Miniature Garden

by Clover_Zero

Summary

MANBAHAREMI

"Are you willing to do anything necessary to save the people you love?"

Yamanbagiri Kunihiro thinks of himself as an unlucky man who lives through his teenage years in pseudo-peace. Hidden from public view, he observes another world most people can't see, safely and quietly behind the line.

Bizarre events involving supernatural problems arise within his high school life, threatening the peace and safety of everyone he holds dear. Even though love is nothing but a curse for him, he is willing to cross the line of no return and unravel the truths about people around him, and ultimately, his own self.

His world is a small one - a miniature garden within the vast and boundless world, but inside it exists the ever-expanding untold stories, all intertwined in a pile of mistakes, regrets, and the never-ending passion.

"I will never be forgiven for my selfishness, but even so, let me forgive your sins."

This is a tale in purgatory of love and obsession.
[The long chapters are divided into shorter chapters. Updates once per two weeks.]
Chapter Summary

"What does it mean to love someone?"

Under the row of cherry trees and blooming flowers, a feeling was realized inside of his very being. A seed grew into a full-fledged flower, a feeling of love and affection towards someone that doesn't even know him.

Even as his friend loves the same person he does, he continues to hold the said person dearly and watches from afar, unable to let it go.

"I want to be with you."

A wish was born from these pure feelings - but still, his past and fear never let him go. He can't find peace, even in his newborn joy of finding love.

These feelings that can never be granted, that he has always kept concealed deep in the depths of his heart, now begin to arise and warp in a single accident.

"Can you give up on your love for your friend, who loves the same person as you do?"

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Touken Ranbu (c) DMMゲーマーズ and Nitroplus.
Warning: Bad English. Sorry for grammars and other mistakes.
Beta-read by Cyanblue475. Thank you so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Email (Sent May 24th 7:00 AM JST)

To: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: New case, new problems

Hello. Good day. Is it morning, afternoon, or evening there? It's morning here. I'm still amazed by how many situations you can use 'good day' on. It's not really a good day for me, though. How about you?

When I let my guard down, problems after problems come and hit me. I know this all along, and yet, I…

…Yes, as you can guess, I encountered another case. Another trouble. It is concerning my classmate,
Kashuu Kiyomitsu. He is my classmate in 2nd year of high school.

He is widely known for his girlish appearance (not to mention his long hair) and his closeness with girls. He is really popular with girls, but he has never dated any of them, as far as I know. He is just like another best friend for the girls, someone they can freely talk to about relationships, cosmetics, and so on. However, the fact that he is close with girls, even with the prettiest girls, makes most of male students at school hate him. They're overly jealous. They can hardly accept the fact that a pretty boy like Kashuu is popular with girls.

They will joke around that Kashuu is actually a girl himself, that he is a pathetic guy who can't date a girl, that he is not a heterosexual, that he is a crossdresser…there are all kinds of rumors behind his back. I don't want to know whether Kashuu knows it or not. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss. Actually, as far as I see, Kashuu isn't a bullied victim. He has rumors, the end of story (and every eccentric, almost out of place students have those weird rumors, right?).

Don't ask what about me. Please, just don't.

Despite the hate from other males, Kashuu is still fairly cheerful. His life is happy as ever, as far as I can see. He has male friends too. The closest one is Yamatonokami Yasusada, another pretty boy (I'm sorry. I don't have any grudge to you, I'm just stating what I think in the most honest way possible). I heard that they've been friends since childhood. No wonder they're really close. Like, really, really, close. If I see Kashuu, there should be Yasusada. If I see Yasusada, there should be Kashuu. Although they're also known to have routine fights.

It seems that the fights are all small, though. They make up soon after.

Or maybe they don't even apologize to each other. I do it often with my brothers. Now, I realize how bad I am as a younger brother…

Anyway, I rarely talk to Kashuu. We're in different worlds. Kashuu who is always surrounded by people, and me - Yamanbagiri who seems always alone, if Yoshiyuki doesn't drag me somewhere, or when Hasebe asks me something.

Not that I mind. To be honest, I don't care about Kashuu's life. He doesn't care about the life of a mere bystander, either. Our life doesn't really cross outside school.

We're strangers to each other.

Kashuu Kiyomitsu is just another normal boy with an eccentric appearance and way of talking.

At least, so I thought.

On that particular day, everything changed. The 23rd of May. Yes, it was yesterday.

I went home late at night because of Yoshiyuki. He forced me to play a game with him at his house. I won 3 rounds and he asked me to replay, again and again, to change the result. However, he didn't win. In the end, I won all 20 rounds. He screamed about how much he hated to lose, but he enjoyed the game, nonetheless. I rode my bike on the way home, and Yoshiyuki accompanied me with his own bike. It was a rare occasion. Despite his childlike looks and personality, he is quite the gentleman. Since he was the one responsible to make me go home late, he accompanied me. How reliable.

(Or maybe that was because my brother, Horikawa, asked him to do so on the phone. Perhaps my brother forced him to. I don't know and I don't mind.)
Halfway through the journey, the two of us saw it.

We saw Kashuu Kiyomitsu.

Moonlit on his back, red eyes blazing like fire, he pinned a young woman to the tree. With his sharp fangs, he tore the young woman's skin. He bit on her neck and drank the blood that flowed out.

Just like…a vampire. No, I think, that time, he was certainly a vampire.

(It was really a mistake to gave in to Yoshiyuki's request…)

What did we do after that? We ran away as fast as possible, of course.

I have a bad feeling. Something tells me that I'm going to get dragged down deep into somewhere dangerous because of this accident…but still, I want to help Kashuu in any way I can. Maybe he has just became a blood-sucking creature and I still can save him. I can still turn him into a normal human. Yeah, I hope so. I don't want to see another innocent human fall into the world of oddities, after all.

If you're curious, maybe I'll send you reports. It helps me to sort out stuffs, too.

Well then, see you soon. I hope this case won't be too long and dangerous. Wish me luck.

>>Send

Chapter End Notes

*Chapter 1 is divided into 8 parts/short chapters because it bothers me to cramp it in 1 chapter. The format is " AO3 chapter count: actual chapter-title-part ". This rule may apply to other chapters. This rule apply to all chapters.*
"Kiyomitsu?" Hasebe doesn't remove his concentration from the paper in front of him, but his eyes look puzzled. "What about him?"

"Umm…" I hesitate, "I'm just…curious."

"I see. It's rare for you to be interested in someone, Yamanbagiri."

"Ah. Is it that rare?"

"It is rare," Ichigo-senpai speaks up, "Really rare, even. Yamanbagiri-san who doesn't seem to be interested in anything else but computer-related things is asking about someone is obviously rare."

Hasebe chuckles, following my rather disappointed comment;

"Even you, Hitofuri-senpai…?"

"Sorry, sorry," Ichigo-senpai waves it off. "Also, just call me Ichigo-senpai. I thought I asked you to do so before."

"But-
"

"No buts."

I shut my mouth. What a terrifying power of an upperclassman.

I call him with his given name at heart, but with his last name in reality. I'm embarrassed, you know. But well, if he really wants me to call him with his given name…there's no harm.

Why am I so weak in front of him nowadays?

"….Alright. Ichigo-senpai."

Why did I decide to give up today?

Ichigo-senpai smiles, "Easy, isn't it?"

He is Ichigo Hitofuri.

A third year and a part of the student council. He is the secretary. He is a top student, with almost perfect grades. Popular with teachers, boys, and girls because of his good-looking face and his kind personality. They say that his smile can make even a big iceberg melt (and to be honest, even I surrender to that smile). He is a really kind human being, good at taking care of other people. He is also a determined, hard-headed person. He doesn't budge once he has made up his mind.

I don't know how and why, but he found me, along with Hasebe, and pushed the two of us to become the head of the disciplinary committee (also known as public morals, but I like the word discipline better here). Hasebe as the leader and I as the vice-leader. To be honest, I thought the
school would end with a bang the moment I stepped as the vice-leader.

He also pushed Yoshiyuki to become the class representative of my class. Yoshiyuki with his normal grades. Not a delinquent, not a problem child, just your everyday high school student that is lazy, cheerful, and a hardcore gamer. I can hardly imagine how he would manage the class. Surprisingly, he does it well. He looks like a natural-born leader at good times.

And surprisingly again, I’ve managed to fit my role as the vice-leader of disciplinary committee, as well.

Is it Ichigo-senpai's talent to find hidden powers inside someone? How terrifying.

On another note, I actually befriended Ichigo-senpai since I was a first year. Not really friends, I think, but we know each other personally because of a certain case. But, ah, let's save the story for another time.

"Ah, Yamanbagiri-san. Take off your hood."

I immediately back away with my chair, "Why should I? It's after school, so it should be fine." I'm pretty sensitive when it comes to my hood.

"Yes, but...your face is almost covered," Ichigo-senpai replies, "Come on. Let me see your face."

"No." Why does he want to see my face that bad, anyway? Sure, the hood gets in the way, but my face still exists in place. You can still see my eyes, my nose, and my mouth.

"Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai stands and stretches out his hand to me. I flinch, surprised for a bit, but I don't resist when his hand manages to pull down my hood. I can only sigh and flinch again when his fingers touch my bangs, his face is really close to mine, "Your bangs are long, Yamanbagiri-san."

I guess that means my bangs are in the way, too.

"I'm not going to cut it."

Ichigo-senpai chuckles as he sits back, "I know. This school doesn't have a rule for males' hair. As long as it doesn't bother you. Besides, I think you look better with these bangs."

"I look more emo, you mean?"

"Not that...you look like yourself, that's all."

"I'm confused. I am myself, so I look like myself, right?"

"Ah, sorry. I'm troubled to choose the words..."

Hasebe looks uncomfortable when he is sitting in the middle, working in silence as I and Ichigo-senpai talk. He clears his throat, "So...what do you want to know about Kiyomitsu?"

Ah, he is angry. I'm too scared to even look at him. I take a peek and see that he is still looking at the paper with all seriousness.

He is Heshikiri Hasebe.

A second year just like me. Someone with an air of a leader for disciplinary committee, awfully serious, rule-abiding, and popular with teachers (not so much with other classmates). A rare breed in
modern days. We've been classmates since first year of high school, actually. The so-called fate has made us to be classmates once again, even closer. Don't think of anything just yet. Pathetic, call me so, but other than Yoshiyuki, my only close friend is Hasebe. Not a best friend yet, I think, but we're close enough to share our private troubles.

The fact that Hasebe calls me with my given name now is the proof that we're pretty close.

Uh, what, why are you asking me about Ichigo-senpai? He is an upperclassman, that's all. End of story. But…well…if Ichigo-senpai considers me as a friend, I'll consider him as a friend, too. That is enough. What? Ah…are you asking…what if Ichigo-senpai considers me as something more? What more? Does it even exist? If you mean he has a crush on me, there's just no way. I'm sure he is straight, yes, unlike me.

Anyways, both I and Hasebe are lone wolves, most of the time, and so, we naturally feel attracted to each other…at first, though, it was just that we have no other choice but to hang around each other, especially in group works, but we ended up having a real friendship.

"What, huh…there's nothing specific, really. It just that…his given name is weird."

I'm half-lying here.

"His given name is Kashuu, right? Weird, indeed, but I think yours is weirder."

"I can't deny that my given name is absurd. Mountain witch slasher…" I sigh, "Yours is weird too, Heshikiri."

"Why do you call me Heshikiri now…?" Hasebe finally looks at me. "I'd prefer you to call me Hasebe. Heshikiri sounds weird."

"I know. I personally think your name is good, though, not only that both Heshikiri and Hasebe sound like given name and last name at the same time," I continue to write, "Also, pressure slash sounds cooler, doesn't it?"

Hasebe knows that I'm just joking with him, because I know his true reason for not liking his own name. I don't want to dig his old wound. I'm not that cruel - even if I'm really cruel at times - at least, I won't dig his old wound. I won't ever mention it in front of his face.

"I humbly thank you…" Hasebe takes a breath, "Yamanba."

My eyebrows twitch as I look at Hasebe, "Did you just - ?"

"On another note, Hitofuri-senpai, your name is really meaningful," Hasebe interrupts me. It is clear that he doesn't want me to continue.

I know he called me Yamanba. Mountain witch. A monster, looked like an old lady that lived in the mountains and prey on humans. Basically, Hasebe has just insulted me. A joke, I know, so I let it slide.

Just for today. I'm being generous here, Hasebe.

Mikazuki, I can totally hear you laughing elegantly to my pain. Please stop - not you too, Kogitsunemaru…! Shh, go away for now.
"You broke the fourth wall, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says, "Is it alright?"

That one is intended, don't worry. Everything is alright - no it isn't.

"Really? Thank you. Also, just call me Ichigo-senpai."

I think these lines have become his catchphrase. When he creates a profile or something, he has to write these down. His own catchphrase. Like a wikia page…his existing one is about his angst with fire, huh…wait, what am I thinking? What about fire and its connection with Ichigo-senpai? Does he even have a wikia page? If so, how?

…Whatever, let's drown it deep down the sea. I don't want to think too much.

"Alright, Hitofuri-senpai," Hasebe never gives in, I'm impressed, "If I'm not wrong, Hitofuri means one blade and Ichigo means once in a lifetime, isn't it?"

"Correct, that's how my name is written."

"Really meaningful, indeed," I say, "But when the two is combined…Ichigo-senpai's name can mean the first and the last, I think."

I think I've read it somewhere, that's why I know…I wonder where?

"Your interpretation is cool," Hasebe approves, "That sounds like a line in romantic novels."

"Ahaha, but it sounds pretty grim," Ichigo-senpai replies, "Once in a lifetime sounds more romantic, I like it better."

My eyes instantly lock with Hasebe's. Fiber optics inside our eyes send light signals to each other (we're just talking through our eyes, really). Our thoughts are one and the same, but I decide to speak up first, "Ichigo-senpai, did you just brag about your good name? That actually hurts."

"Huh…?" Ichigo-senpai blinks.

Hasebe says next, "Your name is good, meaningful, unlike our absurd names. To think that even the kind Hitofuri-senpai can hurt his underclassmen' feelings…"

"Eh? Eeeh????" Ichigo-senpai looks confused. Hasebe and I chuckle. "I-I didn't mean it that way! I'm sorry!"

I wave it off, "We're just joking, Ichigo-senpai."

Ichigo-senpai sighs in relief.

"Half-joking. We meant some words," Hasebe corrects me. "Right?"

Ichigo-senpai turns his head to face me with wide eyes, as if asking me to deny Hasebe's words. Too bad…I'm sorry, Ichigo-senpai, I'm going along with Hasebe. "Hasebe, that should stay as a secret. Poor Ichigo-senpai."

Ichigo-senpai slams his head to the desk. "Why are you two conspiring to tease your upperclassmen…?"

"Just because," I reply. Conspiring is such a nice word to use here. "By the way, Ichigo-senpai, do you know Kashuu Kiyomitsu? Your face tells me that you do."
Ichigo-senpai regains his composure and smiles as if nothing has happened, "Yes, I do. He has red eyes, his brown hair is usually tied, and he usually wears nail polish. He is pretty popular, actually."

"Do you hear rumors about him?"

"Why do you ask that, Hasebe…?" I look at Hasebe in disbelief. I mean, it’s as if he wants to gossip about his classmate. I don’t think he is that kind of person.

"I'm just curious," he shrugs.

"Let’s see…he is always surrounded with girls, almost as if he has a harem…he is really close with girls…ah, do you want to hear the negative ones?"

"Wait, I think I know - that he is actually a girl and stuff?"

"That one exists, too," Ichigo-senpai confirms me, "I'm sure you two know about the rumors concerning his appearance and sexuality, being his classmates."

"I only have a gist, but let's say so, okay," Hasebe nods.

"Here's a personal one. He was abandoned by his parents when he was a child. No, I heard that his mother died and thus, his father abandoned him, leaving him alone - I don't know where. His current mother is his foster mother."

"...That's too deep and personal to be a rumor with no truth," I say, "It's terrifying if that’s just a rumor."

Hasebe looks unfazed, but his face is rather tense. "If it isn’t a rumor but the truth, anyone who made the rumor must have dug deep inside his history."

"Surely, that someone hates him so much - to waste their time on investigating and spreading rumors," Ichigo-senpai adds, "I'm sure his other rumors are made and spread by his haters, too. Sometimes I wonder what’s going on with their heads…to do such thing…"

"Well, that's obvious. Hate is terrifying. It makes humans act inhumanly, with no reason or logic whatsoever."

"Anyway…let's put that topic aside, it's bad to talk about people behind their backs," Hasebe changes immediately into his (usual) serious mode. Hey, you’re the one who wanted to know about rumors! "About the new rules, what should we really add? What rules are needed for now?"

Getting back into business, I see.

Actually, yes, Hasebe and I are supposedly discussing about school rules. We need to spread discipline to the other students. Hasebe said that the school rules as they are now aren’t effective and the punishments are too light. When you think about it, what he said is correct. School rules seem like meaningless texts with no purpose, just a mere decoration in the corner of classrooms. No one actually really abide it, other than Hasebe and the likes of him. I don't really abide it, either. Wearing hoodies during class is actually forbidden, but not that I care. Not even with my position as a vice-leader of disciplinary committee.

(Please don't follow my example.)

And so, we stayed after school and are now discussing about what we should do with the school rules.
Ichigo-senpai, as the secretary of the student council, has to write a report about our discussion - just the results, actually, so that the president of student council can decline or accept the results and talk about it with the principal later. But as a responsible and kind upperclassman, Ichigo-senpai decided to accompany and help the two of us. He gave his opinion that the school rules need to change, or new rules should be made, which Hasebe and I accepted. The discussion was going smoothly before I suddenly asked about Kashuu.

I'm the one who ruined the discussion, huh…

What? The papers I and Hasebe are actually working on? They're reports, too. We write down the flow of our discussion, just in case we forget something. But well, I don't actually write a report, since Hasebe is the one who does it. I just write random things in the paper.

I don't know why Hasebe is still writing something even when the three of us talk about something very different from the real business.

Does he even write that something? It might be just scribbles…

"First, we should know the problems - in this case, problematic acts - that are happening around the students, so that we can add rules to prevent such acts from happening again," I reply.

"What are these problematic acts, for example?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

"Let's be honest, there are plenty of students that are smoking at school during the day. That's one of the major problems - but the school - teachers - haven't done anything, despite the rules."

Ichigo-senpai nods as Hasebe looks like he is thinking hard.

"In other words, we have to go deeper with the students and find out what's wrong," Hasebe says, "How to solve the problems are what we need. Sounds good."

"Although it may take a long time, I think that's what we can do to make effective rules that actually prevent something bad from happening. The punishments have to be severe, too." So I say, but I know it can't prevent everything. Bad students will still break the rules, despite the harsher punishments.

Also, if the something bad is supernatural-related, no rules can help. The world of supernatural - oddities - follows no rules whatsoever.

"I agree completely," Ichigo-senpai says as he writes in the book, "So, what now?"

"With this, I think our first discussion is over," Hasebe exclaims as he puts his belongings in the bag, "We'll have to investigate ourselves."

"We have to inform the other disciplinary committee members, then," I sigh. What I didn't add is; how troublesome.

"I'll inform them," Hasebe replies, much to my relief. I think he realizes how much I hate it to inform the other members. Or perhaps it is just his sense of responsibility because he is the leader. Either way, it benefits me.

"Well, then, let's go home," I say, "That ended earlier than I expected…"

"Isn't that good," Ichigo-senpai chuckles, "Going home early is bliss."
"Who doesn't feel happy to go home early?" Hasebe says.

The three of us slowly stand up and walk to the door.

"I'm actually surprised, to think that even Hasebe likes to go home early…"

"Like I said, who doesn't," Hasebe repeats with a hiss as he locks the door, "What do you think of me, anyway?"

"Hmm…a robot? Android?"

Hasebe's face suddenly snaps into something scary.

"I'm joking," I wave him off, "You're definitely a human, don't worry."

Ichigo-senpai tilts his head, "Even for a joke, that is cruel, Yamanbagiri-san."

That's pretty painful.

So, I guess I'm really cruel at times.

"Don't worry about it, Yamanbagiri, your personality is like that. You bother people at times," Hasebe says in all honesty, "As your friend, I should be prepared to face you when you're in that state…"

"What state, exactly?"

"Who knows."

I look at Ichigo-senpai, "…Did he just insult me, Ichigo-senpai?"

He chuckles, "Don't worry, I don't think so."

"No, I'm pretty sure he was insulting you…" I hear Kogitsunemaru whispers. I silently nod in agreement. Two jokes in a day, I wonder what happened to Hasebe…

I hiss at Hasebe and Ichigo-senpai, "I'm being generous today, so I'll let this slip away." I can see Hasebe is smirking and Ichigo-senpai smiles even wider. I'm about to snap when I remember something and immediately ask, "Ah, Ichigo-senpai, is the class representatives' meeting over yet?"

The three of us walk down the long corridor of the third floor.

…Yes, yes, five. Including my two invisible stalkers. Yes, you two.

"Hmm, I don't really know…it should be over in a few minutes, though," Ichigo-senpai replies, "Ah. Are you going home with Yoshiyuki-san today?"

"Yeah, we're going to the convenience store. He is going to treat me."

Ichigo-senpai's face becomes somewhat sad, "I see. Too bad, I want to ask you to go home together…"

Is it wrong to feel happy hearing him? It is wrong, isn't it?! Or am I just feeling too bad for him?!

"I'm sorry, Ichigo-senpai. Next time, then?"
He smiles, "That's alright."

I can feel a dark aura from Hasebe…what's happening? Walking in the middle, I feel uneasy. The dark aura Hasebe emits is directed to Ichigo-senpai, after all. I don't know why Hasebe emits that aura. I don't think I want to know, but I somehow realize that it's partly my fault. What should I do at times like this? Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, you two hear me?

"Start a conversation?"

About what, Mikazuki?

"Ahahaha, I don't know. Anything can do, I think."

You're not helping…

"I don't know what to do, either, Yamanbagiri. I'm sorry."

Well…it's alright, Kogitsunemaru. Wait - Mikazuki?!

"What's wrong, Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe blinks, he stops walking and looks at me.

"Um…no, my back feel heavy and painful all of sudden for no reason," I say. There is no way I can say that an invisible being has just attacked my back. Suddenly hugging me from behind with all his force, to be precise. I can hear that Mikazuki is being pouty and Kogitsunemaru chuckles at the sidelines. These two children trapped in old men bodies, seriously…

Surprisingly, Kogitsunemaru slides my remarks away. He is still laughing cheerily.

"Are you alright?" Hasebe asks in worry.

I forced my back to straighten up, "I'm alright." I try to walk, automatically dragging Mikazuki along. Huh, he is surprisingly…heavy. Why are you so heavy, Mikazuki…?! What have you eaten all this time?! I can hardly move. He grabs my waist tightly. Hasebe and Ichigo are staring at me with weird expressions on their face…aaahhh….

Let me go already, Mikazuki…!

"No way," He pouts softly, "Not until you act fair with your two fiancés!"

Fi-Fiancés…?

"I'm talking about myself and Kogitsunemaru, of course. We are your fiancés, aren't we?"

Ah…please don't say it!

Kogitsunemaru suddenly appears, "But we're going to marry you sooner or later. What is wrong with that fact?"

My knees immediately fall to the cold floor, my palm covers my face. Facepalm. Yes, I repeat, facepalm.

"Y-Yamanbagiri-san?!" I can hear Ichigo-senpai's voice as he worriedly kneels down next to me. Hasebe does the same, he pats my back, "Are you feeling dizzy? Don't force yourself."

"You've been acting weird today…tell us if you're not feeling well," Ichigo-senpai says.
This got nothing to do with my real reason on acting weird today, but, I can only let out a soft groan out of my mouth. Mikazuki is heavily heavy.

"Can you walk?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

With Mikazuki clinging onto me, I don't think I can. So, I shake my head.

Suddenly, I feel my body up in the air.

After a few seconds of shock, I realize that I'm in Hasebe's arms.

If I have to say it easily, he carries me like I'm a princess. Mikazuki instantly falls down to the floor with a soundless thud.

"H-H-Hasebe?!!" I almost scream, "What are you - !"

I ignore my drive to laugh at Mikazuki (because he gets the divine punishment) who rolls on the floor, holding the pain of a sudden shock of falling. The fact that Hasebe carries me in a princess-style (or bridal-style, take your pick) right now is what matters.

"You can't walk right now, so I'll help you," Hasebe answers coolly, his face is as flat as possible.

"But there are other ways to help me…? Why did you choose this, out of all ways?!" My honest comment at the moment.

Hasebe is clearly ignoring me, "Hitofuri-senpai, this is alright, isn't it?"

Ichigo-senpai looks almost dumbfounded, but he clears his throat and puts a smile, "Of course it is. This is the third floor, I think it's the best for Yamanbagiri-san if he can't walk by himself."

His voice sounds rather dark…I'm scared.

Hasebe nods and starts to walk, Ichigo-senpai follows him. Silence envelops the three of us.

Just what is this situation…? Mikazuki, it's all your fault.

"Eh~" Mikazuki smiles as he floats in front of me, "It's your fault for not being fair."

Geez. Okay, I apologize. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I like to tease you more, Mikazuki, that's all.

"Why?"

The same reason you like to tease me.

Wait, don't get all happy right now. You better help me here.

"Ah~ Help you with what?"

With this situation.

Mikazuki chuckles, "Isn't this alright, Yamanbagiri?"

How is this alright…?

"Hasebe was jealous of Ichigo before. That's why, he emitted that aura. Now it's gone, right? With you in his arms," Mikazuki simply replies with a smile, "In a way, I helped you."
…Helping by creating another problematic situation, you mean?

Kogitsunemaru peeks on Ichigo who emits a rather dark aura, "Now Ichigo is the one who gets all jealous..." He awkwardly laughs, "Well, I think he can control himself more than Hasebe, so it's a happy end...I hope."

I hope the same...

By the way, why do they get jealous of each other?

"This is so you, Yamanbagiri. Oblivious as usual," Kogitsunemaru chuckles, "Do you really want to know their reason?"

…Okay, forget it for now. I'm getting scared.

More importantly, this is really embarrassing. To be carried like this...at school...a public place...how embarrassing...! I feel like I can die if this continues more...

Is my face red, now? I hope not. I am glad that the school is almost empty at this hour, though. I won't know what to do if some stranger spots Hasebe carrying me like this...I wonder what kind of rumors that will spread? Wait, I don't want to know.

Without realizing, the three of us are already at the second floor. Time really passes so fast. Or is it because in Hasebe's arms feel so nice and warm that I...?

Never mind that, Hasebe must be really strong to support my weight and his at the same time. I mean, I'm pretty heavy...how can he hold on?

"Um, Hasebe? I'm alright now. Please let me down."

He looks at me, almost glaring. How scary. "Really?"

I nod in certainty, "I'm seriously alright now."

Besides, someone like me deserves nothing. I don't deserve such kindness. Not from Hasebe, not from Ichigo-senpai, not even from the otherworldly beings such as Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. Not even from my best friend, Yoshiyuki.

I'm hopeless. I'm helpless. I simply cannot be saved.

A sinner like me deserves nothing.

Most likely noticing the burning feelings inside my heart, Kogitsunemaru looks at me rather worriedly. I avoid his gaze and look at Hasebe.

After a moment of silence, Hasebe nods and puts me down.

"Thank you."

I finally land on the hard floor. I feel relieved upon landing. I still exist, I still can stand by my own feet...

"You're welcome."

The walk continues once again. It feels like forever now, because it's pretty awkward for me to walk in the middle. The silence is actually strangling me, deep down in my throat. I want to say
Something, but I don't know what, and I don't know how. I feel like, for this moment, I've lost the ability to speak. To open my mouth and let out a sound is almost impossible. My body feels restless and heavy.

Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru say nothing. They quietly float around.

…Someone, somebody, please say something. Just a word is fine - this silence is suffocating…

"This weighed my mind…" Ichigo-senpai suddenly speaks as the three of us walk down the stairs, "Yamanbagiri-san, why did you ask about Kashuu Kiyomitsu-san, again?"

"Eh?"

That's so sudden.

Maybe he was thinking about it all this time, that's why he kept quiet…

"I'm pretty curious about that, too," Hasebe agrees, pushing me to answer.

I take a peek on Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, asking for help. There is no way I can tell the truth. I suppose I can say so to Ichigo-senpai, but…not to Hasebe. It's impossible.

"How about you tell them that you're just curious about Kashuu because he looks cute?"

A weird suggestion comes from Mikazuki.

…He is giggling mysteriously right now. What a bad omen.

I feel stupid, but with no other thoughts, I use Mikazuki's idea, "L-Let's see…I think he looks cute."

Ichigo-senpai and Hasebe stop walking altogether, as if time freeze for them.

"Um…?"

I feel totally uneasy right now. Is it that weird? I, in all honesty, do think Kashuu looks cute, along with Yasusada, but…

"I see, I see," Ichigo-senpai claps his hands. He is still smiling as usual, but his face is now warped around a certain darkness. My instinct is pretty sharp at these kinds of mysterious darkness.

Hasebe glares at me, wordless. Is it just me, or Ichigo-senpai's darkness has spread all the way to Hasebe?

Shivers come down to my spine.

"I think you're cuter, Yamanbagiri-san."

"…Excuse me?" I turn my head in shock to face Ichigo-senpai.

"Do you want me to say that again?"

Honestly, I'm not really sure what he is saying.

"…Ichigo-senpai, did you say that I'm cute?"

Ahahaha, no way.
"Of course I did," he turns to Hasebe, "Don't you agree about that, Hasebe-san?"

Hasebe looks surprised, but he calmly answers, "I agree. Yamanbagiri is cute." He looks rather flustered.

What's actually going on here?

I don't know how to respond. I just stand there, dumbfounded, like a totally dumb person. Ah, perhaps I am. I mean, to hear such words…is really surprising. Is this reality? Or is it a dream? For someone to call me cute…is almost impossible!

…Well, almost. It's still possible at the end…

"W-What…just what part of me is cute?"

I immediately regret the fact that I let these words came out of my mouth.

"Does cuteness needs a reason? A proof?" Hasebe replies, "I don't think so."

"You're cute because you're yourself, Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai says with a chuckle.

I don't understand. Not at all.

"Ah, look at the time. I should get going now," Ichigo-senpai suddenly speaks, "Good work today, you two. See you tomorrow," he walks as fast as possible as he waves his hands.

"I'm going home, too," Hasebe follows next, "See you tomorrow."

I can't even wave them goodbye because I'm still in the middle of a shock.

Now, I'm all alone in the first floor corridor.

Chapter End Notes

*For those who don't know: It isn't uncommon for Japanese people to refer to others using only their family name. It implies the distance between the speaker and the person referred to (i.e not close). However, if they're close enough, they call each other by their given names.*
"Ahahaha," Mikazuki chuckles happily as he floats next to me, "Aren't you happy, Yamanbagiri? *Your* Ichigo-senpai has just praised you. He noticed you, congratulations!"

"I…I don't know what should I feel."

Also, what's with the *Your Ichigo-senpai* part? And why do I feel that you're using the *senpai please notice me!* thing?

Mikazuki doesn't answer.

"That was really surprising," Kogitsunemaru comments, "To think that they straightforwardly flirted with you…"

So, they were **really**…?

"But still, even Hasebe got easily into the mood, huh? As expected from Ichigo. What a terrifying enemy…" He continues.

"What mood…?" I decide to ignore his remarks about Ichigo-senpai as an enemy.

"The mood to…get closer to you, in…romantic way, I guess."

Why did I **even** ask, I wonder?

"Don't worry. I'm pretty sure everything will end someday in a happy way," Mikazuki says. He seems more serious than usual, "As a god, I can guarantee you that, Yamanbagiri."

That's right. Both Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are otherworldly beings, named **oddities**. They basically defy logics of humans' world, after all. However, their species are different.

Mikazuki Munechika is a divine spirit. He is a *shinrei*. He is a human that achieved godhood and thus, obtained immortality. Mikazuki was worshipped as a god when he was a human because he had extraordinary powers. Yes, supernatural abilities. The so-called magic. But, hearing the story from Mikazuki, I think he was more to a natural-born esper with more than one power instead of a witch. He isn't a magician. After he achieved true godhood and immortality, though, it's another story.

But of course, the people from the era where Mikazuki was still alive as a human didn't know the term. It was more than 300 years ago. The term *esper* and its study field haven't existed just yet.

Mikazuki started to be his village's god and lived inside the shrine when he was a 14 years old boy.

He didn't receive immortality instantly. All of the villagers had to worship him and sent him faith. The faith had to keep on piling up as a mountain until he could be recognized as a *god*. When the time came for him to be a true god, he was 22 years old. I don't really understand the mechanism for him to be a true god. Mikazuki didn't explain it, either…anyway; Mikazuki achieved true godhood and immortality when he was 22 years old. He stopped completely being a human and is completely fine to not eat or drink. He became an oddity.
However, as the time progressed, more and more people stopped to worship him. Some even didn't believe in gods. He was, basically, abandoned.

Mikazuki, eventually, turned invisible to naked eyes. He didn't receive any faith, while faith is what powering him. He couldn't continue to live and exist in the world if nobody believes him. He could still exist even if only one person knows him and believes in his existence. That one person is the only thing he needed at the time.

He was about to disappear when I showed up at his shrine, about 2 years ago. And then, he fell down the sky and I caught him.

We kissed by accident.

The one that stole my first kiss was him. A god, an oddity, not a human.

Mikazuki Munechika has been following me since then. He stated that he loves me, but even I'm not quite sure about that.

"I can hear you pretty well, Yamanbagiri…" Mikazuki says, rather dejected, "I really do love you. Why do you doubt me?"

He clings to my right arm, rubbing his cheek against mine. So comfortably soft…Kogitsunemaru's hair is softer, though.

"I'm just being pessimistic as usual. Don't worry about it."

"That makes me really worried."

"Yamanbagiri, it's not good to doubt your future husbands, you know," Kogitsunemaru says.

"Please don't put it like that…I mean, future husbands sound…uhh…" Anyways, like I said, Kogitsunemaru is also an oddity. But, he is a pure oddity. He is already an oddity since the moment he was born. Just like his cat-shaped ears showed, he is a fox. A fox spirit. A kitsune. A nine-tailed fox, even. However, Kogitsunemaru said that he came from China, instead of Japan. His nature isn't that of a Japanese fox spirits. He said that he is a jiuwei hu. A nine-tailed fox in Chinese. What's the difference? I don't really understand, to be honest.

Being a jiuwei hu, Kogitsunemaru acts rather free. After reading a wiki entry for kitsune, yeah, I suppose Kogitsunemaru is really not a kitsune. He isn't associated by Oinari-sama in any way. He didn't even know who is Oinari-sama before I told him. For those who don't know, Oinari-sama - also called Inari-sama - is Japanese rice god. I suppose he is really a free jiuwei hu. He is from China. His name and his clothes are really Japanese-like. He looks seriously pure Japanese.

"My name isn't my real name," Kogitsunemaru suddenly says. He must be reading my mind right now. Having connected thoughts is actually pretty annoying…no, I can't read Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's minds like they can read mine. Pretty unfair, isn't it?

"Where did you get it, then?"

"I came to Japan 2 years ago, some months before I met you. I settled on a certain abandoned shrine at this city. Then, a traveler came. It was a man. He was all alone…” He replies, "He could see me, so we had a conversation. I asked a lot of things about this town, since I'm new. I asked about Japanese cultures and such. After a pretty long talk, he suddenly asked my name. I said that I don't have a name. So, he gave me one…Kogitsunemaru. Ah, he gave me this outfit, too…then, he
vanished without a trace. I don’t know who he is even now - he is really a mysterious person, but I'm glad I met him."

"I see. How can you break the language barrier…?"

I mean, if Kogitsunemaru comes from China, then his language is Chinese. *Obviously* not Japanese.

"I don't really know myself," he shrugs with a smile.

Mikazuki suddenly says, "Oddities follow no logic, Yamanbagiri. They defy basically everything humans know. I suppose it's not weird for an oddity to automatically be able to speak and understand another language."

"I agree…thinking about that is useless," I say, "Uh. I almost forgot…I have to wait for Yoshiyuki, right? Then I think I have to wait at the front door…"

"Now that you said it…you have to go."

"I can't speak out loud, then, huh?" I start to walk leisurely.

"Of course. It'll be weird if someone sees you talking all by yourself," Mikazuki smiles. I don't want to have a rumor that says I'm insane because I was seen talking all alone…

"Because you're weird enough for people?"

Mikazuki hits the jackpot. I don't want to admit it, but he's *completely* right.

While walking, the conversation continues.

"Talking about the past, how I met you is rather weird…" Kogitsunemaru starts.

Of course it *is* weird. What I remember is, Kogitsunemaru, you suddenly appeared from the sky and told me to be your wife. You almost begged me to marry you, even.

"Well, I heard about *kitsune no yomeiri*…to be accepted in Japan, I thought I have to do it."

The fox's wedding, huh? Wait, foxes are supposed to marry other foxes.

I'm a human. A male, even. Why did you choose me?

"I wonder why, too. My type wasn't someone like you, but when I saw you that day, I…" He suddenly looks troubled to choose his words, "Maybe it's a love at the first sight."

"Are you even sure that's *love*?"

"How cruel. I won't follow you for this past 2 years if I don't love you, right?"

I suppose you're right. People said that love lasts for more than 3 months. If you love someone for more than one year, then…it's true love.

"Do you believe us? Yamanbagiri…" Mikazuki pushes my head to face him. I stop walking.

I believe in you two.

I'm just always uneasy.
"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," Kogitsunemaru kisses my cheek softly, "You don't want the two of us to betray you. You're scared of that possibility."

"And that is alright. That means you want us, too, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says, "That is enough."

I close my eyes and let his lips meet mine.

Mikazuki is invisible, sure, but he can touch physical things. No, actually, all oddities can do that. Normal humans just can't see them.

I obviously feel his moist lips, grazing against mine.

Even after a few times, I still find kissing as weird. Honestly, I find that all kinds of skinship as weird. Skinship feels really weird…but weirdly enough, I don't mind. Whether it's kissing or holding hands and linking arms, I don't mind them. But still, they feel weird. Ah, I hope Mikazuki doesn't read my mind right now.

"Too bad," Mikazuki chuckles as he parts his lips with mine, "I'm reading it."

…As expected.

I can cut our 'shared' minds and senses, but, it's a bother…

"Feels weird, huh…I can't really disagree," Kogitsunemaru pushes my head this time. He quietly rubs my cheeks with his palm, "When I touch you like this, I feel a weird warm feeling inside my heart. That counts, isn't it?"

It is. That's what people call excitement and happiness, I think. Double hit. Triple hit with lust as the main drive, usually.

"Lust isn't really nice…"

But it exists within your heart, right? Only platonic love has no lust.

"Of course it is."

Kissing him after that talk feels uncomfortable…ah, but I don't have anything to lose, so I don't resist it. I'm pretty worried, though. Kogitsunemaru has sharp fangs and he is rather wild. Based on my experiences so far, the chances that he bites my tongue by accident are more than the chances he won't or he does it consciously.

Well, looks like this time is only a kiss on lips. A pretty fast one, even. I'm safe from any danger for now.

Kogitsunemaru stares at me deeply, quietly, wordless. How uncomfortable…

"…What?" I'm getting worried when he rubs and pokes my cheeks with all curiosity.

"No, I'm just thinking…" Kogitsunemaru look serious, "Your lips are soft, so does your cheek!"

You've just realized it after all the 2 years we spent together?! After my first time you stole?!

Kogitsunemaru chuckles as his hands leave me, "I'm joking. I just want to appreciate this moment…"
…Hm…I see.

I'm actually stunned for a second there. I'm shocked.

"Me too," Mikazuki adds.

"What kind of impression did I give you two…? I'm always serious, you know," Kogitsunemaru looks sad. "I just think that…we can't be together forever. It's sad, so I want to hold these moments together…they seem normal and simple, sure, but they will surely become precious someday."

I nod quietly.

I'm a human. My lifespan is that of a human's. My life is short. On the other hand, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru can live for another hundreds years because they're oddities. Even if this love can last for another hundreds years, even if I'm able to reincarnate (if reincarnation exists) and somehow reunite with them…things will be different. That'll be starting from zero.

"I see," Mikazuki giggles, "Even Yamanbagiri's pessimistic thinking gets Kogitsunemaru, huh?"

How rude. I'm a realist, not a pessimist.

…Well, close to a pessimist, but still…

Kogitsunemaru smiles, "I want to create good memories, that's all."

"That's good. Too bad we can hardly take a photo with Yamanbagiri, huh?"

Only people that can see oddities may see oddities in photos and mirrors…so it is actually almost pointless for me to take a photo with them for memory album, since there's nobody that can see them. They are there, and yet they aren't at the same time - pretty frightening if you ask me. But well, if it's a photo for myself, I guess it is fine.

"Maybe we should ask someone to paint the three of us?"

But then, that person has to see you two, too. I can share my view with someone else, but…

"It has to be someone close who can believe you, huh…pretty hard," Mikazuki says, "We can try it someday. It's a good option."

"I hope we can do it when that day comes…"

I agree.

Somehow, I'm feeling really happy right now. That warm feeling inside my heart…is always weird, but then again, I don't mind it. Maybe I'm smiling like a lunatic right now, I don't really want to imagine, but everything is alright…

I stop walking as I arrived at my destination, the front gate. I hum an unknown song as I wait for the time to passes by.
"Yo, Yamanbagiri. Working hard, aren't you?"

I hear a voice that came from behind me. I try to be calm as I turn to see the caller. Tsurumaru-senpai, with his usual pure white appearance, is smiling brightly at me - as if he doesn't feel bad on surprising me.

He heard me humming, didn't he?

I didn't realize his presence, not at all. He managed to get behind me without any sounds. Is he an assassin or something…? Well, he always likes to surprise people - as in, pranking people - so it should be no surprise for him to surprise me.

"Hello, Tsurumaru-senpai."

Tsurumaru-senpai smiles - well, he smiles most of the time, so there's no actual difference.

Tsurumaru Kuninaga is his name. He's my upperclassman, so he is a third year. He is the student council vice-president, despite his delinquent-like look. His hair is naturally pure white and his clothing is white, too, he seems like a walking ghost. Albeit playful. Like I said before, he likes to surprise people. Pranking people. I don't know for what, but he seems to enjoy his life thanks to the surprises he does. Maybe it's out of boredom, maybe he's searching an escape, I don't know and I don't have the right to peek into his private thoughts. He is playful by nature, so he's pretty popular at school. Obviously, duh, he's the student council vice-president…he's also pretty kind, actually. He likes to help people while also surprising them. Pretty random, isn't he?

