. The forest casts a looming shadow over the abandoned complex; equipment rusts in silence as brick dust spirals through the wind. Haru takes a deep breath and tastes the forest – the air is crisp, heavy. Haunting. The nostalgia is sickening.

Haru remembers Pietro saying that the Bloodhounds took members of Diamond Back in this very location, but he doesn’t see anyone around. Cautiously, he wanders to the main building, the doors unhinged by looters looking for scrap metal or copper. Light cuts through the barred windows, dust flittering through the air. His footsteps echo through the yawning space and he notices a pack of dogs nosing through the trash, quivering on twig-thin legs. Though they are underfed, their spiked collars flash in the weak light, and when they catch Haru’s scent, their lips curl back as hungry foam drips from their teeth.

A whistle pierces the air, snapping Haru’s spine straight. The dogs stalk across the mill to loom protectively behind a figure. Haru tenses as they saunter forward and a woman steps into a cut of light, her blue eyes raking ice down his spine before the rest of her becomes visible.

It’s the woman from Samezuka that Haru stabbed. The leader of the Bloodhounds.

She is an eerie being, her presence as evoking as a wolf’s, but something about her is familiar – too close to home. Her eyes are weak, but her jaw still tightens, proving that she is someone who has been forced to survive the most primitive level of existence. Her natural grit is born of poverty, and hardship has left the promise of pain in every molecule of her being. Her gritty shirt is torn under a bulky jacket stained red at the sleeves – maybe from cutting up an animal to fend off starvation. Maybe from something much worse.

Her pants are thick to endure the brutal forest winters and her steel toe boots have dagger-like spurs not meant for kicking horses, but people. A metal sleeve wraps around each finger, narrowing into five sharp points – it’s a metal claw, Haru realizes, purposely left to rust so a slashed victim will fall sick with tetanus and die, regardless of if the actual cut was fatal. Everything about her is built for survival, even her hair, which is buzzed short to stay out of her eyes. The only piece of her attire that could be considered normal is an engagement ring glittering off the hand knotted in Nii’s hair.

She is collapsed on her knees and Nii doesn’t look like she could go anywhere even if the woman
didn’t have her by the hair. Her hands and feet are zip-tied, and when she raises her face to Haru, he sees that her teeth are bloody, eyes sunken in exhaustion and brimming with tears of relief, even as she opens her mouth to protest him being there. He shakes his head as gently as he can muster, silently telling her that there is nothing she can do to stop herself from being saved. She bows her head in defeat, just wanting to go home.

Haru stiffens when other figures come into view, but he is surprised that none of them appear to be from the outskirts like the woman. He recognizes members of Diamond Back in the finest clothes, though they are ruined. Evening gowns trail mud; suit sleeves are rolled up to bruised elbows. Girls from Honeyblade scratch over their scabbed arms restlessly as boys from Rough Rabbit twitch and curl their lips over and over again like they’re gnawing at something. They’re all cracked-out of their minds and none of their gang leaders are here. He doesn’t see Chigusa or Ikuya in the crowd either.

Haru is reeling in confusion when the woman with Nii snaps, “Who’re you?” Her voice is a thick drawl that he fights to keep out of his accent on a daily basis.

He steels himself. “Haruka Nanase. I’m here for Nii.”

She looks him up and down, head tilting. “You the kingpin?”

“Yes.”

Her features scrunch in bewilderment. She lets go of Nii’s hair to take out a phone and dial a number.

As she does so, Haru quickly raises his brows at Nii – are you okay?

Her head jerks into a quick nod, but she freezes at Haru’s bandages, the soot all over his clothes and the new bruises and scrapes across his face. He shakes his head, silently assuring that he’s all right as someone answers the woman’s phone call. “Yeah, the kid’s here,” she grunts, stretching her neck back and forth in exhaustion, her voice tight with the impatience to get some rest. “I’m ready to cut the girl free ‘n bounce.”

Haru’s heart leaps with a flare of hope, then the woman tenses. Slowly, her eyes cut to his.

“Whatchu mean, who’s wit’ him? Ain’t nobody wit’ him.” She jerks back as the person yells through the line, anger startling over her face. “Listen, motherfucker,” she barks, voice booming through the vaulted ceiling. “I ain’t playin’ none of these fuckin’ games no more. You got me out here without my people, tryin’ to keep your fuckin’ dope fiends in line. I got your boy here. Come and get ‘im.”

The voice shouts something back with ten times more ferocity than the woman ever dreamed of – fear drains her face pale, but her mouth twists into a snarl. With her rotten teeth gritted, she hisses to Haru, “Where’s Miho?”

He cranes back. Why the hell would anyone want Miho when Freebird rests on Haru’s shoulders? Freebird has the power to keep going if Miho falls, but not without Haru. Any gang leader, any cop or FBI agent, would know that the key to destroying Freebird is sinking a bullet into Haru’s skull, not hers.

At his reeling silence, the woman fumes a sigh and she almost sounds apologetic as her eyes flicker to Nii. “Shit ain’t gonna happen if you don’t got Miho.”
Haru shakes his head desperately, lunging a step closer. “I don’t know where she is, I’ll probably never see her again. She’s getting ready to run, she’s in hiding, I don’t know where she is, just take me!”

The woman’s lips part in disbelief, eyes flaring wide when Nii sobs, “Don’t, Haru.”

The woman shifts with conflict as Haru’s voice falls to a pleading rasp. “She’s sixteen.” He promised Nii he’d never tell that secret, but it might save her life in this instance. His fists tighten with impassioned resolve. “I know you don’t want to kill her.”

Her jaw hardens, eyes guarded, but Haru can see the hesitation swimming in their blue depths. “She’s a kid,” he whispers, gaze piercing hers. “She still has a chance. Don’t make her a victim like we are.”

The woman’s breath leaves her in a disbelieving rush. She exhales hard, fingers tightening around the phone still at her ear. The others stare at her avidly, their sunken eyes too big for their gaunt faces. They look at her like starved dogs, and Haru knows better than anyone that a hungry creature will eat anything – even the hand that feeds it. Meaning they’ll attack the woman if her superior tells them to. She’s in the same pot of hot water as Haru is.

Time itself freezes when the voice drones: “Just kill him, Ookami. Him and the girl.”

The woman – Ookami – slowly looks at Haru. “You know those little crackheads will kill you too if you don’t follow orders,” the voice taunts.

Loathing sinks into her face, skin flaring red. She breathes a laugh. “Nah, bitch.”

She hangs up and before the first man can race to claw her eyes out, she’s sunk a bullet in his skull and the man behind him. The two of them drop quicker than the next breath, the sound of her gun blast still echoing through the space as Haru’s jaw drops.

A girl lunges at Ookami’s back and she reaches around, digging her metal claws into the girl’s throat to flip her onto the concrete with a force that knocks her out instantly.

Ookami crouches behind Nii and the tear of a blade through zip-ties makes Haru gasp. Nii rubs the wrists of her freed hands in shock as Ookami stands upright and meets his wide gaze flatly. “Do whatcha want, I’m done takin’ orders.” As an afterthought, she hesitantly gestures to Nii. “Me ‘n my Bloodhounds didn’t have shit to do wit’ her. I’m real sorry about her.” She takes out a blade and weaves it through her fingers with a shrug. “Samezuka was all me, but he promised us a better life, if that makes any difference.” She reloads her gun with the quickest, terrifying accuracy. “But me ‘n you know there ain’t no better life for people like us.”

She runs out, the blast of her bullets startling Haru back to life. Another woman dives for Nii, but the girl whips a board across her face with a power that leaves her spinning to the ground. Before they know it, they’re lost in a fray of people fighting with desperate ferocity, but Haru hears Nii’s shout: “Haru, go after Ookami!” She grunts under the fist in her gut and hits back three times harder, fueled by rage. “The missing people are in the outskirts and she knows where! Go, I got this!”

Haru stumbles in Ookami’s direction, yanking hands off his vest, pulling fingers from his hair, ignoring the pain when strands go with them. He lunges through the doors and grey light sears him into temporary blindness. As his eyes adjust, his ears flex at the roar of a distant engine and he stumbles toward it, arms flailing when he trips and something sharp carves through the meat of his
thigh. His eyes clench shut when he hits the ground, feeling like his lungs burst on impact. He gropes for his leg, dread sinking into him as hot, red liquid spills between his fingers. His vision adjusts and he realizes he tripped over a saw blade, rusted brown with age but still sharp enough to cut through skin.

That engine turns over again and determination acts as Haru’s only strength to haul himself up and go stumbling after the noise, darkness eating at the edges of his vision each time he limps on his wounded leg. He rips through the trees, branches slashing his face. He breaks free and staggers into the road just as a car screams by so close and fast that the slipstream throws him on his ass. He makes out Ookami’s hair just over the headrest of the driver’s seat, her clawed hand outstretched through the open window, weaving through the air in disorienting slow motion. It looks like freedom.

The car disappears in a cloud of dust that he has no hope of following, so Haru rears around and rushes back for the mills, using tree trunks to stay upright as his leg spasms. He gets back to the complex in time to see the group of cars loading up with the wayward gang members, and when he catches sight of Nii unconscious in a man’s arms, Haru runs with every ounce of strength he has left, tearing through the dirt, firing Makoto’s pistol in blind rage. He shoots holes into the man standing over the trunk, but a woman slams it with Nii trapped inside, and Haru runs and runs after that car until he screams himself hoarse, until his vision goes dark.

He wakes under snow fall, shaking like a live wire in the cold. He rests his head in the cushion of snow for a brief moment, rubbing away the soft wetness of snowflakes over his feverish cheeks. His burned arm is throbbing, blisters weeping, but it feels like the cut down his thigh is truly on fire. He peels away the torn denim to see the skin red with infection, but it doesn’t start bleeding again until Haru hauls himself to his feet by clawing up a tree trunk. He rests his forehead against the bark, his features unraveling as a wolf howl pierces the night. It’s a sound that no longer fills him with grief-stricken rage – instead a thousand questions swarm his mind and newfound perseverance moves his feet in the direction of the cliffs near the commercial fishing zone.

He reaches the clearing Natsuya took him and the rest of Freebird to when they infiltrated Rough Rabbit mere days ago. He settles back against a boulder and closes his eyes.

He wakes up to Copper Gorge’s clay ceiling sprinkling red dust over him as a train zooms by above ground, shaking the hollow canyon that is Rough Rabbit’s base of operations. The cot he lies on is itchy, woven by rope and creaking when he sits up.

Natsuya lunges to his bedside, thrusting a canteen against his lips, and Haru drinks gratefully. The stale water is nearly hot from being kept in the canteen, but he swallows every drop, heaving when he is finished.

He looks down at himself and notices that his pants are gone, but he’s still got his boxers on and his bandages are fresh, save for the long line of red bleeding through the cloth. His burned arm is uncovered so the wound can breathe, but his blisters are oozing.

He shifts and hisses through gritted teeth, soreness aching through him. “Easy,” Natsuya soothes, putting a hand on his shoulder to ease him back over the pillows. “I had one of our medics treat you. She gave you a tetanus shot and stitched you back up. What in Christ’s name happened, Haru?”

Haru reaches for the crackers sitting on a mirror that acts as a plate. Natsuya sighs and hands it to him, watching in silence as Haru devours the stale food. When he’s eaten enough to remember how to speak, he croaks, “Does anyone know I’m here?”
Natsuya parts his lips. “I – no, I didn’t have time to call anyone. I was too busy trying to find you a medic. I just got back from hunting for Nii with Nao.”

Haru levels their gazes intently. “Does Nao know?”

“Know what?”

“He can’t know I’m here, Natsuya.”

Natsuya jerks like Haru’s words just snapped a bear trap around his heart. The air is so stifling that the muscled column of his throat is already glistening, and he gets up in a burst of frustration to stalk to the nearby sink. The faucet splutters before it spits russet water – it bleeds clear after a few moments and Natsuya rakes a damp rag across his neck, rubbing it over his tired eyes.

Haru glances around and assumes he’s in Natsuya’s chambers, which are carved into the side of the mountain, rather than confined to a boxcar. He still has the basic necessities, such as the light of a hanging bulb and a stovetop. There’s a table with a tattered cloth over it, and none of the chairs match but they’re all wooden, carved ornately – probably souvenirs from his days of hustling the richest of Iwatobi. His cot is so uncomfortable that it’s a thing of medieval torture, but Haru is sure that the stress of leading Rough Rabbit makes for a deep sleep every night. He glances to the bedside table and notices a sketch set in a dusty picture frame – a charcoal drawing of Nao’s profile, his features young and soft. Before everything fell apart.

Natsuya meets Haru’s eyes in the cracked mirror over the sink. “What’s going on, Nanase?” His voice is stern. Natsuya never had time for bullshit and that’s something Haru missed about him.

He looks away. “I can’t put that on you. You shouldn’t have to lie to Nao.”

“Why do you have to lie to Nao?” Natsuya throws his hands out. “Why do you have to lie to anyone?”

Haru’s lips quiver open. The memory of Nii sinks into his bones, weighing him down like six feet of dirt. “I don’t want anyone else to get hurt,” he whispers.

He hears Natsuya sigh. Haru looks up in surprise as Natsuya flops down on the other end of the cot, crossing his arms with a stubborn frown. They listen to the pulse of a train overhead as Natsuya gathers his thoughts. “I understand the need to sacrifice yourself. I sincerely do.” His smirk is almost pitying. “But you could never die a martyr, Nanase. Your death wouldn’t make anyone stronger. Rin would gut Miho in the street if you died, whether or not it was by her hand.” He shrugs thoughtfully. “Killing her would take care of our ultimate problem, but Rin would go to prison because losing you and Gou… his cop might try to save him, but Rin’s a force of nature and his grief would be uncontrollable. Aki would be a shell of a person for the rest of her life – Freebird is her heart, walking outside of her body, and without it she would perish at twenty-three, even if she lived to be eighty.”

Natsuya shakes his head mournfully. “Asahi would have a nervous breakdown that I don’t know he would able to come back from. Nii would no longer have anyone that she is striving to be like. Neither would Gou.” Emotion breaks his voice. “Neither would Ikuya. And Nao loves you, even all those monsters in your head, and I would try my best to pull him back from whatever dark path your death would send him down.” He levels their gazes. “But that’s nothing to say of how it would destroy me. Or your boyfriend, for that matter.”
Haru bows his head, humbled. “Thank you, Natsuya, but I’m really not trying to die.”

He snorts. “Could have fooled me.”

Haru doesn’t retaliate, but he shakes his head. “What I’ve done behind everyone’s back, not only am I doing it for them, but I’m doing it for me, too.” He speaks with open adoration. “I love my boyfriend and I will have a life with him. I’ll get Gou back to Rin even if I have to do it as a ghost, but I’m selfish and want to be there, so I’ll be alive for the day Rin gets her back.” He shakes his head once more, firmly this time. “No death is worthy of what I’ve fucking been through. Not for another seventy years, anyway. I’m going to be free and that’s the only reality I’ll accept.”

Natsuya relaxes a bit, shoulders dropping as he breathes easier. He nods hesitantly. “All right, then. I’m… glad to hear it.” He gazes at the sketch of Nao before chuckling. “Though, there’s one thing you must understand. Even if I agree to keep secrets from Nao, there is no feasible way I could do it successfully.” He arches a brow over a smirk. “There is a reason Diamond Back called him the Viper. He, too, is a snake. You’ve just never seen it. He can taste lies in the air the moment you’ve spoken them.” His eyes widen with emphasis. “And I’m not being poetic. I’m serious. So…” He takes a steadying breath. “Just don’t tell me too much. I will try to help the best I can.”

Haru’s eyes dart as his brain scrambles. “Okay, I’ll leave it at this: I need a way into the outskirts. The Bloodhounds have gone rogue; they’re not working for the snitch in the police department anymore.”

Natsuya frowns. “So who will be doing his dirty work now?”

“I think the snitch has drugged the gang members who were taken. I… I saw some of them. He’s got them addicted to something, and won’t give them their fix unless they work for him.”

“Shit,” Natsuya breathes.

“I think the Bloodhounds may want to fight him. They might even let out the missing people they’re keeping prisoner in the outskirts.”

Natsuya leans forward with hunger, pressing his fingers together intently. “Go on.”

“I came to you because I need to know if you able to find those old railroad blueprints. I need some sort of path through the forest so I don’t just stumble into the Bloodhounds’ camp and get ambushed.”

Natsuya rakes a hand through his hair with frustration. “No, I’ve searched every inch of this place. I even journeymed the entirety of that skeleton subway system. I have no way into the outskirts, I’m sorry.” He stands up, body radiating the heat of self-loathing, and stalks to a dusty bottle of amber liquor, swallowing the liquid fire. He savors the burn, brows furrowing before inspiration strikes him and his eyes fly open.

Haru lunges upright. “What is it?”

Natsuya parts his lips before they firm into a line. Stubbornly, he pours up another shot in a small, clay bowl. “It’s not a feasible plan; doomed to fail.”

Haru grips the bedpost in an earnest fist. “Natsuya, I’ll try anything for Nii. For Ikuya. Please.”
Natsuya’s eyes fall shut under the weight of grief. He takes a deep breath, strong pectorals expanding. His exhale comes out as a sigh and he flops back on the cot with his dusty bottle of liquor, taking a swig before offering it to Haru, who has a life in which he could always use a stiff drink. The alcohol warms the lingering chill in his bones as Natsuya’s voice ventures. “Nao told me that you’ve come to some sort of treaty agreement with Pietro.” He says the name like it burns him, like there are flames licking at his tongue.

Haru nods, tension fizzling out of his muscles as a honeyed buzz slows everything down. “He wants us to find the Bloodhounds and in return, he’ll find the snitch in the police department.”

Natsuya’s scowl firms. “So everything is riding on me telling you this?” He meets Haru’s gaze pleadingly. “I need you to tell me that.”

Haru tenses. “Yes?” His voice is laced with caution.

Natsuya takes a longer sip from the bottle before speaking. “You know what kind of man I was before Freebird. A con – the very best. I was so good that I started hustling Diamond Back, made them think I was as rich and ignorant as the lot of them. I even rubbed elbows with Augustine De Vitis.”

A dull bulb flickers to life in Haru’s head. “Pietro’s father.”

“Yes, the previous leader of Diamond Back. Augustine had a hunting lodge in the outskirts.”

Haru blinks in confusion before realization strikes him, and he surges to grab Natsuya’s arm. “Do you remember where it was? Wait –” His brows scrunch. “If that’s true, then why the hell isn’t Pietro using it to find the Bloodhounds?”

“Because Augustine was murdered at the lodge. Nobody has been out there ever since – no one is allowed to. Pietro doesn’t even go.” He levels their gazes, folding his hands with intent. “But if you can convince Pietro that using the lodge is the key to finding the Bloodhounds, his pride will get the best of him and he’ll tell you where it is.”

Haru rises to a stand with determination – tries to, anyway. His leg spasms in protest and Natsuya goes to help but Haru’s hand flies out to stop him. He pulls himself to his feet all on his own, and then his steely gaze meets Natsuya’s. “I’ll need pants.”


He gives Haru some clothes, a pair of black jeans like the ones Haru has at the cabin.

Had at the cabin.

Natsuya gives him enough knives to fill up his vest pockets and a backpack that carries two pistols (as many as Rough Rabbit could spare in the gang war), some extra clothes, a first aid kit in a tiny, metal box, and a canteen of water with a bag of soda crackers.

Haru zips up his backpack as a thought strikes him, heart clenching with longing. He pulls his phone off of Natsuya’s charger and swipes his thumb over the shattered screen, flakes of broken glass prickling his finger. He texts Makoto: I’m okay. With Natsuya. I’ll be home later. He sends it and goes to put his phone away, but the ache in his chest gets the best of him and he sends another
I miss you.

The reply is instant. *Then come home soon, idiot.*

Natsuya glances over Haru’s shoulder and reads the message, a chuckle startling to life. “He doesn’t take your shit,” he muses, lips curled in a handsome smirk. “I think that’s what you’ve always needed.”

Haru tips his head in question and Natsuya struggles to clarify. “Someone... *separate* from all of this.” He gestures to the chambers, indicating Rough Rabbit and all the gangs in general. He smiles with disbelief. “Today was the first time I saw you with him and... you looked at him as though he was your first breath when your head’s been drowning. He surprised me in the best of ways.”

Haru smirks tiredly. “I know the feeling.”

“It can be difficult to be with someone trapped in the same situation.” He fondly traces the sparrow tattoo on his hand. “When we first started with Miho, Nao and I didn’t want to burden each other with the fears that come with this lifestyle, so we both turned to drugs instead.” His eyes fall distant with memory. “We were both so scared that we didn’t even have the words to tell each other just how terrified we were. At least, that’s the excuse we used. Addiction will drive an uncrossable rift between you and the people you love.” His smile twists in apology. “But you already know that. You’ve been clean for what, five years now? That’s admirable, Haru.”

He shakes his head as he adjusts his backpack. “I still lust for it. It’s like my veins itch.”

Natsuya nods with exhaustion. “Shit, I know what you mean. I haven’t even been clean for a fraction of your track record and it’s a constant battle. I could sit on the couch all day, not doing anything, and it would still be considered a war, not going back on the needle. But with all of this going on?” He nods out his chamber exit, the war right outside his door, and scoffs. “It’s a constant battle and I’m barely making it out alive.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “I don’t know how Nao was able to do it. I’m so proud of him for getting clean.”

“We all were.”

Natsuya smiles briefly, but it slips away as his features sink into darker thoughts. His lips part to say something, but Haru already knows what he wants to ask. Tension swells in the air as Natsuya licks his lips, his voice heavy from holding back this question for so long: “Do you know what happened to his eye?”

Haru swallows down the bile that rises with that sickening memory. His expression is answer enough, but Natsuya waits intently, crossing his arms tighter across his chest. “He gets angry when I try to ask. Vehemently angry. He only gets like that when he’s trying to lie for the sake of my feelings.”

“Then you already know what happened. You just need me to say it.” His fingers clench around his backpack straps. “I don’t have the strength for it, I’m sorry.”

Slowly, Natsuya’s brows raise. His entire being stills. “Miho –” Haru jumps when he sends the whiskey bottle flying, shattering it into a thousand pieces, just like Natsuya’s heart. “She did that to him? *Because of me?*”
Haru shakes Natsuya by the shoulders rigorously. “Stop it, listen to me. I know it’s hard to come to terms with and you probably never will, but Nao thought you were worth the sacrifice.” Natsuya’s growl is pained, but Haru meets all the murderous fervor of his eyes. “Don’t go off hunting for Miho and get killed – *be worth his sacrifice*.”

Natsuya looks like he wants to fly into a blind rage, but he sighs and collapses in a chair. He hides his face in his hands before raking them through his hair. “Go,” he says roughly, nodding in encouragement. “Call me if you need back up.” He musters a weak smile. “You have someone very special to get home to.”

Resolve surges through Haru as he leaves.

When he’s gone, Natsuya gropes for his phone in the dim light. Nao answers on the last ring, voice thick and sweet with sleep. “What now?” Though he tries to sound annoyed, Natsuya can hear the smiling pout in his tone.

It makes him curl a tired smirk. “Nothing, I only missed you.”

Nao yawns a laugh. “*Mm, I suppose I could endure you for a little while longer if I had to.*” Now the smile has no dream of being hidden from his voice.

“Would you venture to say you could endure a night or two at Rough Rabbit?” Or three nights. Or three years, however long it takes for them to be able to walk down the street without being armed.

Nao sighs. “*I can take care of myself, you know. I’ve been doing it for quite some time.*”

“I know,” Natsuya promises. “And you have got a *ravishing* left hook darling, but I really don’t think you should have to take care of yourself all the time.” He tucks the phone between cheek and shoulder as he sweeps up broken glass. “And we *are* married, you know. It’s a bit harsh to make your husband sleep alone, miles below the surface of the earth trapped in a never-ending heat wave, encased in a clay ball valued at the equivalent of fucking elephant dung.”

Nao startles a laugh that still makes Natsuya’s veins light up after all these years. “*Well, how can I refuse when you’ve told me what a ghastly situation you’re in? Poor thing.*”

Natsuya nods his head mournfully, chin resting on the broom handle. “*Yes, it is profoundly terrible. I truly may perish if you aren’t here in mere minutes so that we may partake in numerous assorted debaucheries.*”

Nao chuckles over the sound of his van engine spluttering to life. “*All right, I’m on my way.*”

When he gets there, the cavern is lit with cooking fires, tents and sleeping bags rippling with the breeze lulling through the open ceiling. Natsuya swears that the stars above pulse brighter when he embraces Nao. Since every day that Rough Rabbit goes without losing someone is a celebration, there’s wine out, and children dance in the firelight as an old record player croons Italian love songs. Natsuya makes Nao dance, sweeps him up in his arms and gets more drunk off the heat of his skin than the alcohol singing through his veins. Nao *laughs* when Natsuya dips him, the sound breaking into a sigh when Natsuya purrs those foreign lyrics against his ear.

When the party winds down and most of Rough Rabbit has passed out, they sway in the flickering embers with Nao’s cheek snuggled against Natsuya’s heart. “*I’m so worried for Nii.*” He admits it
quietly, voice low and vulnerable when it’s only the two of them.

Natsuya’s heart twists, lips fitting against Nao’s temple. “I am as well.” He leans down to frame Nao’s face, sweeping his hair back. “But you’ll do her no good if you continue to run yourself ragged.” He raises his brows pointedly. “Which is a terrible habit of yours, I might add.”

Nao doesn’t disagree. He sighs, resting his forehead against Natsuya’s and whispering, “I’d like to stop thinking for a while.” He gazes up at him pleadingly with a sparkle of hope in his eye.

Natsuya purses his lips around a smirk and guides Nao by the hand to his chambers. Nao sweeps the curtain back and takes in the space in the weak glow of tea candles. He shrugs off his coat and smiles over his shoulder. “It’s much warmer down here than the rest of Iwatobi. I like it.”

Natsuya hums in response and steps into him, hugging him from behind. Their blood purrs at the intimacy and Natsuya skims his nose down the side of Nao’s neck, lips grazing the flesh, remembering its taste. “Take your clothes off for me,” he breathes.

A surprised flush pulses over Nao’s face, lips hiking into an incredulous smirk. “You should have told me you were so eager. I would have gotten here sooner.”

Natsuya chuckles. “I’m always eager for you.” He presses a line of kisses down Nao’s throat and makes him stretch out his neck in surrender to the sensation. Natsuya holds him a fraction tighter, lips murmuring against skin. “I should tell you that I love you more often.”

Surprise flares off Nao but Natsuya doesn’t falter, lifting his hands to stiff shoulders and kneading the tension away. “I should show you that I love you more often.” He presses his nose against Nao’s hair, inhaling and absorbing everything about him. “Let me show you.”

Nao can only part his lips for Natsuya’s kiss and tip his head back as Natsuya opens his jaw to tease his tongue inside. Their fingers tangle together, playing along the coy edge of playfulness, that lost sliver of young love innocence they never got to bask in long enough. Their bodies collide in a frantic passion, locking together like magnets as they fall onto the bed with Natsuya’s hand cradling the back of Nao’s head. Every kiss is heartfelt, each touch heavy with reverence, and desire pulses between them as they lose their clothes like their garments have caught on fire.

When their bodies finally join, Nao screams like he’s dying because Natsuya’s rendered him to such weakness, he’s teased him for so long. Natsuya grits a curse and his fingers dig bruises into Nao’s hips, guiding them into a rhythm that blinds Nao with pleasure. His arms and legs embrace Natsuya, sitting in his lap as their eyes close to revel in each other. Every sound Nao makes is broken, crumbling, and it’s scary what Natsuya would do to stay buried in the heat of him forever.

He flips them over, their lips grazing in a delirious slide as he pins their intertwined hands over Nao’s head. His teeth snag his lower lip as tension pulses hotter between them, and Natsuya breathes heat into the shell of Nao’s ear and chants his name like a prayer before they both go over the edge.

When it’s over and all that’s left is a tangle of sheets and dying candlelight, Natsuya traces the shape of Nao’s lips, turning them up into a languid grin. But the expression falls away when Natsuya trails a finger down the strap of his eye patch, nauseous dread rolling across Nao’s face.

Natsuya apologizes through kisses against his forehead, his cheeks and hands, but Nao sighs in defeat. He looks small and vulnerable in Natsuya’s arms as he whispers, “You shouldn’t feel sorry about it.”
Natsuya didn’t even have to say that he had realized it was his fault Nao lost his eye – Nao just knew. But how could he not, when they’re connected on such a level?

Natsuya cups his cheek, thumb sweeping and mournful. “I want to be worthy of what you sacrificed.”

Nao’s brows twitch together with annoyance and he flips them, pinning Natsuya’s hands over his head so their gazes must meet. Nao shakes his head firmly. “You were always worthy of me, Natsuya Kirishima. You still are.”

Natsuya’s smile is pained. “I do not enjoy disagreeing with you.”

“Mm, but it’s not really your choice whether I think you’re worthy or not. Sorry.”

Natsuya lets out a frustrated jet of air through his nose and Nao sits up, his borrowed shirt hanging low under his dainty collarbones. The shape of Natsuya’s teeth is a dark imprint on the side of his throat. “I never understood why it’s so surprising,” Nao muses, amber shadows shaping to the irritated twist of his mouth. “Why I ‘sacrificed’ myself for you. I married my first kiss. Whatever souls are made of, yours and mine are the same.”

Tears startle into Natsuya’s eyes, his whisper scandalized. “Don’t you dare quote Wuthering Heights at this hour of the night, you magnificent scoundrel –”

Nao laughs against his lips, taking them in a sensual clutch of his own. “What I’m saying,” he whispers, “is that you’re my life.” Natsuya gazes up as Nao’s brows furrow with reverence. “Of course I’d do anything for you to be happy. Even if that cost my own happiness, or money, security, I’d give up anything for you. Even the breath in my lungs, Natsuya, because you would do the same.” He snorts, lazing his arms around Natsuya’s neck. “Though I’m sure you’d do it with more theatrical dramatics and no short amount of poetic gusto.” He pecks his lips and snuggles into his chest. “Everything I married you for.”

Natsuya’s hands hover over him, motionless, speechless. Then he surges around Nao, embracing him and trying to convey all his love through a mere hug. “I love you,” he nearly moans, overcome with emotion.

Nao smiles, real and true. “I love you as well.” He yawns and rubs Natsuya’s bare abdomen, tracing the planes of it. “Have you been to sleep yet?”

Natsuya grimaces. “Ah, not really. I had a bit on my mind.”

A smirk curls Nao’s tone. “Well, that won’t do.”

Natsuya frowns as Nao sits up in his lap, shifting backwards. “What are you – oh, fuck…”

Nao grinds Natsuya back inside, whipping the air from his lungs. Nao’s voice is breathless with a grin. “What were you saying?”

“Nothing,” Natsuya wheezes. “Not a shitting thing.” He arches off the bed while his eyes roll back and Nao’s laugh rings through the room before it breaks into a moan. Natsuya surges upright and their lips collide like a storm; they fall back into their passion as though no heartache occurred between their first kiss and their present one.
Pietro opens his eyes to find Haru Nanase standing over him with a pistol.

His eyes blink wider as they follow the trail of blood across the bedroom floor to Haru, who looks like he’s *bathed* in red, dripping with it. The blood compliments the blueness of his eyes – a true, beautiful monster. It’s been years since Pietro’s seen him this far gone.

A little impressed, Pietro arches a brow, noticing that the boy is heaving from the exertion of a fight. “Did you kill my guards?”

Haru bears the weight of his sins well, his pistol not wavering as it presses harder between Pietro’s eyes. “Yes.”

“I see.” Pietro’s voice is empty of all emotion, even anger. “And what of my medical personnel?”

“I let the nurse go.”

“Thank you.” He means that – his nurse has a warm soul.

His heart monitor is an insistent beep in the tense silence. The IV needle is an ache at the crook of Pietro’s elbow and all his medications are still lined up on the nightstand, so Haru’s visit isn’t a robbery. How *curious.* “And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

“I need access to your father’s hunting lodge in the outskirts.”

Pietro’s eyes cut into a glare. “No.”

Haru cocks his gun. “Yes.”

Pietro’s fists clench the bed sheets. His breath is pure heat as he exhales, then he levels himself with a poised smile. “If you would be so kind?” He gestures for his IV stand a few feet away.

Haru’s brows scrunch in confusion and Pietro’s accent thickens with a flare of impatience. “I’d like to go get a drink to take some medicine, my fucking insides are on fire. Or just go ahead and put me out of my misery.” He spreads his arms mockingly, giving Haru’s pistol clear range to sink a bullet into his heart.

Haru glances from the IV stand to the needle in Pietro’s elbow, something like *understanding* passing over his face. He relents, wheeling the stand closer so Pietro can use it to haul himself out of bed. He cages a pained noise behind gritted teeth, marveling how his body can be so weak yet still be strong enough to feel so much agony.

He wills his head to stop spinning and slips into a silk robe and slippers, doing it all with one hand since his right arm ends in a stump where that hand used to be. He shoves the stump into a robe pocket and leans on the IV stand as he guides Haru through the mansion.

Their steps echo through the home, which overflows with luxury, but is empty of other inhabitants. They go to the kitchen, where moonlight flares over white granite countertops. Pietro goes to the wine fridge and pulls out a bottle of something that probably costs more than most houses in Iwatobi. He pops it open and pours himself a glass in a tall flute, then swallows a handful of pills with it. He grimaces as they cut down his throat. “I have not even thought of that hunting lodge in years.” He sighs, taking a nostalgic sip of his wine as he gazes about the room. “I’ve been here alone for so
long, I can admit that the silence haunts me at times. My father often snuck his mistress in at this hour. Perhaps that’s why my mother killed him.” He shrugs easily as he takes another drink. “Perhaps that’s why I killed her.”

Haru’s face is stoic, his aimed gun still not wavering. “Was that supposed to surprise me?” His mouth twists in disgust. “I’ve always known how fucked up you are.”

Pietro leans forward with hungry excitement. “Oh, have you?” A thought strikes him and the crazed glint in his eye dims. “Nao told you everything about his time in Diamond Back, I’m sure.” His smile is heavy with sorrow. “This house was much different when Nao was here.”

He stands by Haru and leans back against the island, making him tense when Pietro sweeps his hand out in a grand gesture. “Just picture it, Haru. The young viper on the brink of eighteen years, walking over every man and woman that threw themselves at his feet.” His voice curls with a taunting smirk. “You cannot picture it, can you?” He chuckles darkly. “Real monsters make their masks their true faces – don’t forget that.” He goes to the sink and runs water over a cloth before sliding it to Haru. “No need to wear your mask here. I know what you are whether or not you’re covered in blood.”

Haru’s nostrils flare with agitation, but he rakes the cloth over his face, seeming surprised when red stains the white. Pietro’s smile is toxic. “You are much like Nao, impressive without striving to be such.” His eyes fall distant with memory. “He was so bored with luxury. Not challenged, even with me. We grew up together and he had always bewitched me, but he only joined Diamond Back to please his father.” His voice fades. “Not even me. Though, we were always meant to be together, politically, anyway. Nao’s father wanted power; my father thought Nao was good for me. It was a perfect match.” Bittersweet honey drenches his words. “Too perfect. I did not want to marry him because… we have a way of life, you see. There is no loyalty in our marriages and I quite liked Nao. I did not want to hurt him like I would have to.”

Angry heat flares off of Haru’s skin. “You shouldn’t have to hurt anyone you love.”

Pietro offers him a coy head tilt. “You’re saying you are unfamiliar with the concept?” He laughs at Haru’s guarded look. “Come now, Haru, lies are how men like us survive.” He levels their gazes, searing black against blue steel. “Lies are how the people we love survive, no?”

Haru thinks about Makoto that night at Samezuka, and the countless other times he dripped poison off his tongue to keep him safe. Haru looks away.

“I’d dare to say you learned how to lie from Natsuya.” Just speaking the name makes him down the rest of his wine and pour another glass to wash away the aftertaste of the word. “He’s oozing with determination and charm. A deadly combination, even I will admit as much. When he first showed up, everyone wanted him. Everyone but Nao.”

He crosses his arms tightly, cradling his stump over a forearm. “The first time I caught wind of him, I was at a party and happened to hear his conversation with the prettiest rentboy.” He curls a wicked smirk at the dangerous clench of Haru’s fists. “Natsuya was staring at Nao and asked Rin, is that Pietro’s boy? Rin told him yes, and I remember –” A muscle twitches in his jaw. “I remember that look in his eyes, that slow smile. Natsuya told Rin, not for long. I should have spilled that stronzo’s guts that night, but I didn’t. I was arrogant. I was so sure than nothing could impress Nao.”

He sighs, shrugging miserably. “I was right, at first. Nao saw through his façade like he did with everything else.” He circles the rim of his glass with a sincere look of pity. “The life of Diamond
Back, the motions of it… they were especially hard for Nao. When he went to his mother about his troubles, she gave him cocaine to get through the gatherings his father forced him to go to. But nothing could save him because nothing could stop it. I was not there for Nao when he stood on a balcony at a masquerade many years ago, but Natsuya was, and I will forever owe him a debt for that.”

Haru reels at the honesty deep in his voice. “He told Nao he was not there to stop him,” Pietro continues. “He was only outside to smoke.” He laughs in disbelief. “His nonchalance is what broke Nao, made him confess his fear of being trapped in this life forever. Natsuya did not hesitate to tell Nao that he was smarter than all of us, and he could make a way. So Nao tried to get down but he slipped. Natsuya caught him, though I heard the scream. I ran outside and Nao insisted that he had merely slipped *accidentally* and Natsuya saved him. That is what got him into my circle.”

He takes a contemplative sip of his wine. “Even I was impressed with Natsuya. Here he comes out of thin air, charming the diamonds off of women and catching the eye of my own father. He is what made Nao venture into the city… where he met you.”

Haru remembers that night at the bar so long ago. He was still on heroin and Rin was still homeless, making money in bathroom stalls and alleyways. He had offered Nao sex that night, remembering that he had seen him at Diamond Back festivities – Rin knew he had an overflowing bank account. But Nao was the first person to ever decline Rin, and something about his sincerity made Rin bring him over to the rest of the group. Asahi had been there, as had Aki, but this was back when Rin still didn’t like Nakagawa because he was always stealing competition, so Kazuki wasn’t there. Nobody had even met Nii yet. But Haru remembers that struggling was different when they all were younger – they still felt ruthless and immortal.

Natsuya was the oldest, so reality hit him a bit harder than everyone else. He had showed up to that party stressed out of his mind, not knowing how his mother was going to get the bills paid. Nao made his worries slip away. Something was so intimate about the way they merely gazed at each other. Haru never could have guessed the connection was born from Natsuya talking Nao down from a balcony.

Though the details of that night are blurred, Haru remembers with startling clarity that Natsuya and Nao got drunk together, and Natsuya was arrested the next day for stealing and selling Nao’s watch at a pawn shop to pay the bills. Natsuya confessed his reasoning and Nao dropped the charges, but told him to never speak to him again.

“Around that time, my father was killed,” Pietro says. A shadow haunts his face. “I immediately went to Nao.” He swallows thickly in the silence between them. “My father did not love me, but I swore to Nao that I would learn for him.” He clenches his fist, bowing his head mournfully. “I sealed his doom that day. His father found out and Nao had no choice but to accept my terms; he was moved into my estate within hours. His father wanted too much power to allow Nao to be happy.

“I thought I could be enough for him, but life had me by the throat. I spent more time trying to run Diamond Back than with him. So I wasn’t home the day the mail ran and Nao found an envelope with his watch and a note enclosed: _figured you would want this back more than the money._”

He scowls. “Nao went looking for him, ended up in a dangerous part of town and Natsuya saved him yet again. I was still gone so Nao invited him in. They fucked in my bed. Natsuya knew all of Nao’s favorite stories, could quote lines of _The Iliad_ so effortlessly that it swept Nao right off his feet.
“But his father cut off his savings in the hope that it would urge him to marry me quicker. Nao worked at his father’s hospital, you see. The man went as far to say he was caught abusing drugs while on the clock – that way, Nao could not get another job in the medical field and he would not be able to support himself. I was his last option. Which wasn’t exactly a compliment, but it was enough for me.” His mouth firms into a line. “Not for Nao, though. He was devastated. He loved helping people.”

Haru remembers that as well. In those first months of Natsuya and Nao getting together, Natsuya couldn’t stop talking about him – how he worked at the hospital and was the smartest person alive. He was the first thing Haru thought of when Rin got stabbed in a hit-and-run – *that rich boy Natsuya was head over heels for, he was a doctor or something.*

Nakagawa had been the one to find Rin, so Kazuki was there when Haru showed up at their hotel room with Nii, who was fresh off of heroin and half-feral. Aki was a mess and so was Asahi. Nitori was still in medical school, so he was having trouble stopping the bleeding, and that’s when Natsuya burst in with Nao in tow. That was the night their family truly came together.

Nao started spending more time with them with the excuse that he needed to check up on Rin, but even Haru knew that Nao was in a bad situation at home. Pietro can act like the scorned ex-lover all he wants – Haru remembers the finger-shaped bruises around Nao’s wrists, his neck. It doesn’t mean fuck if Pietro’s father didn’t love him; that’s not an excuse to beat someone.

Pietro came looking for Nao once, demanding that he come home, and Haru remembers the hell-light that poured into Natsuya’s eyes. “*The next time you lay a hand on him will be the last time you have a hand.*”

But Nao had not wanted anyone to get hurt, and he knew that if he saw Natsuya again, Pietro would kill him. So Nao went with him that night and Haru nor anyone else saw Nao for *months.* Pietro kept him confined to the mansion, didn’t even let him go outside, he was so crazed with jealousy. At long last, he went on a business trip, and it was Haru who called Natsuya when he was out dealing for his dad and saw Pietro’s caravan of SUVs headed for the airport. Natsuya went to Nao and spent a whole week with him, but when Pietro came back and he realized that he could not save Nao, he felt hopeless on top of helping his mother with bills and constantly bailing his father out of jail. It was around that time that Natsuya started using heroin.

But Pietro went on more business trips and Nao came around more. He was snorting a constant line of cocaine at this point, just trying to survive sharing a life with Pietro, but he and Natsuya were still happy.

Pietro stares down at the floor. “There was only a flicker of life left in his eyes and it was not for me. He had to drug himself just to sleep with me. He overdosed and I… let him go. I refused to give him money, but I vowed not to follow him. That was when he moved in with Natsuya.”

Haru remembers – that was probably their happiest time as a family, before Miho. Even if he and Rin were living at the soup kitchen, all of them were *free.*

But they still had their troubles. Ikuya was getting bullied at school and needed to move systems, but the only one left in the district was a private school, which came at a ridiculous cost of tuition. That was when Haru found someone who could triple the profit of drug dealing.

Miho.
Nao hadn’t wanted to at first, and he and Natsuya got in a huge fight about it when Natsuya had insisted he would be the only one dealing, Nao didn’t have to put himself in danger like that, but Nao refused to let Natsuya endure a life like that on his own.

“I had thought a life of struggle would bring him back to me,” Pietro muses. “I searched for him and found that his name had changed.” Haru frowns in confusion as Pietro hisses, “Nao Kirishima. They will have been married four years in the summer.”

Haru stares. “I… I didn’t know that.”

Pietro shakes his head in a building fury. “It broke me. When I finally found him, I was a mess. I…” He shoves his stump deeper into his pocket as his eyes squeeze shut. “I was so wrong.”

That must have been when Natsuya took his hand. Pietro went after Nao in a blind rage and put him in the hospital. Haru remembers that Natsuya had been stoic, a vessel of protection in Nao’s time of need.

But that night, Natsuya had snuck into the mansion and beat Pietro within an inch of his life. He walked with a cane after that; he kept his stump tucked into his pocket. Pietro had too much pride to admit that a slumdog had done such a thing to him.

But it was still a bold move, and Natsuya and Nao needed more protection from Pietro. That was the only reason why they agreed to Miho’s terms. They started dealing, and both of them started using more. When Ikuya found Natsuya deranged from some bad heroin, or sludge, as dealers know it, Nao went to Miho, telling her that Natsuya needed out. But Miho said that Natsuya did his best work when he was desperate, and someone would have to pay the price if she lost him. Nao accepted those terms and got Natsuya out of Iwatobi.

After losing his eye, Nao had a brutal recovery, but he managed. He moved out of Natsuya’s family home to keep them safe, but he still sends them money every month, sacrificing a way of life for himself because they were the only true family he ever knew. Miho hardly gives him anything to live on because of what he did for Natsuya – that is why he’s homeless.

Even when Natsuya called from rehab, half-crazed from withdrawals and damning Nao for using even though he wasn’t, Nao never lost faith in their love. “We’ll be together,” he’d assure Haru. “Even if it’s not in this lifetime.”

And now here they are. Haru is overjoyed that he lived to see Nao and Natsuya back together, but that trip down memory lane made old thoughts resurface like a dead thing from a grave, resurrected from pure evil. He remembers how heroin crippled him; how Miho took his weaknesses and turned them into a monster.

Pietro smiles slow like a heartless, smooth machine, as though it was his story’s intention to bring Haru’s darkness to light. Haru’s eyes cut into a glare. “Why did you tell me all of that?”

Pietro studies him with a long sweep of his gaze, making Haru jump when he scoffs a laugh. “You feel guilty.”

Haru can’t keep the surprise off his face and Pietro’s voice is a venomous purr as he stalks forward, dragging his IV stand along. “You fear those demons you created.” He circles Haru, the wheels of the stand creaking in a way that freezes his blood. “Tell me, Haru, do you still think of sinking –” he hisses the word in delight, “that needle into your arm?”
With vehemence, Haru snaps, “I’d die before I used again.”

“Oh?” Pietro lifts his brows with mock interest. “Are you so sure of that? Then tell me, tell me…” He leans forward until Haru takes a step back in disgust. “How will you cope with everything you have just lost? Everything you know you will have to do to end this war once and for all, how do you plan on surviving it?”

Haru meets his eyes without wavering, but Pietro sees the hopelessness in the depths of his gaze. Pietro’s features harden with intent. “I will tell you how you are going to survive, Haru Nanase.”

Haru reels, but Pietro does not falter. “That black hole in your heart – fall into it.” He dips closer, whispering near Haru’s ear and clawing ice down his back. “Those screams in your head? Start listening to what they are saying. Stop running from your past when it is clearly three steps ahead of you. None of my Diamond Back could have endured what you went through in the past twelve hours. You know why you did?” He points a finger into Haru’s chest with emphasis. “Because of that shack in the fucking woods you grew up in.” His stump ghosts over the burn scars on Haru’s throat. “Those parents who brought you into this world and tried to take you out of it? They were your advantage.”

“You don’t know fuck about –”

“But I do.” Now that he has Haru’s full attention, he speaks with reverence. “You never knew their love, I’ve always been able to see it in your eyes. I recognized it. I’m sure Miho did as well. But she turned you from porcelain to iron.” He settles a hand on Haru’s shoulders. “That darkness, you must listen to it Haru. Return to your past and remember how you survived the outskirts. Now is not the time to feel guilty.” He levels their gazes. “Now is the time for your lesson is dualism. It is time to survive.”

Haru shakes his head in a daze. “Why do you care?”

A flicker of emotion twitches in Pietro’s smirk. “Because it is what I would do, if my body were not killing me so quickly yet painstakingly slow. You have some realizations in your final days – not peace, but… acceptance.” He sighs a laugh. “My Diamond Back are doomed in their selfishness. They don’t care for me. Oh, how I would return the favor if I had the strength.” His eyes clench shut for a brief moment. “Nao does not care for me, but he deserves freedom. Catching these Bloodhounds will keep him safe.”

Shocked, Haru can only follow him into a study, where bookshelves cast darkness over the sprawling desk in the center of the room. Pietro digs through a drawer and tosses Haru a notebook. “The combination to disarm the lodge is in there. I will call my driver to take you to the edge of the forest and from there, you have a map in that notebook that will take you to the lodge.” His eyes dart with conflict before his mouth firms into a line. “And there is a file in there for you. I found out the information yesterday and thought about keeping it to myself, but… you can do more with it than I can.”

Haru stares down at the file in confusion and Pietro smirks, a jagged edge of lamp light cutting down the center of his face. “It is your police snitch.”
Saltyaf, bless you for the effort you put into this story, I can’t thank you enough for it.  
[archive of our own | twitter]

A lot happens in this chapter, so there is not a specific song that encompasses all of it, but ZZ Ward’s "Ghost" is for Aki, and Troye Sivan's "Touch" is for Momotarou and Nitori. Please enjoy!

**WARNINGS:** Graphic fight scenes ahead.

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Samezuka’s design was inspired by the story of the Garden of Eden. Miho loved festering in the particulars of temptation, the trickery of it and how many different ways it could burn someone inside out – how many times she could get people crawling back to the club for more.

The theme always made Rin contemplate what the Garden of Eden would have been like after God’s first children were cast out. As he stands in the reopened club, he is positive that he knows what it was like when paradise fell.

But for one shining moment, there was heaven on earth – he knows that because it was that beach cabin. His sister was so happy that he could practically fall into her sunlight, and Haru finally, finally had a safe place to sleep. It was like a window cut into the earthly realm, a lost chunk of Mount Olympus, carved from mirrors and gold. Reflections of *themselves* – parts they didn’t have to be scared of. Parts they didn’t have to bring home.

Maybe they were too happy. Was it karma; was it a vicious circle like a snake eating its tail, ignorantly devouring itself? Was their home the forbidden fruit? Was it fucking too much to ask for?

These maddening thoughts take hold as he sits on the bed in his rent room. His mind is static, buzzing in his lips, mouth aching to be smothered by a kiss so hard, it’s like the pressure before a lightning strike. Only Sousuke is capable of such kisses. He is not here.

Instead, a weight drapes over his back, supple softness that makes him want to recoil. The nameless woman parts her lips against the back of his neck, nails teasing up his arms, failing to leave chills in their wake. His expression is an emotionless slate, the coldest, impenetrable ivory.

Rin is used to mentally leaving his body when with a client. Not so long ago, he was able to pour himself into that dark, empty place in the back of his mind, but that place does not exist anymore. It was filled to the brim, overflowed in colors of rose gold flushes, singing heat, and the white-hot burst of starlight behind his eyes when his body joined with Sousuke’s on their first night together.

His body cannot pretend to love this woman because it feels like cheating, and that – *that* hurts like a knife burning in his gut. He can’t even breathe around it. Bile rises in his throat with each brush of her skin against his. Never before has Rin reacted so strongly to anything other than how badly he does not want to be here.
He turns around, shrugging her off as gently as he can muster, if only because he understands her hurt stare of rejection. “I’m sorry,” he says. “But I can’t do this.”

She startles a laugh like it’s a joke, but his gaze is so frigid that she falls into dumbfounded silence. She blinks, lips fumbling for the words. “Then… what the hell are you doing here?”

Now Rin laughs, but the harsh sound makes her flinch. “I don’t even know.”

Her dark eyes soften with concern, which catches him off guard. She lifts her chin with an idea and scoots back against the headboard, patting the space beside her. “How about we just sit for a while?”

Rin doesn’t move until she smirks, cut with exasperation and a ghost of dark humor. “I’m not going to jump you, I promise.”

He hesitates a moment more before cautiously, like a lion crawling free from a tiny cage, eases nearer, but settles on the edge of the bed, as far away from her as possible. She does not seem offended; her sad smile is shaped from understanding.

He watches her lean over to the nightstand and pour herself some whiskey, but he loses interest – and the strength to keep his head up – so he closes his eyes and leans back against the headboard. His eyes blink open in surprise when she nudges a glass of whiskey against his arm, sighing, “You look like you need it.”

That’s the understatement of the year, so Rin takes it with a stiff nod and swallows the liquid fire. Heated displeasure blooms through his chest, down into his gut and simmering in his nerves. Then it all lulls to a slow warmth, and he exhales like it’s his first breath after almost drowning.

The woman folds a pillow over her lap to get comfortable, looking a little out of place, but trying to make the best of how Rin has changed the situation. They sit in awkward silence before she clears her throat and perks a smile. “I don’t think I even told you my name. I’m Akuma, if that matters.”

His eyes narrow a fraction, brow twitching up. “Rin.” It almost comes out like a question.

She is not fazed. “That’s a pretty name.” Akuma takes a thoughtful sip of her drink, musing, “I was actually supposed to see another man… I don’t know if ‘prostitute’ is the appropriate term, I’m sorry.”

He rasps a chuckle. “Whatever is fine.” Honestly.

“Anyway, I think his name was Nakagawa? But I was sent to you instead. I’m not exactly sure why.”

“He was murdered.”

Akuma tenses at how, well, dead Rin sounds. So far gone in hopelessness. “Oh, I’m… so sorry, I had no idea.” She winces in embarrassment, hands fumbling in self-consciousness, unable to meet his gaze. “I was just trying to apologize for me getting thrown into your schedule or whatever, I’m – I’m really sorry.”

Rin grimaces at his own actions, shaking his head firmly. “No, it’s not that. It’s not you.” He opens his mouth to say more but ends up taking a defeated drink instead.
Akuma snorts, flipping her blonde curls away with a flick of her wrist, the action tight with frustration. “They all say that.”

“I mean it, though.”

His sincerity makes her falter and she blinks up at him through her lashes. He glances her over, brows creasing at how beautiful she is, her red lips pouty, little black dress filled out in all the right places. It’s confusing, and he frowns against his glass as he takes another sip. “Why are you paying for sex when you could get it on your own?”

Something flickers through her eyes that makes Rin tense for a reason that he cannot place. All at once, the thought fizzles away, his body heavy with a fog much thicker than drunkenness. Akuma looks away with another sigh, tipping her head back against the wall to stare up at the ceiling. She works her jaw, lips twisted in resentment. Her mask drops into an expression of loathing. “My husband sent me. Pretty fucked up, right?”

Rin’s blood is moving like sludge, so he cannot process a response quick enough to stop her from flying into an emotional tangent. “We met at the Police Academy like, twenty years ago. It was a fucking rom-com. Started off as friends, then we had one too many one night stands with each other. It was around graduation that I realized I was in love with him.” She blinks back infuriated tears. “But before I could grow the balls to tell him, this dainty little thing swept him off his feet. They got divorced like I knew they would and not two weeks later, the bastard found me on Facebook.”

She shakes her head with building fury – the movements are slow drips of watercolor to Rin’s eyes. “I gave in so easily. I dropped everything for him. Quit that detective job in a precinct I worked so hard for, just like that. Just to stay at home and try to be a mom for his kids, who hate me by the way.”

Akuma stalks the length of the room, her voice stretching out, distorted to Rin’s ears. “They want their ‘real mom’ back.” Her words are a mocking coo. “Even though she was a piece of shit. An addict. Got so swept up in herself that one day, she couldn’t wait to get her fix before dropping the kids off at school. The dealer jumped them and put the son in a wheelchair for the rest of his life.” She rears around to stare at Rin in wide-eyed disbelief. “Him and his sister, they still miss her. What did that monster do to deserve kids as beautiful as that? What am I not doing right? Or wrong, for that matter, since they apparently like to be treated like dogs.” She stares into the mirror on the wall, carding her fingers restlessly through her curls, jaw gritted as her lashes spike with tears. “I do too much for him.”

Rin can barely keep his eyes open, but just enough to peer down into his glass. His blood freezes when he notices grains floating at the bottom, like flecks of powder.

He meets Akuma’s eyes at the same moment that he realizes he has been drugged.

Her features tighten with panic before she lunges at him. He tosses his drink at her, throwing the glass at her face – it doesn’t break, but there is a satisfying clunk when it hits her nose, which gushes blood. Rin surges off the bed and gets a head rush; his bones are jelly and he crumbles to the floor. Stubborn grit acts as his strength to crawl across the floor, but he feels the shift in the air when Akuma dives for him. He flings the nightstand into her path and she falls in a disgruntled heap as the lamp shatters.
Adrenaline helps fight off the effects of being drugged and Rin knows how to level himself in the situation so that he can stay alive. At least, he thinks he's got it handled until he realizes that Akuma is straddling him with a knee shoved into his throat, crushing his airways. He thrashes weakly, stiffening when his fingers brush a shard from the lamp. He drives it into Akuma’s arm and carves through the flesh without mercy.

Blood sprays him, hot and jarring, her wail piercing his senses. He shoves her off and claws the carpet to get to the door as his strength drains. Akuma tackles him, the rush of breath from his lungs leaving him in a shout.

Even if he had it in him to run, he is frozen in place because she presses a pistol between his eyes. Akuma wipes red off her mouth, smearing lipstick and blood, reminding him of someone. He remembers who when she snarls, “Where’s Miho hiding out?”

Aki normally considers herself lucky when clients don’t want extensive treatment but today, it took everything she had just to show up to work. The fear Miho inflicts, even in absence, is baffling, and so powerful that it can force someone to find the strength to follow orders even when there is nothing left on reserve.

After the defeat of losing Gou, Aki wants to hide out from the world somewhere dark and untraceable. Somewhere nobody can touch her – that desire is strong after this last client, not because he did anything particularly out of the ordinary, but because she is disgusted with herself for wasting time on him when there are crucial things at stake. She should be trying to call Nii instead of taking care of a stranger’s sexual needs. She should be calling the foster center to find out when she can see Gou. She should be comforting Rin or Haru or literally anyone from Freebird because who the hell isn’t falling apart at this point?

Determination settles over her worries and she rolls off the bed to walk over to her wardrobe. She bypasses folded sets of lingerie for a pair of leggings and a turtleneck, breathing easier as she drags her curls out from under the thick collar. Aki doesn’t like the weight of this man’s stare on her back – there’s something much more disturbing about his eyes than mere lust.

She glances over her shoulder as she laces up Nakagawa’s boots, tensely watching the man zip his pants and roll his shirt over an intimidating row of abs, his hands big as trash can lids. His face is stern without a trace of emotion – not even when he was inside her did that stone slate falter.

Aki doesn’t have the time to be nervous about such things. She puts on her most disarming smile and longingly sighs, “I wish we had more time together.” Usually, that line will make a client run for the hills or make him eager for another appointment; both situations involve him leaving, which needs to happen so Aki can get out of here.

It’s like he did not even hear her speak – the man merely tilts his head toward the adjoining wall between Aki’s room and Rin’s, ears flexed to listen for something. Aki’s brows crease in frustrated confusion, so she decides to just go, headed for the door when a shout from Rin’s room makes the world stop.

It’s not a shout of pleasure – she knows what Rin sounds like in that regard. This howl rocketed from the bottom of his lungs, laced with pain.

Aki’s eyes meet the man’s, his narrowed, hers wide. He lunges for her and Aki stumbles for the
door, yelping when he dives for her legs and rips her feet out from under her. She hits the floor with their limbs tangled together and adrenaline pours kerosene into her gut.

Aki relies on pure instinct as she drives the steel toe of her boot into the man’s eye. It pops like a grape and his arms go flying from around her. Aki reaches into the boot’s tongue and rips the pocketknife Nakagawa sewed inside free, strings fraying. She looks up to aim her weapon but the man slaps her hard enough to make spit fly out of her mouth, five pinpoints of heat throbbing where his fingers pressed into her cheek.

The pain trembles out of her toes and fingers, shaking her. She meets her own gaze in the mirror on the far wall, leveling herself for the death that is sure to come. She scrambles to find acceptance, trying to forget her useless determination.

But she cannot convince herself that this is the end. A fire like none other roars through her and she tightens her hands into fists, nostrils flaring on an exhale of pure heat. She does not waste any breath on screaming out for help – instead she puts her energy into hauling herself to her feet, and Aki stands over the man, flicking the pocketknife open because she will be damned before she begs for her life to be spared.

The man pries his hand away from his busted eye and attacks. Aki does not try to deflect his punch, knowing that she is not strong enough to do so, but dodges it by lunging to the side. She might trip over her own feet when she does it, but she manages to swoop under his outstretched arm and shoves the blade between his ribs with a satisfying twist.

He lashes out with a burst of strength that throws her into a backwards summersault across the floor. It feels like her lungs explode on impact when she hits the wall and she hunches over, mind wavering.

Her thoughts snap into focus when the man rips the blade free and charges at her. Aki stumbles for the nearest door, that being the bathroom, but the man tackles her from behind and they stagger into the sink – the impact of their weight tears the screws out from the wall and it goes falling with a deafening crash.

The broken pieces of the sink drives bloody gouges into Aki, who is pinned between the wreckage and the man’s weight. She gropes for a chunk of porcelain and whips it over the back of her head, slamming it into the man’s face – his teeth break on impact.

Aki shrugs him off as he howls and gets to her feet just in time for him to run her into the mirror. It shatters into her back, a thousand needle pricks of glass trapped between layers of skin. The man shoves a forearm against her throat and her toes dance to find the floor, black dots swarming her vision as she chokes. Aki squeezes her eyes shut tightly, willing herself some spine. She grits her teeth and rams the boot’s steel toe into his crotch.

He goes down in a crumbled heap, curling in on himself, and Aki falls to her knees. She wavers as oxygen floods her body, glass shards tinkling from her back.

She shouts when the man yanks her arm straight out of the socket, pulling her to the floor, but on the way down her hand closes around a chunk of porcelain that she pounds into his head. He slumps over and she should take the chance to run, but her anger just won’t let her do that. Aki straddles him and brings the porcelain down on his face again and again, screaming out with rage that threatens to set the room on fire.
She comes back to herself as she heaves for breath, the porcelain rolling out of her hand numbly. She stares down at the mess left of the man’s head and turns away with nausea churning through her. She hauls herself up, feeling like a phoenix from the ashes, and stumbles for Rin’s room.

Upon opening his door, a few things stand out in her mind as time falls into slow-motion horror: there is a bloody woman straddling Rin, and her blonde hair is a bright spot against the darkness of the room. Her black eyes cut into a glare, and when the woman aims her pistol at her, Aki knows that she does not have time to move.

All she can do is meet Rin’s wide-eyed gaze in apology as the woman fires a shot into her chest.

For the first time in his life, Sousuke leaves work early.

He finished his report on the beach cabin explosion with two hours left to spare – two hours he would have spent pouring caffeine over his anxiousness until he physically exploded with worry for Rin. He could not take it, so he left, Seijuro on his heels as he followed him out the door.

They are the only ones in the squad car, since Sousuke left Echo with Makoto and this is Momotarou’s first day in his own police car. Sousuke drives to Samezuka with Seijuro riding shotgun, and the only noise in the cab is Seijuro’s fingers tapping a nervous pattern against the window. Sousuke mumbles, “You all right?”

Seijuro’s foot bobs up and down. “Someone was able to find out where Haru and Rin live and they targeted that cabin knowing that a little girl lived there. I –” He works his jaw. “If they’re willing to stoop that low, there’s nothing stopping them from finding out where anyone else in Freebird stays.”

“You mean where Aki stays?”

Seijuro cuts him a grim smirk, but his features soften. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

Sousuke turns the steering wheel at an intersection with a thoughtful purse of his lips. “You fell for her pretty quick.” His words do not bring any uncomfortable tension to the air – he and Sei were partners long before they went rogue. They’ve been friends since they raided Haru’s shack in the outskirts five years ago, so there is no need to pass a steady stream of bullshit between each other in conversation.

Seijuro stretches out his legs, crossing his ankles and arms. “She’s a good girl.” His eyes follow the steely-blue landscape of winter outside the glass. “Deserves better than all this.” Anxious vulnerability tightens his features. “I just wanna check on her.”

Sousuke gets that. He parks on the curb behind a white Mercedes and they take to the sidewalk, nestling their fists into the pockets of their navy police jackets. Their ears and noses are red from the cold by the time they step into Samzuka. Though the heater is on full blast, a chill lingers in Sousuke’s bones from the last time they were in the club, when it was a crime scene.

There aren’t many people here. Employees are setting up the restaurant for the evening rush in a few hours, but other than that, there is no one around to notice Sousuke and Seijuro sneaking into the forbidden wing. Sousuke is trying to remember which strand of hair Rin twirled on the statue at the end of the hallway, but he notices that the secret door is already thrown open as though someone left in a rush.
He shares a tense glance with Seijuro before hurrying down the spiral staircase, gripping his hip holster firmly. Upon stepping down into the corridor of rent rooms, Sousuke does not notice anything out of the ordinary. His hand tightens over his pistol as he stalks the length of the hallway, heart faltering when he hears a choked gasp.

Before Sousuke can even comprehend what’s going on, Seijuro rushes by and slides down on his knees to envelop the body on the floor, sprawled half-way outside the doorway of Rin’s room. Ginger curls spill over Seijuro’s arm and Sousuke’s feet run at their own accord as numbness grips his senses.

The soldier takes over, assessing injuries; Aki was clearly in a fight, one that left her bruised and scraped. He calls it a damn good fight because even if she was attacked, that girl fought back with everything she has – there’s blood under her fingernails. She’s just in leggings and a sports bra because she took off her sweater and balled it up against the upper right part of her chest, and fear puts Sousuke back into his body when he realizes she’s been shot.

With one hand, he cradles the back of Aki’s head off the cold tiles and with the other, he flicks on his radio and explains the situation with clipped urgency. Seijuro exchanges Aki’s blood-soaked sweater for his own jacket, balling it up and using it to apply heavier pressure against her wound.

Aki’s lips fly open on a gasp, teeth red and chattering, her nails digging into Seijuro’s arm to claw him closer. “Hey, baby, hey,” he coos, shaking his head with a confidence that Aki needs right now more than ever. “It’s gonna be all right, you hear me?”

Aki’s eyes flare wider in distress and he shakes his head again, thumb sweeping over her cheek and smearing away a line of red. “Stay awake for me, Yazaki.” His voice falls to a broken whisper. “Please, just stay with me.”

Aki swallows thickly and jerks a nod, never looking away from his gaze.

On the radio, Sousuke gets the confirmation that medical personnel and police back up are en route to Samezuka. He glances into Rin’s open door and his chest tightens at the mess left in the empty room.

Sousuke’s head jerks down when Aki pulls his arm, gritting, “She… t-t-took… him.” Her voice raws with desperation, nails cutting into his flesh. “Go.”

Sousuke does not ask any of the questions racing through his brain. His expression firms with the most terrifying resolve, and Seijuro gives him a firm nod to rush back up the staircase.

He pauses only when Seijuro calls, “Sousuke.”

He turns and though Seijuro’s back is to him, the deathly quiet of his voice resonates. “Kill her.”

Sousuke’s menacing silence is enough of an answer, and he flies up the stairs.

He Stumbles through the hallway and throws open the club’s front doors, tumbling out into the biting cold. He heaves with the exertion of his panic, whipping around and around to find any sign of where to go.

His gaze falls to the white Mercedes parked in front of his squad car, and though the windshield is tinted, he would know the weight of Rin’s stare even in death. The vehicle growls to life, headlights
flaring on, and the stench of burning rubber pours forth as the Mercedes takes off in a white-hot flash.

Heat floods Sousuke’s pores and he dives into the squad car, the very earth trembling as the engine roars awake. With sirens wailing, Sousuke hits the gas and two tons of metal screams into drive.

He follows the Mercedes as it barrels through an intersection. Two cars lurch into Sousuke’s path from either side and he slams the gas and cuts the wheel, steam spiraling from the tires. He jerks the car straight and frost drips down the windshield in the wake of the engine’s heat. Sousuke pounds the horn as the Mercedes rides up a curb, pedestrians flying out of the way, his heart lurching when a woman rips her baby free from a stroller before the car’s tires level it.

Up ahead, a construction structure climbs the side of a burned apartment building. The Mercedes barrels through the beams and the structure tilts over, coming down over Sousuke in a looming shadow. He floors the gas and escapes by a mere breath, the structure crashing to the road in an explosion of flying metal. He flinches when a beam shatters his back windshield, accelerating to ninety miles per hour with his nails cutting into the steering wheel.

He catches up to the Mercedes and weighs his options. He could run the vehicle off the road easily, but Rin is in there, and Sousuke risks killing him if the Mercedes crashes. If he calls the chase into the department, Rin could be held as a hostage. But if that Mercedes gets away, Sousuke will probably never see him again.

Like most situations involved with Rin, he is the one who grabs life by the balls and takes control. Sousuke follows the Mercedes onto a steep ramp and can only watch in horror as the car goes flying off the edge like someone just cut the wheel as hard as it would go – the scream of metal is deafening. The car rolls down the embankment, crumbling in on itself and hitting the river below like an explosion.

Sousuke jerks his car to a stop, doesn’t even remember to put it in park as he flies down the hill. He stumbles into the icy shallows, his relief threatening to sink him to his knees when a maroon head comes over the surface with a gasp for air.

Sousuke tears off his jacket and swims out to meet Rin, clinging to a rock formation so the tide will not sweep them away. Sousuke cages him in a fierce hold, eyes darting over Rin’s face as shivers wrack their frames. “Are you okay?”

Rin jerks a nod, teeth chattering, skin tinged blue. Sousuke’s eyes flicker to the Mercedes’s underbelly bobbing over the water. “Leave her,” Rin hisses. “I already killed her.”

Sousuke does not protest or ask questions. He hikes Rin up onto his back and swims to shore, carrying his added weight easily. When they sit up on dry land, Sousuke looks Rin over. The side of his face is bruised from being pistol-whipped, which probably knocked him out for a time. His ankle is twisted at an angle that makes Sousuke queasy, and he is startled that Rin’s hands are trembling in cuffs. “You did all that in hand cuffs?”

Rin barks a harsh laugh. “I can do lots of things in cuffs, baby.” His smirk is weak, lashes glittering with frost, eyes dazed with the relief of being alive.

Sousuke smiles brokenly and kisses him, the warmth of Rin’s mouth singing through his frozen insides. Rin’s hands quiver over his face, fingers blue at the tips and seeking the heat of Sousuke’s skin.
Quickly, Sousuke pulls away and fishes some keys out of his pocket, curiously putting them in the cuffs’ lock. He twists the key and the cuffs fall free, making his mouth firm into a line. “They’re police issued.”

Rin blinks drowsily, gaze roaming over Sousuke’s shoulder. His eyes flare wide and he wrenches Sousuke to the side, rolling them out of the path of the squad car as it crashes into the water.

Sousuke looks up from his protective curl around Rin and watches the merciless river swallow his car. Rin follows his gaze in shock and breathes, “What the fuck?”

“I, ah… might have left it in drive.”

Rin’s eyes dart to comprehend his words and he lurches with a realization. “What happened to Aki?” His voice is a delirious slur, pupils dilated too wide. He staggers to his feet like he is drunk, his twisted ankle sending him back into the cold mud.

Frantically, Sousuke pulls him up and lets Rin lean on him, struggling to keep up with his urgent mumbles. He holds up a finger to see if Rin’s eyes can follow it – the boy’s gaze tracks after it too slowly, trailing to the ground and lingering. Only once has Sousuke ever seen Rin so absent, and that was when they first met. When he was drugged. Like last time, the adrenaline of the crash must have worn off and cannot keep him focused.

Rin pushes away and almost falls on his ass again, but Sousuke catches him in an embrace. “Stop, stop,” he breathes. “Aki’s alive, Sei is with her.”

Rin deflates with relief. Sousuke bends to retrieve his dry jacket and wraps it around Rin’s shoulders, letting the boy lean into him for his body heat. Sousuke contemplates what to do next, heart lurching as police sirens echo through the sky. He stiffens with a thought, feeling like a son of a bitch for even thinking it, but he swallows down his hesitation because Rin is going to freeze to death if he doesn’t get somewhere warm. That makes the decision for Sousuke.

He reaches into his jacket pocket and bypasses his radio for his cell phone, flipping it open and quickly going through his contacts. He holds Rin a fraction tighter until there is an answer on the last ring. “Yamazaki-senpai…?”

“Momotarou,” Sousuke says. “Have you got to Samezuka yet?”

“No, I’m on my way –”

“I need you to come to Exit Ramp 15 instead.”

Stunned silence is his only response before Momotarou’s voice ventures. “Why? And – and why did you call my phone instead of over the radio? Yamazaki-senpai, what’s going on?” Sousuke goes to make up a lie, but Momotarou snaps, “Is this about what you and Sei have been up to?” His voice is frustrated, but panic makes it waver. “I’m not stupid, I know the two of you have been doing something behind my back – behind everyone’s back.”

Sousuke sighs in defeat, resting his forehead against Rin’s hair. “Come to Ramp 15 and I’ll explain everything. I’ll even retire my badge if need be, but please, Momotarou, I need your help right now. You’re the only one besides Seijuro I can trust at this point.”
Momotarou’s breath leaves him in a disbelieving rush. Sousuke waits for a response, but instead he hears a car stop at the top of the hill. Momotarou steps out of the squad car, eyes flaring wide as Sousuke climbs with Rin in tow, boots working against the mudslide.

He is heaving by the time he eases Rin into the backseat and climbs in after him. Momotarou numbly falls back into the driver’s seat, staring down at the two cars floating down the river, and though his tongue is heavy with a thousand questions, he is speechless.

Sousuke contemplates taking Rin to the hospital, but his gut burns, insisting that letting the boy out of his sight for even a minute will result in disaster, or worse, death.

“I’ll give you directions to my house,” Sousuke says.

Though Sousuke was ready to keep his word on confessing all to Momotarou, the younger boy leaves as soon as they get Rin into the house. He insists on just wanting to give them some space, but Sousuke knows that Momotarou needs some time alone to gather his thoughts. He thanks him with everything he is and lets him go.

After that, Rin supplies the number to dial Nitori, who tells Sousuke to keep Rin awake until he arrives. He also orders the both of them to get warm as quickly as possible, so for the first time, Sousuke puts his gas fireplace to good use. He and Rin shiver under three blankets, their hands rubbing warmth back into each other’s skin until Nitori hurries through the front door with his first aid kit in tow.

He wraps Rin’s twisted ankle with the utmost gentleness but is not as kind in telling him what an idiot he was for getting hurt, though it is clear his frustrations are fueled by love. Delicately, he stitches a cut near Rin’s eye and looks Sousuke over, noticing as he palms his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Sousuke tenses in surprise, but nods in reassurance. “Yeah, thank you.”

Nitori keeps his eyes on his work, his voice expectant and stern. “He’s staying with you, yes?”

Sousuke blinks. Nitori glances at him with an arched brow. “I’m assuming Haru will be staying with Makoto. You’re letting Rin stay with you until everything gets sorted out, right?”

Sousuke stares. Nitori, who barely stands tall enough to reach Sousuke’s chest, is not hesitating in laying down the law with him. Letting him know that he’d better take the best care of Rin in the midst of all this chaos.

Sousuke nods firmly. “Yes.”

Nitori nods back, finishing up with Rin and breathing out a sigh. “You were stupid-lucky, as usual. You don’t seem to have a concussion or any internal bleeding, and I think the effects of being drugged are wearing off quite fast. The adrenaline rush probably helped. But it’ll hurt to even breathe for a few days. And stay warm, for Christ’s sake.”

Rin reaches out and weakly ruffles his hair. “Thank you, Ai.”

Nitori smiles tiredly. “I’m glad you’re all right.” He makes quick work of gathering up his things, stress tightening his features once more. “I’m going to go check on Aki.” Rin moves to sit up and
Nitori points a thermometer in his face. “No – I’m going. You’re staying here.” He rolls his eyes to Sousuke. “He doesn’t need to exert himself physically or emotionally. Please, make sure he stays here.”

“I will.”

Sluggishly, Rin tips his head in confusion. “Did you not come from the hospital?”

Nitori’s features smooth over into a poised smile that is not very convincing. “No, I was off today.”


Nitori busies himself with putting on his scarf so he will not have to meet Rin’s gaze. “I’m staying with my dad.”

“But… but didn’t Momo just move in with you?”

Nitori stills, his back to them. “Yes. That’s why I’m staying with my dad.”

He flinches when Rin touches his arm, then sinks onto the couch in defeat. This feels like a moment in which Sousuke should step out to give them some privacy, but neither Rin nor Nitori seem concerned with him. The younger boy lifts his tearful eyes to Rin and smiles just to keep from falling apart. “We broke up.”

Rin hugs an arm around his shoulders in distress, causing Nitori to let out a sound caught between a sob and a laugh. “I’m the one who ended it. I had to.” Rin shakes his head in confusion and Nitori shrugs miserably. “I couldn’t… drown him in all this.” Remorse sinks into his features, indicating that he did not want Momotarou to drown in his chaotic lifestyle. “I’ve been juggling everything. Helping Freebird, working doubles, worrying about everyone…” He wipes his eyes but the tears keep coming. “On top of my anxiety and the anniversary of Mom’s aneurism coming up and him being so secretive, it was just too much.”

Rin rubs his back comfortingly. “You have to take care of yourself first before everyone else, Ai.”

His smile twists bitterly. “But I was too swept up in myself to even realize that Momo was putting me before everything else. He was working so much to build a future with me, that’s what he wanted with me…” Nitori’s face crumbles. “He asked me to marry him.”

Rin’s gaze finds Sousuke’s, their eyes wide in equal measure. “That’s why he was being distant,” Nitori laughs, voice high with exasperation. “He was trying to figure out how to ask me, if I would even say yes…”

Rin treads carefully. “What did you say?”

Nitori looks down, a stray tear falling as he does so. “Everything in me wanted to scream yes.” He takes a deep breath. “But I love him too much to get him caught up in all of this.”

Guiltily, Rin’s hand falls away from his back, but Nitori is quick to shake his head. “It’s not your fault I told Momotarou no. I will never regret the decision that started my involvement with Freebird. You and Haru would have died on the streets if you hadn’t stayed at the soup kitchen.” His smile is wide with sincerity. “And you two were my only friends before the rest of Freebird came together. You guys have got me through more than you’ll ever know.” He wipes his eyes one last time. “If
this gang war ever ends, then I’d tell Momo yes on the other side of it. But until then…” He lifts his
eyes to will away the fresh wave of tears and shakes his head.

Rin squeezes his hand in understanding. “We’re here if you need anything, Ai.”

Nitori nods like he means it, and he rises from the couch to finish gathering his things. “I’ll keep you
updated on Aki.” His gaze and Rin’s are lost to the same memory. “She’s been shot before. This is
nothing like the first time – she’s at the hospital, they’ll be able to help her.”

“That’s still not safe,” Rin whispers hopelessly.

“Seijuro is there,” Sousuke says, sitting down next to him and wrapping a blanket around his
shoulders. “He’ll watch over her.”

Rin bows his head in acceptance and lifts his eyes to Nitori pleadingly. “Call Haru. Let him know I
don’t –” His throat works and he swallows hard. “I know Gou doesn’t blame him for anything and
he needs to know that I don’t either.”

Nitori assures him that he’ll get word out to Haru and let Freebird know about Aki. Sousuke’s arm
wraps around Rin’s waist to help him limp into the bedroom and stretch out under the covers. He
crouches beside the bed, sweeping Rin’s hair back and watching him blink drowsily. Rin whispers,
“You’ll sleep with me?”

Sousuke goes to nod, but tenses when he hears the front door creak open. He goes to his bedroom
door, peeking through the crack as Momotarou steps inside the house, glancing about nervously.

Rin is at his back in an instant, breathing, “Who is it?” He leans up on his tiptoes to look over
Sousuke’s shoulder and cranes back when he recognizes Momotarou.

Momotarou notices Nitori, who is still in the living room. Their gazes lock in wide-eyed
embarrassment, jaws slack on words they do not have. To busy himself, Momotarou backs into the
door to shut it, though there is a lingering chill between them. The fireplace crackles in the awkward
silence. Momotarou clears his throat, nodding politely. “Hey.”


Momotarou looks him over, brows twitching together. “You, uh, know Yamazaki-senpai?”

Nitori glances away, worrying his lips. “I was here for Rin.”

“Is he okay?”

Nitori cannot keep the disbelief out of his tone. “You know about –”

Momotarou is the one who looks away this time. He shuffles his feet, mumbling, “Yeah. I just talked
to Sei about… everything.”

Rin and Sousuke glance at each other. “We should probably give them some privacy,” Rin whispers.

“Yeah,” Sousuke responds with a solemn nod.

Neither of them move for a second. Then they both lunge for the crack in the door, ears flexing to
listen.

Momotarou is haggard, his shirt untucked and wrinkled, his features sunken in exhaustion. It looks like his innocence was ripped away all at once. “He went rogue with Sousuke. I was so… hurt, at first, but then he explained how it all happened.” His eyes shine like living gold for Nitori. “He told me why everyone is sacrificing so much: they’re doing it for each other.”

Nitori does not move as Momotarou approaches with hesitant steps like Nitori is a small, frightened animal he just wants to love. He dips down to meet Nitori’s eyes under the protective cover of his bangs. “Is that why you couldn’t tell me, Ai-chan? Because you thought you needed to protect everyone?”

Nitori lifts his head, their noses almost brushing with how close they are – how close they have missed being. “They’re my family,” Nitori whispers. “And their secret wasn’t mine to tell. It was too dangerous for them and you.”

Momotarou’s brows raise, his eyes wide with sadness. “What about you?”

His words punch Nitori in the gut.

Momotarou dares to step closer and Nitori’s features unravel breathlessly when their foreheads rest together. “You should be happy,” Momotarou says. “Whether it’s with me or alone.” He blushes nervously. “For the record, I’m still happy with you after I’ve been told everything.” He smiles even as Nitori’s eyes reddened with unshed tears. “And I’d try to make you happy every day if you married me, but I get that I was an idiot about it, and…” His face hardens with painful resolve as he steps back. “I’ll back off if that’s what you need.”

Nitori’s heart breaks – it shows on his face. “That’s not what I need, Momo.”

Momotarou looks up through his lashes, hope flashing through his expression.

Nitori’s smile is endearing. “I’m always going to need you if I ever want to be happy.”

Momotarou does nothing but stare for all of ten seconds, then he inhales sharply. He shakes his head, struggling to comprehend, his voice fumbling in a daze. “Wait, does that mean –”

Nitori laughs through his tears with exasperation. “It means yes.”

Momotarou freezes. “Yes? You mean you’ll –”

“Yes – mmph!” The couch catches them when Momotarou attacks him with kisses, and Nitori meshes their grins together, fist his jacket to drag him closer.

Momotarou straddles Nitori and frames his face, broken with adoration. Their foreheads rest together as they heave for breath, smiling at each other in a young love daze.

Even Sousuke can’t help but smile at the scene, but frowns when he hears sniffling. He turns slowly and looks down at Rin flatly, watching him fail to wipe away the steady stream of tears. Sousuke sighs and wraps an arm around his shoulders, bringing him close to kiss his forehead and smile against his hair.
Momotarou and Nitori leave together; after that, Sousuke tries to help Rin get some sleep. Sousuke is not in the right state of mind to slip into unconsciousness – the events of the day have left him reeling, so instead of his eyes closing, they dart across the ceiling as they relive the horrors. He finds comfort by drawing Rin’s back against his chest and whispering reassurance each time a memory startles the boy awake.

The sunset fights through the winter clouds, throwing gleaming streaks across Rin’s face when he turns in Sousuke’s hold to face him, deciding not to fight the battle for sleep any longer. He runs a soothing thumb over the heavy lines around Sousuke’s eyes. “You look so tired.”

Sousuke tucks his cold fingers into the back of Rin’s pants, snug warmth. “Just getting to lay down is enough.”

Rin does not try to admonish him, and the headache gnawing at Sousuke’s eyes thanks him for it. Neither of them fall to sleep, but they hide from the world under the blankets and share lazy kisses, which helps tension unwind, at least. Echo comes back from Makoto’s by easing through the newly installed doggy door and crawls into their lair of covers, making Rin laugh as Sousuke groans.

After a while, Sousuke’s voice ventures. “The woman at Samezuka, was she your boss?”

Rin shakes his head. “No, I didn’t know her.” He relays every detail of what he can remember, then frowns. “When I was in the car with her, she was on the phone and saying, your brother is dead. The callgirl killed him.”

Sousuke tries not to shudder. “So it’s a family affair.”

“ Seems like it.”

They freeze when Sousuke’s phone buzzes on the nightstand. He prepares himself for the worst as he retrieves it, absently rubbing Rin’s back while he reads the message. His heart surges. “Sei’s gonna drop by about Aki.”

Rin flies out of bed and paces the length of the den until Seijuro drives up. Sousuke opens the door, flooding the house with the sunset’s rich warmth. Seijuro drags his feet inside, still in uniform. His body is weighed down by the type of exhaustion that only comes when a loved one is in the hospital. Then comes the most overwhelming sense of needing to scream with victorious joy. “She’s gonna make it.”

Rin collapses into a chair with relief, bowing his face into his hands. “It’s gonna be a shitty recovery,” Seijuro says. “She just got out of surgery, so she’ll be doped-up for a while, but she’ll be okay. Momo and Ai are with her – I think Asahi was running in when I was leaving.” He grimaces at Sousuke. “I didn’t have a choice but to tell Momo. I owed him that; he’s my brother and he can handle more than we give him credit for.” His chin lifts with resolve, prepared to take the fall for his actions.

Sousuke shakes his head. “He did need to know. He’s the only one in the whole department we can trust.”

Seijuro nods, but the action falls absent when his eyes flicker to Rin. Seijuro seems as though he has something dire left to say. “Sousuke,” he intones with a brisk tilt of his head. “Could I talk to Rin for a second?” Alone.
Sousuke’s brows race for his hairline. Rin’s surprise is more muted and he nods at Sousuke to take Echo out, leaving him alone with Seijuro.

Restlessly, Seijuro leans back against the wall, crossing his arms, his ankles, shoving his hands into his pockets and sighing in defeat. “There’s no way to say this without being awkward as fuck,” he mumbles to himself, scrubbing his face to shit. “Aki told me about… you and her.”

Rin’s skin crawls uncomfortably because he wasn’t exactly prepared for this conversation with Seijuro. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Seijuro clears his throat with a grimace. “Listen, this is painfully awkward for the both of us, but there’s a pretty big reason I’m opening this can of worms.”

“You’re not going around thinking me and her still have feelings for each other, are you?”

“No. That’s not what I’m trying to say at all. What I’m trying to say is…” Seijuro looks everywhere but at Rin’s face. “When’s the last time you two had sex?”

Rin’s voice flies out in a frazzled cry a dozen octaves too high. “What?”

Seijuro pinches the bridge of his nose. Hard. “I am not asking because I genuinely want to know. I’m asking because I have to.”

The heat from the fireplace is suddenly oppressive, frying Rin’s brain. His thoughts scramble to find an answer to the original question. “A little over two months.” The last time he and Aki had sex was around Sousuke and Seijuro’s first investigation at Samezuka, when Rin told him that he had to forget the relay case. After that, Rin and Sousuke had their two month gap apart.

Seijuro’s right eye twitches. “You’re sure? It – it wasn’t any sooner than that? You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” Seijuro clears his throat with a grimace. “Listen, this is painfully awkward for the both of us, but there’s a pretty big reason I’m opening this can of worms.”

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Seijuro’s right eye twitches. “You’re sure? It – it wasn’t any sooner than that? You’re sure?”

“Yes? Seijuro, what the hell’s going on –”

“I’ll explain, just – just one more question.” He steeples his fingers and squeezes his eyes shut like he’s fighting nausea. “Does your boss make everyone use protection during rents?”

Rin reels. “She… I mean, yeah, unprotected sex isn’t allowed. We always use condoms. Clients have to sign a contract about it and everything.” Even if Rin and Aki cannot have children anymore, it would be too easy for them to get an STI from a client and thus, cause Miho to lose business.

Seijuro’s arms go slack, his hands falling open, desensitized. “Why doesn’t she use condoms with me, then?”

The dumbass should already know that answer. “Probably because you’re different to her.”

The heaviest emotion sinks into Seijuro’s face, worrying the piss out of Rin because he looks way too grave about these invasive questions. Rin parts his lips to voice his concern and Seijuro blurts, “Aki’s pregnant.”

Rin’s stomach drops into a never-ending hole. The room tilts. Then he startles a laugh that sounds more than a little crazed. “That’s not possible.”
Seijuro looks pitying, like he tried to feed himself that line of shit too. “She told me about Hitomu, but... just now at the hospital, they gave her an MRI and saw the damage left behind from a traumatizing surgery. Despite the odds, they saw a –” Rin startles when his hand flies out to brace against the wall. “They gave me the sonogram picture and I didn’t even know what I was looking at, it just looked like a bunch of dark smudges.” His brows furrow over closed eyes, throat working, voice falling to a whisper. “But then I saw this bright spot.”

Rin stares as Seijuro turns away to wipe his eyes, putting his hands on his hips. “It’s a few weeks old. The only reason I even found out was because I was there and the nurse rightfully assumed I’m the – the fath – oh, God.”

Rin yelps and dives forward to catch Seijuro, but the idiot collapses with the dramatics of a wealthy 18th century woman. He’s also curling into himself like he might truly be having a mental breakdown.

“Hey,” Rin snaps, roughly turning Seijuro onto his back and accidently letting the man’s head rest in his lap. “This ain’t the time for runnin’ around with your fucking tail between your legs, she’s pregnant, it’s yours, now listen to me.”

Seijuro stares up in wide-eyed shock, looking like a deer in the headlights for so many reasons. “I already know that she’s going to keep it,” Rin says. “All she’s ever wanted is to be a mom, so don’t you dare try to take that from her just because you’re scared.”

Seijuro’s expression is thrown open with the fear of being so unprepared and not good enough. “What am I going to do?”

Rin’s face twists incredulously. “What are you talking about?”

Seijuro just cries and Rin grabs a rolled up newspaper from the basket by the couch and smacks Seijuro upside the head with it, emphasizing each word with a whop. “Pull! Yourself! Together! My God, ‘what am I going to do,’ is that a question?” He points the rolled up newspaper at Seijuro. “You’re Commissioner Mikoshiba. You’ll show Aki that you remember she’s the personification of every good thing ever and you’ll remind her who you are. You’re about to have a tie with her you won’t be able to break for the rest of your lives, so snap out of it!”

Rin raises the newspaper to smack Seijuro again, making him curl into the fetal position and cry out, “I do want to be tied down by her!”

Rin’s eyes squint. “You mean to her.”

Seijuro curls tighter into himself. “That too!”

Rin lowers the newspaper and Seijuro’s features steel in resolve. “I’m – I’m still scared shitless, but I’m not gonna be like my dad. I’ll do right by Aki.” His chest surges with emotion, breathing, “And our – our baby. Holy shit.”

Rin smirks and helps Seijuro stand on wobbly knees, patting his arm in understanding. “Feeling inadequate won’t ever really go away, but you gotta remember that just putting forth an effort puts you ahead of most guys.”

Seijuro nods, his smile trembling around the edges, still reeling. “I’m gonna go back to the hospital now.” He hunches over his stomach. “But can I like, puke first? I really need to puke, man.”
Rin rolls his eyes and sweeps his hand out in a grand gesture toward the bathroom. He rests his forehead against the window with a disbelieving smile, chuckling against the sound of Seijuro retching in the distance.

She wakes to moonlight spilling through the bars of the window. The weakness of the shadows tells her that night just fell, and the full moon provides enough light to glance over herself. Her ankles are still bound, legs prickling with numbness and bent together at an awkward angle. Her wrists are no longer cuffed behind her back, but an ache still throbs all the way from her hands to her shoulders. She has never been so cold or tired in her life, but she’s breathing, and that’s all that matters.

Nii stiffens when she hears the door creak open and the gait of two approaching figures. Someone is thrown and hits the floor in a groaning heap of limbs.

The door latches shut and Nii is left alone with the person, but instead of glancing over, she lays her head against the wall and tries to chase just an hour of sleep.

The person’s breath falters and he croaks, “Nii…?”

Her heart lurches in realization. Nii turns around in shock, letting out a hollow gasp.

Then her arms fly around Ikuya and he hugs her back just as fiercely.

Turns out, Ikuya is just about as clueless as she is. “I got jumped,” he mumbles, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with her in the cell, after he’s let her borrow his jacket. “They took my phone and beat the hell out of me.” The bruise around his left eye has reached the psychedelic phase of purples, yellows, and black.

Nii scowls out the barred window. “Where the hell are we?”

“They had me and a bunch of others in some caves out in the woods at first,” Ikuya explains. “But now they’re trying to move everyone here. These are the old mills near the outskirts.”

Nii rubs her aching temple with stress and Ikuya glances at her nervously. “The people that get kidnapped… there’s other cells here, Nii, and they’re going down the rows, making people take relay.”

“Why? Are they just getting people yacked out of boredom?”

Ikuya shakes his head. “No, I think there’s a plan to all this.” He hugs his arms around his knees. “I think they’re getting them addicted to relay so they’ll follow orders and go cause chaos or something.” Fear passes through his eyes. “Sometimes they use heroin instead.”

Nii’s insides run cold because she will go batshit crazy if she starts using heroin again. That cannot happen.

She’s quick to push her emotions away when Ikuya turns to her, and Nii shakes her head firmly. “I’m not giving up on Freebird.”

His eyes fall below her neck, studying the bird with wings outstretched across her chest. Curiously,
he asks, “Is that your Freebird tattoo?”

Nii glances down with her first smile in days. “Yeah.”

“Why an owl?”

She tucks some hair behind her ear, looking a bit uncomfortable. “I, um. Grew up in the outskirts. Hearing the owls was like, the best part of my childhood.”

He observes the bird’s glaring blue eyes and the sweep of its outstretched, black feathers. “It kind of looks like you.”

She arches a brow over a smirk. “What bird are you gonna get when we get out of here?”

Ikuya cranes back in surprise, making Nii roll her eyes. “I think everyone can agree you’ve earned your place. But don’t make anyone regret it by choosing something fucking ridiculous like Asahi’s toucan.”

Ikuya tips his head to the ceiling to think, his smile more than a little excited. “Uh, I don’t really know.”

“Don’t act like you ain’t thought about it. Liar.”

Ikuya’s features soften with a memory. “If I had to pick something from childhood, I guess it would be a nightingale.” Nii’s brows lift in surprise and he shrugs. “When Nao moved in with Natsuya all those years ago, they used to read me bedtime stories. Like, old ones. Plays and stuff. There was this one where the nightingale’s song symbolized everyone staying together and all that.” His voice drifts absent. “I liked that.”

Nii stares. “You are not talking about the nightingale in Romeo and Juliet right now.”

Every drop of blood rushes to Ikuya’s face and Nii’s laugh bounces off the walls. “How cute, Ikuya.”

He crosses his arms smartly. “How did you know what story it was from?”

Nii’s laugh dies as she tenses. Ikuya almost apologizes because she looks so guarded, but the girl sighs in defeat. “When I was getting off heroin, Haru found me in the old swim club. I don’t remember how I even wondered in there, but… he’d bring me pizza and stuff. New music for my CD player. Books.” She smirks at Ikuya’s questioning look. “They were Nao’s books – probably the same ones he read to you.”

They gasp as a wolf howl pierces the night, stretching through the forest to reach them. Ikuya’s eyes open wider, his voice the smallest whisper. “I’m scared.”

Nii parts her lips before they firm into a line. Not knowing what to say or do, she relents to her exhaustion and tucks her face against his neck. Ikuya sighs, lays his temple against her hair, and they close their eyes.
The outskirts are the poorest area in Iwatobi. The forest seclusion has isolated those living there, trapping them in extreme poverty. The people of the outskirts are so out of tune with society that it’s as though the rest of the world has forgotten about them. There are no mailboxes, no addresses; in the past few years, the woods have nearly become impenetrable and keep those inside hidden. The people of the outskirts have been forced to become completely self-sufficient and that sense of isolation is growing, much like the forest around them.
Haru sits in the back of Pietro’s SUV, still staring down at the file in his hands. His driver is an old, ex-mafia allegiant who will be paying a mysterious debt to the De Vitis family the rest of his life with mundane tasks such as steering a car day in and day out. Needless to say, he looks bitter, but Haru can’t blame anyone for being pissed when they’re called to drive out to the woods in the middle of the night.

The driver cuts off the main road to follow a hidden strip carving through the forest, the path so narrow that tree branches rake the windshield. They break through the wilderness and the vehicle approaches the abandoned hunting lodge. The property and its surrounding land have been abandoned for nearly a decade, and it shows.

The driver shudders and crosses himself while Haru tucks the file into his backpack. “This place is cursed,” the man whispers. “Nobody comes because anyone who goes inside will be driven mad by the spirits roaming these grounds.”

“Their company will be nice,” Haru says easily, completely unfazed as he hops out and shuts the door in the driver’s horror-struck face.

Haru approaches the rusty gate, vines tangled in the lacy ironwork. He punches in the code from Pietro’s notebook and the gates creak to life, strings of ivy breaking as they part. Haru cranes his head back and approaches in a daze, stunned by the sight before him.

The lodge was surely an architectural masterpiece in its golden days. Plum-colored brick and dark stonework compliment the black shutters. Several chimneys climb from a sprawling roof and balconies loom from every side. But some of those balconies have collapsed with the lodge’s abandonment, and vines climb the columns and strangle the stonework.

A promenade of lightning-struck oak trees shadow the lodge. Haru steps into the darkness cautiously, steps too loud as they crunch over gravel. He passes a sprawling fountain, now only filled when rain falls, and tries to ignore the marble-eyed stares coming from the Greek statues.

Upon entering the key code for the front door, Haru is greeted by a burst of old heat, thick with neglect. A looming staircase greets him so he wanders up, not liking how his steps echo in the forlorn silence.

Thankfully, Pietro seems to have had the electricity turned back on just for Haru’s visit. He brushes away cobwebs to open the first door he sees and turns on the light switch, just long enough to realize he’s standing in a bedroom. Haru takes in no details before crawling onto the mattress and falling into the darkness behind his eyes.

When he wakes, his arm stretches out to try and find Makoto’s warmth, but his fingers clench empty air instead. Haru’s eyes blink open and he slowly registers where he is with a bittersweet ache in his heart.

The bedroom is still lavish under a coating of dust, but he cannot bring himself to care about wasted luxury and instead turns his attention to more important things. He unwraps his forearm to let his burn breathe for a while and changes the bandages for the slash down his thigh. Thanks to the tetanus shot at Rough Rabbit, it is no longer red with infection, but the pain still cuts deep. He fills his canteen with water from the bathroom sink, then swallows a handful of ibuprofen and iron pills. His phone died during the night, so he charges that before redressing and going to explore the lodge.
Cobwebs string sunlight between curtains and chandeliers as he wanders the mansion. Though the lodge is abandoned, it still feels hauntingly lived in. Whiskey bottles sit in the hallway, waiting to be poured. Muddy boots are ready to be washed in the laundry. Lavish evening gowns and suits are draped over beds, ready to be worn.

Haru finds only one room locked, and opening it is as easy as pistol-whipping the door knob. He assumes it’s the master bedroom, with its bay windows overlooking the tree tops and a nearby lake, so this was the room Augustine De Vitis shared with his wife. The room was left in chaos – furniture is toppled over, and a shattered glass of wine glitters as the sun rises. A silk canopy drapes over the bed, which is not made – the covers turn open to reveal the spray of stained blood across Augustine’s pillow.

Ice claws down Haru’s back, skin prickling under what can only be the cold stare of a ghost. He exits the bedroom and closes the door firmly, leaving Augustine’s spirit to enjoy his eternal solitude, away from Iwatobi and the gang war consuming it.

Haru finds the study and unfolds a map of the forest, which takes up most of the desk. He finds where the lodge is located and another chart of where the most deer have been killed. He is glad that the largest wolf den was documented near the deer’s clearing as well. The Bloodhounds are sure to be camped out near the largest food source, so he maps out a trail from the lodge to the clearing, which is about two miles out.

His eyes roam over the map with curiosity taunting him. Over the past five years, the forest has grown out of control, so the road in which he lived on has been lost to the trees, at least in terms of an address. Despite this, his buried emotions come up like a raging, dead thing from a grave. Haru works his jaw and gazes out the window, sighing through his nose.

He finds himself wandering in the direction of his old home when he leaves the lodge with his backpack of supplies and one of Augustine’s rifles slung over his shoulder. The forest is a world within itself, branches closing over the light of the sky. He walks around a silken drape of spider webs, surprised that he never realized just how entrancing the wilderness can be. Every tree stands like a forgotten ghost, comforted by the hymn of sparrows. Rivers carve through the woods with bridges of fallen oaks. The hoot of owls echoes as beehives purr overhead and Haru's blood freezes when he passes by a cave and hears the growling snore of a hibernating bear.

He follows the map to landmarks he remembers, like the overgrown path to the grocery store so many miles away, then to the cherry tree a neighbor had close by.

Haru brushes away a curtain of ivy and his breath falters.

The shack never stood impressively, but what’s left of it is definitely leaves an impact. Though the explosion destroyed most of the structure, the house frame still stands with boards like bones, with broken window glass jagged as the trail of Haru’s thoughts. Rust crawls across the tin roof from five years worth of storms, yet it still stands. Even the concrete porch is still there, and when Haru’s foot hits the first step, his breath lurches out of him in a hollow gasp.

He bows his head to swallow the lump in his throat, then gathers the strength to climb the rest of the porch steps. He steps into the roof’s shadow and the bitter set of his jaw cuts through the darkness. In a daze, his hand trails down the overthrown couch – all that’s left is its skeleton, the cushioning burned away in the explosion or eaten by starved dogs. He remembers sitting here with his mother and wrenches away to hug his arms around himself.
He finds what is left of the stove, fingers tracing the spiral of a rusty burner. The porcelain bathtub he
would sit in to cut weed is also there. The floorboards in his room are soft with mold, falling away. When his shoe crunches down on an old syringe, he lets one burning tear fall for his younger self, and his forehead sinks against the doorframe as his eyes close.

He doesn’t know what he wanted to feel, coming here. Maybe he hoped that his anger and fear
would collide and he would destroy everything. But all he can do is sit on that porch where Rin first
told him about running away to the soup kitchen, and he stares out at the trees in wide-eyed disbelief. His head is caught between reality and memory, brain scrambling to comprehend everything he made it out of.

Then he cries, partly out of horror, but mostly from the exhaustion of carrying so much inside of him. He cries out his rage and the grief for his parents. For himself.

The tears don’t wash everything away. Afterward, he does not feel invigorated with self-worth, nor is his head magically cleared. But his heart sure as fuck doesn’t clench in fear when he thinks about that shack anymore. He stares at what’s left of it, realizing that the people who made it hell don’t exist anymore, and the person that he was when he lived here died five years ago.

He rises from the porch steps with that bittersweet sense of peace and takes a deep breath. Haru wipes his eyes, cupping his gloved hands over his mouth for warmth. All at once, he tenses, feeling someone’s gaze on him, and turns around.

His pulse stops.