Tsurumaru-senpai chuckles after he looks at me deeply, "I see that Ichigo-chan managed to get you call him by his first name, huh?"

Whoops.

"I-I'm sorry. I said it unconsciously…"

"Ah, don't apologize! I'm happy like this, you know," he nods, almost happily, "Can I call you Manba-chan, then?"

"W-What? That's too sudden!"

I said it out loud. Slip of tongue, purely accidental.

"Hmm? Too sudden, huh? Too bad, then, I'm always waiting for this moment," Tsurumaru-senpai looks disappointed. His lips suddenly form a forced smile.

Why is he waiting for this moment? Now I feel really bad.

"…I actually don't really mind it…call me whatever you want."
Tsurumaru-senpai's face turns bright in mere seconds, "Then, I'll gladly call you Manba-chan from now on!"

Ah, how embarrassing...that's how one of my brother, Horikawa, calls me when he teases me, but... it feels different and really, really weird when someone else says it.

"Just say that you're happy, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru laughs, "You have crush for almost all upperclassmen you know, right?"

I-I-I-I-I'm absolutely not! I'm not happy and I don't have any crush to them!

"Then, why is your face red, I wonder?" Mikazuki teases me next, "Your heart is beating very fast, too, just like when Hasebe carried you earlier."

...please, you two, shut your mouth for a while.

For my future husbands, I see that you two like to ship me with someone else. You shippers...

"Well, it's mainly because our future wife likes someone else while also liking others at the same moment," Kogitsunemaru says, "I'm not saying that it's a bad thing."

"As long as you're happy, Yamanbagiri, we're happy too. That's why, we adapted ourselves to accept any love you give to others," Mikazuki smiles widely.

I really don't know what to feel right now...

The way you two said it made me sounds like - excuse me - a slut or something.

And the fact that I can't reject your statements hurt me the most...no, it surprises me more than anything.

"Don't worry; your types are pretty high-classes, I think," Mikazuki assures me, "Albeit pretty random."

Now, I'm angry.

But whatever, let's put that topic aside for now.

Like and love are two different things. If I like someone, it may or may not mean that I love that person, too. I think you two are implying that I like and love others at the same time, which I think is wrong.

My like towards Ichigo-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai, for example, are admiration. It's nothing more. I admire them as my upperclassmen.

On the other hand, my like towards you, Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki, is love.

"Alright, if that's what you say, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru smiles, but it's rather creepy, "But what if you happen to fall in love with them in the future?"

I can deal with it when the time comes.

"That's so you," Kogitsunemaru chuckles, "I'm curious on what the future holds right now."

What about you two, Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru? What if I love someone else?
"Like I already said, we accept it. We are certainly going to accept anything as long that makes you happy," Mikazuki answers immediately, "We share you at the moment, so I think it won't be very hard for us to share you with someone else in the future."

…I see.

Thank you, Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru.

…And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything…

I…I…

"Manba-chan?"

Tsurumaru-senpai slaps my two cheeks, but it doesn't hurt, just tickles.

I'm back to reality. I forgot that I'm currently in the middle of a conversation with Tsurumaru-senpai…

"What's wrong? You seem out of it, it scares me for a moment," Tsurumaru-senpai laughs awkwardly.

"I'm sorry. There is just something on my mind that I…"

Tsurumaru-senpai pats my shoulder, "Don't worry about that. But don't let the thing that weighs your mind makes your condition worse, alright?" He smiles kindly and it assures me somehow, "I can hear you out at any moment, Manba-chan. You don't have to bear a pain all by yourself."

"Yes. Thank you very much, Tsurumaru-senpai."

"No problem. Oh, you're waiting for Yoshiyuki, aren't you? He's cleaning the meeting room with some others, so he'll be late."

"Oh…I see. He works hard too, doesn't he?"

"Yes, he is, so you better not lose. Oh, how is the meeting earlier?"

"The meeting? It goes…normally," I don't really know what to say, "We found a solution but we have to take - umm, something like a survey or investigation before that."

"Investigation about moral problems the students face?"

"Yeah. Something like that." Tsurumaru-senpai is really sharp.

"I see, I see. Good luck with that, then. Hasebe and Ichigo didn't do anything weird to you, right?"

This question catches me off guard.

"W-What kind of weird…?"

Tsurumaru-senpai smirks, full of meaning beyond my comprehension, "Let's see. A little bit of skinship, maybe?"

If Hasebe carrying me on his arms counts as a skinship, yeah…but I can't say it to him.

"Nothing of the sort."
"Oh, really?" Tsurumaru-senpai gets closer - too close that it makes me uncomfortable, "Don't hide these stuffs from me, Manba-chan."

"Why can't I? What do you mean by these stuffs?"

"Now, I wonder why. I wonder what," he chuckles. I don't really understand what's going on in his mind sometimes…it's scary.

"Well, if I hide something…you can ask Ichigo-senpai or Hasebe tomorrow. It's simple."

"Hmm, that's true. You don't want to answer me that much?"

"Yeah."

He refuses to answer my question, too.

"I like that honesty of yours, Manba-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai walks away as he softly laughs, "See you tomorrow, then! Don't go home too late, okay?"

"I won't."

For once, even Tsurumaru-senpai can act like a proper upperclassman. That surprises me the most.

"Why do I feel that he can see us?" Kogitsunemaru whispers.

"I believe that he stares at us when we were talking to Yamanbagiri earlier," Mikazuki says.

Really?

If he can see oddities, too, I wonder why he doesn't tell me. If we're really the same…that question about skinship also bothers me.

"Good afternoon, Yamanbagiri-chan. Skipping club again?"

Here comes another…trouble.

I turn my head, almost shakily say, "I apologize, Mitsutada-senpai. I have a disciplinary committee meeting today, as you know, so I can't attend the club again."

Mitsutada-senpai laughs, "It's alright. I'm glad to see you working hard but still fine and all. Kuri-chan isn't happy that you're not there today, though."

Ookurikara next to him immediately replies with an annoyed face, "I'm not."

"Oh, sure you do. You were sulking the whole time."

"No, I wasn't! Absolutely not!" Ookurikara hisses unhappily.

These two are arguing again…ah, they're Shokudaikiri Mitsutada and Ookurikara. Mitsutada-senpai, the one with an eyepatch on his right eye, is a third year. Ookurikara, the one with a delinquent look, is a second year. By club, they mean the IT club. Yes, I love computer. I love to hack stuffs. And so, I joined the IT club full of nerds. No offense there. The IT club is actually pretty popular, it has a mesmerizing amount of members…but the ones I'm close to are only Mitsutada-senpai and Ookurikara who has a mysterious last name.

As you can see, the two of them are close. They're neighbors, so they often come to school and go
They look like real brothers, especially with Mitsutada-senpai as an all-can-do older brother and Ookurikara as a complete tsundere almost good-for-nothing (no offense to you, seriously, Ookurikara) younger brother. How cute, not to mention that they both like the same thing. Yes, computer stuffs.

"Anyway, what are you doing, Yamanbagiri? Standing there?" Ookurikara turns to see me and asks, ending the argument.

"I'm waiting for Yoshiyuki."

"I see. He is your class representative, isn't it? He must be working hard, too," Mitsutada-senpai chuckles.

"Sometimes I wonder how can he work."

"What are you two doing after this?" Ookurikara asks rather curiously. I rarely go home with Yoshiyuki, actually, since he is busy most of the time…or I'm just too lazy to wait for him. So, for me to go home with him today is weird.

"We're going to the convenience store. He's going to treat me."

"Did he do something to you?"

"Oh. You know me so well, Ookurikara. Or is it your sharp instinct?" I tilt my head innocently. Perhaps I'm smiling to him. "He lost 20 rounds of a game two days ago. The loser has to treat the winner, you see."

"But…convenience store?" Mitsutada-senpai wonders.

It is certainly weird without explanation.

"Yoshiyuki is going to make a dinner for me. He only needs to gather a few materials."

"He can cook?!"

Ookurikara looks purely surprised. How rare, I have to take a picture! I pull out my smartphone out of my pocket as fast as I can, but Ookurikara has already go back to his enigmatic face. These precious seconds I wasted…

I glare at Ookurikara, "Why is your rare emotion only stays for seconds on your face?"

"What…the hell do you mean?"

"Please be surprised. Now, go."

"What."

Ookurikara stays enigmatic. Mitsutada-senpai must realize what I'm aiming for - he starts to smirk.

I remember that I have a paper ball in my pocket. I throw it out of frustration, "Show it, Ookurikara."

The paper lands on Mitsutada-senpai's chest. He catches it. "Why did you throw it to me?"

"Landing failed, sorry," I put my smartphone back into the pocket and slap my two hands together, "Anyway, I have to admit that it's pretty scary for him to be able to cook, but, yes, he can cook well."
"Wait, what's with that earlier? And that paper," Ookurikara asks - his face stays the same, sadly.

"It's nothing," I reply, not to assure him - just simply replying.

Mitsutada-senpai throws the paper into the nearest trash bin and he succeeds, "Yeah, it's nothing."

I'm glad I have Mitsutada-senpai to support me.

Ookurikara glares at the two of us, "So random." But he says nothing more.

I sigh, "Excuse me for my randomness. There seems to be a malfunction in my system today."

"Anyway, for Yoshiyuki to cook is really surprising," Mitsutada-senpai smiles, ignoring my stupid joke. Back to the track.

"Don't try to have a cooking battle with him, Mitsutada-senpai. Yoshiyuki is going to lose."

"I won't, of course. But I would like to try his cooking even once."

"Are you sure that's not for showing off your greater skills?" Ookurikara smirks at Mitsutada-senpai. Before Mitsutada-senpai can object his statement, Ookurikara continues, "By the way, Yamanbagiri, are you coming to club tomorrow?"

"I have no plans, so I'm coming."

"I see," Ookurikara replies.

Is he smiling? As in, purely smiling and not smirking or grinning?

Ah, his enigmatic face is back. I'm too late again.

"Well then, see you tomorrow, Yamanbagiri-chan," Mitsutada-senpai waves his hands as he walks off, "Have a fun dinner!"

I wave him back.

"Oh, that's right," I think I have to ask right now right here, "Mitsutada-senpai, Ookurikara. Am I cute?"

"That still bothers you, Yamanbagiri…?" Kogitsunemaru speaks up.

Of course it is. That's why I need comments from other people to set things right. I refuse to ask Tsurumaru-senpai, though. He said that I'm cute once before, so there's no need.

I can hear Mikazuki chuckles. He knows that I'm always bothered with things that involve my appearance and personality, but stays quiet all the time. And now, Mikazuki, I bet that Mitsutada-senpai's and Ookurikara's answers are the negative.

"Huh? I think you're cute," Mitsutada-senpai quickly answers.

…Uh-oh. Okay, forget my last paragraph, everyone. I didn't say anything about that, okay?

"What do you think, Kuri-chan?"

"Well, I think…" Ookurikara looks at me. He stays quiet, staring deeply at me. After he looks like he comes up with an answer, he says, "Translate this within a second, Yamanbagiri. You're…"
"C." I immediately get what he is saying and answer without thinking. Now I'm scared of myself. 

"1010101"

"U."

"1010100."

"T."

"1000101."

"E."

"So, what's my answer?"

"...You said that I'm cute, in English, in capital letters. CUTE."

"Yeah, CUTE. Capital letters, note that," Ookurikara nods.

What an avant-garde way to say that someone is cute, Ookurikara.

"That's 100 points from me," Mikazuki giggles. Kogitsunemaru nods, although he looks rather confused.

Ookurikara grins and immediately walks away. Mitsutada-senpai smiles at me and catches up with Ookurikara. Soon, the two of them disappear from my sight.

"Whoa, what's earlier?" Kogitsunemaru asks, perhaps scared of the numbers Ookurikara stated.

They are ASCII binary codes. ASCII is an abbreviation from American Standard Code for Information Interchange, a character-encoding scheme. ASCII codes, like the ones Ookurikara said, represent text in computers, communications equipment, and other devices that use text. Most modern character-encoding schemes are based on ASCII, though they support many additional characters. Originally based on the English alphabet, ASCII encodes 128 specified characters into seven-bit integers.

"I see," Mikazuki chuckles as if he actually doesn't understand, but he cares less anyway, "You and Ookurikara are really computer nerds."

Why, thank you. I'm so proud of it.

"How do you feel now that you know that you're cute, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki continues with a smile.

I don't know. I don't understand myself. My feelings are all too mixed up that even I can't tell. I guess you can tell my thoughts clearer than I can?

"That isn't possible. If you don't think about it, we can't read it," Kogitsunemaru replies, "We can only read your mind. What you think at the moment. That's all."

I'm actually relieved to hear that...no offense there. Huh...how many times did I say no offense today?
"Three, maybe? I didn't count," Kogitsunemaru answers.

You don't have to answer, you know.

"I know. I just feel like replying."

Okay...I guess your answer is correct.

"By the way, where did you get that paper from?"

...um, from my pocket? Oh...that's the paper I should throw away since morning but I forgot all the time.

"Ah, I see."

Kogitsunemaru doesn't ask more. He knows that I'm really tired today - too tired that my head starts to malfunction. My mind gets so wrong.

"Wait, so the malfunction part is true?!"

Of course it is. I'm getting more dazed, now, aren't I? Also, why would I openly show that I wanted to take picture of Ookurikara's surprised face? I won't show it if I'm my normal self. Maybe only with Yoshiyuki.

"That is certainly true," Mikazuki says. "When you get home, you better rest well, Yamanbagiri."

That's what I'll do. I won't play games tonight...my body is really sore. I'll have to charge my energy. Okay, let's plug in the charger now...

Hey, don't look at me like that, you two. Don't ruin my cyberpunk imagination. Worry not, I won't melt into the town and becomes invisible or something. There's no augmented reality here - not yet. Well, even if there is, there's no way I can melt into the town. This isn't a cyberpunk story. [1]

Don't even ask where to plug the charger in because with you two, everything becomes lewd. Don't ask about what is the source of my energy, either.

Mikazuki pokes my cheek with his finger, "Alright, whatever you want, Yamanbagiri."

I sigh as I wait. The school ground seems really empty now. The sky is getting darker and darker...I get sleepy for some reason. Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki don't speak to me - unusually - they realize I need time to not think about anything at all and perhaps daydream.

Yeah, let's look at the sky and daydream...

"Oh, look at that. That's Yoshiyuki, isn't it?" Mikazuki suddenly speaks as he points at something faraway.

There is someone running from afar, from inside the building to the front door and to the yard. Yes, it's Yoshiyuki. He is running frantically to my place. His longer hair part is waving, as if it's a tail.

"Adorable," I mutter without thinking.

"T-That's cruel, Yamanbagiri...he looks out of breath," Kogitsunemaru comments worriedly.

I can only let out a giggle.
Yoshiyuki arrives at my place with a scream. He tries to catch his own breath, "I-I'm sorry I'm late!"

I hand him a bottle of mineral water, "Don't worry, I didn't wait too long."

Yoshiyuki grins widely like he always does as he holds the bottle. He drinks the water with all happiness, almost emptying it in mere seconds. After he finished, he looks at Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, "Good afternoon, Mikazuki, Kogi!"

"Don't shorten my name," Kogitsunemaru laughs, "Good afternoon, I see that you're still alive."

"How cruel!" Yoshiyuki whines, "Ah, your name is too long…"

"Yours is the same."

"Now, now. Glad to see you healthy, Yoshiyuki," Mikazuki smiles.

"I'm still alive and all good, of course!" Yoshiyuki smiles as he gives Mikazuki some kind of salute, "I didn't see ya two during school time. That's unusual, what's wrong?"

"Kogitsunemaru was asleep from morning until afternoon because he didn't sleep yesterday," I answer, "Mikazuki was going somewhere out of boredom."

"Since Kogitsunemaru was still inside Yamanbagiri, I figured that it would be safe for me to take a stroll once in a while," Mikazuki says, "A change of pace once in a while is nice, just like how Kogitsunemaru played a video game all night."

'Inside' sounds really, really ambiguous. Mikazuki means that Kogitsunemaru was asleep inside my shadow. They are 'living' inside my shadow, after all, but they usually come out to float around me and sleep with me, next to me, at night.

Yoshiyuki lets out a pleasant laugh out of his mouth, "So, Kogi didn't sleep because of a video game? I'm surprised! Yamanbagiri, did ya poison him or something?"

"Of course I didn't…"

"No, you seriously did, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru objects, "You showed me how to play that game and I get addicted!"

"You get addicted - your own fault, not mine. I just showed you how because you asked me to."

"But still…"

"I'm amazed that I can sleep, though," I cut him off, "You screamed persona [2] all night. It's hilarious."

"Yamanbagiri - !"

Yoshiyuki waves his hands, cutting off the heated argument, "It's getting late, Yamanbagiri. Let's go now. Ya can fight with Kogi later~"

I nod, "Okay."

Let me introduce Yoshiyuki.

Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki is his name. Also a second year, obviously, our age is the same. He is my best friend since elementary school. I didn't go to the same middle school as him, but we're always
close and now classmates in high school. Ah, yes, his given name is Mutsunokami, but he refuses to be called so. He said it sounds weird, unnatural, and too long. He likes his name, but he said it just weird to be called Mutsunokami. And so, everyone calls him Yoshiyuki, which sounds more natural and short. His reason for not using his given name is similar to Hasebe's, but Hasebe dislikes his given name.

Oh, are you asking why Yoshiyuki can see Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru?

Yoshiyuki is the same as me. He can see oddities from the moment he was born. Maybe that's why, despite our opposing personalities, we get along really well. As kids, we both felt out of place, undesired, and weird, because the others can't see oddities. We felt forsaken by the world and had no place to go to, that our world is full of nothing but lies. We deceive people, yes, even until now, and pretend that we're normal, the same as them who know nothing about oddities. In truth, of course we're different from others. Living with deceiving people is suffocating. It's hard for our hearts. That's why, when we meet with each other and found out that the two of us are the same or similar, we naturally became close. Together, we can be ourselves.

Why am I grumbling like this? Anyway, that's our story. The end. No fabrication at all.

"Yoshiyuki, how's the meeting?" I decide to open a new conversation.

"Boring as usual," Yoshiyuki chuckles, "We were talking about the upcoming school festival."

"But…you like school festival, right?"

"Yes, but only the practice. The planning is boring, although no good result may come from a bad planning, so it's better than nothing…I guess? Ahahaha!"

"So you know…" Yoshiyuki is always like that. He knows what's good, but still ends up bothered by it anyway. Pretty much the same as me…

"How's your meeting, Yamanbagiri?"

"We found the solution, but we need to talk to other members, so it ended early."

"What's the solution? Eh, what's the problem, anyway?"

"You will know sooner or later. I'm too lazy to explain…"

Yoshiyuki nods and decides to ask no more.

"By the way, Yoshiyuki," Kogitsunemaru suddenly calls, "Hasebe carried Yamanbagiri earlier."

This sparks an interest in Yoshiyuki. "Carried? What do ya mean?"

…Kogi, you…ugh. You don't have to say it to Yoshiyuki…

"There's no harm," Mikazuki says, "Simply put, Yamanbagiri's legs fell weak so he couldn't walk and Hasebe helped him. By carrying him on his arms."

"It's your fault, Mikazuki. If only you didn't hug me like that."

Mikazuki just chuckles.

"That's sure weird and rare!" Yoshiyuki comments with a smile, his eyes are shocked, though, "What did ya do to him, Yamanbagiri?"
"I did nothing. He spoke two jokes today, too...how weird."

"Maybe he's in a good mood."

"If he is, then it's all good..."

"Ichigo and Hasebe called Yamanbagiri cute, too!"

"Kogitsunemaru!!" I move to slap Kogitsunemaru, but he easily avoids my attack with a smile.

Yoshiyuki stops walking and looks at me with a serious expression, "Ya sure ya did nothing to them?"

"Of course not," I stare back into his warm eyes. I'm dead serious, too.

"Ahaha, well, Yamanbagiri is cute, so it's true," Yoshiyuki says as he continues to walk.

I walk next to him, "What does it mean to be cute, anyway?" I ask a stupid question.

"The definition of cute differs from person to person, of course. But generally, I guess cute stuffs are stuffs that can make your heart go thump thump and make ya want to hug them."

"That's weird," I can't help but to say.

Yoshiyuki laughs it off, "Weird, indeed! Ah. I'm curious, now, what about me, Yamanbagiri? Am I cute?"

"I think you are cute. Like a puppy. A cute puppy waving its tail."

"Should I take that as compliment?"

"Yes, of course."

Yoshiyuki smiles and looks at the road. After a moment of silence, he suddenly says, "It's sure weird...for us become a part of the inner school system. I've never imagined it before. It feels so surreal even after experiencing it."

"What a sudden thought. But yes, it is."

"Not that sudden, since I have that thought often," Yoshiyuki says, "But still...what do ya think about this, Yamanbagiri?"

Yoshiyuki is unusually serious today...and I'm pretty sure that he's talking about the fact that the two of us are different from other normal humans. We can see oddities, we can interact with them, we have some sort of supernatural power, too...then, are we really humans? What does it mean to be a human, anyway? What is normal? Do we have the right to become a part of society when we don't really belong to it? We aren't really sure about that.

"It's surreal. It's weird. It's weird. Weird," I repeat weird thrice for no reason, "But we became a part of it, anyway. All we can do now is to do our best. It doesn't matter even if we're weird, we're unusual, we're different from others, even if we pretend to be normal...at the end of the day, we're still a part of society. The society here is, so to speak, the inner school system. But of course, we're also still a part of a bigger society."

"...That's right...it doesn't matter even if we aren't normal humans or even not humans...we're still living inside a society inside this world."
"Yes. We have the right to do stuffs like other people. Also, you don't have to pretend when you're with someone you can trust. Pretending hurts, it's suffocating, but there are times when even you're free from the chains around you."

"Yeah," Yoshiyuki looks at me and smiles sweetly, "Thank ya, Yamanbagiri. I'm sorry for suddenly bringing this up."

"It's okay. If that makes you feel better, I'm glad," I reply, "Don't you know that Uguisumaru-senpai is the same as us? But he's the student council president. Kousetsu-senpai is the same - but the ability to see oddities runs through his veins - it's a part of his job, so he is slightly different."

"Ah, right! Pretty awesome, I think."

"It seems that Tsurumaru-senpai can see oddities, too. Still a possibility, though. Maybe I'll ask."

"If he is also the same as us...well, how small the world is!" Yoshiyuki comments, "Wait, Yamanbagiri, since when did you call him by his first name? Kousetsu-senpai's name, too."

"Since earlier."

"You lost to Ichigo-senpai, huh?" Yoshiyuki laughs cheerily.

"Not that kind of losing, but...well, yeah," I have to admit it even if I don't want to, "By the way, Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, you two are unusually quiet."

"Well...you two were talking about a serious stuff, we don't want to interrupt," Kogitsunemaru replies.

"We can relate to the two of you, but still, our circumstances are different, so we better stay quiet." Mikazuki adds.

"How considerate, how nice."

"That's good, isn't it?" Yoshiyuki says, "Oh, right, Yamanbagiri, can you lend me some money? I don't think my money is enough for buying the stuffs."

"You...well, that's alright. I have plenty, I'll lend it to you."

"Yey! Thanks, Yamanbagiri~"

"I'll give it to you later."

"Okay!" Yoshiyuki smiles, "I can't wait to impress ya with my cooking."

"Yes, I can't wait. Please don't make me disappointed," I poke his fluffy cheek with my finger, "Otherwise, I'll give you a lot of bitter critique."

"Ahahaha, I'll gladly listen to you!"

"Oh...by the way...Kashuu didn't go to class today, huh..." I suddenly remember about him. "I'm worried."

"Yeah, I know. Yasusada said nothing, there's no help," Yoshiyuki says, "By the way - are ya sure we're going to call them with their given names like this behind their backs?"

"Well, I like to call them so. You can call them whatever you want. Besides, Yasusada is
Yamatonokami's last name. His given name is too weird just like yours."
"I like to call their given names, too, but it's weird if we aren't close friends…"
"That doesn't matter at the backstage. Don't worry too much, just don't slip."
"You're right."
"Are you two going to confront Kashuu soon?" Mikazuki suddenly asks.
"I'm not sure," I reply. Yoshiyuki nods in agreement.
"If you two want to save him, do it soon. I don't think there's plenty of time left for him," Kogitsunemaru adds.
"I want to save him…I want to help him with anything I can do," Yoshiyuki says in certainty.
"Same here. But we have no clues…we don't even know his contact and where is his house."
I sigh heavily.
"I failed to ask the teachers, I'm sorry. Today's not good, either," Yoshiyuki also sighs, "I got his phone number, sure, but it's creepy if I send him a message out of the blue."
"True."
Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru soon follow our sighs. Sighs are really contagious.
"I wonder if Yasusada knows about Kashuu's condition and his house. As his best friend, I think he knows…"
"Should we ask him?" Yoshiyuki looks at me. I nod in certainty.
"But we should do that soon…should we get his contact? I hope he can trust us."
"Wait," Yoshiyuki yelps, "Yamanbagiri, isn't that Yasusada?" He points at a faraway place. I stare at the direction he points out. Someone is going out of the convenience store.
"Huh? Wait, let me check…"
I observe the figure.
Ah, it's really Yamatonokami Yasusada, with his distinctive hair style and face.
Speak of the devil.
His blue eyes look grim as he stares downcast before he turns his head - only to see me and Yoshiyuki. I can feel it - our eyes meet.
"Yamanbagiri…Kunihiro…" His mouth opens up when his eyes snap wide open, "And Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki…"
Oh, he remembers me, a totally unnoticed classmate? How rare. To notice me first then Yoshiyuki is weird, though. Yoshiyuki is an active person, after all - no, he is the class representative. Why does he look so surprised, anyway? Mysteries are piling up. How delicious.
"Yamanbagiri, I think this is the time you should ask about Kashuu," Kogitsunemaru offers his
opinion.

Yoshiyuki nods in agreement.

That's what I'm going to do. I want to ask, too.

I brace myself.

"Uh, umm... Yasusada-san..." I say in hesitation, trying to be as polite as possible, "You're close with Kiyomitsu-san, right? Do you know what happened to him?"

"He missed school for 2 days without any notice," Yoshiyuki helps me, "Our homeroom teacher asked me earlier. If ya know something, ya better say it."

Yoshiyuki's eyes tell me that he is half-lying, but I don't care on which part he fabricated.

Yasusada regains his composure after he takes a breath, "...I don't know, either. But I'm sure he is just ill or something."

"He doesn't look at you or Yoshiyuki. He must be lying," Mikazuki says.

Yes, even I know that pretty well. But I feel that he doesn't want to look at me for another reason.

"How can you know?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

I don't know. It's just a feeling. His gaze towards me is different, I can feel it. A familiar feeling...but I don't know what. What am I even saying?

"Well then, please excuse me," Yasusada quickly turns away and walks. He obviously doesn't want to have anything to do with us.

"Wait, Yasusada-san..." I call.

Yasusada doesn't turn back, however. Even Yoshiyuki is speechless.

It comes to this, huh? I take a breath before yelling on the empty street, "Yasusada-san, I know what happened to him, actually. He sucks people's blood now, doesn't he?"

Yasusada quickly turns his head to look directly into my eyes. "How did you...?"

"I saw him, two days ago, along with Yoshiyuki."

Yasusada's face hardens as he speaks, "I see. So? That got nothing to do with you."

"I know how to cure him, Yasusada-san," I try to assure him, which is actually true; "Do you want him to continue living as a blood-sucking creature? If this goes on, he might lose his humanity forever and thus unable to turn back."

"What do you know about these impossible stuffs?"

This guy...I've never thought of him as annoying, but only this time...I'm sorry.

"I know plenty," I reply calmly, "If you want to know why and how, you have to take me to his house."

Yasusada stays silent.
"Don't ya want to save Kiyomitsu?" Yoshiyuki says, almost shouting in the empty street, "Or is just that ya don't believe in the two of us?"

After another moment of silence, Yasusada turns away. "Follow me," he finally says.

Mission accomplished - a little. Still a long way to help Kashuu.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Refers to Ghost in the Shell or by extension, Serial Experiments Lain. Both are cyberpunk animes.
Kashuu Kiyomitsu's house, is, surprisingly, close to the school. It only takes us about 10 minutes from the convenience store (near school) to his house. His house looks normal, two-story building with a small garden at front, full of colorful flowers. The outer lights are on, so it isn't dimmed by the dark background.

"This is Kashuu's house," Yasusada says, "He is at an unstable state right now, so please be careful."

"We will," I assure him.

"Just so you know, he only lives with his mother, and his mother is currently on a business trip."

"In other words...he is all alone right now," Yoshiyuki concludes.

Yasusada nods as he opens the front gate that is unlocked, "I spent the night here for the last 2 days. Come in."

I approach the small garden, observing the flowers. I can't help but to get attracted. They're beautiful and well-maintained. The sweet fragrance of these flowers is nice, mixing with each other. The fragrance is nature is always soothing. Someone said - when you like a flower, you pluck it. When you love a flower, you take care of it. This well-maintained garden is the proof of great love.

Such thing is beautiful, I have to say.

Sorry for my randomness - oh, I've said this already, haven't I?

"Um, I'm just curious...who takes care of this garden?" I decide to ask.

"Mostly Kashuu's mother, but Kashuu takes care of it too sometimes," Yasusada answers.

"I see. They're nice."

"I don't think Kashuu would mind if you pluck it."

I look at Yasusada and shake my head, "No, it's alright. I don't want to mess someone's garden. This garden is clearly loved - I don't want to destroy it."

Yasusada's mouth falls open for some seconds, as if he is surprised. He turns away and replies, "I see. Well then, come in. Don't forget to take off your shoes."

He unlocks the front door and let us in.

Yoshiyuki and I take off our shoes before we step inside the house quietly and go upstairs. When we arrive in front of Kashuu's door, Yasusada knocks the door a few times.

"I'm back, Kashuu. I bring something for you."

"...Come in."
Kashuu's voice sounds fragile, but sharp and crisp. He sounds even stronger than usual…

Yasusada sends a signal to me and Yoshiyuki, saying, "Don't show yourself before I call you out."
Then, he opens the door and comes inside Kashuu's room, a plastic bag on his hand.

I want to hear their conversation, but I can't let Mikazuki or Kogitsunemaru eavesdrop. If Kashuu sucks blood now, then he becomes an oddity and can see other oddities. It's pretty dangerous.

Ah, oh, nevermind that…without all the hard work, I can hear things inside the room pretty well from the outside. The walls are thin.

"How are you feeling, Kashuu?" Yasusada's voice comes.

"As you can see. I'm better than this morning."

"You're starting to look like a vampire or something, Kashuu. You look so white."

"I guess I am…like, I can hardly move during the day. But the sun is going to set now and I'm all fine."

"…Kashuu, do you want to stay like this?" Yasusada's voice is somewhat heavy.

I can hear Kashuu sighs, "Of course not. It's uncomfortable. I want to move around and all."

"You see, I bring some help for you."

"Help?"

Yasusada finally says the word, "Come in."

Kogitsunemaru, Mikazuki, come in only after I give a signal, okay?

The two of them nod hearing my thoughts.

I open the door and come in first, with Yoshiyuki follows behind me. "Excuse us…" I shut the door close.

"You two…? Why…?"

Kashuu sits on the bed. He is clearly surprised by our appearance, but no more than that. I guess because he is better than he is in the morning, he is more stable than Yasusada said - or than what I expected as the worst case possibility.

"Do you remember, Kiyomitsu-san? The two of us saw you 2 days ago," I begin.

"I don't remember it clearly…but yes, you were there, Kunihiro."

Yoshiyuki looks dejected because he is not being remembered pretty well.

"What are you two doing here?" Kashuu asks.

"We're going to help ya as much as we can. We know some stuff," Yoshiyuki answers, "But first…"

"Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"I don't mind."
And so, I begin to ask.

"How are you feeling? Still feeling thirsty for blood, Kiyomitsu-san?"

Kashuu looks downcast, "I hate to admit it, but yeah. After that first night, I didn't drink any blood. I don't feel hungry for food, just thirsty for blood…"

"I see. Look at the ceiling, Kiyomitsu-san. Can you see them?"

Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru appear in a flash, floating with big smiles on their faces. I hope these smiles won't scare Kashuu…

"…Them?” Kashuu looks at the ceiling, "W-W-Who are they?! They're floating!"

Yasusada tilts his head in confusion. He obviously can't see oddities.

"Yasusada-san, your hand…"

Yasusada willingly gives me his hand. I hold his right hand and shiver when I feel its coldness. How can his hand be this cold? This is even colder than spirits. Not that it is my business, but, it bothers me…

"Alright. Close your eyes, Yasusada-san. When I count to four, open your eyes."

Yasusada nods. Next, I close my eyes. This is one of the ways to temporarily giving someone the ability to see oddities. Basically, I lend some of my powers to Yasusada through hand contact. Our minds have to connect - to be in the same wavelength, like watching the same channel and show through different televisions. To do this, we have to do an action at the same time. The easiest way is to read something together or that kind of stuffs, but the fastest way is this.

"…in one, two…three…four!"

Yasusada opens his eyes at the same time I open mine. He gasps when he sees the two floating oddities. "They…are?"

"I'll introduce them. They're my stalkers."

"He's joking, please don't hear him," Kogitsunemaru says.

“They're oddities. Supernatural creatures, simply put,” I continue, "Mikazuki, the blue-haired one, is a shinrei. He is a human that reached godhood."

Mikazuki lands on the floor and politely bows, "Hello and good evening. Nice to meet you."

"The white one is Kogitsunemaru. He is a jiuwei hu, some kind of nine-tailed fox. He doesn't show his tails here, of course."

Kogitsunemaru smiles, "Nice to meet you."

I expect proper greetings from them. Good.

"Yamanbagiri and I can see oddities since we were born," Yoshiyuki explains, "We knew some of oddities that reside in this city. Mikazuki and Kogi are one of them, but they follow Yamanbagiri everywhere. Well, they live inside Yamanbagiri's shadow, but if that is confusing, let's put that aside for now."
"Because of this, I know the world of oddities pretty well. Ah, my eldest brother is a specialist in oddities," I say, "By saying that I want to help you, I really can. Still depends, but I hope I can."

I can see Kashuu's eyes glint up in hope.

I cough once and continue, "There are two types of blood-sucking creature, western vampire and Chinese one, jiangshi. I still don't know which type you are. Worry not, I believe you're still partly human, Kiyomitsu-san. But if this goes on, you'll gradually becomes a true blood-sucking creature and thus unable to turn back into human."

"I see…"

"I will try a few experiments to decide which type you are infected with. Your story can go on later. Is there a mirror here?"

Yasusada answers, "Kashuu broke it 2 days ago."

"Wow - why?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"I don't know why, but…now I'm terrified seeing my own reflection," Kashuu replies, "Weird, isn't it…? Even though mirror is supposedly an important item for me…I broke it easily."

"You said it yourself, so I don't have to have an experiment with mirror," I say, "Do you feel terrified hearing rooster's call, too, Kiyomitsu-san?"

"Pretty much…well, I dislike it since the beginning."

"Okay, then…next," I rummage my bag and take out a handbell. It's a handbell I have as a disciplinary committee member. Weird, indeed, but it is used to show that the usually sudden inspection has began or was ending. My voice isn't loud, so I rely on this. It is surprisingly needed today. "I'm sorry, Kiyomitsu-san. But please bear with this…"

I begin to move the handbell. It makes rather creepy ringing sounds.

Kashuu gasps when he hears it. "Ouch - my head, it hurts, it hurts -" He mutters as his two palms cover his ears. I can see his skin is whitening. I immediately stop ringing the handbell.

"Another one will probably hurt, I'm sorry."

Kashuu doesn't reply. He tries to breathe rightly.

I sit on the floor and rummage my bag once more. I take out my pen and a piece of paper. I begin to draw a bagua sign as fast as possible. Somehow, I still remember how it looks with all details. Bagua is also used in Feng Shui - a Chinese philosophical system of harmonizing everyone with the surrounding environment - but there two types, Fu Xi 'Earlier Heaven' which is usually used for burial area and King Wen 'Later Heaven' which is usually used for residences.

"What are you drawing?" Yasusada asks.

"Bagua. They're eight trigrams used in daoist cosmology to represent the fundamental principles of reality, seen as a range of eight interrelated concepts. Each consists of three lines, each line either 'broken' or 'unbroken', respectively representing yin or yang," I reply, but I think Yasusada won't understand anyway, "I'm currently drawing Later Heaven bagua that describes the patterns of the environmental changes. Well, its real function isn't needed for now. Ah, you don't have to understand. Just see."
I just have to scare Kashuu.

When I finished, I stand up and show it to Kashuu - right at front of his face. Kashuu immediately jumps backwards; his red eyes are wide open. He yells, "G-Get that thing out of my face!!!"

"Yes, of course," I fold the paper and slip it into my pocket, "Thank you, Kiyomitsu-san. I'm sorry. Now, I don't want to hurt you any more than that. I think that's enough - I know what you're now."

"W-What...am I?"

"You're infected with the jiangshi virus, Kiyomitsu-san."

"Jiangshi?" Yasusada's voice comes.

"The Chinese hopping vampire or zombies," Kogitsunemaru explains, "Fundamentally similar to western vampire, but jiangshi suck blood to absorb qi, the life force - their food."

"Sure, the experiment with the bagua sign is kind of enough, but things aren't that simple," I say, "Kiyomitsu-san, try sucking my blood. That is the only way to be sure at this moment."

"Huh?!" Yoshiyuki and Yasusada shout altogether. Kashuu stays silent in shock.

"Don't worry; I won't become a jiangshi that easily. I'm bounded Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, so I should be safe...maybe."

"Bounded?"

"It's a long story. Let's just simply say that they're my guardian that share senses with me. Also, you can't go on without blood for now. You'll crave for blood more eventually, but when that time comes, things are already dangerous. You better drink some blood before that happens."

"Ah...I see," Kashuu nods, "Okay."

"Are ya sure it's safe?" Yoshiyuki asks grimly.

"Just believe me," I smile to him. Yoshiyuki just sighs heavily. He likes to worry about me. I'm happy that he is worried about my well-being, but I feel bad at times.

"Should I open my own wound or...?" I ask Kogitsunemaru.

"It's safer for you to open your own wound, I think," he answers.

I take out a safety pin and stab my left index finger with it. A sharp pain comes as the blood starts to drip.

I bring myself to Kashuu's side and give him my finger. He stares at it for a moment before he moves closer to me and starts to lick my wound. It seems like he is experimenting. After he is sure, he starts to suck on it. I can feel his sharp fangs are grazing my skin, but he tries his best to not to make me bleed more. I can even feel his lips shiver in hesitation, but he keeps on sucking, taking out my blood. I can't help but to whine softly and hold my voice. It's pretty painful....

Slowly, I can feel it.

The insides of my mind seem to be taken out, slowly but surely - my mind goes empty. My consciousness starts to fade away bit by bit, just like flower petals that are plucked gently into nothingness. I feel an irresistible urge to just let everything go and sleep.
"This…" Kogitsunemaru flinches.

"He is sucking out Yamanbagiri's life force. Jiangshi, no doubt about it," Mikazuki says.

No wonder I feel so…weirdly empty.

"Is this…enough?" I ask.

Kashuu stops and goes away from my finger, "…I think it is. Thank you." He looks brighter than before. The blood is working fast on his almost-Jiangshi body, it seems.

"No problem…uh…"

I feel dizzy all of sudden. I see my surroundings are shaking and then spinning wildly. I'm so confused, my head hurts, my eyes hurt - I can hardly see things clearly now, but their shadows, colors, and shapes are all there. This is insane. I exist within a spinning dimension - colorful wheels surround me. The world has become unknown to me. I don't know where this is. My feet automatically try to escape. I understand nothing, but I know I have to escape somehow.

My head screams, let me out, let me out - but these aren't my voice. These voices that come from my mind…aren't mine. I realize this. My voice isn't like that. Whose voice? Why inside my head? I know that voice, I've heard it before - but I don't remember. As I think, my head starts to spin even harder. The screams get louder and louder, vibrating inside my mind and spread to my insides, but they only stay inside and echo for nobody knows how long. Escape - I have to escape. I try to move my legs.

I lose my sense of balance and fall. Fall to where? I don't know. I have no strength…

When I come to, I find myself almost hitting the floor. Yasusada's hands support my weight. In a snap, I can clearly see. I look at Yasusada's worried face.

I believe only seconds have passed, but for me, it feels like eternity. A nightmare that lasts for eternity.

"That was dangerous…are you alright?" I can hear him.

"I just feel dizzy…must be because of life force is reduced…thank you," I say as I try to stand.

Yoshiyuki immediately helps me. I stand wobbly, my head is still spinning. After I'm able to stand rightly, Yasusada lets me go almost reluctantly. I can tell when my body is sensitive like this.

"Is there any sweet food here? As long as I know, eating sweet food can help a bit after your life force is reduced," Kogitsunemaru says.

"There's only chocolate ice cream in the fridge, is that alright?" Yasusada replies.

"I think it is."

"Ah, I'll go get it. Excuse me!" Yoshiyuki runs downstairs. Yasusada is the one that holds me now. I can't help but to think about his surprisingly strong arms that are holding me. His figure is pretty small or even cute for our age and he doesn't look strong at all. My impressions on him change slightly.

"I'm sorry…" Kashuu says, feeling really bad. Now, he doesn't even look at me.

"It's alright," I wave him off; "This is nothing than the pain and shock you experienced for the past 2
days."

Kashuu just nods quietly.

"Do you want something else, Kashuu?" Yasusada asks.

"I wonder if I can still eat human food. I want some sweet food now," Kashuu replies.

"I believe you still able to eat human food. Most oddities are able to," Mikazuki comments, "I'll tell Yoshiyuki to bring more ice cream, then. I want one too. Is that alright?"

"That's alright," Kashuu says, "If I remember correctly, the expiration date is close, anyway. Go ahead and eat them."

"I want one too, then," Yasusada says.

I don't have to say anything since Yoshiyuki is, strictly speaking, gets the ice cream for me at the first place.