Twenty yards away is a wolf, crouched in suspicion with rigid muscles. Haru wants to believe he’s
dreaming, that he is just so emotionally wrung out that his mind is playing tricks on him, but this creature holds too much of a presence to be anything but terrifying reality. The breeze flutters through her white coat, which is startlingly pristine. Her blue eyes haunt him; they are practically the same shade as his.

Seeing something so pure amongst the wreckage of his past life makes him bitter for what could have been. He thinks of someone else who could have been more, who had his eyes – that wolf’s eyes.

Hope lurches through him, his voice lodged in his throat. “Mom?”

The wolf bolts and Haru does not know what possesses him to tear through the branches after her. Pain flares through his insides, but he races to keep that white flash in his sight. He chases her through an icy stream and crows startle awake, taking to the sky with banshee wails that spike fear into his blood.

The wolf tears through a clearing and he breaks free of the wilderness, only to race back into the protective shadows of the trees.

The clearing is not wide-open grassland; there’s a sprawling village in the distance. He thought the wolf was retreating to her den, but instead she has led him to a massive homestead. Though the log cabins are small, there are dozens of them climbing the hillside. Smokestacks billow from cooking fires and he crouches lower when two men step through the clearing with dead boar hogs slung over their shoulders.

Haru’s eyes follow them to the river’s edge, where a skinned deer hangs by its back legs from a tree branch. A woman is sawing through the meat and she nods when the two men leave their hogs to be
skinned before they head for the village. Haru ducks behind a tree when the woman turns, her tank top and face dripping with blood from a day’s worth of messy skinning. He tenses when he recognizes her as Ookami, the leader of the Bloodhounds.

When the men are clear out of sight, the white wolf slithers from the tree line, crouched low as it stalks Ookami. The woman’s ear flexes when the wolf steps down on a branch, making her turn slowly. Ookami rolls her eyes in exasperation, smirking as she cuts a chunk of meat and tosses it at the wolf. “Go on, get,” she murmurs almost fondly.

The wolf sinks its fangs into the meat and drags it back into the woods, where she disappears.

Ookami goes back to work as Haru silently reels. He weighs his options before an out-of-place giggle makes him notice the quilt laid out a few feet away from Ookami.

A baby is laid out on her front across the blanket, just old enough to lift her head. She’s got a head of poofy, white curls and her jumper looks to have been made from tattered scraps of old fabric. She’s gnawing on a rag doll, drooling all over her hands, and it almost makes Haru smile before the baby locks eyes with him.

She startles a gummy grin and Haru shakes his head frantically, but alas, the baby has no sympathy for his cause and screams laughter. Ookami jerks around and before Haru can even take his next breath, she’s swept the baby up and pointed a pistol at him. Panic lights her eyes as she snarls, “The hell are you doin’ here?”

Haru’s swallow is audible in the tense silence. He raises his hands as he stands, approaching her cautiously. “I just want to talk.”

“Ain’t nothin’ to talk about,” she snaps with a frantic edge.

Haru’s eyes dart to the baby in realization. With rigid caution, he shrugs off his rifle and backpack, leaving him defenseless and letting her know it. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you. I don’t want trouble.”

Her gaze slides to the forest. “You alone?”

“Yes.”

She stares him down and he meets her eyes without wavering. She seems convinced but does not dare lower her gun. “I told you I ain’t had nothin’ to do with that girl. I ain’t got shit to do with that police guy no more, either.” Angry redness spreads under her skin at the mere reminder of him.

Haru’s brow arches with interest. “Those other gang members that aren’t yours, the ones he had you working with – do you know what he’s doing with them?”

Ookami scoffs. “I don’t fuckin’ care.”

He levels their gazes. “He’s going to say they’re your people, and Iwatobi will destroy your home.” She cocks her gun and his hands fly up. “That’s not a threat, I’m warning you! I don’t want it to happen, that’s why I’m here!”

Ookami’s face twists with conflict. “Why do you care?”
Haru’s breath is shallow from having a gun pointed at his heart, but he levels himself. “The only way I’d fight you is if it were to see who could slit his throat first.”

Ookami stares.

Haru steps closer, shaking his head with building fury. “You want him dead as much as I do, but both of us – my people and yours – will fall if we can’t do this.” His eyes flicker to the baby with emphasis, but he does not dare speak on it.

She grits her jaw. Ookami sizes him up, then nods to herself. Though she does not lower her gun as she says, “If you’re lyin’ to me and you got people out here in these woods for an ambush, I’ll chain you to that tree and watch the wolves eat you alive tonight. You hear?”

Haru startles a blink, the gruesome thought flashing before his eyes, then jerks a nod. “I hear you.”

He leaves his weapons and backpack at the tree line. Ookami shrugs a pouch over her front and nestles the baby inside, cradling her against her chest. Two young girls dressed in clothes too big for them come down from the village to finish skinning the deer and hogs – though they are surprised at Haru, their eyes light up when they notice his purple Converse. They’re not even wearing shoes.

Ookami leads him up the hill and disbelieving silence falls over the village. Haru tries not to wither under the menacing stares, his skin prickling as whispers erupt. They enter the compound and he notices that the homes are not as sturdy as they appeared to be in the distance. Yurts are molded from river clay and piles of branches act as the roof. There are no doors, only animal pelts that act as curtains – the only layer of protection between a family and the wilderness.

A pack of hunting dogs gallops by, the only sound in the entire village as Haru approaches. The people are covered in the grime of the forest – sap from peeling tree bark to chew, pollen from gathering plants, dirt from the crops, blood from a ruthless hunt. Men leave their cooking fires to stalk him, but their jaws grit to keep their protests inside. A group of children look up from playing and trail after him in a daze, their skin pulled so gaunt over their faces that Haru almost falters in his steps. A woman meets his eyes while thrusting an axe through a block of wood, the promise of pain laced in her muscles. Though he is clearly not welcome, nobody speaks out against Ookami deciding to bring him here. They are firm with the deepest, most unshakable respect for her.

Ookami leads Haru to a cottage with a straw roof and a skinny cat slinks across the porch railing to greet them. Ookami scratches her ears before pushing the thick bear pelt aside to enter the cottage with Haru behind her. A fire pit crackles in the center of the floor and warmth envelops them, filling the room with the saturated aroma of honeyed heat from the kindling sap. Various equipment chains and rope leashes for hunting dogs hang from the walls.

Ookami lays the baby down in a small, wooden cradle beside her bed cot. She shrugs her pouch off, looking Haru over as the fire crackles in the stiff silence. She goes to the cooking fire and gestures for Haru to sit with her. He goes in a bit of a stupor, sitting cross-legged across from her as she boils some water and takes out some preserved jerky. She works briskly, flowing through the motions of meal preparation, and a question prickles at the back of his mind. “When you were at Samezuka… why did you say ‘Bloodhound’ when I…”

Haru blinks. “Have I…? No.”

Ookami goes to the cooking fire and gestures for Haru to sit with her. He goes in a bit of a stupor, sitting cross-legged across from her as she boils some water and takes out some preserved jerky. She works briskly, flowing through the motions of meal preparation, and a question prickles at the back of his mind. “When you were at Samezuka… why did you say ‘Bloodhound’ when I…”
Ookami pauses to arch a brow. “When you fuckin’ stabbed me?”

Haru grimaces in apology and she snorts, flapping a hand. “You hit like a bitch, anyway,” she mumbles. Haru grits his jaw in angry exasperation, making her chuckle. She mulls over his original question as she rips open a packet of brown powder, which she pours into two cups of steaming water. “I could just tell you was from the outskirts,” she begins, stirring the powder with a spoon. “You had them eyes. The grit.” She offers him a cup, snorting, “Even though you keep tryin’ to fight the accent. Good luck wit’ it.”

He takes the cup, though blinks down at the questionable liquid. “It’s hot chocolate,” Ookami explains. “I ain’t got a lot of it, so you better drink it all.”

Something painful and wonderful makes his heart clench. He drinks and the flavor evokes memories of tangled limbs under blankets, forehead kisses, the sweet heat of Makoto’s body and his sun-soaked smiles.

Ookami sits back and drinks her hot chocolate in pensive thoughtfulness. “So was I right? You from here?”

Haru hesitates for only a moment before nodding, cupping his hands around his cup to warm his frozen fingers. “I left a few years ago.”

Ookami stills. “How?” she breathes, her eyes wide with awe. Haru sees so much more meaning in the depths of her gaze – how did he escape such dooming poverty?

He brushes his thumbs across the lip of his cup as memories threaten to choke him. “My dad had me making drugs in our house and selling them in the city. I met a friend there and he found us somewhere to stay.”

“What happened to your daddy?”

He takes a long drink. “The police caught wind of what was going on and raided the house, so he blew it up.”

Ookami cranes back. “Damn. That’s some crazy shit.” She serves the jerky in rags, saying, “It’s deer, by the way.”

Haru eats, chewing rigorously to work through the tough meat. After a few bites, he shakes his head. “How’d the outskirts get this bad?” He gestures about the cottage. “You don’t even have electricity. Or doors.”

Ookami snorts a laugh. “Power lines went down a few years ago and the city never got ‘em fixed. All the old houses flooded in storms – ain’t been able to get any help, so we took that shit into our own hands. But then that grocery store a few miles out closed down and we were really fucked, then.” She shakes her head, then shrugs. “This was the only way.”

They eat in solemn silence and feed their scraps to the half-bald cat. Ookami absently rocks the baby’s cradle as she sleeps. “I lived here all my life, so it ain’t really as traumatizing to see in my case. I can’t write or read much, but I never needed that to make it out here. Everything’s went so far down in the last few years that we don’t really gotta be involved with the rest of the world at all.” She picks her teeth with a bone splint. “Sometimes I like it that way.” The fur pelt ripples in the
breeze and she gestures outside. “It’s beautiful out here, even if it’s ruthless.”

Haru nods and Ookami slumps with exhaustion. “But it’s hard, now. Everyone used to get their drugs from the outskirts and we was thrivin’ back then. I think that’s when your daddy was makin’ drugs – hell, he was probably one of us. My grandad taught me how to grow food and them herbal drugs. I was content with people comin’ in the woods to buy and not havin’ no more contact with any other part of the outside world.”

The baby whimpers, chubby fists reaching out. Ookami laughs as she nestles the child in the crook of her arm. “Then I got pregnant. This is Namiko,” she breathes, sweeping through the baby’s curls. “She’s what made me realize there’s more to life than surviving.”

Haru glances at the engagement ring glittering from her finger. “Where’s her dad?”

Ookami’s smile is mournful, her eyes still lowered to Namiko. “He was my second in command. He wanted more for Nami, so he started dealin’ in the city when people quit comin’ all the way out here. He became a yakuza.”

Haru’s blood runs cold. His mind trails back to when Rin was taken and Kazuki was murdered. He remembers that suspect in the ambulance Nakagawa nearly killed. “I knew I’d be dead and so’d my girl, baby too. I didn’t want to kill anybody, not him, not the dealer and I’m sorry about him, both of them, I’m sorry about your boyfriend, I’m sorry, please –!”

Haru looks away and closes his eyes. “He said that his boss was a ‘he’…”

“That was to protect me.” Ookami holds Namiko a fraction tighter. “We didn’t want nobody to die. The man I sent with ‘im, he’s the one who stabbed your friend. I told them not to do no crazy shit but he panicked.” She meets his gaze without wavering. “That shit was wrong, and I’ll own up to that, but we didn’t know it was gonna be like that. I don’t even know who the police dude is. Never seen him, just heard ‘im on the phone. I ain’t even the one he first contacted with the deal – he was watchin’ my boyfriend in the city and went to him. Eiichi, my boyfriend, acted as the leader of the Bloodhounds so I wouldn’t have to go into the city.” Her voice hardens with self-loathing. “I’m scared of it. The police dude said that if we went by his rules, he could make the Bloodhounds strong again. We could get people comin’ back into the outskirts to buy drugs and we could make a way for ourselves. For Namiko.”

She bows her head in defeat. “I was wrong. I was scared. I didn’t want my daughter growin’ up like I did.” Her eyes flicker to her ring. “Neither did Eiichi.” She clenches her hand into a fist. “I wanna hate you for him dyin’ at Samezuka, but none of this would have happened if that sorry motherfucker in the police department hadn’t played the both of us.” She puts her hand on Haru’s shoulder. “This is all ‘cause he wants Miho. You don’t mean shit to him and neither do I – he used us.” Her hand squeezes his shoulder a fraction tighter. “I don’t play that shit. The dude started forcin’ people into my gang with relay. He told us that takin’ those gang members would be the last part of our agreement, but I didn’t know he was gettin’ them addicted so they’d follow his orders. When I figured out what was goin’ on, I finally said fuck it because I might sell drugs to keep my kid alive, but I’d never make anyone use. I bounced and now the guy’s movin’ all the people we had hidden in them caves a few miles out.”

It takes Haru a few seconds to comprehend, then he freezes to the bone. “What caves?”

Before Ookami can speak, he’s lurched to his feet. “Take me to them. Please.”
Ookami navigates the wilderness with the silence of a ghost and shoots a glare over her shoulder each time Haru steps down on a twig. The cold has turned their lips blue by the time they get to a frozen waterfall and climb the rocky slope to peek over the top. A mountain is hollowed out with numerous caves, and an old, rusty S.W.A.T. bus is parked there. Armed men, clearly addicts, stand guard as people are dragged from the cave and shoved into the bus.

Haru looks down when Ookami nudges a pistol into his hand, and he hesitates to wrap his fingers around the grip. “They’re drugged,” he whispers. “They don’t have to die for him.”

“You’ll die if you don’t kill them,” she retorts, nudging the pistol into his hand more insistently. “I know it ain’t right, but you ain’t seen how relay takes somebody over when they get addicted. There ain’t no talkin’ to ‘em.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to shoot them,” Haru hisses.

Ookami’s mouth firms into a line, and conflict tightens her features.

“There’s only two guys armed,” Haru whispers, nodding to them. “We can handle that. Just tie them up and we’ll go from there.”

She takes a deep breath, exchanging her gun for rope. They nod to each other and lunge over the other side of the hill.

It’s easy to knock the men’s guns away, but they fight vigorously in the way most scared addicts do. Haru gets them tied up and Ookami keeps her rifle trained on them as he cuts the prisoners’ bound hands free, not caring if they’re from Diamond Back, Rough Rabbit, or Honeyblade. He even finds the five missing members of Freebird, just some teenage kids that cry when they ask if he’s taking them back to Miho. He promises that he isn’t and the crowd stares at him in varying degrees of shock and an overwhelming amount of gratitude. Everyone is half-starved and freezing, but nobody looks like they’ve been forced to take any relay yet.

The unarmed addicts are handed over to their fellow members of Rough Rabbit, who vow to keep them from causing any trouble. Ookami approaches Haru with her arms crossed to fight the cold. “Girl from Diamond Back said that they been bringin’ this bus to the caves and haulin’ people somewhere else. She heard some addicts talkin’ and thinks everyone’s gettin’ moved because I betrayed ‘the boss’ and he thought I’d free everyone.” She lets out a laugh, taking a gulp from her canteen. “Motherfucker ain’t wrong.”

“So this was the last group,” Haru mumbles to himself, shaking his head hopelessly. “Think of how many we missed.”

She nudges him as they stare out at the gathering. “Don’t think of it like that. We’ll get ‘em.”

They search the bus for clues as to where the other groups were taken, but it’s barren. Ookami wants the vehicle as a resource for her people, but since neither she nor Haru can drive very well, a girl from Honeyblade parks it elsewhere and the other gangs take it upon themselves to cover it in underbrush. Ookami leads the liberated group toward the Bloodhounds’ compound, admitting that they do not have much food to spare, but the freed members can stay the night to gather their strength for the long journey back into the city.

Haru looks for Ikuya and Nii in the group, gives a physical description to every individual, but nobody remembers seeing them. His grief is a physical pain as he goes to follow the group to
Ookami’s camp, but he stops when one last person ventures out of the cave. She creeps out with her arms wrapped around herself and lifts her face to the sunlight, dust glittering all over her. Haru stares and when she looks at him, the shock knocks her on her ass. He whispers, “Chigusa?”

Her jaw slacks and she stumbles to her feet to run to him. He catches her in a fierce embrace, holding her as she sobs in relief.

Night falls and torches light the compound as snowflakes find ground. Children stick their tongues out for them in between gathering towels for healers to tend to their liberated guests. Fireflies glow in the blue-darkness of the forest and moonlight spills into bonfires. From Ookami’s porch, Haru listens to panthers scream awake in the mountains, and Ookami tips her head back to listen to the song of howling wolves. Namiko giggles from the cradle of her arms, making the woman chuckle.

She and Haru watch the gangs together in silence before Ookami purses her lips at him. “So whatchu gonna do now?”

He takes a sip of the black coffee she prepared for them both. “I have a plan to kill the police snitch and Miho at once, but I don’t know how many addicts he’s got working for him.” He breathes out a cloud of frost. “That’s a problem, because I don’t want to get the rest of my gang involved. I’ll need back up.” He arches a brow in challenge over the lip of his cup.

Ookami’s eyes flash in the torchlight. “Only if you let me kill him.”

“You’ve earned that right.”

She nods firmly and turns back to the scene. “Then I’ll be there.”

Haru finishes his coffee and after a time, Ookami smirks to herself. “My daddy told me this story when I was little – about how this wolf pack got rid of its weak alpha. It kinda reminds me of your gang.”

He regards her as she stares into the fire, gaze distant with memory. “That alpha made the pack lose so much as individuals, that they each took a turn in attacking it. Eating it alive – takin’ vengeance for themselves and each other.” He lifts his brows and she shrugs with a smirk. “It’s a thought. Why rob your people of that?”

“Because this started with me.” He closes his eyes against the snowfall with resolve. “It has to end with me.”

Haru sets his empty cup down on the porch railing and prepares to leave. Ookami walks him and Chigusa to the edge of the compound with Namiko in her back pouch. “I’ll talk to ‘em,” Ookami says, nodding back at the liberated members. “See if they can’t get contact with any addicts they know, try to get an eye on the inside.”

Haru nods in thanks, face warmed by the torch in his grip. “I’ll be in touch.”

Ookami gives him a dry salute and heads back up to camp, pausing when he calls, “Ookami.”

She glances over her shoulder and he tightens his grip on the torch. “That wolf, earlier today…” Ookami turns to face him fully and though the words leave him, the desperation shows on his face.
Somehow, she understands. “She’s gotta vibe about her. I ain’t gave her a name or anything. She don’t really seem to have a pack. She just kinda shows up at the weirdest time, when you just… need a little magic.” She saunters backward, turning for the village and calling, “These woods take care of what belongs to them, Haru – don’t forget it.”

He and Chigusa find their way back to the hunting lodge. After she’s devoured the crackers he had in his backpack from Rough Rabbit, the girl goes to take her first shower in weeks. Then he helps her get settled into a bedroom down the hallway and does not ask her any questions; she’s beyond words with thanks, and he leaves her to sleep.

Afterward, he comes back to his room to stare out the window, watching deer graze in the valley below and drinking hot chocolate from the flask Ookami gave him. Haru wanders over to the nightstand, where he accidently left his cell phone today. He eases down on the bed, body aching for sleep, and unlocks the screen.

More than twenty missed calls.

His gut sinks as he thumbs to his text message inbox. His eyes dart across the screen and the flask falls from his slack hand, spraying liquid, and Haru grabs his backpack on the race to wake Chigusa.

Makoto cups his hands around his mouth and breathes warmth into the space. He rubs his palms together and nestles his fists into his jacket pockets, shuffling his feet from the winter and restless worry. He should have asked more questions when Haru called him in the middle of the night and begged him to come to the hospital, but the boy’s whisper sounded so devastated that Makoto feared questions would make him fall apart. Haru assured the hospital visit was not for himself, that something happened to Aki but nobody died, however, this whole situation leaves Makoto with a cold weight in his stomach.

He tenses when a black SUV pulls up beside him on the curb. Makoto feels a little too much like Sousuke wearing a holster again, but at the moment, he’s glad to be acting like a certain cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof Sergeant.

He frowns in surprise when a young girl hops out of the SUV, followed by someone else. For a moment, he merely thinks his glasses have fogged up and his mind is playing cruel tricks on him, but then the figure comes closer and Makoto realizes that it truly is Haru.

They stare at each other for all of three seconds before he catches Haru in an embrace, the cold press of his lips electrifying Makoto’s senses. He pulls Haru into a deeper kiss with a hand on the back of his neck, fingers dragging up through his hair as Haru just holds him, clinging to the sturdiness of his frame so weakly.

Makoto’s thumb brushes over Haru’s red cheeks as snowflakes fall into the darkness of his hair, frost glittering from the sweep of his lashes. Emotion quivers through Makoto’s voice. “Are you okay, Haruka?”

Haru leans into his palm, lips grazing his hand and eyes closing with a rush of love drunk delirium. He gazes up at him and lets Makoto see his first true smile in what feels like a lifetime. “I am now.”
Disarm You

Chapter Notes

Thank you to franelhanne for this depiction of Nao! <3 <3 <3

A big, big hug to infinite_always for this drabble about what Gou, Haru, and Makoto were up to in Chapter 22 during Rin and Sousuke’s date. The characterization is spot on and I have been geeking out about it ever since this little gem was posted. You are such a talent and I am so touched by the work and dedication you put into it. Please, give it a read and all the kudos! *heart eyes for days*

Also, I wrote the I'm-So-Glad-We're-Alive sex Rin and Sousuke had after the events of Chapter 25. It's called "A Handful of Frozen Time."

A big thank you goes to saltyaf for beta reading! (archive of our own | twitter)

Lastly, our chapter song is here. Please enjoy!

"Let me disarm you, I'm not trying to own you

I just wanna know what it feels like to have your body so close

Let me absolve you of the past that controls you

I just wanna know what you look like without a weight on your soul

I know somewhere we could get away

If you wanna find another place, love

Disappear and never leave a trace

I'll take you anywhere you want

So let me disarm you

There's an army I'm fighting around your heart

I just want to love who you really are.

I can bring you out of the darkness

Into the fiery light."

"Disarm You" by Kaskade
Aki’s hospital room is crowded, but filled with love. Natsuya and Nao pile up on the loveseat, Asahi paces the floor, and Seijuro sits at the end of Aki’s bed with a protective hand over her knee.

When Haru enters the room hand-in-hand with Makoto, Rin stands up from the floor in total silence and embraces him. Haru is too stunned to react, his watery eyes opened wide before he hugs Rin back with a sigh.

Rin leans back, gaze darting across Haru’s face. “Where have you been?”

Haru shrugs miserably. “I had to get away.”

Rin’s features soften and he nods in understanding, then sits back on the floor with Sousuke; Echo drapes herself over their legs to fall asleep. Rin pulls his hair back, revealing a black line of stitches beside his eye, like a crack in the porcelain skin of a china doll. On the way to the hospital, Haru had called Nitori, who explained what happened at Samezuka a day ago. It had set Haru on fire with guilt.

His eyes trail to the hospital bed, monitors beeping in the solemn quiet as he ventures over. Tubes give Aki back the blood she lost in the ruthless fight for her life, and her eyes are closed in a drug-induced sleep. White sheets are tucked up to her chin, hiding the state of her body, but seeing her face swollen with bruises is hard enough. She is too weak to even breathe; an oxygen mask does the work for her.

Mournfully, Haru trails his fingers through her hair and cups her cheek. Nao comes over to put a hand on his back, rubbing in heavy circles. “They reset her arm,” Nao sighs. “And they didn’t find any bullet fragments in surgery – it went clean through her. They’ve done what they can to make her comfortable with her ribs.” He smiles sadly as he adjusts Aki’s blankets. “She fought like a scrapper.”

Asahi tips his head back against the wall, curling a tired smirk. “Gave Kazuki a run for his money.”

Haru’s nostrils flare on an exhale of pride. He turns to Seijuro and Sousuke. “Has there been an autopsy on the man who attacked her? Who was he?”

Seijuro’s face is creased with lines of exhaustion, his voice rough with it. “She bashed his head in, so it’s hard to get a match on dental records since all his teeth were smashed. Fingerprints came back with no match in the criminal database. We don’t know anything yet.”

Chigusa hesitantly steps into the room and shock blazes the air for one frozen moment. Then Rin surges to life and hugs the girl in disbelief, meeting Haru’s eyes over Chigusa’s head.

She goes to Aki’s bedside in a daze while Rin pulls Haru into the hallway. They face each other with their shoulders tucked against the wall, keeping clear of the hospital traffic of nurses and doctors. Rin says, “Where the hell did you find her?”

“The outskirts.”

Rin stares. “You went home?”

Haru gingerly crosses his arms, body aching from the cold. “I needed to.” He glances away from Rin’s look of sorrow. “It was… it was good for me.”
“Any sign of Nii and Ikuya out there?”

Haru closes his eyes with grief. “No.”

He looks up with Rin as Makoto slips out of the room, breathing a little easier in the wider space of the hallway. He rubs the back of his neck sheepishly as he steps forward. “Rin, I wanted to let you know that Gou was all right in class today.” He grimaces. “Well, she wasn’t in class very much, actually. She spent most of the day in Kisumi’s office, but she played at recess.”

Rin goes boneless with relief. “Thank you, Makoto.”

He smiles, lifting his brows at Haru. “She asked me about you, at the end of the day – if you were okay.” He shifts his weight for a moment. “She told me to watch out for you. I think she knows about… us.”

Rin snorts. “Not surprising.”

Sousuke breaks free of the tight constraints of Aki’s room, shuddering with relief in the open air. He tucks his fists into his leather jacket and walks down the hallway, tipping his head at Makoto impatiently. “Mako, come buy me a coffee in the cafeteria. I forgot my wallet at home.”

Makoto’s brows scrunch with indignation. “Why do I have to buy you –”

Sousuke swivels around, walking backward with a smug smolder. “Haru, has Makoto told you about that goat in Baghdad, you know, the one we –”

Makoto gropes for the nearest nursing cart and flings a box of latex gloves at Sousuke’s face. He catches it and smacks it down on another cart, grinning with satisfaction as Makoto jogs after him, throwing an exasperated look over his shoulder.

Haru blinks, stiffly turning to Rin. “What happened in Baghdad with a goat?”

A shadow haunts Rin’s face. “You’ll need a pint of liquor in your body to handle that answer.”

Haru stares, but Rin changes the subject with a relaxed smirk. “Anyway, me and Sousuke will keep looking for Ikuya and Nii when he gets back.” Haru straightens with purpose and Rin firmly pushes him back against the wall. “Not you, cowboy – go home with Makoto. Quit acting like you’re fucking allergic to rest.”

Haru smirks in acceptance, but the expression trails away as he bows his head. “I’m… Rin, about Gou…” His voice is heavy with remorse. “I’m so sorry about everything.”

Rin blinks away a fresh wave of tears. “I know she doesn’t blame you for anything. Neither do I. You’re all the family we got, so go with Mako and let him take care of you, for Christ’s sake.” Concern sinks into Haru as Rin mumbles, “We all have to take care of each other now more than ever.”

Haru follows his gaze back to Aki’s room, puzzled by the weight of Rin’s stare, but even more confused by his smile. “Aki’s pregnant, Haru.”

The shock almost knocks his feet out from under him. “How?”
“I don’t know. They’re calling it a miracle.” He shakes his head at Haru’s cautious, questioning look. “It’s not mine; the baby is only a few weeks old and I haven’t had sex with her in months.” His mouth twists with bitterness. “I can’t get anyone pregnant, anyway. That surgery Miho forced me into was a complete success. The baby is Seijuro’s. Nobody else knows besides me and him – I don’t think Aki had any idea. We aren’t telling anyone else until she wakes up. At that point, Sei will explain it to her.”

Haru studies his expression. “How do you feel about all this?”

Rin sighs, nestling deeper into Sousuke’s oversized jacket. “In all honesty, I can’t remember the last time I was this happy.” The light in his eyes is sincere. “A baby will do everyone a lot of good. Make us feel human again.”

Haru lifts his brows. “But?”

Rin glances away. “Of course I’m jealous, but I’ll never let her or anyone else know that. This is her dream; I’d never take away from that.”

Before Haru can respond, he hears footsteps come to a stop behind him. “Haru-senpai?”

Haru turns around to see Rei in the most immaculately-ironed lab coat he’s ever seen, his surgical mask tucked neatly under his chin. He approaches in a surprised daze. “I – I was just coming to check on Aki-san.”

Haru glances from Aki’s room to Rei’s navy scrubs and makes the connection. “You did her surgery?”

Rei nods with a tired smile. “Yes, she came out very well.” He worries his lip, eyes darting between Haru and Rin. “I heard about what happened to your home. Please, if you need anything at all, do not hesitate to let Nagisa or I know, all right?”

Haru’s heart warms. “Thank you, Rei.”

Rin steps back into Aki’s room as Rei gives Haru a concerned once over. “I understand that you’ve been through quite a traumatic experience, Haru-senpai, but you appear quite pale, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

Haru hesitates, but Rei’s a fucking doctor, so he sighs in defeat. “I’m anemic. My blood and iron levels are shit.”

Sympathy sinks into Rei’s features. “I’m sorry, I had no idea. When was your last transfusion or infusion?”

Haru snorts a laugh. “Too long, but there’s no way I could get an appointment this suddenly.”

Rei inclines his head thoughtfully. “Could you find the time in your schedule to come to the Oncology Center tomorrow evening? We have a department in that building for blood disorders; our regular transfusion and infusion patients have appointments there.” At Haru’s blink, Rei smirks. “There are a few benefits to being this hospital’s most proficient surgeon. I’d be happy to pull some strings for you.”

Gratitude overwhelms him. “Thank you, Rei.”
They head back into Aki’s room so Haru can say goodbye to everyone. He takes Aki’s limp hand, squeezing her fingers, and he would like to think he feels her hand twitch in response.

By the time they walk to the hospital parking deck, Haru’s soreness catches up with him, so Makoto bends and sweeps his knees out from under him to lift him into the truck. Just getting situated in the cab exerts him, and though the heater is on full blast, a restless chill shakes Haru. Makoto hushes him as the city lights streak through the darkness and takes Haru back to his house, which has become their home overnight.

When they get there, Haru has just enough strength to sit up on the bed as Makoto unlaces his Converse for him. He brushes some dust off Haru’s cheek and asks, “Do you want to take a shower?”

Haru’s eyes follow Makoto as he stands, gaze tracing his strong arms, wanting to be held safely in their embrace. Haru nods shyly, fingers roaming down Makoto’s shoulders to come together at the buttons of his flannel, tugging them open with pleading insistence. Makoto’s features soften in understanding and he cups Haru’s face to kiss him delicately, then leads him to the bathroom.

The showerhead pours water over them in hot rivulets, unraveling the tension in Haru’s shoulders. Soft, damp lips trace the curve of his neck, sweeping up and down – such a subtle motion shouldn’t leave Haru quivering, yet it does. His bones ache from the cold, but Makoto rubs the discomfort away with soapy fingers, trailing a woody-cinnamon scent across Haru’s skin.

Haru reaches up to lather Makoto’s hair with shampoo, kneading his scalp and making him sigh. Makoto bows his head, rolling his neck to work out corded tension as he leans into Haru’s touch. The shower spray washes away the shampoo and Haru’s fingers follow the water trail, roaming down, teasing lower as their eyes lock.

They surge together, all the sensation in their bodies rising to their lips as they collide in a frantic kiss. Makoto lowers to the shower ledge and Haru straddles him, trembling from the sensory overload of so much naked skin all slick against his own. He parts his lips to taste the damp warmth of Makoto’s mouth and heavy arms hug him closer. Haru tucks his forehead against Makoto’s temple for one overwhelmed moment, their eyes closing to let the rest of the world fall away. His tongue is thick under the weight of so much to say, but instead he kisses Makoto harder, demanding to feel more, needing the numbness of too much sensation.

It’s messy and desperate – all it takes is one minute of Haru rubbing his cock into the hard plane of Makoto’s stomach before fire zings along the edge of every bone and he finds release. He is a little more selfish for Makoto’s pleasure, wants a true hand in it, and so he works his cock with a steady fist, eyes riveted to Makoto’s face as his expression unravels and tightens. Haru eats at his throat, sucking possessive marks to life until Makoto’s muscles clench and heat blasts off his skin, then he goes boneless.

They do a lazy job of toweling off and grope through the darkness of the bedroom for clothes to wear to sleep. Haru finds boxers and a cotton shirt while Makoto rolls on some sweats, then they go to bed.

Haru likes tucking his back against Makoto’s chest, feels most secure in that position, but tonight he turns to face him, gaze darting to translate his expression. Makoto’s brows lift in question as he draws Haru’s thigh over his hip, pulling him flush. Haru blushes at the motion but keeps eye contact,
fingers anxiously climbing Makoto’s chest. Makoto lets out an understanding sigh. “Of course I was worried sick about you, but I’m all right.” He rubs Haru’s hip rather sheepishly. “In all honesty, I’ve been so busy at work that I haven’t had much time for anything else – not even for overthinking.”

“I’m glad,” Haru says, shifting for Makoto to reach down and take off his prosthctic. After a moment of hesitantly chewing his lip, he mumbles, “Um, thank you for letting me stay with you.”

He startles a laugh when Makoto blows a raspberry against his shoulder. “Don’t be so crazy.”

Haru smiles. “Okay,” he whispers.

Makoto smiles back and kisses him, a warm, soft press in the dark.

Despite the comfort of Makoto’s embrace, Haru does not sleep much that night. He stares up at the ceiling fan in thought, absently playing with Makoto’s hair as he snuggles his cheek against Haru’s heart.

Makoto does not wake up at all during the night, not even when Haru slips out of bed to pace the cobblestone patio in the backyard with cold starlight overhead. He sits on top of the picnic table with his elbows braced over his legs until the winter sky lightens to pale blue. Restlessly, Haru moves to the porch swing with his knees drawn up and a quilt around his shoulders. The frosted grass blades catch the sunrise in icy prisms of gold and pink; white clouds swarm overhead and Haru reaches out to catch the first snowflake of the morning in his hand, then closes it into a fist of resolve.

He slips back into the bedroom without so much as a rustle of fabric. Haru unfolds the blankets and upon lying down, Makoto magnetizes to him and startles awake. “Jesus, you’re freezing,” he breathes, hands rubbing warmth back into Haru, pressing kisses all over his fingers to unwind their stiff, cold tension. “Did you go outside?”

Haru shrugs, tucking his chilled toes under Makoto’s legs. “Just for a while.”

Makoto’s brow twitches up but he does not say anything – instead, he reaches over to the nightstand and takes his hearing aid off the charger, then nestles it into his ear, adjusting for a few moments. After that, he puts on his glasses and levels their gazes. “Are you hungry?”

Haru nods and they move to the kitchen after Makoto puts on his prosthetic. As pancakes cook on the stove and the wheezing tea kettle fills the house with invigorated warmth, Makoto looks over Haru’s burned forearm. He handles it delicately, turning his arm this way and that to find the worst damage. “I have some antibiotic ointment left over from when my burns were still healing. Would you like to use some?”

Haru nods a little too eagerly and Makoto smiles sadly, returning from the bathroom with a tube of what might very well be liquid gold, because Haru cannot even describe how wonderful it feels to slather the cream over his charred skin. It saturates his burns in cool relief and Makoto dresses his forearm in loose gauze to let the wound breathe. “Kind of crazy that cosmetic damage can hurt so badly, right?”

“Yeah,” Haru says, eyes roaming up to the edge of Makoto’s sleeves, studying the imprint of flames that licked up his skin.

“My back was burned a little deeper,” Makoto sighs as he turns to the stove to flip the pancakes. “It’s
mostly just patches of second and third degree burns, but there are a few areas of fourth degree burns, too.” He shrugs while sliding Haru’s pancakes onto a plate. “I have nerve damage from them, which is a blessing in its own way since I can’t feel those pieces of shrapnel in my back very often.”

Haru shakes his head and forks off a piece of pancake, chewing, “You’re scary-optimistic.”

Makoto leans over the kitchen table to wink. “Have to be.” He nods down at Haru’s food. “You want anything on those?”

Haru blinks down at his pancakes, thinking, then his heart twists. “Do you have blueberries?”

Makoto does, just a small handful of them, but the taste makes Haru’s eyes burn with unshed tears for Gou. Blueberry pancakes are her favorite meal and Haru would give anything to make them for her just one last time. He wonders how she’s doing at the foster center – if she has slept at all or if there’s a television there for her to watch morning cartoons on, so she can have some semblance of the home she lost.

Haru has so much to answer for, but the heaviest chain of guilt is bound to the person sitting next to him. “I need to tell you something.”

Makoto composes his expression and swallows to brace himself. “All right.”

Haru glances at the microwave clock in concern. “Don’t you have to get to work?”

Makoto sweeps a thumb over his phone screen to show him a text message. “That’s from the principal. There’s a chance of icy roads later today, so school was cancelled.” His foot nudges Haru’s under the table as he smirks. “I got the text when you were outside for ‘just a while’ last night.”

Haru’s eyes fall flat and Makoto’s smirk deepens, then he laces their ankles together. “I’ve got plenty of time for whatever you need to say, but… I’m a little nervous because it’s clear that there’s so much on your mind.” Their hands find each other as they watch snow tumble over the window frame. “I know that nothing is okay right now, but I want you to be.”

Haru captures Makoto’s resolve to memory, the set of his jaw and the fierce green of his eyes. Haru cups Makoto’s cheek, his voice falling to a vulnerable whisper. “You make me okay.” He shakes his head with earnest insistence. “When nothing else can.”

Haru’s life pulled his heart out by the roots, leaving an empty foundation behind where nothing could ever grow. Until Makoto planted seed after seed, nurturing them with sunshine smiles and golden sincerity. Haru has always bloomed under the attention in his own quiet way, but now he must run from the maze garden Makoto planted inside him, the one in which Haru lost himself in goodness, security, and warmth. He will abandon his comfort zone because he must find those empty spaces in Makoto now, and fill them with the love he deserves.

With the truth he deserves.

A hot lump of fear swells in his throat and he feels like he’s going to be sick or, at the very least, faint. His collarbones tighten and ache as they always do with a rush of anxiety, so he takes a deep breath, then just one more. Makoto waits in silence, though his gaze darts across Haru’s face uneasily.
Haru looks out the window to watch the snow fall, remembering when the roof fell in at the shack and how he watched snowflakes dance across the open sky from his bedroom floor, doped out of his mind with his arm still tied off. He cannot even remember what it felt like to be as hopeless as he was back then; Makoto has filled his life with such joy that those memories are watercolor smudges in the darkness of his mind, still there, but weaker.

“After both of my parents died, I was so scared.” His voice is weighted with defeat. “Even though they were terrible, it’s like you said: chaos feels safe when it’s the only consistency in your life. I needed chaos because it was all I knew. I didn’t know how to be part of a world that I had never lived in and an average life scared me more than my parents ever did.”

Makoto’s eyes are wide with sadness and Haru says, “I found someone who was the same as me. She knew there was something missing in me, something that everyone else had but I didn’t.” A stray tear falls as he meets Makoto’s gaze. “A heart.”

Makoto’s chest falls on a shocked exhale.

“She needed someone like me to do her dirty work. To make her money.” He closes his eyes with the heaviest guilt. “To destroy Iwatobi.”

Makoto squeezes his hands in distress, but Haru does not look up. He stares down at where their fingers are tangled but cannot feel Makoto’s touch as numbness spreads through him. It feels like a shovel is digging into his gut, wrenching his darkest secret from the place he buried it, and throwing it into searing light. “I’m a drug dealer, Makoto.”

Makoto goes so still that time itself pulses to a stop. Haru can see it on his face that the blood has stalled in his veins and his heart is faltering.

“I’m the kingpin of Freebird, Iwatobi’s most powerful gang, and I’m in love with you.”

Makoto surges to life, mouth flying open to speak, but Haru stumbles out of his chair with a jarring scrape of wood across the floor and backs into a corner, holding out a pleading hand even as he sobs, “You can’t say it back.”

Tears startle into Makoto’s eyes and he is hopeless to do anything but stare as Haru crumbles – the boy cannot stop the fingers of his outstretched hand from reaching out to Makoto before he forces his arms around himself. Makoto’s heart is breaking, Haru can see it on his face, but even so he whispers, “You can’t say it back.”

Makoto’s chest lurches on a gasp of disbelieving confusion. “Why?”

The only movement in the whole house is the tear that falls down Haru’s cheek. “I can’t – can’t do this to you.”

Makoto stands up on wobbly knees, body straining forward. His palms are open to Haru, but his hands close into fists as he begs, “Why? How did it even come to the point of being in a gang?” He turns his back on Haru to pace, stepling his fingers behind his head. “Drugs, they – it kills people slowly, it’s not the same as just…” His eyes darken with torment, then he looks away in utter ruin.

They startle when Makoto’s cell phone vibrates on the table, reality cutting through the fog of shock. Gradually, Makoto drags his feet over and reads the message, looking everywhere but at Haru’s face, twisting a knife deeper into his heart with each passing second. “Nagisa has a busted water pipe. He
wants me to come look at it.”

Haru cannot find his voice and Makoto does not wait for any response. All Haru can do is watch as he pockets his keys and wallet, then shrugs on a jacket and laces up his boots with frustrated urgency. He opens the front door to leave but pauses, his shoulders tightening with conflict.

The wind echoes in the grave silence, chills raking over Haru’s arms. Though Makoto’s back is to him, Haru can imagine the way his features are collapsed in hopeless grief. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel,” Makoto whispers, gazing out into the world of swirling white. “I’ve known from the beginning that there was something deeper… darker to all of this, but…”

Haru takes a step closer, arms quivering to hold Makoto from behind – the room is tilting and he needs the stability of Makoto’s frame, but a rift is driven between them. Makoto bows his head. “As much as I’ve worried, as much as I’ve driven myself crazy with theories about how all this happened, this was the last thing I expected from you.”

His words punch Haru in the gut, body wavering from the shockwave. Makoto steps out of the house and Haru flinches when the door closes. He rests his forehead against it, fist clenching around the knob, unaware that Makoto has sunk back against the other side of the door with tears dripping off his chin.

He would like to say he drives to Nagisa and Rei’s house on autopilot, but Makoto is grounded in cold, hard reality. Every mile he puts between himself and Haru hurts more than a bullet ever could; he wants to turn the truck around and barrel back toward home, he wants to kiss the breath out of Haru, wants to yell himself hoarse. All the sleepless nights and countless hours of denying the truth… the torment is screaming awake from where it’s been buried.

Makoto thought he would always be able to fake a smile, even if the world was burning to the ground, but he just can’t this time. Nagisa is more perceptive than anyone gives him credit for, but Makoto’s saving grace is the busted water pipe – Nagisa is too busy soothing a frazzled Rei to notice much of anything else.

Makoto goes down to the flooded basement and throws himself into the task of fixing the water pipe, ignoring the bite of icy water seeping into his boots. It’s a bit harder to maintain his stubborn grit when water sprays him like needles, but at least it gives him something else to think about, if only for a few hours.

He gets the pipe taped off and Rei tags along on the hurried drive to the home improvement store to find a replacement. The plumbing aisle is crowded with people who are there for the same problem, but loneliness still aches through Makoto’s chest.

On the way back, Rei bobs his knee in the stiff silence of the truck cab. He’s attempted to start a conversation with Makoto several times, thanking him profusely for the help, commenting on the sudden change in weather, but Makoto can never muster up anything more than a grunt of acknowledgement.

At long last, Rei stammers, “I hope – I hope everything is all right, Makoto-senpai.”

Makoto grimaces in apology, guilt burning across his stomach. “Thanks, Rei. I’m sorry, I just…” He sighs, tucking his elbow against the window. “Had a fight with Haru.”
Rei startles a blink. “Oh.” His eyes dart to follow the blur of scenery out the windshield. “Well, I’m not sure how much relevant advice I could give in that category —”

Makoto hikes a grin at that.

“Though I am more than happy to listen if that would be any help.”

Makoto shrugs miserably, watching as a dump truck pours salt across the ice-slick highway. “I’m kind of speechless about the whole thing, really.”

Rei stiffens, then tilts his head. “Might I talk, then?”

Makoto tenses in surprise, then nods.

Rei crosses his legs in thought, brushing the wrinkles out of his Burberry scarf. “Though Nagisa and I have extremely demanding jobs and our lives are by no means perfect, I think we both find comfort in the agreement that those months after my overdose in college were the toughest time for us as a couple.” A muscle ticks in his jaw with repressed self-loathing. “Any current situation becomes dull in comparison, when we remember that time. The withdrawals from speed were crippling; my body was so dependent on the rush that I was exhausted without it.”

Rei chukles in memory. “Nagisa was so earnest in telling me that I was stronger than those urges, but he couldn’t understand why I had started using in the first place. His confusion made me happy, truly,” he mumbles absently. “That he had never known that hopelessness.”

Makoto’s brows scrunch and Rei shakes his head with a pitying smile. “Makoto-senpai, do you know what I have learned from my experience as both an addict and the doctor who treats them?” He leans forward with the most heartbreaking look in his eyes. “People turn to drugs because they feel like drugs are the only guarantee we have in this world. Speed always kept me awake to study longer when nothing else could; heroin can take a person to a world far from this one. You are no longer mentally capable of worrying about your problems because they simply do not matter in that state of mind.”

He sinks back into his seat, tipping his head to gaze out the window. “Life is so much, and there are people who can only see its beauty when they are on drugs.” He sighs. “They are what make Iwatobi go ‘round, if you will. If someone is not using, then they must be dealing.”

Makoto’s heart lurches. “Why do you think that is?”

Rei shakes his head mournfully. “This city’s economy is not the best and that can either be your downfall or your advantage.”

“But it’s – isn’t it wrong to –”

Rei lifts his chin. “Makoto-senpai, do not believe for one moment that dealers are without morals. Understand that organized crime is extremely normalized in this environment.”

Somehow, that makes sense to Makoto. He remembers the children growing up in the war zones he fought in, how they could still find reasons to smile when all Makoto wanted to do was weep.

Rei says, “People are struggling to find jobs and they are having to ask themselves, how far am I willing to go to get my bills paid? To feed my family? To just stay alive?”
Makoto turns to the window, his wide eyes glistening. He thinks about Gou and how expensive it is to raise a child. He’s never considered the possibility of someone turning to a life of crime for the sake of a loved one, sacrificing their own safety so readily, just to make sure their child gets fed. Though he was in the military and had brushes with death on a daily basis, he cannot imagine making that kind of decision here at home. He knows that he was raised traditionally, but he had no idea how much of a privilege that was until this very moment – his parents never had to make such heartbreaking choices.

As frustrated and betrayed as Makoto wants to feel, a part of him whispers of course, because of course Haru would make that choice for Gou or anyone else he loves. That is the Haruka that Makoto knows.

Rei squeezes his shoulder with a knowing smile. “I think I have said my piece.”

Makoto breathes a tired laugh and nods. “Thank you, Rei.”

“Of course, Makoto-senpai.”

He pulls into Rei’s driveway and cuts the engine with a deep breath. Rei perks up and buttons his pea coat, saying, “After we fix this pipe, why don’t you come to support group with Nagisa and I this evening? Give yourself some time to think and such.”

Makoto nods and it’s easier to force a smile this time.

“You can’t say it back’?”

Rin’s voice is a dull echo of disbelief through the quiet of Sousuke’s house. The shadows wrap them in blue-darkness as Haru sits on the couch like a complete shell of a person, oblivious to Rin kneeling before him and desperately searching for signs of life in his empty gaze. “I got scared,” Haru croaks.

Rin shakes his head in confusion, putting a hand on Haru’s knee as if to ground him with this point of contact, but the boy is long gone. “Haru, what are you scared of?”

So often, Rin looks like that teenage punk with eyes lost to dreamland, but in this moment, Haru is that lost, frail thing with the loneliest eyes Rin has ever seen. “He doesn’t even know me.” He curls his fist into his heart with frustrated emphasis. “The things I’ve done, Rin…” Bitterly, he grits his jaw against the hot tears rolling down his face. “I’m not who he thinks I am. Who he thinks he’s in love with –”

Rin’s nostrils flare on an infuriated breath and he grabs Haru’s wrist, leveling their gazes with the fiercest severity. “What you’ve done to survive never defined you,” he whispers. “Not to me or our sister or anyone else who loves you.” His stoic expression falters, brows going high with pleading. “It’s time for you to realize that you deserve to be happy.”

Haru is tired in a hundred different ways, but Rin’s words cause a shift inside of him. His body knows it’s about to rest for the first time in his life; his demons will have sleeping peace because they are about to be loved and danced with and forgiven.

Maybe forgiveness is too much to ask for. “What if he hates me now?”
His voice is small with fear and it nearly breaks Rin. “Oh, Haru.” He sits on the couch to wrap him in a hug of overwhelming adoration. “He’d be a fool to hate you.” He leans back with purpose. “I think Makoto will understand if you explain what brought you down this path in the first place. You need to tell him that you were an addict.”

Haru is already shaking his head, but Rin squeezes his hand with firm reassurance. “I know how scary this part is, Haru – it’s so fucking scary that I haven’t even told Sousuke about Hitomu. These dark spots, they’re…” He takes a moment to gather himself. “Hard. But you have to do it; I know you’re willing to do it for Mako.”

Nausea swarms him, but Haru finds himself nodding. Rin nods back, reaching for the phone on the coffee table. “You said he’s at Nagisa’s?”

Haru is taken aback, but he confirms it. Rin dials a number and nudges Haru with his hip as he swings Sousuke’s dog tags around a finger. “I’ll handle this part.”

That evening, Makoto drives Nagisa and Rei to the soup kitchen and the sight of the building makes bittersweet nostalgia tighten in his chest. Nitori opens the front door for them, beaming so hard that he is a source of light on the gloomy street. Makoto understands why when he notices the silver band wrapped around Nitori’s finger, and he can’t remember the last time jealousy burned him like this.

The cafeteria is crowded with a larger group of people that usual. Makoto picks out pieces of conversations, mumbles about drug shortages and the streets becoming war zones when night falls. It leaves him feeling sick, scared, and smaller than ever before.

All kinds of people sit in the circle of chairs and Makoto takes in the faces of struggling addicts, homeless veterans, even a few low-ranking, concerned politicians. He recognizes Natsuya, as haggard as he looks, the weak light in his eyes flaring brighter when Nao takes his hand and their sparrow tattoos meet.

Makoto’s eyes roam further down the line of chairs and his stomach drops when Haru looks up to meet his gaze. Makoto gasps but Haru does not waver, his jaw firmed with resolve even as his lip shakes.

Rei’s voice is distant to Makoto’s ears as he calls the meeting to a start. He begins by telling his story as an addict, then everyone goes down the line introducing themselves and why they are here. The stories are usually heart-wrenching, but Makoto cannot focus on them – his blood is on a race for its life by the time Natsuya gives a summary of his drug experience.

Makoto’s heard his story before, how he started using heroin to cope with stress, but tonight he shares a new detail. Natsuya shifts his elbows to his knees, his gaze cast to the floor and lost to memories. “I was in a bad financial place when I was using. My younger brother was getting bullied and needed to move to the private school, but even with both my mother and I working, we couldn’t afford it – we did not know how we were going to even keep the lights on.” His gaze pierces the floor. “The gang leaders of Iwatobi understand the financial state of this city and gave me opportunities never presented to me before. I had a choice: I could work construction and decide between paying the electricity or water, or I could deal heroin for a night and make hundreds.”

Natsuya shrugs, arching a brow. “It wasn’t too hard of a choice, back then.” He glances at Nao with regret. “But everything changes after a while. Gang leaders stop letting you keep as much profit and
they learn more about you as time passes – where you live, who you love. The things they can do…” He meets Nao’s gaze with so much shame.

Nao shakes his head in unspoken apology, turning to address the group with a poised smile. “My name is Nao and I haven’t used cocaine in a little over a year.” He bows his head in thanks through the standard bout of applause and Makoto claps numbly, surprised by Nao’s confession. “Though I don’t often have the urge to use again, Natsuya has said wonderful things about coming here and I’ve noticed an incredible difference inside of him.” He tips Rei a smile, lavender strands slipping from behind his ear. “I wanted to thank you for doing such a great thing for Iwatobi, Ryugazaki-kun.”

Makoto’s gaze moves to Haru as the rest of the room shifts attention to him, since he is next in the line of chairs. Tension strains like a rope pulled taut between him and Makoto, and his voice is heavy with a lifetime’s worth of exhaustion. “My name is Haru – Haruka Nanase and –” He licks his lips before they firm into a determined line. “I started using heroin when I was fifteen.”

A shockwave rushes through Makoto’s body and lurches into a spiraling current. His body loses stability, his point of gravity falling into a never-ending hole of the most all-encompassing grief.

There is a pulse of silence, then Haru finds his voice. “My parents abused drugs. And me. I never had any relief, especially not at school. I got into a fight when I was fourteen and was expelled, but I never went back.” He pulls his sleeves over his hands to hide his trembling fingers. “I think that’s when I really started being scared of other people. I never finished school and that kind of put this…” He gestures weakly. “Wall between me and everyone else. I didn’t know what was normal. When my mom offered me heroin, I knew it was wrong, I just –” Haru swallows, every word thick with emphasis. “Wrong was good because I didn’t have to be at home when I was high. I was in a completely different world where I didn’t have to be me.” He gropes for the words. “My friend Rin, he didn’t understand that. He said, ‘you’re not you when you’re on heroin,’ and I said, ‘that’s the point.’”

A few addicts nod, their eyes sad with understanding. Haru sighs. “My dad used my addiction to his advantage and I started dealing for him. In return, I got a cut of the heroin.” He wraps his arms around himself. “Then he had me making all kinds of drugs – mixing crack, trimming pot, making crocodile.”

Makoto does not know what that last term means, but a homeless woman’s full-body shudder gives him a hint.

“My mom overdosed on it,” Haru says, emotion sinking into his features. “And as wicked as she was, something about her dying just made the nothingness of being high so…” He lets out a hollow breath. “So lonely. I haven’t been on the needle since I was eighteen.” This round of applause is earnest, and Haru gives a tiny smile of appreciation. “It’s hard to stay clean, especially when I have so much anxiety and other medical issues.” He worries his lip. “I’m anemic and the treatments are expensive. Since I didn’t even finish high school and couldn’t get a job, I…” He closes his eyes for a brief moment and Nao rubs his back. “I was an easy target for someone who needed the work of desperate people like me.”

He opens his eyes with resolve. “But I’m not that person anymore.” He gathers the strength to meet Makoto’s gaze. “I’m ready to let it all go because I’m done with letting drugs keep me from the people I love.”

The whirlwind of Makoto’s emotions narrows to the base of his spine, locking him in a shellshock of
disbelief. Then the warmth of acceptance floods him, pouring a rosy haze over his mind and washing away the drought in his heart, drowning him in whispers of *you love him, you love this boy and you will always love him.*

His fingers ache to reach out and touch, but Haru stands up to bow his head in thanks to the group and excuses himself. Makoto listens to the door slip closed, a gust of wind raking chills over his arms, his body soaring with adrenaline like none other.

Rei puts a hand on Makoto’s shoulder. “The Oncology Center at the hospital,” he whispers. “Go to him.”

He leaves the meeting and throws open the door, racing through the night.
Antebellum

Chapter Notes

Quick update because I have waited over a year to write this scene.

Special thanks to Aquarex-sama for this depiction of ewoatt!Makoto as a sniper, he looks so handsome and strong *heart eyes* thank you so much!

Saltyaf, thank you so much for your hard work as a beta reader! I can't thank you enough. (archive of our own | twitter)

Chapter song is My Love by Sia, and this has always been my go to ewoatt!makoharu song, so if you'd like to set the mood for this chapter, I recommend giving it a listen! Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"My love, leave yourself behind

Beat inside me, leave you blind

You took a chance and you took the fall for us

You came thoughtfully

Loved me faithfully

You taught me honor

You did it for me

You gave all you had

And now I am whole."

"My Love" by Sia

Being at a hospital as night falls is disorienting, and it leaves Makoto feeling queasy. Artificial lights flicker too brightly, like caffeine poured over a nurse’s twelve-hour shift – jarring and nauseating. It’s disturbing to see so many people gathered in the waiting rooms like a funeral by moonlight. These families have been pulled from their beds by loved ones caught in the crossfire of gang violence; Makoto hears talk of gunshot wounds and overdoses, which quickly has him barreling toward the first person in scrubs that he sees. He does not care how frazzled he sounds when he asks where the Oncology Center is, and he manages to follow the doctor’s directions to a round building across the yard, snow flickering through his lashes as he hurries over.

Makoto steps through the doorway hesitantly, cheeks flushing when a gust of heat blasts him.
Recessed lighting warms the dark hardwood; amber shapes roam through the indigo shadows, creating a soothing ambiance. Before Makoto is a line of empty recliners with IV racks. His eyes follow the row to the last chair, where someone is asleep with a needle taped to the crook of their elbow, attached to a tube of dark sludge.

Makoto’s heart twists at how fragile Haru looks curled up in the chair, nestled under a wool blanket. He ventures closer, pausing when an older woman in scrubs steps around the corner. She blinks in surprise, taking her glasses off. “Oh,” she whispers, startling a smile. “Hello.” Her eyes flicker between Haru and Makoto with an air of excitement. “Do you know Haru?”

“I’m his boyfriend. Can I sit with him, please?”

The woman gives this shudder like she’s about to fly apart with excitement, urgently whispering, “Of course, of course!” She gestures to the recliner beside Haru and even gives Makoto another blanket, which makes him tip a confused smile. The woman blushes and tucks a grey curl behind her ear. “He’s been coming to the hospital for a long time and he’s a sweet boy. It’s nice to see someone with him.”

Makoto nods in understanding and the nurse slips back into her office, leaving him alone in the quiet. He shrugs his jacket off and freezes when Haru shivers awake, his teeth chattering despite how warm the room is. He curls deeper into himself, struggling with the blanket until he feels the weight of Makoto’s stare and blinks up.

Makoto had a speech prepared – okay, maybe he thought he did, but it’s hard to come up with an elaborate declaration of love on the fly. If he’s being truthful, he didn’t put much thought into what he would say because he thought a kiss would shed enough light on the depth of his feelings, but that would feel so wrong when Haru is shrinking away like he doesn’t deserve to even be near Makoto.

He touches Haru’s hand and the boy flinches, brows furrowing over closed eyes as though he’s silently begging for this to truly be happening. Makoto frowns as he rubs warmth back into Haru’s fingers. “You’re so cold,” he says in a baffled daze.

Haru nods up at the IV bag of sludge. “It’s the iron.”

Makoto unfolds the extra blanket the nurse left and sweeps it over Haru, grinning when he shudders in relief. They have a beat of timid silence before Makoto swallows. “Is this…” He gestures to the IV bag. “This looks really serious, Haru.”

He straightens his arm out, the tape at the crook of his elbow flexing. “It can be,” he says carefully. “If I don’t get enough treatments.” He sighs, voice stricken with vulnerability. “It’s miserable and it makes me feel sick and tired and –” His head thunks back against his seat. “Of all things, I’m bound to this.” He flaps his elbow weakly. “Forever.”

Makoto’s chest aches. “I’m sorry, Haruka.”

Haru’s gaze flickers away as he shifts in embarrassment and Makoto gives an exasperated shake of his head. “Why didn’t you tell me you were anemic?”

He puts a hand on Haru’s knee when the boy refuses to look at him. Haru bristles at the touch and his voice is raw, wobbling as he snaps, “For the same reason I didn’t tell you about anything else!”

His words stretch through the quiet, making Makoto crane back. Haru’s eyes are red-rimmed with
tears, the blueness flaring with emotion. “It’s too much,” he whispers. “And you’re too good.”

Haru tries to physically swallow his feelings down and bury love in the darkest part of his mind, but it roars with such light that it cannot be snuffed out. He does not deserve to be free of shadow and sin; he insists that he is still bound to the coldest, blackest chains even as Makoto’s touch makes them all fall away.

In one last attempt, he finds his voice. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into,” Haru says, even as he can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The light is in Makoto’s eyes. “I know you. I love you.”

The words hit Haru harder than a train, dizzying him with a high like none other. Everything about this moment is ethereal, from the golden shards in those emerald eyes to the freckles like starlight across Makoto’s nose, yet it’s all still so human – his veins are throbbing, body wracking with so much happiness that he has no choice but to finally, finally accept it.

Makoto exhales a laugh, sounding as breathless as Haru feels. “I love you,” he says again, wavering as he does so. He frames Haru’s face with the most tender adoration. “There is no life for me without you. Anything else is…” He shakes his head mournfully. “It’s meaningless without you, Haruka Nanase.”

Their foreheads rest together, eyes closing to revel in one another. Their breaths are ragged and Makoto’s voice is wrecked, but his smile shines through. “And I am so in love with you that I swear to God, you’re seriously sleeping on the couch if you keep trying to convince me otherwise.”

A thick laugh bursts forth and Haru smiles when Makoto thumbs his tears away. He sniffs and nods, letting go of the tension in his chest and accepting Makoto’s love with an all-consuming kiss, blood on fire with it. Their gazes lock with a new heat singing through them, and their mouths surge harder together as desperation takes hold.

Makoto’s front door bursts open and he and Haru surge into the house, hitting a wall in manic passion, kissing with frantic need. Haru’s legs tighten around Makoto’s hips, tongue sweeping into his mouth, hungry for the taste of him. Snowflakes melt into the heat of their skin, rolling down the thick column of Makoto’s throat and dripping down the arch of Haru’s spine.

After a few jarring steps, Haru falls over a mattress and though Makoto hovers over him, he can still feel his radiating warmth. Haru pulls him down and Makoto’s arms encompass him, secure and protective in everything he does, even the way his lips take Haru’s with such careful passion.

Their hands are impatient to find naked skin, their hips restless to lock together. Haru tips his head back for Makoto to kiss his throat, teeth grazing, making Haru arch into the motion. Makoto delves into the sensitive juncture of his neck and shoulder, breathing heat over damp sweeps of saliva and lighting Haru’s nerves on fire.

Haru heaves for breath, stretching out his throat for Makoto’s kisses. He tips his face to the ceiling, eyes closed to feel as much sensation as possible, and he loses himself to the rush as he whispers, “Makoto, I want you to…” He wavers from just the thought of it.

Makoto leans up, shoulders hunching to carry his weight over Haru, gaze roaming in a love-drunk haze. Haru blushed, squeezing into the thickness of Makoto’s biceps with earnest insistence. “I want
you.”

He beams. “I want you, too.”

This idiot. “No, I mean, I’ve never let someone…” Jesus, he’s actually going to have to say it, isn’t he? “I’ve never let anyone inside of me.” His throat dries, tightening his voice to a croak. “I want it to be you.”

Makoto inhales sharply, body seizing all at once.

Haru stares. “Did you just come in your pants?”

“No,” Makoto wheezes, his features still rigid. “Almost, but no.”

Haru bites his lip around a smirk, anticipation quivering through his chest. Makoto clears his throat to compose himself, but he still stammers. “So you’ve, uh, topped, but like, you’ve never…?”

Haru shrugs. “Never wanted to bottom until now.”

Makoto’s muscles tighten again. “Don’t – don’t keep saying things like that!” He smothers Haru’s laugh with a kiss, meshing their lips together, all supple and warm. Anxiously, he pets Haru’s hair, his voice deep with vulnerability. “I’m scared I’ll hurt you.”

Haru finds his mouth in the dark, understanding. The rest of the world does not exist in this space they have created together; there is nothing other than the weight of Makoto’s hips between his thighs and the way their chests are pressed together, hearts pounding to the same reckless beat. Haru trails kisses over Makoto’s cheekbone to breathe warmth into the shell of his ear. “I’m ready for you,” he whispers, eyes closing with emotion. “I have always been ready for you.”

Makoto looks away for an overwhelmed moment, eyes darting with inadequacy, curling into himself self-consciously. Haru frames his face to level their gazes. “You’re perfect, Makoto.” He kisses his mouth, lips sliding up his cheek to his forehead. “I want it to be you. Please.”

Makoto interlaces their fingers and tucks their joined hands between their hearts. “Haru…” He can feel the emotion in his touch, hear it in his breathing. “I’ll cherish this.”

Haru smiles and pulls him down for a deep, savoring kiss. Makoto presses over him with resolve, filling Haru’s senses with him. Haru sits up and Makoto leans back on his haunches for the boy to fumble with his flannel buttons, the motion tense with nerves. Shyly, Haru keeps his eyes cast down to the task at hand, and he is so aware of Makoto’s shadow towering over him, making him feel small, yet safe.

He parts the shirt and relishes in the wide expanse of Makoto’s pectorals, gaze spilling down the muscled curve of his ribs and the rippling plane of his abdomen. With trembling fingers, he sweeps the shirt down Makoto’s shoulders, and the warmth of his naked skin floods Haru’s pores.

Makoto takes off his glasses, the shuffle of movement loud in the quiet of the room. Haru’s awareness is hot-wired to the very air around them – he swears that he can even hear the snow falling outside. Makoto bows his head to soothe Haru’s nerves with a reassuring kiss, cupping his face with delicacy. “It’s all right,” he whispers, taking a deep breath. “We’re all right,” he adds to calm the race of his own heart.
He helps Haru shrug out of his denim vest, but Makoto pauses at the hem of his shirt. Haru nods as he lifts his arms for Makoto to slip the garment off, skin tightening with chills not brought on from the coolness of the room, but from Makoto’s heavy stare. “God, you’re beautiful,” he exhales.

“So are you,” Haru says, and there is something about a love confession that makes them believe each other’s words for once. He leans up to take Makoto’s lips and when their tongues brush, Makoto surges over him, cradling the back of Haru’s head as they fall over the mattress. They kick off their shoes and hear them thunk roughly to the floor. Makoto’s hands come together at the button of Haru’s skinny jeans and the boy arches up to help Makoto shimmy them off with his boxers, laughing at his impatient curse.

Makoto kicks his pants off and Haru’s hands are restless, driving down the front of Makoto’s boxers before urgently rolling them off. Haru settles over the pillows and Makoto licks heat down his stomach, over his nipples, into his mouth. Their bodies press together, damp and aching to become one.

Makoto’s kisses trail down Haru’s chest in a wet, delirious slide that drives him crazy. His brain short-circuits when Makoto swallows his cock, the slip of his mouth shooting tremors up Haru’s spine. After only twenty seconds of soft lips and tight suction, Haru is embarrassingly close to the edge, so he gropes for the nightstand to fling the drawer open, heart lurching when he touches the bottle of lubricant from the last time they joined in this bed.

He gives the bottle to Makoto, who takes it rather nervously, which is far too endearing because Haru is the one who is about to shake apart from the inside out. The cap flips open and Haru keeps his wide eyes locked on the ceiling, fingers twitching over the sheets in an anxious dance.

Makoto’s voice breaks the pounding tension. “Are you okay, Haruka?”

“Nervous,” he breathes.

“Me too. Do you want to keep going? We can take a break, if you want.”

Haru shakes his head with a tight swallow of determination, spreading his legs for Makoto’s touch. Makoto sits up to study Haru’s face as his hand trails warmth over his thighs, getting him comfortable with the touch in such a sensitive area. After a few minutes of sweet, loving touches and absent kisses, Makoto pours lubricant over his hand and a finger brushes Haru’s entrance. His stomach lurches with surprise because he knew this was going to be, well, invasive, but he didn’t think he could be so excited for it.

Makoto’s finger dips inside, making Haru’s cock twitch. It slips deeper and he lets out a sharp moan through the pulsing burn, not because it hurts, but because the sensation is so new and foreign and those types of things are never supposed to feel so good. This is nothing like when he fingers himself – Makoto’s fingers are thicker, warmer, oh God, twisting –

Makoto turns his wrist and Haru jolts like an electric shock. “Right there, Haruka?”

“Th-ere, oh, fuck –”

Makoto’s fingers curl and Haru buries a moan into the pillows, hips lurching to take him deeper. He didn’t even know he was capable of making such noises – wondering, anxious little whines like he is no longer capable of language because he’s been rendered to the most primitive, desperate state of need.
He leans up into Makoto’s kiss and those fingers press into the spot that sets Haru’s veins on fire. He throws his head back, stretching out his neck for long drags of tongue and teasing bites. “Harder,” Haru croaks, wanting everything, *everything* harder, faster. Makoto moves in and out in a steady rhythm, mimicking the feeling of being fucked, and Haru comes, crying out Makoto’s name like it is the only word he knows.

He cannot even imagine how ruined he looks after he has come all over himself, skin gleaming with sweat, face flushed as he drifts between reality and rapture. Makoto wipes him off with the edge of the sheet clenched in a trembling hand and Haru looks up to see his muscles rigid with restraint, precome smeared across his abs from where his cock has been rubbing against them.

Their eyes lock and Haru’s gut clenches with anticipation. He pulls Makoto over him, breath hitching as their bodies slide together. That orgasm did not leave Haru sated at all – feeling any part of Makoto inside of him makes him need more.

Makoto bends one of Haru’s legs back by the knee to nudge against the place that no one else has ever been, or will ever be. They meet one another’s gaze as memories flood their eyes, reliving each fleeting glance and brush of hands that led to them being connected like this. They do not need words to know that they would suffer all the heartache a thousand times over, if only it came down to this very moment.

Haru holds each detail of this minute dear. He drags his foot down Makoto’s leg, marveling at how the sweet heat of his skin turns into the cold, unyielding metal of his prosthetic. The lamppost outside turns the snowflakes into cascading flecks of gold, and his voice is hushed in the warm shadows. “I’ve loved you since we met, you know?”

Makoto smiles against his cheek. “I think I loved you before that.” He kisses Haru, their mouths lingering together as he whispers, “Are you ready?”

Haru hugs his arms around Makoto’s waist and nods. Makoto looks scared shitless for all of three seconds before his features harden with resolve, and his lips fall flush with Haru’s ear. “Take a deep breath for me.”

Haru swallows, closes his eyes, then inhales.

Makoto pushes in and Haru’s eyes fly open – he keeps pulling in air long after his lungs have reached full capacity. His brain scrambles to comprehend the new feeling of being *stretched*, but his thoughts warp into static as Makoto nudges deeper. Nothing in the world could have prepared him to feel this much, all at once, caught in a sensation that is practically alive, it is so unstoppable.

Makoto’s eyes are riveted to Haru’s face, waiting for his frantic nod to keep going. The pressure is like suction, the tightest, hottest, wettest slide. Tension builds between Haru’s eyes, pulsing through his face and beating heat into the air. The searing pain encompasses all of his senses, buried in the deepest part of him and aching through his limbs. His nails dig into Makoto’s back but he does not protest, whispering encouragements that Haru arches up into.

Makoto pumps Haru’s cock and he sighs in relief, thighs falling open as the pressure inside widens. When their hips settle together, Haru almost pushes Makoto off because he can’t take being so full, but then something inside of him *shifts*, his body squeezing Makoto’s cock even tighter and refusing to let him go. Instead of too much, it’s suddenly *not enough.*
Haru’s hips lurch to take him deeper and Makoto fists the sheets, letting out a broken sound against Haru’s shoulder. His hips roll into a shallow, tender rhythm, his body one tight cord of restraint. Each time Makoto pulls out, Haru feels empty and abandoned, cold, but when their bodies meld together, light bleeds into his veins and it’s burning too bright, too hot. Instead of being in tune with every detail around him, his awareness falls away, save for the fixed point of Makoto inside of him.

Haru’s arms and legs scramble around Makoto to bury his cock deep in the heat of him. They learn how one another moves, discovering a rhythm together, and Makoto slips out more than once but they laugh through it. They maneuver their position, tucking a pillow under Haru’s back, and Makoto figures out how to hold his weight up on his elbows – after that, Haru arches up to meet his thrusts and their bodies roll together, fluid and unconscious.

Sweat speckles their foreheads as they heave for breath, their kisses nothing more than delirious smears across mouths. Haru’s fingers tremble around Makoto’s face, thumbing his lower lip in dazed wonder. Makoto bows to kiss Haru’s palm, nuzzling into his touch, and their faces crumple around each thrust, tension swelling hot between their legs.

Makoto whispers his love against Haru’s ear and that’s when his senses explode into color, his toes full of static. A current surges between them until he does not know where his own body ends and Makoto’s begins. Haru curls into him, insides clenching with his heartbeat, and Makoto’s hips buck as he falls over the edge with him.

They tremble as one, scrabbling to pull each other close. Makoto collapses on top of him, burying his cheek against Haru’s heart to listen to its frantic beat. Haru loses his fingers in the thick heat of Makoto’s hair and meshes their lips together in a soft kiss, feeling the shape of each other’s smile.

“Sousuke was there?”

Haru nods, parting his lips for another spoonful of ice cream, and his teeth click against the silver as he swallows. “He was undercover – after that, my house got raided.”

Makoto sits up against the headboard, staring at the ceiling in disbelief. “Well, I guess it makes more sense now – why you two didn’t seem to like each other the first time I saw you together at Seven Tears and all that.” He scoops out some ice cream from the carton and takes a bite. “I knew he had been a cop in Iwatobi before joining the military, but I never could have guessed something like that had happened.”

Haru rolls onto his stomach, tucking a pillow under his chin. “I wasn’t sure if I should be the one to tell you, or him.”

Makoto sighs, offering up another spoonful to Haru, who indulges in the sweet, creamy vanilla. “You and Sousuke are a lot alike,” Makoto muses, hiking his leg up and bobbing his knee thoughtfully. “Private, quiet. Scary as shit when you want to be.” Haru rolls his eyes and Makoto curls a handsome grin. “You both keep your past hidden for the same reasons, too: you’re trying to forget it.” He shrugs. “I get that.”

Haru leans over to press a kiss against Makoto’s bare thigh in thanks. Moonlight spills over Haru’s naked back and he takes another bite of ice cream as Makoto asks, “So after all that, what’s-her-name found you?”

Haru nods, swallowing heavier this time. “Miho, yeah.” Talking about her with Makoto is surreal,
but doing so lifts a weight off his chest. “I found out quickly that working for her wasn’t worth the money. She’s… possessive of me. I think it’s because she says I look like her son.”

Makoto frowns at that, brows twitching together in disturbance. Haru eases closer, taking Makoto’s warmth as comfort. “I tried to leave Freebird once, and when I did, she…” His voice dies out and he brings Makoto’s hand to the side of his neck, over his hawk tattoo.

Makoto finds the scar hidden beneath the ink and his face drains pale. “She slit your throat?”

Instead of answering, Haru looks away, fixating on a point on the wall and taking deep breaths. “After that, I knew I had to stay with her.” He shakes his head in defiance. “But I wasn’t going to wear her scar, so I got a tattoo over it. After that, birds became the symbol of the group and people started knowing us on the streets as *Freebird.*” He gives an ill-humored laugh. “I don’t know why anyone thought we were free, though.”

Makoto purses his lips and places the empty ice cream carton on the nightstand. He drags his fingers through Haru’s hair and the boy gazes up at him, silently pleading for reassurance. “You’re free because you’re still you,” Makoto says, brows furrowing earnestly. “Most people would become a monster in that situation just because they’re afraid. You didn’t.”

A shadow haunts Haru’s face and Makoto shakes his head firmly. “No monster could have as much love in their heart as you do, Haruka. Don’t even go there.” He leans down to kiss Haru’s forehead. “You’ve stayed a good man throughout all of this and I love you for that.”

Haru’s heart swells, eyes darting to watch the shadows of snowflakes trail down Makoto’s face, whispering, “You made me a good man.”

Makoto kisses him, clearing his mind even as it fogs over in a rosy haze. Haru straddles him, sheets slipping away and trailing chills over his naked skin. He hugs his arms around Makoto’s neck, snuggling into his chest. “Let’s talk about something else.”

Makoto chuckles, absently massaging Haru’s sore hips. “Okay. What would you like to talk about?”

Haru chews his lip, but it falls open on a deep breath. “I want to talk about when all of this is over.”

Emotion sinks into Makoto’s features. “‘This’? You mean after…” He tips his head, breathing a laugh. “I think *postbellum* is the best word for it. It’s Latin for ‘after the war.’” He loops his arms around Haru’s waist with a considering hum, but the noise trails off as he smiles. “Honestly, just getting to hold you like this every night would be enough for me. *But…*” He shifts their positions, snuggling them tighter together. “I definitely wouldn’t be opposed to having tea with each other every morning and kissing you until I’m late for work.”

Haru smiles shyly, his eyes asking for more. “We’ll be able to stay up late talking like we always do,” Makoto says. “Or we can sleep in late and not worry about a thing.” Emotion sinks into his features as he whispers, “One day, we won’t have to be scared.”

Haru tucks his face against Makoto’s shoulder. “That sounds like a dream.”

Makoto holds him a fraction closer. “It won’t just be a dream for much longer. You have to believe that.” He rests their foreheads together. “You believe me, don’t you?”

Haru smiles, but his whisper is broken. “Yes.”
He seals it with a kiss that catches their blood on fire and they fall back into their passion, burning through the night.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was purposely titled "Antebellum," because it means before the war. With that being said, the next chapter will be the climax of our story.
Eyes Closed

Chapter Notes

At long last, guys. Here we are.

Chapter song is "Over the Love" by Florence + The Machine, which, if you'd like, you can listen before reading right here. While writing, I had T.T.L's "Deep Shadows," on repeat, so I highly recommend listening to it while reading! Song is here.

Shout out to the wonderful saedao for this colorful, lovely depiction of Haru!

And the biggest thank you to saltyaf for working so hard and so quickly on beta reading this chapter! (archive of our own | twitter)

Finally, thank you so much for sticking with this story to its climax.

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**WARNING:** This chapter contains graphic depictions of fight sequences.

"Now there's green light in my eyes
And my lover on my mind
I don't want to see what I've seen
To undo what has been done
Turn off all the lights
Let the morning come
You're a hard soul to save
With an ocean in the way
But I'll get around it
I can see the green light
I can see it in your eyes
I'll cry and cry and cry
Over the love of you."

"Over the Love" by Florence + The Machine
Sousuke wakes long before the sun rises, but he doesn’t get out of bed. Instead, he watches Rin’s features shape to dreams, hair splayed around his face with his lips parted. Sousuke sighs, heart twisting with conflict. He hears Makoto’s truck drive off, headed to work, and Sousuke settles his decision with a kiss against Rin’s forehead. He leaves Echo to watch over him and slips out the back door, quiet as snowfall.

Haru sits on Makoto’s patio swing with a steaming cup of tea. Sousuke crunches over and leans against the swing with a frown. “You know, it’s freezing out here.”

Haru smirks against his cup. “I don’t like getting too comfortable.”

Dark humor passes between their gazes because Sousuke gets that. He glances back at the roof of his house, letting out a sharp jet of air through his nose. “Rin knows you’re hiding something from him.”

Haru takes an evasive sip of his drink. He’s a smooth, icy machine, but Sousuke isn’t fooled. “I’m not here to make you fess up. I want in.”

Haru’s brow twitches. “In what?”

“Cut the shit, okay? I’m freezing my ass off.” He levels their gazes. “You have a plan and I want in.” His features tighten with emotion. “But I don’t want Rin involved. I know you’re lying to him and everyone else to minimize the body count, but I’m not letting you do this alone.” He meets Haru’s eyes with resolve.

Haru looks him over before nodding. “If you’re serious, come to the old swim club at noon. Drop Rin off at the Foster Center to see Gou so he won’t get suspicious.”

Sousuke does as Haru tells him to and rides shotgun in Seijuro’s squad car while Momotarou gives them directions to the swim club from the backseat. The Mikoshibas have changed overnight – with Momotarou engaged and Seijuro with a baby on the way, they both have plenty to fight for, and they’re ready to stand alongside Sousuke and Haru to protect their futures.

The swim club is very literally falling apart at the seams, and Sousuke keeps a hand over his hip holster as they stalk the gloomy halls. He finds Haru standing near an empty pool, and when Sousuke follows him down the stairs into it, it’s like stepping into a lion’s den.

The worst of Iwatobi stands before him. Pietro De Vitis is a looming presence, standing tall with a regal, terrifying air. Nadia Roufeil, the leader of Honeyblade, glowers from a corner, not trusting anyone enough to have her back to them. Sousuke does not have to know the other woman’s name to know she is from the Bloodhounds – she smells of cedar fires and blood, her eyes more animal than human.

Haru stands between the gang leaders and cops, not wavering under their piercing stares. “Regardless of why each one of us is here, we all have to agree on a temporary treaty if this is going to work.”

The woman from the Bloodhounds nods without hesitation, but Pietro scoffs a laugh. “You cannot expect me to truly believe she –” he glances at Nadia in disgust, “won’t try to slit my throat the moment she gets a chance to.”

Nadia pouts at him in mock-hurt. “I’d never do that, Pietro.” She weaves a blade between her
fingers, purring, “I’ll just do Natsuya a favor and slice your other hand off.”

“That’s fine,” Haru breezes. “But you can’t do it for the next twenty-four hours.”

Pietro and Nadia turn to him with varying degrees of rage, but Haru does not falter. “Nadia, the only way you’re getting your girls back is if you don’t kill Pietro during this plan.” His glare cuts to the other man. “Pietro, you’re not getting any form of revenge on the police snitch unless you stay true to our agreement.” His voice darkens with promise. “I won’t give Nadia the chance to kill you if you double-cross me.”

Pietro’s brows lift with interest, excited by the threat. He makes Sousuke’s skin crawl.

Haru tips his head toward the woman from the Bloodhounds. “Ookami is a tracker; she’s found out where everyone’s kidnapped members are being kept, and we’re going to lead the snitch into an ambush at that location.” He lifts his chin. “I’m bringing Miho to the ambush. She and the snitch will be dead by this time tomorrow.”

Sousuke reels. “How are you going to get her to come with you? What’s the key to all of this?”

Footsteps echo through the room. Natsuya saunters out of the darkness, cutting a glare at Pietro, his eyes determined as he looks to Haru.

Haru nods. “Natsuya is the key.”

The treaty is settled. After the meeting at the swim club, Haru stands with Sousuke by the squad car while Seijuro and Momotarou wait inside the vehicle. “You’ll go to work tomorrow like it’s a completely normal day,” Haru reminds him, then his voice lowers with gravity. “And you have to be with Rin tonight as though nothing is wrong.”

Sousuke works his jaw, burning with guilt, but nods firmly.

Rin has mixed emotions after seeing Gou. She overjoyed him, but he falls into a depression the moment they’re separated. His eyes are heavy and vacant, his conversations with Sousuke absent and confusing.

Sousuke does not try to fill that empty space in Rin’s heart. He is content to sit on the couch with Rin, feeling the radiating warmth of his skin, and Sousuke suffers the emotional exhaustion of tomorrow in silence. When he hears Rin’s breathing even out, Sousuke takes him to bed and climbs in with him, then closes his eyes to fill the rest of his senses with Rin.

Though Sousuke only sleeps for a few hours, he wakes feeling more rejuvenated than he has in weeks. His eyes open to find Rin watching him, hair mused from their nap and his gaze half-lidded as he curls a languid grin. “You look so sweet when you sleep,” Rin whispers, not wanting to disturb the quiet.

“I’m not sweet,” Sousuke frowns, snuggling closer and making Rin laugh, all raspy and free. Sousuke props up on an elbow to lean down and kiss him, yearning for the softness of his lips. Rin teases his tongue into Sousuke’s mouth, flicking with that piercing, so coy and deceivingly shy that heat purrs through Sousuke.

They’ve had tender, sleepy sex before, but never has Sousuke been so reverent about it. His hands
move with meaning and finality, his stomach tight with knots. Every detail burns into his memory, body on fire with the way Rin whimpers and chews his lip as Sousuke’s fingers move in slippery touches between his thighs.

Rin’s body takes him in like Sousuke will never belong anywhere else, their skin clinging with sweat, the bed creaking with each thrust. Sousuke is utterly silent throughout the whole thing, Rin’s name the only word he speaks, like a prayer.

Haru cannot hide anything from Makoto, and he does not try to.

That night, Makoto does not use polite, meaningless conversation to dispel the tension in the air, nor does he try to flit around Haru with nervous, smothering touches – it’s difficult to combat such fretful urges, but the storm brewing in Haru’s eyes is too dark to be placated.

At the same time, Makoto does not ask Haru to speak on his feelings, because a part of him knows what this is all about. He cannot put words to his thoughts – the realization is distant, yet swallowing him whole. Makoto knows what is going to happen, and his heart races in the silence between them, for he knows that there is nothing he can do to stop the oncoming train.

They have a quiet dinner with absent conversation: Makoto does most of the talking and pretends he isn’t about to be sick while Haru sips on his second glass of wine, pretending his fingers are not trembling around the stem.

When Haru reaches for the bottle to pour his third glass, Makoto takes his wrist to stop him and levels their gazes. Haru’s eyes dart across his face and recognizes his look of understanding. The boy sighs and lowers his hand, not pulling his wrist from Makoto’s grip. He stares down at Makoto’s fingers, gaze tracing their shape, and swallows. “It’s tomorrow.”

Makoto’s voice is hollow. “Tomorrow.” He parts his lips, licks them, worries them. “Tomorrow, you’re…”

Slowly, Haru looks up. “I’m going to kill Miho.”

Even when he was shot, never did Makoto’s breath leave him in such a rush.

With shame, Haru looks away, busying himself with gathering the dishes. He goes to the sink and Makoto hears the faucet sputter to life, then the methodical slosh of water as Haru moves a sponge over silverware, the apple-sweet aroma of dish soap filling the kitchen.

Makoto bows his head, not sure what to think. Distress clenches his heart even as a steadiness builds inside of him because he always knew that this moment would come. Even before he found out that Haru was a drug dealer, Makoto always felt the looming shadow at their backs, like a curse upon their love, their lives.

He never gave a damn about it. That has not changed.

Makoto rises from his chair as evening falls, drenching the house in red, sensuous shadows. Haru’s shoulders are heavy under the weight of the world, and Makoto notes the stress gathered at the taut line of his spine. He steps into Haru from behind and feels all that tension unravel, bleeding into the air as his hands settle against the counter, one on either side of Haru. The boy relaxes as though he knows on a subconscious level that he is not safe unless he is caged against Makoto like this, where
nothing can touch him.

Makoto would never let anything hurt Haru again, if only he would utter the words. Haru shouldn’t even *have* to ask that of Makoto – when in the Special Forces, he dedicated his life to protecting people he didn’t know. In this moment, Makoto is more motivated to fight for Haru than he ever was to fight in the war.

Despite all of this, he is not a soldier anymore, and this is not his fight.

But Haru is a soldier now, and Makoto still knows what a soldier needs: to feel *alive*.

He turns Haru around, pressing into the softness of his body. The boy’s motions are sluggish and docile, and he looks to Makoto to bring him strength – to give him *sensation*.

Makoto breathes heat into the inch between their mouths, and Haru parts his lips for a kiss he had no way of preparing for. He seizes, swept up in Makoto’s passion, and he is unable to stop his hands from flying up in the most primitive action of surrender.

Makoto frames Haru’s face, thumbing his jaw open as he tips the boy’s head back, knocking Haru’s knees straight out from under him – Makoto’s hips pin him against the counter to keep him standing. Haru *whimpers*, weak and soft, dragging his tongue against Makoto’s as their bodies melt together into one aching flame. They stumble into the bedroom and Makoto sweeps Haru away from the rest of the world, the bed their fortress in the battleground that has become Iwatobi.

When one hears the term *making love*, it is often pictured as slow, tender. But that’s not what *love* is, not always, especially when it spears as deeply as it does Makoto and Haru. The passion is desperate, so consuming that it grips all their senses – their eyes glaze over, they taste nothing but the burning swell of emotion in their throats, and they gasp each other’s name as the heat of sweat layers over the synthetic scent of lubricant.

It’s chaos between their lips, a fight to chase as much sensation as possible. They are greedy with one another, stacking pleasure up their spines, climbing higher and higher only to dive into a full-body crash of release.

Wrapped up in each other and a tangle of sheets, Haru walks his fingers up Makoto’s shoulder, studying the contrast of his pale skin against Makoto’s tan. Haru looks up, eyes darting to take in the rich warmth of that green gaze, knowing that his own eyes are comparable to topaz or any cool gem left in the black soil of a wintery grave, no light to be found.

Haru rolls over on top of Makoto, thighs spreading over his hips as their mouths find each other in the dark. He leans up and Makoto’s gaze follows the motion, climbing up from between Haru’s legs. Haru has never felt so powerful as he does now, having those eyes on him like this.

He grinds Makoto’s cock back inside and startles a scream. A hurricane fists his gut, shaking through his limbs, Haru takes every inch of him, tightening around his shaft. Makoto sits up and Haru embraces him with arms and legs, huffing with each thrust of his cock. He grits his teeth, nails digging red crescents into Makoto’s back as pleasure and desperation collide, their bodies falling onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs.

Haru rolls onto his back and moans, opening his hands for Makoto to slide his fingers between his own.
The way their bodies fit together in this moment is blinding. "Don’t stop," Haru rushes, Makoto’s frame bowing over him, draping him in shadow. Haru shakes his head pleadingly. “Never stop loving me.” Even if I’m not here, please, never stop.

Emotion sinks into Makoto’s features. “Never,” he vows, promising, “Always.”

Makoto wakes to the jangle of a belt buckle, eyes opening to the searing grey of a winter sunrise. He is sore and alone.

Makoto finds Haru at the dresser, fastening the button of his jeans before bending to lace up his Converse. Makoto does not flinch as Haru slides bullet after bullet into the chamber of one handgun, then another. But then Haru struggles to put his holster on, muscles spasming in protest, and Makoto rises, slipping on some jeans and a shirt as he does so.

Makoto comes up behind Haru and wraps his fingers around the holster straps. For a flash, he pictures himself ripping the holster away and guiding Haru back to bed to hide from the world that is trying so earnestly to tear them apart, but Makoto refuses to be shaken. He meets Haru’s gaze in the mirror as he pulls the straps over the boy’s shoulders with resolve. Their fingers brush when Haru gives Makoto a handgun to tuck into each side pocket, then he lifts his arms for Makoto to roll a long-sleeve shirt down his torso.

Lastly, Makoto helps Haru into his denim vest and turns the boy around. Makoto nods to himself, then to Haru, more firmly and with reassurance. But then he breathes the saddest laugh, shaking his head hopelessly. “You shouldn’t look so beautiful right now. I can’t stand you for it.”

Haru’s face crumbles and he surges up on his toes to kiss Makoto, their hands moving through hair and framing faces. Makoto buries Haru against his chest, squeezing his eyes shut against the watery burn. Fiercely, he whispers, “You better come home to me.”

Haru pulls back, fisting Makoto’s shirt. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Haru’s lips tremble apart to say more, but then firm into a line. Instead, he presses his cheek against Makoto’s heart and listens as it beats.

Haru treks through the snow, venturing to the most lavish apartment building downtown, a glass tower that casts him in shadow. He notes the moving van parked at the corner and hurries through the crowded lobby, slipping into the elevator and putting in the code for the penthouse.

The elevator doors open and Haru is greeted by two men with boxes stacked in their arms. He ignores their confusion and breezes into the penthouse, his steps echoing in the emptiness. There is no sign of anyone having ever lived in the space, at least to the untrained eye. Haru notices pink stains across the carpet from wine glasses thrown in a blazing fury, but soon, the cleaners will wash all of that away.

Haru goes to the bedroom and finds Miho at her vanity, her silhouette a black arch against a glass wall of snowy skyline. The red of her lips stands out in the room, smudged and askew on her face. Black lace embroidery crawls across the plum silk of her gown like snakes.
Haru watches her bow to snort crushed pills and the most wicked satisfaction burns through him. Miho was first introduced to the gang war through her addiction to painkillers, and that love affair with black market narcotics never stopped. Drug abuse has left her body decaying from the inside out, the knobs of her spine protruding through her dress, her fingers grey as they grope for the flask on the vanity. She finds it empty and Haru doesn’t flinch as she sends the flask soaring into the wall of glass, leaving a hair-thin crack.

The collapse of her sanity was gradual, but Haru saw it eating her alive, nibbling away bit by bit. She has lost her mind to addiction and madness, and she breathes heavily, her mouth twisting and rolling in a restless scowl. Then, like the sharp draw of a violin string, her eyes flash to Haru’s in the vanity mirror. He says, “You’re running away?”

Her croak is apologetic. “I have to, Haruka. I don’t have the assets to stay in Iwatobi and be safe.” Police cruisers race through the maze of narrow city-streets below and the wailing sirens make her quiver.

“Where will you go?”

“Peru, not like it matters.” She gazes out the window, her eyes a storm of forlorn bitterness. “I feel like I had a reason to stay, once.” She shakes her head, whispering, “I can’t remember what it was.”

Haru ventures over and kneels to slip her cold feet into the nearest pair of black stilettoes, then helps her stand on wobbly knees. She blinks sluggishly, watching him in confusion. Haru steels himself. “Let me go with you.”

Miho’s eyes narrow even as hope lights them. “You shouldn’t want that.”

Haru’s voice tightens with desperation. “I’m not safe here, either. You can’t just leave me.”

Guilt sinks into Miho’s features, and whether it’s sincerity or madness, Haru does not care. She looks him over. “Your friends will die without you. You couldn’t handle having their blood on your hands.”

Haru shakes his head earnestly. “I’m more like you than I am them.”

Miho stares in disbelief, then her gaze hardens, shoulders sinking with relief. “Are you ready to go, then?”

Haru nods and he follows her to the elevator. She puts on some Chanel sunglasses that are too big for her gaunt face and muses her hair in the reflection of the elevator buttons, cooing, “You’re making the best decision for yourself, Haruka.”

His fingers tighten around the knife in his vest pocket. “I know.”

They walk out onto the street, Miho’s fur coat billowing in the wind as they get into her vintage Cadillac parked at the corner. Miho jerks the car into drive and lurches into traffic, ignoring startled honks and carving her way into the lane toward the airport. “Using the back roads will be quicker,” Haru says. He braces a hand on the dashboard as one of the car tires jumps the curb. “We shouldn’t cause a scene.”

Miho gives him a look, but follows his directions down the exit ramp to the outskirts. The car approaches an intersection and a dirt bike cuts in front of the Cadillac – Miho slams the breaks,
scoffing with indignation. She rips off her sunglasses to get a better look at the biker, whose back is to her, his lean muscles clad in a brown leather jacket. Though he is wearing a helmet, something about him causes Miho to sit up straighter as her brows twitch together.

The biker flexes his hand on the throttle and a tattoo peaks out from under his sleeve – a blue sparrow. He glances over his shoulder and his eyes are hard like garnets, impossible to forget.

Realization dawns on Miho’s face as infuriated heat floods her skin, and just like that, the hair-thin crack of her sanity shatters. “That mother–”

Faster than Haru’s eyes can follow, she whips a pistol out of the console and fires a deafening shot – the windshield spills down in a rain of glass. Natsuya dodges the bullet, rips his fist down the throttle, and the tires spin, snow melting under the burning rubber. He speeds off as Miho floors it with an enraged cry.

Wind blasts Haru through the open windshield, slicing across his cheeks. Natsuya turns down a forest trail and Haru’s arms fly up to block the sweep of low branches – he grits his jaw against the stinging cuts across his arms. The trees close in from either side and Haru hears crunching metal as darkness presses over them. Deer leap from the bushes of the narrowing path, then the car wedges between two oaks, the tires uselessly spraying mud.

The engine dies with a flood of smoke, but Miho scrambles through the windshield, her stockings tearing on broken glass. She is a flashing shape through the maze of black trees, and Haru follows her, his heart racing in the haunting silence of the woods.

He breaks into the clearing where the old factory mills lay in waiting, and the falling snow is the only movement in the entire complex. A shot fires in the distance and Haru’s voice leaves him in a startled yell. “Natsuya?”

No answer. Haru’s heart lodges in his throat as he races for the closest building, tearing around the corner before stopping dead in his tracks.

Miho is facedown in the snow, her temple bleeding, red spilling over white. Natsuya’s bike helmet rolls out of his limp hand and Haru’s gaze climbs his body, all the way up to his hip, where a bullet slashed his leather jacket. The shot missed him by less than an inch.

Haru glances down at Miho and tenses. “Did you kill her, Natsuya?”

He does not look up from the woman’s body. “I don’t… think so?” He raises his brows at Haru, eyes wide with embarrassment, and shrugs. “I panicked.”

Haru bends and rolls Miho over, feeling around her throat for her pulse, then listening to her shallow breaths. “You knocked her out.” He looks up and arches a brow. “Did you follow the plan and call the police station to tell them you heard gunfire around here?”

Natsuya nods. “Yes, so we need to finish the rest of the plan quickly. Where is Ooka –” He looks over Haru’s shoulder and throws himself at the boy – they slam to the ground as gunfire rents the air in two. They dive behind a stack of boxes and Haru hears the unforgettable melody of machine guns spraying bullets.

The ground jolts with the sudden fire of a rifle and Haru glances over the boxes. His gaze travels to the largest building in the factory complex – Ookami is crouched by the door and she handles her
rifle unflinchingly, firing shot after shot across the clearing. Addicts lie dead in the snow while others shoot blindly, and Ookami impatiently waves Haru over before laying down some cover fire.

Quickly, Natsuya strips the wires from some rusted machinery and binds Miho’s hands. He hauls her over his shoulder and follows Haru across the complex. They stagger through the door and the darkness of the building encompasses them, giving them a moment of relief before bullets shatter the windows. Ookami hauls Haru and Natsuya to the floor, then they hunker down as she returns fire.

“Those are the last of the snitch’s addicts,” Ookami snarls. “I came alone since I didn’t wanna get the rest of my people involved in this shit.” She fires the last of her bullets and curses, tucking close to Haru and Natsuya.

The gunfire ceases and everyone’s ears ring at a fever pitch. Ookami sags against the wall in relief but Haru asks, “What will you do without bullets?”

She shows him the claw over her right hand, rust flaking off as the metal fingers click together.

“Anyone who’s scratched gets an infection, but I ain’t got that kinda patience.” She holds the claw to the light and curls a grin. “I coated it in wolfsbane. We use it to poison arrows for huntin’.” She fiddles with the straps of her backpack. “This building we’re in is where they’re keepin’ all the prisoners from them other gangs like Diamond Back ’n Rough Rabbit.” She nods to the floor. “In the basement. All put up in cells, wrapped up like lil’ presents for them other kingpins.” She shifts restlessly. “I’m ready to finish this shit.”

Natsuya sets Miho down and races for the stairwell, descending the steps two at a time. At Ookami’s blink, Haru says, “Our people might be down there, too.” He wants to chase after Natsuya because he swears he can feel Nii and Ikuya’s presence in the very air, but he trusts Natsuya to take care of them, and like Ookami said, it’s time to finish this.

“Natsuya called the police a few minutes ago,” Haru tells her. “They should be here any second now.”

He looks to the window, focusing on the green, forest light shining through the broken glass, and pretends he is not shaking.

Sousuke does not drink any coffee that day.

He tried to, before leaving for work. He could not even force himself to take two swallows – the smell made him nauseous and the taste was wrong, probably because everything felt wrong about today.

Rin came into the kitchen a few minutes later, hair mused from sleep, wearing nothing but Sousuke’s old t-shirt from the Police Academy. Sousuke apologized for waking him but Rin assured it was fine. He told Rin that he did not have to get up so early, that he could go back to sleep, but again, Rin said it was fine, then he just sat in the kitchen with Sousuke. The moment was surreal because Sousuke had grown used to the lonely silence of mornings before work, but sitting in the quiet with Rin was… blessed.

Neither of them broke the silence until Rin asked Sousuke why he wasn’t drinking any coffee. Sousuke mumbled that he already had some, and he was unaware that Rin’s eyes flashed, catching the lie but not calling him out on it.

Today definitely felt wrong, but it felt right when Rin kissed Sousuke goodbye at the door. It was
nostalgic and familiar in the way Rin lazed his arms around Sousuke’s neck, swaying into his kiss, his body supple and warm.

Sousuke has a cold weight in his gut for the rest of the day, up until Rin calls him from the grocery store a few hours into his shift. He asks what Sousuke wants for dinner, and the question is so sweet and domestic and everything Sousuke never knew he needed. It’s something he could get used to, and that realization steels him because if there is anything in the world to fight for, it’s moments as simple as this.

“Get whatever you want,” Sousuke tells Rin on his cell phone as he paces Seijuro’s office. Echo curls up on her doggy bed in the corner, her eyes following Sousuke back and forth. Seijuro sits at his desk, fingers steepled as they wait for the plan to unfold in the tense silence. Momotarou props against the wall, alternating between bobbing his knee and weaving a rubber band through his anxious fingers.

Rin rolls his eyes – Sousuke can hear it in his voice. “We’d be having steak every night for the rest of our lives if you kept leaving the decision up to me.”

“You act like that’s a bad thing.”

“It is for your credit card.”

Sousuke sinks back against the wall, tired eyes lulling shut. “Honestly, it’s okay this time.”

Rin pauses. “Okay...” It comes out like a question.

Frustration burns through Sousuke before the intercoms blare to life, echoing through the station. “All stand-by officers: proceed to your vehicles for a 10-33 off of Exit Ramp 15. Follow S.W.A.T. in accordance with 10-40.”

Momotarou’s eyes flicker between Seijuro and Sousuke nervously. “10-33 is an emergency and – and Ramp 15 is to the outskirts... 10-40 is no lights or sirens, right?”

Seijuro smacks his hands against the desk as he stands. “It’s a stealth operation.” He shakes his head at Sousuke, sounding urgent yet apologetic. “You gotta call Haru.” You have to tell Rin goodbye.

Sousuke opens his mouth and cannot find the words, but it’s Rin who speaks. “Oh, hey, I gotta go – Makoto just texted me, wants me to call him for some reason.”

Sousuke clears his throat to level himself. “Yeah, no, that’s fine. I have to go, anyway.”

“Mmm.” Rin’s voice is playful with a smile. “Well, I’ll be waiting for you at home with your third steak of the week.”

“Can’t wait,” Sousuke breathes, meaning it with everything he is. “I love you so much.”

There is a beat of surprised silence – Rin surely did not expect Sousuke to pour so much emotion into his goodbye, but either way, Rin meets the sentiment with equal reverence. “I love you, too.”

Sousuke bows his head, closing his eyes for a brief moment, and hangs up. He takes a steadying breath and opens his eyes with resolve, meeting the determination in Seijuro and Momotarou’s gazes. “Let’s go.”
When the precession arrives at the tree line, the S.W.A.T. leader gathers the officers around – the man’s name is Takao and Sousuke’s always liked him for his blunt attitude and no-nonsense impatience. “We got a call this morning,” he begins, his voice ringing true and strong, “about a complaint of gunfire in this area.” Respectfully, he inclines his head toward Corro. “It’s been decided by our superior to not take any chances because there is a serious chance the gunfire could be linked to gang activity. So we’re leaving the vehicles here and trekking to the location of the gunfire on foot.”