"Eating ice cream at this kind of weather - gosh. I don't need one, by the way," Kogitsunemaru says before Mikazuki ask him anything.

Mikazuki smiles and flies to the first floor.

"Now then…Kiyomitsu-san, can you tell me your story? The day when you were infected," I start once again, "You don't have to answer if it's traumatic. I just want to confirm things."

"I don't mind," Kashuu's red eyes waver slightly in certainty, "The problem is…I don't really remember. My memories are blurry, like a thick fog is covering them. I can't recall them. When I try to, my head gets painful ache," Kashuu replies grimly, "But one thing for sure, I snapped to drink blood two days ago, that night, on that road."

"I see. Thank you."

Cold silence envelops the room. What a dark, uncomfortable situation…

Anyway, for now, I have to think about Kashuu's situation. He awakened as a jiangshi-infected - newly infected human 2 days ago. The jiangshi virus, however, doesn't spread instantly. Yes, just like a normal illness that a virus caused, it infects the infected people slowly but surely. Just like a normal virus, it was triggered by at hing. The jiangshi virus spreads by infection through biting. Just like a normal illness, the infected people suffer from symptoms that show that they will become a jiangshi. The infected people gradually lose their human characteristics and instead gain jiangshi's characteristics. Of course, once again, this doesn't happen instantly.

The time ranges from people to people, but usually, the infected people will suffer from a jiangshi important need - blood - for the first time 2 days after they got the virus. They will snap and attack anyone nearby. It takes about 6 days after that for someone to become a complete jiangshi. Total 8 days and 10 days including the virus infection. This means that Kashuu was somehow infected about 4 days ago and…I don't think there's much time left for Kashuu now. The next 3 days are important for him. The next 3 days are a trial for him, where he'll crave for blood and life force even more. The instincts to hunt and eat are stronger these days. If I can't turn him back into a normal human in 3 days, he is doomed.

I don't have much time left. I don't want to take any risks, so it's better if I can save Kashuu tomorrow, or two days from now on for the worst case.
"Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru suddenly disturbs my thoughts, "How is your finger?"

"Eh? Oh…" I look at my left index finger. There's still red blood, but it's not dripping anymore. Now that I think about it, the pain has gone away, too. "It's alright now."

"You better wash it," Yasusada speaks, "Otherwise it might get infected. After that, you can put band-aid on it. I have one."

"You're right. Where's the bathroom?"

"Just next to this room."

I step out of Kashuu's room, Kogitsunemaru follows me.

"Are you really fine?"

There, Kogitsunemaru and his usual mother's-like-worries. Pretty cute for his big build, actually. Yoshiyuki likes to worry about me, sure, but he is more carefree…and he looks like a puppy instead of a mother, unlike Kogitsunemaru. This is a compliment for you, Kogi, and Yoshiyuki as well. Yes, seriously.

"Don't worry, I'm fine now."

I wash my hands in the sink, cold water envelops my hands. It feels nice, although a bit painful with my opened wound. I dry my hands with a towel and then I look at myself inside the mirror. To be honest, I was afraid of mirrors when I was a kid. Around five years old, I think? Mirrors were scary because they projected reality, but the realities inside mirrors themselves don't - shouldn't - exist. You know what I mean? Reality shouldn't exist within mirror, and yet, it reflects reality. I also got scared of the stories when mirrors don't reflect the way things are rightly. The fact that I can see oddities made everything worse, since when I'm looking at the mirror, I can clearly see things that lurk behind me. To this day, I still think mirrors are frightening, but using mirrors to live everyday is unavoidable.

"Yamanbagiri."

I turn to see Kogitsunemaru who suddenly takes my left hand.

"Kogitsunemaru?" I ask in confusion, "What are you doing?"

"I can do this, can't I?"

That smirk on his face…wait, wait, don't tell me he is going to…!!

"Kogitsunemaru, no, please -"”

It's too late.

I let out a weird voice out of my mouth when he licks my wound. A weird voice…I'm obviously moaning in surprise. I repeat, in surprise, not something else.

"Really?" Kogitsunemaru is still teasing my finger, sucking on it, "I know your body pretty well, Yamanbagiri. You're sensitive basically everywhere."

"You…" To let out a rather lewd remark about my body… "This isn't really like you, Kogitsunemaru. Why are you doing this? Are you jealous of Kashuu?"
He stops and looks at me, "...Maybe I am...I've never put much thought, unlike Mikazuki, about if...if you get another lover," he takes a deep breath, "This little thing bothers me so much...I guess I'm not ready yet to share you with others more. I apologize for my selfishness, but, I..."

"You're really honest, aren't you? But anyhow...I'm glad," I reply, "I've never put much thought on it, either. I don't know what future lies and I don't want to know just yet. But hearing that thing from Mikazuki, again and again...I'm getting scared myself."

"Getting scared of what?"

"Getting another lover...and all kinds of possibilities that follow."

"Do you want to get another lover?"

"I...I honestly don't know," I hesitate after a deep thought, "Maybe I do, maybe I don't. I don't want to hurt you and Mikazuki, that's all. Even if I do get another lover...I don't want to hurt that person, too. I don't know what to decide. Maybe I'll leave the decision to you two..."

Kogitsunemaru quietly lock my fingers with his and smiles, "You're really kind, Yamanbagiri."

I can say nothing in return, smiling as the warmth from our fingers send all kinds of warmth to our whole bodies.

"You know, I think the decision has been made. We accepted that it's alright for you to get another lover, as long as you don't abandon us," Kogitsunemaru chuckles, "Besides, I think you have that another lover already."

"Eh? Who?"

"Isn't that obvious? He's not a candidate anymore. He's already an important part of your life."

"Who? Kogitsunemaru, tell me."

Kogitsunemaru smiles, "He is -"

"What are ya two doing there?"

Yoshiyuki's voice suddenly comes as he walks in the bathroom. Startled, I look at him.

"Washing wound...I think?"

"With holding hands?" Mikazuki smiles creepily, "Ah, don't worry, I know. Kogitsunemaru started it. He licked your wound, didn't he?"

I nod, feeling uneasy. Kogitsunemaru awkwardly laughs next to me, our hands are parting.

"Let me lick it too," Mikazuki says.

Excuse me...?

"Wa-wa-wait!!"

I whine as Mikazuki suddenly grabs my hand forcefully with that ever-annoying-smile on his face. Before Mikazuki can lick my wound, though, Yoshiyuki stops him. He grabs Mikazuki's shoulder with a terrifying aura on his back.
"Can't ya do it when I'm not here…?" Yoshiyuki deadpans, "Besides, we have a more urgent thing now. Let's go back to Kashuu's room."

Nice, Yoshiyuki. Thank you so much, you saved me!

Mikazuki looks pouty, but he nods and follows Yoshiyuki's suggestion anyway. He still pulls my hand, though, not letting it go as we walk to Kashuu's room once again. Huh, his grip on my hand is tightening and tightening…

"Mikazuki, are you angry or something?" I decide to ask.

"I'm just jealous, that's all," Mikazuki replies without looking at me. He is being pouty right now, so cute.

"Just like Kogitsunemaru does?" I ask.

Kogitsunemaru groans in displeasure that I have revealed his jealousy to public.

Mikazuki smiles, "Right. Pretty much. You're going to spoil me at home, aren't you, Yamanbagiri?"

"If that's what you want…okay."

I feel bad for Yoshiyuki for always listening to our conversation, especially the flirty ones, even when he doesn't want to, but…there's nothing I can do. I have to apologize later.

Yoshiyuki opens the door and we're back in Kashuu's room once again. Mikazuki lets go of my hand already, by the way.

"That takes a mysteriously long time," Kashuu comments, his face says that he is confused and worried at the same time.

Yoshiyuki laughs, "We talked and lost track of time."

He's lying, but I suppose it's not entirely false, either. I had a conversation with Kogitsunemaru that lasted long enough to let Yoshiyuki and Mikazuki finished their job.

"Sorry about that," I say.

Kashuu shakes his head, "It's okay. How's your wound, Kunihiro?"

"It's closed now…pretty much."

Yasusada hands me a band-aid without words, avoiding eye contact with me for a reason I don't know. I take it and put it on my wounded finger. I feel so much better now.

"Here's the ice cream," Yoshiyuki smiles as he hands the ice cream to everyone in the room except Kogitsunemaru.

Kashuu suddenly brightens up and hums as he opens the ice cream wrapper. Then, he eats the ice cream with all happiness, as if he hasn't eaten it for years.

Opening up the wrapper, I'm in doubt whether or not eating ice cream will help my condition now. Oh well, eating ice cream isn't bad. I love chocolate, anyway. This ice cream is sweet and crunchy, really to my liking. It's delicious.

"Kogi, ya sure ya don't want one?" Yoshiyuki asks as he holds the stick and eats the ice cream.
"I'm sure that I don't want one," Kogitsunemaru replies, but then he looks at me with sparkling eyes. What is he hoping for…? ……?

………Oh… I see. I'm not giving you my ice cream, Kogitsunemaru. Not my indirect kiss, either.

Kogitsunemaru frowns hearing my thoughts, much to Mikazuki's amusement. I ignore the two of them.

"So…what will happen after this?" Kashuu asks.

I'm sure he is asking about his condition. I decide to tell him the truth.

"The next 3 days will be a trial for you. You'll crave for more blood and life force. The instinct to hunt and eat are stronger these days," I reply, "Also…this is an important point. It takes 10 days in total for someone to become a complete jiangshi. You got the virus 4 days ago and awakened to drink blood 2 days ago, which means there's only 4 days left to save you. Otherwise, you'll become a complete jiangshi, losing your humanity."

Kashuu and Yasusada can't hide their surprised faces. Maybe I said it too bluntly…

"H-How can you save him?" Yasusada asks.

"I…I honestly know nothing more. Neither do Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. That's why; I'm going to ask my brother, who is a specialist, later. For now, telling you this all I can do. I'm sorry," I politely bow.

Kashuu looks rather calm, though, maybe it's the ice cream, "…It's alright. Thank you for wanting to help me."

"I wish the best for you, Kiyomitsu-san."

I see Kashuu bites his bottom lip, "Umm… I'm sorry, this is sudden, but," Kashuu says, "Calling each other with last name feels weird. No, all of this polite talk is weird. Can I just call you two with your given names?"

"I don't mind. Can I call you Kashuu, too?" I immediately reply. Kashuu nods.

"That'll do - I feel awkward with all of that politeness, too," Yoshiyuki laughs, "Just call me Yoshiyuki, though."

"That'll do, indeed," Yasusada nods, "As for me, either is fine. Be it Yasusada, Yasu, or Yamato."

I'm still eating the ice cream happily, "I think I'll settle for Yasusada."

"Yep, our name is similarly weird, huh?" Yoshiyuki pats Yasusada's shoulder, ultimately breaking the ice around all of us.

"Yes, I wonder why," Yasusada chuckles - this is probably the first time I've seen him like this so closely. "I don't particularly dislike my given name, but it's too long and weird."

"I know, I know! What was inside our parents' mind when they named us?"

"I don't even want to think."

"Gee, why are we talking about given names," I comment in sadness.
"Yamanbagiri has enough of this topic, it seems," Mikazuki chuckles.

"Huh, why?" Yasusada asks.

Kogitsunemaru pokes my cheek with his finger, "Yamanbagiri dislikes the meaning of his given name."

"Yeah, yeah. I don't need to review this topic twice in a day."

"Yamanbagiri, what does your given name means?" Kashuu asks anyway.

"...Why did you even ask?" I feel a tremendous anger boiling inside my heart.

Kashuu smiles, purely, innocently, just like his usual self I've seen - the first time in these minutes, "I'm curious, sorry."

I sigh heavily, "Mountain witch slasher. I don't slash mountain witches, though. Don't laugh, please."

"I-I'm sorry...pfft," Kashuu holds his laugh. "It sounds cool, though."

"Whoa, thank you. That's the first time someone ever said that about my name..."

Yoshiyuki slaps my back, I'm almost choking my ice cream oh god, "See, Yamanbagiri? Your name is fine and good!"

"That's true," Yasusada says, "Considering that you know stuffs like...oddities, now, that name is really meaningful."

"...Can I cry in happiness? Ohh, I have to show off to Hasebe tomorrow..."

"Muahahaha! Don't. Don't break his pure heart!" Yoshiyuki pats my shoulder.

"I won't, of course. Just a little bit of teasing."

Kogitsunemaru says, "Your teasing is cruel, Yamanbagiri."

I send him a glare. "Shut your mouth, Kogitsunemaru - you little fox."

"Eh. Why am I getting dragged into this right now?" Kogitsunemaru yelps, "You should get angry to Mikazuki."

"Mikazuki - oh, crescent moon? That's suit you. You look so elegant," Kashuu says as he looks up to see Mikazuki.

"Thank you, I'm honored to hear it."

I'm sure my face is full of terror and shock, "Kashuu, don't be fooled by his appearance. He is thoroughly and greatly a perverted old man."

"That's painful, Yamanbagiri...but feel free to get angry to me. I'll gladly accept your -"

"Mikazuki, stop. Don't scare Kashuu and Yasusada out."

"Wait, so it is fine for him to scare me out?" Yoshiyuki asks.
"Yes."

"That hurts!!!" Yoshiyuki holds his chest, as if hurting, while biting his ice cream.

Mikazuki chuckles as usual and elegantly says, "You've been with us for almost two years, Yoshiyuki. Surely, our creepiness is already a normal thing for you."

"Wait - our? That counts me? Why...?!" Kogitsunemaru yelps when Mikazuki nods.

Yoshiyuki bites his lip and nods, "Guess that's true. How painful."

"All of you seem really close," Yasusada comments.

"Yeah, really. It's nice to see at," Kashuu says.

Now that the awkwardness has melted - kind of, the four of us - Yoshiyuki, Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, and I - act like we normally do when there's nobody around. I wonder if it is alright. Well, we still restrain ourselves to not give any hints about me dating Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki.

"Are you sure, because we're basically just failed comedians that spout nonsense-"

"Yamanbagiri, stop," Kogitsunemaru cuts me off. I send him a smirk.

"I'll hand it over to Yoshiyuki, then."

"Yoshiyuki, stop."

"I haven't said anything yet, Kogi!"

"Whatever, just don't say anything you want to say."

Kashuu giggles, "I'm surprised you two - Yoshiyuki and Yamanbagiri - can act like this, really."

"Me too? Yamanbagiri is indeed a loner at school, but I'm different."

I pinch Yoshiyuki's cheek, hating what he has just said, but he doesn't take it back. I shouldn't refuse it, though, what he said is true.

"I think Kashuu means you two acting together like this," Yasusada says and Kashuu nods, "I know you two are best friends, but I've never even thought once that you two have such chemistry. You two have never shown it at class - or even school, I guess."

"Chemistry," I can't help but to repeat and chuckle. It's weird to hear it.

"It's refreshing to see different parts of you two," Kashuu adds, "Even Yoshiyuki - your actions aren't forced here. The way you act with Yamanbagiri seems so natural."

Yoshiyuki smiles, "So you know I forced myself to act sometimes."

"It's obvious. I mean, who doesn't act like that outside?" Yasusada says.

My feeling is bad. If this conversation continues more… "Okay, let's cut that off before things get gloomy. Excuse me for this."

"That's better," Kashuu says.
"By the way, Kashuu," Yoshiyuki has just finished his ice cream and has thrown away the stick. He rummages his bag and takes out papers, "These are handouts. For notes, go ask Yasusada."

Kashuu takes it. "Thank you. Hhhhh…I'm falling behind, huh."

"Don't worry, the school has just started. Things are still relaxing," Yasusada says.

"Yeah, but, it's troublesome to catch up!"

"I know," I chuckle, "But it can't be helped. Tomorrow, too, I think you'll have to stay still at home. You can get out from bed, of course. Besides, if you go out, you'll see things you don't want to see."

Kashuu sighs, "But I'm bored here…"

"Go play games," Kogitsunemaru gives a thumb up. I thought he is going to hate games because of last night, but I guess not. How nice. I'm proud of you.

"If you want, I can lend you my games," I say.

"I'm not too interested in games, but…thank you, I'll consider it. Anything but horror games, okay?"

"You have plenty of comics," Mikazuki says as he looks around Kashuu's room, travelling the cupboards with ice cream on his hands, "The genres vary, on top of that."

"I don't really have preferences for genres. I'll read anything I take as interesting. I've read them all many times. Still waiting for the continuation."

"You like comics, too, huh? I didn't know," Yoshiyuki smiles.

"Kashuu is secretly an addict. Feel free to spread this in class," Yasusada adds. Kashuu sends him a glare.

I chuckle, "It's refreshing to see different parts of you two, too."

"Opening up to others is actually nice," Kashuu nods, "We're classmates, but we're so distant with each other. It's painful to think sometimes."

"I hope all of us can get along well, even after this ends," Yasusada smiles. I nod - I see Yoshiyuki and Kashuu nod, too.

"I have people I dislike in the class, but I'm pretty fond of you two," I say.

"Same here," Yoshiyuki and Kashuu say at the same time. They look at each other and laugh pleasantly.

I feel a bond is slowly forming. Wait, what is this - am I inside Persona game and is creating a social link? [3] I'm joking. The walls of ice around us slowly melt away - it feels warm and less awkward now. It is weird of us to get closer this fast, of course - well, we don't get that close, but close enough, anyway - but it's okay. Good chemistry, right?

I quickly finished my ice cream.

I feel refreshed…I guess Kogitsunemaru is right.

"Kashuu and Yasusada - you two don't get annoyed by someone like me? How rare," I say as I throw the stick into the trash bin. A clean, perfect goal.
"I care less about stuffs like that. You're attractive in appearance and smart. Don't you know some girls would squeal in happiness - fangirling - when you pass by or speaking?" Yasusada replies, "Sure, you're overshadowed by others that are more friendly, but you're still pretty popular in our class."

"Ah…yeah, I know…” Too bad I'm not straight. Hell, I have two male lovers already.

"Ooh, our loner is sure popular~" Mikazuki teases me.

"Lock your lips, Mikazuki," I slam his beautiful face with my palm gently with all love. Wait, when did he finish his ice cream? How mysterious.

"It's getting late, you all should go home soon," Yasusada says after he looks at the clock.

"Ah, you're right," Yoshiyuki takes his bag, "Let's go, Yamanbagiri."

I nod and take my bag.

"Rest well, Kashuu. Don't forget homework!" Yoshiyuki says.

Kashuu waves us off with a grin, "Yeah, yeah, sure. See you."

We bid goodbye to Kashuu and Yasusada brings us out.

"Thanks for today, you two," Yasusada says with a smile. How many times did he smile today? What a good occasion. His face looks better with such a kind, pure smile. "I'm sorry for your finger…uh…Kunihiro. You don't have to pay back for the band-aid, by the way."

Come to think of it, this is the first time he calls me by my name, but not my full name. Strangely, it sounds familiar to me. Did I know him before? I decide to think about it later.

"It's alright. Thank you," I say. "Just call me Yamanbagiri like Kashuu does."

"Bu-but…uh…" Yasusada looks uncertain. I see him biting his bottom lip before replying, "Then, please call me Yamato."

"Huh?" What a weird thing to ask, but I don't mind. "Well, if that's what you want. Sure, Yamato."

I can see faint colors of red on Yasu - I mean - Yamato's cheeks, "T-Thank you. I'm sorry… Yamanbagiri."

"What for?"

"N-N-Nothing."

Why does he stutter when talking now and that blush on his face, why. Just why. WHY. Something is really fishy and weird here! I feel so suddenly uneasy.

I clear my throat to clear away my stupid thoughts and act calm, "By the way, do you want to… close your sixth sense now? If you don't, you'll start to see things around you."

"Eh? Ah…” Yamato looks like he's in a deep thought, "I want to keep it open for now. I'll be careful."

Gosh, calling Yasusada as Yamato feels weird, but I'll get used to it in no time, I'm sure of it.
"Okay. If anything happens, please just contact me. Do you have my handphone number or LINE contact or anything else?"

After three seconds of silence, he answers, "I don't."

Well, it'll be creepy if he does have it. We exchange our handphone number, LINE ID, and email address.

Then, Yoshiyuki, Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, and I bid goodbye to Yamato and go home. No, there's still a story before I get home…right?

On another note - I wonder whose voice I heard before, when I was heavily dizzy. It is just my imagination…? I hope so. I hope it is just nothing, only my imagination when I couldn't think clearly.

Chapter End Notes

[3] Social links are an important gameplay mechanic that appears in the later Shin Megami Tensei Persona games - starting from Persona 3 onwards, represented by arcanas. Basically and loosely speaking, social links are interpersonal relationships/interpersonal ties (with levels) - social associations, connections, or affiliations between two or more people. Well, simply put, social bonds with people.

*Chapter 1 is finished already, but I'll post the short chapters periodically for the next few days. Just because.
Yoshiyuki stretches his arms when walking, "Looks like my punishment will wait later, Yamanbagiri."

"Please don't put it that way, it's as if I'm the bad one. There's nobody bad now, just a winner and a loser," I reply, "Too bad, though... I was looking forward to it."

"Yeah, me too. When I thought I will finally impress ya... ugh!"

"Hmm. You said it as if you've never impressed me."

Yoshiyuki stops walking and looks at me, his eyes are widening, his cheeks slowly turn red, "Eh...? Yamanbagiri, ya..."

Why is he so surprised? Isn't it normal to be impressed by your friends? Not to mention that he is my savior... the one to pull me out of the darkness where I was buried deep inside. His smile, his positive attitude, his laughter - everything about him impressed me. Everything about him is precious for me.

Inside the still black - he was my only light.

How can I am not impressed by his actions back then?

While others doubt me and resent me, he was the only one to believe me - and stood up for me. He fought for me. I kept telling him that he doesn't need to do so, and yet he kept on protecting me. He was the only one for me that time.

For me, he was my hero. My only hero. No, I think he is still my hero even now.

I decide to tease Yoshiyuki and walk faster, "Who knows."

I can hear Yoshiyuki chuckles and he suddenly jumps, hugging me from behind.

"Yoshiyuki... that surprised me. It's dangerous."

"Ehehehe," I'm sure he is making a stupid face right now. I can feel him resting his chin on my shoulder. "Thank ya, Yamanbagiri. I'm happy."

He realizes that what impressed me are stuffs from the past, huh. Well, even now, he is still... amazing, you know?

I reach out for his arms that are hugging me.

"I should be the one saying that. Thank you for everything, Yoshiyuki."

He chuckles again, "This is really sudden. It feels weird."

"I know," I turn my body to face him. His face is really close to mine. I can clearly tell his red cheeks apart from the burning orange from the sun. Adorable. "Truth to be told, I don't know what should
I...do or say at times like this."

"Same here," he smiles, "Say, Yamanbagiri..."

"Yeah?"

He suddenly looks uneasy. "...Uh, nothing."

"What's wrong?"

His arms let me go and he answers awkwardly, "Just...stay away from dangers, okay? I hate to see ya in pain and all."

I can't help but to smile at his cute worries, "Okay."

"Promise me?"

"Yeah. It's a promise. But...will you help me if I encounter dangers again?"

"Of course," he lightly slaps my cheeks with his hands and repeats, "Of course I will."

It doesn't hurt. I hold his hand on my cheek, rubbing it softly.

"And when you encounter the same, I will be the one to help you."

"Ehehehe, I'm so happy. But, ya know, I think you're the one to encounter dangers. Yamanbagiri is unlucky, after all!"

"That's rude," I chuckle, "Oh well, it doesn't matter. We will help each other when there's trouble, right?"

Yoshiyuki nods, "Right."

And the two of us stay silent, our eyes lock with each other - quietly, wordlessly, talking through our eyes - recalling the past we've gone through together.

It feels really weird...but it's nice. Somewhat comforting.

"Geez...you two," Kogitsunemaru finally speaks up. And when I'm just wondering about him and Mikazuki. "Why don't you two just..."

"Just...just what?"

Mikazuki covers Kogitsunemaru's mouth with his left hand before he can continue and chuckles, "Now, now. It's getting pretty late, don't you think?"

"Ah, that's right," Yoshiyuki lets me go, "Let's go."

The four of us continue to walk down the street - okay, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are floating.

"Kogi, what did ya want to say earlier?" Yoshiyuki asks.

Kogitsunemaru smiles, full of hidden meanings - whatever he hides, "It's nothing, don't worry."

"Fufu, you two are really cute," Mikazuki suddenly says.

"What is this about?" I can't help but to get worried. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru shake their heads,
saying *it's nothing* without words, annoying smiles on their face. I wonder what they're hiding…

"What did ya do to them, Yamanbagiri? They're acting weird!"

"I did nothing. That joke is getting old, sorry. You better find something better."

Yoshiyuki chuckles, "But I don't have any other daily joke."

"Go make one," that's all I can say.

"We aren't weird, by the way," Mikazuki pouts cutely. Not elegant, sadly.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I cut him off. "I'm glad today is going to end…today is really tiring."

"I know…" Yoshiyuki replies as he stretches his arms once again, "Rest well, Yamanbagiri. We have lots of stuffs to do!"

"You too. Let's do our best."

"Don't do anything *weird* to him, Kogi, Mikazuki."

I wonder if the meaning of *weird* for us is the same. It's rare for Yoshiyuki to say something not *innocent*.

"We won't, of course," Kogitsunemaru replies with a grin, "Not if Yamanbagiri doesn't want it."

"I'm not going to want it, sorry. I just want to sleep."

Mikazuki smirks, "Sleep…like what?"

"Don't think of anything *weird*, you two."

I let out a sigh as Yoshiyuki laughs pleasantly. I guess we - me, Kogitsunemaru, and Mikazuki - have defiled Yoshiyuki's innocent mind with these kinds of talks…gosh, I feel so guilty.

"Forgive us for everything, Yoshiyuki," I deeply bow.

"Eh…???",

"Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki, too, hurry up and apologize," I say, "Apologize to Amaterasu."

"What's the connection between Amaterasu and Yoshiyuki?!" Kogitsunemaru yelps.

"I know!" Mikazuki exclaims, "They're both shining - am I correct?"

"100 points," I slap my palm with Mikazuki's - high five - in happiness.

Yoshiyuki watches, completely dumbfounded.

Kogitsunemaru hides his face with his two palms - facepalm, "Just *what* are you guys talking about."

"It doesn't matter. Just apologize, you two. Apologize to CEO Amaterasu!"

"We aren't playing that trading card game! How to apologize to her anyway?! And why should we?!" Kogitsunemaru has enough, it seems.

Yoshiyuki finally laughs, "Are you saying that inside me exists Amaterasu? Well then - come forth,
my persona, *CEO Amaterasu*!

Mikazuki comments, "The sun is indeed blinding."

"Indeed it is. Should I take the support cards now?"

"Huh, Yamanbagiri, ya have that clan? Wow."

"Not you too, Yoshiyuki! That crossover or mix-up [4] - whatever it is - is too weird! Please stay sane -"

I push Kogitsunemaru away for a bit (he yelps for who knows how many times today, sad for him, but I ignore him anyway) and say, "Yes, I have that clan, but it doesn't matter. Once again, forgive us for everything, Yoshiyuki."

"What for? Ya guys did nothing wrong."

"Just accept it," Mikazuki says.

"Uh? Ah? Okay. I forgive ya all. That's so sudden, though, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," I reply, "Ah, I've been infected by Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's *it's nothing* virus, it seems…"

"It isn't a virus, you said the same to Mitsutada and Ookurikara," Kogitsunemaru says weakly.

"It's nothing." I chuckle. "Mikazuki is weirder than you, but he doesn't get annoyed."

"I take that as a compliment from Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki nods, "Being weird is normal for us oddities, though, so I think it's fine. Besides, Yamanbagiri accepted us."

Kogitsunemaru smiles softly, giving up, "Yeah, I guess so."

"What kind of *weird* are ya guys talking about?" Yoshiyuki must realize that I'm talking with Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki through my mind and he is confused.

I answer him, "Just something about comedians mixed with weird personality."

"*Manzai*?"

For those who don't know - *manzai* is a traditional stand-up comedy in Japan. There are two roles, straight man - *tsukkomi* that corrects the funny man - *boke*'s mistakes. Just for further information, in Chinese, it is called *xiangsheng* or crosstalk which can involve more than two people - it can also be solo monologue. In western and modern culture, I think, it is similar with normal stand-up comedy and double act or comedy duo. No, you don't have to take notes. Just for your information.

"Yes, pretty much."

Yoshiyuki nods, "I'm the *boke*, huh? Along with Mikazuki. Eh, if that is alright."
"It is certainly alright. I would love Yamanbagiri to correct me."

Mikazuki's remark is pretty creepy for me, the person in question, but oh well. "What about me? I believe I'm the tsukkomi."

"I think ya can do both roles."

"I know it...like I did earlier with Kogitsunemaru, right?"

"That's certainly one."

"Too random for my liking," Kogitsunemaru says.

"But I'm to your liking? You love me, don't you? Ah, I'm not seducing you or something."

Kogitsunemaru's face flushes red as his ears shake thrice (important to note). I grin seeing that - teasing him is sure fun.

"Yamanbagiri, you're so cruel," Kogitsunemaru says as he turns his head away from me, acting all embarrassed, "I do love you. How many times do you want to hear it?"

"I know. I want to hear it as many times as you want to say."

Yoshiyuki giggles when he sees this, "Yamanbagiri has become more aggressive over the year."

"I can't deny that," I smile to him, "Mikazuki's influence, maybe. It isn't a bad thing, I guess."

"I'm really happy to hear that," Mikazuki says as his two hands hold my shoulders. "But you know, Yamanbagiri - teasing someone has its limits."

"I know...are you telling me I'm too cruel?"

"It's not that. You're free to tease someone you're close to. That person might be happy, too. What I mean is, I would be more happy to be teased, so -"

"Mikazuki, stop," I cut him off, "You can continue it at home, but not now."

Besides, I know what he wants to say. He wants me to tease him more. It's fun teasing him, too, but he likes to tease back, which is not really fun for me. I'm sorry. I like to tease someone but kind of dislike it when someone teases me...well, I can tease back if I want to. It's easy - but I'm too annoyed to tease back sometimes. Everything depends on my mood, sadly.

"Ow...but, alright." Mikazuki nods and stays quiet.

"I'm surprised ya didn't tease them too much earlier, at Kashuu's house," Yoshiyuki says.

"That's a cruel thing to say, Yoshiyuki," I reply, "But, yeah...when there's nobody like this, I can let my guard down. Meanwhile, at that place like earlier - with people I'm not close with - my guard is up and it's rather exhausting. I can hardly do something about that, though. It is akin to defense mechanism, I guess."

"I know what ya mean. It is a good thing to restrain yourself, but, it is tiring," Yoshiyuki laughs as he rubs his nose with his finger.

"Hnn. I'm not like this before. I wonder when I started to act like this. To happily tease someone, I mean. The current me...really differs from my old self," I say as I stare into the darkening orange
I can see faint scenes of my past there, reflected by the faint clouds, "Sometimes, when I think about my old self...I feel my current self is really out of character."

Yoshiyuki looks at me, "That's called character growth. Ya changed into something better, what is wrong with that? I think ya always like to tease someone you're close with, but in the past, ya hardly showed it. Your shyness and coldness towards someone ya meet for the first time stays the same, though. And you're still the same loner, but more accepting. No offense, eh."

"Perhaps that's true...I hid myself away...because of...it," My past - my childhood - isn't exactly nice. I would rather not talk about it. But I feel that I have to say this, "But now...things are different. If this is the way I should be at the first place, then I'm under reconstruction. It's okay now, for me to be like this..."

Yoshiyuki smiles as he taps my shoulder gently, "Yep. Rest assured and be yourself, Yamanbagiri."

I give him a certain nod with a smile.

"The word reconstruction, though...are ya a building?"

"What kind of joke is that?"

I'm certainly not a vessel for stuffs, unlike a building.

"Ahahaha, nothing. Let's split here. See ya all!" Yoshiyuki starts to walk away. Time sure flies so fast. We've arrived at a street that split into three ways.

"Okay. See you tomorrow, Yoshiyuki," I wave him goodbye and he waves me back with a grin. "Don't forget your homework."

"W-What homework?!"

"Math. Didn't you hear the teacher last week? There are plenty of pages and numbers, too..." I sigh.

"Eh-Ehh?! Which pages? Let me see yours, Yamanbagiri! I beg of ya!"

"Hmm...I'm joking, don't worry."

Gosh, teasing him is fun. His reaction is funny and cute.

I said the same about Kogitsunemaru, huh? I really like to tease people, don't I?

I think...everything started when I was a mere observer. I am still, now, but slightly differs from the past. I like to observe people and see their reactions. I don't pay attention to my surroundings that much, I acknowledge that, but when I'm interested, I like to see people's reactions. Their faces, their voices - sometimes all of these are interesting. Feel free to call me idiot - but I like these things - and they made me the way I am now. I like watching nature in general, though.

Yoshiyuki is an expressive person. He has a variety of expression and it is fun to watch - or observe - his expressions and reactions. Well, maybe that's the main cause.

Meeting Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru is another cause, after what happened years ago.

"Ehhhh, that's cruel!" Yoshiyuki cutely pouts, but he soon laughs as usual, "Oh well, thank god there's none. I'm screwed if there's one. Well then, see ya!"
We wave hands once again - this time, for real, we part ways.

He walks off. I stare at his back that looks tough, his longer hair part that I love to call tail, and the way he walks. He changed over the time, too, of course, but these three things about him stay the same. Ah, and his blinding smile, sure. I feel relieved for no reason knowing this. His figure blends with the orange background, completely gone, out of my sight.

I heave a sigh for myself and continue to walk home, down the empty streets.

On nobody knows how many steps, I look back. The street and houses I've passed have become no more than black shadows, forming nightmare-ish shapes. The distant sun will set in no time, and soon, the world is going to be covered by still darkness. I can hear the crows cry in a faraway place. Everything feels lonely and gloomy.

Oddities really like these kind of times.

"I don't know why, but I feel endangered right now, even though the sun is still up," I start to walk again.

"Yes, I feel it too. Today seems dangerous," Mikazuki says, "Today…this road is pretty quiet and empty - and I don't see any wandering kodama on the way. It's rather unsettling."

"Ah, you're right. I'm wondering where did all of the oddities that are usually here go to," Kogitsunemaru says, "Did the same thing happen in the morning?"

"Yes, but the morning is mostly empty anyway, so I can't tell the difference," I reply, "But now…something is certainly wrong, I can feel it. I want to get home as soon as possible."

"Do you want us to carry you and fly to your house?" Mikazuki offers.

"No, thank you. Floating and flying with you two are experiences that I don't want to experience ever again."

Kogitsunemaru chuckles, "Was it that traumatizing?"

"Yes. It was terrifying, mind you."

"Well, that's alright. We'll protect you from anything dangerous," Kogitsunemaru smiles.

"I feel assured, thank you. I hope nothing happens."

With the two of them by my side, I feel safe, somehow.

I have many thoughts I want to convey - especially about Kashuu's case - but I'll keep them for now. I'm too tired. Ah - I wonder if he had replied my email from yesterday yet. I haven't checked it today. I hope he replied it already. I've waited for two days - he must be busy over there, too. I wonder when he is free…we can't do live chat due to time differences, but I hope we can do so someday.

I'm too busy on thinking that I've just realized something.

"These weird echoes, aren't they…"

"Kodama, certainly," Mikazuki says with a relieved sigh, "So they're here, after all. I'm getting worried that they aren't there, actually."
Kodama are souls that inhabit trees. They're the protectors of forests. They usually exist deep inside untouched forests. These souls can wander outside of their hosts, tending to their groves and maintaining the balance of nature. Kodama are rarely ever seen, but they are often heard - particularly as echoes that take just a little longer to return than they should. When they do appear, they usually look like faint orbs of light in the distance; or occasionally as a tiny, funny-shaped vaguely humanoid figure. A kodama's life force is directly tied to the tree it inhabits, and if either the tree or the kodama dies, the other cannot live.

The echoes I hear right now come from them.

"True. Night without hearing them even once is weird. But the sun hasn't set just yet, that's unusual. What are they saying?"

"Hmm…I can grasp 'I want a girlfriend' and 'I want to be rich' echoes," Kogitsunemaru laughs. His hearing is excellent, more than that of a human's. "I'm surprised the kodama are willing to echo such thing."

"A form of comfort for the screamers, I guess," I chuckle, "This has been bothering me for a long time, but, this is a neighborhood area, totally touched. Why are they here? For such a long time…"

"Well, there must be at least one untouched old tree in this area. This quiet area is surrounded by thick trees, resembling a forest, after all. But, evolution exists. Even oddities change over the time," Kogitsunemaru says with a smile, "The nurikabe as well. Look, it's waiting for you."

I look at my front and find a light brown wall is standing greatly there, blocking my path. It isn't exactly a wall, though. This nurikabe looks soft with wrinkles there and there. It has a face and ears that resemble dogs', but its nose resembles humans'. In this modern day, the nurikabe is rather shy - if it encounters a stranger, it won't show its face and just shows vague face-like features. It has two legs and hands that point at me - akin to a puppy that wants to eat.

This nurikabe shows its face to me because…well, we've known each other for a long time.

The nurikabe is only supposed to block travelers' way, not a usual passerby like me, but…certainly, time has changed. It still stretches out to every direction where the victim moves to, though, totally blocking the way.

"Good evening, Nurikabe-san," I greet first - this nurikabe doesn't have a name, of course, but it doesn't mind to be called as such, "The day is still not dark yet. Why are you here? Don't block my path, please."

"Good evening, Yamanbagiri. I know. Forgive me to block your path, I want to deliver a message from Hotarumaru as soon as possible," Nurikabe-san says politely. It is always polite and friendly. I wonder if the other nurikabe is like that, too.

"From Hotarumaru? What is it?"

"He was searching frantically for you earlier. He said it is an emergency, but I don't know exactly what. He wants to meet you tomorrow at the riverbank. The time is up to you, he will wait there all day, he said," it replies, "I have a gist on what he wants to say, though. This area seems weird today, don't you think?"

"Ah, yes…I feel endangered on the way. The street is rather empty. The kodama didn't wander and instead start to echo earlier than usual…and then there are you," I reply, "What happened?"

"The kodama panicked earlier - they said they sensed an existence of a dangerous tree nearby. The
tree must be *dangerous* enough for the *kodama* to panic and went for investigation. They found nothing, though, but the aura of an unusual tree is still there, they said. I also feel that this area's aura seems darker than usual. In fact, I can show up here when the stars are yet to be seen."

Mikazuki asks, "Do you think the dark aura today has something to do with the tree the *kodama* sensed?"

"I believe so."

"Where are the other oddities that are usually here go to?" Kogitsunemaru asks this time.

"I'm wondering about that, too. This dark aura should attract more oddities, but the usual oddities are nowhere to be found," Nurikabe-san says with a sigh, "Maybe they feel uneasy so they left for the time being. I actually feel uneasy here, too. This dark aura is just...bad and dangerous."

"I see...thank you, Nurikabe-san. What are you going to do right now?" I ask.

"For the time being, I will stay on guard here. This is my home, after all. I can't just leave - I have to protect it. If there's a danger incoming, I'll hold it with my body. Nobody wants casualties. Yamanbagiri, you should go home quickly before the sun really sets."

"Yes. Thank you again, Nurikabe-san. If there's further information about this case, please talk to me. I'll try to help and tell brother Yamabushi as well."

"That's a great help. Thank you as always. You're a human, but you're dragged into all of this."

"Eh, I don't mind, really."

"Well then, see you. Don't forget about Hotarumaru's message."

I nod and Nurikabe-san moves out of the way, allowing me to continue walking home. Nurikabe is supposedly only disappears all for once when the said person - whose path is blocked - taps the near ground with a stick or knocks on the *nurikabe*'s lower left part. However, its duty isn't to block my way today. It is just to deliver a message. Sometimes, it will block my way for fun, but that's all. This oddity is relatively harmless. Some people also said that the *nurikabe* is in fact a manifestation of shape-shifting oddities that play pranks on unsuspecting humans. Basically harmless if you know how to deal with it.

I bid goodbye to Nurikabe-san and continue to walk.

The *kodama*'s echoes start fading out on the way. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru say nothing, they're on guard - keeping a lookout on every direction.

Chapter End Notes

[4] Amaterasu is the goddess of sun in Japanese folklore. CEO Amaterasu is a card in the trading card game (TCG) Cardfight!! Vanguard. By clan, it refers to clan (a set of cards linked by same or similar themes) Oracle Think Thank, where the sub-clan Amaterasu (consists of CEO Amaterasu, Goddess of the Sun Amaterasu, and the support cards such as Ohiruhime) exist. This clan mostly consists of pretty girls, but there are also dragons and non-human cards. Meanwhile, persona Amaterasu obviously comes from Shin Megami Tensei Persona.
*Both Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru know the game stuffs mean that Yamanbagiri has infected them already (with games).*
I feel relieved when I see my house. It's a medium-sized two story building like any other. Completely normal. I see the sky is darkening with every seconds passed - now, the orange color from the sun has almost disappeared completely. I managed to come home on time.

I see a running black cat at the front of my house. Seeing a black cat at times like this seems like a bad omen, but that cat is a resident here. It usually hangs around here, so it's normal.

"I'm home," I say as I open the door.

"Welcome home!" I can hear brother Horikawa's voice from the kitchen. He must be cooking right now. Ah…I forgot to text him about my plan with Yoshiyuki, huh? Well, thankfully, that is the right thing. Coincidences are scary. "Dinner will be ready soon."

"Okay."

"Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are there, right?" He calls.

"Eh? Ye-yes," Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, and I immediately answer in sync. The three of us are obviously nervous when it comes to our relationships.

"Don't worry, I just want to call."

Yes, brother Horikawa knows about my (and brother Yamabushi's and Yoshiyuki's) abilities. He also knows about Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki…about that they're bound to me in an engagement. After a series of tests (whatever they are), he came to accept the two of them. At first, though, he can't see oddities, unlike me and brother Yamabushi. With brother Yamabushi's help, he opened his sixth sense. Brother Horikawa is still cautious towards Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, though - for obvious good reasons. He's worried about my safety.

"Ah, where's brother Yamabushi?"

"He hasn't come home. He didn't leave any notes. He didn't reply my texts, either...but this is already late. I don't think he'll come home today."