He gives the officers a dismissive nod and they quickly prepare their equipment, but Sousuke’s eyes roam to Corro. The man leans over the trunk of his squad car, digging through a duffle bag. He straps on every weapon he owns, tucking pistols into his side holsters, shrugging rifle straps over each shoulder.

Wordlessly, Sousuke and Seijuro glance at each other, then gear up with the rest of the officers. Sousuke fumbles with Echo’s vest, using it as a cover to text Haru about the change of plans, and tells him to keep sharp watch of their approach from the east.

The team descends into the cold, black grave of the forest and an eerie chill crawls across Sousuke’s skin. At least his gear protects him from falling victim to the steep drop in temperature – he’s wearing tactical gloves with a beanie tucked over his ears, and he has on a long-sleeved compression shirt under his dense, bulletproof vest. He keeps his rifle aimed as they venture through the trees and Sousuke cannot help but notice the contrasts between this moment and Iraq; this cold compared to that heat, the crunch of snow under his boots rather than the give of sand. He doesn’t know which setting he prefers and decides that in both situations, all that ever mattered was getting home.

He would feel more confident about going into battle if Makoto were by his side, being that warm, steady presence Sousuke feels alone without. But Seijuro and Momotarou are his brothers in that same sense – so are these other officers, now that he thinks about it. None of them know that he broke his oath as a policeman and everyone in this formation would still sacrifice their lives for him without a second thought.

Sousuke would do the same for them, but he would also do it for anyone in Freebird. Conflict sinks into his gut, but it spills into nauseous horror as the hot stench of blood fills the air. Momotarou stills beside Sousuke, his voice choking on horror. “Holy shit…”

They approach the factory complex to see a pack of wolves fighting over fresh bodies, slurping from the bowls of opened stomachs. Their fangs gnash and red spittle flies over the snow; Echo bristles and Sousuke grabs her vest strap, hushing her protective growls.

He notices that the bodies are frail with very little meat for the wolves to choose from. Sousuke sees guns abandoned on the ground and assesses that these people were the addicts – kidnapped members of Iwatobi’s gangs that lost their minds to relay. Now they’ve lost their lives to it.

The formation stills as one when a gunshot blasts from the central structure. The officers approach the building, crouched low, and Takao boots the door open with enough power to send it flying off its hinges. Sousuke’s focus cuts like a razor as the team floods the building, but the space is empty. The area is dark and vaulted, tall with a maze of stairs leading to catwalks overhead. Winter sunlight cuts through a glass wall in searing grey lines. Sousuke’s gaze follows the spill of light all the way to the floor and his blood freezes.

Haru stands like a pillar of cold steel. On the floor in front of him, a small, feeble woman is crumpled
to her knees with her hands bound, and Haru has a pistol aimed at the back of her head.

Sousuke does not know this woman, but he’s never witnessed such menace in someone’s expression. How can so much evil be contained to one face?

All at once, Sousuke knows this is Miho. He knows and his finger almost slips over the trigger of his gun.

He startles back to himself when Takao yells for Haru to drop his weapon, but the boy does not even flinch – he merely arches a brow at Takao’s chest. With dread, Takao slowly follows his gaze to the pinpoint of red light aimed at his heart. Sousuke feels eyes on him and he glances up at the catwalk, which is cast in protective shadows. Since he knows the full extent of the plan, Sousuke knows it’s Ookami’s gaze he feels, but that does not make him content with having a weapon pointed his way.

Haru now has control of the situation and he did it without even lifting a finger. “Corro,” he calls, sounding more pleasant than Sousuke’s ever heard him. “You remember your ex-wife, Miho, don’t you?”

The woman, Miho, looks up and for a moment she looks innocent, frail in her confusion. But then her gaze locks with Corro’s and hellfire pours into her eyes; the loathing between them threatens to set the room on fire.

Corro grits his jaw under the officers’ disbelieving stares. He lets out a sharp, concentrated jet of air through his nose and lifts his chin at Haru. “You got a problem with me, kid, then we can settle it together.” He shakes his head. “You don’t have to kill anyone today.”

Footsteps come down the metal stairs. The shadows pull away and Ookami approaches, her expression severe as she sets her eyes on Corro for the first time. Haru raises his brows in mock-innocence. “But you’re the one who wanted Miho here.”

Corro scoffs a laugh. “You have no evidence of that.”

“Oh, but I do,” someone purrs. Tension pulses through the room as the tap of a cane echoes in the silence. Pietro saunters into view, wearing his best suit of emerald velvet and a smirk aimed to kill. “I have several of your officers on my payroll, Commissioner. They have gathered all the evidence needed to prove your deceit.” He nods at Takao. “Good work.”

The hard slate of Corro’s expression shatters as Takao bows his head at Pietro.

Another voice rings through the room, raw with grief-stricken rage. “You stole children off the streets.” Heels click across the floor and Nadia leans over the catwalk. “My girls.”

With fury building in the air around him, Corro regards Haru. The boy whispers, “You thought starting a relay war would drive Iwatobi apart, but you created the opposite. You betrayed your own precinct and family for nothing.” His voice rolls into a black-fire growl. “Murdered two of my own.” He looks upon Corro and Miho with disgust. “I would have handed her over to you at the start of all this if you had just asked me.” He shakes his head and cocks his gun at Corro. “But Kazuki and Nakagawa are gone, and you’ve hurt my family to an unforgivable measure. I can’t let that go.”

Corro tips his head, studying Haru as if fascinated. “You still think I deserve to die first, after what she’s done to you?” He nods at Miho, who does not bow her head in shame. “She was crazy long before she got in that car wreck and got addicted to her painkillers. The addiction just made it all…”
He gives a vague, tired gesture. “Escalate.” He stares down at her bitterly. “I did this for our children. The son and daughter that you destroyed.” He looks to Haru and his whisper is torn apart with grief. “She took them on drug runs and left them to die when it all went wrong. Our son will be in a wheelchair the rest of his life because of her.”

Miho snaps, “I didn’t –” She looks away as a stray tear falls, and her eyes squeeze shut like she can’t stand herself for it. Miho opens her eyes and they are bloodshot with mania. “You try to act like you don’t love me.” Her grin stretches too wide. “I told you what my mother always said: the highest form of passion is a man who loves you enough to kill you.”

Her words are so distorted with insanity that just hearing them makes the room tilt, as though Sousuke might pass out just trying to comprehend such horror. “You love me.” Miho’s laugh is like breaking glass. “That new little wife of yours? Akuma? She wasn’t me and you hated her for it. You love me and you hate yourself for it.” Her eyes narrow over a poisonous smirk. “That’s what this is all about and you know it.”

Just then, the basement door creaks open and Natsuya steps into the light with a protective arm around Ikuya. Nii comes up behind them and she is haggard, gaunt from starvation and weakened by pneumonia, but when her eyes find Haru, their faces crumble around the most heart-breaking relief.

Then Nii turns to Corro and under everyone’s gazes, he makes a silent decision for himself. He huffs a laugh and nods. “All right, then.”

Quicker than the next breath, he turns his gun on Sousuke and fires.

It blasts him into the wall and the shockwave twists his organs. He slams down onto the concrete, hearing Echo bark through the muffled ringing in his ears.

Weakly, Sousuke looks up just as Corro aims at Takao’s head and shoots in a blinding flash. Hot blood sprays Sousuke’s face and that wakes him up – he rolls behind a generator as one sweep of Corro’s machine gun takes out the entire line of officers – men and women who stand, wavering, for the most sickening moment of Sousuke’s life before they fall dead to the floor.

He gasps for breath, nudging Echo away to try to find his wound. He waits for the spill of blood over his fingers but instead he touches his unyielding, bulletproof vest. Sousuke looks down to find the bullet compressed like a coin near his foot, and he just stares for a wide-eyed moment. Then he sags back in relief, tipping his head to the ceiling to level himself.

Sousuke peeks over the generator to see the center of the room empty. He meets Seijuro’s eyes across the floor – he’s hidden behind an assembly line with Momotarou and it looks like the three of them are the only officers left alive. He catches the whip of Miho’s hair turning down the hallway, hears the scramble of her bare feet. She’s as smart as she is crazy – she took off her shoes to keep quiet.

Sousuke’s heart lurches up his throat because he cannot see Haru. He hears a heavy, dragging gait and recognizes it as Corro’s – all it takes is one burning glance at the dead officers to make Sousuke stalk after him. He keeps low, hunkering against the wall as he keeps a steady finger over the trigger of his gun.

Across the room, hidden behind some crates, Natsuya rises from his crouch over Ikuya and gently helps him to a stand. Nii took off after Haru and Natsuya grabs Ikuya’s hand to follow her, but he rounds the corner and finds himself staring down the barrel of a pistol.
His gaze trails up the attached arm to meet Pietro’s glare. “Not you,” he coos. “Not you, Natsuya.” Pietro tightens his grip on the gun. “I believe you and I have much to catch up on.”

Natsuya grinds his jaw and presses Ikuya behind him.

Haru dove for the nearest hallway when Corro opened fire and hearing his approach, he hides in a row of lockers. His world is pitch black, save for the three horizontal slats at the top of the locker. His breathing is amplified in the tight space and even the roll of sweat down his throat seems to make too much sound.

His heartbeat pulses in his ears as steps shuffle down the hallway, then pause. Corro gives a long sigh and Haru freezes when he hears a gun being reloaded. Corro calls, “Before you judge me for the things I’ve done, Haruka Nanase, I’d like to know why you didn’t just kill her yourself.”

He spoke loudly, so he might not realize that Haru is only standing three feet from him. Corro chuckles and Haru holds his breath. “I knew her well, even after the divorce,” the man muses, speaking absentely, as if to himself. “She was going to excel in whatever environment she found herself in. I knew once she got involved in gangs that she’d be running her own in no time, so I studied each group’s habits. It didn’t take long to realize which gang was hers: who was the most powerful, yet scared shitless. You had it in your power to kill Miho from the start, Haruka, but you never did.” Haru’s eyes fly open wide as Corro cocks his gun. “Because you were afraid.”

Corro sprays the row of lockers with bullets, shooting from one end to the other, and just before he fills Haru’s locker with bullets, Nii lets out a shout and a bottle flies into Corro’s shoulder. He staggers into the wall with a curse and Haru flies out of the locker, shooting as he runs down the hallway with Corro staggering after him.

Haru’s only purpose is getting the mad-man away from his friends. He lures Corro deeper into the factory, where the darkness is thicker and the cold is ghastly. The stench of rust fills his lungs; the floorboards are wet and soft with mold.

He goes down a brick tunnel to the offices and hunkers under a desk, tensing as Corro’s heaving breaks through the stillness. The man’s riflescope lights a path for him to walk. “I’ll start at the beginning, I think,” Corro says, huffing out a cloud of frost. “When I first decided to take Miho down, I heard about the success of a drug called relay in surrounding cities. I knew Miho would be after it, and so would the other gangs – the ones who cared about profit, anyway. The Bloodhounds didn’t give a shit about that sort of thing; they didn’t even care about what was going on in the real world.”

Corro steps through the door and Haru looks up to find Ookami perched on the top of the door frame, balancing on her heels with rigid posture. Corro walks right under her; Haru is shocked that he cannot feel her eyes burning a hole into the back of his head.

Dust billows around Corro’s steps and Haru pinches his nose to the point of pain so he will not sneeze. “I found the Bloodhounds five years ago,” Corro says. “I was in the outskirts looking for more crack houses like yours, Haruka. Oh, and I remarried around that time,” he announces as though this is all part of a pleasant conversation. “Told my wife I was going on hunting trips when I was really watching the Bloodhounds.” He snorts a laugh. “That’s one advantage of being ex-Special Forces – I can watch someone for years and they’ll never even know it.”
Ookami’s nostrils flare on an exhale of heat.

Corro tenses, his head tilting back toward the door. “I saw Ookami with her baby,” he mumbles, voice trailing off. “And I recognized that light in her eyes. We all want better lives for our children, so I promised the Bloodhounds that opportunity in exchange for taking down Freebird.”

He falls silent, ears flexing. Corro narrows his eyes and turns, but before he can notice Ookami, Haru lunges out from under the desk and fires. The bullet rips through Corro’s shoulder and the man shoots in a blind craze. Haru stumbles behind a filing cabinet for cover and though his distraction gives Ookami a chance to escape, she remains perched over the door, motionless and staring down at Corro unblinkingly.

Hatred acts as her courage to lunge at him. Ookami tackles Corro and his nose busts against the floor, gushing blood. She knots a fist in his hair and slams his face into the concrete, her rage leaving her in a scream. Nothing is as nauseating as hearing teeth shatter, and Haru has never seen anyone’s face swell purple as quickly as Corro’s does.

The man reaches around blindly and slams Ookami to the floor with enough force to rattle the walls. Corro rears back to hit her and Haru blasts him in the thigh, throwing him off Ookami. She straddles him to dig her claw into his gut and just like that, she’s killed him – even if he’s still breathing and fighting and cursing, the wolfsbane’s poison will take his life in a matter of hours.

For one frozen moment, Haru has relief like none other. Ookami has ended war with one swipe of her hand and a new life dawns before his eyes.

But nothing, especially a war, goes down without a fight, and quicker than the next blink, Corro carves a shard of broken glass through Ookami’s throat.

Ookami blinks drowsily like she’s confused. Then her throat opens in a red flood and her chest lurches on a desperate gulp of air. Corro shoves her off to stumble out the door. Haru dives for Ookami and catches the back of her head as she collapses to the floor.

He cups her throat but his meek fingers cannot dam the rush of blood, and Ookami pushes his hand away because she knows that. Though she convulses, she manages a grimacing smile. “Ain’t scared. I know w-where… I’m goin’. ” She swallows thickly, nodding to the corner where she stashed her backpack. “Take m-my pack. Knives.” She blinks away tears as her features sink in grief. “And promise… get Namiko o-out of the outs-skirts… like you did.”

Haru nods. “I will,” he whispers. “I’ll find a way, I promise.” Her fingers are a sickening combination of wet and sticky, but he still squeezes her hand earnestly. “Where will you go?”

Ookami’s smile is languid, her voice slurring away. “Back… back to the woods…”

Haru squeezes her hand tighter, if only for himself. “Then go. It’s waiting for you.”

Ookami breathes a tired laugh and closes her eyes. She stops shaking. She stops breathing. Haru bows his head against her temple, smelling home in her hair – forest fires and rain, wet soil and wild roses.

He rises to a stand and grabs Ookami’s bag as he takes off after Corro. He follows his blood trail down another brick tunnel leading to the loading deck. Haru rounds the corner and raises his gun at the same time Corro does, but neither of them shoot. Corro grins with bloody teeth. “You want to
know how it all happened, don’t you? You gotta know.”

Corro’s free hand is pressed against his shoulder, which is weeping red. He’s slouched against the wall since the bullet that he took in his leg left it useless. Haru grits his teeth. “Why’d you kill Kazuki and take Rin in the first place if Miho was all you wanted from the start?”

Corro is drenched in sweat and racing toward death, but he still takes his time in speaking. “Miho wouldn’t have power without her puppets. The original plan was to take down her strongest links, Rin being one of them. I gave Ookami’s boyfriend money to rent him and get answers out of him.” Haru’s eyes bore into him and Corro snorts. “That plan didn’t work, obviously. He was stronger than I anticipated, so I had the Bloodhounds go after Kazuki. Told ‘em to corner him in an alley where I knew the city cameras weren’t working.” He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Damn budget cuts, you know?”

Corro glances down. “I never told them to kill anyone, just for the record. I thought about calling the whole plan quits after Kazuki died.” He meets Haru’s eyes, his chest expanding in building fury. “But then you dumped that relay down the mail shaft at the station and that just… pissed me off. I felt like I was already caught, so I panicked. Got all heated and killed that one Bloodhound in the hospital, but I let Ookami’s boyfriend go. Eiichi was a pussy; Ookami had balls of steel. Their dynamic worked in my favor because I scared Eiichi into convincing Ookami that they didn’t have a choice but to follow my orders and attack Freebird at Samezuka.”

Corro shakes his head in frustration. “I didn’t understand Freebird. I didn’t expect you all to be so… earnest, and fight for each other. I’ve never seen anything like that crazy shit.” His leg gives out and he slides to the floor. Corro heaves for a few moments before swallowing. “They killed one fucking person at Samezuka. Nakagawa might’ve been strong but I wanted you all dead at once, I didn’t wanna have to – I wanted all of this to be over.” He sighs. “But that’s not how it works. So after the Bloodhounds proved they were fucking useless, I turned to other gangs to get the job done.”

Haru freezes in realization. “That’s why the Bloodhounds started kidnapping members from other gangs.”

Corro nods drowsily. “Relay’s got stronger over the last few months. It’s instant addiction, and that worked in my favor. Even if I made the kidnapped members addicts, they still had skill. I thought they’d still be able to take Freebird down.” He squeezes his eyes shut against a wave of pain. “I just needed to find an angle with you. I saw you with that sniper…” Haru’s brows crease in confusion and Corro slurs, “The guy Sousuke came home with… Tachi-something.”

Haru surges forward, “I’ll fucking kill you –”

Corro waves Haru away. “I couldn’t have touched him if I tried.” He snorts a laugh. “He’s more deadly than Sousuke.” He lifts his chin with resolve. “And he’s a veteran. I didn’t want him involved as much as I didn’t want Sousuke involved.” His honesty leaves Haru reeling. “So I needed to find another angle with you, since you were Miho’s favorite, that was obvious. I saw that Ikuya kid talking with you and took him, but he didn’t know how to find you.” Corro twitches a smirk. “That Nii girl, though.” He leans forward with a conspiring whisper. “She’s not as tough as she looks, between you and me. One minute of interrogation had her telling me where you were.” He grimaces in embarrassment. “Well, given that the integration included some tactics I learned in the war.” He shrugs, unimpressed. “But still, she’s not as tough as she looks.”

Haru can only stare in horror as Corro continues. “I called you and tried to end all this, but you wouldn’t give. I didn’t want to blow up that little girl’s house. You kept this going.” Corro looks
away like he doesn’t even believe that himself, but he had to say it or the guilt would eat him alive. “I thought you’d just die in the explosion. You didn’t. You never did. So I decided to take things into my own hands.”

He sighs, long and low. “I can admit that I got obsessed. To the point that I sent my own wife on a rent with Rin, and I convinced my brother to go with her on his own rent to watch her back. That redheaded bitch? Aki? She fucking killed him. Rin killed Akuma and I haven’t even been able to tell anyone. The kids think she went on a trip to visit her mother, her mother calls, I have to say she’s on a fieldtrip with the kids, it’s all so… monotonous.”

He gathers the strength to meet Haru’s eyes. “And now we’re here, Haruka.” They both keep their guns aimed at one another. “You should have let that sniper protect you.” Corro goes to say more, but then his ear flexes toward the door.

There is a beat of absolute stillness, then the floor trembles as a crowd rushes into the building, then the factory erupts in gunfire.

Pietro’s had his pistol aimed between Natsuya’s eyes for a while now, just standing there, watching him with morbid curiosity. “I think I give Nao too much credit,” Pietro mumbles, eyes too wide. “For the life of me, I still cannot find a reason why he would want you.”

A muscle ticks in Natsuya’s jaw. “That is the only thing you and I have ever been able to agree on.” He keeps Ikuya pressed between the wall and his back, ready to use himself as a shield if – when Pietro’s sanity teeters.

The leader of Diamond Back glares. “You don’t love him. If you did, you would let him go and allow him to have a life of luxury rather than struggle.” His voice raws with vehemence. “You know that’s what he deserves.”

“Yes,” Natsuya nods. “That’s what he deserves, but that is not what he had with you; he lived in fear.”

The basement door opens and Nadia steps out with a young girl riding on her back, as well as some teenagers clinging to her dress. Members of Diamond Back step into the light for the first time in weeks, but Pietro is uninterested in them.

Members of Rough Rabbit come out of the basement in a daze and when they see Natsuya held at gunpoint, they rush to help him, but Natsuya holds up a hand. Pietro regards the group with a slow look, then levels his gaze with Natsuya. “I am a dying man,” he admits. “With very little left to offer or take from this world.” He pushes the gun harder between Natsuya’s eyes. “But you understand that I’ve lost too much to let you or anyone else in here survive, yes?”

The front door bursts open and a crowd floods in, all of them wearing shades of deep green, but their ferocity alone claims them as Diamond Back’s. They shoot Nadia despite the girls surrounding her, and they throw grenades down the basement stairwell even though their own people wait for rescue, alone in the dark.

The grenades explode and a tremor builds from the depths of the earth. Fire races up the basement stairs at an unstoppable speed and surges above Natsuya in a roaring spiral of flames. The surviving members of Rough Rabbit and Honeyblade look to each other and come to a silent truce before attacking Diamond Back with every ounce of strength they have left.
Flames climb the walls, breaking windows with a single touch. Fire eats at crates and wiring in an explosion of chemical colors. Though the building screams with heat and people are fighting for their lives all around them, Pietro still has his gun aimed at Natsuya. “Get on your knees,” he orders.

Natsuya glances back at Ikuya with a look of apology, shame, and love, and his little brother shakes his head pleadingly in wide-eyed horror. Natsuya turns away and he meets Pietro’s gaze as he sinks to the floor. Pietro’s foot pushes a box in front of Natsuya. “Put your hands up there.”

His stomach drops in realization, but it doesn’t matter because Pietro no longer has his gun pointed at Natsuya – it’s aimed at Ikuya. Gladly, Natsuya offers both of his hands and settles them on the box, meeting Pietro’s eyes unflinchingly even as he crosses his ankles to brace himself.

Pietro has a girl from Diamond Back keep her pistol aimed steadily at Ikuya while he switches his gun out for a blade. Natsuya stares at it hopelessly, gaze trailing from the thick base to the diamond-sharp tip.

Ikuya chokes, “Don’t –”

Natsuya does not look away from Pietro’s gaze even as he throws the blade down and through his fingers. The pain sets Natsuya on fire and he grits his teeth to cage in a scream, blood dripping from where he bit through his lip. He blinks through the tears to watch Pietro cut down to the next knuckle, then the final one, and darkness crawls at the edges of Natsuya’s vision as Pietro rears back to slice off his wrist.

Pietro’s arm comes down but someone knocks him away and the blade goes flying. Natsuya collapses over the box and cries out in relief, his arms pulsing with hot-numbness. The room slows in nauseating drips of flaming orange; he struggles to turn around because it’s like moving through water. The girl from Diamond Back lunges to shoot Ikuya, but Natsuya hears a muffled gunshot from somewhere and she collapses.

Asahi slides on his knees to embrace Ikuya, who fell in his terror. Natsuya cannot comprehend the sight. Smoke stings new tears into his eyes as he turns to the side and sees a man trapping Nii into a corner, moving to shoot her. Rin lunges over the man’s back and with one twist of his thighs, he snaps the man’s neck and he falls.

Rin stares up at Nii from his perch over the body, then they surge together and he cradles the back of her head as she sobs into his chest.

Natsuya knows who attacked Pietro without having to turn and look – the rage pouring out of Nao burns the air hotter than fire ever could. With the most passionate hatred, he sinks that knife into Pietro once, twice, three times in a building wrath. Mercilessly, Nao carves through Pietro’s chest and twists the knife into his heart. “Never,” Nao grits, driving the blade deeper with each syllable. “Touch him.”

Pietro stares up at him lifelessly, and at long last, Nao relents. He heaves as blood drips from his hair and Natsuya reaches for him with a weak, pleading noise. Nao jerks around and terror floods his face.

The pain leaves Natsuya crumbling to the floor and Nao cradles his head in his lap, frantic. “Natsuya, hold on –” Ikuya offers his jacket and Nao wraps it around what’s left of Natsuya’s hands, making him bury a wail against Nao’s leg. Screaming takes the last of his strength and Natsuya’s
vision swims, his head lolling to the side. Nao cups Natsuya’s cheek, his voice pitching in distress. “Natsuya, where are you going, where are you going?!”

Natsuya’s eyes lull open and he struggles to hold Nao’s gaze. Nao shakes his head desperately, openly crying because there is only one thing in the world that scares him to tears, and that has always, always been losing Natsuya. “Don’t you dare leave me,” Nao whispers. “Don’t go where I cannot follow.”

He squeezes pressure over Natsuya’s hands but the pain is nothing compared to the thought of leaving Nao alone. “Never,” Natsuya croaks, and he is going to fight off death by sheer will alone because he loves Nao that much. “I’ll never leave you.”

Echo follows Corro’s trail into the depths of the factory, and when Sousuke turns a corner, his stomach lurches at the sight before him. Corro and Haru aim their guns at each other, but in a split-second flash, Corro’s eyes flicker to Sousuke and he shoots at him. Sousuke crouches and the bullet shreds through the empty air where his head just was. He hears the heavy stumble of Corro escaping and what might be Haru giving chase – Sousuke goes to follow just as weight crushes him from behind.

Before Echo can fight the attacker off and put herself in danger, Sousuke backpedals and slams the person into the brick wall, hearing the satisfying crunch of bones. He reaches back and digs into their hair to throw them to the ground with enough force to crack ribs. It’s a man Sousuke does not know – he wears a shattered Rolex and a soot-covered suit, indicating that he is from Diamond Back, and he is too muscled and healthy to be a kidnapped addict.

Meaning only one thing: Pietro betrayed the treaty and the factory is about to become a warzone.

The man dives for him and Sousuke merely picks him up by the throat to throw him over the nearest desk, which collapses under his weight. The impact knocks the breath out of the guy and Sousuke turns to follow Corro, but he stops short when something lands in his back, just under his bulletproof vest.

When he mentally catches up with what just happened, his nerves explode around the knife lodged in his back, muscles convulsing. Sousuke grits a curse and when he turns around, the man is standing with a pistol aimed at him.

He opens his mouth to give Echo the kill command, but someone takes a running leap at the guy’s back. The person climbs the man’s shoulders and thighs vice around his throat. The guy chokes, hands scrambling at the legs around him, but Rin is merciless as he hisses, “Not my man, you festering shit.”

With one sharp twist, Sousuke hears the wet crack of the guy’s neck breaking and watches him fall. Rin gets up, sweeping his hair back and distantly, beyond the disbelief and pain, Sousuke has to take a moment and appreciate how damn wild Rin looks in the heat of battle, muscles glossy with sweat, hair splayed across his forehead, leather outfit shaping to the planes of his limbs.

Sousuke startles back to himself as Rin snaps, “You fucking lied to me?”

“I got a knife in my back,” Sousuke wheezes.

Rin snorts. “Yeah, I know the feeling.”
“No, I have a real –” Sousuke grimaces and turns around.

Rin inhales sharply. “Oh.” In apology, he runs his hands down Sousuke’s shoulders, then wraps his fingers around the knife handle – just that small action makes Sousuke curse. “It’s really not that deep.”

Sousuke scoffs in disbelief and he hears the sympathy in Rin’s voice. “Right, sorry. I’ll pull on three. One, two –”

Sousuke clenches his fists against the pain, kneading his forehead against the wall. Rin drops the knife and quickly pulls Sousuke’s shirt up so he can bandages the wound. Gently, Rin turns Sousuke around and searches his face with earnest. “How could you keep this from me?”

Sousuke wavers on his feet, grabbing Rin’s arms for stability. “You need to get out of here.”

Rin digs into Sousuke’s biceps as the distant fire lights his eyes. “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

Sousuke’s mouth firms into a line of defeat. “How the hell did you find out about this?”

“Nao’s had suspicions that Natsuya was lying to him about something for a while now,” Rin explains. “But he didn’t know what. I’ve known for a while now that Haru was keeping something from me. But then Makoto texted me at the grocery store. Haru hadn’t told him the entire plan, but Mako knows what self-sacrificing idiots you and Haru are – he was worried that you two were going into this alone, which he was fucking right about. Didn’t take long for me to realize something even bigger was up when Diamond Back paraded through the city. Me and Asahi hitched a ride with Nao and we followed them here.”

The building gives a dangerous shudder as fire eats it from the inside out, and Sousuke tucks Rin under his arm as the roof threatens to collapse. The shockwave fades and Sousuke regains his posture, working around the aching stiffness in his back. “You have to go.” Rin opens his mouth to curse at him and Sousuke snaps, “Haru’s chasing down Corro – I’ll bring his ass back and I’ll come meet you, I swear, just – damn it Rin, please, go.”

Rin’s nostrils flare on an infuriated exhale, but he does not move.

Sousuke expects him to run now. He’s waiting for it.

What he doesn’t expect is for the boy to back him up against the brick wall, framing his face with a delicacy he still thinks Sousuke is worth, and kiss him.

It rips the breath from Sousuke because it feels like they’re back in the alley where they met, when the passion was blind yet so terrifyingly understanding. Sousuke cups the back of Rin’s head and knots a fist in his hair, parting the boy’s lips with his own, brows furrowing as he pours the very heat of his soul into their kiss.

He rests their foreheads together. “I love –”

Rin presses two fingers over his lips, whispering, “Don’t.” He sweeps over Sousuke’s brow. “Don’t. It was too much like goodbye the last time you said it.” Rin backs away, holding his gaze. “I’ll see you outside.”
Sousuke nods firmly and they part ways, Rin lunging through the fire as darkness swallows Sousuke and Echo whole.

Haru tucks close to the wall as he moves blindly through the dark, ears straining to listen for any movement. Fire chases him up a staircase and he tenses as a catwalk groans overhead. Feeling eyes on him, Haru quickly scrambles up the ladder, rises to a stand, then freezes to the bone.

Miho stares at him from the end of the catwalk. Her pale skin is glossy with sweat and her feet are black with soot, like a monster who walked through the fire she was born from. Her growl rolls from her very core. “Why, Haruka? Why would you do this to me, when I loved you like a son?”

He stares. “You’re fucking crazy,” Haru whispers like a dawning realization. “You have a son that you abandoned. It wasn’t enough to destroy him and your daughter – everyone you know, you have to kill them from the inside out.” His features twist with loathing. “You tried to make me be like you. You shaped me, you – I thought for so long that I wasn’t capable of anything other than the life you had forced me to live. Killing and dealing and dying, all at the same time.”

Hatred burns through him. “You tried to kill me but even then, my fear was stronger than my need to be free.” He shakes his head. “But being caught up in your puppet strings – that’s not a life.” Faces flash before his eyes, one more than others. “You’ll never feel love.” His brows go high and crease with pity. “I feel sorry for you.”

Miho stares in shock, then her features twist into a vile expression as she launches at him.

Haru raises his gun, but someone else fires the shot.

A bullet rips through Miho from behind and she looks down at herself in the ringing silence. Marveling, she watches blood spill over her fingers as it pours from her stomach in a crimson rush. Nausea slams Haru, threatening to knock him off his feet. He looks over Miho’s shoulder in wide-eyed disbelief and Corro meets his stare, then lifts his rifle to Haru.

Haru grunts as Miho collides with him and her body jolts with every shot Corro fires into her. The silence that follows is like none other and Haru cannot catch his breath as disbelief grips his senses.

Miho used herself as a shield for him.

Her weight is sprawled over him and the hot rush of her blood drenches his clothes, oozes into his pores. Haru stares up at her and Miho blinks with some sort of regret, yet her eyes are blank and porcelain, like the painted, hollow expression of a sad china doll.

Haru says, “Thanks.”

Then he presses his pistol between her wide eyes and fires.

He shrugs her off and Miho’s body slides off the catwalk. The fire below swallows her greedily and roars in satisfaction – it’s a sound that Haru will never forget.

He rises to his feet as Corro smirks and tosses his empty rifle over the catwalk. He prowls forward and takes out a pistol, smirking. “You really are full of surprises.”

Haru smirks back, so cold that Corro freezes to the bone. “I’m not the only one.”
Corro turns just as Sousuke shoots from the end of the catwalk. Corro staggers backward with the force of the bullet, flailing for balance before he collapses. He splutters, choking on his own blood. Haru stares down at him, almost contemplating mercy, but that thought quickly gives way to the satisfaction of leaving him to suffer. Haru looks over the railing, hit with the realization that Miho no longer exists and Corro is dying at his feet.

Haru feels empty, violent, and free.

The smoke threatens to swallow him and Sousuke, and they cover their heads as debris falls from the ceiling. “Let’s go,” Sousuke calls, smearing soot across his cheek. “Everyone is already outside.”

Hope lurches through him. “Everyone?”

“The rest of Freebird showed up,” Sousuke hurries, beckoning for him to go down the ladder. Echo wags her tail impatiently from his side. “This place is about to be levelled, we gotta get out of here.” His voice lowers with exhaustion and emotion. “I wanna fucking go home.”

Sousuke starts down the ladder, saying, “Hand Echo down to me in a second.”

Haru nods faintly. He closes his eyes, dizzy with elation.

A growl rolls across the catwalk. “Haruka.”

His eyes fly open as Corro shoots, and the blast stretches through time in slow-motion horror. Then sound and color rushes around the bullet’s slipstream, and being shot knocks the breath out of Haru, not like when he’s been punched in the chest. It knocks the breath out of him so hard and fast that he knows he’ll never be able to take another inhale. Being shot is the most terrifying, unnatural sensation he’s ever felt, and he is forced to relive it as Corro shoots again and again.

Haru has never felt anything as hopeless as his very life-force pouring out of him in a red flood. He’s cold inside, as if a draft is moving through him – the bullets left holes in his chest and how, how in the world can he still feel afraid when he’s this empty?

Haru sinks to the catwalk and hears Sousuke shout. Haru tries to yell no, stop, run, but he’s drowning in the taste of copper and he cannot stop Sousuke’s head from coming over the railing, and he cannot stop Corro from shooting him.

Haru’s vision swims in shades of white, but he hears the shot land, and Sousuke flails backward off the ladder, then crashes to the ground with a sickening crunch of bones.

Corro aims to fire his last shot between Haru’s eyes and he screams through his bloody teeth, not remembering the word for help, not knowing anything other than these weak, broken sounds.

A shadow launches over him and the dark shape attacks with a flash of titanium fangs. Echo tears into Corro’s face with a hateful savagery that’s almost conscious, sentient. His howl is muffled to Haru’s ears – he turns away to grab the railing and determination acts as his only source of strength to haul himself over the ladder. Weakness seizes his limbs and he cannot comprehend that he’s fallen until he hits the ground with the force of an explosion.

Waves of cold and hot churn through him as he struggles to breathe. He rolls over to spit out a gob of blood and though his body is very literally shaking apart, he manages to level his gaze with
Sousuke’s.

Sousuke is still alive – he’s **broken** from the inside out, dust clotting his scrapes, the blueness of his gaze standing out against the soot on his face, and his back is probably broken from the fall, but he’s still ruthlessly alive. Defiance screams through his eyes even as he cups the side of his throat, where a bullet is lodged.

With excruciating pain, Haru tries to shrug off Ookami’s backpack and Sousuke quickly uses his free hand to slide it off the rest of the way, then dumps out the contents. There are standard band-aids and knives, all of which are useless in this moment.

Haru looks around the burning room in desperation; craftiness was the only thing that helped him survive his parents’ shack and it will be his only saving grace now. Weakly, he reaches for the corner, grabbing at the thick cobwebs and slathering them over his chest, hoping they will clot the blood flow. Blindly, Sousuke gropes for some ash and debris on the floor and packs it into his wound, but Haru is fading too fast to track the motion.

Sousuke pushes Haru onto his back and grabs one of Ookami’s pocket knives; he flicks it open with his thumb and lets it hover in the flames crawling toward them. The blade burns red and Sousuke glances at Haru in apology, making him realize what is about to happen: Sousuke’s going to try cauterizing his wounds. Use fire to close them.

Sousuke presses the side of the knife against Haru’s chest and it melts his skin until bone meets blade. He feels the burn of a scream in his throat, but cannot hear it over the bubbling throb of his dying heartbeat in his ears.

Sousuke dips the bloody knife back into the fire and presses it against Haru over and over, as many times as he was shot, he doesn’t know, can’t remember – the stench of burning flesh leaves it impossible to think. He hears Sousuke cry out and assumes he cauterized his own wound, but upon opening his eyes, Haru sees blood still seeping between Sousuke’s fingers. Echo is there, too, licking the soot off Sousuke’s face and whining in distress. “I know,” Sousuke rasps, gazing at her sadly. “I know, La La, I’m sorry.”

A black curtain falls over Haru’s eyes, spiraling him into oblivion.

Sousuke shouts Haru’s name; his voice is distorted and far away, such a long way, spanning across the impossible distance between life and death. This darkness is strange and tastes cold, yet familiar. Was he here before he took his first breath? Is this where he was before his eyes first opened wide? Before he witnessed horrors that would sear into his mind and never leave him?

If he had never been born, Haru would have never known what it feels like to be paralyzed on a cold floor, mouth full of hot blood, bullets buried in his chest. He could have died in that hospital room as a baby and he would have been fine with an afterlife of quiet darkness; he didn’t know any better.

But dying as he looks up at the lights of police sirens dancing across the ceiling, Haru knows that he won’t be satisfied with Heaven if there aren’t green eyes looking down at him when he gets there.

Fingers glide through his hair, and his head rests in someone’s lap. They smell like cigarettes, but it makes him feel bittersweet nostalgia, like a forgotten dream unfolding before his eyes. The ends of long, black hair tickle his face, and he blinks up at his mother as she smiles down at him. Her eyes are still tired, as they always were, but they’re not yellow from alcoholism or bloodshot from drugs anymore.
Haru does not know what to say to her, but he knows what he wants to ask. “Where’s Mori?”

“She’s not here,” someone else answers. Haru looks up and Kazuki sits cross-legged beside him, one hand over Haru’s, the other resting on Nakagawa’s knee.

Nakagawa’s expression is a mix of anger and understanding. “You can stop fighting now, Haru. You can rest now.”

“What? No, I –” Haru shakes his head vehemently. “I don’t want to rest. I want to stay.”

“Stay?”

“Stay here – o-or… or there?” Pleading tears burn his eyes. “I want to stay with him.”

Nakagawa regards him carefully. “Your life is up to you at this point.”

Makoto’s voice echoes through his head. “When someone’s fighting for their life, they’re… I don’t know, it’s like, their will to live is different. You can tell who wants to fight for the people they love, or their cause, or whatever.” Makoto shook his head with a vague look of nausea. “Every single time, all I could think about was my family. My Mom, Ren and Ran, Sousuke and Echo.” He swept Haru’s bangs back, his eyes falling half-lidded, his voice soft. “The person I was meant to be with.”

He feels pressure around his fingers and it’s not Kazuki’s touch – the grip is warmer, alive, but Haru cannot see who it is. He doesn’t have to; he’d know Makoto’s touch in any darkness. In death.

Haru tries to squeeze back; he does not have the strength to reach through time and space, but that does not matter. Makoto feels his presence even in the chaos of a painfully bright hospital corridor, where Sousuke’s gurney left a red trail to the emergency room. Makoto feels Haru in the midst of that tormenting sight, and Haru feels Makoto’s whisper against his ear. “I know how hard it can be, waking up. I know it’s painful, Haruka. I almost don’t want to ask that of you, but…” He squeezes his eyes shut, but the tears are an endless flood. Grief sinks him to his knees beside the gurney. “Please, stay with me. I’m selfish but I don’t care, please, God, just –”

Haru stares up at him, the blueness of his eyes nearly colorless. Lifeless. Makoto kisses him and just the touch of his mouth sweeps away what is left of Haru’s strength. In those last, pulsing seconds, he closes his eyes, reveling in Makoto and the softest, most painful kiss to ever exist.

The chaos of wailing monitors and shouting nurses fades into Makoto’s whisper. “I can’t live without my heart.”

Nitori wheels Haru into surgery and Makoto watches his hand fall limp over the side of the gurney.
Makoto stares out into the darkness of the hospital parking lot, bracing himself to call his mother, and it’s the hardest thing he’s ever done in his life.

She picks up on the last ring, her voice sluggish from sleep. “Mako-chan,” she yawns. “Hey baby, it’s late.” Dread pulls a brick down his insides. “What’s going on?”

Makoto’s throat swells, his voice rough and hollow. “Um.” He looks down hopelessly, gaze tracking to Echo. She’s curled up at his feet and nosing his leg insistently because he is not who she wants right now. His eyes fall shut. “You should – probably come to Iwatobi.”
There is a sharp pause on her end. Makoto hears the abrupt creak of his mother sitting up in bed as she takes a shuddering breath, every system in her body teetering with the realest kind of fear. “Why should I come?” She doesn’t even know and her voice is already thickening with tears.

“It’s…” Nausea rolls through him. “It’s Sousuke.”

She sounds like she just got punched in the chest. In the heart. “Mako, please –”

“I don’t know anything yet,” Makoto says, wiping his tears away in frustration – they’re the wrong kind of warmth, lingering wet against his face like stains. “He’s still in surgery, Rei’s been back there with him for hours.”

He remembers that blood trail in the hospital corridor, so bright and disorienting that Makoto swore it was moving, crawling. He flinches as an explosion goes off in his head, wracking his bones like it’s real, but it’s not real – Echo is deathly silent at his feet; she’d bark if there was any noise in a quarter-mile radius of her and Makoto.

Sousuke isn’t here, in this moment, but Makoto’s memory of him is. Focus on something. Sousuke told him that first week they moved to Iwatobi, when Makoto jumped the curb in his truck and thought a bomb had gone off under the vehicle. Anything, Sousuke had insisted earnestly. Tell me what it is and what color it is and then find something else and do it again and again.

Hungrily, Makoto eats up the details of the world around him, and all of it is terrifyingly real – how the snow turns the parking lot into a white ocean, one that Makoto does not have to be afraid of.

When he speaks, he sounds younger and more lost than he did even before basic training. “Please, just come, Momma.”

Sheets rustle, then he hears the hurried patter of feet – probably his mother running to her closet to cram some clothes into a backpack. Her voice is choked by that urgent, desperate kind of fear that only a parent losing a child can feel. “Do you know what happened to him, Makoto? Do you know anything?”

He pulls his jacket tighter around himself, but he’s still cold from the inside out. “He was… working.” Not a lie. Not exactly the truth, either, but there are bigger things to worry about than Makoto having a morality crisis. “He got shot.” Somehow, his tears burn even hotter. “Haruka was with him.”

His mom startles. “What? Why was he – is he hurt?”

This all feels like a knife spiraling through his heart, dancing. “He’s worse.”

“Oh, Mako…” She’s at a loss for words, which is all right with Makoto, at this point – he’s running off of adrenaline and heartbreak; he can barely keep up with his own thoughts. But his mother breaks through to him, leveling them both with grave seriousness. “You stay put. I’ll be there as fast as I can. Your uncle still works at the airport, so I’ll make him pull some strings for me to get a flight. I’m going to leave Ren and Ran with your aunt – I need to focus on you right now.” She swallows, a crackle of anxiousness breaking her voice. “I need you to hang in there until I get to you, Makoto. Don’t try to convince yourself you’re okay to drive for any reason, do you hear me? Just stay where you are and I’ll be there soon, I swear it.”

There’s an underlining meaning to her words – don’t hurt yourself.

“I love you, too.”

Makoto hangs up, drowning in a hopeless sense of loneliness. Echo’s ears perk up and her gaze zeroes in on a familiar BMW barreling around the corner – Makoto recognizes it as Rei’s. The car parks on the curb and Nagisa steps out, then Kisumi exits from the passenger side. Nagisa’s eyes find Makoto and one look at his face has Nagisa rushing across the parking lot to embrace him, putting all of his strength into it. “Rei had a nurse call me,” he exhales, resting his head against Makoto’s chest. “She told me bits and pieces.” He leans back and Makoto notices how colorless Nagisa looks. That’s the only word for it – Nagisa usually carries around his own palette of light in all different shades of exuberance, but right now, in the dead of night, he’s drained out. “Mako-chan, I can’t even imagine…” Nagisa squeezes his hand, mouth wobbling in frustration. “I wish there was something I could say.”

Makoto hugs him and shakes his head in understanding. After that, Kisumi embraces him, softer, as though he knows that Makoto feels weaker than he ever has before. Hesitantly, Kisumi asks, “Do you know if Asahi is still here? Rei’s nurse gave Nagisa a list of patients that came in at the same time.” His throat works, voice rough yet frail. “And then when Asahi’s name came up, Nagisa called me, and I don’t know what any of this is about but I heard he was here and I just…” He worries his lip and looks away, eyes watery and hard.

Makoto nods faintly, dazed with exhaustion. “Everyone involved –” He cuts himself off and his gaze flickers over Kisumi’s face. Makoto gathers pretty quickly that Kisumi has not a damn clue about what kind of life Asahi led, so he mentally rephrases his words. “He was treated for smoke inhalation, but other than that, he’s physically okay. I think. Uh, I can – I could take you to his room, since everyone’s being held on the same floor.”

Kisumi graciously shakes his head, rubbing soothing patterns over Makoto’s arm. “You don’t have to do that at all, Makoto, I’m sorry. I can just ask the receptionist.”

Makoto shakes his head, then nods, struggling to link his thoughts with his actions. “Really, it’s fine.” He forces a smile. “It’ll keep me busy.” He’ll be the first to admit that he’s codependent as hell in traumatic situations, but taking care of others might be his only saving grace in this instance – he will go insane with grief if he’s left alone for too long, he knows it.

He feels detached from his body, and thus his movements, as he guides Nagisa and Kisumi into the building. They take the elevator to the ninth floor and stepping out is like walking into a warzone. Nurses rush between rooms, their voices distant to Makoto’s ears. It’s too much like the chaos of a battlefield and he gropes for Nagisa’s hand, hanging on for a few petrified moments. Nagisa’s fingers are soft, untouched by war, and Makoto comes back to himself just enough to walk down the nearest corridor.

He hears screaming – real screaming – and he follows the noise to the first door, which opens to a dark room with two beds. Ikuya sits up in one, an oxygen mask sitting too big over his mouth. His hair is matted, skin layered in grime. Nii is on the other bed and she’s the one screaming – her mind is reduced to the primitive fear of a cornered animal. Nurses try to hold her down so she will not disrupt the IV feeding her the only substance her starved body can handle. Ikuya reaches over and talks Nii down, then a nurse slips a needle into the back of her neck to force the girl into a drug-induced sleep.
The next room reveals Seijuro and Momotarou, who are getting stitched up and numbly passing an oxygen mask back and forth. Seijuro towers beside Momotarou, silent and grim as his younger brother stares unblinkingly at the wall. His eyes have been opened wide to the horrors of Iwatobi; never again will he be able to look away into ignorant bliss.

The next room is Natsuya’s. He was just wheeled out of surgery and is still unconscious with his hands wrapped in bandages – he lost something around two fingers on one hand and three on the other. Nao protectively sleeps on Natsuya’s chest, shoulders tense and ready to tear into anyone who dares wake them up to separate them.

Makoto rounds the corner to Asahi’s room and finds him sitting up on the side of the bed with a pillow hugged too tightly against his middle. Without hesitation, Kisumi ventures over to him and Asahi’s head jerks up. The most heartbreaking relief fills his eyes, and then he bows his head to hide his face in Kisumi’s stomach, fingers digging into his hips to pull him closer. Kisumi steps between Asahi’s thighs and cards through his hair in understanding silence; Makoto leaves to give them some privacy, wandering to the next room over.

Aki was already at the hospital, still recovering from her gunshot wound at Samezuka, and woke up to a nightmare of a life, but she handles it with endless grace and finds the strength to comfort Rin. He was untouchable when the group first arrived at the hospital, screaming into the darkness of the parking lot, fighting anyone who tried to console him, but now that has left him exhausted – he cries in the coldest silence as he grips Sousuke’s dog tags in a trembling fist.

Makoto is the only one who can touch him; he puts a hand on Rin’s shoulder and miserable understanding passes between their eyes. They step out into the hallway and Nagisa stays with Aki to offer his condolences. Makoto and Rin gravitate to the empty waiting room down the hall, which is blessedly quiet, and Rin pours himself a cup of black coffee as Makoto just tries to keep breathing.

Rin sits down beside him and Echo sprawls over their feet. They hunch over with weighted shoulders and Rin’s voice is distant. “I’m not gonna make it if they both… if either of them…” His closes his eyes in defeat.

Makoto nods. “I feel the same way.” He puts a hand on Rin’s knee to level their gazes. “But no matter what happens tonight, Gou will always need you.”

Rin stares, angry and scared, needing someone to tell him that he can give up, but Makoto refuses to. Rin turns away, gritting his teeth in distress as he asks himself, “Why did they go off on their own like that?”

“Probably because they thought nobody else would get hurt,” Makoto assumes, then his tone lightens. “And also because they’re idiots.” He nudges Rin’s shoulder. “Which we both know way too well.”

Rin smiles sadly, then turns to focus on the television. He shakes his head righteously. “I’m kicking Sousuke in the balls when all this is over. Haru too.”

“If you must,” Makoto sighs.

“And we should go on strike,” Rin insists with raised brows. “No sex for like, a year.” Makoto opens his mouth to respond but Rin snorts. “Nah, never mind, I can’t last that long.” He laughs at himself, a small, broken huff, and a stray tear falls. “Even as messed up as I am right now, I’ve never
wanted to touch him so badly."

They sit for another hour, nearly climbing the walls with restlessness. At long last, Rei steps into the waiting room, haggard with exhaustion and his hair disheveled from his surgeon’s cap. He keeps an air of poised professionalism as he sits across from Makoto and Rin, but the room feels like it’s tilting.

Rei regards the two of them. “They both survived their surgeries.”

Makoto slumps in relief, covering his face with a hand, but Rin doesn’t move – he stares into Rei’s nervous expression and the doctor sighs. “But they’ve both fallen into a coma due to head trauma from the falling debris at the factory. I’m so sorry I couldn’t do more.”

It feels like the floor drops out and Rin starts shaking from his legs to his voice. “What does that mean, how – what’s gonna happen now?”

Rei looks away carefully. “Even if there isn’t much brain activity, I still take the coma as a positive sign because their bodies are taking care of themselves by shutting down to that degree – they need that level of rest if they’re going to heal.”

Makoto swallows. “When do you think they’ll wake up?”

“I cannot say, I’m sorry. They’ve both lost a profuse amount of blood and they both have infections from cauterizing their wounds by themselves.” Rei turns to Rin regretfully. “Sousuke-senpai has some fractured vertebrae from a fall, probably off the catwalk that an EMT mentioned to me, but he isn’t paralyzed.”

Rei turns to Makoto and puts a sympathetic hand on his shoulder, but Makoto is numb to the touch. “Haru-senpai was shot three times in the chest, but the good news is that the bullets had clean exits through his back – even though that traumatized his body, if the bullets had stayed trapped inside him, I would have been forced to do a series of x-rays that Haru-senpai did not have time for.” His expression falters for one overwhelmed moment. “I resuscitated him twice during the surgery. He is… a resilient fighter. I want to see him come out of this.”

Makoto is already rising to his feet. “Can we see him, please? And Sousuke?”

Rei takes Makoto, Rin, and Echo through a series of double doors that he unlocks with an ID card. The hallways are a never-ending strip of white tiles that disorients Makoto as they walk deeper and deeper into the hospital. They step into the overwhelming ICU and Echo stiffens, her tail whipping upright before she lunges into the nearest room.

A current of electric anxiety still hangs in the air of Sousuke’s room, the crash from the terrifying high of a surgery. His monitors glow in the soft darkness, his heart rate a droning pulse in the solemn silence. Sousuke lies rigid in a back brace, the side of his throat bandaged tightly where the bullet was removed. His skin is dark with bruises and soot, contrasting his stark hospital gown, and even if a machine breathes for him, making his chest move, he still looks too lifeless for Makoto bear.