I can hear that brother Horikawa is annoyed by brother Yamabushi's actions. Yeah, he never tells us, his family, about his work and whereabouts. Just after an accident in elementary school he opened up to me…a bit. After I met Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, he became more open, but still secrets are there. He also likes to suddenly appear and disappear without any news, and comes back like it's nothing - with his usual kakakaka laugh. I can't get angry at him, neither can brother Horikawa.

"Hmm…I hope he'll come back quickly," because I'll be screwed if he doesn't come home quickly.

"Oh, I've prepared the bath for you. Take it now."

"Okay. Thanks, brother."

Everyone's rooms are located in the second floor, like any other houses around this area. I walk upstairs to my room and put my bag on my bed. "What a day…” I sigh. I feel more tired than usual. How many times have I said this? Ahhhh…
"Let's take a bath, shall we?" Mikazuki says. I nod and take off my purple wristband, putting it on my desk. Then, I take some towels.

The bathroom isn't that big, but surprisingly, it is enough to fit three creatures all at once.

"Yamanbagiri, let us wash you," Kogitsunemaru offers.

"Ah, sure."

It sounds weird, it looks weird, but the fact that we're having bath together is already normal. This has become a routine. I'm not even embarrassed anymore when I get naked, they get naked, and they wash my body clean. It's now comfortable, actually. For me, to just sit and do nothing as two people wash me...I feel like a king or some sort. Well, after a tiresome day, something like this count as a relaxing time.

"Are you sleepy, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki asks as he rubs my hair with a shampoo.

"Yeah, kind of."

It feels really good when someone plays with your hair gently like this…

"Well, today was pretty heavy, right?" Kogitsunemaru comments as he grabs a sponge, pours soap and a little bit of water onto it, and then he scrubs it to my upper right arm. He doesn't really do it gently, but I don't mind. It usually tickles, but after a plenty of times, I've used to it.

"Yeah. Too much stuff happened at all once, I'm confused."

Mikazuki giggles softly, "Just take it easy."

"Yes, I'm relaxing with all happiness right now," I reply, "But I'm really worried...about Kashuu. I wonder when brother will be back..."

"Well, you can't depend on him forever," Kogitsunemaru says, "Maybe, tomorrow; I'll gather some information about jiangshi. You should gather information, too."

"That's a good idea. I'll ask the kodama, then. Yamanbagiri, maybe you can ask your senior tomorrow. Who it is again...? Ah, Kousetsu, isn't it? If I remember it correctly, he knows plenty about oddities," Mikazuki says.

I close my eyes when Mikazuki pours water onto my head, wiping off all the foam, "Okay, I'll do. Maybe Uguisumaru-senpai can help, too."

"Anyone but him," Mikazuki says. He is still smiling, but his voice seems different.

"Why do you have such a strong hate towards him, Mikazuki?" Kogitsunemaru asks as he scrubs my thighs and feet. Now, this one really tickles. His fingers slip to my toes and scrub everything thoroughly. I always feel really weird here…

"How to put it...I feel uncomfortable around him, that's all," Mikazuki replies, "He has a frightening aura. I would rather avoid him."

"Now that you said it. The pressure he always brings is too heavy, as if he isn't a normal human."

I don't really understand what they're talking about.

"Ah, do you want to scrub Yamanbagiri's back, now, Mikazuki?"
"Yes."

Kogitsunemaru hands Mikazuki another sponge full of soap. While Kogitsunemaru is scrubbing my legs, Mikazuki starts to scrubs my back. I close my eyes, enjoying the feeling. They've became good on this…I can really fall asleep now. How relaxing.

Kogitsunemaru pours my body with water, clearing all the foam. Mikazuki does the same to my back some seconds later. Ah, it's ending, huh. I barely realize how much time passes.

I notice that Kogitsunemaru suddenly sits in front of me and stares at me intensely. I stare back in confusion.

"Your face is seducing, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says as his wet fingers trace my lips. He opens my mouth gently and tickling the inside with his fingers. I hold the urge to bite his fingers. I hope there's no soap left on his fingers…I don't want to taste soap. "I can't take it anymore. You're too adorable."

Just what kind of face I'm making right now…?

"Does it feel that good, Yamanbagiri? Even more so than your night with us?" Mikazuki whispers as he buries his face on my nape, tickling my back.

I can't help but to shudder.

But no, really…the good feeling differs from…uh…let's be frontal - wait, I'm always frontal so it's normal…okay, let's start from the beginning. The good feeling differs from sexual pleasure. The pleasure here is different. Is my face really showing such pleasure?

"I think so," Kogitsunemaru answers with a smile. His fingers finally leave my mouth, but then he caresses my thigh. Mikazuki still buries his face on my back. These two, seriously…

"Come on, guys, I haven't even dip myself in the bathtub yet. The water is waiting. Please don't seduce me. More and I'll give in, it's dangerous," I finally say with a sigh.

"You're unexpectedly cool about this tonight, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says.

"Yeah, I'm just really tired right now…"

"Okay, then. You two can take the bathtub, I'm going to shower," Kogitsunemaru says as he pulls me to stand up.

"You still dislike big puddle of water that much?" Mikazuki chuckles as he starts to scrub his own body.

"Hngh, yeah." An honest answer.

"That's surprisingly cute, Kogitsunemaru," I comment as I dip myself into the hot water inside the bathtub.

I see Kogitsunemaru's ears shake thrice as his cheeks turn red, but he doesn't give a reply and turns away, scrubbing his own body. That mode again. Cute.

Ah…I'm just going to enjoy myself inside the relaxing hot water. It's really nice after a tiresome day. I feel like an old man.

After some minutes, Mikazuki joins me inside the bathtub. He is fast on washing his body…too fast,
even - almost abnormal. It's pretty crowded now. We're currently sitting opposite of each other, legs crossing uncomfortably.

"Yamanbagiri, come to me," he offers and I accept. I move to him, he embraces me from behind. It's less uncomfortable now, there's just a lingering of danger in my mind. Mikazuki gently combs my hair with his slender fingers, "Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything."

He obviously reads my mind.

"I know. I believe in you."

I notice that Mikazuki is smiling as a response. Well, he smiles most of the time, so there's no actual difference.

As I enjoy myself inside Mikazuki's embrace, Kogitsunemaru calls, "Yamanbagiri. The shampoo is almost empty now; you'll have to buy a new one."

I send him a glare almost immediately.

"My fur isn't at fault here," Kogitsunemaru stands up for himself. My thought is pretty obvious here.

"It's hair and it is at fault," I huff, "Oh well. There's actually another one in my room. I'll get it later."

I see Kogitsunemaru nods and continues what he is doing.

I clear my throat, "So...let's sort out some stuff. First of all, when I dozed off at Kashuu's house after he drank my blood...did you two hear my thoughts?"

"No. In those short seconds, you weren't thinking at all," Mikazuki replies, "What's wrong?"

"It is normal to...hear voices and get dizzy - really dizzy; the world is spinning - after your life force is taken?"

"Getting dizzy is normal, but spinning world and hearing voices aren't. Don't tell me, you..." Kogitsunemaru answers as he points the shower head to me, the flowing hot water almost hits my face.

"Yes. I felt it. The voices I heard weren't my voice, though, but I do know that voice. It seems familiar, but I don't know whose," I say, "That time, I know that I was thinking about it. How can you two didn't hear it?"

"That shouldn't be possible...maybe you accidentally fall to your subconscious mind. The voices and spinning world came from it. That's why we can't hear you," Mikazuki says, "But is that possible to be triggered by losing life force?"

Kogitsunemaru sighs heavily, "I don't know. If it's an event you have experienced before, then it's possible, I guess. However, this is your first time to be bitten by a jiangshi, right, Yamanbagiri?"

I nod, "Right. It's most likely not possible...what did I actually experienced, then? Well, let's keep them for now. The next one...Kashuu's attacker. At least one jiangshi must be in this city. I'm worried if it will attack someone else."

"That's worrying, true," Mikazuki sighs this time. He sounds tired as well, "Don't ever think to catch the culprit, Yamanbagiri. We'll do if we encounter it, but don't search for it. Let the specialists do. Perhaps Yamabushi's work this time is related to this."
"Okay. I can only help Kashuu to get him back into a human for now…"

"Now, onto another mystery. A dangerous tree the *kodama* sensed, what can it be?" Kogitsunemaru starts, "Such a tree can't just appear without any signs. When such tree is going to awaken in a dangerous way, the *kodama* should have sensed it long before and therefore have taken care of it already. But according to *Nurikabe*, they've just found it today and they panicked. This must be because the tree awoken already."

"This tree can't just appear by itself, right? Whatever it is, it may cause the dark aura that surrounds this area today," I say, "What are the effects of the dark aura?"

"Oddities feel uneasy and even frightened that most of the new residents left," Mikazuki says, "This is certainly weird considering most oddities are formed from darkness. I think this dark aura may be formed to chase out the oddities."

"A dark aura caused by a dangerous, out-of-nowhere tree—something wrong is seriously going on here," Kogitsunemaru sighs again, "I have a feeling that Kashuu becoming a *jiangshi* has something to do with it."

I tap the bathtub's hard shell with my knuckles, feeling uneasy, "Same here, but it's weird—what's the connection between a vampire and a tree? There's only *jubokko*, the vampiric tree, but it is impossible for it to appear here. This town is free of bloodshed and war, as far as I know."

"That's right. This town - this land - is pure. A *jubokko* can't possibly exist here through natural means," Mikazuki nods.

"Are you saying that an external force can make it exist?"

"Nothing stated that it can only appear through natural means, so, yes - it is possible, but even I don't know how," Kogitsunemaru clears his throat, "Besides, if it is connected to Kashuu…how? He lives pretty far from this area. I doubt that he has ever gone to here. Also, how did you know about *jiangshi* with such details, Yamanbagiri?"

"Eh? I thought brother Yamabushi told me once about it…?"

"I never knew about that," Mikazuki says.

"Neither did I. I've never told you about it, either, but your information is correct. *How did you know*?"

His repeating question presses me so hard.

"That's weird…I'm sure brother Yamabushi told me, but my memory is vague. Maybe before I'm engaged with you two."

I see Kogitsunemaru bites his bottom lip and look at me deeply, "Well…that's possible, sure, but something smells fishy."

"Let that one go. Yamanbagiri's knowledge about *jiangshi* helps," Mikazuki rubs my head almost impatiently (it doesn't hurt), "The important one is…what is happening in this town? Weird things happened one after another. It is, certainly, can't be just coincidence. Someone - somebody - may do this to disturb this town."

"Just…what kind of person who wants to do it? For what?"
Of course, my question is left unanswered. Nobody speak for a moment, the three of us have our minds running wildly, thinking about every possibilities - but we can say nothing. We know nothing, so we can decide nothing. The three of us sigh at the same moment.

I clap my two hands, "Well, why don't we get out of here right now? We're done bathing and showering, right? Dinner is waiting."

Kogitsunemaru nods, "You're right. There's nothing we can do at the moment. No use pondering about it."

The three of us quit the bathroom and wear the towels and go back to my room for dressing. I'm wearing a normal relaxed outfit at home - a shirt and pants. Both Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are wearing one-piece white hakama, fitting their ancient and traditional everyday outfits. I'm the one who bought their hakama, by the way…apparently, they have nothing to wear for sleeping before they went out with me. Brother Yamabushi have some hakama like that, but it's limited and only for him to wear. Different sizes, too.

I wear my beloved wristband once again and sit on my bed with a towel on my shoulders, doing nothing. I always want to think of nothing and do nothing after a nice bath like this.

Mikazuki sits behind me and says, "Yamanbagiri, dry your hair already or you'll certainly catch a cold."

I send him a grumble in displeasure, because I'm too lazy to do so. "Will you do me?"

"Hmm, if that's what you want, I'll gladly do it."

"Okay. Do it, please."

Mikazuki chuckles as he takes my towel and starts to dry my hair. Yes, with only a towel, because the hairdryer is being used by Kogitsunemaru right now. Gosh, you don't know how pitiful and painful life is when the three of us started living together. My bed is cramped now, I almost choked to death because Kogitsunemaru's hair strangled me in sleep, Mikazuki also hugged me to death in sleep twice before, I pushed both Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki off the bed thrice before, when the two of them have no pajamas they have to use brother Yamabushi's shirts and pants but they know nothing of modern times so they screwed up, Mikazuki was bad with electronics (and he is still bad, but he can use handphone and television rightly now - much improvement!) and drying Kogitsunemaru's hair - or fur, whatever it is - with only towels was a hell.

No hairdryer yet. Mikazuki and I would bring as many towels as possible to dry his hair together. Kogitsunemaru sat patiently. But because of that, the two of us hardly dry our own hair. Mikazuki, as an oddity, can dry his hair faster - I don't know how (Kogitsunemaru is the same, but his hair is too long) - so it's pretty much fine with him, but I get cold every now and then. Sometimes light flu, sometimes with fever.

Brother Horikawa bought a hairdryer after hearing this.

Of course, only Kogitsunemaru uses it. He is sitting near the corner of my room, drying his hair while humming. Really, I wonder how can he takes a good care of such long and thick hair. I'm tired enough with my short hair.

"Kogitsunemaru, you really love your hair, huh?"

I slipped.
Kogitsunemaru looks at me, smiling like a child, "Yes!" He doesn't refuse my statement about hair instead of fur? How rare. Kogitsunemaru continues with a prideful look. "For me, my fur is my point of manliness. I love it."

Uh-oh, he is still calling it fur.

"What…? Your body is manly enough, you know. Other men will surely get jealous seeing your body."

"Is that so? I'm certainly big for a small fox," he says, "But I love my fur the most. Fluffy and pure white."

"Why am I getting a thought that says you're the type that like to see someone wearing white underwear because it's pure in your sense?" I speak without thinking and Kogitsunemaru gives me what-the-hell look, I immediately continue, "I'm absolutely joking, don't worry. I don't care about your taste in underwear and such."

Mikazuki interrupts before Kogitsunemaru can say anything, "I'm sure you'll still look great in anything, Yamanbagiri."

"In…underwear, you mean?" I'm trembling in terror.

"Absolutely everything and anything. Underwear included, I believe."

Kogitsunemaru chuckles when he realizes that Mikazuki is teasing me, "Yes, I'm sure you'll look great in anything, Yamanbagiri. To prove that I like white stuffs, why don't you wear it next time?"

My own statement backfires me. My weapon is malfunctioning and attacks me, instead. How bitter…

"I admit that I lost to today," I bite my bottom lip in frustration.

"Oh~ Why don't you wear something cute right now, then? A punishment for the loser," Mikazuki giggles.

"Please stop this perverted topic right now. Drop it. Drop it. I know I started it, but it was a slip of tongue. Also a stupid joke of mine as usual."

Kogitsunemaru laughs, "Fine, then. The night is still long, let's continue it on -"

"I don't want to hear the continuation," I cut him off cruelly. Kogitsunemaru is still laughing elegantly, although less elegant than Mikazuki (and less annoying as well).

"Speaking of night, have you gotten a reply from him, yet, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki asks, changing the topic.

"Let's see…" I take my smartphone and check my email, "He hasn't."

What a disappointment.

"Your hair is dried now, Yamanbagiri. Dry mine next?" Mikazuki says.

I nod and dry his hair in return. His hair is normal, deep blue-colored. It is somehow kind of dried already - it's not wet now…but I still dry his hair with a towel anyway.

"He is really busy, isn't he? Living outside his country like that, studying and working with
"strangers," I say, continuing the talk, "But even I'm busy enough with people I know...I can't imagine all the troubles he has to face."

"But of course. He gets lessons he can't get from there. When there is something to gain, another thing has to be sacrificed. It's an absolute rule," Mikazuki replies.

"Even passing time like this to figure out something, to do something - is already a price, huh?" Kogitsunemaru says.

"Why are we talking about something rather grim right now? With a lot of something, on top of that."

"It can't be helped. All of us are hungry. Ah, I wonder if there is fried tofu today..."

"All you think is fried tofu, Kogitsunemaru." Mikazuki says.

"Well, at least not please spoil me, Yamanbagiri! thoughts like yours," Kogitsunemaru smirks.

"Mikazuki, you...you always have such thoughts?!" I immediately back away from Mikazuki.

"What kind of reaction is that," Mikazuki sobs, "Kogi, that's really cruel! Sure, I have such thoughts, but...I know I'm the one who gets jealous more easily than you, but I'm also the one who pushes Yamanbagiri to feel free on having other lovers, right?"

"Well, that's true," Kogitsunemaru nods, "But, you -"

"I'm not done yet," Mikazuki interrupts with a deadly serious expression on his face, "I actually don't demand fairness in this relationship. I only need what I need, I don't have to look into others - in this case, you, Kogitsunemaru - and ask myself am I getting the same thing as you? Instead, I have to ask myself am I getting what I need? Not everyone has the same needs and happiness is found more easily in having your needs met than in having the same things as the people around you. I'm joking about the fairness - I love Yamanbagiri and he loves me back, so I don't mind. Of course, I want attention from Yamanbagiri, too, but I don't want to hurt and force anyone."

The room goes deadly silent.

Mikazuki smiles and chuckles in his own old-man-way as usual as if nothing happened, "Why are you two freezing? Did the time stop?"

Kogitsunemaru snaps back first. He points the hairdryer towards Mikazuki with a shocked face, "A- Are you really Mikazuki?!!"

I snap back just then, I'm sure my face is a shocked one too, "W-Who are you?"

"A-ha-ha-ha, this isn't nice, you two," Mikazuki replies calmly, "Who else can slap on Yamanbagiri's buttock but he doesn't realize it during bath earlier?"

"Oh. You're right," Kogitsunemaru says, "You're Mikazuki!"

I throw the towel away somewhere. I take my pillow and I hit Mikazuki's face as hard and many times as I can until he falls down with a laugh, "Mikazuki, don't ever do it again! Not without my permission!" I'm still hitting his face. He can still breathe, can't he?

Yeah, I hear soft giggles come out from his mouth.

"Such thing doesn't have any meaning with permission, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says. I see
him turning off and plugging out the hairdryer. He finished his hair faster than I thought.

"I know, but that is exactly why. I dislike it. At least do it on bed - which is kind of unavoidable, not anywhere else." I sigh for nobody knows how many times today and leave the bed. My pillow is still resting on Mikazuki's face. "Let's have dinner already."

Mikazuki chuckles after he freed himself from the pillow, "Were you surprised by what I said, Yamanbagiri?"

"Of course. Everyone has their own serious side, but I didn't expect that from you. I don't think it's bad."

I open the door, not looking back.

"That's right," Kogitsunemaru follows me to the outside, "I think to have such thoughts are good. Fairness or equality doesn't matter in this case, indeed."

"Have you ever thought of it?" Mikazuki asks as he follows.

"Yes, of course. I'm content with having my needs met. This relationship, too…"

"How about you, Yamanbagiri?"

I must not stop walking. My face must be red right now. It's bad…!

"…I actually feel embarrassed hearing it, being the person in question."

Well, well, aren't I an honest one?

"Are you happy?"

The stupid Mikazuki asks.

"You know my answer already," I stop walking and turn my head to see their stupidly cute looks, "I am happy."

I see them smile warmly before they take my hands and pull me downstairs. This kind of thing is dangerous, I should get angry, but no - this time, I'll just smile and run along them.

"Don't run, you three! It's dangerous!" Brother Horikawa yells angrily when he sees the scene.

The three of us chuckle awkwardly as an answer.

Brother Horikawa puffs his chest and sighs, "As long as you know. Now, take a seat and have dinner."

The table is filled with delicious-looking still-hot dishes.

"There's tofu!" Kogitsunemaru says in happiness after he takes a seat. Well, it isn't dried tofu, but sesame tofu instead - it seems he likes all kinds of tofu.

"Eat the others as well, Kogitsunemaru," Brother Horikawa demands, "I won't let you go until you finish everything, even the pickled radish."

Kogitsunemaru frowns. He kind of dislikes pickled radish. He only wants to eat it when he is in the mood, but brother Horikawa demands him to finish all the dishes. It is impolite for Kogitsunemaru to
left something on his plate, so I just watch his misery.

I take a look at one of the dishes, "Green pepper, tofu, and chicken skewer? It's rare for you to made this, brother." And it looks out of place as well.

"We haven't had any chicken, so I think it's fine once in a while. Brother Yamabushi isn't here, so it's all good," brother Horikawa replies. Brother Yamabushi is a Buddhist monk in a sense, so he is a vegetarian. We eat vegetables most of the time when he is around - no meat at all. I don't mind, since brother Horikawa can make anything good. He claps his two hands, "Well then, itadakimasu."

"Itadakimasu."

I start with the sweet potato miso soup first. "Brother Horikawa's miso soup is the best," I comment - although it is likely because I need something warm. Brother Horikawa thanks me for the compliment. But, really, brother Horikawa's specialty is miso soup. All kinds of miso soup - and all kinds of porridge as well. His oden is also the best. Wait, that's plenty. Brother is really good at cooking basically everything.

"The portion seems smaller today," Mikazuki says. Now that he said it - yes, he is right.

"A friend of mine gave some potatoes, so I made croquettes as an extra. I want them to be finished by tonight, so try to not make your stomach too full before eating the croquettes."

"Okay," I can only nod. "It's a good rare occasion."

Brother Horikawa moves his chopsticks to take the pickled radish, "How is school, brother?" He asks.

"It went normally. I had a meeting, just like I said. It was surprisingly simple," I reply vaguely, "Oh, I have no homework as well."

"Hmm. Hmm. Alright. But what made you came home pretty late today?"

"Did I…come home that late?"

Brother Horikawa nods. His face is deadly serious…I'm getting scared. He has a sharp instinct, so he must have realized that I'm hiding something. I must not make him angry. Let's just tell him the truth.

I sip on my mineral water and clear my throat, "The meeting finished early. I had a plan with Yoshiyuki I've forgotten to tell you yesterday. He lost 20 rounds of a game and was going to cook me something as a punishment. But then…a case appeared. It appeared two days ago, actually, but just today I can face it directly."

"Another case?"

He is clearly demanding more details.

"Two days ago, I found that my classmate, Kashuu Kiyomitsu, has turned into a blood-sucking creature. Just today, I've confirmed that he is slowly becoming a jiangshi. I want to turn him back into human before he completely becomes a jiangshi."

"Do you know how?"

I shake my head after swallowing my food, "No. Not yet. I have no further information. Brother Yamabushi isn't here, so I can't ask. Tomorrow, I'm going to ask around," I softly tap my chopsticks
to the bowl. "Also, this area here seems weird today. The oddities around said so. Nobody knows for sure what is happening, but something wrong is going on, and I think it is somehow connected to Kashuu's case."

Brother Horikawa silently finishes his food, drinks water, and nods. He stares right into my eyes. "I see. Given the circumstances, I guess it is unavoidable for brother to be involved. That's alright, just take care of yourself. Don't put yourself into dangers."

"Yes, of course."

Although I can't promise him, I'll do my best to not run into danger straight-forwardly like usual.

"We will protect him, no matter what," Mikazuki says.

Kogitsunemaru nods while his mouth is munching food.

Brother Horikawa smiles, "I leave brother into your care, as always."

I feel that this kind of talk is…similar to a talk between a parent-in-law and a son-in-law, seriously. This is correct considering I'm engaged to Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, but still…I feel embarrassed thinking about it.

"Umm…can I have seconds, please?" Kogitsunemaru raises his hand.

"Are you sure you can eat the croquettes later?" Brother Horikawa asks.

"Of course!" Kogitsunemaru replies, full of pride.

Brother Horikawa giggles and moves to get more dishes, "Stay true on your words, please."

"Don't make trouble," I say as I sweep a grain of rice on Kogitsunemaru's cheek with my finger.

"I won't. If I do, feel free to punish me."

"What kind of punishment do you want?"

"Anything you want, of course. If I ask for what I want, it's not a punishment."

"I have an idea, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki pats my shoulder, "Either let him sleep without you for a week or forbid him to eat tofu for a month, which one do you want?"

"That's a great idea. Why not both?"

"A-Anything but tofu, please! I can't stay alive if I don't eat tofu at least once a week!" Kogitsunemaru sobs, "But I don't want to sleep without you, either…"

"Hmm, I wonder what is your punishment, then. Well, let's see if you make trouble or not," I chuckle.

"I hope I won't…!"

After we finished eating, I put all the plates and bowls on the kitchen counter.

"Brother, you don't have to clean the dishes today," brother Horikawa says with a plate of croquettes on his hands, "After you eat these, you can go to sleep. I'll do the dishes."
"Really?"

"Yeah, really," he puts the plate on the table, "You have to rest well. Nobody knows what you're going to face tomorrow."

Brother Horikawa is always considerate. I take a seat and take one of the still-hot croquettes. I eat it carefully. It is crunchy and tastes good, as expected from brother. I look at the plate - there are plenty. I wonder if they can be finished by tonight…well, there are two gluttons here. I should not worry. I see the two of them are eating the croquettes in delight. They look like cute hamsters with fluffy cheeks. I know they hear my thought. Be happy, alright? It's a compliment.

Mikazuki nods silently and Kogitsunemaru's ears shake twice. A form of agreement this time.

I turn on the TV out of boredom. My dining room is at the same place with the living room, after all.

"A single car accident happened at Suzuran today. The driver is safe and is currently receiving treatment for minor injuries."

The female presenter starts, her voice echoes from the TV's shell to the room.

"At our town? That's rare," brother Horikawa says as he takes a croquette.

Believe it or not, this rural town is named Suzuran. It comes from the flowers that reside here, the highly poisonous suzuran - lily of the valley. Really, I wonder who named it…it sounds like a rural town. This town isn't big, sure, but it isn't so rural, either. It is pretty modern like any normal cities in Japan. Look, I have a smartphone. Basically everyone has.

"The car collided with a telephone pole. It is highly suspected that the driver was drunk."

"That's not really rare," I comment.


"However, there is no alcohol found in the driver's body. The driver did not go drink, as his friends said."

"Now that's something," Kogitsunemaru says, "I have a bad feeling about this."

The television shows short interviews with the police and the driver's friends. The police found no evidence to back up the driver was drunk during the accident and the friends said that the driver is never fond of alcohol.

"The driver said that his car was suddenly pulled by dozens of black rope-like stuffs towards the telephone pole and he was powerless to stop it. The driver is completely sane, but such thing is deemed as impossible. The police is still trying to determine the cause of the accident."

"Oddity?" Brother Horikawa asks.

"Most likely," I reply, "Now, that's really rare. To openly caused an accident and failed to kill the victim like that…"

"Maybe the purpose isn't to kill the victim but traumatize him instead? An act of terror?" Kogitsunemaru says, "But anyway, that's weird. The oddity must be really strong to appear in front of a human that can't see oddities."

"Everything is possible at this point. Anyhow, this isn't good. Something unbelievable is going to
"If...if it does concern you, brother...and brother Yamabushi as well," brother Horikawa says as he looks at me, his knuckles are tapping on his cup, "Be careful. I wish for the best. May there be no casualties."

"...yes. I hope so," I watch the television once again.

The news program has changed topic. Now, it is the male presenter's turn to bring the news. Not that I care. I can't grasp what he says. I feel...sleepy...already? Looks like I won't play any games at home today.

"Brother, do you want to continue watching TV?"

"No. It's okay to turn it off."

I immediately turn the TV off and stand up.

"I'm going to sleep, then. Don't stay too late, brother."

Brother Horikawa smiles, "Of course. You too."

He goes to the kitchen and washes the dishes.

I see Kogitsunemaru hurriedly eats the croquettes and Mikazuki is sipping on tea calmly. Kogitsunemaru intends to finish the croquettes all by himself, it seems. They aren't done yet, huh...I can just leave them and go to sleep real soon, but it feels weird to do so. It has been almost a year since I started living together with them. Wherever I go, they're always there. To go sleep together is a routine. Sleeping together is a routine.

(On another note, so many weird is spoken today...)

While waiting, I decide to eat another croquette, helping Kogitsunemaru a bit. I'm pretty stuffed now, but there's no harm in eating another one. Just one. Only one. Mikazuki isn't going to eat more, I know, and brother Horikawa isn't going to finish it (most likely). Kogitsunemaru looks pained now, but he has to keep eating - he promised to. I should really consider on punishing him, it seems. What kind of punishment should I give?

Ah, forget it. He successfully finished the croquettes. I give the empty plate to brother Horikawa. I see Mikazuki gives a tea to Kogitsunemaru while chuckling. Kogitsunemaru accepts it and drinks it delightfully. He must be so thirsty before.

"You did your best," I say as I pat Kogitsunemaru's back, calming him down. He nods with a smile. "Well then, good night, brother."

"Good night. Have a nice sleep, guys."

The three of us go back to my room. I put the towel I threw away back to its place.

"That was a close call, wasn't it, Kogitsunemaru?" Mikazuki smirks, "You were about to get a punishment from Yamanbagiri."

Kogitsunemaru grumbles, "Well, yes...I'm glad everything turned out well at the end."

"That's right. I don't want to punish Kogitsunemaru, anyway."
"Kogitsunemaru - are you sure you're actually happy to not get a punishment? Yamanbagiri too, are you actually happy to not punish him?"

Does he mean…Kogitsunemaru wants me to punish him…and I actually want to punish him…?

"What kind of question is that?!" Kogitsunemaru throws a hair tie he is about to wear to Mikazuki. Mikazuki catches it easily.

"Mikazuki, you big idiot," seconds later, I throw a pillow to Mikazuki. It hits his forehead, but he doesn't budge even an inch. A very annoying expression stays on his beautiful face.

"Just normal questions, what are you two thinking? Hmm?" Mikazuki replies with a smile. He throws back the pillow along with Kogitsunemaru's ribbon and I catch it.

"I wonder what," Kogitsunemaru mutters, "Yamanbagiri, my ribbon."

I give him his hair tie. He calls it ribbon whenever he is tired. Yes, he is really tired now - too tired to give a counter-attack to Mikazuki. Well, the hair tie becomes a ribbon when he wears it, so I guess it is a ribbon.

"So…you won't answer me, Yamanbagiri?"

"Eh, is that a question I have to answer? Excuse me, then, but you've read my mind already. I don't need to answer now."

Mikazuki grins, "That is true. Are you going to sleep now?"

"I think so," I yawn and sit on my bed. I check my smartphone - no new notifications. I turn it off and put it to a coffee table next to my bed.

"Wait, you two. Comb your hair first before sleeping or it'll be a mess in the morning," Kogitsunemaru pulls my hand, a comb on his hand.

"What a bother…"

Kogitsunemaru hisses to me and Mikazuki chuckles as he takes another comb.

"I'll comb your hair, then, Yamanbagiri. No objection accepted," Kogitsunemaru says as he sits behind me and starts to comb my hair. I just stay still and relax.

"Please don't brush it too hard."

"Looks like I can't. There are tangles there and there!"

"Well, I'm sorry about that."

"You have to take care of yourself better, Yamanbagiri," he says as he brushes my hair.

"Hmm-mm."

"Hey, I'm serious here."

"I know."

"It's not like you have me or Mikazuki to take care of you all the -"
"I know."

In fact, I know that better than you.

"Nnh…" Kogitsunemaru gives up, "Sorry about that. You aren't in the mood to…"

"Yes. It's alright, though."

"Talking about taking care, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki approaches me, "I told you to spoil me today. Why don't you comb my hair right now?"

"You're serious about that part, huh…" I actually feel lazy, "But…okay."

Mikazuki sits in front of me and gives me his comb. I start to comb his silky hair that usually makes me jealous. I can smell his scent which is, actually, the same as me, considering we use the same soap and shampoo. But of course, when being used to different people, it gives off different feeling as well. Mikazuki's scent is nothing like mine.

"Is my scent nice?" Mikazuki asks without shame.

"I think so. How about mine?"

"You always smell nice," Kogitsunemaru says as he buries his face on my nape. It tickles me - I can make out the shape of his nose, touching my neck.

"Kogitsunemaru, are you done?"

"Yes…"

"Why are you burying your head there…?"

"Resting. And smelling your scent, I guess," Kogitsunemaru replies, "Ugh, my stomach is so full."

"It's your fault. You shouldn't ask for more serving…and then finish off croquettes like that…" I reply, "Thankfully, you can sleep faster now, right?"

"But…yeah. It can't be helped. Nobody wants to finish it," he groans, "Mikazuki only ate three!"

"My stomach differs from you, excuse me," Mikazuki says happily, "At least I help you. A bit."

Are they going to fight now? Sheesh.

"Now, now. At least this means you can sleep faster, Kogitsunemaru," I say (with a repeat) as I finish up tidying Mikazuki's hair, "I'm done, Mikazuki."

Mikazuki turns his body and face me. I hear him laughing softly before he pushes my body down. I can hear Kogitsunemaru grumbles in surprise when he automatically falls along me. Now, I'm getting sandwiched between Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki. I can feel their chest, it's really uncomfortable…

"What is this?" I ask with Mikazuki on top of me. He is hugging me tightly, I can't move at all.

"He…heavy…" Kogitsunemaru groans, as if he has a difficulty to breathe. Well, of course, he is being crushed by two heavy people all at once.

"Ehehehe," Mikazuki has a stupid expression on his face, "Nothing."
"I...I'm...I'm dying..." Kogitsunemaru sounds really pained.

I can only say, "Hang in there, Kogi. Mikazuki, will you get up already?"

Surprisingly, Mikazuki does as I asked and lies down in my right. I get up from Kogitsunemaru.

"What was that about? Really," Kogitsunemaru coughs a few times as the after effect.

"Forgive me about that," Mikazuki's face says that he isn't sorry at all, "I feel like doing it. I want to do some tickling, but...maybe now is fine?"

"No, please don't."

Of course I reject him.

"Ahaha, I know it. Let's sleep, then?"

I nod and Kogitsunemaru puts the two hair combs back to their place. He tie his hair, turns off the light, and crawls back to my bed, lying down in my left. He pulls the blanket to cover our (the three of us) bodies.

Mikazuki looks at him, "Why do you always tie your hair before sleeping?"

"So that my fur will be perfect in the morning," Kogitsunemaru replies with a smile.

Looks like hair still equals fur in his dictionary.

"You still have to comb it, though," I say, "Isn't it bothersome?"

"Hmm...I do feel lazy at times, so yes it is...but it's for my beloved fur. I have to take care of it pretty well."

"I see. Yamanbagiri should follow that example," Mikazuki says.

"What? Why me?"

"Take care of your own beloved body."

Mikazuki's gaze is deep. It's rather frightening.

I think he means...I have to keep myself away from dangers. I have to take my own safety as the top priority...right?

I take your smile as a 'yes'.

"...Of course. I will."

I kiss his lips as a goodnight kiss. I turn around to kiss Kogitsunemaru as well. The two of them proceed to kiss my cheeks altogether after that.

I grumble, "Hey, I thought I told you to stop that..."

"There's no harm, right? Why not," Kogitsunemaru says as he holds my hand, "Good night."

"That's right. You actually like it, don't you? Good night," Mikazuki says as he clings to my arm.

I can do nothing about that, huh...oh well...
"Good night. Sweet dreams, everyone."

I close my eyes.

"...By the way...we aren't going to talk about cute outfits for Yamanbagiri?" Kogitsunemaru suddenly speaks up.

"Ah. I forgot about that. Let's talk about it," Mikazuki says.

"...Sleep already, you two!"
I open my eyes and find myself inside a watery space.

I'm dreaming. This is inside my dream. I'm lucid dreaming, but I can't control stuffs here. I know, because this isn't my first time. This place inside my dream is a gigantic aquarium, a cage for my sinful self. As usual, I sit on a pale wooden chair, floating inside the space of sea where I can breathe rightly, but chains lock me in place. There are chains on the chair and my feet, but my hands are free.

_I can never move from here._

A blue whale swims in front of me; its large body covers my sight. It doesn't move and floats there, blocking my sight. I can see marks on its side, akin to scars. These scars are numbers - the front is 95, but the rest is blurry, but clearly not zeros - I know these numbers make up as hundred. _Nine hundred five thousand something_ of…what? Whatever it is, my heart always aches seeing it…I wonder why.

On my right hand suddenly appears a bubble-blower. I instinctively know I have to blow it to make the blue whale moves again. I blow it, but the bubbles that are out of the circle turn into small, orange-colored koi fishes. The whale moves away, clearing my sight, and the koi fishes swim across. I watch them swim far away until their colors change into pink, purple, and then blue - blending with the water, then vanishing without a trace. I stop blowing when the whale disappears completely as well.

I look around. Deep below me, stand white-colored crosses. Together, they make up a graveyard. Yes, a graveyard below me. There are something written there, but of course, I can't see that far. There are also flowers there. A long chain stretches from the ceiling to the unseen bottom - if this aquarium does have a bottom.

_Atop of me are glasses, as the usual aquarium has. Sometimes they become mirrors, reflecting stuffs inside. The blue light from outside world shines them._

On the same level as where I float, on the aquarium's walls, exist framed pictures. Maybe pictures from real world or paintings, I don't really know. I'm bored of waiting, so I count the pictures. I can only count up to 10 and the rest is blurry, as if a fog covers them, hiding them from me - although I know the pictures are more than 10, even more than 15, but what inside the pictures are blurry, almost unseen.

The only pictures I can clearly see and notice are Mikazuki's, Kogitsunemaru's, and brother Horikawa's portraits.
Why do their pictures exist here, inside my dream? I don't know. I don't even think about it.

"Where are you? Since I'm dreaming of this place, there must be you."

I yell, my voice echoes throughout the gloomy aquarium.

"It's rare for you to call me out," a familiar voice comes.

The same voice I heard in Kashuu's room. It's him, after all...but the conscious me doesn't know about him. When I wake up, I'll have no memory of this place, but the sensations and feelings will still remain. I always feel uneasy to wake up after this dream, but I can do nothing. If I don't wake up, I die. When I sleep and dream of this place, all memories of him come back as though big waves hit me cruelly. At first, I thought everything was an illusion, lies - but now, things are different.

"Well...I'm sure you have something to talk about to me. I want to ask you something, too. Come out already."

A white wooden chair and a round table appear to float in front of me. They look elegant, as if used for tea party and such. The boy I've called appears in a flash elegantly. He sits on the chair with a cup on his hand and he takes a sip on it.

"Good evening, Yamanbagiri," the boy finally speaks with a cheerful tone that doesn't match his sharp eyes, "Did you have a nice sleep?"

"I don't know, but since I'm dreaming, my sleep should be good. Hopefully."

"That's good, then," he says and claps his hands, "Now then, why don't we have a nice evening tea?"

"As usual? Sure."

Like I said, this isn't the first time I met him. In fact, we meet regularly. This boy - no, this nameless young man with a short posture - introduced himself as a passerby that wants to bring fortune to the unlucky me. You're not a passerby, then, I remember I said that. He just laughed and took me to join his tea party - only the two of us. Yes, inside the dream world, inside this watery aquarium. I was wary of him and I still do, but now, I can enjoy our tea time.

I still have no idea on what his name is. He rarely talks about himself. I don't even know what kind of oddity he is. I personally think of him akin to zashiki warashi, the child-like oddity, carrier of fortune to people's houses - in my case, my own subconscious mind - if it is ignored or treated badly, misfortune befalls. One of many reasons to have a peaceful relationship with him.

A plate of manjus appears on the table, along with the plates and my tea cup.

I pour the tea from the teapot to my cup. I raise the cup and smell the fragrance. "Green tea? How unusual." But I drink it anyway. I have no preferences for tea. "That is the reason for manjus today, huh?"

He giggles, "Yes! A change of menu once in a while is nice, isn't it?"

"The table and the cups don't match, though, but I don't really care," I say as I stare into my reflection in the green tea wavering surface. How can my reflections exist there, anyway? But this is a dream, so it doesn't really matter. "Even in dream, food and drinks taste good."

"Aren't they? There's no guarantee that they'll taste that good in reality, sadly," he says, "There are
discrepancy between reality and hope, after all."

"Such is reality, but this is a dream," I take a manju and bite it, "Oh, this is a matcha - green tea manju, huh? The main menu is green tea, indeed."

"Do you dislike it?"

"It's okay. I prefer something sweet now, but this is alright."

"I actually prefer something sweet, too. Next time," he eats a manju delightfully before continuing, "Why don't we start the business now? I'm sleepy."

"You didn't have enough sleep again?"

He chuckles apologetically, "Ehehe, sorry about that. I prepared this - it was hard, and it is for you, you know!"

"Hhh…make sure you get enough sleep. Even oddity needs a good sleep."

He just nods, "Now, the business. I'm sure you want to ask about Kashuu Kiyomitsu. He has started to become a jiangshi and you want to turn him back into a human - curing him, right?"

"I'm not surprised…you know everything, as usual."

"I don't know everything. I only know what I know - oh wait, that is someone else's catchphrase, let's not use that," he smiles innocently. Looking at him like this, he is really cute. A cute child. But he is older than me…way older. He said that he is about 700 years old. That's even older than Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. "I just know because I notice the information out there."

I accept his revision. "Yes, about Kashuu. And other supernatural problems that are happening around me as well."

I see him tapping his fingers on his glass and look at me, as if he is surprised, "Supernatural problems around you? For example?"

"What, you don't know? This is surprising."

"Like I said, I don't know everything. I do know about an accident on TV, but that's not what you mean, right?"

"Well, that one is included. First, I went to Kashuu's house today and he took a bit of my blood. Of course, I got dizzy - but not only that, I heard your voice, screaming let me out, and the world around me spun around. Just for these short seconds. Mikazuki said I didn't think anything there," I reply, "Second, the kodama was panicking because they found a dangerous tree around my residence, but they found nothing. A dark aura surrounds that area, too, chasing out the other oddities."

He rests his chin on his two palms, his eyes are deadly serious. He mutters with a low voice, "That's weird…such thing didn't happen before…why did I avert my attention from you that time? This is ba..."

"Hey…?" I don't understand what he muttered…

"Ah, nothing," he waves me off, "I don't know anything about these, either. I'll try to investigate, too. I know you're greatly worried about these things, but your top priority is to help Kashuu. Let them go for now, oddities around you will help, right? Don't forget about that and your safety."
"Plenty of people have said that to me today," I bite a manju, "But how can I help him? Brother Yamabushi is away…there isn't much time left for Kashuu."

"Didn't you create a plan to ask around tomorrow? Do that and you'll be fine. Just be careful around trees and nighttime. Avoid going out at night, especially for the next 3 days. Tell your friends the same."

I'm confused (as usual), of course, but I know everything seems dangerous now, so it is logical for me to avoid nighttime accidents. _Unless necessary._ I don't promise anyone.

"Okay," I nod to him. "Anything else to note?"

"Let's see…ah! Remember, Yamanbagiri," his pointer finger is pointing at the ceiling, his face looks so proud - he says matter-of-factly, "You share thoughts with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. You can do the same to _other stuffs._"

"As in, sharing _something_…internal? Inside the body?"

He nods with a smile, "How you do it, search yourself. It's pretty easy and simple, really! I'm sure you can do it."

"Hmm…alright. Let's see what the _conscious me_ can do," I drink my green tea again. Now, it tastes rather hollow. Perhaps I'm going to wake up any moment.

"You're talking about yourself as if you are a different Yamanbagiri Kunihiro - as if you're a different entity from him that remembers nothing about this dream when he is conscious."

"Do I? Well, that's a possibility. I might be just Yamanbagiri Kunihiro's subconscious mind - his id, ego, and super-ego in form of a human that looks exactly like him - his doppelganger in a way that is only conscious when _he_ is unconscious," I look at my own reflection in the tea again. I look exactly the same as _me_. The windows around me have become mirrors and reflect myself, there, too, and I find no differences between the conscious me and this _me_. "It is weird for me to forget _everything_ about this kind of dream when I wake up and remember _everything_ when I dream about this. I won't even remember that I had a dream most of the time."

"To dream is to remember, to wake up is to forget - something like that? Even though dreams are supposedly reflection of suppressed and ignored feelings…"

"Maybe. It is normal to forget about your dreams soon after you wake up, but in my case, I feel that _something_ is absolutely off. I have no recollections about my dreams in this place, nothing at all. I found it weird. That _something_, I wonder what it is."

"Since you heard my voice when you were conscious - or half-conscious today - the truth will be revealed sooner or later, I'm sure."

"I know you are the cause - or you know about my internal subconscious problems here, but you refuse to answer, don't you?"

He lets out a soft laugh out of his mouth, "Of course. I can't give you all answers. You'll find all answers to your questions in the future."

I accept his words. Demanding for more is useless.

"Ah, before I forget. This green tea is an obvious hint, don't you think?"
"Uguisumaru-senpai, isn't it? You don't have to reveal it, really."

"Ahahaha, I thought it was necessary."

"This means…Uguisumaru-senpai can help me?"

"Of course, but maybe not much. Just talk to him and Kousetsu during break time."

He talks vaguely as usual.

"Okay…ah, Hotarumaru told me to see him tomorrow…maybe after school, huh? He said he want to talk about something."

"Hmm, yes, that's the best plan for now. Listen carefully to what he says. Be careful on your investigation, Yamanbagiri. Kashuu might be stable now, but who knows what'll happen tomorrow."

"I know. Thank you, as always."

"Well, now the serious business is pretty much done, let's put them aside," he grins - so annoying, "I know Mikazuki encouraged you to have more lovers. Kogitsunemaru has accepted it, too. How do you actually feel about it?"

I almost choke on my tea.

"W-What do you mean…?"

How did he even know?

"I mean what I meant," he replies nonchalantly, poking a manju with his finger impolitely, "You know what I mean, right? Don't act oblivious to this."

I grumble unhappily, "Do I have to answer…?"

"Of course! Well then, I'll guide you, slowly but surely. You always dislike people that strive for happiness only or mostly by pursuing sameness or parity with others, right? You think people like that are cowards that can't stand by their own feet, those who have no firm beliefs."

"That's…right."

I shouldn't be surprised anymore. He knows basically everything about me, as if he is - my own self.

"Surely, when you heard Mikazuki said that he doesn't need fairness with others, you feel something. How do you feel, with all honesty?" He innocently eats a manju.

"Uh…" I hesitate. I look at him and his burning eyes are still looking at me, anticipating my answer -commanding me to answer. I finally give up and sigh, "This will become a wall of text. I'm sorry and brace yourself."

He nods with a smile full of anticipation.

"Honestly, there are times where Mikazuki's attention-striving acts are tiresome and annoying, but I'm happy to know that he loves me. Sometimes I feel bad to Kogitsunemaru for that matter, since he rarely asks for it with all seriousness unlike Mikazuki, but even there are times where I pay less attention to Mikazuki. I love the two of them, I don't want to hurt any - but in any kinds of relationship, it is impossible. No matter how much I love them and I want to give them love equally, I can't, and it hurts me. I tried to do so, but it is away from perfect, even good - I know. I'm not a
good lover for them."

I take a breath and drink my green tea before continuing. All of my thoughts are going to pour out now.

"I'm going kind of out of topic, sorry, I'll just say it. I thought our relationship won't last than 5 months because of this unfairness stuff, but it has been one year. We're still learning to be a better person in this relationship, sure, but we're halfway good, I believe. Even Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are becoming closer than ever. At the start of this relationship, they rarely talk to each other and usually send glares to each other, but now, they tell jokes, tease, and support each other - even about flirting me, they're in sync. The sight of them chatting while drinking tea, only the two of them - couldn't happen before. I have accepted their terrible flirting ways and their other flaws, they've accepted my random self, too."

I recall my memories with them so far. The images that come to my mind seem so vivid and real, as if I'm experiencing it all over again. The sweet times, the hard times…

I must be smiling like an idiot right now… I drink my tea to calm myself down for a bit.

"I've accepted them, I love them so much - I'm happy to stand next to them. But of course, my worry still lingers. Sometimes I'm scared that they'll eventually fight each other to death and these kind of stuffs… so when Mikazuki said that he doesn't need such fairness, I'm relieved - I'm glad - I'm happy. Kogitsunemaru accepted it, too, so the chance of them fighting to death is less likely now. Of course, I still want to treat them with justice. I want to be a good lover for them."

"Wall of texts, indeed," he chuckles, "Now, what's about the part that you can have more lovers?"

Straight to the point…

"I said it to Kogitsunemaru… I'm honestly not sure about that. I'm getting scared of all the possibilities that follow if I do get another lover. Once again, I don't want to hurt anyone, not even my new lover. I'll just wait for the future right now, and maybe leave the decision to Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru," I reply, "Besides, to be honest, I don't think I can get another lover. I'm not exactly a likeable person. Everything is still a possibility."

"I think you're likeable enough," he replies with a smile.

"No, I'm not."

"Your self-esteem is still low. Have more confidence and pride in yourself already. Two weird oddities fell for you and you have plenty of people you can call friends now - good, right? Your oblivious nature is your charm, by the way, so it's OK."

"Why are you giving me a lecture now? Oh wait, you do it most of the time vaguely."

I decide to ignore his words about me being an oblivious person. Some people have said the same thing to me, but, I still have no understanding.

"Yep. I'm glad you realized it!" He chuckles.

"You old man in a child's body…"

"I take that as a compliment from you. I'm happy," he looks at his pocket watch, "Ah, the time is almost up."
"That was faster than usual…" I immediately finish my green tea. It tastes like nothing now.

"You'll wake up soon. Do you have any other questions?"

"I don't think so. Thank you again."

"You're welcome. Now, go. Good luck, Yamanbagiri. Until we meet again. Don't ever forget about your duty and safety!"

"Yeah. I know. Serve sweet foods next time, alright?"

He shoots me a smile before my eyes shut down by themselves.

[Fade out to white]

Chapter End Notes

A long note exclusive for the very first chapter. I apologize for this, but please kindly read this to avoid confusion and stuffs.

*I don't think I'll discontinue this story. Sure, updates may be late - really really late, but I want to finish this with all certainty. The same goes from my other multi-chaptered fics (I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't write another multi-chaptered fics like this when there are still the unfinished). I hope so. If I do discontinue this anyway, that would only happened if I lost interest in Yamanbagiri - but I love him a lot right now.

*This is inspired by Monogatari Series. Only inspired, because this one greatly differs. It's a good thing because I can add more and more characters as Yamanbagiri's lovers, even if they can hardly fit in the usual stories.

*I have plans for this one already and it's going to be long. Like, really long. I hope I can update this regularly. (A friendly reminder that this is still chapter 1. Kashuu's arc will probably lasts to 3rd chapter. From my current guess, chapter 2 will have more than 5 parts. The real story hasn't begun yet - this is still far, far away from it. You can guess how long this is going to be...I'm getting scared thinking on how long this is going to be, seriously.)

*This is based on Japanese and Chinese mythology/legendary creatures. I have a limited knowledge and information, and thus, I fabricated some stuffs. They are made to be more up-to-date as well, blending more with the modern days.

*This is going to be illustrated by myself. They're still works in progress (cry). I take this in the form of a light novel - not all chapters have illustrations. There are times where
writing fast is easier than drawing and vice-versa...oh, as a spoiler, there’ll be illustration in chapter 2.

*There'll extra chapters, especially something like omake after an arc, stuffed with information corner about oddities, setting, etc, and perhaps extra stories. I can't just put the oddities' images on chapters they first appear, can I?

*Please kindly inform me about mistakes, especially in the formatting - such as missing spaces, because in my word editors (yWriter and Microsoft Word) everything is alright except for grammars - but when I copy them to AO3, errors happen for a reason I don't know. Mostly after or before italic and bold words. This is certainly a problem because I'm going to use a lot of italic and bold. I found plenty of missing spaces in earlier chapters, it frustrates me.

*I will only update chapters on weekdays. Most likely not Friday, though.

*The harem hasn't begun just yet, therefore the 'eventual harem' tag. Will be changed when Yamanbagiri gets more than 4 lovers.

*Mikazuki, Yamanbagiri, and Kogitsunemaru are already in a threesome relationship, but since this going to be a harem with more than threesome, I'm not going to add the threesome tag. Here's a warning - this fic isn't for those who only want to see one pairing. This is a harem, the pairings as the main focus will be different/switch each arc, and there's no other pairing other than those with Yamanbagiri. Yamanbagiri will officially date those who love him here.

*Just to be clear, the Yamanbagiri here is: usually sarcastic, enigmatic and expressionless most of the time, somewhat-random, sassy, straightforward, brutally honest, love to tease (usually with a straight face), like cute stuffs, selfless, a loner, an absolute gamer, and oblivious towards people that aren't his lovers. Of course, he is open to basically anything and is shy towards new people. When he acts in manzai/telling random jokes, he usually wears a straight face. He isn't really good to express himself, both in actions and face expressions.

*More characters and ships tags are going to be added later as they appear and story progresses. I don't want to spoil the story for the time being.

Thank you for reading!

References: Yokai.com, English Wikipedia, etc.
Email (Sent May 26th 10:00 AM CET)

From: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: Re: New case, new problems

Hello and good day, Yamanbagiri. I'm sorry for the late reply. It's morning here. I'm currently taking a short break. You can tell that I'm busy here, huh? You seem busy over there, too. My day isn't that good, either. Some teachers have lashed out their anger to me for no reason…is it because I'm Japanese? At this age and day…

Ah, I'm still amazed on how unlucky you are. I apologize, no offense intended. Unlucky isn't correct, but, you are attracted to incidents nowadays, especially concerning oddities. It isn't really a bad thing since you can help people in a way other people can't, but, it is dangerous for your well-being. One year ago with your upperclassman, umm, Ichigo Hitofuri, isn't it, you almost died. I was panicking here when I saw your email about the result…not to mention your incident with that person. You know who I mean. Your another childhood friend.

I wish you the best. Please, stay away from dangers.

If something bad happens to you, I will slay Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru and write their death poems. I'm serious. I'm dead serious. Feel free to show them this threat.

I'm happy, though. You seem cheerful nowadays, despite the problems. You're as honest and as sadistic as usual. Don't bully Yoshiyuki too much, alright? Well, you're always kind, no matter what, so your dark side is covered up, I believe.

I won't ask you about your rumors, don't worry. I think I know you well to know what kind of rumors that possibly shows up. Oh, right, how is your and Hasebe's work as disciplinary committee head going? I'm still chuckling sometimes reading the fact that you're the vice-president now. I'm sorry, I can't help it. The one with Yoshiyuki is funnier, though. How about your brothers? Are they well?

Feel free to send me your reports. You've sent me these before, too. No need for my consent, just send whatever you want. I'm always here to read and reply. Your email is as detailed and as long as ever, but it is really interesting. Sometimes I think I'm reading a book to fill the hole in my free time. It's a compliment, believe me.

See you soon, Yamanbagiri. We won't be seeing each other soon, though - well, I know you mean reading each other reply. Wish me luck to get along with the teachers, too. I have no problem to
study, so worry not.

P.S. I want to hear your voice. I think I miss you. Is it bad?

>>Reply
What I see in the morning the moment I wake up isn't the ceiling of my room, but rather, my own bed. Not exactly my bed - I can see the ceiling, but on my left is my bed - white sheets. I'm not dreaming, aren't I? I pinch my cheek. It hurts. This is reality. Okay, then…so, I guess I'm on the floor. This isn't my first time falling from the bed. But, weirdly, it seems like I'm still on the bed. When I look at my left, there's nothing but white. There's no Kogitsunemaru. I look at my right and find Mikazuki instead. He is still sleeping peacefully, his arms warp my body. I feel no pain whatsoever even though I fell to the floor…it must be because Mikazuki hugged me…all night long. I can hardly move with him hugging me like this, though.

"Mikazuki…?" I whisper as gentle as I could, "Wake up, Mikazuki…"

I hear him grumble a bit, but he doesn't wake up. I shake his shoulders, but he stays asleep.

I decide to pinch his cheek.

"Ungh…?" Mikazuki's eyes slowly open. He looks at me and smiles with half-lidded eyes, "Good morning, Yamanbagiri…"

"Good morning, Mikazuki."

He yawns and asks, "What's wrong…?"

"Look at our surroundings."

He sleepily looks at his left and right, and then up. "Oh…we're on the floor," he says as if it is normal.

"Yes. H-Hey, don't keep hugging me," I say when I feel Mikazuki's grip on me tightens.

"Why not? It's warm and comfortable…" He closes his eyes and starts to doze off.

I pinch his cheek again, "Don't go back to sleep, Mikazuki."

"Why not…?"

"Should I slap you or something?"

Mikazuki's eyes snap wide open. He smiles innocently, "No, no, anything but that. I'm awake now, alright?"
I wonder what time is it. I forgot to set my alarm clock yesterday…! But brother Horikawa hasn't come here; it means I'm still safe. I'm not late for school.

Then, I hear a sound of grumble from my bed. It's Kogitsunemaru. It seems that he is waking up.

"Kogi," I call him, "Kogitsunemaru. Are you up?"

I hear a soft rustle sound as the blanket moves slightly, "Umm…yeah…" Kogitsunemaru answers sleepily. "…Wa-wait, where are you, Yamanbagiri?!"

"On the floor."

Kogitsunemaru immediately finds me. He looks at me from atop the bed. "Oh god…how could you two sleep like that?" Kogitsunemaru groans in both worry and confusion, "Are you two alright?"

I'm too lazy to move just yet.

I reply, "I'm alright, I think. Mikazuki is as soft as a pillow. It's nice." And warm, but I don't bother to add it.

"More importantly, how could you two fall to the floor together while hugging like that…?" Kogitsunemaru is still in disbelief.

Mikazuki chuckles pleasantly, "Sleeping reflexes, I guess? I'm fine here, too. The touchdown must be gentle."

Kogitsunemaru sighs, "What a weird morning. Anyway, get up, you two. Yamanbagiri, you have morning duty today, right? You have to get up now."

"Mikazuki won't let me go."

"Yep, I won't~"

Can I hit him already?

"Pull him away from me, will you, Kogi?"

"Okay," Kogitsunemaru replies as he gets out of the bed and approaches my place. He starts to pull Mikazuki away from my body. Surprisingly, Mikazuki doesn't struggle and instead let him does it. Maybe he is still sleepy.

"Let's take a bath now…" I say as I stand up and take towels.

"I have days when all I want to do is to do nothing and sleep, you know," Mikazuki's voice comes. I see him lying on the floor lazily.
But you do nothing and sit around and watch most of the time almost everyday?

"Ahahaha. That's true."

Hhh…since you have nothing to do, take off your clothes.

"Eh?" I see Mikazuki gets up from the mirror, his eyes are suddenly sparkling. He acts shy, "What is this, Yamanbagiri? It's still morning and yet you want to do it…well, I'll happily-"

It's not that, you idiot. Don't mess with me in the morning.

Of course I mean that you should prepare yourself to take a bath!

"Ahahaha. Alright."

Brother Horikawa has already prepared the hot water, so we only need to dip in after we wash ourselves.

Kogitsunemaru comes after I finished brushing my teeth and brushes his teeth rather lazily. After that, the three of us proceed to take a bath together as usual. This time, I also wash them halfway. I have to do it quick, though, and we don't wash our hair this time. Kogitsunemaru wears a shower cap and Mikazuki ties his side hair with a hairpin to the back side of his head/hair. I wear a shower cap just in case, because I have two side hair and long bangs.

Really, sometimes I wonder how Kogitsunemaru puts his hair inside the shower cap rightly. His hair is long and thick, but he can put it inside the shower cap. Now, atop of his head, there's a bundle of white inside the shower cap. It's funny to see the big bundle that looks heavy. I'm sure Kogitsunemaru has no problem with it, though. He is strong, after all.

Afterwards, we go back to my room with towels to dress ourselves. Of course, I wear my uniform and my beloved jacket. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru wear their usual, hard-to-wear traditional clothes. I still feel weird seeing them wearing such complex outfits. Okay, it has been almost a year since I started living together with them, but I only asked them to buy modern outfits once. They replied something along the lines; "Nah, it's okay, that would be a bother." So I didn't ask them again.

It's still bothering me, though.

"I'll take no objections this time," I say while I'm combing my hair, knowing that they know what I'm thinking, "I'll go out and buy modern outfits for you two. Of course, you two are coming with me. I don't care about the pajamas; you two look comfortable enough in hakama. Just everyday outfits."

"Uuh…" I hear Kogitsunemaru groans. He is combing his hair as well.

"Like I said, no objections. Why are you so against it?"

"Hmm…I just think it's a bother…" He honestly replies, "And it'll feel weird…"

"You'll get used to it in no time."

"But…"

"No buts. I'm sure you two will look even more handsome, anyway. Outfits won't ruin your look."

That one is intentional.
The two of them suddenly go quiet. I turn around to see Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are blushing.

"If that's what you say, Yamanbagiri. Everything is okay," Mikazuki says happily, "You're pretty bold now, by the way…how embarrassing."

"Yeah, yeah. You guys are so simple," I say with a mocking tone, but then I approach the still-blushing Kogitsunemaru and kiss his lips lightly. "It's alright, if you don't know how to wear it and stuffs, I'm here to help."

Kogitsunemaru nods with a smile. His ears shake twice. I tug on one of them with my fingers. He jumps in an instant and his face becomes red once again. I already knew that his ears are his sensitive spot and it's always fun to see his reaction.

"A-Anything but there…!" He sobs, but he doesn't slap my hand. I chuckle and pat his head.

I approach Mikazuki and before I can do anything, he pulls me into a kiss I don't resist.

It's a good morning kiss, I think. It has become a habit…a routine I can't miss. Good morning kiss and goodnight kiss…huh, I've taken kisses quite lightly now, haven't I?

"By the way, are you really alright, Yamanbagiri, Mikazuki?" Kogitsunemaru asks. He means the fact that the two of us fell to the floor this morning, huh.

"I'm completely unharmed," Mikazuki replies.

"Me too. Mikazuki is so soft and fluffy, though, I can hardly believe it," I comment as I take my books by schedule and put them inside my bag.

"Ha! I think I know the reason. You're getting fat, then, aren't you, Mikazuki?" Kogitsunemaru teases, "Look at that fluffy cheeks."

"Ahahaha, what about you? I'm sure you're the same," Mikazuki strikes back, "Who asked for more servings yesterday?"

The two of them send glares to each other, still smiling.

These oddities…old men in age, children inside, arguing over physical bodies like two female students…

I cut them off before a fire breaks out, "Let's go already, you two."

They nod, but before that, I turn on my smartphone. Uh, I forgot to charge it yesterday…guess I'll charge it at my classroom. I'll arrive early, after all.

"Ah. He replied," I say when I look at my email notification.

"Finally. What did he say?" Kogitsunemaru asks. Mikazuki peeks in curiosity.

I chuckle and shove them my smartphone. They read it.

"He is really worried about you, the unlucky Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki chuckles.

"He threatens us, though, Mikazuki," Kogitsunemaru says, "Well, we'll protect Yamanbagiri no matter what happens. Thanks for the reminder."

I smile to them and decide to write him back later.
We go downstairs and meet brother Horikawa who is currently placing the plates on the table. The breakfast today is western-styled (I think) - bread pudding. "Good morning. Just in time," he smiles, "I wonder if sugar is good enough for a busy day?"

"I think it is enough," I reply. Kogitsunemaru looks sad that there isn't any tofu, but it can't be helped.

After we do our usual morning ritual, we eat the breakfast happily.

"Oh. Brother," I call in the middle of the meal, "I want to go to the shopping district this Saturday. I want to buy modern outfits for Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. Is that alright?"

"That's alright. If you don't have enough money, I'll lend it."

I nod.

"Oh. Nevermind, I'll give you one now, brother. I'm going home at eight today, so I can't make dinner. Buy something good, okay? You can cook too, if you want," brother says as he takes out some papers of money from his pocket and gives them to me, "I hope that'll cover for dinner and your plan in Saturday."

I count the money, "I think it is enough. Thanks again, brother."

In fact, the money he gives me is a little bit too much, but I won't refuse extra money. I put them in my wallet.

"Yamanbagiri, let's buy tofu for dinner!" Kogitsunemaru says excitedly.

"No. I think I want something western tonight."

Kogitsunemaru pouts cutely like a child, but he nods anyway.

After everyone finished eating, I put the empty plates on the kitchen counter and take my bag.

"Brother, I have morning duty to prepare the class today, so I'm going ahead. I'll leave cleaning the dishes to you again."

"I see," Brother Horikawa says, "Here, your lunchbox. Don't forget it."

"Yeah. Thanks as always, brother," I take the lunchbox and put it into my bag. I wonder what it is today. Since he made western breakfast, it should be something western, too…

"Be careful on your way and study well," he smiles before he goes to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

"Okay. I'm going."

I get out of my house and walk to the school.

I look at the sky, "It's cloudy…how rare. It's pretty cold as well."

"Well, it's June soon. Rainy season is soon," Mikazuki says.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Kogitsunemaru says.

"Ah, please, leave this day as a peaceful one…” I sigh, "Whoops, sighing in the morning is bad."

"Let's sort out our plan for today, alright?" Mikazuki suggests.
"That's a good idea," I reply as I wear my hood - I feel bothered without it, "So, first…me. I'll meet Uguisumaru-senpai and Kousetsu-senpai during break time and ask them a lot of stuffs. After school, I will go to the riverbank and meet Hotarumaru and hear what he wants to say."

Thankfully, the street is empty so early in the morning, so it's alright for me to say out loud.

"I'll wander around to gather information about jiangshi," Kogitsunemaru says, "I'm going out until second break time because I'm sure that'll take a long time. Mikazuki can stay with Yamanbagiri at that time."

"Right. After Kogitsunemaru comes back, I'll go and ask the kodama about yesterday's incident until the school is done. If I haven't come back after school, just go to the riverbank and I'll catch up," Mikazuki says, "That concludes it. Let's do our best to ask around."

Kogitsunemaru and I nod. We continue to talk while walking.

"Today is going to be pretty hectic," I say, "We better get ready."

I see Kogitsunemaru floats on my right and smiles, "Of course. As long as I'm with you, though, I'm ready for anything and everything."

"What is that? You're going alone, you know." Though I can't help but to smile.

"Because anything for Yamanbagiri is alright. The moment the decision was made, we're ready," Mikazuki smiles as he links my arms with his.

How am I supposed to reply, really?

"Yamanbagiri, too, get ready if we suddenly attack you or something," Kogitsunemaru smiles.

What's that supposed to mean? Please spare me from any activities on night like that for a while.

"Are you sure you don't want it? It has been a pretty long time since we did it…" Mikazuki says, smirking to me.

No, it hasn't been that long. We haven't done it for just one month.

"If you want to, just tell us. Don't be shy, we know how to please you."

You - you guys are so annoying.

"Ah~ Yamanbagiri is blushing~" Mikazuki chuckles, "It means you want it, right? Here, let me give you a kiss."

My right palm slams on Mikazuki's face before he can kiss my face. Haha, not so fast…!

I suddenly feel someone is biting my right earlobe.

"K-Kogi…?! No, no, not my ear -!" I immediately shout in surprise even though I'm not supposed to, "Wait, that's not the problem! Stop it!"

"Payback for earlier," Kogitsunemaru is snickering, "Just a little revenge, alright? I'm sure you will enjoy it, Yamanbagiri."

"Like hell I will enjoy it here!"
Mikazuki suddenly kisses my palm that is resting on his mouth. He doesn't want to lose, too, it seems. As Kogitsunemaru starts to lick my ear, Mikazuki also licks my palm.

"O-Oh god, stop it, you two," I mutter as I try to hold back my desire to just moan, "Stop, just stop."

My voice sounds so weird…!! I'm starting to tremble, too. I have stopped walking…

"I-I don't want to get tired so early in the morning, okay? I know I'm vulnerable in the morning, agh. I have a morning duty, too, so please…stop…"

"Nnh, but we do it right now is precisely because you're vulnerable in the morning," Kogitsunemaru says right next to my ear.

I can tell that Mikazuki is smirking. I can feel the shape of his lips on my palm. I can't pull my hand back, Mikazuki grabs it so hard.

"N-No, please, stop…!"

No response is given.

This is bad. It feels good, but I must not give in!

I have to use my last resort. Even though I don't want to…!

"T-Tonight, okay? We can do it tonight. Just not now."

They stop working altogether. I finally pull my hand away from Mikazuki and sigh. Not in really in relief, because I'm safe for now…but not tonight. Sadly.

"Save your energy for today's works," I say at the end.

I see Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru pull themselves away from me and smile brightly, their eyes are sparkling. They hug me with all power, almost making me fall. I hear their squeals of happiness and just pat their head. I really can't get angry when they're cute like this…

We continue the journey to school (with Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki cling to my arms and occasionally mutter something I don't really comprehend), but I visit the park near school first to wash my palm and ear because…earlier.

"Do you really need to wash it?" Kogitsunemaru asks, looking a bit dejected.

"Of course," I begin to clean my ear and hands with the water.

"You go to sleep immediately after doing it, though?" Mikazuki says.

"That's different…I have something to do now. The day is still long."

Besides, I'm tired after all of that activities…and the stuffs I do during the daytime. Of course I'm beat.

"Yamanbagiri at times like that is really defenseless," Kogitsunemaru says.

"We-well…is that…bad?"

"No, of course not!" Mikazuki suddenly embraces me from behind after I wipe off my ear and hands from the water with a handkerchief, "Your cuteness goes up when you're like that."
"Yamanbagiri is the cutest," Kogitsunemaru says as his cheek rubs against mine. How soft…and fluffy…

I can feel that my face is hot again. They've been teasing me on the way until here. Looks like they intend to continue it.

"Why do I feel that you two are implying yesterday's events…?"

I decide to continue walking to the school. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are sticking close to me.

"Because we are?" Kogitsunemaru says innocently.

"Accept it already, Yamanbagiri. You are cute," Mikazuki says.

"Hnn…" I sigh for the second time today, "Why do you two keep on teasing me today? It's weird…"

It's not like I'm not happy or anything. This is just bad for my heart…and so early in the morning!

"We apologize for that," Mikazuki smiles, "We'll part with you later, which is weird after we spent the whole day together for almost two years without miss. Sure, I went somewhere yesterday, but it wasn't that long. I stayed inside you after that."

Kogitsunemaru nods in agreement, "Don't miss us later, Yamanbagiri. We don't want to see you sad."

"That's my line. Don't miss me and cry to me later."
Without realizing, we arrive at the school grounds. The school gate is opened widely; no gate guards (students from disciplinary committee that wait near the gate to close it and take notes of the late students) are there yet. Far away on the sports grounds, I can see some people are there. They must be in the athletic clubs, having a morning practice. Students are running there and there. I decide to stop speaking out loud with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru and walk into the building.

As the second year, my class is in the second floor.

Yesterday, the meeting between me, Hasebe, and Ichigo-senpai was held in the third floor because it was Ichigo-senpai's classroom. Hasebe wanted to do it in my (and his) classroom, but he forgot to ask for the key and it was a bother to go to the faculty room in the first floor, so we decided to use Ichigo-senpai's classroom instead (and we've arrived in the third floor to get Ichigo-senpai without the key). As a part of the student council, he has a spare key (I don't know for what).

I slide the door open and find that there is someone inside the classroom already.

"Oh…good morning, Yamanbagiri."

I thought it was Hasebe since he is likely to arrive this early, but the voice is Yasu - I mean Yamato's.

"Good morning, Yamato. Do you always arrive this early?" I ask as I close the door and walk to my seat on the back row.

"Ah, no. I have morning duty today," Yamato replies as he turns around to see me - his seat is actually near mine, just on different row, "With you."

I didn't know that. I didn't check on with who I'll be doing it. I tend to have no care about such things.

"Oh…right…"

I take the chair down and put my bag on my desk. I take out my smartphone and charger and charge my smartphone.

"Good morning, Yamato," Mikazuki greets elegantly.

"Good morning, Yamato," Kogitsuemaru smiles.

They try to act polite, I see. Good, good.

Yamato looks surprised, he straightens himself as if he is meeting his boss for the second time, "G-Good morning, umm…Mikazuki-san, Kogitsuemaru-san."

"No need to be so stiff and polite," Mikazuki waves him off.

"That's right, Yamato. In fact, please be impolite and harsh with them," I say.
Yamato looks at me in disbelief.

"Ahaha, you don't have to believe in him," Kogitsunemaru says, "Just be casual. Don't worry; we won't bite you or something."

"If they do bite you, anyway, please tell me. I'm ready to punish them," I add.

"O…Okay," Yamato looks dumbfounded right now. Maybe he is confused on how can I act like that with two high otherworldly beings. Of course, I can't tell him that Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are my lovers and we're going to get married (without humans' world laws, of course)…

"Let's begin, then?"

Yamato nods, "Can you erase the blackboard, Yamanbagiri? I'll take the chairs down."

"Sure."

"Ah~ Yamanbagiri, we're going to go inside you," Mikazuki says after he yawns, "I'm sleepy, after all."

"Okay. Go ahead."

Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru approach me and hold my shoulders before they disappear altogether.

"They live inside you?" Yamato asks, his eyes are full of curiosity.

"Kind of. They usually come out and float next to me, though. Well, let's get started."

My mind is still connected to theirs, by the way.

Yamato nods and starts to take down the chairs.

I erase the writings on the blackboard and re-write the date as today.

I open a window and take two blackboard erasers. I stretch my arms to outstrip the window and clap the two erasers together. The dust or whatever from the erasers becomes little clouds of white. Gosh, I don't know how to describe them rightly, but anyway, you can imagine. I cough a few times as the effect. After I finished, I put them back on their place.

I see Yamato is halfway done through his work.

"I'll help you, Yamato."

I immediately take down the chairs Yamato hasn't taken down before he replies.

"Ah…thanks."

"No problem. Uh, hey…how is Kashuu this morning?" I ask in the middle of work.

"He looks better that before. He is more energetic than usual, in fact," Yamato replies, also working. The classroom is full of creaking chairs. "He told me that he wanted to jog, but the sun is hurting his skin. He said he wanted to do so tonight."

"That's good…" Eh? Did he say tonight? I immediately fix my words, "Wait. No, he absolutely must not go outside tonight. You too, Yamato. Not for this three days."
I look at Yamato and he looks back at me, "Why?"

"It's dangerous," I don't know how, but I know this in all certainty, "Suzuran - this city - is having heavy supernatural problems right now. You must, absolutely, go outside at night. Nighttime is the time for most oddities to go on rampage."

I said absolutely, but I have no promise that I'll do the same.

I see Yamato blinks a few times, a surprised expression on his face. He nods after, "Alright."

"Do you believe me?"

"Yes, of course. I have no reason to not believe you," He replies, "Sorry about yesterday, in front of the convenience store. I was too harsh."

"It's fine. Your reaction is normal."

"Thank you for yesterday, Yamanbagiri. Kashuu is relieved to know that there's hope for him."

"I haven't helped anything other than giving information, though…"

Yamato flashes a smile, "That's enough for now. Thank you again."

"Y-Yeah…no problem…" I always feel uneasy (maybe flustered) when someone is thanking me like this. I mean, I don't think I deserve it. "Ah, now we finished with the chairs. What do we need to do next?"

"Hmm…the trash bin is empty already, so…we are finished, I guess," Yamato shrugs, "Sometimes I wonder on why there's morning duty when there's after school duty."

I chuckle, "I understand that. Though this means we're on duty for the whole day until school ends."

"True…" Yamato yawns, "Do you have anything important to do after this, Yamanbagiri?"

"No, I'm not. I'm free until the bell rings."

"I see," Yamato approaches me and fidgets with a shy look and faint red on his cheeks. I wonder why he is acting like that…he continues after a few seconds, "Can we…talk? I-I want to know more about you…if that's alright."

"Sure. I want to know more about you, too."

He doesn't have to stutter like that…I feel kind of bad.

I see his face brightens up with a faint smile, "R-Really?" He asks, probably without thinking.

"Of course. We're…friends, now, aren't we?"

"Y-Yes," Yamato nods, I can clearly see that he is happy with my answer, "Shall we talk on your desk?"

"Sure."

I can't refuse to his suddenly cheerful face, can I? Besides, I really do want to know more about him.

I sit on my seat and Yamato sits in front of me. He, however, stays quiet, as if wondering on what he
should talk about. He is nervous, even I can tell (and I know how he feels because I've experienced it)...so, I decide to speak first.

"How are you, Yamato? How do you feel now that you can see oddities?"

That's my concern about him.

Yamato takes a deep breath before answering, "Yesterday's night was quite scary."

"What did you encounter? If I can ask."

"It's okay. Uh...there were...weird-shaped creatures - that scared me - walking outside. I could see them from the window. I'm sure Kashuu can see them, too, but he rarely sees through the window."

"How many were there?"

"More than 15, I think...?"

Whoa. That area - also area near this school - is pretty active at night, huh? My neighborhood is similar to that, too. "That's...indeed traumatizing. I'm sorry, I think it's better to close your sixth sense, after all..."

"No, no, I'm okay with this," Yamato waves me off, "I was just surprised. It was my first time seeing them, after all. I'm...pretty good at ignoring...stuffs...after some time. I just need more time to adjust myself with this new thing."

"Are you really okay? You look like you haven't gotten a good sleep."

I can see dark circles below his eyes, seriously.

"...Well...actually, I saw eyes on the ceiling."

"That's it. I'm going to close your -"

Yamato stops my hand that is reaching him with his hand almost immediately, "No, please don't. I'll keep it. Like I said, I only need more time."

"Why do you...intend to keep it?" I think it's pretty forced....

"I'm...a part of me is curious about oddities," Yamato says with certainty, his eyes are gazing at me, "I want to know more...about the world you're into, Yamanbagiri."

"But it's dangerous."

Why does he want to know, anyway? But I can't ask him that.

"I know. But even for once, I want to know...besides, Kashuu, my friend, is currently stepping into that world," he says, "I want to see the things he may see. At least, I want to keep my sixth sense opened until Kashuu is back to a normal human. Is that...too much?"

I can't say no to these eyes full of hope, can I?

"If that's what you want...okay. Just be extra careful. Not all oddities are human-friendly. Make sure they don't know you can see them now."

Yamato nods, "I understand. Thank you..."
"You don't have to thank me about that."

Just then, I realize that...we're holding hands now. He stopped my hand with holding it, and it stays still there.

I can feel my face is becoming hot again.

I want to say something about our hands to Yamato, but then I feel that his hand is trembling. Trembling out of what?

"Yamato, your hand is trembling. Are you okay?"

"Eh?" He looks at his hand and blushes. "I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to..."

He is about to pull his hand away from mine when I quickly say, "Do you mind if we keep this...for a little while? I want to make up what I've done to you."

"Eh...?"

"Umm...I think that...you're trembling because of the oddities. In this classroom, too, there are some...they're human-friendly, but...they look scary, right?"

I see him rolling his eyes to see somewhere else, avoiding my gaze, "Y-Yes..."

"It's okay," I tighten my grip on his right hand, "I can do nothing about that, but I'm here. I can give you a little comfort, and this is it...do you mind?"

"...I don't mind holding hands...if it's with someone I like...with you..."

Now he looks downcast. I don't understand what he means.

"Huh?"

"It's nothing. And you did nothing wrong to me, Yamanbagiri..." Yamato says, "I'm the one who is at fault. I'm the one that has to make up to you."

Once again, I don't understand what he means. I'm the one at fault here, so why is he...?

"Why? You did nothing to me."

"It's...nothing. I don't mind if we hold hands," Yamato finally looks into my eyes, although he seems a bit reluctant, "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Yamato. It's okay."

I don't deserve apologize, anyway.

He might apologize out of embarrassment from holding hands, but for some reason, I don't think so here.

I don't really mind holding hands as a form of comfort, so I'm not really embarrassed. My blushing from earlier when I've just realized that we're holding hands? That was purely out of surprise. What else do you think?

The two of us stay quiet with my hand holding his.
His hand is cold, as cold as yesterday's. I don't know if my hand is warm or not, but, I hope it is. I want to comfort him somehow...he doesn't look *that* troubled, sure, but...I can't help but to reach him.

I'm sure I've never held his hand before yesterday, however, it seems familiar. His hand. His fingers. His coldness. His awkward words in awkward situations that aren't like him at all...all of sudden, everything about him seems familiar, even though I've never gotten so close with him before today. How mysterious...it might be just imagination, after all. *Déjà vu* is false most of the time...right?

How many minutes have passed since we started to stay quiet?

This is so awkward, for god's sake.

"U-Uh, Yamato," I finally call, "Do you have...any other trouble?"

Yamato shakes his head, "I don't think so."

"Do you...want me to do anything else?"

Whoa, what a stupid question I've just spouted!

I can see his eyes are widening in surprise. What a bad idea, *me*.

"F-Forget it," I immediately correct myself.

"Yamanbagiri..." I almost jump when he calls me. I stare at him, waiting for his words. He stares back. "I...I want to become friends with you. I want to get closer to you. Is that...alright?"

I look at him deeply. He looks like he really wants to befriend me...there's no way I can reject him. "Of course it is alright. Didn't I say we're friends already?"

"Ah. You're right," Yamato finally smiles, "Sorry, I was an idiot. I didn't think clearly with your hand is holding mine."

"Eh, are my hands a bother...?"

"N-No, of course not!" He almost shouts, "I was really embarrassed. I was nervous. I still do, but...I like your hand..." His voice turns into a whisper, "It's warm...and nice."

"I see..."

I'm glad if he thinks so, but his words make me even more embarrassed here.

"I'm sorry. This is so awkward, isn't it?" Yamato chuckles, a bit forced but sweet nonetheless, "I'm at loss for words, honestly."

"Same here," I say, trying to overcome my embarrassment, "Well, why don't we talk about each other's liking? Hobbies and stuffs, since we want to know each other better."

"Let me start first, then," Yamato clears his throat, "I'm interested in Yama-"

He abruptly stops talking.

"Yama...? Mountain?"

"Y-Y-Yeah. I want to climb a mountain even once," he finally says.
"Ooh, I want to do it, too. I have mountain in my name and I think I have to do it someday," I reply, "For me, I think you already know. I love computer-related stuffs and games. Basically only these two. And some anime. What else do you like?"

"I think I like doing housework. I live with my mother and she rarely goes home, so I do housework all by myself. Cooking is fun. Sew up cloths and stuffs have become fun, too. I can only sew simple stuffs, though."

That sounds pretty girly, but cool enough for me, since I can never do such things.

"I also love reading books. Mostly historical books," he adds.

"What kind of historical books?"

"Modern wars, such as World War 1 and 2," he replies, "I'm especially interested in tanks."

"That's surprisingly manly, coming from you. Aah, no offense."

He smiles, "I know. People have said the same thing."

"What tank is your favorite?"

"I don't have particular favorite, but, I think I love reading about German tanks the most. The history of their making and such are interesting."

"I see."

I shut my mouth.

W-What should I say next? I'm nervous, too. The more I become conscious of our linked hands, I…I…maybe I shouldn't have offered that, after all…but I did it…anyway, I have to stay calm!

"Uh…Yamato?"

I suddenly realize that his finger is rubbing on a band aid on my finger.

"What's wrong…?"

"I…I just think…it hurts, isn't it?" Yamato replies, staring at my finger, "This wound…" He keeps on rubbing the band aid. Although it doesn't hurt, his touches are tickling me.

"Y-Yeah. But it's okay now."

"Hmm."

I feel his fingers are slipping between my fingers.

Our fingers interlocked now.

I can feel my face is becoming hotter than ever. I can't think anything clearly now. I don't think I've ever done it with Yoshiyuki before, but now…with Yamato…

I-It's not like I mind it, but…

"I-I'm sorry!" Yamato suddenly yells, snapping me out of my daze, "I didn't think that I…our….fingers…" He can't even say it clearly, "L-Let's just part our hands. Someone is going to come
soon, I think…"

"O-Okay…"

He leaves my hand almost immediately and he looks down with a completely red face. My face must be as red as his, too, or even redder. How embarrassing this situation is…

My hand is still resting on the desk, frozen.

The two of us stay quiet.

And then the door suddenly slides open.

"Good morning."

Hasebe's voice surprises me and Yamato. The two of us involuntarily look at Hasebe who is standing on the doorway, looking to us.

"Morning…Hasebe," I greet him back as fast as I can.

"Good morning," Yamato bows his head.

Hasebe looks stern and scarier than usual as he closes the door and then approaches my place.

"I don't know you two are close," he says.

How can he conclude that Yamato and I are close just because we sit facing each other…? I don't think he heard us talking (hopefully not). Well, he isn't wrong, I guess.

"J-Just recently," I reply. I must act natural so that Hasebe won't suspect anything.

Hasebe looks around the class, "I see that you two have done the morning duty."

"Of course," Yamato replies this time.

Hasebe walks to his seat wordlessly and puts his bag on his desk. He then proceeds to go outside the classroom.

"Huh? Hasebe, is today your turn as gate guard?" I ask in confusion. Hasebe always arrive at school pretty early, sure, but he usually stays in the classroom until the bell rings.