Echo nuzzles into Sousuke’s limp hand, blinking up at his sleeping face. With a deep sigh, she settles on the floor beside his bed, guarding him as she always has.

Rin gravitates to him like the pull of a magnet, and he stares down at Sousuke, waiting for him to feel the mighty pull between them and wake up, but he never does. Rin bows his head, crumbling with
grief as he covers his mouth to cry. Makoto rubs his back, then squeezes Sousuke’s hand in a silent demand to keep fighting.

“I’ll go check on Haru,” Makoto tells Rin, seeing that he’s reached the limit of what his heart can handle before he has a complete mental break down. Rin nods gratefully and curls up beside Sousuke, gaze focused on his face to watch for any twitch of life.

Rei takes Makoto down the hall to the next room but before he opens the door, he glances back at Makoto to gauge his reaction. Makoto nods, impatient and terrified, his heart lurching to find Haru.

Rei opens the door to a room with florescent lighting that dries the space out in artificial warmth. Makoto’s eyes search the room frantically, then an ache tightens in his chest.

Haru is an empty shell of himself. His eyes are closed but it’s not like he’s sleeping – Makoto’s watched him sleep before and even unconscious, his personality was still there. Sometimes his brows furrow through a dream or he wraps his arms around Makoto from behind to nuzzle his face between his shoulder blades.

But Haru is not reaching for him now. He’s bruised, burned, and broken, the room smelling like charred flesh and eye-stinging disinfectant. He’s too weak to even breathe for himself; the tube down his throat does it for him.

Makoto goes to him with hesitant steps – Haru looks so fragile that Makoto worries making too much noise will hurt him, somehow. He pulls up a chair to Haru’s bedside and Makoto’s hands are restless, his entire being screaming to touch the boy, but one touch might break him.

Rei reads his expression and nods in reassurance. “It’s all right. He’s as stable as he can be.”

Haru’s hand is freezing and stiff, so Makoto gently kneads his fingers. He gazes at his slack face, voice rent with longing. “Can he hear me?”

Rei smiles sadly. “I’ve always liked to think they can.”

Rei leaves Makoto alone with Haru and his heart monitor beeps in the quiet, his breathing machine sucking in air and forcing it out methodically. Makoto props his elbows on the bed and rests his forehead against Haru’s hand as he takes a ragged breath. He kisses across Haru’s fingers, soft and so thankful, just to have this. “You are in so much trouble when you wake up,” Makoto whispers, brushing Haru’s fringe aside. “So much.”

Makoto falls asleep in the chair and wakes a few hours later, his back very upset at him. He grimaces as he stretches and looks over at Haru, heart deflating as the boy continues to sleep.

Nitori comes in to take Haru for an EEG and Makoto hesitates in letting Haru out of his sight. His heart beats painfully fast and energy floods his hands; he remembers the terror from last night and it lingers cold in his bones.

He startles back to himself when Nitori puts a hand on his arm. “He’s safe here, Makoto-senpai, and so are you.”

Makoto bows his head in embarrassment. “I, um – thanks.” He leans down to kiss Haru’s forehead and shuts his eyes for one stricken moment.
After that, Makoto steps out into the hallway so Nitori can wheel Haru’s gurney and all those machines into the elevator. Makoto watches him go and heaves a sigh, mind aching with stress. Tomorrow is Monday and he has no lesson plan for his class. He contemplates calling in a substitute teacher, but there’s only so many days he can do that—

His cell phone vibrates in his pocket. He reads the message across the screen and rushes to the stairs with his heart lodged in his throat.

He hurries through the automatic doors at the hospital entrance and crisp, winter air blasts him. A taxi parks on the curb and a woman steps out of the passenger’s side. His mother is ragged and looks around the parking lot in a daze until her tired eyes find Makoto. Her features sink with relief and Makoto rushes to embrace her, squeezing her against his chest, and she is so small in his arms, yet only her hug can make him feel protected right now.

She tucks her cheek against his heart, clutching him fiercely. She leans up to cup his cheek and he bows his head into her touch. “My sweet boy,” she whispers, eyes bloodshot from crying through her entire flight. “Take me to your brother.”

Sousuke is alone in his room and doesn’t seem to have moved much since last night, but his head is slumped over in an uncomfortable position. Makoto’s mother hurries to his bedside and she delicately tips his head back, upright against the pillows, and her hands quiver around his face. She sniffles as she pets his bedhead and her gaze traces his back brace. “He hurt his back?”

“Some of it’s fractured,” Makoto says.

“What in Christ’s name was he doing?”

Makoto shuffles his feet with an uncomfortable grimace. His mother sighs, shaking her head to clear it. “Never mind, then.” She stubbornly ruffles Sousuke’s hair. “I’ll make you tell me when you wake up.”

Makoto puts an arm around her shoulder and she rests her cheek against his side. “You must feel so lost, Mako-chan,” she says, not bothering to wipe away her tears.

Makoto stares down at Sousuke. “Even if we have our own lives now, it’s always been me and Sousuke, ever since we were nineteen in basic training.”

His mother smiles sadly at the memory. “You’ve been each other’s… pillars, for so long.”

Makoto sits down beside Sousuke and squeezes his hand, on fire with guilt. “I hate myself for not having his back. Even if I had no business there last night… back in the war, my place was always right beside him.”

His mother gazes at him fiercely. “You’re still brothers, regardless of the different paths you’ve taken.” She rubs Sousuke’s cheek tenderly. “But recovering is his mission now.” She jabs Makoto in the side with insistence. “Keeping yourself sane is yours.”

He chuckles and they sit together for a while. Makoto tells her about work and in turn, his mother goes into the drama happening at the veterinarian office where she works. He asks how the twins are doing in school and tells her about his students. His mother brings normalcy to the situation, letting Makoto know that the world isn’t falling apart, as much as it feels like it is.
After a bit, his mother says, “I’d like to meet your Haruka now.”

Makoto takes her down the hallway, but just as they’re about to turn the corner, his mother looks over his shoulder. Her gaze narrows on a distant point and she walks toward it. Makoto follows her eyes to the coffee pot in the waiting room – it looks like Rin slept across a row of chairs, probably so the nurses could run some tests on Sousuke last night. His hair is disheveled and his clothes are a wrinkled mess; his sleepy irritation with the coffee pot makes Makoto grin, especially as Echo tugs at Rin’s jacket, wanting to play.

The dog suddenly glances to the side and zeroes in on Makoto’s mother. Echo’s ears perk up and she scrambles across the floor to lunge into the woman’s arms. His mother stumbles but catches her, swooping her up like a baby. “Hi, Miss La Rue,” she laughs, wincing around a smile as Echo licks her face. “Yes, I’m happy to see you, too!”

Rin’s brows scrunch in confusion as he watches the scene, his eyes flickering between Makoto and his mother comically fast before realization dawns on his face. He combs his fingers through his hair, straightening his clothes in a panic.

Echo hops out of the woman’s arms to trot over to Makoto. His mother steps up to Rin and he goes rigid, eyes a little too wide. She notices the dog tags hanging down his neck and understanding floods her expression. Then she whispers, “Are you the stripper?”

Rin opens and closes his mouth nervously, a blush skittering up his cheeks, then he looks down to nod. He gasps when the woman embraces him and the shock of it leaves him frozen in her arms. “Oh, I’ve heard so much about you,” she says, swaying him back and forth in delight. She leans back to squeeze his hands, laughing through her tears. “You’re as gorgeous as he told me you were.”

Tears flood Rin’s eyes and he hugs the woman back this time.

Natsuya stays in the hospital to recover from the reconstructive surgeries of his hands. He handles the psychological trauma well, or at least, quietly. Nao sleeps on Natsuya’s chest so he’ll feel it when heStarts awake from a memory-turned-nightmare, and instead of going back to sleep, they talk about the most pointless things until morning. It’s nice for them to have time to discuss trivial topics such as books or weather or absolutely anything they can think of – Nao falls in love with every little detail of those days.

Ikuya is even quieter than he used to be; he talks to Nii the most, but those two have conjured up their own language through glances. His temper is not as short as it was before captivity – he’s still young and defensive, but his relationship with Natsuya improves, even if they spend most of their time together watching infomercials on the television in Natsuya’s hospital room. If the only thing those two can agree upon is how stupid a multi-functional chair is, then Nao will gladly take it.

Something he and Natsuya have not discussed is where their lives are going from here. Very few things are set in stone for them now; Ikuya will go back to school next semester, but Nao and Natsuya have to get him through weeks of physical and mental recovery before that happens.

Another thing that hasn’t changed is the fact that Natsuya still has a bleeding heart for Rough Rabbit. Nao wants to be frustrated with him because with Miho finally dead, they have their first chance at making their lives their own, but he knows deep down that peace will not last if Rough Rabbit are left to their own devices.
So they decide to go back to Copper Gorge when Natsuya is set to leave the hospital. Nao will go with him, of course, to make sure he is taking the time to properly heal, but there are still too many “what if’s” running through his mind to let his thoughts settle. What will it be like when Iwatobi is left in peace for the first time in its history? Nao has ached for normalcy for so long, but in the end he’s still homeless, and finding a job is hard.

He moves through Natsuya’s hospital room on autopilot as he packs his husband’s things to leave. Natsuya calls his name, then again, and Nao blinks up from tucking some novels into a suitcase, uttering a very dumb, “Huh?”

The response is so absent and out of character that Natsuya arches a brow. Gauze binds each hand, wrapping around his palms and over fingers of disturbingly different lengths. Often, Nao glances over his hands to count how many fingers are left, as odd and morbid as it is. Natsuya still has both thumbs on both hands; on his right hand, he lost some of his middle and ring finger, but he still has his pointer finger up to the second knuckle. He’s missing a lot of his ring and pinkie finger on the left hand – Nao is sure that Pietro cut Natsuya’s ring finger very purposely.

He startles back to himself when Natsuya stands in front of him, draping him in warm shadow. “Nao, what’s wrong?”

“Sorry,” he breathes for the hundredth time that day.

Natsuya gives a thoughtful pout and flops back on the hospital bed, tapping his thigh with an elbow for Nao to sit on. Nao laughs and settles on his lap, then Natsuya wraps him up tightly in his arms, secure when nothing else is. He stares at Nao with glazed, half-lidded eyes, adoring his soft features. “You flower,” Natsuya murmurs, head dipping to trail slow kisses over Nao’s throat, teasing his tongue against the skin. “You feast,” he purrs.

Nao gasps and arches into the sensation, then tips his head back to grin. “That pain medication is supposed to decrease libido, you know.” Natsuya slides their lips together and Nao hums a laugh as teeth play with his lower lip. “I thought I was going to get a break from you.”


Nao parts his lips in hesitation. “Just worrying about things I can’t control.”

Natsuya’s brows furrow in concern and he hugs Nao a fraction tighter, making him feel so warm and protected. “I am afraid of what’s to come, too,” Natsuya whispers, tucking the secret against Nao’s ear. “Yet I’m excited because you’ll be there.”

Nao lazes his fingers through Natsuya’s curls, brushing their noses together. “I’m sure you will take good care of me.” He clenches Natsuya’s shoulders. “I’m just anxious about… jobs. Finances.” God, he feels sick just saying it.

Natsuya bumps Nao with his nose, reprimanding and stern. “Nao, you can’t worry about that right now.” Nao scowls in frustration and Natsuya leans out of their embrace, snapping and losing his eloquence, falling back into his rumbling, slum drawl. “I’m not excited about going back to slaving away at a fuckin’ construction zone, Nao.” He lets out a jet of air through his nose, mouth firmed into a regretful line. “But I’ll do it,” he vows, voice softening with delicacy. “Even if Pietro had took both my arms, I’d find a way to put food on your plate.”
Emotion climbs up Nao’s throat and thickens his voice with tears. “Natsuya, I’m sorry, I wasn’t
trying to say I’m anxious about what you’ll be able to do. All this frustration is about myself.” He
bows his head mournfully. “I wish I could do more to support you. Us. I’m scared we’ll have to
work so much that we won’t be able to have days like we’ve had this week.” He cups Natsuya’s
cheek, aching. “I’ve enjoyed having time with you.”

Natsuya kisses his forehead. “Darling, we’ve got all the time in the world. We do,” he promises
earnestly. “If we struggle for a time, then it won’t last forever. Nothing lasts forever.” He perks an
adorable grin and looks so young. “Except us.”

Nao laughs warmly. “You’re very charming.”

“You’ll keep me then, baby?”

Nao sighs with fake dramatics. “If I must.” He grins, kissing Natsuya gently, then deeply. “I must,”
he whispers, losing himself in Natsuya’s eyes of burning roses and honey whiskey. “I must always
keep you.”

That week is the longest, most disheartening week Makoto’s ever had. He’s forced to go back to
work or risk losing his job next semester; normally, his superiors are more considering about
devastating matters such as the love of Makoto’s life and his brother being in a coma, but since this is
his first year of teaching, they will not bend for him.

His mother nearly goes to the school to cuss out the principal, but Makoto calms her down and
toughs it out – tries to, anyway. He relies on autopilot to teach and refuses to apologize for checking
his phone after walking his students to the library or during lunch duty. The only status reports Rei
sends him during the day are improving results from brain scans, or the number of times Haru’s hand
twitches within the span of an hour.

Every day after school, Makoto hauls ass to the hospital, barreling through the snow just to sit by
Haru or Sousuke and grade homework until nightfall. Even when Makoto is not there, Haru and
Sousuke are surrounded by love at all hours of the day. While he’s at work, his mother and Rin stay
at the hospital. At night, when the three of them need to go home for showers or sleep, members of
Freebird shack up at the hospital to watch over Haru and Sousuke until morning – that’s when
Makoto drops off his mother, Echo, and Rin on his way to work.

The situation is draining, but everyone’s support is overwhelming. Haru’s friends give Makoto time
alone with him in the evenings just to sit and kiss his fingers or cry as much as Makoto needs to. By
Friday night, he is so wrung-out that he doesn’t even drive home – instead, he kicks off his shoes,
takes off his glasses, and curls up beside Haru, careful not to tangle his IV lines or disrupt his
breathing tube.

Makoto runs the tips of his fingers down Haru’s cheek before tucking close and breathing him in.
Haru’s hair is damp with warmth from when the nurses bathed him a few hours ago, and Makoto
shuts his eyes with grief. “Haruka, I need you, love. I miss you even though you’re right here.” He
snuggles his head against Haru’s shoulder. “It’s not the same as having you look at me… or seeing
you try to fight a smile.”

Makoto kneads Haru’s hand, trying to work some blood flow into his fingers. “I never mentioned
this to you, but I was in a coma for a few weeks after Sousuke and I were rescued from captivity. I
remember bits and pieces… flashes of light or thinking someone was touching me.” Absently, he brushes his lips against Haru’s hair. “I know you must be tired and hurting, but I want you to know that you’re fighting so well. Rei says there are more signs of brain activity every time he gives you an EEG. I’m really proud of you for that.”

Makoto scowls. “Your MRI specialist is a dick though, I’m sorry, he really is. All he talks about is how long your recovery is going to be and I never listen to him.” His gaze traces Haru’s face, the line of his profile. “I know that when you get through this, every day forward will be the best day of my life. Even though recovery is maddening, I’ll cherish every second of it.”

His eyes slip shut as exhaustion weighs over his body. “I love you,” Makoto sighs, because there is nothing else to say.

He wakes in the dead of night, under the weight of a stare. Makoto blinks awake, eyes darting over Haru, but the boy is still asleep. Makoto frowns in confusion and inhales sharply when a figure steps into the room. It’s a woman with a bandaged arm, barefoot in a hospital gown and dragging an IV rack behind her. She looks Haru over, then regards Makoto. “You know who I am?”

Something about the way she’s staring at him is jarring and it makes Makoto wish he had brought his pistol with him. “No.”

She nods at Haru, her gaze piercing through Makoto. “Do you know who he is?”

Her playful, mocking undertone whispers, “Do you know what he is? Do you know his little secret?”

Makoto doesn’t answer, his jaw hardening. The woman curls a tired smirk. “Right.” She leans back against the wall, gingerly crossing her arms. “When he wakes up, tell him that Honeyblade is out of the gang war.” She levels their gazes. “That doesn’t mean my girls will stop dealing, and they have a right to be callgirls if that’s what they want to do, and if someone shoots first, Haru can bet his ass that I’m gonna be shooting back.” She looks away, emotion passing over her face. “But I’ve seen enough people die for no fucking reason. So Honeyblade’s out. Diamond Back fell with that cunt, Pietro. I doubt the Bloodhounds will ever come out of the woods again, after what happened to Ookami. I know Haru won’t lead Freebird into another war, same deal with Natsuya and Rough Rabbit, so this is Honeyblade’s path.”

The woman turns to leave and Makoto calls, “What’s your name?”

She glances back with a Cheshire Cat smirk, her teeth flashing in the dark as she purrs, “Nadia.”

Makoto sleeps past daybreak, unbothered by the sunlight pouring through the window, enjoying the warmth across his sore back. He nuzzles closer to Haru and gradually blinks away to study the boy’s face. Haru’s eyelids shift, brows twitching together once, so faintly that Makoto thinks he dreamed the action. Haru’s lashes flutter and okay, yeah, that’s definitely happening, and Makoto pounds the call button for the nurse quickly enough to nearly make the bed’s control panel smoke.

Nitori flies into the room just as Haru’s eyes crack open in thin, blue slits, and Makoto feels the physical sensation of his heart climbing up his throat. It takes a few minutes for Haru to gather the strength to open his eyes more, and his gaze isn’t focused – he’s looking straight through Makoto.
It’s disturbing, and Makoto’s nerves threaten to quiver apart and split his body down the middle. He jerks when Haru huffs a breath through his nose, then his eyes roam over Makoto with a flicker of recognition.

He holds Makoto’s gaze for seven seconds before his eyes shut again. Makoto lets out a breath, head prickling with dizziness. Nitori beams. “Did you hear that breath he made? He’s trying to breathe on his own; that means he’ll get his tube out soon, and then he’ll be waking up before we know it.”

Sousuke is slow in breaking through his coma, but in the meantime, he is prepped for a back x-ray and Rin kisses his cheek before he’s wheeled into the elevator. Rin hugs his arms around himself and longingly watches Sousuke go, then heads down the hallway to Aki’s room.

She’s set to be released from the hospital today and Rin walks into her room to find Nii brushing Aki’s hair, since Aki’s mobility is still limited after being shot at Samezuka. She’s stiff from weeks of bed rest, but her smile is gracious and she wears a peach sundress that drapes over her growing belly.

Rin hopes she will not run herself ragged worrying about everyone else; he trusts that Nii will keep a sharp eye on Aki’s health. Nii was released from the hospital a few days ago, but she and Aki are set for months of recovery in their shared apartment.

Nii leaves to go pick up Aki’s prenatal meds at the pharmacy and Rin packs up the rest of her things. Aki is quiet as she absently rubs the swell of her belly, where her hands naturally fall to now. All at once, Aki’s face flashes hot and she cups her stomach with nausea. Rin thinks she’s due for another bout of morning sickness and grabs the wastebasket, but she shakes her head. “I think I’ll be okay. Sorry, it’s just nerves.” She ducks her head to blush. “I’m getting an ultrasound before I go home and Seijuro said he’d like to be there.”

Rin beams with genuine warmth. “That’s awesome.”

Aki smooths the creases of her dress with a smile. “I haven’t gone two days without him coming by the hospital to see me, even though he’s so busy with Corro’s old position. He sneaks cherry ice cream into the hospital for me when I’m craving it and he even met my mom last time he was here.” Her smile softens at the memory.

Rin finishes folding her laundry and zips it up in her duffle bag. He sits down to embrace her and she hugs him back fiercely. “You’ll both do great,” Rin says in reassurance.

“Thank you, Rin,” she sighs, leaning back to take his hand. “Text me the moment you find out how Sousuke’s x-ray went.”

He nods with a smile. “I will. Let me know how the ultrasound goes.”

Rin leaves Aki alone with her thoughts and she rubs circles over her stomach in the heavy silence of the room. She startles when the door opens, breathing in relief as Seijuro steps in. His hair is disheveled from the snowstorm and he rakes it back with a blush crawling up his cheeks. “Hi,” he says, grinning breathlessly.

He seems to be oblivious to the bouquet of sunflowers he’s holding. “Are those for me?”

Seijuro blinks down at the bouquet like he just realized they’re in his grip. “Oh. Yeah, sorry, uh, here.” He offers them with a nervous smile.
Aki beams and inhales deeply. “Oh wow, these smell so nice.” She takes another grateful breath, heart yearning. “I can hardly remember what the outside world smells like, I’ve been in here so long.” She hugs the bouquet against her chest. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” Seijuro sits down next to her on the bed, their knees lingering together, and he nudges her leg. “You feeling okay?”

Aki nods and her curls roll down her shoulder – Seijuro’s gaze follows the motion. “I’m excited,” she says.

He grins, his fingers walking over to hold hers. “Me too.”

Aki’s doctor comes in to take her to the ultrasound technician’s office. The walk seems to take forever, maybe because Aki’s natural state is bone-tired these days, or perhaps because her heart is beating too fast for time to catch up to it.

They lay her down in a dark, warm room and Aki settles on her back, a towel settled below her bare stomach. Seijuro sits in a chair beside her, looking a little too wide-eyed, his feet tapping a nervous pattern against the floor as the ultrasound technician turns on the monitor.

She squirts cold, slimy gel onto Aki’s stomach and moves the sonogram wand across her belly. The image on the monitor looks like the surface of the moon, and a few minutes of searching through the images goes by – there is no movement in her belly thus far and no heartbeat. Aki blindly reaches for Seijuro’s hand, her chest sinking in the coldest dread until the woman breathes, “Ah, there you are. It was hiding from us,” she laughs.

They look at the monitor and a white outline carves through the darkness, creating the familiar line of a profile. “There’s the nose,” the woman says, pointing to a little swoop. “A fist, an arm.” She traces the shape back to the head. “On down, we’ve got feet, two legs right there… let’s see…” She zooms in the picture and squints at the screen. “I think you’re far along enough for us to tell the sex, if you want to know what it is.”

Aki hikes up on her elbows and nods, her breath coming quicker. The woman searches the images and the next minute is the longest of Aki’s life, but time stops when the woman coos, “Aw, you’ve got a little girl.”

Aki covers her mouth with a trembling hand. The most uncontainable happiness flutters through her like a hummingbird caged in her ribs, and her exhale comes out as a laugh. Seijuro gazes up at the monitor in a daze, twitching a disbelieving smile. “She’s a cutie, Yazaki,” he breathes.

Aki stares at the screen, her heart soaring. She falls deeper in love as she hears the baby’s heartbeat – she’s a strong girl, Aki thinks, listening to the firm, steady pattern. She’s strong and brave and perfect.

Seijuro squeezes her hand, secure and promising. Aki thinks of Nii waiting for her at home and Rin’s embrace; her mind goes to Asahi who has always acted as her endearing little brother, then Nao and Natsuya, who are once again watching over this little family.

She thinks of Haru, who risked his life so that they may all have a dream for the future.

Aki gazes at the sonogram. She’s strong and loved and free.
Sousuke gets his breathing tube out before Haru, and Rin figures out how to coax him into keeping his eyes open longer and longer by talking to him. He watches Rin’s lips move like he’s struggling to understand him, but every few days, he appears more lucid. Sometimes he grunts when Makoto walks into the room, but whenever Sousuke is awake, he keeps his gaze on Rin because he’s a glowing presence at Sousuke’s bedside, acting as his true nightlight in the grim darkness.

Makoto is elated and jealous at the same time. Haru’s progress declines to a hopeless point; he can’t be off his breathing tube for too long because the boy is so drugged that he often forgets to breathe on his own, and each heave sounds like it takes an immense amount of strength.

After spending an entire Sunday watching Haru choke and cough up blood, Makoto starts bracing himself for the end because his vision of a future with Haru is slipping through his fingers.

Makoto goes to the hospital chapel and begs God to let him trade places with Haru, he cries and gets angrier than he’s ever been. Then he asks for a sign of Heaven being real or anything having meaning, but nothing happens. His very pores feel ripped open with emotion; his gut is fist in a knot that got tighter and tighter with each passing day. He hunches over in the pew and feels an arm come around his shoulders – he recognizes Rin’s understanding touch, but just cries harder.

Makoto finally reaches the point of physically having no more tears to cry and rasps, “I feel like I’m dying with him.”

Rin’s swallow echoes through the chapel. “If Haru can’t breathe or eat on his own soon, Rei’s gonna ask me for a decision.” Makoto turns to him, horrorstruck, and Rin gives a confirming nod. “You should be a part of the decision.”

Makoto stares. “What do you want to do?”

Rin’s gaze climbs the stained-glass windows. “I’ll never give up on him. We could be sitting here ten years from now with no progress from Haru at all, and I’d still say just give him one more day.” He glances at Makoto, features blown open with vulnerability. “But I don’t know how much pain he’s in or if he can feel anything at all. You said the first time he opened his eyes that he looked like he knew you, and that’s what’s screwing with me. He remembered you and you’re probably the only reason he’s even taking handfuls of breath on his own.”

Makoto’s heart falters. He never looked at it like that. “That sounds very far-fetched,” he whispers.

Rin’s eyes fall flat as he arches an unimpressed brow. “It’s not a miracle. You and him are fact. If there’s anything Haru will remember, it’s you.”

Makoto looks away and Rin touches his arm, scrunching his brows. “You don’t get it,” he breathes. “You still don’t get that he did it all for you.”

Makoto turns back to him with wide eyes and Rin leans forward with emphasis. “He was fighting for a future with you.” Rin leans back, grimacing as he recalls memories. “I don’t know how much he told you about his past, but Haru’s never had much to strive for. Yeah, his parents died when he was pretty young and that could have been his way out, but Miho found him right after that. He never had a chance at a ‘normal’ life – or just normal happiness, if you wanna be real about it.”

Rin nudges Makoto with a sweet grin. “You’re the only person who could change that for him. Haru needed someone apart from his kind of lifestyle; otherwise, he would have never learned any better.
And I promise you, he was scared shitless of what life was going to be like on the other side of the gang war, but he ended it anyway because he knew he’d get to be with you. That’s all he wanted.” He nudges Makoto again. “Give yourself more credit.”

Makoto struggles to rein in his thoughts, but one realization shines through. “Ten years, then.”

Rin blinks in confusion and Makoto smiles sadly. “Ten years from now, we still ask for Rei to give him one more day.”

Rin lets out a hollow laugh but nods firmly.

Makoto goes back to Haru’s room, deciding to sleep there for the night instead of battling traffic through the snow, but he stumbles in on Nitori and a group of nurses with Haru, and Makoto’s ears flex at the sound of raspy breathing.

He surges around the nurses and lurches to Haru’s bedside, watching the boy inhale weakly before exhaling and falling back against the pillows in exhaustion. Makoto gropes for a chair before his knees can give out. “How long has he been breathing on his own?”

“About forty-five minutes,” Nitori says from the other side of Haru, glancing at the computer clock.

“That’s the longest he’s ever gone,” Makoto whispers in awe.

Haru’s eyes dart to Makoto when he speaks. He takes fast, shallow breaths and his heart monitor spikes quicker. Makoto grabs Haru’s hand to place it over his heart and Haru’s breath stutters, eyes opening a little wider. Makoto holds his gaze as the world narrows down to their point of contact.

Makoto swallows, lacing his fingers with Haru’s over his chest. “Your heart is beating too fast, Haru-chan. You need to breathe slower.”

Haru is too disoriented to comprehend his words, but he watches Makoto’s lips part for breath. Haru’s gaze follows the rise and fall of his chest, listening to his breaths in the tense silence of the room. After a few seconds, Haru’s lips tremble apart to follow the motions of Makoto’s breaths.

They sit like that for hours, oblivious to the nurses leaving them in privacy – Nitori documents Haru’s progress and pops in every few minutes to check the monitors, but Makoto is unaware of anything other than Haru’s face. The boy studies Makoto in his slow journey of being requited with reality; Haru stares into the pattern of his flannel shirt and watches Makoto brush kisses over his hand.

Around 3:00 a.m., Makoto struggles to remain upright, he is so tired. But he wouldn’t give up this time with Haru for anything in the world, especially a few hours of sleep, so he lets Haru keep watching him. “I can’t believe you’re wide awake right now,” Makoto says with a playful smile. “You must have been resting quite nicely these past few days to have so much energy.”

Haru just blinks drowsily and Makoto ducks his head to trace the lines of the boy’s palm. Haru’s eyelids flutter at the touch and Makoto chuckles. “Does that make you sleepy?” He grins as he continues to trace Haru’s palm. “I’ll have to remember that.”

Haru drifts to sleep and Makoto lies down beside him, watching the steady rise and fall of his chest. Pride overflows Makoto, and Haru’s sighs lure him into the darkness behind his eyes.
A few hours later, he wakes to find Haru staring at him, his features tight and stricken, brows creased into the most apologetic, sorrowful expression.

Realization blooms through Makoto. “Oh, Haruka…” He nuzzles in to press the softest kiss against Haru’s mouth, then Makoto whispers, “I’d wait for you forever, you don’t have to apologize for that.” His laugh thickens with tears. “I’m so happy to see you, I’ve never been so happy.”

Haru spends that morning looking over Makoto, gaze following the curve of his nose down to his lips. After two hours of keeping his eyes open, Haru tires himself out – Makoto plays with his hair and Haru leans into the touch, then sleeps hard.

The first time Sousuke speaks, Makoto is stepping out of the elevator and hears a roaring slew of blush-worthy curses down the hallway. He hurries into Sousuke’s room to find him lying on his side for a nurse to give him a shot in his back, and the needle is so long that Makoto has to turn away to fight nausea.

Sousuke buries his head in Rin’s lap, burying his face into his thigh. Rin bows to whisper soothing encouragements against his ear, fingers tender and loving as they rake through Sousuke’s hair. At long last, the needle slides out and Sousuke deflates, sighing, “Fuck,” then passes out.

Rin smirks dryly. “Guess his shining personality stayed intact.”

Over the next couple of days, Haru grows more lucid, staying awake longer and becoming more expressive, though he’s still lost in his own little world of delirium. Makoto thinks that’s why Haru looks at him one night and rasps, “I want… mom…”

Rei told Makoto that Haru might hallucinate, given that he suffered from head trauma, but Makoto was not as prepared for it as he thought he’d be. He texts Rin, who flies into the room just as Haru repeats the statement. Instead of having a frozen panic attack like Makoto is, Rin promises Haru that his mother will be back soon and suggest that he goes back to sleep while he waits on her. Just like that, Haru slips away, and Rin sinks into a chair. “He used to hallucinate when he did heroin, so I’ve had that conversation with him before.”

Makoto burns with inadequacy for a while after that, but everything changes when Sousuke starts having PTSD episodes. He gets sucked into the black hole of his memories and falls into violent fits of panic as he relives the worst moments of his life. He fights nurses that try to sedate him and all that thrashing threatens to put him back at square one in the healing process. Rin tries to talk him down, promising that he is safe, and Sousuke will look confused like he wants to believe Rin, but fear drives them apart.

So on those nights when Sousuke screams himself awake, Rin switches places with Makoto – he watches over Haru and Makoto becomes Sousuke’s only fixed point in reality because they were together during captivity, the worst moments of both their lives. Echo’s presence helps, her weight grounding in Sousuke’s lap, but there is only so much that she and Makoto can do.

While Makoto sits with him, Sousuke goes rigid each time someone walks down the hallway and he rasps that “they’re” coming back.

“Okay, Sousuke,” Makoto nods, meeting his terror with ease. “I’m here with you. Where ever you are, I’m right there with you.”
Makoto is Sousuke’s anchor in the storm of himself, and it takes three hours for Makoto to talk him back into his own skin. They sit in the haunting quiet, then Sousuke croaks, “Did Haru make it?”

Makoto studies his expression, gauging how lucid he is, and Sousuke arches a brow tiredly. “Yeah,” Makoto says. “He sleeps a lot, but he’s getting there. He got off his breathing tube a few days ago and he’s starting to eat more. He doesn’t say much to me.”

Sousuke works his fingers through Echo’s fur. “Sometimes I’m back at that factory. Not Iraq.” It sounds like his voice box was rolled through gravel – a permanent side effect from being shot in the throat. “I hate scaring Rin.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Makoto begs, squeezing Sousuke’s left shoulder earnestly. “Rin isn’t scared of you, he’s… more afraid of the fact that he doesn’t know what to do.”

“This isn’t his fault though,” Sousuke says, shaking his head hopelessly. “He shouldn’t feel so worthless.”

Makoto’s shoulders ache as they collapse. “Sousuke, he loves you, and everyone’s natural state in shitty situations like this is terrified. We’re all feeling inadequate about some parts of this – you, me, our mom, Rin, Haru. Everyone but Echo,” Makoto jokes, rubbing her ears and making her tail lazily flap against the bed.

He meets Sousuke’s miserable eyes. “This hurts all of us, every single day, but we’re getting through it.” Makoto perks up with an idea. “Why don’t I go get Rin? He’s just with Haru in the next room over.” He looks Sousuke over carefully. “Or I can stay with you, if you need it. I’ll do whatever you think is best for you.”

Sousuke shakes his head. “I’m fine. I need him.”

Makoto nods in response and Sousuke reaches out. “Thank you, Mako.”

Makoto takes his hand and fierce devotion passes between their eyes.

He leaves and a few minutes later, Rin steps through the doorway to wander over. “Hey,” he says timidly, his voice low like he’s worried that speaking too loudly might spook Sousuke.

Sousuke isn’t offended. “Hi,” he mumbles, relieved as Rin moves closer to sit at his bedside. They sit awkwardly for a minute, then Sousuke gathers the courage to meet Rin’s gaze. “I’m sorry.”

Rin looks confused, but his eyes are already brimming with tears, overwhelmed. “For what?”

“Everything.” Sousuke grimaces as he swallows and Rin leans over to the nightstand for a cup of ice water. He holds the straw up for Sousuke to take some heavy, grateful sips, then Sousuke huffs, “I’m sorry for everything – lying about the ambush in the first place. Putting you through hell, always.”

Rin breathes a sad laugh and takes Sousuke’s hand. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about what you and Haru did, and… I think I’ll always be pissed when it comes up in my mind, but I know that you were trying to protect me by lying about the ambush.” He shrugs. “I would’ve lied to protect you, if our positions were switched.”

Sousuke shudders. “I couldn’t handle seeing you in this bed, going in and out. I’m not strong
enough.” He admits this shamelessly.

A tear slips down Rin’s cheek and he frames Sousuke’s face to rest their foreheads together. “I’ve never loved you more than when I see you getting stronger every day,” he whispers. Rin kisses him with suppressed passion, momentarily slipping into desires that were nearly lost to cold fear. “God, I just want to go home with you.”

“We will,” Sousuke vows, carding Rin’s hair back to gaze up at him. “We’re getting through it.” Emotion swells in his throat. “Thank you for staying with me.” *And not leaving like my birth mother.* “I love you.”

Rin settles against his chest with a smile. “I love you, baby,” he yawns.

Sousuke glances at Rin’s duffle bag in the corner, squinting. "What are all those textbooks for?"

Rin tiredly follows his gaze, then blushes. "Oh, I... um, started taking some online classes. Makoto helped me register and stuff.” He plays with the edge of the sheet, seeming embarrassed - maybe even ashamed. "I didn't finish high school and I think it'll look better in court if I have some sort of certificate, you know, when I try to get custody for Gou."

Sousuke's heart warms. "That's great."

Rin smiles back all coy and Sousuke's heart monitor beeps faster.

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By December 1st, Haru is awake each evening when Makoto comes to the hospital after work. His face lights up when Makoto walks into the room and Haru always leans up for Makoto to kiss him in greeting. Haru asks about his day with a strained face and Makoto knows it’s because the more time Haru stays conscious, the worse his pain gets.

Haru doesn’t like being drugged – he confesses to Makoto that it’s because his parents were addicts and he’s afraid of getting hooked on pain medication. Makoto suggests that Haru tell his counselor his concerns – most patients with head trauma don’t have a choice in talking to a professional, so he might as well take advantage of the situation and ask what the woman’s opinion is.

It just turned out to be a sad deal. The counselor gave Haru a series of tests for a number of mental disorders, which, again, is standard after head trauma; he came back positive for a generalized anxiety disorder and tested high for PTSD – the diagnosis led to the counselor urging Haru to get on even *more* medication, which infuriates him.

“İt’s old news,” Haru insists from his wheelchair, sitting beside Makoto in the hospital garden and looking like a bitter, adorable grandmother in his robe. “İ’ve had anxiety my whole fucking life and I came out fine.”

Makoto shifts his prosthetic into a more comfortable position, enjoying the rare bout of sunshine and taking Haru’s rage in stride because it’s a side effect of having a brain injury, which Makoto doesn’t say because he’s got blind trust in Haru’s doctors – it’s because Makoto was *constantly* pissed off those first few months after his coma post-captivity, and usually for no reason at all. It takes time for the brain to relearn itself, so he has a good amount of patience for Haru.

He watches the hospital staff decorate the towering Christmas tree looming in the heart of the garden. Some locals volunteer to hang the thousands of ornaments, and it looks like Momotarou and Nitori
are having an impromptu engagement session at the Christmas tree – or maybe not, since all the photos Momotarou snaps on his phone are different angles of Nitori looking cute in front of the tree.

“That one thing your counselor said was interesting,” Makoto mumbles. “When she explained that the anxiety disorder is what makes your heroin withdrawals so intense.”

“A pill isn’t going to change that,” Haru snaps, angry and afraid. “It’s going to get me addicted.” He looks away quickly but Makoto already saw the tears gleaming in his eyes.

Makoto sobered up, reaching out to gently turn Haru’s chin back to him. The boy meets his gaze with self-loathing. “I’m sorry,” Makoto says. “There’s only so much I can understand because I haven’t been through what you have, but whatever you decide to do, I’ll support it.” He leans forward, raising his brows sternly. “I’ll talk to her if you feel like she’s forcing you into the decision.”

Haru closes his eyes in relief, then shakes his head. “I’ll have to think about it.” After a beat of silence, he tiredly mumbles, “You’re good to me. I’m so sorry.”

Makoto shakes his head in understanding, lacing their fingers together as they watch snow cascade down the Christmas tree.

Haru doesn’t have much of a choice about taking painkillers – his chest is literally rebuilding itself, closing the tunnels that bullets carved through him, and he would pass out from the pain if he did not pass out into drug-induced oblivion.

Haru decides to try the anti-depressants the counselor suggests, but refuses to start on anything over ten milligrams. Makoto doesn’t notice much of a change in Haru’s attitude, but taking that first step in feeling better leads to more steps, such as going outside more often.

Physical therapy starts with Haru sitting up in bed for thirty minutes, which was at first, so tiring that he slept for hours afterwards. Gradually, he builds strength, and when it’s time for him to start walking, Makoto is the one Haru leans on as he limps back and forth down the hallway, quietly beaming under his praises.

At long last, Haru and Sousuke are scheduled a release date, which is a relief because Makoto and Rin have nearly gone stir-crazy being at the hospital so much. It’s at the point where Rin’s making up conspiracy theories about how the shitty waiting room coffee is either killing him or turning him immortal, and Makoto’s gotten way too good at sneaking Haru blueberry pancakes from the cafeteria every morning.

Makoto’s mother decides to come back to Iwatobi to help Sousuke transition into living at home, but her flight isn’t until later that afternoon, so Makoto and Haru take an accidental nap waiting up on her.

Haru startles awake, blindly groping for Makoto. He finds his head and pets through his hair, breathing deeply to calm his racing heart.

He tenses and looks up. A woman stands in the doorway, her expression unreadable. Makoto’s eyes are a mirror image of hers – warm and green and holy shit, this is his mother.

Haru sits up on his hospital bed and the woman raises her hands with an embarrassed smile. “Sorry,” she whispers, not wanting to wake Makoto, oddly enough. She tucks some hair behind her ear with a blush. “It’s just that you look very different from the last time I was here.”
Haru blinks. “Oh.” He runs his sweaty palms under the sheets. “I, um… don’t remember that,” he mumbles sheepishly.

The woman smirks, eyes lighting. “Yeah, I figured.” She shrugs off her backpack and tucks it into the corner, then approaches him and reaches out like she’s trying to shake Haru’s hand. “I’m Hana.” She nods down at Makoto and then the adjacent wall to Sousuke’s room, grinning in exasperation. “Their mom.”

“Haru.” He takes her hand and she surprises him when she squeezes gratefully.

Hana’s features tighten with emotion. “I’m so glad you’re doing better, Haru.”

“Thank you, I’m… glad to finally meet you.”

She pulls up a seat beside Haru, gazing at Makoto as he sleeps in his own chair across the bed. “He was… really torn up about you.” She sighs through her nose. “I’ve never seen him so scared.”

Haru opens his mouth to apologize, but Hana cuts him off. “Haruka, I’m going to say this once and I want you to know that I hope we can work through this.”

Haru stares at her, dumbfounded. Hana leans back and crosses her arms as she regards him. “Sousuke hasn’t told me much about when he was shot, but Makoto told me you were there with him in that factory.” She inclines her head. “I needed to know more and Commissioner Mikoshiba doesn’t do well when terrified mothers confront him, wanting to know why their son was shot down with their other son’s boyfriend in the middle of a gang war.”

She composes herself and her expression softens. “I am not judging you for your life choices; I’m firm in the belief that you’re a good man and know how lucky you are to have Makoto’s heart.” She leans forward, meeting his eyes unflinchingly. “But I need you to tell me that you’re never going back to the lifestyle that almost got you killed and nearly cost Makoto his sanity. I don’t want to have to worry about the two of you like I’ve had to over this – I want you both to be happy and safe.”

Haru’s exhale pours out of him, then he shakes his head in resolve. “I’m done with all of that. Forever.” His voice lowers with emotion. “I want a quiet life with Makoto. I’ll never get bored of just sitting somewhere with him, safe.” He bows his head. “I hope you will believe me.”

She takes his hand, smiling in reassurance. “I do, honey.” She pats his arm. “I met Rin the last time I was here; you’re both sweet boys.”

Hana looks around the room, seeming done with that intense subject, and she huffs as she shakes her head in disbelief. “You’ve got to be so bored in here. I can’t even imagine.”

Haru shrugs. “Makoto takes me outside sometimes, but I’m stuck in here when he’s at work.”

“So do you have anything to do?”

“I have games on my phone but that’s about it, if I’m not in physical therapy.”

She stares at him with an odd excitement in her eyes. “Do you know about the wonders of crochet?”

Haru blinks. “No?”
She grins and reaches for her backpack.

So Makoto assumes that Haru and his mother are getting along well, given that they’ve crocheted him two blankets, eight cup cozies, a phone case, and five pencil pouches.

The best part of all of this is that they drag Sousuke into yarn hell with them. He vehemently refused the practice of crochet at first, insisting that he isn’t bored in the slightest and is enjoying his time off, but one too many afternoons of watching the stock market channel on the television in his hospital room made him give in. Rin cries when Sousuke presents the black slippers he knitted for him, and just like that, Sousuke has a new passion, even if he does it begrudgingly.

Haru and Sousuke are released from the hospital after what feels like an eternity. Just getting wheeled to Makoto’s truck tires them both out, but they’re determined to stay wide awake on the drive back to Sagebrook so they can drink in all the details of the outside world.

Rin’s slept at Sousuke’s house during the entirety of his hospital stay and kept it spotless. Makoto wishes he had a more inviting atmosphere to bring Haru home to, but he didn’t have the energy to polish every surface between running from the elementary school to the hospital, then back home to get about five hours of sleep and do it all over again.

But he does carry Haru over the threshold because screw it, he’s bringing the love of his life home from the hospital and he’s never been happier in his entire life. Haru laughs at his antics and kisses him in a way that he never has, pouring so much naked devotion into the kiss that Makoto could cry, he’s so happy to finally have him home – so joyful that he doesn’t even care about his mother and Rin using their cell phones to frantically snap photos of the love-ridden spectacle that is Makoto and Haru.

Haru falls asleep minutes after that – Makoto lays him down in bed, their bed, and hurries over to Sousuke’s to make sure he’s settling in well. Makoto’s mother and Rin have him set up on the couch and he’s already passed out, exhausted. Their mother kisses him on the forehead before getting a taxi back to her hotel, and Makoto leaves Rin and Sousuke in privacy so they can bask in being alone in their home together.

Echo follows Makoto back to his house, but he doesn’t mind her piling up in the bed with him and Haru. Makoto takes off his prosthetic, glasses, and hearing aid, then snuggles under the covers. Anxiously, he keeps checking over Haru’s face, making sure his features aren’t pinched together in any sort of pain. Makoto watches him sleep for a time, fit to burst with pride, then rolls over on his side to try and get some sleep.

Unconsciously, Haru pulls Makoto’s back into his chest and buries his face between his shoulder blades, sighing in relief. Makoto closes his eyes as a thankful tear falls, then he drifts away in Haru’s arms.
Chapter Summary

Makoto smiles brokenly. “I want the soft, sleepy days with you, but I’ll still fight for our happiness; I’ll find it if someone tries to take it because we deserve it, love,” he whispers, folding a hand over Haru’s heart. “We can close our eyes now. There’s nothing dangerous to look out for anymore. We can rest. We’ve fought our war and it’s time for us to come home.”

Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter of the story, and yes, I am already an emotional mess, but there will be an epilogue to follow. And I am so, so sorry I’ve gotten behind on replying to comments - I’m going through so much at school with midterms and I’m also looking for a new place (which is taking a ridiculous amount of my time), but please know that I read every single one of them and your kindness has got me through so much over these past few weeks. I love y’all!

Shout out to bakapandy for this awesome depiction of Rin and Sousuke from The Shape of You, which I wrote as an EWOATT Spin Off that I can now confirm is 100% canon after the ending of this story. Thank you so much!

saltyaf, thank you a million times over for your hard work beta reading this chapter! (archive of our own) | (twitter)

Chapter song is Alive by Sia, which some tumblr users and I have agreed is basically Haru's anthem for EWOATT. Feel free to listen.

I'm going to try and save my emotional notes for the end of the epilogue coming up next, but please know how grateful I am for you as a reader! I really do hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I had a one-way ticket to the place where all the demons go

Where the wind don't change and nothing in the ground can ever grow

No hope, just lies, and you're taught to cry in your pillow

But I survived

I have made every single mistake

That you could ever possibly make
I knew what I wanted; I went out and got it

Did all the things that you said that I wouldn't

I told you that I would never be forgotten

And all in spite of you

I'm still breathing

I'm still breathing

I'm still breathing

I'm alive."

"Alive" by Sia

Over time, Iwatobi changes. Though the streets are no longer battlefields for the gang war, suspicion drapes over the city like smoke, dark and still too warm, too real. Everyone is afraid to hope; they keep the lingering taste of death under their tongues, bracing themselves for the next time that the city wakes to the hot stench of blood and wailing police sirens.

Seijuro gets Corro’s position and Sousuke will go back to work when he’s healed, but they do not get to survive Iwatobi’s greatest massacre without having to answer for it. At the interrogation, they are asked how they survived when twelve officers didn’t, and it’s questioned how they managed to stumble upon all the gangs at once in a secluded, abandoned factory near the outskirts.

An explanation is demanded as to why Haru and his friends were there, so lies must be told. Sousuke is good at lying, if only because he knows his personal truth, but he’s bad at coming up with an extensive story – he’d rather just glare someone into silence, but that will not work in this case.

Seijuro, on the other hand, is elaborate and earnest – nobody second-guesses what he tells the court. Unflinchingly, he explains that Corro recruited Freebird unlawfully and entirely for the purpose of his own agenda, which was revenge on Miho. He also threatened Freebird into helping him take down the other gangs for personal glory.

The court buys it, but that leaves the question of what to do with Haru and the rest of Freebird. Again, Seijuro rescues them, insisting that Iwatobi will not heal if everyone’s grief and rage falls on the gangs, who will end up retaliating when all they want to do is start over.

The heartfelt speech isn’t enough for a pardon, but Haru’s decision is. He tells the judge that he knows where to find the Bloodhounds, who are being searched for in the outskirts with sympathy for Iwatobi’s forgotten people. He says that Honeyblade and Rough Rabbit’s leaders have confirmed that they will not be the ones to start another war. People are concerned that Diamond Back will have a vengeful return, but Nao comes forward with vital intel that the police department will need if Diamond Back ever decides to fire the first shot of the next war.

There’s a question of how Freebird got their drugs into the city, given that most product is seized at the airport or toll bridges. Haru confesses that Miho’s supplier left the product on a barge he swam out to, and it’s settled rather quickly that no one else will ever be able to pull such a stunt.
In return for the exchange of crucial information, Freebird is released under a pardon designed to give Iwatobi’s gangs a new start. However, if anyone is caught in gang activity again, their penalties will be tripled.

When the officers find the Bloodhounds in the depths of the forest, they bring back a sickly child who the people give up under the assumption that’s what her mother, Ookami, would have wanted. Namiko and a few more babies are put in the hospital for malnourishment, and Seijuro makes an effort to reconnect with the city’s lost people.

Everyone changes with Iwatobi – clumsily, fearfully, stumbling along this unknown path to peace. The city’s hateful and violent molten core has burned itself clean, but nobody knows what to do with the handful of ash that has been left behind.

The first thing to be done is to heal. Winter break rolls around and Makoto enjoys his free time with Haru. Their schedules revolve around one another; in the mornings, Makoto likes getting up earlier than Haru just so he can kiss him awake and leave him breathless, feeling loved. They have their tea in bed before dressing in scarves and gloves to head over to Sousuke and Rin’s, and then the four of them pile into Makoto’s truck to go to physical therapy.

Sometimes Makoto has his own appointments for his prosthetic, and Haru is a welcome support during those times. Afterward, they go back home to nap or just relax until dinner. At that point, either Sousuke and Rin come over, or Makoto and Haru trek to their house. The four of them normally agree on some form of take-out, but picking something to watch on the television is always a hilarious disagreement. Sousuke insists that he doesn’t care what anyone watches, but he sighs every fourteen seconds when Rin puts on a romantic comedy. Haru likes nature shows about marine life and Makoto enjoys those, as repetitive as they can be. Sousuke likes historical documentaries, preferably about how certain weapons have evolved over the centuries, but they put Rin to sleep in a matter of minutes. The only thing two of the four can agree on is soap operas and that’s something only Makoto and Rin get fired up about, but luckily, Haru and Sousuke often let them have whatever they want.

Everyone decides to have Christmas at Makoto’s house, which he didn’t have much say in, but he’s oddly excited for the gathering – big social events are usually horrific to him. Maybe he’s just happy because of the normalcy that the holidays bring. He’s had the best time curling up with Haru and a cup of hot chocolate by the fireplace, or spending hours in the freezing cold on Sousuke’s roof to help him adjust the Christmas lights to Rin’s liking, or watching Haru and Rin accidentally tape their hands when they try wrapping presents to take to Gou.

All of Freebird comes to Makoto’s house on Christmas, including some others. Rei arrives with Nagisa, who is armed to the teeth with mistletoe and cartons of eggnog. Nitori and Momotarou share wedding ideas with Aki while Seijuro throws back beer with Sousuke. Natsuya and Nao have Ikuya dressed in the most precious reindeer sweater, which the boy loathes to a withering degree, but he perks up when he notices Nii – he follows her into the kitchen to sneak some eggnog. Asahi lights cigarettes on Sousuke’s prized grill as he cooks steaks and is oblivious to each murderous look he receives.