"No, but the supposed gate guard is not coming to school today, so I replace him," he replies and turns around, "Do you want to help me, Yamanbagiri?"

"No."

"Well, of course. I expect nothing from you."

"Hasebe, don't mess with me in the mor-"

"Well then, I'm off."

He walks away and closes the door. Happy working, Hasebe.

"You two are pretty close, aren't you?" Yamato asks.

"You can say so…"
"Hmm…I'm kinda…envious…"

He is just whispering, but I can hear him clearly. That comment surprised me…now I'm embarrassed again.

Yamato sighs, "Sorry, I'm such an idiot."

"Eh?"

"Err, I'm just grumbling, don't worry."

He is really nervous, huh?

"Yamato, do you want to open all the windows?" I ask, "It can calm us down."

I say us. Yeah…I'm being honest…

"Y-Yes."

We stand up and open all the windows. We stand there, facing the opened windows and look at the scenery outside.

"It's cold," Yamato says.

"But nice," I add.

We inhale and exhale the morning breeze. We look so depressed here, honestly.

"Yamanbagiri, I'm really sorry about earlier," Yamato says after a few minutes of silence.

"It's okay. I don't mind."

He apologized for plenty of times now, it makes me feel really bad.

He stays quiet. I look at his guilty face and say, "You don't have to worry about such things. I was the one to hold your hand first."

Yamato turns around to face me, "…Okay. Feel free to scream to me if I…do such things ever again, Yamanbagiri."

"I can't scream, you know, but I'll tell you if it's bothering me."

"And if it doesn't bother you…?"

"I will probably stay quiet."

Yamato's eyes are wide open for a moment, his voice is shaking, "But that…that means you like it, right…?"

"I guess so. There's nothing wrong with that if the people in question are comfortable."

I can see that Yamato's face is turning red again. Did I say…something weird? I don't think so…

"Thank you, Yamanbagiri…"

"For what?"
"I just want to say it."

Yamato smiles, but his cheeks are still red. The sunlight from the outside almost covers them, though. He looks strangely…shining, that I can't look away from him.

When I realize, his finger is pulling my bangs gently.

Yamato’s face turns into a shocked one when he realizes what he is doing.

"A-Ah! I did it again…” Yamato bows his head, I almost can't see his face. He whispers, "I can't control myself when you're looking like that…”

What does he mean? Control???

He finally looks at me and says, "Yamanbagiri, I'm so-"

I pull his bangs with my fingers. It's pretty embarrassing, but, better than more awkward moments, I guess.

"Don't say sorry. Here, we're even," I reply, "Your hair is pretty thick…"

Yamato is in silence for seconds, as if surprised, and then he smiles again. "Yours too, Yamanbagiri - and your bangs are long. Mine is not that long."

"Really? Oh well…” I look at Yamato, "Your ponytail interests me, Yamato."

"Eh? Ah…it's stupidly big, isn't it?” He chuckles, "Do you want to see my hair when it's down?"

"I-Is that okay?"

"Yeah."

I nod in excitement.

Yamato pulls his hair tie and his hair falls down slowly. His hair reaches his chest level now - looking thick but rather messy, sharp strands there and here.

"I don't know your hair is that long…” I mutter.

"Are you surprised?"

I nod, "I don't expect it. Can I touch your hair?"

"E-Ah? O-Of course you can."

I touch his longer side hair with my fingertips.

It's silky and soft - somewhat like Mikazuki's with the thickness and softness of Kogitsunemaru's. Come to think of it, Yamato's hair color is similar to Mikazuki's…

I slowly comb his side hair with my fingers.

"Yamanbagiri?"

I snap when Yamato calls me. I pull back my hand. "Sorry, I get too carried away…”

"It's alright. It feels nice when someone combs your hair like that, so…I don't mind," He replies with
a smile, "Do you want to touch my hair again?"

"M-Maybe later…thanks…"

Yamato nods. I watch him tying his hair. It looks so easy, but it must be hard for beginners.

"Why do you grow your hair long, Yamato?"

The question slipped away from my tongue.

"Ah…" He looks like he is thinking for the answer. He turns around to see the window, seeing something far away, "For me, it's…to forget the past."

"I see."

I didn't expect that answer, but I understand how he feels. I have a past I want to forget, too.

"Why do you wear your hood most of the time, Yamanbagiri?" Yamato asks me back.

"Hmm…I just feel uncomfortable if I don't wear it in public. It has become a part of my life, I think."

Yamato nods in understanding.

The door slides open and plenty of classmates come inside. I look at the clock on the wall - it's time for the classroom to be full. The class will begin in a few minutes.

"The class is getting full now," I say as I and Yamato walk away from the windows.

"Class will begin soon. Where is Yoshiyuki?"

"I bet that he is late."

Yamato chuckles, "It's normal for him, huh. Even though he is the class representative."

"He is generally unreliable, after all."

"Do you want to continue talking, Yamanbagiri?"

"Yeah, why not."

Yamato and I continue talking on my desk once again, the awkwardness disappears slowly but surely.

"Have you ever arrived late, Yamato?" I ask out of curiosity.

"I have. When I was a first year. Five times in a row. I hope I won't be late for the whole year now."

"Ahh…were you punished, then?"

"Of course," he sighs remembering the whole ordeal, "It was hell. What about you, Yamanbagiri?"

"Just once, so I got no punishment. Was it that bad? As bad as the rumors said?"

"Pretty much. You are basically a slave during that time."

"Slave…what did you do?"
"Stuffs. Like a slave. But my punishment is better than others, since I was only late five times - a week. The others were late for 2 weeks and so on."

I chuckle, "That's really a hell. Good job survived through it."

Yamato nods and clenches his fist in happiness, "I tried my best. Ah, it was during exam week, too."

"But you still got punishment…? Wow. How did you…get late five times in a row, anyway?"

"The clocks in my house were malfunctioning and I woke up too late."

"That's not normal."

"I know. When I experienced it, I couldn't believe it myself, either."

Guess such weird things happen sometimes. The existence of oddities is way weirder, though.

"This school isn't really strict about rules, but is strict about tardiness, huh? I don't want to be late ever for this whole year and next…"

"You are the disciplinary committee vice-leader, Yamanbagiri."

"Hey, I don't want to abuse my power. And you - don't come to me, crying, and ask me to save you if you are getting punished because you cross the rules."

"I will abide the rules, don't worry."

"That smile isn't helping, Yamato."

"If I do come to you with tears anyway -"

"I won't help you."

"Just once, okay?" Yamato pinches my cheek.

Ah, we're getting this close now.

"Maybe. I can't promise you."

"I'll buy you games if you help me in the future."

He knows how to bribe me now? Well, my obsession towards game is pretty much obvious...

"I-I-I won't fall for that."

Yamato grins when the bell rings. He quickly goes back to his own seat.

The class begins.

(At the end, Yoshiyuki is late by 10 minutes.)

Chapter End Notes

*Super awkward moments with Yamato, ahahaha. Yes, Yamato almost messed up by
being honest, saying that he is interested in Yamanbagiri.
I've just realized that Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru were watching the whole thing an hour after the event. I mean, the event between me and Yamato. I was too nervous that I forgot they weren't asleep…! They heard the whole thing - plus my embarrassing thoughts. Kogitsunemaru teased me a lot about how bold I was to hold Yamato's hand before he went to gather information (he didn't like to tease me like that at first, believe it or not - he changed now that I think about it). Throughout the whole class, Mikazuki also teased me about Yamato (he is always like that). The worst thing was when I unconsciously glanced to Yamato only to find him staring at me. Our gazes met, yes.

I guess our situation will get even more awkward later.

It was hell. I could hardly concentrate on the lessons.

But now, it's the first break time. Lunch time. I sigh in relief as I put away my books.

I wonder if I should visit Uguisumaru-senpai and Kousetsu-senpai now…

Ah, Mikazuki is residing inside me all the time. When he teased me, only I could hear it, and I could answer without speaking - only with thinking, similar to usual, but more private.

Come to think of it…Mikazuki, why don't you appear now?

"Ahaha. No need. I want to rest a bit more here before meeting Uguisumaru."

Okay, if you say so…don't get too lazy.

"Yamanbagiri," Yoshiyuki calls as he approaches me, stretching his arms, "Hah…finally, break time! I thought I was going to die earlier."

"Ahh…the teacher was really angry at you for being late…"

He chuckles. "Where do ya want to eat lunch? I think I'm going to cafeteria first."

"You don't bring your lunch?"

"Yeah. I forgot to bring it since I was running late."

"I think I'm going to visit the student council room, though."

"Huh? For what?"

Before I can reply, Yamato's voice suddenly comes.

"U-Umm…"

"Yo, Yasu! What's wrong?" Yoshiyuki greets. How can he not surprised by Yamato's sudden appearance? Maybe he is still unfocused. He has it bad with math earlier.
"Are you two going to eat lunch now…?" Yamato asks nervously. I know where this is going…

"Yeah. Dunno where, yet, though."

"C-Can I join you?"

"Of course!" Yoshiyuki smiles widely as he slaps Yamato's back, "Don't be shy; we're friends, now, aren't we?"

Yamato nods awkwardly with a smile on his face. Yoshiyuki's slap must be painful.

Well, then, I guess I'm going to visit Kousetsu-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai on the second break time. I'm quite hungry myself now.

I stand up, "Let's go to cafeteria, then. Do you bring your own lunch, Yamato?"

"No. I'm going to buy something there, after all. What about you, Yamanbagiri?"

"I bring my own lunch. My brother made it."

"So you have a brother…?"

"Two older brothers."

"Wait, since when did you call him Yamato, Yamanbagiri?" Yoshiyuki asks innocently.

"S-Since yesterday. I want him to call me like that. It's okay to call me so if you want to," Yamato answers instead of me.

"Nah. I'll call ya Yasu. It sounds cuter!"

"I…see…"

Yamato looks dumbfounded on the word cute. I know that feeling so well, comrade.

The three of us walk to the corridor, almost passing Hasebe on the way. Yoshiyuki stops walking and grabs Hasebe's shoulder (as impolite as he is).

"Hasebe! Do you want to eat lunch with us?" He offers.

Hasebe looks incredibly surprised. "…This isn't a plan to take me down, is it?" He replies.

"There's no such plan. Why should we take you down, anyway?" I reply calmly.

"Come on, dude, we have done this a few times," Yoshiyuki says, "There's no harm."

Hasebe look at the three of us with a strange expression. He sighs before saying, "Wait here, I'll put the handouts first." Then, he walks pretty fast back to the classroom.

"Ooh, he gave in, he gave in," Yoshiyuki claps his hand.

"Do you really have a plan to take him down?" Yamato asks curiously.

"I don't have, but Yoshiyuki has."

"Muahaha, yes. No, I don't!"
"I'm pretty sure you said that you want to take revenge after he beat you completely on *shogi*.

"T-That got nothing to do with this."

"Yoshiyuki, you can play *shogi*?" Yamato sounds like he is admiring the surprising fact.

"Yeah! I love it. Ya see, I'm pretty much a traditional person, so…"

"A traditional person that loves to play electronic games, sure," I add. Yoshiyuki lightly jabs my arm with his elbow. That hurts.

Hasebe walks to us, "What are you doing? Let's go now. We can't waste time."

"Do you perhaps want to buy a special menu?" Yamato asks.

"Yes," Hasebe replies as he walks faster. The three of us try to catch up to him.

The cafeteria is on the first floor. This is clearly a disadvantage for second and especially third years. It is always packed by the students on every break time. The seats are pretty limited. It is managed by school and has special menu that changes every day. This menu is **really** limited. There is also special discount on some days.

We go downstairs, passing corridors full of students, and enter the fully packed cafeteria.

"I'll search for a seat for us," I walk away before the other three can reply, "Wish you all good luck."

Cafeteria is a battlefield, honestly. Fighting to buy the food, fighting to buy and get the special menu, and fighting to get good seats and clean tables. Here, everyone is basically fighting with each other. This is a serious war. Fighting to get the special menu is harder than fighting to buy the normal ones, since the food is limited and everyone are allowed to play foul to order and get what they want. I'm glad brother makes me lunch every day so I don't have to gone through such war.

"Hmm…empty seat, empty seat…"

I look around, searching for any empty seats. It's hard to see when there are many people blocking my view.

Mikazuki pops up, "I'll help," he says as he goes out of my body and floats. He looks around as well.

"Ah. There, Yamanbagiri. Seven o'clock."

I look at the direction he is pointing at. There are four chairs near the windows. The table is clean. Perfect.

Thanks, Mikazuki. Having you at these times are convenient. Do you want to eat something?

"I'm not hungry yet. I'll eat later, when you meet your upperclassmen. I'll go back now and savor your happy expression when you're eating."

W-What do you mean by *savoring*…my expression…?

Mikazuki only giggles as he vanishes again, going inside me - or actually, my shadow. No *other means* intended.

I run as fast as I can and immediately sit on one of the chairs. I sigh in relief. Table, get!
Now I'll start eating while waiting for the other three. I hope they can notice me…this place is quite far away from the counters. It is also hidden pretty well - it's secluded, isolated from other tables. They can contact me in case they fail to find me, though. Easy.

It is normal for me to start eating first without eating for others. I don't think they'll come back so soon, anyway.

I open my lunchbox. Western-styled, indeed. If I'm not wrong, the name is…uh…roasted vegetable…frittata? Frittata? Well, whatever, still roasted vegetables. In contrast with the sweet breakfast, huh. It's pretty unusual for brother to make this. I take a fork and start eating.

"Yamanbagiri, are you relieved that Yamato doesn't think you as weird? Well, he seems to act normally for now, despite what you did…" Mikazuki suddenly says.

What do you mean? Wait, are you implying that what I did this morning is weird?

He chuckles, "Of course it is. I think it is fine for comfort, but, you two started talking only yesterday. You two aren't so close yet for physical contacts."

Ahh…I knew it…

"Now, now, don't be so depressed. I think Yamato is quite fond of you since the start. You've never realized it, but, he likes to stare at you with warm eyes since long ago."

Long ago…how long?

"I wonder how long. As an old man, I've forgotten," he chuckles.

I feel that you're lying, but I'll let it slide today.

"What do you think about Yamato? I can assure you that he isn't your stalker, however…his eyes told me that he has known you for so long. But you don't remember him, do you?"

…That's right. I don't remember a single thing about him.

"But still, even you feel some sort of familiarity with him, right?"

That's right. I don't know what's going on…more the reason to get closer to him, don't you think? Of course, I genuinely want to, even without this mystery.

"Ahaha. Of course, I believe so."

Mikazuki sinks into silence afterwards. I guess he is in a deep thought.

When I've eaten half of my lunch, familiar voices come along.

"Ah! There he is!"

Footsteps come closer and they finally arrive at my place. Yoshiyuki sits next to me while Yamato and Hasebe sit across.

"Why did you start eating all by yourself?" Yoshiyuki asks, looking dejected.

"I'm hungry, too. Just tell me if you want to try my lunch."

"Yey~ Feed me, please." I take a piece and shove it in inside Yoshiyuki's mouth. He munches it
down happily. "So good! Horikawa-sama is really a top chef…!"

"Since when did you call my brother like that…?" I see Hasebe and Yamato are staring at the two of us. I turn to them and ask, "What's wrong? Do you want one, too?"

"Ah…yes, please," Hasebe replies immediately.

"Okay. Open your mouth."

I shove my fork with a piece of the food on it in front of Hasebe's face. He looks reluctant, but he opens his mouth and eats it anyway.

Yamato looks at us with a strange unreadable expression on his face. He looks shocked more than anything, though. He mutters, "Y-You guys…don't you…uhh…?"

"What's wrong, Yasusada?" Hasebe asks. Yoshiyuki looks at Yamato too, question mark on his face.

I'm afraid that I, Yoshiyuki, and Hasebe know nothing on what he is talking about.

He shakes his head furiously, "N-Nothing. Please feed me one."

I take another piece and feed Yamato.

"How is it?"

"It's really good!" Yamato exclaims as his eyes brightens up.

Hasebe's face looks somewhat brighter. "I don't mind eating your lunch everyday…"

"Whoa. I'm not going to give you all of them or even ask my brother to make lunch for you, too."

"I know, I know," he waves me off, "Why don't you try our lunch, now, Yamanbagiri? It's an exchange."

"Hmm? Sure."

"Open your mouth, now, Yamanbagiri!"

Yoshiyuki immediately shoves a piece of food inside my mouth. I munch it down without knowing what it is. "…Fish? Whatever fish it is…" I ask. Yoshiyuki nods with a smile. He really loves eating fish, doesn't he?

Of course, I end up tasting Hasebe's and Yamato's food, too.

"The school's cafeteria menus are always tasty," I say at the end.

"And have good prices," Yamato adds.

"No wonder it is always packed…" Hasebe says as he looks around, "Thank you for getting this table, Yamanbagiri. It's a good secluded one."

"No problem. This table is the only empty one when I was searching around, anyway."

"Hmm. On the way here, all of the tables are full," Yoshiyuki says.

"I'm still amazed by such sight," Yamato says.
"Only at times like this, Yamanbagiri is lucky, huh?" Yoshiyuki laughs to me. Because he is eating, though, I can't jab him.

"Isn't that good? If I'm unlucky as usual, I might bring all of you toward your downfall with me."

"I certainly don't want that," Hasebe groans.

"Yamanbagiri…is unlucky?"

"Ah, you didn't know," Hasebe turns to see the confused Yamato, "If you look at him, though…he always attracts all kinds of accidents, so he likes to look clumsy."

"Ah…I see, I see." Yamato looks like he understands now. Do I look clumsy…?

"I'm becoming better and better lately, though. Don't call me unlucky-giri ever again in the future."

Beware of long monologue ahead, that probably only lasts for a second in real life. This is for your sake, you read me?

It's true that my unluckiness has weaken since the past 2 years. Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's appearance is the cause - especially Mikazuki. He is a shinrei, his task is to bring prosperity to his believers. He said that I'm tied deeply to unluckiness (whatever it actually means), as if it's a curse - so my unluckiness is heavier than a normal person, but with Mikazuki here, he cleanse my unluckiness - pulling it out of my soul.

It is said that my unluckiness is on par with a real curse and is similar to each other. One curse is akin to a knot, it is easy to untie it. However, layered curses form a complex web of many threads, too tangled to undo. My unluckiness is closer to layered curses, though it isn't impossible to untie it. Mikazuki unconsciously unties my unluckiness, slowly but surely.

This web of many threads has a center, and to completely erase my unluckiness is to untie that center - the beginning - or root - of everything. However, my unluckiness center lies too deep for Mikazuki to reach. Thus, it is impossible for him to completely untie everything without untying the center. If this center still exists, my unluckiness will still grow - and Mikazuki will still untie the threads he can reach.

It's a slow, endless process - as though my unluckiness is an ever-rotating ouroboros - a snake that keeps eating its own tail or two snakes eating each other’s tails for eternity. Ouroboros is, after all, can be a symbol of infinity - the turned 8.

…More the reason to marry Mikazuki as soon as possible and stay with him until I die, I guess. My super-unlucky life was a hell. I'm pretty much living peacefully now.

It's not like Kogitsunemaru is entirely useless in this, of course. In fact, he is the one that told me and Mikazuki about this, because even Mikazuki himself was unaware. Mikazuki can't see web threads of life - which includes my unlucky curse - because he has lost half of his power as a shinrei during his secluded period. Kogitsunemaru, on the other hand, can see them, though only if he is close to the said person (don't ask me how). It doesn't matter if he is useless or not, though, I still love him. Cough.

End of monologue here.

On another note, unlucky-giri is my nickname created by the evil Hasebe and Yoshiyuki when they were bored. They hardly call me so now, thankfully.
"Unlucky-giri sounds cute, though," Yamato says, "Besides, the meaning can be unlucky slasher, right? Isn't that good for an unlucky person?"

"You slash your own unluckiness. Yup, that's good," Hasebe continues.

"Ah! Why don't we call him unlucky-giri from now on? Who knows, maybe his unluckiness will drop even more," Yoshiyuki offers a stupid idea.

I cut off before the others can agree with him, "No, no. That name sounds like a curse for me, so don't call me that. I'm OK with mountain witch slasher, okay? It sounds way cooler, in a ridiculous way."

"If the person in question said that, alright," Hasebe gives in easily, I'm surprised.

I change the topic before anyone can disagree, "Good, then. By the way, Hasebe, what were the handouts earlier?"

"These are for the class. I passed the history teacher and he asked me to bring it. It contains materials for the next test, I think. Yoshiyuki, as the class representative, you have to pass them to everyone, alright?"

"Okay~!"

Yoshiyuki has finished eating and is currently drinking mineral water. Yamato and Hasebe follow him soon after.

"The bell will ring soon. Let's go back," Yamato calls. We nod and get out of the cafeteria (which is still bursting with colors, full of people) immediately.

Yoshiyuki whispers on the way, "Yamanbagiri, why do ya want to visit the student council?"

He is really patient to ask me only now, isn't he? Despite his looks, I think he is even more patient than Hasebe in some cases. He is just too cheerful, that it almost looks out of control - that's all.

"I want to ask Kousetsu-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai about jiangshi. I have to gather information."

"Ah…is that why Kogi isn't here right now?"

"Yes. He is gathering information, as well."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"I don't mind, if you -"

"Yoshiyuki!"

Someone is calling him, cutting off my words.

"Ah, yes?" Yoshiyuki answers as he approaches the said person. Another classmate.

Ah, we've arrived at the classroom already.

"Our English teacher isn't going to school today, so here are papers you have to copy for the last class. I've just gotten them from another teacher."

Yoshiyuki takes the papers. "Oh, exercises…"
I take this moment to quietly go to my seat. Hasebe and Yamato go to their respective seats as well, but Hasebe takes the handouts and stands up, probably going to Yoshiyuki later.

Meanwhile, their conversation goes on.

"Make sure you copy them on the second break."

"Alright! Where's the treasurer?"

"Still on the restroom, I guess. You know, girls."

"Ahahaha. Tell her later I'm going to borrow the class' money, then!"

Yoshiyuki ends the conversation and goes to his seat, putting the papers on his map. Hasebe approaches him and gives him the handouts. Yoshiyuki immediately puts the handouts on everyone's desks, because it's still break time and there are some students that are still outside. Only Kashuu is absent.

When he passes me, he whispers, "Sorry, looks like I can't tag along today."

"It's okay. Just do your job rightly. Oh, I can't go home with you, today, either."

He smiles and continues to pass on the papers. After that, he sits on his seat and sees his map full of papers.

Yamato's and Yoshiyuki's seats are actually near. I overhear them talking.

"It's hard to be a class representative, huh, Yoshiyuki?"

"Ahaha. Well, ya can get used to it! It's pretty fun, actually. Do ya want to help me?"

"If it's small stuffs, I guess…wait, you aren't recruiting me, are you?!"

Yoshiyuki laughs him off.

They're getting along pretty well. I relax myself as I wait for the bell to ring.

I take a glance at the empty seat - Kashuu Kiyomitsu's.

I wonder if his condition is better right now…

"Hmm…aren't you wondering why Kashuu didn't look too surprised yesterday? He didn't even cry or scream when he found out that he is about to become a jiangshi," Mikazuki says.

I think he refrained himself to not cry in front of us, or…I think it's more possible that Yamato has comforted him. I'm sure Kashuu himself tried to act the same as usual, because he doesn't want anyone to worry too much about him. This time, though, he has no choice but to depend on Yamato and us to turn him back into a normal human.

"That's more like something you would do, Yamanbagiri."

A giggle comes. I frown. That's a normal thing anyone can think of, Mikazuki.

"Ahaha. I know, I know. Once again, don't push yourself too far, alright? You know that…you're that kind of person. You're someone that is more than willing to sacrifice yourself for others. Please think about yourself more and people who will be sad if you're injured even the slightest."
I understand. I want to finish this problem and get out unscathed, as well...though I don't think that'll happen.

"May I ask, why?"

I just have a hunch.

A flash of white appears right before me. I jolt in surprise.

"Eh...?"

The still white image changes into an animation, as if I'm watching a blurry film - a live action one, though it seems I am inside it, in first point of view. The scenes look like they're unfolding right in front of me as if I'm experiencing them (...all over again? What a weird thing to think). Every movements and scenes send some kind of electric shock to my head.

Ouch. My head hurts...! I feel like my head is being cracked open...

Ignoring the pain, I try to focus myself on the rolling film. Or an automated 1st POV game, take your pick. The scenes are coming to me non-stop. I don't know if my head can absorb all of this...!

I can't see clearly. I hear familiar voices and see familiar shapes, but, I can figure out nothing.

Oh wait...is that Kashuu there? He is completely in red, wearing casual clothes. I think that's a moon hovering above him. I also hear people talking, though seemingly in Japanese, their voices are edited - censored like in TV news - that I can hardly understand what they're saying.

Am I interacting with Kashuu there? I don't know what is going on there, even his expression is blurry.

What are these? Why am I seeing this?

My head is spinning - then I realize that my hand in the scene is covered in red. Blood...?

The pain takes over my concentration. My head falls down to the desk, because it feels too heavy I can't hold it anymore.

The film is still rolling mercilessly, uncaring to everything. I can't focus myself on the new scenes, so I don't get the rest (at all). My head hurts - it hurts - it hurts...!

The scenes abruptly fade into black along with the pain.

I blink a few times as I try to catch my breath.

Mikazuki gasps and asks, "What...was that...? It was painful..."

Ah, he felt my pain, right. Kogitsunemaru felt it too, then. Though...did you see what I saw?

"No. What did you see? I did hear your thoughts, but I can hardly grasp their meanings."

Hmm...to put it simply...I saw a film. Fragments of it. Scenes of everyday life. They felt too real to be a mere imagination. As if they're memories though blurry...hell, I saw Kashuu there, but I know nothing more than that.

Not to mention...that pain, it almost like...as if I...
"You lost your memories and they came back to you, although unclear?"

Yes, something like that. I'm sure it has something to do with déjà vu I encounter lately.

"Are you alright now?"

I lift my head to avoid any suspicion. My head feels light now.

I'm okay.

I wonder…what were the scenes I've seen? Why did I see them? I can't really tell what was going on there, but…I definitely saw Kashuu there wearing casual clothes. I definitely haven't seen him with these clothes, so why did I…? Ahh, my head, my head…it hurts…

Mikazuki comes out of my shadow and gently pats my head.

"Don't try to remember what you've seen or think too hard for now, Yamanbagiri. Just relax."

Yeah…that's the best thing I should do for now. Thanks, Mikazuki…

"No problem. I'm always here if you need me…"


He smiles, "Anything and everything."

Your existence comforts me already, really…

Ahh, now I don't care if Yamato finds out about my true relationship with Mikazuki (and Kogitsunemaru)...I want Mikazuki to spoil me like this all the time.

But still, the time comes for him to stop - when the bell rings, the class continues.

Chapter End Notes

*Yes, I changed the section/part divider(?)'s alignment to center. It actually looks better now...I hope.
Come to think of it, I have club today, huh?

"That's right. Did you forget?" Mikazuki asks. He is floating next to me.

Yeah...I forgot a lot of things lately.

"You've been like that from the start, though. You're clumsy, after all~"

Shut up. Too much stuff happened all at once, I'm confused as hell.

Well, there are no changes in the plans. I can go home early from the club with an excuse. Maybe I can use the school's internet to search for jiangshi and news, too.

"News? For what?"

Maybe there's other accidents that may involve oddities, other than the one in TV yesterday.

"I see, I see. Technology is sure convenient."

You sound like an old man...wait, let me correct it - you're certainly an old man.

"Ahaha, I am, indeed. And you fell for two old men, Yamanbagiri. Ah. Do you, perhaps, prefer older ones? You seem to like your upperclassmen a lot."

Let's ignore him, everyone.

If you're wondering, we're on the way to the student council room on the third floor. Second break. I contacted neither Kousetsu-senpai nor Uguisumaru-senpai (Tsurumaru-senpai and Ichigo-senpai are out of question), so hopefully they are inside the student council room. Kogitsunemaru hasn't returned yet. I can imagine him panicking when he felt a sudden pain from when I saw mysterious scenes, but, since I didn't contact him, he should know that the situation is still pretty much alright. Pretty much...yeah...let's try to stay positive, shall we?

"Staying positive isn't your forte, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says with a grin, "Though it is a good change. Perhaps you can look at me and Kogitsunemaru with a more positive outlook now."

Did I look at you negatively? If you mean about my suspicion towards your thinking...that won't change.

"Ahahaha. Is that so? Too bad. Well then, how about a more positive outlook on life?"

I didn't look at my life negatively...just pessimistically, as realistic as possible. Know the difference.

Mikazuki pinches my cheek, "No, no, yours have tendency to go downright negative, Yamanbagiri. There are better, positive things in this world. Don't only look at the negative things around you. I know you know. you try to act positive at desperate times, but deep down in your heart - you always expect the worst. Your mind is full of worst case scenarios. That is, certainly good to create strategy, but it may strain your mind and body. Please, take a break for once. Take it easy."

Sheesh, I know, I know. Why are you giving me advice now...? This isn't the time.
"Just a note for my beloved Yamanbagiri. I want you stay healthy, after all."

Ah...okay...I appreciate it.

"Ouch...?!!"

When I realize, I feel pain on my forehead. It knocked a pillar. I clutch my pained forehead.

Why didn't you tell me about this *obstacle*, Mikazuki?

Mikazuki chuckles, "Why not? You look cute when you're clumsy like this."

Is this *clumsy*...? You just like to see me in misery, don't you?

"I'm not. If I do, I wouldn't tell you to take care of yourself, right? If I do, what I said would be a contradiction," Mikazuki pats my head for a reason I don't know, "I'm not lying, of course. You know me better than anyone."

You're right...oh well.

I look at my surroundings to know where I am, only to find a very familiar door. I look up at the label and find that it is student council room. I knock on the door twice.

"Who is there?"

Uguisumaru-senpai asks from beyond the door.

"Yamanbagiri Kunihiro."

I don't really know why I answered with my full name.

The door slides open almost immediately, with Kousetsu-senpai stands on the doorway. He welcomes me in. Ah, there's nobody else but him and Uguisumaru-senpai here. Great.

"Good afternoon, Kunihiro-san, Munechika-san," he politely bows when the door is tightly shut.

"Good afternoon, Kouhiro-san, Munehiko-san," I and Mikazuki also bow. Kousetsu-senpai looks at me with a questioning look. I quickly continue, "I've lost to Ichigo-senpai. Do you mind if I call you by your given name, senpai?"

"...No, I don't mind," he replies, "Sit there."

Kousetsu-senpai - full name Kousetsu Samonji - is a third year. He is the treasurer of the student council. He dislikes fighting and violence. He loves peace. Probably the only one I know to wear glasses because his sight is pretty bad (I'm not any better, though). He has an absurdly long hair and his hairstyle makes him look like a princess. A Japanese princess. *Yamato Nadeshiko* male version? Presumably. He is *always* gentle at everything that is almost elegant, after all. Yes, he is indeed beautiful, though his rather cold and quiet personality make him hard to approach. He seems cold from outside, but he is really a kind person.

He usually speaks as if he is whispering, as gentle as the breeze.

He is a specialist in oddities - a Buddhist monk - though he is still an apprentice. It's his family's business. He can see oddities from the moment he was born.

We sit on the sofa and look at Uguisumaru-senpai who is sitting on the center of the room with a
quite bossy pose. Considering that he is the student council president, he is indeed the big boss.

"Good afternoon, you two," He smiles, as gentle as ever, as mysterious as always, "What kind of urgent matter that brings you here today, Yamanbagiri?"

"As expected from Uguisumaru-senpai, you knew that I have something urgent…"

Uguisumaru-senpai is also a third year. I forgot his last name. I'm sorry! He is the president of the student council. He is quite old-fashioned (not as much as Mikazuki is, thankfully - he knows how to use technology pretty well) and loves green tea. He is also the current president of tea ceremony club. His hair has green color that seems like green tea. His right eye is covered by his long bangs. He has a gentle voice that has killed countless fangirls (and fanboys, if they do exist) from time to time. He is also good at singing.

He can see oddities, but he claims that he is a regular person just like me. Mikazuki doesn't think so. Truth to be told, something about Uguisumaru-senpai is rather unsettling, even for me, but…I believe in him after he helped me months ago, along with Kousetsu-senpai.

On a side note, the current student council is called R4 (I don't know what this stands for) or Royal Ice Milk Tea quartet. Royal is Ichigo-senpai, ice is Kousetsu-senpai, milk is Tsurumaru-senpai, and tea is Uguisumaru-senpai. They have countless fangirls (hardly fanboys, but who knows) in this school. These fans may include shippers as well. They're a weird combination, if you ask me, but cute to see.

(You can see the reason on their nicknames (whatever word it is), right? Though I wonder why Ichigo-senpai is royal…maybe because when he was a second year, he acted as a prince on a stage play. He looked undeniably good - almost perfect - as a prince.)

Uguisumaru-senpai chuckles, "Well, Mikazuki won't appear in front of me unless it is urgent, am I right?"

"That's completely right. I refuse to meet you, but for Yamanbagiri, I'll do anything," Mikazuki replies calmly with a smile.

I can see sparks of fire between the two of them. They're always like this when they meet each other…at first, it was because Mikazuki is rather hostile to him (and avoid him most of the time), but then Uguisumaru-senpai started to reply to his actions. I think he is teasing Mikazuki, though…a battle between two old men…no offense to you, Uguisumaru-senpai.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" Kousetsu-senpai offers at the right time.

"No, thank you. Why don't you sit here, Kousetsu-senpai? If you two don't mind, I want to ask something."

He nods and sits on the sofa across mine without asking.

"Let me guess, Yamanbagiri," Uguisumaru-senpai says, "You have another…case? Oddity-related problems?"

I nod in defeat. "I believe in you two, so I'll just say it. My classmate, Kashuu Kiyomitsu, is infected by jiangshi. I want to turn him back into a complete, normal human in 2 days. More than that, everything is too late."

Uguisumaru-senpai stands up and walks slowly. He looks like he is thinking deeply as he sits next to Kousetsu-senpai, who speaks up first, "So…you want to know how to stop the jiangshi virus before
"Yes," I nod in certainty, "I thought maybe you two can help me…or give me further information about jiangshi and its virus. I only know how to counter the jiangshi itself, not to stop its virus or to turn the victim back into human."

Uguisumaru-senpai says after a silence, "First of all, jiangshi is an animated corpse. Undead. Living corpses. However, this Kiyomitsu hasn't died yet, so he is a victim of jiangshi virus, right?"

"Yes."

"For the sake of information - how did you know that Kiyomitsu is an infected jiangshi and hasn't died?" Uguisumaru-senpai's left eye is looking straight at me. Whoa, this is pretty intense…his gaze is gentle, but, at the same time, piercing my body. I can never lie to him if he stares at me like this. I don't think anyone can.

"That's simple. It usually takes a very long time - decades, even - for a corpse to turn into a jiangshi - a real living corpse. Even if Kashuu died a few days ago, he still can't be a living corpse. Yesterday, when I checked him, he didn't look like a jiangshi. In fact, he is still fairly a human, just with a few of jiangshi's characteristics, but he retains his sanity and personality. Thus, I drew a conclusion that Kashuu is an infected jiangshi instead."

I didn't explain that in my monologue before, huh? Sorry for that. I drew the conclusion as fast as I can. It's pretty obvious, if you ask me.

"Besides," I continue, "His yesterday's characteristics aren't enough for a complete jiangshi. He didn't go berserk and he still could hold himself back. Therefore, he is still in the middle of the process towards becoming a complete jiangshi. This can only mean that he is infected by the virus."

Uguisumaru-senpai nods, "I see. You're pretty good at analyzing this, Yamanbagiri." He smiles.

"T-Thank you for the compliment, senpai…" Whoa, that feels weird.

"How did you confirm that Kashuu Kiyomitsu is infected by jiangshi? What kind of experiment did you do?" It's Kousetsu-senpai's turn to ask.

"I used simple methods to counter jiangshi to see his reaction. A bagua sign, mirror, a rooster's call, and the sound of a handbell. I shoved them to Kashuu and he was afraid, to the point that his pale skin was turning even paler."

"As an extra, because I'm sure Yamanbagiri doesn't want to say it," Mikazuki says. Ah, I'll let him say it. "Kashuu drank a little of his blood, sucking a little of his qi. It's another proof that Kashuu is indeed infected by the jiangshi virus."

"You…why did you allow something so dangerous happened to you? Again? Kunihiro-san."

I see Kousetsu-senpai's face hardens. As expected, he seems pretty angry at me.

"I'm sorry. I thought that was the only way to be sure…"

"And he is fine with me and Kogitsunemaru. Don't worry," Mikazuki adds.

Kousetsu-senpai clears his throat, "…As long as you know the danger…now, since you set a time limit, I'm sure you know the period of process to become a jiangshi."
"Yes."

"You already know that much. It's impressive," Uguisumaru-senpai says. No, no, you're the one that know almost everything, despite claiming to be normal, senpai. "However, your goal is to find the way to stop the virus and turn Kiyomitsu into a human…"

"…To be honest, I have no idea how to do it," Kousetsu-senpai says, "Perhaps to use the stuffs to counter normal jiangshi can do, but, I believe that might kill him instead."

"Yeah…that's my concern. If the virus is akin to a curse, I can do something about it, but…"

"Unfortunately, jiangshi virus isn't a curse. It is far from it," Uguisumaru-senpai says, "It is a virus. A disease. You need to find the cure - the medicine - as normal diseases have."

He speaks vaguely - as though he certainly knows while not knowing at the same time.

"A medicine…but what…? How to make it…?"

"I heard that jiangshi is weak to items made of wood from a peach tree."

"That's correct. Peach is the essence of wu xing, the five elements. It can subjugate evil auras and deter evil spirits," Kousetsu-senpai confirms.

"Wu xing…?"

"Wu xing is a Taoism theory of classical elements," Tsurumaru-senpai's voice comes. He is standing at the doorway with a pile of papers on his hands. "It is similar to godai in Japanese, or even alchemy."

"T-Tsurumaru-senpai?!

He appeared out of nowhere, seriously.

He smiles widely as he enters the room, "Yo! I overheard the wu xing part, so I can't help but to butt in. Sorry to disturb you a bit." He puts the papers on the desk.

"Ah…Tsurumaru, you study Taoism, don't you?" Uguisumaru-senpai asks.

"Yep! I know wu xing because it is Taoism theory," he replies, "Oh, I don't practice it, by the way. I only read stuffs."

He is studying Taoism? That's greatly unexpected - why, though…? It smells fishy…

"Why are you asking about that, though, Manba-chan?"

"Uhh…I…"

"Are you perhaps interested in Taoism in a whole?"

This is bad. My main objective isn't asking about wu xing, but if it can help Kashuu in a way…

"Y-Yes, I'm interested in it. Just for…study," I finally tell a lie, "Internet doesn't really help, so I thought maybe Kousetsu-senpai can explain some stuffs to me."

"I see, I see. Kousetsu is a Buddhist, but he knows about others pretty deep, after all. That's a secret everyone knows about," Tsurumaru-senpai chuckles, "I'm just here to bring these papers, but I'll tell
you what I know about *wu xing*.

"T-Thank you, senpai!"

"Should I explain from the start?"

"That'll help. I'm lost here."

Tsurumaru-senpai coughs and explains, "*Wu xing*, shortened form of *wu zhong liu xing zhi chi* or translated as the *five types of chi dominating at different times* is a fivefold conceptual scheme that many traditional Chinese fields used to explain a wide array of phenomena - and describing interactions and relationships between phenomena. It is also known as the *Five Elements, Five Phases*, et cetera. *Wu xing* has five elements - wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These elements are states of a never ending series of interactions and processes. They are equally important and should form a balance, while being in constant move and cyclical change or phases. They represent five different phases of the *qi* or *chi*."

I have to say, he is fluent in speaking Chinese…what a surprise.

"What is *qi* or *chi"? I know that one already, but, let's pretend to be clueless.

"Also called *ki* in Japanese and *gi* in Korean, it is an active principle forming part of any living thing, akin to life force or spiritual force. All material things are made of a single or a combination of the *Five Elements*, since these are the fundamental components."

"*Wu xing* is…the root of everything?"

"Hmm, I guess you can say so. *The Five Elements* were believed to control the change and movement of the universe, and to provide the energy for all the other groups of five in the Chinese cosmology, such as the *Five Sacred Mountains of Taoism*. The source of these ancient beliefs is the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*."

"Then…what does peach has to do anything with *wu xing*?"

"*The Five Elements* are associated with other stuffs. For example, metal is associated with peach, autumn, white, Venus, and west direction. Its symbol is white tiger or *Bai Hu*. There are others, too, of course."

I almost clap my hands in amazement. "Tsurumaru-senpai, you're surprisingly amazing…though I don't really understand…"

"I'm always amazing, Manba-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai says proudly, "I don't really understand it, either. What was written there is just table of correspondences, I do not know why and how they're associated. Do you want to know more?"

"No, this much is fine. Thank you, Tsurumaru-senpai. I'm sorry to hold you back."

"It's okay. I'm the one that wants to help you. I'll get going, then," Tsurumaru-senpai smiles and waves his hands as he walks away, "Oh, by the way, Manba-chan. I already know what happened yesterday."

"Yesterday…?"

That smirk on his face…don't tell me…
"Yup! Ichigo-chan told me what you didn't want to say. Hasebe-chan carried you like a princess, right?" He winks.

The door closes before I can reply anything.

T-That idiot! To said it in front of others…Ichigo-senpai, too, to honestly said it…!

"Ohoho. What is this? What happened between you and Ichigo and Hasebe?" Uguisumaru-senpai chuckles with a pleasant expression on his face.

"It's nothing. Just forget it," I reply as I try to be calm. I know for sure that Uguisumaru-senpai won't buy this, but…

"Princess carry. That is something, dear Yamanbagiri."

"S-So what? You found it out, so what?"

Uguisumaru-senpai starts to grin. "So…why don't you let me -"

Kousetsu-senpai coughs a few times, cutting Uguisumaru-senpai's sentence. I feel incredibly saved, though I do not know what Uguisumaru-senpai wanted to say, I know that I was about to get cornered there.

"Let's get back to the main topic, shall we?" Kousetsu-senpai asks.

"Let's."

Uguisumaru-senpai regains his composure. "...Okay then. What I'm trying to say is, jiangshi is weak to items made of wood from a peach tree. I think it's possible for jiangshi to be weak towards the fruit - peach - itself, because why not," he says.

"Ah…I see. You're right. There's that possibility…" Mikazuki finally speaks after minutes of silence, "And even if it isn't strong enough to defeat a jiangshi, it may act as a medicine to stop the virus - because it is weak and can go inside the victim's body."

"I suppose it is alright to try it," Kousetsu-senpai says, "What do you think, Kunihiro-san?"

"I can see a new light of hope," I mutter, "Ah, I mean, I'll try it. Where can I get the peach? It's not the season yet…"

"Hmm…I'll contact someone to get it, perhaps from other country, as soon as possible," Uguisumaru-senpai offers.

"Y-You don't have to go that far, senpai…" Though I wonder who he will contact to get the peach from other country. What kind of social network does he has? He is too mysterious.

"My cute underclassmen is asking for help, of course I can't refuse, can I?" He smiles, "If you feel really bad for getting it for free, though, perhaps you can give me something someday."

"Something…?"

"Anything can do, like Christmas presents or valentine chocolates. I'm okay with your homemade food, too."

"Okay…I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, senpai."
Hmm-mm. It seems that I have to give Kousetsu-senpai something, someday, too. And Yoshiyuki, I've troubled him a lot since we were just kids. And maybe Ichigo-senpai...though he was the one that created a problem, I've troubled him in some way. I have to give them some gifts as my sign of gratitude.

I take a glance at Mikazuki whose face is darker than before. What is he thinking?

"I have another concern as well," I say, ignoring Mikazuki who is suddenly sulking for now, "Kashuu is infected, that means there is a running jiangshi around here. It's dangerous, I don't want any casualties."

"I'll spread the information to specialists' network, then," Kousetsu-senpai says, "Wait...have you told your older brother about this?"

"I haven't. He didn't come home and can't be contacted," I shrug, "Typical brother Yamabushi. I'll tell him when he comes home."

"...Alright. Is there anything else, Kunihiro-san?"

Should I tell them about the kodama's problems, Mikazuki? There's a chance it is connected to the jiangshi, after all.

Mikazuki shakes his head. "I guess that's all for now," I say, "Thank you for the help, Kousetsu-senpai, Uguisumaru-senpai. I'm sorry to bother the two of you."

"No problem. It's not a bother for us," Kousetsu-senpai replies, "We'll help you to the best of our abilities."

Uguisumaru-senpai stands up and walks to the door, "That's right. We can't let you fight alone in that field, Yamanbagiri." He slides the door open.

"Ah."

Ichigo-senpai is standing there, eyes wide in surprise. He looks like he is about to slide the door open himself. Uguisumaru-senpai stares at him for some seconds before he slams the door close.

"Hey?!" Ichigo-senpai's voice can be heard. The door shakes as he tries to open it, but Uguisumaru-senpai won't let the door open.

Wait, he opens it.

...Only to close it again?

He repeats it, again and again while chuckling. Mikazuki, I, and Kousetsu-senpai look at him, totally dumbfounded. I guess he is...teasing Ichigo-senpai?

"Hey!!" Ichigo-senpai starts to bang the door, though it isn't rough, so it won't cause a commotion. "What's wrong? Why don't you let me in?"

"Hmm, just because," Uguisumaru-senpai answers. "Yamanbagiri, come here."

Mikazuki instantly vanishes before I walk to Uguisumaru-senpai, only to get pushed by him when the door opens, ultimately bumping Ichigo-senpai. More like, I'm in his embrace now.

Whoa.
"Y-Y-Yamanbagiri-san?!" Ichigo-senpai stutters, I can see his cheeks are reddening, "W-Why are you…?"

"I have some questions to Uguisumaru-senpai and Kousetsu-senpai," I answer, trying to keep my calm.

"I see…”

The two of us fall silent, unmoving from our awkward position. We're standing so close now, I can even hear his soft breathing clearly. Why are the two of us reluctant to move? It should be simple for us to move out of the way…! This is bad, my heart can't calm down. I panic, but I can't move.

…When I look at him in this distance…his height is pretty close to mine, isn't it? Maybe differs by five centimeters…?

Uh-oh, our eyes meet.

"That decides it," Uguisumaru-senpai claps his hands, "I'll bully you for the rest of the day, Ichigo."


"You won't let Yamanbagiri go, here, will you? That is why…”

"Excuse me," Kousetsu-senpai immediately stands forward and pushes Ichigo-senpai out of the way while pushing me to get out of the room. "For the sake of your safety, Kunihiro-san, I'll accompany you to your classroom."

He holds my shoulders and pushes me to walk.

"Uh…okay?"

What does my safety has to do with this? I can't refuse him, though, so I go along with the wave. The two of us go down the corridor, leaving Ichigo-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai. I can't look back.

"Kunihiro-san. There are other things that bother you. Am I right?" Kousetsu-senpai asks when we're far from the student council room.

How does he know? Am I too readable?

"Actually…yes," I reply with all honestly, "B-But, they're nothing big, and they're my own problem, so…"

"I'm worried about you," he says, stopping me to walk and look at me with serious eyes. "Please don't push yourself too far. You aren't alone. I'll help you whenever you ask."

I wonder how many times people have said that to me…

"I understand. I appreciate your concern, Kousetsu-senpai, thank you, but don't worry too much."

More importantly, his hands on my shoulder are starting to bother me. I'm not angry or something, it just…feels…uncomfortable. Yeah.

I see Kousetsu-senpai flashes a faint smile before we walk downstairs.

Uhh, people aren't looking at us…right? I think I look like a child comforted by an older person after
getting punished at…thinking about the gazes make me feel uneasy, even though I'm wearing my hood…I can still feel the piercing gazes, perhaps along with whispers - they might be mere illusion, but for someone like me…even illusion is scary…

"Oh, don't come out at night. It's full moon," Kousetsu-senpai says, "If you have to go out no matter what, please send me a message. I'll back you up with information about your surroundings."

Even I know how dangerous the night is. Combined with full moon, that's more deadly than anything. Then again, I said that I have no promise to not go out no matter what. Kousetsu-senpai seems to know that, if the situation calls for it, I'll go out without a second thought - and he is okay with it.

"Okay…once again, thank you, senpai."

I part with him on the corridor and goes to my classroom. I think he accompanied me just to say that.

Anyway, Mikazuki, why are you sulking?

"I'm just kind of pissed that Uguisumaru wants to eat your cooking, that's all," Mikazuki replies, "Kousetsu was unexpectedly getting touchy with you, too…!"

Err…I see nothing wrong in that…

Mikazuki sighs, "You're too oblivious."

**Excuse me?**

"Nothing. Please let it slide. Just my childish rambling."

So you've admitted that you are childish at times…

"Of course," I think he smiles here, "I won't be an adult if I can't admit my weakness."

That's a rich quote, coming from you. Well then, maybe you should control your childish part a bit. Fix it, control it, restrain it, and don't let it show so easily. Despite your appearances, you've passed adult phase, Mikazuki. You are an old man - a grandpa, even. I know you're wiser than others, but you're also more prone to psychological attacks.

"My heart is still young, though," he chuckles, "I always try my best to restrain myself from doing unnecessary things, Yamanbagiri, but I'll try my best."

Restrain in what, exactly?

"Hmm…for example, I'm restraining myself to not eat you right away, such as right now, especially because Kogitsunemaru isn't here, which means I can have you all by myself."

…I shouldn't have asked.

I guess you think of dirty stuffs too much that you've ended up restraining yourself more on that area and ignore others…

"Ah! I can't deny that," Mikazuki replies innocently.

I can't help but to sigh.

Mikazuki, I think you will have to control your thoughts now. I'm glad I don't know what you're
thinking most of the time. It'll be scary if I pick up your dirty thoughts.

"Unfortunately, I can't control my thoughts. They keep coming at me without my consent."

…I know where you're going at, but…I'm sure you know how to ignore silly thoughts. Wait, why am I giving you advice? This isn't so serious that I need to…right?

"I guess?" He chuckles. "Anyhow, I'll try to restrain myself a bit more. I don't want to look weak in front of someone I don't trust, either."

Your doubt to Uguisumaru-senpai is severe, I see. Well, do your best, then. Are you going out now?

"When the bell rings, I'm going to. I hope you won't get lonely, Yamanbagiri."

I won't, don't worry about me. Please, just gather information as much as you can. I shall bid you farewell. Don't ever hope that I'll miss you.

"Alright, I'll accept your lie for now~"

Hmm.

More importantly...Mikazuki, you said that you don't trust Uguisumaru-senpai, didn't you?

"Yes, I did."

You're doubting him...but we still depend on him on some stuffs. Is that why you told me to not tell him and Kousetsu-senpai about kodama's problems?

"You doubt him, too, Yamanbagiri. No, you're the same as me - you doubt both Uguisumaru and Kousetsu," Mikazuki says, "We want to trust them, but something about them is unsettling. Kousetsu is much more alright because I believe he understands that we don't trust him that much - so he keeps a fair distance, but Uguisumaru, on the other hand, acts oblivious and crosses the line at times - which makes us doubt him even more."

...You're right. I think so, too. That is why I didn't tell them about my suspicion towards Tsurumaru-senpai, though they may suspect the same thing as well, as they're close to him...and more importantly, problems that come from my own self - mysterious scenes, voices...I have no reason to tell them such thing.

"That is correct. For stuffs to deep or personal, you choose to tell them nothing," Mikazuki says, "You don't trust them deep enough to tell and you don't want to trouble them - just like with Yoshiyuki."

I understand all of this, but what's about kodama's problems?

"To tell you the truth, I think nothing will change even if you tell them. It is the kodama's own problems, our neighborhood's problems - none of their business, not even dangerous enough for now to catch their attention."

I see...for now, even we can only watch over how things are going for that one problem.

"Yes. Even we, the residents, can do nothing about it."

Ahh...I hope today ends peacefully. May the kodama find the solution as well.
The class is done. All lessons for today are finished. Kogitsunemaru has returned.

Peace doesn't come that fast, though. I don't think it exists in my dictionary in the truest sense now… w-wait, I hope it still exists for my sanity.

"It's raining," I look at the heavy downpour beyond the windows as I put my books in the bag.

"It just fell all of sudden, huh," Yoshiyuki says next to me.

Kogitsunemaru freely floats, he looks bored as usual. He says, "Season of rain is just around the corner, no wonder. I have to prepare my fur when the time fully comes."

"Crap, I didn't bring my umbrella," Yoshiyuki grumbles. I was about to mock him but then I realize I also didn't bring mine.

"Neither do I," I give him a sigh, "But I have club and you're going home immediately today. I can't help you, Yoshiyuki."

"Uhh. Yasu, Yasu," Yoshiyuki shouts. I see Yamato looks at him as he stands up. "Are ya going straight home today?"

"Ah, yes. I'm not in any club, after all," Yamato replies as he takes his bag and approaches us.

"I didn't bring my umbrella. Mind if I share one with ya?" Yoshiyuki claps his hand and politely bows, "Please!"

Yamato seems to be taken aback by his actions, but he nods, "I-It's okay, I don't mind. I'm coming to Kashuu's house, so you can take my umbrella with you afterwards. Just give it back tomorrow."

"Thank ya! Lifesaver!" Yoshiyuki yells happily as he gives Yamato a surprise hug, "I'll do something for ya sometime!"

"You don't have to…" Yamato just chuckles and looks at me. "Ah, Yamanbagiri, do you have a club today?"

"Yep. IT club," I stand up and wave them goodbye, "I'm in a hurry, so, see you tomorrow. Regarding Kashuu, I'll do my best. Give my regards to him."

I see them waving their hands and walk out of the classroom.


I have many things on my mind…my head feels heavy. And the rain just makes everything gloomier. I don't bring my umbrella, so I hope the rain stops when I'm going out…or someone can lend me one…

Uh, back to the track. Who cares about rain now? I have my jacket, right?
I've told you about mysterious scenes I saw, right? Then there's jiangshi problems, and kodama… and stuffs I don't even remember…they bother me more than I ever thought.

"There, there," Kogitsunemaru pats my head to comfort me and it's working somehow, "We'll solve one by one, step by step, slowly but surely. No need to take everything all at once. Go ahead to hide under my fur if you want it again."

Hmm…maybe I'll use your hair as a blanket tonight.

"E-Err…are there no other options?" Kogitsunemaru looks troubled as expected, "But if it's you…go ahead and do it. I'm alright with staying still when you're asleep. I'll be happy if you hug me on the way."

I'm joking…but I might really do it. Thank you, Kogi.

"Anything for you, Yamanbagiri," he smiles, "But, really, when I felt that pain, I was really worried about you. I'm glad you're not harmed as much as I thought."

Yeah, you said it already. Thrice. I'm getting bored hearing it.

"Did I? Whoops," Kogitsunemaru chuckles as he floats in front of me, "Looks like your forgetfulness spread all the way to me, Yamanbagiri."

Such thing can't happen, dear. Don't justify it and don't ask me to give you something or do something in exchange, either. You are just an old man by age, to forget stuffs are normal.

"Ah~ You know me so well."

That is a good thing, Kogitsunemaru. And you know me pretty well now…it's an exchange. In a real sense.

"Let's call it a given. We've known each other for two years; we've been lovers for a year, and almost never to be apart, after all."

Hmm. Sure, let's call it that.

I go downstairs to the IT room. I slide the door open and go inside the room crammed with people.

"There's this many people already," Kogitsunemaru comments.

It's always like that. Hah…honestly, I don't feel like doing club, I want to have peace in solitude or something, but I promised Ookurikara…

"Haha. He'll be sad if you don't show up today. No, he might sulk and avoid you for a week, I believe."

…Is he that extreme? Really?

"You're too oblivious about his feelings."

Oblivious…sigh. That word describes me the most, huh?

"Yes. Besides being illegally cute and selfless, that's it," Kogitsunemaru pokes my cheek with his pointer finger.

I ignore him and sit on my usual place around the corner, the wall is next to me. I look around, but I
don't see Ookurikara or Mitsutada-senpai. It's pretty weird for them to *not* be early for club...they're devoted members. Truthfully speaking, they're the IT's club aces, even more skilled (in hacking and coding) more than the heads. I'm just a spectator sitting in the back.

I turn on the computer, unsure what to do.

Let's look for news now. I can use my smartphone for that, but, let's save battery (there is a wifi I can use in this room, but *meh*).

"What are you looking for?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

Like I said - news. News about weird, illogical, unexplainable stuffs around the past two weeks.

"Why is the range two weeks?"

Just in case. Better safe than sorry.

"That's rich, coming from you," Kogitsunemaru giggles.

I glare at him for a second before I focus on the computer.

I type a news website and after it loads, I immediately look at the newest news feed. I read the descriptions as fast as I can and click whatever interests me - though I only look for what happened in Suzuran. As expected, the case from yesterday is there. The description is similar to what the TV news said. Skimming, skimming, and skimming - I found six mysterious cases in the past two weeks.

"That's plenty; considering they happened in the range of 14 days," Kogitsunemaru comments, "Let's sort it out."

I'll put the description as simple as possible.

The earliest one happened exactly two weeks ago - May 12th. It happened at southern area of Suzuran. The second one happened in May 15th at eastern area. The third one happened in May 17th at the western area. The fourth one happened in May 19th at northern area. The fifth one happened in May 23th at the center of Suzuran - which means near this school. The sixth one happened yesterday, May 25th - the car accident one, also near this school.

All of them are similar to what happened yesterday. The witnesses are all safe, only got minor injuries, and they stated that they saw stuffs akin to black ropes pulling them and whatever around closer to *somewhere*. These attempts ended in failure, obviously, but if an oddity is really the culprit...these failures might be a diversion or something similar.

They got to be connected, don't you think?

"Yeah...I think there's only one culprit...but how can it moves from a place to another with such a short time without anyone noticing?" Kogitsunemaru wonders.

That stays as a mystery for now.

"Just in case, look up for older news, Yamanbagiri," he says.

I nod and begin to search.

The past three weeks...four weeks...a month...two months...

There's nothing similar. It is safe to conclude that the culprit began its...actions two weeks ago, then.
"Let's hope so - and hope that there are no unknown casualties." Kogitsunemaru sits next to me and rests his head on my shoulder.

By the way, we haven't exchanged information yet.

"Ah...right," Kogitsunemaru clears his throat, "I'll begin first. I asked oddities around if they know anything about jiangshi. Some kindly explained about jiangshi - the things we've known already, but they said they don't know how to stop the virus once someone is infected. They proposed some ideas - like eating a peach, using methods to counter jiangshi but as small as possible...at the end, nobody is sure how."

That's pretty much the same as what I got. Uguisumaru-senpai said that it is possible for peach to be a medicine. Tsurumaru-senpai happened to be there and explained about wu xing and its relationship with peach. He studies Taoism, if you can believe it.

"Really? Wow, that's unexpected."

I guess we don't really get anything valuable other than peach...

"Hmm...I heard something interesting, though."

What is it?

"Some oddities said that they felt a vampiric being around two weeks ago, but now they could feel nothing. They couldn't figure out what kind of vampiric being it is," he continues, "They searched in this whole city, but they found nothing, as if that creature is hiding all the time."

I see...that vampiric being...should be the culprit. It has something like tentacles...I wonder what is it? I don't think jiangshi has tentacles.

"They may evolve by becoming one with other oddities, but, I'm not sure, either. Humanoid with tentacles is just too scary."

Becoming one with other oddities? Is that possible? Wait, if you said so, it is possible...

"Yamanbagiri-chan!!"

That voice...Mitsutada-senpai. Kogitsunemaru immediately vanishes and goes back inside me.

"Good afternoon, Mitsutada-senpai," I greet Mitsutada-senpai back. He is grinning widely as he walks as fast as he can to my seat.

"I'm glad you came!" He says as he slaps my two cheeks with his palms. I'm surprised. I don't think he is this touchy...you learn something new everyday, huh...? This is a real example, then. You learn something new about someone with each passing time.

"Umm, senpai, it hurts..."

Ookurikara comes in and frowns, "That's not cool at all, you know."

"Eh?" Mitsutada-senpai chuckles afterwards as he lets go of my cheeks. "I apologize for that. I'm just so happy to see you here today. It has been a pretty long time since the last you came."

"Really?" I question, but even I realize that I skipped club for some time intentionally. Maybe my skipping actions went on for more than I thought.
"He is exaggerating," Ookurikara says, "He misses you for no reason, that's all."

"You're no better, Kuri-chan," Mitsutada-senpai sulks, "You always have a disappointed face every time you see that there is no Yamanbagiri-chan in the room. You're gloomier than usual in these times. I'm sure you're happy now…Yamanbagiri-chan is here."


Ookurikara hisses unhappily, "Just in your mind. Your imagination."

"Oh? Then why are you smiling, I wonder?"

"I'm not smiling, you blind - !"

Ookurikara jabs Mitsutada-senpai's stomach with his elbow without mercy. Mitsutada-senpai tries to act calm even though his face is full of pain.

"But…you're indeed smiling, Ookurikara," I decide to step in, in the middle of amazement and shock from seeing Ookurikara's rare happy face.

"I'm not," I see him trying to control his lips to stop his blooming smile.

"You are. Why are you lying? It's more than obvious." I stare straight into his amber eyes and he seems uncomfortable with it.

An oblivious person talking about obvious. Yes, me.

"He is just being shy as usual. He is too happy that - ack! I beg for your mercy!" Mitsutada-senpai is hit again.

"There is nothing that makes me happy today!" Ookurikara declares, "And I'm not smiling!"

I don't really understand the happy part…? Why is he happy…?

I hear Kogitsunemaru chuckles inside me. Uhh, what's so funny? I'm sure you aren't laughing at their antics, so what are you laughing at…?

No answer comes.

"Forget about him," Ookurikara says as he takes a seat next to me, pushing his older brother (in my mind) away.

"Hmm…okay." I don't really care as I can ask Kogitsunemaru later. "By the way, why did you two come later than usual?"

"My homeroom went longer than usual and Mitsutada waited for me before going here," Ookurikara replies.

"I see. You two are really good friends, aren't you?" I say, perhaps feeling a bit envious.

I hardly do that with Yoshiyuki, despite being childhood friends. I didn't go to the same middle school as him, so we were disconnected for a while there, but here in high school, I can't do the usual stuffs with him. I rarely hang around with him outside the school, actually. Sometimes I question our status as best friends. Perhaps it's because I have lovers that I neglect him as a friend instead…even though he is my so-called-hero…
I heard such thing is normal - to neglect your friends for your lover. Is this how it feels…? I feel really bad.

"We aren't."

"We are."

You can tell who said what, huh? Pfft.

Mitsutada-senpai settles in the seat next to Ookurikara. "Kuri-chan, that's a cruel thing to say. We are good friends!"

"Since when? We are ne-"

"Since middle school. We are neighbors, duh," Mitsutada-senpai calmly cuts off Ookurikara's words, "Aren't we at least friends?"

Ooh, the two of them went to the same middle school? Thinking about childish Ookurikara and Mitsutada-senpai…how amusing. I see Ookurikara is still looking annoyed, though. He is really a tsundere person. "Ookurikara, you're more stubborn than I thought," I say, "Truthfully speaking, you're pretty dependant on Mitsutada-senpai."

Ookurikara opens his mouth, but no words are out. He shuts his mouth, pursed his lips, still looking annoyed, but he nods anyway. He says nothing, but his nod is enough for Mitsutada-senpai to smile brightly.

Mutual friends. How nice.

"I know Yamanbagiri-chan can take down the stubborn Kuri-chan very easily!" Mitsutada-senpai exclaims happily.

"No, it's not easy. Why me, anyway?" I sigh, "You can do it better, senpai."

"It's -"

"Ugh, don't use the power of friendship or whatever, Mitsutada," Ookurikara says, "Such great power can't exist."

"Says the one who role-plays actively as a chuunibyou character on twitter," I glare at the surprised Ookurikara. Ooh, nice expression there.

"How did you - ?!"

"Putting that aside, what am I to the two of you?" I ask.

I asked out of pure curiosity, but I feel guilty when they freeze altogether. Mitsutada-senpai and Ookurikara turn into stones, staying still, their jaws dropped as their eyes are fixed on me.

"Uh, if it's too hard to answer, forget it…" I continue.

Mitsutada-senpai blinks a few times before replying, "No, uh…we're just surprised by the sudden question, that's all."

"I see. Then, what is your answer? I demand one out of curiosity."

Ookurikara scratches his cheek, looking troubled, but he is the one to speak first, "For me, you're my
"But…?" I wait for him to continue.

"But also…someone I'm…" Ookurikara avoids my gaze, looking somewhere else, "You're also my…uh…"

"Also…?"

I press him to answer, but Mitsutada-senpai snaps before Ookurikara can answer. "You're my friend, Yamanbagiri-chan. Our friend."

Mitsutada-senpai glances at Ookurikara who nods in agreement, "Yeah. That's all."

The two of them look kind of unsure to me, but I nod anyway. "I see. That's an easy question, isn't it? Why so hard to answer?"

"Because…it's embarrassing?" Mitsutada-senpai chuckles, "That question isn't something you would usually ask to your friends, but I expect no less from you, Yamanbagiri-chan."

I don't catch that as an insult. I know that I am indeed odd. Though I feel that Mitsutada-senpai only used that as an excuse to hide something else.

"For someone who likes to spout that we're friends, you're shy, huh, Mitsutada?" Ookurikara mocks him.

Mitsutada-senpai flicks Ookurikara's forehead and asks me, "What are we to you, Yamanbagiri-chan?"

"My friends," I answer immediately. "Uh…what's wrong…?" I notice that they look somewhat disappointed.

Mitsutada-senpai asks, "No…more? Nothing more…?"

"More than friends? Best friends?" I ask back in confusion, "I think we haven't reached that point yet. Do your best if you want to become best friends with me."

"…what about something more?" Ookurikara asks this time; his face is enigmatic as usual.

"Mega best friends? That word actually exists?"

Mitsutada-senpai sits back to maintain his calm composure, but he excitedly says, "…Okay. Let's do our best to become mega best friends with Yamanbagiri-chan, Kuri-chan!"


"There is still hope for us," Mitsutada-senpai replies, "Don't be a coward and take the chance. It's worth to give it a shot."

"I don't understand what you two are talking about," I comment, most likely with a disturbed face because I am greatly disturbed now, "Why are you two talking about me like I'm some kind of important mission?"

"Please ignore out stupid ramblings," Ookurikara sighs as his knuckles tap on the desk, "Forget what we've said. Please."
I glare at him with a clear intent that I don't want to give up until I understand what they talked about. But, seeing his *seriously innocent* face, begging me to forget, *gosh* that rare expression of his - I can't just refuse. "O…kay. I'll do so for now."

I'm not going to press the topic further as it seems that I won't get any answers even if I ask. If I can't have answers now, I can have them later. Anytime. Yes, I hope I have the chance to do so.

"Good, because the club is going to start soon," Mitsutada-senpai smiles gently, the same as usual, as if nothing has happened. He turns on the computer and opens the browser. "I wonder what we are going to do."

"Playing games?" Ookurikara replies, "The IT club isn't a serious club, anyway. We're basically free to do anything we want."

Mitsutada-senpai chuckles, "Unless the president has something in mind, yes."

They begin to talk with one another and I decide to stay quiet, looking at my computer's screen.

I don't want to think too much about what they've said, I swear, but still, I keep thinking about it. What do you think about this, Kogitsunemaru?

Ten seconds passed.

…Kogi?

A minute passed. So fast…?! Is the time display on the computer wrong…?

Umm…Kogi? Please answer me.

"Say, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru calls me after a long silence, "What is *chuunibyou*?"

…You're stuck on that part?! You're so late!

Oh well, I'll explain anyway. *Chuunibyou* is a term used for a syndrome where an adolescence person acts like he or she possesses a supernatural power and such, which is illogical and impossible according to humans' world laws. *Chuunibyou* people are almost or certainly delusional. In normal people's eyes, *chuunibyou* people are creepy and disgusting, though *chuunibyou* people are mostly deemed as cute in 2D world. According to the internet, there are three types; someone who acts like an anti-social or delinquent, someone who chooses non-mainstream culture to be different from others, and lastly - someone who acts like she or he has supernatural power.

"Where does the word *chuunibyou* come from?"

It basically means *eight grader syndrome* in Japanese. But as I said, it doesn't *only* apply to middle schoolers.

"Hmm…just curious, is Ookurikara a *chuunibyou*?"

I know where did you come from, but, no, he isn't. Maybe he is in middle school, but he isn't now. He is just a hardcore *tsundere*. You know what *tsundere* is, right?

"Yeah…someone who acts mean outside but is kind inside, right?"

Basically, yes.

"Then, is Mitsutada a *chuunibyou*?"
"Why did you even ask? He wears an eye patch, sure, but he said it's because he got a scar there… thus making his right eye blind. That's all. Though I suppose he underwent *chuunibyou* phase before, along with Ookurikara… just because.

"How about you, Yamanbagiri? Have you become a *chuunibyou* before?"

You're really curious about this, aren't you?

Kogitsunemaru chuckles.

Oh well. I don't think I became a *chuunibyou* before. I know oddities are real, the impossible stuffs are actually possible - but they make no sense for majority of people - they make no sense in humans' world in a whole. As a child, even I know the fact that I have to stay quiet about oddities.

" Hmm~ I want to see a real example of *chuunibyou* now."

Let's visit Ookurikara's role-play twitter after this, then. He acts as a cheerful *chuunibyou* character pretty well. You can't even tell that Ookurikara is the one who wrote the tweets.

"Oh. Let's do that soon! I'm thirsty for knowledge now."

For your curiosity, to be exact.

"Yes, yes. By the way, Yamanbagiri, have you told anyone that you're going to go home earlier?"

Ah. I forgot. I forgot so many things lately… ugh, I hate this.

The club president is talking in front of the room, but I can barely hear him. I tug on Ookurikara's sleeve and says when he looks to me, "I'm going home earlier, please tell the president."

"Why?"

"I have reasons."

"Serious reasons to make your face tense?"

"…Is my face tense?"

"Yes. A little bit. I can tell that you have a lot of things on your mind. Anyone close to you can tell."

"…Am I *that* obvious?" I rub my own face with my fingers, but I can't exactly tell what kind of face I'm making.

"I don't think so. You're… unpredictable when you're serious, actually. You're always close to the state of complete enigmatic, where nobody can tell what you're thinking." Ookurikara stares at me, but his eyes are gentle somehow, "For you to show your weakness like this… what you're thinking is really serious and important, huh?"

"Hmm. Pretty much."

"I'm sure you won't tell me your reasons, but… okay, I'll tell the president. J-Just this once," he replies and turns his head away from me.

"Thank you, Ookurikara."

"N-No problem."
I can clearly feel that he takes glances at me afterwards, but I stay quiet, turning my focus to the club president and listens to what he is saying. He is talking about today's club activities with his voice full of laziness. Though lazy, he loves computer so much to have a speech about it. Only about it.

Well then, let's get this done quickly.

Chapter End Notes

*Mitsutada officially calls Ookurikara Kara-chan, but I don't want to change it (Kuri-chan sounds cuter). Tsurumaru calling people with '-bou' might not happen, either.
*Edited Tsurumaru's lines. He calls others absolutely with '-chan' now. Mitsutada has to do the same.
*Edited some stuffs in earlier chapters (fixed typos, spaces, and stuffs) and added a line in chapter 2-05. I forgot to mention that Kousetsu wears glasses here. A fatal mistake. I apologize for that. I'll make sure I won't do the same mistake again!
I stop when I reach the entrance door and look at the scenery outside. The rain has long gone. It is just a passing downpour. I turn to look at someone behind me, "President, why are you following me?"

"Oh, so you've realized. You're pretty sharp."

The president of the IT club - Akashi Kuniyuki, my upperclassmen - leaves his hiding spot and appears right in front of me. He fixes his glasses and smiles. It's weird to find him following me...he is a well-known genius lazy bun, after all. I heard that he skips class or sleeps in class...but his grades are always perfect. That's a genius for you. If I'm not mistaken, he is in the same class as Mitsutada-senpai's and Ichigo-senpai's. Eh, his introduction isn't important now.

"Of course. Your movements are as clear as day, president."

Actually, Kogitsunemaru told me that the president is following me long before this scene. I waited to confirm - hey, even I have pretty good instincts on this!

"Huh. I'm pretty confident in my stealth skill...real world isn't as easy as a game. Too bad," he says before he yawns.

"You're an escape artist, president. Even in game, your stealth skill isn't that good. You're better at running," I honestly say it, "Well then, why are you here? Why are you following me? I passed through your surprise test."

He looks kind of pained with my honest words about his skills, but he replies calmly, "Yes, your score on that test is perfect, I have no objections," he yawns again and lazily looks at me, "I'm just curious on why you skipped the club lately. I can't ask you in the room, though, so I want to stop you before you leave, but I ended up following you anyway. I feel so lazy to shout...glad you've called me."

"I'm not skipping today. Besides, I was busy with my work in the newly-formed disciplinary committee."

"Yeah...but you want to go home early today. What for? I sense something is off with you, Yamanbagiri."

Even president realizes? I'm not even close to him - am I really obvious? Guess I am. "I thought you're too lazy for this kind of stuff, president," I decide to not answer his question just yet.

"Well, sometimes even I have to take actions. I want to get it over quickly, though. This curiosity is eating me."

"I'll let your curiosity eats you until death, then."

"I won't end up dead, but that's really cruel."

"Just saying."

"So, you aren't going to answer my question?"
"I'm not going to answer until you tell me your real reason on following me, president," I reply, "Even someone like me realize that you have other motives."

"Ooh?" I see president flicks his head and grins, "I'll just say it, then. I'm expecting a lot from you, Yamanbagiri. Your coding skill is what the IT club need for the upcoming competition. That's why I don't want to see you skipping club."

"Eh…?"

Did I hear him right?

IT club needs…my coding skill? For upcoming competition?! Wait, what…?!

"T-T-This is the first time I heard of such competition, president."

"Ah~ Programming competitions are pretty popular outside. Suzuran gets one this year - a school's IT club against another school's IT club, though," president replies, "Based on my observation, you're the only one capable on programming, Yamanbagiri. You can handle the pressure well and your codes are neat. Perfect. The IT club is counting on you. Its fate rests on your shoulder."

"W-What is this, all of sudden…? B-But others can do the same!"

Crap, I said what's on my mind. I quickly regret my words.

President still looks calm, though. "True, there are others who specialize in coding as well, but for competition, only you are suited for it."

I'm doomed.

"Sorry to suddenly push you in it, but, you're our only hope. Third years are not allowed to participate, so…" president says as he walks closer to me and pats my shoulder. He smiles. "Do it, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro."

"When…is the competition?"

"In August, during summer break. Exact date is still a mystery, so you better prepare yourself."

I don't want to see his annoying smile (grin) right now.

But…I can't just refuse it. President is a third year now - he will graduate this year. If this programming competition is the first to be held in Suzuran, then of course he wants someone from the club to join and win it. He wants a last good memory in the IT club. President is only passionate in computer stuffs, but he is really passionate in it because he loves it so much.

"Alright…I'll do it. I don't have any choice."

I decide to give up.

President smiles even brighter, "I will let you go home early today, but not tomorrow and the day onwards. I'll teach you programming privately."

"President, August is still far away…"

"I know. More the reason to start the training. This competition will be tough; I won't let you laze around. Yes, even though I'm a lazy person myself, I won't let you."
"Why is he picking on me now…?"

"President, I love how you accept your lazy self and seem proud of it, but…what if I get sick and have other business?"

Actually, his pride to his laziness can be bad sometimes, but let's compliment him here.

"That can't be helped. I believe in your skill, but you're still rough on the edges. Let's polish it a bit more."

President looks deadly serious now. His voice changes dramatically from a lazy, slow one to a stern one, as if he is a full-fledged adult. It matches his look pretty well.

I sigh heavily, "Okay, I'll go home now. I'll do my best, president." I turn away and start to walk.

"Yamanbagiri."

I turn around without asking, though annoyed when he calls me again.

"You know, that practice thing is just an excuse. I want to spend some time with you, that's all~" He waves his hand, "You're free to come or not. It's a request. Just take it easy~ I believe in you~"

"President…I don't understand you at all."

I can see his grin as he walks away.

"He…should have said that since the start," Kogitsunemaru finally speaks. He stays inside me.

I know, right…he took all the trouble to lie…that's not like him at all. For me, he is the one being weird here. He was so out of character, don't you think? That's weird. Too weird!

"Yeah…he is acting weird. He is always weird, though," Kogitsunemaru remarks, "What are you going to do with his request, Yamanbagiri?"

Well, if I'm free…I have no reason to not going. Maybe chatting with him for a few minutes is enough and then I can go home. Easy. I'll just hope that he won't force me to do stuffs for him.

Kogitsunemaru chuckles, "I'm sure he is hoping something more, though."

Ahh…I don't want to think about that now…let's just get going already. I'm sure Hotarumaru is waiting.

Oh wait. President didn't tell me what kind of programming language is going to be used for the competition. Well, crap. I'm bad at Visual Basic and C…I think I can do, PHP, Java Script, and Java, but…uhh, all of them are influenced by C, I'm an idiot. There are other programming languages, too, so which one will be used in the competition? If I don't know, it'll be bad!

"Nobody understands what you're talking about, Yamanbagiri. I'm glad you didn't randomly think of the codes on your mind, though."

Oh well. I'll ask him later.

I continue my journey to the riverbank.

"By the way, Mikazuki sure takes a long time…" Kogitsunemaru says.
You're one to talk - but yes, I agree. I thought he said it won't take very long, but, who knows? Maybe he is drinking tea right now and forgets about time.

"Pfft. That's seems plausible!"

I chuckle along him while walking to the courtyard and then to the gate of the school. This time, I take a different route to home. The one I usually take is a shorter path and doesn't cross the river, but my destination is the riverbank now.

"It has been a long time since the last time I went through this route," I mutter in nostalgia. Though my memories of going home from this path aren't that good, there are important sweet memories I created with people here.

"Before Mikazuki and I met you…?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

Yes. During middle school…probably the darkest part of my life for now.

"Can I ask you…what exactly happened?"

I stop on my tracks almost immediately.

I'm sorry, Kogi…I trust you, I trust you a lot, but…

I'm not ready to tell you, after all. I know I should have let the past go already, but - all the pain in these three years - is still lingering inside me. I…I can't. I don't think I can for now.

"I-It's okay! Forgive me for asking such a sensitive topic just to satisfy my bad curiosity. Whatever it is, I know it's hard for you. Please don't think about it…I won't ask you again until you're ready to tell me."

Okay…

"Actually, I'm okay if you don't tell me, too. Your past does not matter for me…what matters is your future with me. And Mikazuki."

What a weird romantic line. That sounds funny coming from you.

I love it, though. Thank you, Kogitsunemaru…

"Hnn. No problem."

"Manba-niichan!"

I look at the direction where the voice comes from and finds Hotaru - full name Hotarumaru - is standing at the riverbank while waving hands at me. I walk faster and approach him.

"It's been a long time, Hotaru. I'm sorry I made you wait."

Hotaru shakes his head and smiles, "It's okay, I didn't wait for that long," he smiles sweetly as usual and says, "Let's sit here, then!"

Hotaru is a shiryou - a dead person's spirit. He is a ghost. At least I think he is. Hotaru himself doesn't have any memory when he was alive, which is kind of weird as a shiryou, but it is possible. Shiryou with no memories whatsoever exists. To be honest, I think he is better that way. He looks young, like an elementary school student or small middle school student. It'll hurt him if he knows the way he died, which might not be painless but cruel instead.
I sit next to him and ask, "How are you, Hotaru? I was surprised when you called me here."

I can freely talk to Hotaru even though he is invisible to normal people's eyes because this riverbank is usually empty. People rarely pass here and I don't care if someone I don't know sees me talking all by myself.

"Ehehe. As you can see, I'm fine," he replies, "I searched for you, but you weren't home yesterday. I want to talk to you after a long break. It has been a long time, right?"

"You're right. I'm pretty busy nowadays...I'm sorry if I make you lonely."

Hotaru shakes his head, "It's okay! It can't be helped that you're busy. I have others around me, too, so I'm not really lonely...ah, where is Kogi-niichan?"

"I'm always here," Kogitsunemaru gets out of my body and appears next to Hotaru, "Hello there, Hotaru. I'm glad to see you."

Hotaru smiles brightly, "I'm happy to see you, too! What about Mika-niichan?"

"He hasn't come back yet," I shrug, "I'm sure he'll come soon, though."

"Eh? What is he doing? That's rare."

Even Hotaru knows I rarely part with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru...

"He is gathering information for Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru replies before I can.

Hotaru nods and doesn't ask further.

"So, what do you want to tell me about, Hotaru?" I ask.

"Oh, right..." He takes a deep breath and his face changes into a very serious one, "You know, I usually hang around here, and yesterday around noon, I saw...something black emerges from the river."

This takes my total attention. "Something black? Can you describe it?"

"It looks like bunch of ropes, but the way they swing around seem like a group of snakes...but they're black and have no faces as far as I can see."

"What did you do when you see it?" Kogitsunemaru asks carefully.

"I watched in shock. I was...frozen. But the thing immediately drowns and I can't see it again," Hotaru replies, "I asked others around the river, they also saw the same thing. Some saw it at different point than what I saw - as if it was moving steadily..."

"Moving to which direction?"

Hotaru points at his right, "West, I think..."

Hmm...it's moving away from the center of Suzuran, then. Where is it going...? Nobody really knows, huh.

"W-What should we do, Manba-niichan? I could sense nothing, but, they said that thing is dangerous! I'm...scared..." Hotaru tugs on my shirt, "I don't want any casualties...!"
I pat his head to comfort him. "It's okay. I think it won't attack other oddities...thank you for the information, Hotaru. That thing is a mystery I want to know as well, but, I can do nothing...I'll report it to my brother when he gets back, so don't worry, the professionals will do their job."

He nods, "Okay."

Really, that's valuable information. Now we know for sure that the thing moves around and it isn't so secretive. Let's just hope that it is moving far away from the place full of people and goes to a remote place instead, like the mountains. Yep, that's better. Since it was moving in the river yesterday, I suppose it makes the river as its road - which means going to the mountains is a possibility. Good.

"Anything else to add, Hotaru?" Kogitsunemaru asks as he also pats Hotaru's head. He looks back and smiles. His eyes are big and round, innocent and bright as usual, but...there's something unsettling about him today.

M-Must be my imagination.

"Actually...I think I remembered something from when I was alive."

That's probably the biggest surprise of the day.

Hotaru continues. "Yesterday, when I was searching for you around your neighborhood I rarely visit, I look at the forest and...a flash of images come to me. They feel familiar...so it should be my memories, right?"

"Hmm...can you tell me what did you see?"

"Y-yeah. The scene is...I was walking around that neighborhood, holding hands with an older man whose hair is dark and a boy around my age, his hair is bright but the scene is in monochromatic so I don't know exactly what colors...I was laughing around with them. That's all. What...do you think?"

"...I think that's really a piece of your memory, Hotaru," Kogitsunemaru replies.

I nod in agreement. "Anything else you've seen?"

"I saw my hand is resting atop a white bed just a while ago. I saw nothing else," Hotaru replies, "I should be happy to regain my memories, but...I don't really know what I should feel."

I think he knows that he might see the way he died. His terrifying last moments and lingering regrets...

"I know," I say, "It's okay. I'm always here to listen."

Besides, I think I...I've experienced the same thing and it may happen again.

"Hnn. Thank you, niichan..."

I'm sure he has other stuffs on his mind, but there's no way I can force him to say it out loud. I can only comfort him for now...what kind of comfort? Head patting and similar stuffs, nothing more.

Oh, right, I forgot to add that despite his lost memories, Hotaru remembers his name and nothing more.

"Come to think of it...what is your full name, Hotaru?" I decide to ask, changing the topic.
"My full name…?" Hotaru looks confused as he tries to think, "I don't really remember my family name. It starts with ku, but I remember nothing more."

"I see."

I found it weird that he can only remember the first letter. Maybe he got it vaguely, like from the scene of his past.

"Manba-niichan, are you alright?"

"Huh?"

Hotaru holds my left wrist, touching the wristband. Ah…

"You look like you're troubled too," he sets off his deadly puppy eyes.

I smile to him, "I'm alright, thank you. Don't worry about me."