Rin and Haru are completely wrapped up in Gou when her social worker drops her and Chigusa off for the evening. Makoto’s mother comes with the twins and she embraces him at the door, then playfully asks who the pretty girl in Rin’s arms is, knowing fully well it’s Gou but making the girl beam shyly. She plays in the snow with Ren and Ran and introduces them to Hayato when he arrives with Kisumi.
Night rolls in and the neighborhood glows in florescent lights of red, green, and white. Makoto and Haru sit on the patio swing with a quilt thrown over their legs as they watch the kids roast marshmallows over Sousuke’s grill, the air warm with cinnamon and fire. Makoto gazes down at Haru, watching Christmas lights play in the darkness of his hair. “Are you feeling all right? Not too tired?”

“Mmm.” Haru takes another sip of hot chocolate and shakes his head. “I’m fine.” He looks Makoto over, arching a knowing brow. “Your leg hurting?” He rocks the swing absently. “You had more adjustments to your prosthetic than usual while we were planning this party.”

Makoto stretches out his legs, tightening his arm around Haru’s shoulder. “It was probably just swelling from the stress. I feel great tonight, though. It helps that there are plenty of places to sit.”

Haru hums and snuggles into Makoto’s side, sighing. “This is so nice.” Quieter, he confesses, “I never thought I’d get to have this.”

Makoto kisses Haru’s forehead. “I know the feeling. I’m…” Emotion swells in his throat. “I’m so happy with you, Haruka.”

Haru looks up as Makoto gazes down at him and realization passes between their eyes. The world falls into soft focus as everything aligns right down to their heartbeats. Makoto is satisfied with where he is in the world for the first time in his life, if only because his place is beside Haru, but he still yearns for more. Makoto cannot get enough of him and wants to be even closer, aching with the desire to be Haru’s forever.

Understanding dawns on Haru’s face, mirroring all of Makoto’s emotions. He cups Makoto’s cheek. “Of course we’ll be together,” he whispers.

Makoto kisses him, clutching Haru’s jaw tenderly as his heart soars. Haru’s fingers laze into Makoto’s hair to bring him in harder, taking his lips with the fire of stars.
The floor is a mess of torn wrapping paper by the time the night is over. Sousuke spends most of the night hunched over toys, putting batteries into them as Gou, draped over his back, watches in impatient excitement. Kisumi lazes in Asahi’s lap after one too many eggnogs with Nagisa, who passes out under the sea of wrapping paper. Rei is a frazzled mess, nearly swimming through gift wrap to find him. The kids fall asleep as well, then Seijuro and Sousuke almost get in a fist fight as they struggle to assemble the baby crib Freebird got Aki – it’s the most entertaining thing Makoto’s seen all year.

Natsuya gives a contented sigh as he draws Nao closer. “Dare I say this Christmas rivals the one we had three years ago.”

“Don’t remind us of that,” Nii snaps, receiving a startled blink from Ikuya and the rest of the crowd. She looks down at her iPod with a blush. “I used to wear acid-washed jeans back then. Those were horrific times.”

Asahi sighs wistfully as he pets Kisumi’s hair – Kisumi nearly purrs like a cat. “That was the year we all met in the junkyard on Christmas Eve,” Asahi muses. “None of us could afford gifts, so we just got a bottle of cheap-ass tequila to pass around. We got plastered~” he sing-songs.

Rin rolls his eyes. “That’s what you remember about that Christmas?”
Asahi snorts and raises his brows. “That’s what I don’t remember about that Christmas.” He pins a smirk on Rin, then Haru. “However, I do happen to remember two dudes gettin’ into a cat fight and throwing themselves into the ocean to see who could swim out to the buoy first.”

Makoto’s eyes triple in size and Haru’s already pinching the bridge of his nose. “On Christmas Eve?” Makoto shriils, making Haru wither. “Haru, you could have gotten hypothermia by jumping into that water!”

“Oh, he did,” Natsuya confirms with a grin, happily ignoring Haru’s glare. “So did Rin. But that’s not the best part.” He leans forward with conspiracy. “Our darling Rin here –”

Rin flails and rears up. “Natsuya, don’t even –” Sousuke grabs his belt loop and yanks him back down on his ass without looking away from Natsuya’s manic grin.

“Rin won the race and swam to the buoy first,” Natsuya says. “But then he thought he saw a shark, so he and Haru were stranded on that buoy, drunk and freezing, for hours.”

Seijuro startles a laugh and Aki shoots him a reprimanding glare, making his expression fall into a solemn mask. “That’s not funny,” he says and looks away, rolling his lips in to hide a grin.

But Asahi does not hide his laughter – he wheezes with it. “You could hear Rin screaming all the way to the beach, and Haru’s funny as shit when he drinks tequila, like, oh my God,” he groans, clutching his chest. “He kept trying to jump off the buoy just to screw with Rin.”

“I was trying to save his sorry life,” Rin yells with exasperation. “There was a shark and Haru’s stupid for playing around with that, I – Sousuke, stop laughing!”

“I was so cold,” Haru sighs. “And drunk. It was awful.”

Makoto asks, “How’d you get back to shore?”

Nao looks exhausted at the memory. “Our friend Kazuki was there at the beach, and he called me – miserably drunk. I couldn’t understand a word he was saying… but I heard him say ‘Rin’ and ‘tequila’ and ‘shark,’ so I knew nothing good could be going on. I came to the beach and they were plastered out of their minds – I’d throw myself to the wolves before I ever deal with another batch of drunk teenagers again.”

“We weren’t that drunk,” Nii pouts.

Nao stares unblinkingly, looking haunted. “Nakagawa was naked, Nii. He had taken his clothes off just to stargaze. You probably don’t remember that part because you were too busy stumbling after crabs that weren’t even there.” Nao rubs his temple with a heave. “Nakagawa was sobbing because he thought he saw a UFO.”

“Hey, I saw that UFO, too,” Asahi says, pointing into his chest earnestly. “That was real.”

Haru takes a judgmental sip of his hot chocolate. “Just like Rin’s shark was real.”

Rin lunges at him. “You festering shit –” Sousuke pulls him back and drags him into his lap this time, which shuts Rin up quite nicely.

“Anyway,” Nao sighs. “Given that it was 2 a.m., I couldn’t do much to get Rin and Haru back to
shore by myself, so I got Natsuya out of bed because he had a jet ski. Our neighbor let us borrow his truck and we hooked it up, drove all the way to the beach –”

“Got a speeding ticket on my way there,” Natsuya scowls. “I tried to explain the situation to the officer and he made me take a sobriety test because he thought I was high for coming up with such a story.”

“We finally get to the beach,” Nao says. “Get Natsuya on the jet ski and in the water, then it won’t even crank.”

Asahi cackles. “Me and Kazuki puked, we laughed so hard at that.”

Nao’s stare pierces him. “Before Natsuya and I could decide what to do, Asahi lunges into the water and decides he’s just going to paddle the jet ski out to the buoy.” Kisumi scoffs a laugh, making Asahi blush. “Needless to say,” Nao sighs, “the tide rolled in and Natsuya and Asahi clung to each other as the jet ski floated a mile out.”

Nii snorts. “I think Natsuya yelled every single one of Shakespeare’s love sonnets at Nao as he and Asahi floated away.” Her voice falls in deadpan. “Most romantic shit I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“The coast guard rescued them that morning,” Nao says. He shakes his head mournfully. “A lifeguard showed up, saw all these teenagers passed out in the sand and said to me, ‘these your kids?’” He shrugs miserably. “I just had to tell him yes.”

Hana pats Nao’s shoulder in understanding. “Being a mother is hard.”

“Oh, but there are perks,” Nao says without missing a beat. “Once all of them woke up with hangovers, I made them drink the rest of the tequila.” He takes a cool sip of his drink. “I haven’t gotten another drunken phone call from them in the middle of the night since.”

Freebird gives a collective shudder. “None of us drink tequila to this day,” Aki says. “Except for Natsuya and Haru.”

Makoto lifts his brows at Haru, who shrugs. “That was still an okay night for me. The ocean was pretty.”

Sousuke glances up at the ceiling, thoughtfully rolling a finger around Rin’s ponytail. He glances at Makoto. “We were doing a tour three Christmases ago, weren’t we?” Makoto nods.

Their mother tips her head. “Weren’t you two in Baghdad that Christmas?”

Sousuke rears around with a shit-eating grin. “We were.” Horror sinks into Makoto’s features as Sousuke gleefully says, “Haru, has Makoto told you about–” He grunts when a pillow collides with his face.

“I’ll fight you,” Makoto says, rearing up. “Right here on this living room floor.”

“Oh,” Kisumi breathes, sitting up straighter and already pulling out his cell phone to record it.

Their mother crosses her arms. “You most certainly will not.”

Kisumi deflates.
Sousuke rolls his eyes, not intimidated by his brother. “It shouldn’t bother you so much.”

“You’re talking about getting our ranks stripped,” Makoto hisses, pushing another pillow into Sousuke’s chest. “You’re playing with our entire military careers here!”

“Makoto,” Sousuke says, his voice wobbling with a hidden laugh. “Nobody in their right mind is going to strip our ranks because of what we did to that goat –”

“Her name was Kiko and she had feelings,” Makoto snaps earnestly.

“She did not,” Sousuke groans, dragging a hand down his face. Everyone’s gaze whips back and forth to follow the exchange.

“She screamed every time you walked into our tent! She knew you hated her, she had to carry that with her!”

“I didn’t hate her,” Sousuke assures. “She was just… impractical.”

Kisumi throws his arms between them. “Please, God,” he begs. “Let me hear this story.”

Makoto starts, “We’re not –”

“Okay, so,” Sousuke begins in delight. “On this tour, we were stationed in a village in Afghanistan. We were on patrol during Christmas and found a goat that had escaped from a farm somewhere. She was in labor and it was fucking gross, but Makoto wouldn’t let me leave because we ‘had to make sure nothing went wrong.’ Like we would have been able to tell if anything was going right, but anyway. She has the baby and –”

“She abandoned it,” Makoto says, closing his eyes gravely. Dramatically. “She left like a thief in the night.”

“No,” Rin breathes, faintly putting a hand over his heart.

Sousuke’s gaze falls flat. “Or she just went to piss. Or eat, or do literally anything that meant she’d be back in thirty seconds, but Makoto couldn’t wait that long. He had a bleeding heart for that wet mop, so he snuck it back into our tent.”

Haru stares. “That’s adorable,” he says flatly, but with meaning.

Makoto beams. “We were rangers. Protect and defend – it’s what we do.”

Sousuke throws his hands up. “We didn’t ‘protect and defend,’ we stole someone’s goat –”

“Anyway,” Makoto says as he shoves a pillow over Sousuke’s face. “Our entire team was a big help. We’d sneak out in the middle of the night to buy milk to bottle feed her.” He shakes his head with a grin. “And she really grew on Sousuke.”

“Only reason I didn’t report your ass was because Echo liked her,” Sousuke snaps.

Nao asks, “What happened to her?”
“We had to move villages a few weeks later,” Makoto says. “So we gave her to a farmer. He had a little boy; they seemed nice.”

Rin turns to smirk at Sousuke. “I’m getting you a goat next Christmas and it’s sleeping in our bed with us. We’re getting diapers for it and everything.”

“No.”

“Goat or pig, Sousuke – you gotta choose.”

Sousuke scoffs. “Where’d the pig come from?”

“It’s livestock,” Rin says with an impatient gesture. “Keep up.”

Sousuke shakes his head. “I’m not getting a damn –” Rin lifts his brows pointedly and Sousuke deflates, rumbling, “Pig, then.”

“Excellent. We’ll name him Sunshine.”
Gou’s social worker comes by to take her and Chigusa back to the foster center. Nobody cries, surprisingly, but that’s due to the fact that Rin’s court date for Gou’s custody hearing is coming up soon. Since he’s got somewhere safe to stay, plus more education, his chances of getting her back have improved.

After her departure, everyone shares gratitude for the company and gifts received, then Makoto closes his front door for the night. His mother and the twins are spending the night at his house, so he gets her settled in the guest bedroom and the twins settle under the Christmas tree with Echo to watch the lights until they fall asleep.

When Makoto shuts his bedroom door, he flops back against it with a relieved breath. Haru glances over his shoulder in amusement and bends to take off his shoes. Makoto’s gaze roams down the elegant curve of his back, fingers twitching to trace the long line of his spine. Haru goes to unbutton his shirt, but pauses when his eyes lock with Makoto’s in the dresser mirror.

Haru holds his gaze until Makoto steps into him from behind, making his eyes flutter shut. He quivers, skin hot under Makoto’s touch, and all at once, Makoto is painfully aware of how long it’s been since they’ve had sex. Anytime they have tried to make out in bed, their physical and mental exhaustion took over before they can go any further. Haru’s been too weak for so long, and being his support system during his recovery left Makoto exhausted most of the time.

But in this moment, Makoto is wide awake in a hundred different ways – his senses are on fire and his body feels lonely. All at once, Haru turns around in his arms and leans up with a demanding
whisper. “Kiss me.”

Makoto swoops down and finds supple lips that part for him hungrily. Lust spikes through him, heat pouring between his legs, and he licks into Haru’s mouth. Haru’s fingers tremble through his hair, their bodies shifting with restless urgency, and Haru gasps when teeth tease his lower lip open for Makoto’s tongue. He jumps to wrap his legs around Makoto’s hips and Makoto kisses him harder with a broken moan, falling apart under his mouth.

He stumbles onto the bed and they never break the clutch of their lips. They fumble in a panic and Makoto preps Haru quicker than he’d like to, but all it takes is two lube-coated fingers to have him riding his hand, rutting up into an arch.

They don’t even have the patience to take off all their clothes; they both still have on shirts and shoes and Haru’s jeans are still hanging on by one ankle, but the pressure between them is threatening to burst. Makoto unzips his pants and rolls them down just enough for his cock to spring free, harder than he’s ever been in his life, and he sinks into Haru.

Haru’s body swells around his cock, bearing down on him in a vice-like spiral. Their hips lurch with a wet slap of skin, moving hard and deep, and though he pounds Haru to aching soreness, his glazed eyes can only beg for more. It’s fast and messy and so good, a satisfaction that burns at the core of themselves, and it’s the best forty-three seconds of their lives. Haru comes and Makoto has to throw a hand over his mouth to muffle his cry, but he can’t stop thrusting into his hot, tight center, and Makoto buries his groan into Haru’s neck as he pours inside of him.

They collapse over the bed, boneless, and Haru’s thighs fall open with Makoto’s cock still pulsing between his legs. Aftershocks rock them and Makoto pants against his ear, his wrinkled shirt damp under Haru’s touch. Their mouths find each other in the dark, flushed lips trembling together in a needy kiss, their hearts pounding in tandem.

Makoto slips out of him and Haru jerks his head into a pillow to wince hard. “Sorry, sorry, I should have been slower,” Makoto breathes, gently running a hand over Haru’s healing chest. “And I didn’t mean to put all my weight on you.”

Haru stiffens when Makoto’s fingers slip through the buttons of his shirt, grazing his skin. They haven’t seen each other naked since before Haru was shot, and he was already so self-conscious about his scars from childhood… Makoto pulls back, not wanting to make Haru any more nervous about his bullet scars.

Haru seizes Makoto’s wrist, demanding him closer. He brings Makoto’s hand back over the buttons of his shirt and nods with a tight swallow. Tension crawls down Makoto’s spine, nervous, and he slides a hand up Haru’s cheek, making him hungrily lean into his touch. “I’m not afraid of you, Haruka,” he whispers. “You’ll always be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

The blueness of Haru’s eyes surges, and Makoto unbuttons the shirt, then parts it. Haru immediately turns away, but Makoto guides his chin back in place and bores into his eyes. “You probably won’t believe me, but you’re even more beautiful to me now.” He bows to run his lips down the valley of Haru’s chest, grazing the tenderest of kisses up and down his abdomen. Haru gasps and arches, thighs clenching Makoto’s hips.

He kisses those rough, dark patches of skin, pouring love over trauma, giving Haru’s demons a softer touch. Makoto leans up to smile into Haru’s glistening eyes. “You’re powerful. So strong and brave, and I get to know that every time I see these scars.” He kisses Haru, closing their lips together in an
earnest press as he traces shapes over his heart. “I get to know how lucky I am to have you.”

Haru sits up to take his shirt off, peeling his jeans away. He helps Makoto strip and climbs in his lap to press their bodies together, vulnerably naked and addictively intimate. Makoto’s love is the strongest drug he’s ever had – ever felt, ever tasted, ever needed like blood in his veins.

“It was always you,” Haru finds himself whispering without thought. Makoto parts his lips in confusion even as he blushes, and Haru smiles hopelessly. “It will always be you. Even if I had died, Makoto.” He frames his face, thumbing his cheeks with enough adoration to make him shake. “Even if I had died, I’d still find you. Even in another life, or – or another world, I would still choose you.”

Makoto’s eyes shine with tears. “Haruka…”

Haru presses their foreheads together, frustration pitching his voice as it thickens with tears. “And I’m so sorry for all the times I’ve made you feel like you weren’t my first choice. You’re more than that; you’re my only choice. You made me realize how pointless and wrong war is. We deserve to be happy and I’ll make you happy, I promise.”

Makoto kisses his cheek. “You make me happy just by breathing, Haruka. You’re my favorite person, always.” He takes Haru’s hands and squeezes them, sobering up for a moment. “I know that life isn’t going to grant us any favors just because we’ve been through too much. As old and tired as the world is, it’s still going to find new ways to hurt us.” He shakes his head in defiance. “But I’ll keep my blind hope, and I’ll walk out the door every day with it because you keep building it up inside of me. As long as I’m yours, faith will be with me because I’ve watched you live and I’ve watched you die.” His voice lowers with gravity. “I’ve seen your eyes light up and I’ve seen them go dark. And you’ve watched me fall apart and loved me for it.”

“Of course I do,” Haru whispers. “I love you, and the world can’t take that away because it’s too cruel to even know how to touch it.”

Makoto smiles brokenly. “I want the soft, sleepy days with you, but I’ll still fight for our happiness; I’ll find it if someone tries to take it because we deserve it, love,” he whispers, folding a hand over Haru’s heart. “We can close our eyes now. There’s nothing dangerous to look out for anymore. We can rest. We’ve fought our war and it’s time for us to come home.”

Haru stares at him, voiceless, then seals their devotion with a kiss.
Rin lazes on the couch with Sousuke, his worries sliding away like wind over ice; untouchable. He tastes Sousuke’s heat in the air and moves into it, hugging a thigh over a strong hip. Sousuke hikes Rin’s knee higher over his waist, sighing as their bodies tuck together under the blankets. He sweeps Rin’s hair to the side so he can trace the planes of his face, and Rin closes his eyes under the pampering. “Where do you see yourself in ten years?”

Sousuke stills, then goes back to petting him. “With you.”

Rin rolls his eyes open with a grin. “I know that. But I mean, like, if you could have anything, or if anything could change, what would it be?”

Sousuke shakes his head. “Nothing. I don’t want anything to change. I just want this.” The statement is so blunt and confident that Rin’s heart buzzes. Sousuke mumbles, “Why do you ask?”

Rin nuzzles deeper into his embrace, then shrugs. “No reason, it’s just nice to think about.” He sighs as fingers drag his hair from its tie to play with the strands. Sousuke makes him feel safe and beautiful – he doesn’t even have to be self-conscious about his teeth anymore.

The realization brings a memory to life and bitterness stings his chest. “When I was little, I was so afraid my kids would have sharp teeth like me. I worried about Gou having them even though she always said they were cool.” An insistent question climbs up his throat and he tries to swallow it down, but it flies out of his mouth. “Have you ever thought about it?”
Sousuke blinks in genuine confusion. “Kids having sharp teeth?”

“Jesus,” Rin hisses, embarrassment and frustration leaving him shaking. “No, Sousuke, have you ever thought about kids. Having them.” He might puke with this nervousness broiling through him.

Sousuke cranes back, eyes a little wide. “Oh.” He shifts the covers as he thinks, then shrugs. “No, not really. I’ve been on my own most of my life, so I never pictured things being much different for me.” He looks Rin over carefully. “You want them, don’t you.” It’s not even a question – it’s obvious. The yearning comes off Rin in waves.

*I’ve already had one,* he wants to say. *I had a son.* His eyes dart across the ceiling and he feels the weight of Sousuke’s stare, but cannot turn to look at him. “When me and Aki were together… we weren’t careful; we were too scared to care, really.” He gathers the strength to meet Sousuke’s gaze and sees the realization already dawning in his wide eyes. “She got pregnant when we were seventeen.”

Sousuke tenses, but he does not interrupt.

Rin’s eyes drift away, his voice lost in a daze. “We called him Hitomu, but he was born too early. I had enough time to meet him, though. He was quiet.”

Sousuke glances down at Rin’s hip, remembering the name inked into his skin forever. Understanding floods his expression, but he doesn’t reach for Rin – inadequacy leaves him frozen.

“Miho found out about him.” Rin’s whisper is vile. “She realized that a baby would make us too strong – it would give us too much hope. So from them on out –” His voice closes up and he claws Sousuke closer, needing his warmth, but cold dread still sinks into Rin. “All the rentboys and callgirls had to get… fixed. Surgically.”

Sousuke sounds closer to crying than Rin’s ever heard him. “Rin –”

“So I can’t have kids anymore,” he croaks, eyes burning wet. Sousuke’s arms come around him in a fierce embrace and Rin’s control unravels, tears pouring out of him. “I’ve always wanted them but with you – you make me need them. And I know we could adopt but just knowing that I can never –” His chest hunches on a sob. “That I can never have my own… I don’t even feel like a person, I can’t –”

“Shh, shh, stop,” Sousuke whispers, framing Rin’s face, brows high and creased. “Stop. You’re more than a person to me, Rin, you’re my person. I love you no matter what kind of future we have.”

Rin pulls away and sits up, trying to regain his composure, but he ends up bowing his face into his hands. The couch shifts and Sousuke sighs, hugging Rin close. “Your mind could change,” Rin weeps, lost in the darkness behind his eyes. “Your mind could change about anything.”

Sousuke squeezes him closer, but Rin is on fire with inadequacy. “I’m so hard to deal with, you could find someone off the street and they’d be easier to love. You could want so many things that I can’t give you.” He crumbles, his one true fear flying out of his mouth. “You can’t promise me that your mind won’t change.”

“Marry me, then.”

Rin is sure that his heart stops, yet his pulse drums in the tense silence of the room. His eyes blink
open in a daze and slowly, he looks up at Sousuke, positive that he dreamed up the whole thing, his heart already sinking hopelessly. But Sousuke’s expression is resolved and Rin starts crying again. “What?”

Sousuke glances away as he blushes. “I said marry me,” he grumbles, clumsily rubbing his hair into a disheveled mess.

Rin drifts out of his body like a ghost, disbelief making his jaw fall slack.

Sousuke takes Rin’s trembling, clammy hands even though his own are shaking. “Marry me,” he says with a pleading note in his voice. “Because there will never be anything I want more than you.”

Rin stares, his eyes wider than they’ve ever been.

Then he surges against Sousuke’s lips, laughing into his mouth and kissing him hard enough to throw him back on the mattress. Rin falls apart in the most sensational way, laughing and crying and ready to burst into light. “Yes,” he sobs, beaming as Sousuke cups his face with the most excited smile, looking so young. “Yes, yes, yes…”

Sousuke kisses him and they fall into the sheets, not coming up till morning.

A few weeks later, Haru is taking his break after an hour of physical therapy, and Sousuke steps into the hospital garden to flop down beside him on the bench. “This is kicking my ass,” he huffs, gritting his jaw as he palms his shoulder brace. “At this rate, I’m not going to be worth shit when I go back to work.”

Haru keeps his eyes closed, determined to enjoy the rare bout of sunshine. “You’ll have to work even harder when you go back,” he lulls. “Just those subscriptions that Rin has to all those bridal magazines is going to run you dry.” He cracks one eye open and raises a judgmental brow. “You realize that you’re going to have to sell a few organs to pay for this dream wedding, right?”

Sousuke chuckles, completely at ease with his fate as a living organ donor. “I’m not too worried about it. Not like I really need both kidneys, anyway.”

Haru found out about the engagement through Rin’s dramatics, of course. Makoto had left for work and Haru was sleeping late in bed, but he woke up to someone jumping on the mattress and screaming in his face. Rin came out of the ordeal with a busted nose for startling Haru awake, but he had no problem keeping bloody tissues against his nose as he went over every detail of the night with Haru, including the dicking down that followed the proposal. Good thing Haru’s already dead inside when it comes to Sousuke and Rin’s sexcapades.

“You should see the guest list he’s already come up with,” Sousuke yawns, squinting in the sunshine. “Nearly took him all night to read it to me.”

Haru snorts, believing every word. “Has he let you contribute anything to the plans?”

Sousuke shrugs, unbothered. “It’s not really my thing, but I like most of his ideas.” He grins at a memory. “At first Gou said she wanted to be the best man, but now she’s told us she’ll settle for flower girl if Echo can walk down the aisle with her.”

Haru shakes his head even as his heart warms. He looks Sousuke over. “Have you invited anyone?”
“We pretty much have the same friends, so no – nobody other than Makoto’s family.” He glances down at his shoes, which are pristine, blindingly white flat-bottoms. It’s like staring into the damn sun. “I don’t talk to any of my biological family,” Sousuke mumbles, sobering Haru up. “I don’t know where my birth mother is.”

Haru regards him carefully. “Would you invite her, if you knew where she was?”

Sousuke thinks for a minute. “It’d be weird,” he confesses quietly. “I could invite my aunt, I guess – she was my father’s sister, not my mother’s.” He rubs the back of his neck in frustration. “She’s nice, she just… doesn’t get it. Why it’s awkward for me to talk her, I mean. She called me and tried to reconcile for my father not being in my life, but she was just torn up. She said my dad had another baby with another woman. We’d be about the same age,” he mumbles absently. “Or we would have been. She told me that when the boy was five, his mother called her and said the boy had died in a drunk driving accident.” He sighs. “I don’t think Mori ever got over it.”

Haru’s stomach drops. “What?”

Sousuke turns, lifting his brows at how breathless Haru sounds. “My biological aunt. My father’s sister. Her name is Mori.”

Haru sits up straighter, adrenaline surging through him. Logic tries to break through the hope; Mori died, his mother told him so, right after the first time she burned him with a cigarette she said –

His heart falters in realization.

When he was five, his mother said that Mori had been killed in a drunk driving accident.

“Haru,” Sousuke’s voice is a muffled echo to his ears. “Haru, you’re shaking.”

He stares at Sousuke, eyes darting over his features, the ice of his eyes and how familiar they suddenly are. “What was your father’s name?”

His mother’s voice drifts through his head and he remembers the last words she ever spoke to him. “You weren’t even breathin’ when you were born. Didja know that? My body tried to kill you.” Her high little laugh pulled Haru’s gaze to her. “And then you started wailin’, screamin’ like you were so fuckin’ mad. I thought to myself, oh, shit. Hakai’s gonna have a hell of a time tryin’ to break this one.”

“Hakai,” Sousuke says.

Three days later, Haru is sitting on an airport bench, his leg bobbing nervously. Makoto presses their thighs together, meeting the storm in his eyes with reassurance. Haru takes a deep breath and shakily combs through his bangs. He has not slept; neither has Sousuke, who leans against the wall a few feet away. Rin rubs his back ceaselessly, but Sousuke remains tense with nerves. He and Haru haven’t spoken to each other in days – they’re shell-shocked out of their minds, gazes boring into the plane terminal.

A crowd of passengers flood into the airport and Haru stands on wobbly knees, eyes searching the sea of people; they come like a tidal wave he drowns in.
He feels like a lost child until the crowd parts and a woman steps forward. His ears close up – the only sound in the world is his echoing huff of disbelief.

The woman is skinny in the way that most ex-addicts tend to be, her cheeks a little too gaunt, her collarbones sharp. She wears a grimy shirt and jeans, her braid the exact same shade of black as Haru’s, her eyes a mirror image of Sousuke’s. She shrinks away from the crowd but she carries herself with a survivor’s grit, her gaze dark yet strong.

Her eyes track the floor and pierce him. She gasps, the sight of him punching her in the stomach, and she staggers backward, dropping her bag. The woman hyperventilates, shock trembling through her fingers as tears drip off her chin. Her face crumbles as she sinks to her knees, the disbelief literally ripping her off her feet, and she starts weeping. It’s the most heartbreaking sound, her sobs wrenched from the burning pit of her soul, and Haru reaches for her but he’s too weak to move.

Then the woman laughs.

It warbles out of her, dazed, then she laughs again, higher, again, like she’s flying apart with joy. She stumbles to her feet to race for Haru and he catches Mori in a spinning embrace, his heart fit to burst.

That evening, Sousuke and Haru sit on Makoto’s patio swing, as far apart as they can be to the point where it’s comical, because they’re still at a loss for words with each other. Mori leans back in her chair across from them and smirks as she glances between them. “You never noticed the similarities?”

Neither Haru or Sousuke turn to look at each other – they continue to sit rigidly and her smirk softens with sympathy.

However, Makoto and Rin look between Haru and Rin like they’re watching a tennis match. “Haru’s got his momma’s eyes,” Mori says. “But Sousuke has Hakai’s.”

Sousuke looks down in shame, mouth firming into a line. Tensely, he says, “Can you explain this?” His voice tightens with impatience. “Please.”

Mori nods, then drags a hand down her face with a grave sigh. “You and Haruka are half-brothers; you have the same father, but you have different mothers. The four of us grew up together.” She smiles at Sousuke. “Your mother, Mika, was my best friend. Takae, Haru’s mother, was the prettiest girl in school, and everyone, especially my brother, wanted to be with her. Even after he got Mika pregnant, he still wanted Takae.”

Mori leans forward with her elbows on her knees, glancing away in memory. “Hakai was always a monster, even in high school. He was a powerful asset to the Bloodhounds.” She rolls up her sleeve, showing Haru the paw-print inked into her forearm. "So was I."

He stares. "You were one of them?"

"Most of us were, back in the day when the gang was at its peak. If you were from the outskirts, it wasn't really a choice." She sighs. "I didn’t know what your father would do to Mika if he found out she was pregnant - she wasn't in the gang. She was a good girl and didn't deserve to get hurt, so I convinced her to transfer schools before she started showing.” A shadow haunts her face. “Her parents wouldn’t help raise you, Sousuke. She had no choice but to tell Hakai. Luckily, he was
pretty content to just give her some money every now and then, at least for a while.” She gazes at him pleadingly. “She was sixteen and completely alone; he was her only support and that’s why she fell in love with him.” Mori turns away regretfully. “That’s why it broke her when she found out Takae was having a baby by Hakai too.”

Mori shakes her head before continuing. “Takae was in the Bloodhounds and she could run with the worst of people. Hakai fell for her, hard, and Mika felt like she wasn’t good enough, after that. She just… spiraled on down.” Earnestly, she says to Sousuke, “However you feel about your mother is entirely justified, but please, know that she loved you.” She puts a hand on his knee. “And she still does.”

Sousuke falters. “You know where she is?”

Mori nods with a smile. “Yes, I do. We’re, um – close.” She blushes as she tucks some hair behind her ear, then gets back on track with the story. “After you went into foster care, she went to rehab and I felt so alone. Haru was the only reason I stayed in Iwatobi.” Emotion sinks into Haru’s features and Mori squeezes his hand. “Those five years I had with you were the best of my life. When Takae lied to me and said you had been killed by a drunk driver –”

“That’s what she told me,” Haru whispers. “She said you had been killed by a drunk driver.”

Mori shakes her head sadly. “I think she was jealous of how close we were, in her own twisted way. When she called me and said you were gone, I left Iwatobi and…” Self-consciously, she tugs her sleeve down to hide the red-dot scars over her arms. “I lost myself for a while.” She snorts. “About thirteen years, actually, but I ended up finding Mika in rehab. She heard that Takae had recently overdosed and said that about a week after that, Hakai had died in an explosion with their son. She said the boy had jumped off a cliff and committed suicide. That had confused me and she showed me a newspaper clipping.”

Mori’s shoulders fall in grief. “I realized that Haru had been alive the entire time – that Takae had lied to me thirteen years ago.” Her chest jerks on a sob. “Haru, realizing that I had left you in that hell, alone, I – I couldn’t even bear myself.”

Haru shakes his head, his voice firm. “It wasn’t your fault and there’s honestly nothing you could have done.” His gaze traces the scar over her eyebrow. “You of all people know what a monster Dad was.”

Mori wipes her eyes and sighs. “Mika was the only thing that got me through losing you a second time. After that, we tried to reconcile with you, Sousuke, but neither of us blamed you for wanting to keep to yourself.”

He rubs his aching temple. “So where do you stay now? I mean… how’ve you dealt with everything?”

“Your mother and I live about a five-hour flight away.” Mori snorts a laugh. “Tried to get as far away from Iwatobi as possible. We stay in a sleepy town. Predicable, quiet. We’re happy there.” She parts her lips, then closes them into a smile. “She’s really been the only light in my life, other than Haru-chan.”

Sousuke stares down at the ground as he thinks, his voice fumbling. “I think – I think I’d like to see her.” He takes a breath and meets Mori’s gaze firmly.
She smiles back. “I can arrange that.”

The five of them have dinner together, which is nice, yet surreal. Afterward, Makoto sets Mori up in his guest bedroom, and Rin heads over to Sousuke’s with Echo. Sousuke stops short on the trek across the yard, still reeling from the events of the day, and promises that he only needs a minute to himself. Rin kisses him and leaves him with his thoughts.

His ears flex as someone crunches through the snow, and he turns to regard Haru, lips parted on words he doesn’t have. Haru’s tired eyes are understanding, and he comes over to lean against the fence with Sousuke. He pulls one of Makoto’s flannels tighter around himself and sighs in the quiet. “I’m glad you never knew him. Our father, I mean.”

Sousuke turns to study the unyielding lines of his profile. “He wasn’t worth knowing,” Haru says. “I hope your mother is a different story.”

“Thanks,” he mumbles. Acceptance passes between them, and Sousuke nods to himself. He walks toward his house but turns as a thought strikes him. “When’s your birthday?”

Haru blinks. “June 30th. I’m 23.”


Haru glares flatly and Sousuke’s laugh echoes across the yard.

“Okay, let’s run through it one more time. What’s the most popular item on the menu?”

“Lobster.”

“Right. What should you be doing if you’re not bussing tables?”

He scoffs. “Whatever I want.”

Nii gives Ikuya a reprimanding look, but it’s obvious that she’s fighting a grin. “You should be restocking napkins, refilling the ice machine, or polishing silverware.”

Ikuya makes a face and adjusts his stiff collar, resisting the urge to untuck his shirt. He stubbornly puts his hands in his apron pockets and glances around the stockroom with a sigh. “So this is what a real job is like,” he mumbles to himself. “Is this what you want to do forever?”

Nii is quick to shake her head. “Hell no.”

“Then what do you want to do?”

She glances down with a self-conscious shrug. “Something… I don’t know, bigger than all this. There’s still bad people out there in Iwatobi and it’s gonna be real hard to watch shit go down and not do anything about it. I’ve seen too many people get hurt.” Her jaw tightens. “I’ve got too hurt. So… I’ve been talkin’ to Sousuke. He thinks I could do really good at the police academy when I turn eighteen. We’ll see what happens.”

Ikuya raises his brows, impressed, then glances around the stockroom once more. “It seems quiet
Nii snorts as she ties her apron around her waist. “Just wait until the dinner rush; there’s been plenty of nights I’d rather be in a gunfight than dealing with middle-class women wanting to speak to the manager about how dry their wine is.”

Ikuya rakes his hair back nervously and Nii sobers up, joining him against the counter to nudge his hip. “Hey, you’ll be fine. Just look at what you’ve been through.”

His exhale trembles out. “Surviving a kidnapping doesn’t really help in these kinds of situations.”

Nii’s expression softens. “It does, though.”

He glances at her through his fringe. Nii’s breath is warm and comforting over his face, smelling like glacier-mint vape smoke. She’s trying to quit smoking entirely, and come to think of it, Ikuya hasn’t seen her drink any alcohol since Christmas some months ago. Her tired eyes stay half-lidded these days, a side effect of fighting sleep and the nightmares that come with it, but her smile is more genuine than ever before. She hasn’t worn makeup since they were rescued from the factory, no longer hiding her young, soft features under black lipstick and thick eyeliner. Ikuya was surprised to find out that she has freckles, dark ones that scatter under her eyes like a starburst.

Nii’s voice brings him out of his thoughts. “We’ve been through more than most people can even fuckin’ comprehend. So don’t take any shit, shrimp.”

He scoffs a laugh. “I’m not a shrimp, I’m almost taller than you now.” It’s true – he’s grown in more ways than one over these past few months.

Nii rolls her eyes with a grin. “You’ll always be a shrimp to Freebird.” She snorts. “Even if Freebird ain’t a gang anymore.” Nii breathes out in relief. “That’s nice to say,” she whispers to herself.

Ikuya’s voice fumbles and he pretends a blush isn’t heating his face. “Thank you, by the way.” Nii turns to arch a brow at him, her sleek, black hair gliding over her shoulder, and Ikuya’s gaze has to resist following the motion. “Uh. For helping me get this job, I mean.”

She smirks. “You’ll just have to owe me one, won’t you?” Nii gathers her notepad and pen, then tosses Ikuya his bussing tub. “All right, let’s do the damn thing.”

They step out into Seven Tears and their senses erupt with bustling conversations, the greasy steam from the kitchen, and the crowd filling the tables. They head up a spiral staircase to the second story, where a balcony overlooks the port as fishing boats come in for the night.

The balcony was reserved for Momotarou and Nitori’s rehearsal dinner, and the two of them are drinking, laughing, and kissing away their nerves for their wedding tomorrow. Rin looks exhausted from his duties as Nitori’s best man, but he can’t stop moving his left hand this way and that to see how his own engagement ring gleams in the evening light. It’s made of black tungsten, of course, but there’s a line of rubies glittering in the center. Sousuke’s ring is much more understated, black with a more industrial build for work, but he still looks dreamy about it in his own subtle way – at least until Gou turns his attention away by offering him crayons to color her kid’s menu with her.

Haru rolls his eyes from his seat in Makoto’s lap as Rin shoves his ring in his face for the dozenth time that night. Makoto chuckles, sitting with his back to the ocean, but he looks completely wrapped up in laughing at Haru’s expense. At the other side of the table, Nao is subtly taking photos on his
cell phone of Ikuya in his waiter uniform as Natsuya snickers with an arm slung around his shoulder.

Aki shakes her head at them but Seijuro grins, absently keeping a protective hand near her swollen belly, which is ready to burst as she rounds her third trimester. At the balcony, Rei swivels a glass of red wine as Nagisa and Kisumi bitch about work over pink martinis, and Asahi nods along to everything Kisumi tells him, watching how the wind moves through his hair.

Ikuya stares at all of them, overwhelmed in the best way. Nii smirks at him and he thinks to himself, how did I get this lucky?

After dinner, Rei and Nagisa say they have an announcement to make, but they cannot do it at the restaurant. That’s how the rehearsal party ends up walking a couple blocks down to a foreclosed lot, where an abandoned building looms behind a for sale sign. Haru squints at the red sold sticker over the sign. “Someone bought the swim club?”

Rei and Nagisa beam at each other and everyone stares at them in realization. Nagisa sweeps his arms in a grand gesture to the depleted building. “This is our announcement!”

The group flinches as some siding falls away, and Makoto clears his throat with a grimace. “Ah, congratulations?”

Rei waves his arms. “No, no, the swim club will not remain a swim club.” He takes Nagisa’s hand proudly. “We’ve decided to open Iwatobi’s first rehabilitation center.” He gives an excited smile. “The soup kitchen has been very good to Nagisa and I, but we’ve talked it over and we believe that we can touch more lives if we have a bigger place to do it. I’ve already spoken to some nurses at the hospital who are ready to volunteer on the medical side of treating addiction, but we’ve gathered you here tonight because we feel as though the facility will be more successful if we can hire employees who have been addicts.” He meets their gazes one by one. “Who have been in gangs. Who are real survivors and can give people real hope.” He shuffles his feet. “I do not know if any of you already had plans set to join the workforce, but… you all have jobs here, if you’d like them. There is no one else I would rather have helping make a difference in Iwatobi than all of you.”

The group stares in disbelief. Then Asahi lunges to tackle Rei in an embrace with a piercing wail and everyone else follows suit, leaving Haru standing alone with Makoto in the utmost shock. Tears spike his lashes and he meets Makoto’s smile with a breathless laugh. Makoto holds him and Haru rests his cheek against his heart, eyes closing as a hand cups the back of his head. Makoto kisses his forehead, murmuring, “You’ll save so many lives here. I’m already so proud of you.”

Haru gazes up at him, thinking, you saved my life first, and kisses him hard.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter artwork of Makoto and Haru by saleishadreams, Makoto and Kiko by starshi, and SouRin is by bakapandy. Thank you so much!

Chapter Explanations: Haru and Sousuke being half-brothers:

So this was a twist that a few people realized during the progression of the story; here's some of the clues they followed.
1. The first hint given takes place in Chapter 6: Seven Tears, when Makoto asks Haru why Sousuke makes him nervous. “Honestly? He looks like my dad. His hair was browner than mine and his eyes were lighter.”

2. In Chapter 10: Official Man, Delusions Grand, we learn about Sousuke’s birth mother and his brief time with his father. As for his father, smoke poured from his mouth every time he talked and it made Sousuke’s head hurt. He busied himself with taking another drag of his pipe instead of holding or even touching him but his mom still liked the guy despite that he didn’t like Sousuke – at least until something happened with another girl. Sousuke’s hands had been too small to catch his mom’s fat tears as she sobbed that the girl was nothing like her with those big blue eyes and smooth, pale skin, but what made them alike was that the girl had a baby that belonged to Sousuke’s dad too.

3. In that same chapter, we learn that an unnamed person from his father’s family (Mori) tried to reconcile with Sousuke. As for his father, one of his family members tried to reconcile with Sousuke a few years ago but he wasn’t having it – that void was filled a long time ago by the brother he’d found on the battlefield and the woman sitting across from him right now.

4. This is more like a personal easter egg, but Corro and Miho were the ones to notice the similarities between Sousuke and Haru first. In Chapter 2, Miho tells Haru that he looks like / reminds her of her son, and in another chapter, Corro tells Sousuke he looks like that same son.

5. This is the point where I got the most messages about the twist. In Chapter 19: We Want War: Part I, Freebird hides behind carousel horses before infiltrating Honeyblade. Sousuke's horse's name is a faded scrawl along its sash: Romulus. A few lines down, we find out Haru is hiding behind a horse named Remus. In Roman mythology, Romulus and Remus were brothers whose story tells the founding of Rome. Romulus kills Remus, kind of like how Sousuke thought he killed Haru in Chapter 1.

6. In Chapter 20: We Want War Part II, we get more concrete evidence that Sousuke is from Iwatobi and the outskirts, where Haru is from. Sousuke tenses under everyone’s stare. “I’m not from Iwatobi.”

Hakim’s brows crease. “You sure? You got the eyes.”

Nii tips her head at Sousuke, voice trailing curiously. “He means outskirt eyes. People born in the woods got certain traits like that.”

There are a few other symbolic parallels between Sousuke and Haru in the story, but those listed above are the main plot points I had going in their arc of learning they’re half-brothers! We will meet Sousuke's birth mother in the epilogue to follow this chapter, and we'll wrap up a few more arcs along the way. Thank you a million times over for the continued support.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Notes are at the end of the epilogue, but rest assured I'm already an emotional mess. : )

Shout out to fishticles for this gritty depiction of Haru that's so emotive and powerful thank you so, so much!

Thank you to bluewire13 for the help with the French used in this chapter!

Thank you saltyaf (archive of our own) | twitter for being the best beta reader ever!

Chapter song is, of course, I Walk The Line, covered by the ever-inspirational Halsey.

Last but not least, thank YOU, just - thank you from the bottom of my heart. Truly.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I keep a close watch on this heart of mine

I keep my eyes wide open all the time."

"I Walk the Line" Cover by Halsey

Three Years Later

Haru wakes under a soft touch, faint and hazy. He sighs, eyes opening to the amber glow of morning. Blackbirds call the sun over the horizon and he listens to their song, watching mist cling to the window, dripping down the glass in yellow-diamond flecks. Iwatobi is peaceful, taking its time to wake from a quiet night.

The sheets rustle and arms hug him from behind, a cheek tucking against his shoulder. Haru turns in Makoto’s hold to rub the pillow creases over his face, and he feels rough fingers trace his spine, unraveling him in relaxation. “Morning,” Makoto yawns, bringing Haru’s thigh over his hip to snuggle closer.

“Morning,” Haru whispers, nestling his cheek into the pillow and rolling his ankle to stretch his muscles languidly. “You must have slept well; you didn’t wake up once.”

Makoto perks a smile and nods. “It was a nice change, wasn’t it?” He usually does not sleep well – neither of them really do, given that they spend most hours of darkness restless with nightmares, but even though trauma is a lurking shadow that haunts both of them, having each other is the greatest comfort.

They take a few minutes to enjoy the quiet, sharing a few absent kisses until their eyes laze shut
again. Haru is nearly asleep when the bed lurches with weight and he gets smothered by itchy fur and dog breath.

“I hate you,” he wheezes, and Makoto chuckles as he coaxes the dog off Haru’s face. He thought it was Echo at first, since she’s too playful for Haru’s liking, but this Shepherd is massive, a hulking beast with chestnut fur and only three legs.

“Hey, Tango,” Makoto coos, letting the dog snuggle him, which Haru loathes because now there’s fur sheddings everywhere. Only in the back of his mind can he admit that he has a soft spot for the retired military dog. After doing two tours with the Special Forces and losing a front leg to an I.E.D., Tango deserves a home where he can leave sheddings wherever he pleases.

But the cat is a different fucking story, and she’s climbing up the bed to claw at Haru’s pajama pants. He resists the urge to throw her out the window and instead picks the Siamese up to give her to Makoto, who she never swats at like she does Haru. Instead she rolls over for a belly rub and purrs under Makoto’s fingers.

Kiki was another charity case like Tango. Haru and Makoto were grocery shopping one night and found a kitten hiding under their truck in the parking lot. She was drenched from the rain, trembling, crying, and completely alone in the world, so Haru already knew what was going to happen when Makoto turned those big green eyes on him.

From then on out, he and Kiki have had a love-hate relationship, meaning she loves to hate Haru and he loves Makoto, so they tolerate one another.

He sits up and pads toward the restroom. “I’m going to take a shower.” Haru glances back to watch Makoto stretch, then he chews his lip. “You need one too?”

Makoto yawns loudly, looking far too pure for what Haru’s trying to insinuate. He straps his prosthetic on happily. “No, thanks! I had one last night, so I should be f…” His breath falters when Haru drags his shirt off, gaze following the motion. “I’ll, um…”

Haru arches a sly brow over his shoulder as he shimmies off his pants and boxers, bending slowly to pull them off. Makoto flushes and Haru sighs on his way to the bathroom, calling, “I guess I’ll just take one by mys-mmph!”

Makoto tackles him into the shower and Haru’s triumphant laugh bounces off the tiles.

After their shower, Haru and Makoto hurry to dress for the day. Haru picks out which flannel Makoto should wear, as he does every morning, then dresses himself in black Converse and skinny jeans. He reaches for a shirt but pauses when he catches sight of Makoto’s fatigues, old and faded in the back of the closet. He pushes it aside to look at his denim vest hanging behind it, blood stained and torn from bullet holes. Unwearable, yet he still needs to see it sometimes. The vest was his mother’s and it’s one of the few relics left from his days as a drug dealer, so he runs a hand over the frayed denim with bittersweet nostalgia before putting on a fresh shirt.

Upon locking the house and stepping out the front door, Rin’s motorbike roars down the street before getting swallowed by the fog. The engine’s growl fades away and Haru turns to the house next door – Sousuke stands in the yard, eyes flat over his coffee mug, and he looks bone-tired from another night of arguing. Haru gives him a questioning look and Sousuke heaves a sigh, confirming his theory.
Makoto grimaces in sympathy as Sousuke drags his feet over to them. “You’re still fighting about the baby thing?”

“Don’t want to talk about it,” Sousuke breezes with mock-pleasantry. “Your damned brother-in-law and I talked about it until three in the morning.”

Makoto shifts, taking his weight off his prosthetic. “Just tell him how you really feel, Sousuke.” He ignores it when Sousuke’s eyes almost roll out of his head. “It’s okay to be scared of a big step like this.”

“Tachibana,” Sousuke snaps. “I will use your ass for target practice right here, right now if you try to talk to me about emotions on three hours of sleep and cold coffee.”

Haru takes Makoto’s hand. “I wouldn’t let him use your ass for target practice.” Makoto beams and squeezes back.

“And I’m not scared of anything,” Sousuke grumbles.

In exasperation, Makoto lifts his gaze to the sky and smirks. “Right.”

Poseidon stretches awake on the top of Sousuke’s squad car, then he eases down the windshield, leaving a trail of dusty paw prints that Sousuke scowls at. Makoto rubs the black cat’s ears and glances into the vehicle, only to find it empty. “Where’s Gou?”

Haru asks, “Is she nervous about today?”

Before Sousuke can answer either question, Gou jogs around a streetlight with Echo and Winnie trotting alongside her with their leashes tangled. Sousuke groans. “Gou, come on, you’re going to be late for school!”

She can’t hear him over the music in her ear buds, but she hurryies over with her long ponytail swishing. She bends with her hands on her knees to catch her breath. “Sorry,” she huffs. “I lost track of time, I was just trying to get a few miles in.”

Makoto’s brows crease in concern. “Should you be pushing yourself so hard when you’ve got a swim meet this afternoon?”

Gou scoffs and rakes her bangs back, face glistening with sweat. “That’s why I have to push myself today! It’s not just a swim meet; it’s the biggest meet of the season! I have the potential to get scouted and everything! Today is the biggest day of my life.”

Gou is thirteen now and more like Rin everyday, especially with her competitive spirit, which truly came to life when she gave up soccer for swimming. Sousuke ruffles her hair proudly. “You’ll do well. Now go jump in the shower really quick so we can get you to school.”

“Oh, can we get Starbucks on the way?! Please?”

Sousuke sighs in defeat. “Yeah, if you hurry up and –” Gou stumbles for the house with Echo and Winnie at her heels.

Haru shakes his head and smiles after her, then his chest tightens with conflict. “Maybe I should go
talk to Rin.”

Sousuke snorts into his coffee mug. “There’s not much you’ll be able to say to him.” He pauses. “But if you feel like it.” He shrugs and glances away.

Haru and Makoto get into his truck on the curb as Makoto calls, “We’ll see you at the meet this afternoon! Tell Gou we’re so excited for her!” Sousuke offers him up a dry salute before they head off.

Haru sits with his legs up on the seat, ankles crossed in Makoto’s lap as they always are when he’s driving. He absentmindedly plays with Haru’s shoelaces before lifting a brow. “You sure this is a good idea? Rin might be a little defensive.”

“That’s nothing new,” Haru snorts. “I can handle him.”

Makoto pulls up to Samezuka and Haru leans over to peck his lips, heart faltering at the touch of his mouth even after all these years. He can’t stop himself from framing Makoto’s face for a deeper, more savoring kiss, teasing his teeth against his lower lip. “God, I love you so much,” Makoto sighs.

Haru leans back and fixes Makoto’s collar, then offers him a secret smile. “Have a good day.”

For a flash, Makoto’s expression sinks with gravity, like he needs to say something dire, but then he smiles back. “You too, Haru-chan.”

“Don’t call me –”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” He smirks. “I love you.”

Haru shoots him a lack-luster glare as he hops out of the truck. “Love you,” he grumbles, and Makoto chuckles before driving off.

Haru steps into Samezuka, nodding at the custodian polishing the statues that line the hallway. It’s sparse at this early hour, save for the employees preparing the club’s restaurant for the lunch rush.

He wanders into the heart of Samezuka, where cleaning products sting the air and the dance floor gleams from being mopped. The DJ tests how tonight’s set will sound as Haru walks through the maze of platforms to find Rin at the red, marble bar, scrubbing it furiously. Haru sits down across from him, startling Rin before recognition dawns in his eyes. Haru gives him a look and Rin’s expression strains with frustration, then he gets back to wiping the bar down, ignoring the weight of Haru’s knowing stare.

“Yamazaki-senpai,” a waitress calls across the floor.

Rin looks up and walks over to answer the girl’s question about table numbering. She looks new and terrified, but Rin eases her worries with a patient smile. However, as soon as he’s back in front of Haru, he bristles. “What?”

Haru’s expression softens. “I just wanted to know if there was anything I can do, about…” Pointedly, he lifts his brows at the dog tags around Rin’s neck.

He deflates, raking his hair back. “Thanks, but we’re pretty fuckin’ hopeless.” He flings the rag away in blind frustration and Haru waits in patient silence as Rin ties his hair back. It’s longer
nowadays, hanging in a low ponytail between his shoulder blades. "I’m pissed," Rin says, "because Sousuke wants a baby, too.” He leans forward, boring into Haru’s eyes. “He wants one, Haru, and I don’t know that just because his whole face lights up when he holds Aki and Sei’s kids. He’s told me he wants kids; he’s said it without me even bringing it up in conversation and I can hear the ache in his voice.” He face sets in resolve.

“Then what’s the hold up?”

Rin looks down sadly. “He doesn’t think he’d be a good dad.” He clenches his fists, shaking his head earnestly. “But that’s bullshit, Sousuke would be the best dad! Fuck, I don’t know why he won’t just talk to me.” He turns his wedding ring, an anxious habit. “Sometimes I wonder if all this is because we had a courthouse ceremony instead of the wedding we really wanted.” He glances around the club. “But Samezuka was up for sale so cheap with all the gang violence that happened here. Buying it was the best move for us in the long run, but…” He sighs and gets back to scrubbing the bar.

Helping Rin buy Samezuka was a sort of wedding gift from Sousuke, though it took both of their money to buy the place. Sometimes, Haru can’t believe that Rin owns the club now. He’s no longer a rentboy, though Sousuke has spent years trying to convince city officials that prostitution should be legalized. Rin doesn’t even dance for money anymore; he teaches choreography to new dancers and shows them how to climb the poles without breaking their damn necks, but aside from that, Rin only gets back on stage for Sousuke, and that usually only happens in Samezuka’s private rooms. Haru knows this because he’s accidentally walked in on too many embarrassing situations when he and Makoto have drunkenly stumbled around the club trying to find somewhere dark and private to make out.

He refocuses. “I know you’ve waited three years for a family with Sousuke, and I get that it hurts you everyday, but… I think, if you want kids with him, you’ll have to wait until he’s ready.”

Rin sighs in acceptance. “Yeah, I know.” The morning humidity is stifling, so he unbuttons some of his shirt and Haru catches sight of the tattoo over Rin’s heart. It’s a smaller version of Sousuke’s desert eagle, the classic weapon he used in the gang war that brought him and Rin together.

Haru tries to turn Rin’s attention to a brighter subject. “Are you getting off early for Gou’s swim meet?”

He startles when Rin drops his face on the bar. “Don’t remind me of that,” he whines, digging through his hair in distress. He drags his head up, face red and stricken. “She’s going to get scouted this afternoon, Haru, you know she will. She’s the best on the team, even if she’s the youngest. She beats Ran every time they race!” Makoto’s twin siblings moved to Iwatobi with their mom about two years ago – after almost losing Sousuke, the Tachibanas decided it was best for their family to live close together.

Rin’s crying pulls Haru out of his thoughts. “She’s getting scouted in mere hours.”

“… isn’t that a good thing?”

Rin scoffs, bristling and offended. “No!” Haru blinks, making him wither. “I mean, yes, of course, but no!” Rin seize him by the arms. “If she gets scouted, that means she’s going to leave Iwatobi for some bougie-ass prep school with uniforms and parties and no brotherly supervision.” He points a finger into Haru’s chest. “This is a teen romance novel about knee-high stocking-cults and vampires just waiting to happen.”
Haru stares flatly. “Please stop reading Makoto’s YA books.”

“Bitch, I’m being serious!” Rin throws himself over the bar dramatically. “She doesn’t need me anymore.”

*God.* Haru rolls his eyes and sighs because his life with Rin is *still* nothing but lectures that don’t mean fuck. “Now, Rin –”

“She’ll just leave us here, all alone with our men and no babies. Literally nothing good is going to come out of this.”

Haru tips his head, considering. “You’ll be able to have kitchen romps again.”

Rin rolls his chin on his fist, mumbling. “Yeah, I miss those. That’ll be nice. I’d still rather have a baby, though.” He glances Haru over. “Speaking of which, have you ever thought about… you know, you and Mako.”

Haru stiffens. “Me and Mako…?”

“Having kids.”

He parts his lips in surprise, then Haru’s gaze falls to his shoes and he remembers Makoto’s fingers tangled between the laces on the ride to Samezuka. They’d never be able to sit in the truck like that with a car seat between them. He can barely handle their pets crawling into bed with them; imagining a child between them is a precious thought as a concept, but in reality? He wouldn’t be able to hold Makoto at night. That’s a luxury Haru nearly died for three years ago.

A chill wracks him and he quickly turns away from those dark thoughts. “We’ve gone through a lot to be together,” he summarizes. “I want to have him to myself for a little while longer.”

Rin gives an understanding hum. “You thought about marrying him?”

He startles a blush and Rin smirks, gliding his tongue ring across his teeth like a cat with the cream. *You have.*

“Honestly, fuck you.”

*Honestly, what gives? Why aren’t you two married yet?*

Haru shrugs, his voice genuine. “We’ve just been so busy over the last few years. So much has happened.”

*Good* things have happened,” Rin clarifies. “Yeah, it was a shit show those first few months we were figuring out how to be normal people, but you and Makoto are in a better place now. You’re financially secure and you’ve made a damn good life for the two of you.”

Haru ducks his head to breathlessly smile in relief. Rin grins and swats him with the bar rag. “How the shit have you two not given into the pressure of everyone else getting married?”

Haru rolls his eyes. “Not *everyone* is married. Now take me to work.” He hops off the stool and heads for the exit with Rin scrambling for his bike helmets under the bar, then hurries after him.
Haru grunts when Rin shoves a helmet into his stomach. “You’re changing the subject~”

“Am not,” Haru pouts, stubbornly keeping his gaze forward. He snaps, “You and Sousuke, Ai and Momotarou, Aki and Seijuro. That’s all – nobody else has gotten married.” Rin opens his mouth and Haru cuts him off. “Natsuya and Nao were already married. They don’t count.”

Rin chuckles. “Kisumi told me at gay book club that Asahi’s been looking at his hands a lot.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Trying to figure out his ring size.”

“Rin, Asahi doesn’t know there are different ring sizes. Kisumi should just propose to him.”

“Maybe you should just ask Mako – ow, you fuck, don’t hit me!”

The swim club had a drastic change during its remodel into a drug rehabilitation center. Just getting the building up to code after years of abandonment took an extensive amount of renovating, but Natsuya, who worked construction years ago, kept the project on budget and met every deadline. Rei let Nagisa do the interior designing while Freebird had a big part in deciding what activities and services should be included. The task took a lot of painful self-reflection, but they’ve been able to help hundreds of addicts in the process.

Instead of being demolished, the pools were cleaned and filled, which overwhelms Haru with happiness. Recovering addicts have a wide array of physical activities to choose from, such as swimming, painting (led by Nagisa and assisted by Sango, as his assistant), basketball, weight training, or beach yoga (led by Kisumi and Asahi). There are workshops and different forms of therapy such as group sessions or one-on-one counseling.

Haru works in orientation and observation; he helps addicts get settled into their rooms, if they need boarding at the rehab center, and he also spends late nights in the infirmary if someone needs to be watched over during a withdrawal. It’s a hard job, but he thinks he was made for it.

Haru steps down the administrative wing and peeks into the first doorway. A plaque sits proudly on the desk, reading, Aki Mikoshiba: Director of Women and Children’s Services. Honey eyes look over the computer monitor and crinkle at him in greeting. Haru’s gaze drifts to the chair across from her desk and he tenses.

Nadia feels his stare and turns around. They nod awkwardly before quickly looking away – it’s uncomfortable being sociable with someone who once tried to shoot you down, but at least they are trying.

A child sits in Nadia’s lap and a head of turbulent, fiery curls pops over her shoulder. Sayaka, Aki’s three-year-old daughter, beams at Haru and he waves his fingers, making her giggle.

Movement stirs from the corner of his eye and he turns to a pair of two-year-olds playing at a plastic kitchen set in the corner. They’re twins – a boy and girl with shockingly orange hair and mischievous grins as they hurdle toy fruits and vegetables at each other.

“I’ll be with you in a second, Haru,” Aki says delightfully, used to her kids’ chaos. “Now how many girls are you sending over, Nadia?”

“Just three. A seventeen-year-old runaway and two kids that come to Hotel Mère de Feu whenever
they aren’t picked up from the bus stop. It happens almost every day. Something needs to be done about their parents.” Honeyblade is not a gang anymore; their hotel is now a woman’s shelter and Nadia takes pride in what has become of her group.

Aki finishes up her report on the computer. “All right, I’ve sent an email to Commissioner Mikoshiba letting him know. He’ll make sure the right investigators get involved with the two kids and that the teenage girl is taken care of.”

Nadia smirks, tying off Sayaka’s braid. “You say that all professional like he ain’t your husband.”

Aki laughs and crosses her arms, lifting her chin. “It’s because he’s my husband that I’ll make sure it gets taken care of.” She’s more assertive now that she’s a mother, but Haru is sure that she will have a genuine heart forever.

Aki stands up to walk Nadia out, but it takes her a second to ease out of her chair so her body doesn’t strain with the weight of her pregnant belly. Nadia and Haru exchange one last, stiff nod before she departs, then Aki flops back into her chair with a huff. “I swear, I can’t even remember what it’s like not being pregnant.”

Thankfully, her and Seijuro’s fourth child isn’t coming with a twin, but Haru can only imagine the strain it’s put on her body. Sympathetically, he asks, “How’re you feeling?”

Aki flexes her swollen feet, then smirks tiredly. “I’m all right, but I’ve decided that Sei’s getting a vasectomy for his birthday.”

Haru chuckles in understanding. The twin boy gets up, lifting his arms and whining for Aki to pick him up. “Shouta,” she coos, cuddling the boy to her chest. The twin girl, Suki, starts crying out of the blue, wanting attention, but falls quiet as Sayaka sits down to entertain her younger sister with an iPad.

Aki sighs. “You remember Ookami’s daughter?”

Haru falters at the memory. “Namiko?”

“Yeah. She’s having a lot of trouble getting adopted out of the foster system, since she has so many health problems from being so malnourished when we got her out of the outskirts. She’s also never a couple’s first choice because her mental development is a little slower than average, but I know that love would help her improve. She’s a darling.” Aki ducks her head, overwhelmed. “Sorry, I was just looking at all my kids and thinking that I would take her myself if I could.”

She goes to say something else, but then Asahi strides into the office and beams in greeting. He slings off his backpack to flop down on the floor and let the kids crawl all over him in delight. He’s wearing a muscle shirt, a stolen pair of Kisumi’s yoga pants, and sliders, which is his standard attire for classes. Aki smiles fondly. “How did your exam go this morning, Asahi?”

He groans, dragging himself up to prop on his elbows as Suki chews his hair. “It was like, a hundred questions, but I think I did okay.” He sits up and cradles Sayaka, smothering her face with kisses and making her scream laughter. Asahi plops her on his shoulders with a sigh. “The test made me want a cigarette.”

Aki gives him a look of playful reprimanding. “You know good and well Kisumi Shigino won’t have you pick up smoking after a two-month clean streak.”
“Yeah, I know,” he grins. Asahi went back to college a year ago – at first, he said it was lonely and frustrating, given that none of his friends could be with him on the long, harrowing journey of academics, but their support, along with Kisumi’s, made a world of difference. Now that Ikuya’s eighteen, he’s started his courses at the local university, and Haru thinks having him on campus has helped Asahi feel much better.

Asahi perks up and says, “Y’all excited for nutmeg’s swim meet?”

Aki nods excitedly and they both turn to Haru, who suddenly feels uneasy about the situation – he hadn’t realized Gou would be leaving Iwatobi if she gets scouted until Rin said it. But either way, he’s determined to be happy for her because she’s worked hard for her achievements. “She’ll do great.”

“Without a doubt,” Aki says proudly.

“She ain’t gonna take no from any academy.” Asahi stiffens with a thought. “Nat and Nao are gonna be there, right?”

“Of course we will,” a voice calls from down the hall.

Asahi shudders. “That’s witchcraft. How can he hear me from that far away?”

Aki smirks. “Mom powers.”

Nao leans on the doorframe with his resting smile, a glint of amusement in his eye. The right side of his profile is to Haru. “I hear everything, Asahi, you should know that by now.”

Aki glances at her phone screen for the time. “You’re at work early, Nao.”

He tucks his hands into his scrub pockets. “There’s some homeless coming from the soup kitchen later this morning; Ai and I were just making sure everything is ready in the infirmary for their check-ups.”

“Aihaya didn’t come in early with you?”

Nao scoffs. “Of course not, that man’s one true love is his bed and I have no dream of ever breaking up that affair.” He turns to face Haru fully, one eye brighter with life than the other, but that’s only noticeable if you know the right one is glass. “How did your infusion go the other night, Haru?”

“I’m still kind of sluggish,” Haru admits. “But I’m okay.” He tries to schedule his infusions or transfusions on Friday evenings at Makoto’s insistence. That way, he’ll have Saturday off to watch over Haru in his miserable, nauseous state after getting iron or blood. That day includes an exceeding amount of pampering that is entirely unnecessary, but Makoto loves doing it and Haru melts under the treatment, so they both enjoy the arrangement.

Natsuya slides up to Nao and kisses him right where he stands, still holding his bike helmet and wearing his russet leather jacket. He leans back, lips flushed, eyes half-lidded with adoration. “Happy anniversary, little dove,” he whispers.

Nao smiles achingly, looking tired in the way that says he’s reliving everything they’ve endured to be where they are. “You too,” he murmurs, cupping Natsuya’s cheek for a brief kiss. Asahi covers
Sayaka and Suki’s eyes, making the girls giggle wildly as they fight against his hands.

Aki sits up straighter and Shouta lolls in her hold. “Oh my gosh, today *is* your anniversary, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Nao says. “We were married six years ago today.” Natsuya rests his chin on top of Nao’s head with a nostalgic sigh.

Haru says, “Are you going to celebrate after Gou’s swim meet?”

“Mmm...” Nao shrugs, lazing back against Natsuya’s chest. “Maybe, or we might just go home.” They live close to Natsuya’s mother in a neighborhood that was cleaned up in recent years, but still had cheap apartments. Neither of them are much for interior decorating, but their kitchen window has lilac curtains with a scenic view of the cliffs that once housed Rough Rabbit. Their home is clean and quiet, which is all that truly matters to them.

Natsuya’s eyes widen with boyish excitement at the prospect of getting Nao alone. “We have the apartment to ourselves now that Ikuya and Nii have their place on 6th Street.” He smirks mischievously. “It’s quite nice.” His hands play with the hem of Nao’s shirt; he’s cleverly learned how to work with his fingers being mismatched lengths, figuring out how to grab his phone differently, discovering new ways to hold pencils, or in this case, how to endearingly annoy Nao.

“Speaking of Nii, I was texting her this morning,” Asahi remembers.

Haru lifts his brows as a realization strikes him. “Today was the first day of her new job, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Asahi gives a big, conspiring grin. “And you’ll *never* guess who her mentor is~”

“What’s this button do?”

“Don’t touch –”

“But I can touch this one, right?”

“No –”

Nii flops back in her seat and crosses her arms with a huff. “Can’t stand no fun, can you, *Yamazaki-senpai*?”

He makes a face and she cackles. “Don’t call me that,” Sousuke mumbles. “It’s too weird; we’ve known each other for years.”

He’s parked the squad car under an overpass so that he can use the support beams to hide from traffic and (hopefully) catch speeders. He’d truly rather watch paint dry, but Nii doesn’t seem disappointed; she’s proud to be a cop, or at least relieved to finally be out of the Police Academy. She graduated at the top of her class and with her extensive insight of Iwatobi’s gangs, she became a respected cadet far quicker than Sousuke did when he first started out. He’s started to think of Nii as a little sister over the years, one that could kick his ass and has a countless number of facial piercings, but that familial sense has grown now that her entire career as an officer will be influenced by what he teaches her as a mentor.

She reaches into the backseat, careful not to wake Echo as she naps in the floorboard. “You mind if I
eat my lunch real quick?"

Sousuke waves affirmatively and takes a sip of coffee from his thermos. It’s bitter, cold, and syrupy – a fucking disgrace. He made it this morning and honestly, he’s out of practice. He used to make the best coffee, dark and soothing, but Rin’s made it ever since they got married. It just worked out like that; Rin’s a light sleeper by nature, always rising at dawn to gather his thoughts in the quiet of early morning. He made the coffee and the pot would be full and steaming by the time Sousuke dragged his ass out of bed, since sleep is a luxury he’s come to live for in these last couple of years of relative peace in Iwatobi. They’d sit at the kitchen table and talk about their schedules, Rin and Gou would fight over the bathroom mirror, and Sousuke forgot what lonely mornings ever felt like.

Now they’ve come back to haunt him, all because of his useless pride and even more useless fear. Since he and Rin are arguing so frequently, Rin doesn’t make coffee in the mornings anymore. Instead, he does what will get him out of the house (and away from Sousuke) quicker, which is usually taking off on his bike and going to Starbucks.

Nii glances at him as she pulls a plastic container out of her paper bag. “You look tired.”

“Thanks,” he grunts, taking another sip of coffee out of sheer spite. He fumes a sigh and rolls down the window to fling the liquid out of his thermos, accidentally spraying a Porsche’s windshield with coffee, and the driver’s curses echo down the highway. Sousuke pinches the bridge of his nose. Hard. “This is fine. I’m fine.”

Nii rolls her eyes in a friendly way of telling him to cut the bullshit. Sousuke sighs, head falling back against his seat in defeat. More gently than she should be capable of, Nii says, “Just tell him if you don’t want a baby right n—”

“I do want one,” Sousuke snaps, heart flaring. “I want one now and I want one with him, I just –”

Nii’s expression softens in understanding. “Maybe you could talk to your mom? Your real one, I mean. They say talking to a stranger sometimes helps and well… like, she’s still kind of new, if that makes sense?”


Nii sits cross-legged in her seat, adjusting her utility belt to get comfortable. She’s still getting used to how stiff the uniform can be, and her hair is pulled back in a tight bun that doesn’t really suit her, but her chest piece is still visible, which makes her look more like herself. “Ikuya grilled some chicken for me,” she says as she opens the plastic container in her lap. “Kinda as a first-day-of-work thing.”

Sousuke lifts his brows in surprise, causing her to grin. “He’s more thoughtful than I ever gave him credit for. He acts differently when we’re alone.” She gives a considering shrug. “I guess I do, too.”

He shoots her a look and Nii punches him in the arm, making him grunt a laugh. “I didn’t say anything!”

“Your eyes did,” Nii retorts. “I’ve told you a billion times, me and Ikuya aren’t together.”

“I’ve never asked about it,” Sousuke reminds her, offended. “It’s Rin that’s always getting tipsy when you come to Samezuka and begging you for details.” Everyone gets together at the club each Friday night and Rin and Kisumi never fail to whisper conspiringly about every glance Ikuya and Nii
She glances out the window with a frustrated sigh and the look in her eyes makes Sousuke start to apologize, but she cuts him off. “All right, you wanna know why I love Ikuya? Why our relationship is deeper than chummy physical shit? It’s because I was thirteen when Haru found me hiding in the old swim club. I had run away from my grandmother in the outskirts, got lost in the city and fell in love with heroin. I don’t think I’ll ever love anyone as much.”

Her gaze falls down her arms and the red, dotted scars that have yet to fade away. “Haru was seven years older than me and everyone else in Freebird was older by a long shot, too, but Haru was the only one I told about my age. I needed it to stay that way; I didn’t want anyone realizing I was so much younger because they’d think I was weaker than them. So I mentally wiped out my childhood and grew up too fast to be level with their playing field.”

She unlocks her phone screen, eyes darting over her wallpaper, which is she and Ikuya sharing earbuds on the subway. “What I’m getting at with this emotional fuckin’ dump is that Freebird is my family, and we’ve all killed for each other and we’ll be ready to do it again if the time ever comes, but I’ve never had friends my age. I was too busy running for my life or killing people for – for Miho.” She shudders whispering that name even after all these years. “Back in the gang war, when the Bloodhounds attacked us at Samezuka and me and Ikuya were trapped in those tunnels… he was just so… vulnerable. Scared out of his mind. I was like, why can’t he cover it up like I can? I was so mad that he wasn’t pretending to be someone else like I was.”

She smiles to herself, running her thumb over her phone screen, his face. “He’s shown me how to not be afraid of myself… or at least, he’s shown me how to own that shit. I get that everyone thinks it’s natural for us to be romantic since we’re so close, but then again, I kind of don’t understand it? Neither of us has the need to be anything other than what we are now.” She leans back in her seat with a grin. “Because we’re just kids, you know?”

Gou’s swim team consists of herself, Chigusa, another girl named Kuriko, and Ran as their captain. They’re set for a 200-meter medley race with a rival school, and Rin is beside himself as he paces the bleachers. “I need a drink,” he breathes, anxiously running his sweaty palms down his jeans.

Nagisa pats his arm comfortingly, but doesn’t waste energy trying to soothe Rin’s nerves; instead he leans back to enjoy the sunshine, wearing some Chanel sunglasses that nobody but Haru knows are internet knock-offs, which he found out after a night of embarrassing, drunken confessions at Samezuka. Rei’s wearing slate-black Ray Bans over his glasses, which Nagisa has assured are authentic and expensive enough to come with an insurance plan.

Asahi fans out his shirt. “It’s too hot for a drink, Rin.” He helps a desperate Kisumi try to push his hair back into an artful sweep, since it fell in the heat. Hayato discreetly snaps pictures of his frazzled brother and Ren shakes his head in disapproval while trying to hide a grin.

“You’ll be fine, Rin,” Haru promises for the eighth time in thirty minutes. The day moves slower under the pounding sun, which helps nobody in this case of nerves.

Makoto and his mother proudly watch Ran give her team an encouraging speech, then Hana checks her watch anxiously. “Where is Sousuke?”

“He and Nii are probably just running late,” Aki says, bouncing Suki on her knee as Shouta sits between her feet to devour a green-apple snow cone, which he spills down his shirt and Aki’s shoes.
She doesn’t even look down to see the mess; instead she just closes her eyes. “Maybe Rin’s right about those drinks.” Sayaka doesn’t look up from her game on Aki’s phone as she digs through the diaper bag to thrust some baby wipes in her mom’s face. Aki sighs and takes them, grumbling her thanks.

“Seijuro’s running late, too,” Momotarou says, lounging beside Ai as he glances at his cell phone. He’s grown taller over the years and Ai uses his husband’s shadow to block out the sun.

Nagisa clasps his fingers together adoringly as he watches Chigusa tuck her auburn hair into a swimming cap. “She was so nervous about today…”

“She will swim beautifully,” Rei says, chest puffing with pride. He and Nagisa welcomed Chigusa into their home as their adoptive daughter two years ago, and they have so much love in their eyes as they watch the girl adjust her cap.

Nii and Sousuke round the corner and clamor up the bleachers still in uniform, and Echo snuggles behind Makoto’s calves to hide from the sunshine. Nii sits thigh-to-thigh with Ikuya, offering him up a lazy smirk that he returns, sending Kisumi and Rin into conspiring whispers. Natsuya ruins Ikuya’s suaveness by throwing him into a headlock and Nao swats Natsuya with his swimming flyer, then gets back to fanning himself with it.

Kisumi and Asahi scoot down to give Sousuke room to sit beside Rin, which he awkwardly does. He and Rin nod politely as if they’re strangers instead of husbands who go through a pack of condoms a week just from make-up sex, which doesn’t seem to be making up anything, if the sudden tension in the air is anything to go by.

But arguments are left behind as the girls take their positions with their goggles on. The crowd falls into silence as Ran and the other backstroke swimmers drop into the water to hold themselves up on the ladder, waiting for the whistle to blow. Kuriko is next in line on the platform for breaststroke, then it’s Chigusa for butterfly, and Gou for –

Haru sits up straighter, breathing, “She’s doing freestyle?”

“I thought she was doing butterfly for today’s race,” Makoto mumbles.

Rin stares at his sister, eyes already reddening with tears. “She decided this morning that she wanted to switch with Kuriko. She said free felt… more like her.”

Haru’s throat swells with emotion as he stares down at her, his heart fit to burst with pride. Gou’s gaze is firm on the water, afraid but unwavering. She stares into her future with eyes wide open, then she clenches her fists and nods to herself.

The scream of the whistle echoes across the sky and Ran launches herself backwards into the water.

In the aftermath of the swim meet, Sousuke is drained from going through a spectrum of emotions, but it was worth getting to watch Gou’s hand slap the side of the pool and hearing her roar in victory. Iwatobi beat their rival school by a long-shot, and she scrambled out of the water to weep in Rin and Haru’s arms, then Sousuke’s and everyone else’s.

Gou was approached by several scouts and Rin was merciless on every single one of them, but she looked overwhelmed and thankful for her brother’s presence, since he knew what questions to ask
about the considerable schools. Ran was approached by scouts as well for her powerful backstroke, but she declined all offers, choosing to stay local and be with her family for as long as possible before going into the military when she turns eighteen.

Afterward, Sousuke drives out past the city limits and up the winding mountain roads to the cliffs. He parks at a log cabin and breathes in the cool smell of rain, taking in the stillness of the forest to gather his thoughts before he approaches the home.

He knocks on the door and Mori answers, hair slipping from her braid as she smears dirt off her face. “Oh,” she startles, recognition dawning in her eyes. “Sousuke, hi.” She sets her basket of wild roses on the porch railing and takes off her muddy gloves to embrace him, her body flushed warm from working in the garden. Mori leans back with a surprised grin. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

Sousuke rubs the back of his neck sheepishly – he doesn’t come out here very often. “Is my mom home?”

Mori looks excited for Mika. “Yeah, of course! She’s just making dinner, follow me.”

Sousuke ducks into the cabin, eyes taking a moment to adjust to his darker surroundings. The log interior does not offer much light, but the home is cozy, just tiny enough to make him feel safe, rather than suffocated. He leaves his muddy boots by the door and hangs his jacket over the blue-and-white checkered couch, blinking at the construction site that the living room has become. There is a wall torn down, and a stack of drywall is propped against the fireplace with dust scattered over the floor.

Mori chuckles at Sousuke’s baffled look. “Mika likes home projects.” She raises her brows. “Meaning she likes finding ideas on the internet for me to complete.”

“What were you trying to do?”

“She wanted me to knock down that wall so the place would have more of an open concept, since that’s what’s popular these days.” Mori gives him a haunted look. “Don’t follow trends, Sousuke. They get you in a whole universe of shit.”

He chuckles and they follow the alluring scent of food to the kitchen. His mother’s soft crooning welcomes him, a song with foreign lyrics that used to be Sousuke’s only memory of her. Mika’s back is to them as she absently sways to her song and washes vegetables in the sink. Her hair is a mess of curls pushed back by a bandana and she’s barefoot in a pair of cut-offs, legs curvy and short.

Mori steps into her from behind and smacks a kiss against Mika’s cheek, making her startle a giggle. Mori says, “You have a visitor.”

Mika turns around and gasps in delight, face lighting up with a smile. “Sousuke!” She quickly takes off her apron, wiping her damp hands on it before leaning all the way up on her toes to hug him. His embrace can be categorized as polite, while hers is fierce, but he’s learning how to accept her love. She deflates against him, breathing with such relief that his chest aches. “It’s so good to see you,” she sighs, beaming up at him.

He nods mannerly. “You too.”

Mika’s face scrunches in concern and she touches his cheek – Sousuke resists flinching away. “Your eyes are so tired,” she murmurs, her voice a honeyed drawl, slow with no harsh syllables. It should be comforting, but Sousuke’s nearly a lost cause at this point.
He shuffles his feet, ducking his head under their stares. He palms his right shoulder, which is pulsating from stress. “I, uh, just wanted to stop by and see if you had a minute to talk.” He looks to the stranded vegetables in the sink and grimaces in apology. “I should have called first, I didn’t mean to interrupt—”

“No, no!” Mika shakes her head earnestly. “No baby, I always got time for you.”

Sousuke’s heart warms at that, easing the tension out of his shoulders. Mori glances between them and makes her leave, but not before cupping the back of Mika’s neck to pull her into a reassuring kiss that settles her nerves, and Mika rubs her fingers over Mori’s side shave in thanks.

Mika takes Sousuke to the balcony off the side of the house, where the forest closes in from one side and the ocean churns at the other. She gives him a mug of sweet coffee with whipped cream and cinnamon sprinkling – Sousuke usually doesn’t like such sugary drinks, but he can tell that she made it with love and he appreciates the gesture. Mika sits next to him, sitting up straight and perking a smile. “So, what’s on your mind?”

Sousuke takes a thoughtful sip of his drink, then smears whipped cream off his mouth. He shrugs miserably. “I haven’t been sure who to talk to about this. There’s not much advice anyone can give me because I already know what the problem is.”

Mika shakes her head in confusion and Sousuke gives in. “Rin wants a baby,” he sighs. “And I really do too, but I’m…” His voice falls to a vulnerable whisper. “I’m scared shitless.”

She puts a hand on his right shoulder and he winces hard – she breathes a timid apology and moves her hand to his other shoulder, making his features unravel. His mother says, “It’s because you didn’t have a daddy, isn’t it? That’s why you’re scared.”

Sousuke feels torn open under her knowing stare, but he can only bow his head, confirming her assumption. “Oh, mon ange,” she sighs, rubbing up and down his back. “I’m so sorry.”

“Rin had an amazing father,” Sousuke says. “He has something to go off of.”

“But so do you,” Mika tells him firmly. “You’re an amazing man all on your own. And there’s no such thing as a perfect parent; just ones that try.”

Sousuke kneads his aching forehead. “I can’t fail at this. This is… the one thing I have to get right.” He shakes his head hopelessly. “But I don’t know how to do this right.”

“You do,” his mother insists. “Look at how much you’ve helped out with Rin’s sister and Makoto’s siblings. You’ve got the love, baby, you’ve got buckets of it.” He looks over at her and she smiles softly. “Nobody in the world is ever 100% ready for a kid. No matter how much experience anyone has, their mind goes blank when they have that baby in their arms.” Mika takes his hand to squeeze it earnestly. “But I know that you’re gonna be a wonderful father, and whoever you raise will end up saving the world just like you have.”

Overwhelmed, Sousuke says, “I didn’t save the world.”

Mika’s eyes dart over his face, taking in their mirrored features, and her smile wobbles. “You saved mine.”
Emotion swells in Sousuke’s throat and he wraps an arm around her to hug her close. “Okay,” he whispers to himself, closing his eyes with a deep breath. “Okay.”

Rin’s head jerks up, hand tightening around his knife as the doorknob turns. Sousuke steps into the house and Rin deflates, shaking his head to clear it before going back to chopping chicken. He wishes he could let go of his ingrained defensive responses when he’s startled, but some demons are just too damn hard to shake.

Echo and Winnie get up from their place at Rin’s feet to greet Sousuke and he bends to scratch their ears before taking off his jacket and shoes. Slowly, Rin turns to the clock on the wall, noting how many hours ago Sousuke should have been home. He parts his lips but denial chokes him, and he turns back to the food.

The silence between them is strained as Rin pretends to be fully absorbed in making dinner. He hears Sousuke dump his keys and wallet onto the counter, feeling his presence in the air, moving closer, and out of the corner of his eye, Rin sees him prop his hip on the island. Shortly, Rin asks, “You have a good day?”

“It was long,” Sousuke says tiredly. “I missed you.”

Rin silently curses his racing heart and turns away to stubbornly mix the chicken with sherry and cornstarch in a bowl. He heats some vegetable oil in a skillet on the stove, then stirs broccoli, zucchini, and garlic together as Sousuke murmurs, “How was your day, before the swim meet?”

“Fine,” Rin grits.

Sousuke glances into the living room, which is empty. In the evenings, Gou usually sits on the couch to watch television until Rin calls her and Sousuke into the kitchen for dinner. “Gou not here?”

Poseidon slinks across the counter and Rin shoos him off. “She’s out celebrating with the swim team and sleeping over with Chigusa.” Steam billows from the skillet and the gust of heat drains his strength; he rakes his damp hair back, face flushed hot. Rin dumps the mixed food into the skillet, motions rigid with stress, then pours in chicken broth and leaves the stir-fry to simmer until the vegetables are tender.

He feels the weight of Sousuke’s gaze on him. “You look exhausted,” Sousuke mumbles. “I could have just brought dinner home so you wouldn’t be on your feet any longer.”

Rin flexes his toes and an ache pulses through his heels. “It’s fine.” He glances at Sousuke, briefly meeting his gaze before looking down at the stove. By their own accord, Rin’s eyes magnetize to the wall clock. “Where have you been?” It comes out louder than he intended, sharper. Hostile. His back tightens. “The swim meet ended hours ago. You said you just had an errand to run.”

Sousuke brows crease into a defensive expression. “I went to visit my mother.”

Rin bristles. “You never visit your mother.”

Sousuke’s jaw hardens, then realization – hurt – dawns on his face. “You think I’m lying to you.”

“I never said that.”
“Your eyes did.” Rin turns away and Sousuke leans over, forcing his way into Rin’s field of vision. “Why would I lie about something like that?”

Because Sousuke could have more than this, that voice of doubt hisses in Rin’s head. He’s leaving you; he’ll leave you for someone not pressuring him into settling down and being safe behind a white-picket fence. He’ll leave you for being mean when you’re scared. He’ll leave you for someone he can fuck without throwing them into a panic attack –

Rin slaps his hands on the counter, grounding himself in his stinging palms, and exhales hard through his nose. Even as frustrated as Sousuke is, his body strains to move closer, but he knows not to offer physical comfort in times like these. Over the years, they’ve both learned what each other needs in emotional situations and when Rin is upset, closing in on him is the worst thing to do. But more than anything else, they’ve learned that marriage is hard, and kisses don’t make everything better like they used to.

So Rin takes the time to gather his thoughts and quietly says, “You don’t come home for lunch anymore. You’re always going out after work with Seijuro to the gun range.” Emotion thickens his voice as he turns to face him. “You sleep with your back to me now.”

“So do you,” Sousuke whispers, sounding just as hurt. “Ever since we started fighting about a baby...”

“Then forget it,” Rin snaps, eyes burning, heart twisting. “Forget the baby, I’ll never say anything about it again, I just need...” He clutches a fist against Sousuke’s heart, voice pitching with desperation. “I need to feel you again.”

Sousuke’s expression softens as he takes Rin’s hand, their rings clicking together. “You shouldn’t have to forget about having kids because I’m being a coward.”

“You’re not, Sousuke,” Rin lunges, squeezing his arms at the elbows. Sousuke aches for physical reassurance in times of doubt, and Rin pours all of himself into meeting that need, running his hands down Sousuke’s neck, touching the scar left behind from being shot in the throat. “You’re not being a coward. I’ve been a complete dick and way too pushy about it.” His hand moves of its own accord, pulling Sousuke’s collar down to see the glock tattooed over his heart. It’s a smaller version of the weapon Rin used the most in the gang war and the reminder makes every argument fall away.

Yet Sousuke still smiles sadly. “You’ve waited your whole life for a family, and three whole years waiting for me to get my shit together.” In exhaustion, he bows to rest their foreheads together, and it is the most intimate contact they’ve had in days. Sousuke’s breath is warm over Rin’s lips as he murmurs, “I’ve wanted this for a long time too. Ever since I met you. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it.”

Rin shakes his head in understanding. Sousuke says, “And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was going to visit my mom. It took me a little while to get home because I also needed to talk to Mori about adding on another room to our house.”

Rin cranes back. “Another room...?”

“Yeah. For the baby.”

He stills. “For the...” Rin falters, eyes widening with pleading hope, and Sousuke gives him a handsome grin. Rin backs away, hands over his mouth as his tears fall in disbelieving silence. He
bows into himself, wracking with sobs, and he feels Sousuke’s arms envelop him. He buries his face in his chest and hugs his arms around his neck, swaying their bodies together. Rin startles a laugh as Sousuke sweeps him up in an embrace, their mouths meeting in overwhelmed joy.

Haru and Makoto have a much more relaxed night. The house is quiet and their pets are surprisingly good, or at least, sleepy. The day took a toll on Makoto’s leg, so he and Haru will be going to physical therapy in the morning, but for now, Haru sits on the bed with Makoto’s stump in his lap as he massages it with medicated cooling cream. Makoto sags under the treatment, breathing out in relief. He’s wearing boxers and taking off his shirt wasn’t exactly necessary, but Haru’s only human. He has wants.

“That feels so nice,” Makoto sighs, folding an arm behind his head as his eyes lull shut. It’s an unspoken fact that he would never allow let anyone but Haru to touch him so vulnerably.

Instead of responding, he continues to rub the ache out of Makoto’s leg. Makoto’s brows twitch together and he reaches for his glasses on the nightstand to regard Haru. “You’ve been really quiet ever since the swim meet.”

“I’m always quiet.”

Makoto gently kneels his hip, teasing. “In a different way.”

Haru glances up, then back down. “It’s just – Gou, leaving…”

Makoto props up on his elbows, smiling in sympathetic understanding. “It’ll be different, but I’m sure she’ll be able to come back home often.”

“Yeah,” Haru mumbles, gently working out the tension in Makoto’s knee.

He blinks up when Makoto nudges him again. “This will be hard for her, too. We’ll visit her as much as we can.”

Haru unwinds under the reassurance, nodding in thanks. He continues rubbing the cream into Makoto’s skin, noting that his stump isn’t as feverish or swelled anymore. “Do you want the heating pad or the ice pack?”

“Ice pack, I think. I can get it –” He goes to sit up and reaches over the side of the bed to reach for his prosthetic, but Haru puts a gentle hand on his chest to stop him. Makoto sighs in defeat, forcing himself to let Haru take care of him.

Haru goes to the kitchen to watch the creamy residue off his hands, then he finds the gel ice pack in the freezer. He comes back to the bedroom and wraps the ice pack in a spare pillowcase they have for this specific reason, then tucks it under Makoto’s stump. “Thanks,” he grumbles, ticked that he couldn’t do it himself, but he’s not as hard on himself as he used to be.

Haru pecks his lips and they pull the blankets back to situate themselves for the night, after taking their medications with some warm tea. Haru scrolls through his phone while Makoto finishes up a novel, one hand holding the small paperback while the other one absentley plays with Haru’s hair. At some point, Tango hops on the bed and curls up at their feet, but Kiki and Poseidon are probably on a romantic, moonlit rendezvous of terrorizing the neighborhood alley cats.
Haru lives for nights like these, when it’s still and predictable. The best part is when Makoto gasps as a particularly surprising event occurs in his book, and Haru loves watching his face shape to lively emotions as his eyes dart across the pages.

Around eleven, they turn off the lamp and Makoto laughs when Haru pulls his back against his chest. “You’re so sweet in the dark,” he whispers with an audible smile. Makoto kisses Haru’s hands before locking their fingers and sighing in content. “This is my favorite part.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything.”

Haru smiles and nestles his cheek between Makoto’s shoulder blades. “Mine too.”

Haru almost falls asleep, but then Makoto stiffens in his arms and his voice ventures hesitantly. “Hey, Haruka?”

“Mmm?”

Makoto shifts like he’s turning to face him, then stops. “Are you… you’re happy, right?”

Haru’s eyes blink open and his palm runs up Makoto’s shoulder to turn him onto his back. He tries to read his expression in the weak light from the bathroom but Makoto glances away, busying himself by fumbling with his hearing aid. “Of course I am,” Haru promises, voice firm with resolve. “Are you?”

Makoto startles and Haru can practically feel the warmth of his blush. “Yes, yes, I’m – ! That’s not what I meant, yes, I’m happy with you. I’m at my most happiest with you.” He kisses him breathless just to prove that point. “I love you more than anything. I’m sorry, I just – I’ve been thinking is all.” Haru rests a hand over Makoto’s stomach, thumb rubbing as he patiently waits for him to gather his thoughts. “What I mean is, do you, um… do you think you could be even happier with me?”

Haru parts his lips. Makoto pulls him close, voice lost to a mess of nerves. “I mean, as I said, I’m always at my happiest with you and I’ve never felt like something is missing, but I still want more of you. I feel like… like, there’s a way we could be even closer, and love each other even more.”

“… you’re not asking me to have a threesome, are you?”

“Oh MY GOD, NO,” Makoto screams into a pillow, startling Tango right off the bed. “No, a thousand times no!” He sits up to groan into his hands and Haru turns the light on in concern. Makoto blushes miserably, looking embarrassed and upset with himself.

Haru tips his head, struggling for words of comfort as he reels. “I always want you, Makoto.”

He turns, brows raised over wide, hopeful eyes.

Haru pushes Makoto’s hair back fondly. “If there was ever a way for us to be closer, then of course I would say yes.”

Makoto’s breath comes quicker. “Y-You would?”

“Yes –” He cuts Haru off with a kiss, laughing against his mouth with such triumph that it makes his
Makoto rests his head on Haru’s shoulder with a deep breath. “Okay, then. I’ll… I’ll ask you soon.”

“… okay, then.” He turns the lamp off to nestle under the blankets once more, but this time, Makoto pulls his back against his chest to snuggle him close. Haru blinks in confusion, then shrugs to himself and falls asleep.

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Gou’s decision on an academy is based on crime statistics around the campus, tuition costs, and of course, which school has the most prestigious and respected athletic department. The school is a three-hour flight away, and her family showers her with as much love before she’s set to leave.

She has her going-away party a month after her decision, and Makoto’s odd, reverent behavior doesn’t let up, but he seems more like himself on the evening of the celebration, even if it takes place at the beach. Years of therapy and support group at the V.A. office helped him remember his love for the ocean, not that he’s going to take a swan dive into the water any time soon, but at least he and Haru can walk down the shoreline together. Makoto doesn’t even flinch when the waves lap at his feet; he stares out at the sea like he’s watching a long lost friend from afar, but he smiles when Haru takes his hand.

Night falls and Seijuro lights a bonfire to show his children how to make s’mores, which becomes a sticky mess, but Aki watches the scene with endearment. Hayato chases Gou down the beach to throw her into the water but ends up getting tackled by Chigusa, followed by Ren and Ran, then Gou jumps on her dogpile of friends. Seven Tears is just up the beach with a band playing on the balcony – Asahi sweeps Kisumi up to dance, barefoot in the sand and dipping him to let him laugh up at the stars.

Nao and Nii watch in amusement as Ikuya and Natsuya swear to fight to the death in a one-on-one volleyball match while Momotarou has a competition with his nieces and nephew to see who can build the tallest s’mores, making Nitori and Aki shake their heads in fond exasperation. Rei sneaks glances on his phone, checking work emails until he trips over the rope Echo and Tango were tugging, and Nagisa fights laughter as he helps his frazzled boyfriend back onto his feet.

Haru and Makoto wander down the beach, leaving the commotion of the party behind. The stars spill across the ocean and moonlight pours into the water, sea spray cool on Haru’s face. He stands to let the waves pull sand over his feet, then he laughs to himself.

Makoto lifts his brows and Haru shakes his head at the ocean. “In the gang war, I used to come to the beach and let my feet sink in the sand like this. I’d pretend the ocean would pull me out, away from Iwatobi.” He sways with the push and pull of the water. “I don’t have to think like that anymore. I want to stay here.” His gaze bores into Makoto. “With you.”

Makoto cups the side of his neck, over his hawk tattoo. “I want to stay with you, too,” he whispers, leaning into Haru, pulled into him like his heart is Makoto’s entire world, and he cannot fight its gravity. “I want to be with you forever.” He swallows, wavering. “I – I’d like to… to please, be able to ask you something, Haruka.”

He’s taken aback at his sudden gravity, but nods.

Makoto wobbles a smile, then blushes to the tip of his ears. He’s adorably flustered as he buries his face in his hands. “Oh my God, I’m so nervous right now.” Makoto mumbles to himself, “I think I
actually might get sick right now, I told myself I wouldn’t, but –” Haru frowns in concern, then Makoto takes the deepest breath he possibly can. “Okay, just – just close your eyes for me.”

Haru’s brought back to sitting with his father a lifetime ago, handing him a beer with shaking hands and always having the taste of fear in his mouth. “You too fuckin’ nervous. Dealer’s gotta be in control of everythin’ around him. You gotta be able to have a gun pointed at your head and not even blink. Eyes wide open all the time.”

That was advice worthy of being etched into a gold slate. Those words are all his father will ever be worth, because they kept Haru alive in the gang war – keep your eyes open, see everything, slaughter, kill or be killed.

But there are no dangers for Haru to look out for anymore.

He can close his eyes now, and so he does.

Somehow, his heart knows what’s about to happen. His blood sings with the realization, then Makoto says, “Okay, open them.”

Haru does and the shock almost knocks him off his feet.

Makoto is down on one knee, offering him a little box with a ring cushioned inside it. Haru’s nerves flare into raw energy and all at once, he cannot stop trembling. He cups his throat to make sure he’s still breathing, tries to remember how to swallow, but his senses meld together into blind, reeling emotion.

Makoto’s whole arm is shaking as he presents the ring, which dazzles in silver twinkles. “It’s, uh, coated in aluminum,” he stammers, voice rough and hollow. “From my dog tags. I wanted to find a way to give them to you, because – well, you’re – you were a soldier in your own war, and you deserve a pair. You deserve mine.”

Haru’s eyes water and Makoto blinks his own tears away. “Haruka Nanase,” he whispers, voice lost to emotion. “I’ve wished for you on every birthday candle since I was thirteen years old. When I finally got to meet you, I was so lost that I couldn’t even see you were the person I was made for. I was broken in every way possible and I honestly still am, but you’ve never tried to fix me because you’ve always loved me as I am. You showed me that I don’t have to keep a brave face. A mask.”

Haru’s chest hiccups on a sob and he pleadingly reaches for Makoto’s free hand because he’s never felt his soul pouring out of him through a stream of tears. “There is no one on the planet as courageous as you,” Makoto says, firm in his adoration for Haru if nothing else. “We’ve been through so much but I swear to God I would endure it a hundred lifetimes more, if only I got to wake up beside you. Every night I get to hold you is an honor I will cherish the rest of my life, if you’ll have me.” He laughs breathlessly. “Please, please will you marry me?”

All the love in his being, the very warmth of his blood, comes out in a single whisper: “Yes.”

Makoto freezes to the bone, then gasps the biggest smile and lunges up to squeeze Haru against his chest in a spinning embrace. Just as Haru kisses him, color explodes into the sky like rainbows tumbling from a star, and the reflection stains the ocean in pigments so bright that they are alive.

More fireworks spiral overhead and Haru looks around Makoto’s shoulder to see Asahi firing them off, gazing at the pair hopefully. Makoto nods excitedly and their friends cheer, but Rin and Sousuke
never look up from smiling at the baby in Rin’s arms. It’s Namiko.

Haru gazes at all the people he loves, then turns back to the one he loves the most and splays his fingers expectantly. Makoto slips the ring onto his finger and the sensation makes him feel complete in a way he never knew he needed.

Haru frames Makoto’s face for a kiss and as the last firework erupts in a heart-shaking blast, they close their eyes.

"You've got a way to keep me on your side
You give me cause for love that I can't hide
For you I know I'd even try to turn the tide
Because you're mine
I walk the line."

"I Walk The Line" Cover by Halsey
There is a particular song I imagined playing at these end credits (lol), and it's Goodnight Gotham by Rihanna. And thank you starshi for the chapter artwork!

I can scarcely believe we're here, y'all. Writing this story was a shining light during the hardest year+ in my life thus far, in which I had to make many difficult decisions that I constantly second-guessed. I was so nervous and frustrated, but writing made me feel
like, "This is something I can do. This is for me, this is separate from everything else going wrong, so it's good and familiar and mine."

Bringing readers emotion, understanding, and sensation was something I always hoped for, but I never thought it would happen on this scale because I never actually thought people would enjoy or even comprehend my view of the world. My inner-viewpoint is a part of myself I've never been able to truly share until writing. Having my perspective validated and resonated with has sincerely been such a great joy.

*Eyes Wide Open All the Time* was partially inspired by my own experiences that I do not often discuss explicitly, bluntly, or even out loud. I've always needed something to hide behind when it comes to discussing, or venting about, trauma - I needed a subtle curtain which was, in this case, writing fiction. I poured myself into the mold of characters that shared certain traits of mine, then I gave them a handful of secrets and said, "What would you do with *this*, if it had happened to you?"

These characters became reflections of myself, yet they shaped the story to who they were at the essence of themselves. When I first started plotting this story, I had a list of topics I felt in my heart that I needed to make statements about - hard situations that are often glamorized or ignored all together, such as drug abuse, PTSD, coming home after war, suicide, the state of the justice system, being an ex-addict, sex after abuse, estranged parents and adoptive parents, and loving a soldier or a drug dealer. I handed that list of topics off to these characters and this is what they did with it.

So yes, this was a very personal story intertwined with a sports anime, but I like how it turned out. I hope you did too.

I'd like to thank some people now: first and foremost, Allie, my beta reader. HONESTLY, you're the Briseis to my Patroclus, such a wonderful friend and so helpful. You're one of the best things to happen to this fic! Thank you for your tireless editing and dedicating so much of your time to looking over nearly HALF A MILLION of my words. You're the real MVP of EWOATT and Coral and Bone, and I will always be grateful. You can find her on [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org) and [Twitter](https)!

To the EWOATT fan artists, makers of fannixes, aesthetics, moodboards, role-players, and cosplayers - I would hug every single one of you if I ever got the chance. Your talent and creativity never fail to leave me speechless and tearing up. I love y'all!

Next, a shout out to my beautiful, beautiful mutuals on Tumblr and Twitter. You're all such a joy to talk to and such passionate people. It's so much fun screaming about *Free!* posters or movies or headcanons with y'all. Thank you for your endless support!

And thank YOU for reading! I really do hope you've enjoyed the ride.

I will be focusing my writing on completing my other fic, yet another *Free!* AU called *Coral and Bone* so you're welcome to check that out if you'd like. Thank you again, and again, and again.

Best wishes,

Macbetha
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!