He grumbles in displeasure that I won't tell him, but he lets it go anyway.

"By the way, where is Mika-niichan? You said he'll come back soon."

"Ah…I don't know either."

Kogitsunemaru adds, "Well, worry not, I'm sure he is just lazing around somewhere."

I whisper to Hotaru, "Please don't follow that old man's example. Ah, Kogi is kind of a lazy bun, too. Not to mention he is a glutton. Please don't follow their examples."

"Of course," he chuckles.

"I hear you clear and well, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru sobs, "Please stop spreading false information that can ruin my image."

"That's not a false information, but a real information," I chuckle as I flick Kogitsunemaru's forehead happily, "Your fault."

"Ungh…"

Kogitsunemaru looks angry, but he can't counter me like usual because Hotaru is there. He can't tease me back with dirty jokes now.

"Ah! Why did you stop, Kogi-niichan? I thought I would see the real thing," Hotaru speaks up.

"The real thing…? What thing?" I question.

"What it is called…hmm…dirty jokes? Mika-niichan told me once."

The time stops in an instant. I see Kogitsunemaru's jaw drops rapidly.

"Mikazuki…told you that?" He asks. Hotaru nods innocently.

"Eh, what is a dirty joke, anyway?"

I don't reply and just smile.

That's it; I'm going to kill Mikazuki Munechika when he gets back. To violate a young child's
"Say, Hotaru. What do you want Mikazuki to eat tonight? Because I'm going to poison him and punish him for his wild mouth."

"You're no better, Yamanbagiri…don't tell a child how to kill someone," Kogitsunemaru sweats.

"Just a little bit of torture. I won't kill him."

Hotaru chuckles awkwardly. Of course he knows what it means to poison, torture, and kill someone. No, I think he actually knows what dirty joke is…if it is told in a frontal way, like about sexual stuffs. Not that I mind. If he is still alive, he should be in middle school now. That's a normal age to know more about sexual stuffs. Eh, if he has an older brother, I'm probably dead now…I'm sorry.

"Ah, Yamanbagiri, what time is it? We haven't bought dinner yet," Kogitsunemaru realizes.

I take my smartphone and almost screams.

"I-It's getting pretty late, uh, we have to go home now," I say in a hurry.

Hotaru smiles sweetly like usual, "Alright. See you. Be careful on the way home."

I stand up and take my bag, "Hotaru, too, be careful. Don't play around with weird people."

"I won't~!"

I walk away after I wave my hands at Hotaru and Kogitsunemaru follows me this time. I walk as fast as I can on the street next to the riverbank.

The river is shining orange. The sky starts to darken. The sun starts to sets off in the distance. Mikazuki has yet to come.

I'm worried, but I believe in him.

The important thing is now - to buy dinner. I said that I want western food, but…what kind of food can I take to home? Steak tastes better when it is warm on the restaurant itself. Junk foods aren't an option. What to do, what to do…I can cook, but I'm pretty bad at it…

"Since this is a rare occurrence, why don't we cook dinner by ourselves? The three of us," Kogitsunemaru suggests, "You can easily search recipes of foods that are easy to make in the internet, right? Then, we'll follow it thoroughly."

It's harder that it seems, you know?

"Of course, but - the three of us will do it. Maybe if Mikazuki can't, the two of us are enough. Cooking together seems romantic for me."

Ah, so that is your main goal…

But…okay, I accept your suggestion. I'll look up for the fastest-to-be-cooked stew recipes now, and then let's buy the ingredients.

"So you want a stew, huh?"

Yeah. You have no complains, right? Other than non-existent tofu, that is.
"Please don't put salt on my wounds, Yamanbagiri. It hurts."

I'm pouring you a lemon, not salt.

"That's still painful…"

I ignore him and start searching for recipes on my smartphone.

A battle starts. At least for me...hopefully, I won't burn the kitchen, or even my whole house. I **seriously** hope I won't and I can cook normally with the other two.
"Mikazuki, I'm glad that you came home alive, but...where did you go?"

I confront Mikazuki right away when I get home. The said person was waiting on the living room, drinking tea, and then smiles as if nothing happened.

"I found no good information about the thing from the kodama. They only said whatever the tree is; it has a foul aura that might drain your life. That's all...and then I drank tea with them," Mikazuki replies.

As expected, he lost track of time.

"Afterwards, I met something interesting on the way, so I was so late to go to the riverbank and decided to wait in home."

"What did you met?" I ask this time.

"Nothing. Just someone I think I know and they piqued my interest."

That's really vague, but I don't really care and mind.

"Okay...please do tell if you won't come in the future. I was worried."

Mikazuki smiles innocently, "I know."

"Well, at least you didn't come to the riverbank to found nobody," Kogitsunemaru chuckles. It is indeed a smart move to just go home at that time. "By the way, we're going to cook dinner all by ourselves. Can you help a bit?" He raises a plastic bag full of ingredients.

"Perhaps..."

"Before that, let's take a quick bath...I don't want to waste any time here," I quickly go upstairs. The other two follow quietly. I'm sure Kogitsunemaru has put the plastic bag on the kitchen, no worries.

We do our usual bathing routine, but this time, it ends faster.

Afterwards, as I'm in a hurry, I quickly go downstairs after dressing myself up. Kogitsunemaru catches me up and ties his hair before he starts to prepare the ingredients.

Mikazuki is obviously left behind as he runs the slowest.

"Eh, that's cruel," he complains hearing my thoughts. He arrives at the kitchen at last.

Welp, whatever. What can you do, anyway, Mikazuki? Do you have any experience in cooking?

"Nope. None. Zero."

"I expect nothing less," I sigh, "I'm pretty sure there is something even you can do..."
Never mind that, Mikazuki is 100% hopeless in cooking.

When the actual cooking starts, he does stuff wrong in basically everything.

He can do nothing. Please, put him away from the kitchen.

"Okay, Mikazuki…just sit there and don't even step on the kitchen again," I warn him.

Mikazuki laughs pleasantly and waits patiently on the sofa.

"So…what should we do with this mess?" Kogitsunemaru looks horribly scared, disgusted, and worried at the same time about the mess Mikazuki has made in the kitchen. I don't even have words to describe what I see rightly. It is a mess. A complete mess. A living nightmare.

"L-Let's clean it up…yes. We still have time, let's do this quickly."

"Alright!"

I'm glad Kogitsunemaru looks fired up. I can depend on you, after all…!

Sorry to skip all of sudden, but, after 120 minutes cooking the real thing, dinner is finished! It is beef and stout stew. Search in internet to see how it looks, dear readers. It looks warm and tasty on the plate. Though it's only a dish, I think I can be full with this.

Kogitsunemaru puts the dishes on the table. We clap our hands and start to eat.

"I think it's turned pretty good," I comment as I see the plate, looking proud.

Kogitsunemaru flashes a smile, "For a beginner, yep. I'm glad we didn't mess the kitchen." He takes a piece and eats with all happiness. "So this is the taste of hard work…"

No, umm, it's the taste of meat.

"Good work, you two," Mikazuki chuckles before he sips his tea.

"You didn't even help, Mikazuki, don't look so proud," Kogitsunemaru says, "You're completely useless in the kitchen."

"Forgive me for that. I have zero experience."

Mikazuki starts to eat elegantly, as if he is in a high-class restaurant. I feel uncomfortable seeing him.

"I have none, other than boiling water and make instant noodles, either. Yeah, yeah, it's better for him to leave out like that, though. I don't want to destroy the kitchen," I chuckle.

"Oh my. Did I disappoint you, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki looks at me, "If I do, I'll make it up by tonight, then. I'm sure you won't be disappointed~"

I drop my fork.
Ah…that's right. I promised this morning…uhh, I'm getting embarrassed…

"Ah~ So you forgot. That's cruel," Kogitsunemaru's ears fold downward, as though he is sad.

"Well, I'm sorry. You know that I tend to forgot stuffs…even important ones like that…except school-related stuffs."

Mikazuki pokes my cheek with his pointer finger, "Still cute, though. Right?"

Kogitsunemaru nods in agreement.

"Sheesh, quit teasing me and eat already."

"We're eating~" Mikazuki replies.

"Quit talking, then."

They really do stop talking for once and eat the dinner quietly. Sounds of spoons, forks, and plates touching each other fill the almost lonely house.

Something seems off…of course. Brother Horikawa isn't here. Brother Yamabushi, too. I wonder when they will come home.

As expected, Kogitsunemaru finished first.

"What do you mean by expected…" He sweats in response and looks at his empty plate, "Umm, who will wash the dishes?"

I turn my head to see Mikazuki who just smiles innocently in return. "…I don't think Mikazuki can, huh. Can you do it, Kogitsunemaru? I have homework for tomorrow, so…"

Kogitsunemaru glares at Mikazuki in displeasure, as if screaming why are you so useless, but he nods anyway. Speaking about age, Mikazuki is still older than Kogitsunemaru. Maybe that's why he can rarely get seriously angry at him. Grandpa vs an old man, huh…

Kogitsunemaru yawns and looks around, as if searching for something. Food, I believe. He is a glutton and never gets fat even though he eats a lot. Perhaps the energy goes to his muscles instead.

Yep, he walks to the fridge and opens it.

"Ah!! There's some pudding there. I didn't know," he exclaims with a big smile on his face.

"I thought we ran out of it last week," Mikazuki says.

"Yeah…I guess brother Horikawa bought another yesterday. We didn't check the fridge."

"Do you want one?" Kogitsunemaru offers.

To my surprise, Mikazuki raises his hand.

"Why are you surprised? Even I need sweets sometimes," Mikazuki says.

"Sorry about that, just a natural response…"

"How about you? Do you want one?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

"No, I'll eat one tomorrow. I don't feel like eating it today."
Kogitsunemaru puts two puddings on the table and starts to eat one. He looks really happy eating it. I see Mikazuki is still eating slowly…very slowly. I take a mineral water and drink it after I finished with my dinner. That was refreshing.

I look at the clock. Eight, huh…

"I'll go upstairs to take my homework first and go back down to do it, okay?"

Even without the answer, I immediately go to my room in the second floor. Since I'm not lazy just for once, I decide to put my books for tomorrow and take out the unnecessary ones. I take my homework and a mechanical pencil after.

Come to think of it, I think I haven't combed my hair yet. Let's do it.

Before that, I charge my smartphone first.

Then, I put my homework on the table and starts to comb my hair in front of a mirror. I take a glance at the clock and decide to do it quick.

It has been a pretty long time since the last time I combed my hair alone, huh. Ahaha, it feels weird. My room feels oddly spacious, too, even though it's small…I'm so used to Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's presence that being alone for once feels greatly weird.

Huh…?

Wait, I feel someone's presence here. I turn around and look around the room, but of course, I find nobody.

What am I feeling, then…? It's eerie…

Well…let's get this done quickly, then.

Forget my bad feeling for now. Maybe it's just my stupid sensitive emotional si-

"Ah…?!!?"

When I turn around to look at the mirror once again, I find it reflects two shadows. One is mine and one is…black…?

"W-Who…?"

I feel a dark presence creeps on my back, slowly but surely closing the gap between me and it. As I shiver feeling the coldness, I realize that I can't move an inch. Not my arms and not my legs. I feel my breath becomes heavier and heavier as seconds passed. I start to sweat.

Looking at the mirror, I can see the black shadow clearly.

It hands are reaching me…and slowly…grabs my neck.

"A-Ah…"

It's so cold. Whatever is touching me right now - is so cold. I-I'm scared right now…I rarely get scared about mystic stuffs since I can see oddities since forever, but now…I know that something is dangerous…!

"W-Who are you…?" I repeat.
No answer comes.

Suddenly, I feel out of breath. When I realize, I see the hands start to crush my neck, slowly but surely, strangling me to death. I start to choke, helplessly, hopelessly - not knowing what to do because I can't move. And then... I can speak no more. I can't breathe. It hurts, it hurts...

...to the point I close my eyes and collapse to the ground.

When my knees fall on the floor, I can breathe once again. I immediately look around and search for anything out of place, but I find nothing.

My heart is still beating too fast. Let's calm down now...

It's weird, though. At times like these, I'm sure both Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki will run immediately to me. But they didn't. Then... they didn't feel it? They didn't hear my thoughts? Even now...?

I turn around and see the clock - which to my surprise, shows that a minute hasn't even passed. Hell, the needle stays on the same place from when I started to comb my hair. Even though I know for sure that at least two minutes should have passed...

"What... is happening lately...?"

I crouch on the ground, holding my knees, like a coward I am. Yeah... I am indeed a coward.

I don't think I will tell the other two about it. Not yet.

Perhaps it's just my imagination, after all. Perhaps I'm too worn out to have delusions. Yes... let's put it that way for now. I don't want to worry anyone.

When I think I have calmed down enough, I take my homework and go downstairs, leaving my oddly cold room.

When I arrive at the dining room, Mikazuki is eating a pudding and Kogitsunemaru is throwing the empty can on the trash bin. I stand there, dumbfounded on how calm they look.

"What's wrong, Yamanbagiri?" Kogitsunemaru asks in confusion.

"It's nothing," I shake my head and start to do my homework on the table.

I'm sure both Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki realize something is off about me, but they decide to stay quiet and do whatever they want. They know me pretty well to know when exactly they have to keep distance from me. We still keep our own secrets, even though the two can basically read my mind deeper if they want to.

Kogitsunemaru turns on the television. He looks bored.

"Maybe you can continue to play the game," I suggest when I see him sighing, "My laptop is in my room, though."

"Huh. You're right. Why did we stay here, again?"

"Mikazuki."

"Ah..."
Mikazuki drinks tea and smiles afterwards, as if he hasn't done anything wrong. He has finished eating the pudding, it seems.

"Before anything, Kogitsunemaru, go wash the dishes," I remind.

"Alright," Kogitsunemaru stands up and starts to take away the empty plates. When he arrives at the kitchen, he cleans it. I look at him to make sure he is doing it rightly. "Don't worry, even I know how to clean the dishes."

"Hmm. Good, then."

I continue to do my homework, scribbling on the textbook, trying to concentrate on what is the meaning of words rightly. Thank God this isn't math or I'm screwed when my mind is in disarray like this.

Mikazuki is watching the TV, by the way.

"Technology is sure convenient," he mutters all of sudden.

"Umm, yeah…?"

"Nothing. I'm just thinking about the great difference between my era and this era," he replies, "Not that I am sad. It is just…fascinating how the world becomes in just hundreds of years."

I see. He is reminiscing about the past…totally a trait a grandpa should have.

Mikazuki chuckles. "Fufu, you really do like calling me grandpa, don't you?"

"Well, it is your real age…are you bothered?"

"Not at all. It is true that I am a grandpa, so what you said is true," he turns to look at me, "You see, I…locked myself when I felt nobody wanted me anymore. I locked myself inside that shrine. Everyone but Shishiou, my guard, left me. Still, I locked myself away from the world…perhaps unable to accept the change."

I listen closely as I write on my textbook.

"Thus, hundreds of years passed without my notice…the world lies in the future, leaving me alone in the past. That time, when I thought I had accepted the changing world and the fact that I have to rot alone sooner or later…you came."

I can feel warmness on his gentle voice.

"It was just…an accident. Our kiss was just an unforeseen accident," Mikazuki continues, his fingers are tapping on the table, "However, at that time, meeting you - a human who can see oddities - seemed like a fate for me. Call me stupid whatsoever, I couldn't shake off the thoughts that meeting you is a chance for me."

"A chance…for what?"

"A chance to go outside my comfort zone and face the future, after hundreds of years in solitude and in rejection…I feel that, with following you, I might finally accept this new world and move on…and then perhaps die in peace," he chuckles awkwardly next, "I was captivated by your appearance. Perhaps it was a love at the first sight, though I seemed not to notice…with following you and bothering you, I realize that I am in love you for sure."

"A chance…for what?"
My hand stops moving all at once.

"Of course, by falling in love, I regain my will to life. I don't want to die...not anymore. Your existence is important for my life, of course, but more than that, I...want to have a future with you."

This time, his eyes look rather teary, though gentle.

His cheeks turn red, "Uh, it's really embarrassing to say this. The past me can't do it. But, now...I can. I changed in a better way. Because of you."

I think he is right...the past Mikazuki is far more egoistical and acts all mighty, even towards me. He is naturally elegant, sure, but he has a lot of pride, especially as a shinrei. Unlike Kogitsunemaru who chased me because he wants to marry me immediately, Mikazuki followed me out of boredom and curiosity. He didn't hold himself back - though Kogitsunemaru didn't, either, even though he wanted to. He simply failed at doing so.

Ah, I think I hear Kogitsunemaru is coughing in displeasure there. Is he embarrassed?

Anyway.

The past Mikazuki - believe it or not - is acting as if he suffers from himedere. You know, one of dere types where the girl acts like a mighty princess - and might actually be one - and is usually a tsundere? I don't know what name should I use for the male version, but, he is similar to that. Because he is a shinrei, a mighty being, even more beautiful than anything - he looks down on those below him.

I forgot when it is...that Mikazuki finally confessed to me and thus becoming an official rival for Kogitsunemaru. And then the two of them fought a lot...even more than before. Mikazuki still acts mighty at times, he is full of pride, after all - but he holds himself back at times. He doesn't give in so easily to his selfish desires anymore.

He also acts more cute, more perverted, and more playful.

Sometimes annoying, but I actually enjoy that side of him more than his egoistical one.

"I'm so honored to hear that," Mikazuki smiles at my thoughts, "Though I have no word about the past me, the worst me..."

"It's okay. That time passed already."

"Yes...still, I'm glad you accepted me, Yamanbagiri. You accepted a selfish grandpa like me...I'm really happy."

For once, I think, Mikazuki is showing his true smile. Not a fake. Not a tease. Just a pure smile of happiness.

I stay still, dumbfounded for good seconds, captivated, because dear God, Mikazuki is always attractive and handsome but even more so when he looks pure like this. His true self. This is illegal. Purely illegal!!

And then I cover my face with my open textbook.

"Ahaha, why are you covering your face, now, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki asks.

"Quiet. I'm sure you know why."
"Why are you getting embarrassed at that? After all the stuffs you've done," Kogitsunemaru laughs from the kitchen. Of course he listens and knows every bit of what Mikazuki said and my thoughts. "Why are you thinking about the past in the first place, Mikazuki?"

"Like Yamanbagiri said, grandpa stuffs. You'll feel it when you're older."

"I...I'm actually not delighted to hear that," he chuckles. "Well, accepting the changes even inside yourself is a point everyone has to gone through. I can't refuse it."

"That is right. I think you're pretty much a grandpa already, Kogitsunemaru."

"I agree," I nod.

"Uhh...okay? I'm not really happy...!"

"Okay, I'll settle with old man for now, then," I go back to focus on my homework.

Mikazuki looks at me in realization, "Ah, you haven't told me about your ordeal during the club, Yamanbagiri. And with Hotarumaru, too."

I forgot to explain, but, they can't read my mind when they're too far away from me. We still share senses such as pain, though.

"Ordeal...I think you know already," I answer, "I did get some information...there are six mysterious cases in the past two weeks in Suzuran. All of them are similar - something like black ropes trying to pull stuffs."

"I see. Then, what about with Hotarumaru?"

"He, along with several oddities, witnessed when a thing emerges from the river yesterday afternoon. Yes, this thing is black ropes that move around like snakes. It drowned quickly afterwards, but others stated that it was seen in other points of the river, as if it was moving to the west."

"What else?"

"Hotaru told me that...he might remember some things of when he was alive, but the images weren't clear and were monochromatic."

"I see...this week is pretty hectic, isn't it?"

"Yeah...one problem after another. One mystery after another..."

Ah. I'm finished with my homework.

Hmm. That's pretty fast. Well, literature is one of my strong points.

"I'm done with the dishes as well," Kogitsunemaru finally speaks, "Look at the time. Let's go to bed and keep the promise, shall we?"

"You're right. It's better for Yamanbagiri to sleep early, so let's start quickly."

Ah. Eh. Oh.

I'm getting embarrassed all of sudden. "P-Please don't smile like that, you two."

"Like what?" Kogitsunemaru asks, he is also grinning. So annoying...
"Like the one you're showing right now."

"Like what?" Mikazuki repeats like an idiot.

"…Whatever. Let's go already."

I stand up, holding my textbook and pencil.

After I make sure all the outer lights are on, the three of us go back to my room.

When the door is closed, Kogitsunemaru immediately jumps to me. It is a surprise attack, but I manage to slap his face, successfully stopping his attack.

"What's wrong?" Kogitsunemaru looks dejected.

That look actually stabs my heart. "Uh, calm down. No need to rush it…okay? I know you're frustrated and all, but…"

Uhh, what is the phrase again?

Mikazuki pats Kogitsunemaru's head, as if consoling him. "Yamanbagiri is right. Instead of forced actions, let them happen naturally, as though we're following the flow of river."

Ah, yes, that's the phrase.

"Uhh~ Alright. Sorry about that."

"It's okay. You're cute when you're pouty like that," I pull Kogitsunemaru closer and press our lips together. It's hard for my neck because of our height difference, but Kogitsunemaru leans in, pushing me backward. Still painful for my waist, but anyway.

This is pretty much the same scene that will happen if I didn't stop him earlier. I guess. Huh.

I close my eyes and let Kogitsunemaru sneaks in his tongue inside my mouth, but I can hear a flick sound of the light switch, so I guess Mikazuki turns the light off…and he hugs me from behind now?

Not that I can think clearly right now - when Kogitsunemaru's tongue is tracing mine and then I trace his.

We're not out of breath, but the kiss breaks anyway. Mikazuki pulls my head sideways and proceeds to kiss me - open-mouthed since the start. Welp, I'm not getting a break here. Not that I mind…you know?

I can feel Kogitsunemaru's fingers are unbuttoning my shirt, slowly but surely, though he stops near my chest. Then, I can feel his tongue running across my neck. That sudden action surprises me a lot, to the point that my legs start to weaken with every swipe he gives. And then there's Mikazuki who is still kissing me with his tongue, his hand is holding my waist, refraining me from falling to the floor.

My legs weaken from every pleasure they give me. Even when Kogitsunemaru bites my neck, I am certainly enjoying it.

I think it's time to move to-

Abruptly. Suddenly. Surprising the three of us.
A familiar sound comes. It is my ringtone.

My smartphone rings and vibrates violently on the table.

I look at my smartphone and see Yamato's name on the screen.

"Why is he…? So late at night…" I ask, even though the answer won't come here. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru look displeased, too, as we have just begun to…yeah. The mood is perfect already, and it is ruined by a single phone call. "I'll answer it…"

Lazily, I take my smartphone and answer, "Hello?"

Yamato screams on the other side, his breathing is unstable, completely on panic. "Kashuu is gone!! I-I can't find him anywhere…!"

Chapter End Notes

*I wonder if the scenes are too much for T. The dirty jokes and the upcoming scenes, too. Tell me anytime if it is too much, I'll change the rating to M.*

*New term of school has started once again. I am now in a new school. The past 2 days are tiring already, so I don't know if I can update this once a week or once every two weeks like usual…but I'll try my best to update at least once a month.*
"What do you mean? Calm down, Yamato."

Even I can hardly grasp what he means.

"Like I said," he takes a deep breath, "Kashuu is gone. He got out and I can't find him anywhere...! It has been almost 35 minutes..."

"...You're searching for him outside, in the area near Kashuu's house?"

"Eh? Uh, yes...I'm sorry! I panicked, so I...I told Kashuu to not go outside, too, but he got out for a reason I don't know."

"Okay, calm down, I won't get angry over this. Where are you now? Are you far from Kashuu's house now?"

"Yes...I'm near the riverbank."

That's the opposite direction of Kashuu's house. His searching area is pretty wide, it seems.

"I found Kashuu's shoes here."

Wait, what? Say what?

"Kashuu's shoes? Are you sure?"

"Yes, there's no mistaking it. It's Kashuu's beloved shoes for running."

Why did he leave his shoes there? But still, that's a proof he was there.

"Y-Yamanbagiri!" Kogitsunemaru suddenly shouts, full of panic, "Look there!"

He points out at the window. Without ending the phone call, I take a look.

Far away in the distance, I can see a giant white skull is walking between the buildings, its rattling bones and chattering teeth create disturbing and eerie sounds. Gachi. Gachi. The buildings around aren't taking any damage from it movements, but...I can see oddities around start to run away when they notice it.

"I-Isn't that...gashadokuro...?" The fear is real. I can feel my voice is shaking. "Why is it here...?"

"It's not even 11 p.m yet...no, it can't exist here in the first place as far as I know," Mikazuki replies, he tries to hide his shaky voice, but it is clear he is also shocked and scared at the same time.

"I-I think it is moving towards the riverbank...!" Kogitsunemaru says.

Oh crap. Yamato is in danger. Kashuu, whose location is unknown, is also in danger. Some innocent people who go out at night are also in danger. Gashadokuro prey on humans out late on the roads,
crushing them in its hand or biting off their heads. Those who stay at home should be safe, but those outside are not. At this hour, there should be plenty of people outside, probably going home from dinner in a restaurant and stuffs…!

Sure, the buildings are somehow safe from its attack now, but the humans aren't.

"Yamanbagiri…? Hello?" Yamato's voice comes.

"Yamato, can you see something big from your place?" I ask.

"Huh…? A-Ah. W-what is that?! It's so big…and it moves?!"

"It's a skeletal giant named gashadokuro. Never mind that, is your house far from your current place?"

"Yes, it's pretty far…"

"Then, can you run to the convenience store near Kashuu's house, Yamato? Run as fast as you can from that thing. Also take people you come across. All of you are in danger. If going to convenience store is impossible, go to a small hut next to school. Or anywhere near you is okay as long as you're inside a building! Stay there, text me where, and wait for me."

"A-Alright…"

I end the phone call. I believe you, Yamato.

"You're going, Yamanbagiri?!" Kogitsunemaru yelps, "You know that it's dangerous…!"

"I know. More the reason to. I have to find Kashuu at least - or help some people on the way," I reply, "Yamato isn't completely safe. He can see oddities now, so the probability of gashadokuro attacking him is higher than normal people, even if he is inside a building. No building is safe for him if it isn't his house."

"That is the same for you. And Kousetsu's family. If you go outside, that's it," Mikazuki says.

"I have the two of you. Kousetsu-senpai and his family are professionals. Yamato, on the other hand, knows nothing and can do nothing."

Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are both glaring at me.

"Wait," Kogitsunemaru suddenly says, "I hear the sound of the front door being opened."

"Brother Horikawa is back, then…?" When Kogitsunemaru nods, I sigh in relief. He came home at the right time. I know he is safe now…

"Now, then, do you still want to go outside, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki asks.

"Yes."

I glare back.

The two of them stay quiet, looking at me with unreadable expression on their faces.

Then, Kogitsunemaru sighs, "I have no right to stop you. I can't reject what you want like that - especially when you're determined to do it no matter what."
Mikazuki giggles, "Same here. What you wish for is our wish as well. We'll follow you anywhere, Yamanbagiri. No hesitation even for a bit."

I think I immediately smile here.

"…Yeah. Thank you."

And then, I decide to call Kousetsu-senpai regarding gashadokuro's appearance. He picks up almost immediately and asks, "You're going to ask about the gashadokuro, aren't you?"

"Ah…yes. So you know."

"I've just realized it…I'm going to call the older specialists after this. Is your brother, Yamabushi, home yet?"

"No. Sadly. I don't even know where he is now…"

"I see…don't worry, I'm sure the others can take care of it. What are you going to do now, Kunihiro-san?"

I stay quiet in response, thinking on what reply I should give.

"Is your friend, perhaps, out there and needs protection?"

His guess is completely on the mark.

"…Yes. I'm going to his location and transport him to his home."

There is a pause before he says, "…As expected. I can't ask you to not going, though. I know you're capable on doing it with the other two…please be careful."

"I will. Thank you, senpai."

I end the call.

I take my jacket and fix my messy clothes. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru take warm coats brother Yamabushi gave and wear them.

I open the window in my room. I can't just tell brother Horikawa, can I…? This has to be done in secret.

"This time, please fly me as quick as possible to Yamato's location, Mikazuki. Kogitsunemaru, distract the gashadokuro when you can and protect any civilians you see."

I see the two of them nod. Mikazuki proceeds to carry me in his arms. I hold on to him tightly. When he is ready, he jumps off the window and flies. Kogitsunemaru follows not so far behind and closes the window.

By the way, when I am touching oddities intimately like this, normal people can't see me.

"It is still scary?" Mikazuki asks.

The wind blows my face, messing my bangs, giving me cold night air. I take a look below and find myself feeling afraid of the height. The scenery down there spins in my eyes. We aren't flying too far away, but, it is scary enough for me.
"Yes, it is…"

"Alright…hang in there, Yamanbagiri, I'll be gentle. Don't see the earth below you."

"Okay."

It's true, though - Mikazuki flies in a fast speed, but it is gentle enough to make me stay sane. The first time he flew me like this; he flew far too fast and caused me to feel really sick.

I think I'm okay with this one.

I look at the scenery far away in the distance. Nighttime scenery is quiet beautiful, if you see it like this...the colorful lights brighten the city. It isn't as bright as in a big city, so the stars can be seen clearly. A full moon is hanging in the sky, shining along with the twinkling stars.

I can enjoy this...if only there isn't gashadokuro there.

"It is really big…" I say in amazement, seeing it from a pretty close distance. This distance is still safe, it won't notice. Not that it'll do anything to oddities around, especially if they're flying.

"It is a skeletal giant, after all," Mikazuki replies, "It is too large and powerful to be killed. It maintains its existence until the energy and malice stored up in its body has completely burnt out. Powerful specialists and oddities can only stop its movements and distract it…"

"But, it requires a large amount of bones to be formed. It can't be formed here, in this city," Kogitsunemaru says as he keeps staring at the gashadokuro. "I don't think the amount of bones with their grudging spirits in this city are enough."

"That's right…the only possibility is that…someone moves it to here," Mikazuki continues.

"Don't think about that just yet. Our priority is to decrease the possible casualties," I say.

"I'm surprised you said that, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru chuckles. "Ah, there's a lone high school girl on the street...I'll move her from the gashadokuro's route."

He sounds excited every time he meets something like this. It isn't a bad thing, of course. Everyone needs a challenge or two at times. Everyone needs adrenaline rush. But not too extreme and too often, please…

Looking at the scenery below me, I notice the more familiar buildings now.

"We're near, aren't we?" I ask, "Well, that's faster than I expected."

"Yes. The gashadokuro is close as well."

I see at the road below and see Kogitsunemaru moves the girl out of the way. How, you ask? He simply teleports the girl to the entrance of her house, though he can only do it when he touches the girl - and he can be seen by the girl when he touches her. No problem, though - the girl is too focused on her smartphone to even notice.

Ah, she has teleported safely, it seems. Good.

Kogitsunemaru obviously doesn't know where that girl’s home is is at, but he can still teleport her as long as the girl knows where it is.

He flies to the two of us at the right time, when the gashadokuro arrives at the place he was at.
Seeing it from close…it is still as menacing as ever.

"I think this area is clear now," he states.

"Good. We can just fly to Yamato's place, then," I say, looking at my smartphone to see Yamato's message. He is at the hut now. That is pretty fast…I'm glad.

I look around me and find that the *gashadokuro* is accelerating. It walks even faster, even though its large body (err, *bones*) must be heavy to be moved. It should be pretty slow. I wonder why it is suddenly moving faster… But, well, it moves faster than it should be since the start.

"Mikazuki, can you accelerate a bit?"

I feel like racing with the *gashadokuro*. It is certainly moving to the riverbank - I have to arrive first and get Yamato out of there. He isn't exactly at the riverbank, but, still near. *Gashadokuro's* movements are random, unreadable, so I have to prepare for the worst case possibility.

"Alright, since you asked to. Grab onto me tighter."

I try to hold onto him more. Mikazuki speeds up, the wind blows our bodies mercilessly. It's cold…but actually pretty nice at the same time. Slowly but surely, we pass the *gashadokuro* and now flies in front of it.

Kogitsunemaru successfully catches up and looks around below him. "I think this area is cle - never mind. There's a lot of people down there, going out from a restaurant."

"Ah. Can you teleport them?" I ask.

"Wait," Mikazuki alerts, "*Gashadokuro* is walking even faster now. It can arrive at these people's location in any minute…"

"W-What should I do? I don't think I can distract or hold off the *gashadokuro* alone."

Even Kogitsunemaru has no idea what to do.

I notice the riverbank below.

"Mikazuki, drop me there. I'll run to the hut. You help Kogitsunemaru to hold off the *gashadokuro*."

Mikazuki looks like he wants to say something (protest, perhaps), but he holds back and nods. In about a minute, I land on the riverbank.

"Be careful."

"Yeah. I'm counting on you."

Mikazuki flies off to help Kogitsunemaru. I run to the hut. I can feel the *gashadokuro*'s creeping shadow behind. It is close…I hope these two can hold it long enough and come to me quickly.

In the chilly night, running seems like a torture, but for another life's sake, this is nothing. The road is incredibly empty and lifeless. Thanks to that, though, I can maintain my calmness and arrive at the hut faster than I thought.

I open the old door, a creaking sound can be heard. The hut is dark, there's no source of light except for the moonlight far away. I can't really make up any shape of objects inside. I walk in the hut with
caution, aware that if there's any danger, I can't see them coming.

"…Yamato?" I call in a low voice.

"Y-Yamanbagiri!"

Yamato jumps to me and hugs me almost immediately. I'm taken aback by his surprise movement.

"Ah…s-sorry," he lets go when he realizes what he has done, a faint red is on his cheeks. Yeah, I can see a bit more clearly in the dark now. Good. I just nod. I have no time to be shy now.

"It's okay. I'm glad you're safe and sound. Now, let's go."

I take Yamato's hand without his consent, but because he doesn't resist, I pull him to get out of the hut. Surprisingly, his hand is warm for once. Maybe that's because my hand is cold…

Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, Yamato is here. Come quickly.

"W-What should we do now…?" Yamato asks.

"We'll wait for our vehicle - I mean, Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki. Let's move around for a bit to confuse the *gashadokuro*, in case it gets there."

Yamato shudders at the mention of the oddity, "What actually is that thing…?"

"I can't explain it well, but…it is formed by dead bodies. Corpses. Bones. Of people whose spirits have grudge towards living humans. These people were usually soldiers who died in warzone, having no formal funeral and all…they couldn't pass on peacefully."

"I see…all oddities have their own back stories, don't they?"

"Hmm. Pretty much…though some just appear with unknown reasons, like the foxes. Kogitsunemaru included," I look at Yamato, "What is that bag in your hand?"

"Kashuu's shoes I found…and some other stuffs," he replies, taking a glance at his bag.

I decide to not question any further and start to walk, pulling him along.

"Umm…Yamanbagiri," Yamato calls after a long silence.

"Yes?"

"I know this isn't the right time, but…"

"But…?"

Yamato falls silent, pushing me to turn around and look at him. He has his gaze on the road below, looking as if he is hesitant about something - most likely about what he is about to tell me.

Yamato inhales and exhales in a long sequence. He calms himself down, I guess. "…Yamanbagiri, do you…remember what happened before?"

I'm utterly confused. "What do you mean?"

His words tell me that he is implying we've met before, but I have no recollection about him.

"I-It's…in…uh…"
I blink and catch something ominous behind Yamato, appearing out of nowhere.

"Yamato!"

In reflex, I pull Yamato away to my sideway in order to protect him from whatever the thing is.

Before I can check on Yamato, I feel a weird sensation on my stomach. My hand touches it and I see red fluid covering it. The fluid drops from my hand to the road, slow motion in my eyes.

That red fluid…is…

"A-Ah…"

And then.

Pain.

The pain strikes my whole body, concentrated on my stomach.

I can taste a bit of iron in my mouth. I cough up blood, splattering it to my palm.

Ah…I'm painted in red. A frightening red.
Blood. Blood is gushing out of my stomach. Painting it red. Painting my hand red. Somehow, the world around me seems to turn red in my eyes.

Too shocked to even scream, I look at my attacker who stands in front of me. Moonlight shines his back, his red eyes are gazing at me, looking down upon the broken piece of trash.

Me. That piece of trash is me.

Ah…

He is…

He slashed me…in mere seconds…I couldn't even see him.

"K-Kashuu…?!"
Yamato seems to see the person in front of me.

That person is…indeed Kashuu Kiyomitsu. He is standing in front of us, his left hand is bloody…staring at us…with shining red eyes…that might…kill the two of us in an instant…

Coughing up blood once again, I tremble and fall on my knees.

"W-Wait, Yamanbagiri…?" He instinctively holds me before I can fall any further. He gently puts me on the ground and sees my blood, his eyes are widening. "W-What…? Did Kashuu….do…?"

Yamato's voice is trembling, both in fear and shock. He turns his head to see Kashuu and perhaps observes his bloody left hand.

I don't know what he is thinking there.

Coughing again and again, Yamato snaps out of his daze and panicky asks me something my ears don't get. But I can't say anything in return. I taste nothing but iron - my own blood in my mouth, flowing out without delay…along with the one in my stomach.

I can't…stay conscious…

It hurts…it's too painful…

Seeing that I don't respond, I think Yamato and Kashuu exchange words there, but their voices don't reach my ears. My eyes capture everything but blurry images I can hardly comprehend.

This pain…is even too much for me to bear…

I close my heavy eyelids even when I don't want to

[Blackout]

{ "Answer me, Yamanbagiri! Between me and Yasusada, which one you like better?"

"Yoshiyuki."

"He isn't an option here~!"

"I'm joking. I can never choose like that, even with others. I love the both of you the same." }

{ "It's okay…don't blame yourself. At the very least, I can die in your arms…"

"No - Yamanbagiri - please - !!"

"It's…too late for this world. I'm sorry to leave you like this….don't blame Yamato, okay…? Please stay by his side. Even though I'm not there, I'm sure the two of you can stay alive just fine together. I promise I'll surely reach a happy end, no matter how many time it takes…"

"What do you…?"
"Thank you, Kashuu…until we meet again…"

[Drifting away]

Chapter End Notes

*The second chapter is shorter than the first by 3K words despite having an extra part. That doesn't matter, though, things are sure getting hotter.
When I open my eyes, I see a familiar ceiling. This is my room, isn't it? What happened - ah…

I remember. Now that I'm not so sleepy, my whole soul has returned inside this very body - and then, I remember.

That night…

Kashuu slashed me. My stomach. Ripping my stomach open. Lots of blood was gushing out -

I feel an incredible nausea when I remember it. Touching my stomach, I feel a little bit of pain. Less than what I felt that night, thankfully, but thinking about the events, the pain - as though it stays the whole time - strikes me again. I feel really sick. I catch my breath and calm myself down.

I have no doubt that such thing happened for real.

With that kind of injury, I'm surprised I didn't wake up in a hospital - this is better, though. I don't want more trouble by dealing with the authorities...

I'm thinking to get up, but I think it's going to hurt if I do so without anyone's help. My eyes wander around my surroundings and find…Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. Their heads are resting on my bed, on both sides, hands tightly gripping mine. Seeing and hearing their constant breath, but not responding to the movements of the blanket, I think they're sleeping.

My hands feel heavy, but I do my best to slip away from theirs and pat their heads. I don't know how many hours or even days have passed, but I know that the two of them stayed with me the whole time.

I see the two of them flinch upon contact.

Kogitsunemaru is the first one to lift his head. He has a mess face as he opens his eyes to find me. He rubs his two eyes as if he is hallucinating or dreaming, unsure about…my conscious state, I think.
"Good morning," I decide to greet him.

Kogitsunemaru blinks, staring at me, rubs his two eyes again, and yawns, and - "Yamanbagiri…you're awake!!"

"That's surprisingly a slow response. Yes, I am."

"Yamanbagiri~!!" He hugs me from my right side, not even restraining his strength. "I'm so glad you wake up…this quick, too…I believe in you."

"Eh? What time is it?"

Kogitsunemaru takes a peek on the clock, "Twelve in the afternoon, Tuesday."

No wonder the sunlight beyond the windows is strong and not calming, unlike the one in mornings.

"That's not really quick, I believe…"

"Quick enough for someone with an injury as bad as you have," Mikazuki's sleepy voice comes. He looks at me - as though he is conscious enough. "Good afternoon, Yamanbagiri."

Yes, conscious enough to greet me.

"Good afternoon, Mikazuki…heh, the two of you look like you didn't get enough sleep."

"We didn't, really," Kogitsunemaru replies.

"Or maybe we're too busy crying, chanting prayers and worrying to sleep," Mikazuki continues with a chuckle.

"You were…crying?" I ask, almost in disbelief.

"Kind of— Especially Kogitsunemaru. He cried until his tears dried up, you know?"

"I-I didn't! You were crying too, Mikazuki..." Kogitsunemaru complains.

I stare at the two of them. "Oh, really…your eyes are the same. The same red. The same tired eyes after crying."

"Yes. I admit, I did cry. Tears did fall down to my face. Seeing you in that state, I didn't know whether you can stay alive or not…I've become weak, but I'm glad these tears were for you," Mikazuki answers in all honesty. "Kogitsunemaru was the same. He panicked more than anyone else."

Kogitsunemaru doesn't complain this time. It is too true to be rejected, huh?

Mikazuki smiles and continues, "However, the two of us believe in you. No, all of us - including others - believe in you, that you will stay alive somehow."

"Others…?"

"Horikawa, Yoshiyuki, and Yamato," Kogitsunemaru answers my question, "Yoshiyuki did stay here for hours before he had to go home and go to school. Yamato visited before going to school. The two of them are genuinely concerned about you, especially Yoshiyuki, who seemed like he didn't want to go anywhere, not until you open your eyes."
"I can imagine that…"

But Yamato, too…? I guess he feels kind of guilty…nothing is his fault, though.

"After I collapsed…what happened?" I decide to ask.

Mikazuki takes a deep breath before he answers, "Feeling that you've fainted, we panicked, but the *gashadokuro* is still a danger for everyone around. Kogitsunemaru held it off and I went to you only to find Yamato, in tears, holding you close. There's…nobody around."

"Yamato explained what happened. He said Kashuu vanished right before Mikazuki came," Kogitsunemaru says, "He vanished in a blink."

"You were…trying to protect Yamato, weren't you?" Mikazuki asks, catching me off guard. He knows… "Yamato said he pulled you out of the way before Kashuu…slashed you."

"I think Kashuu was aiming at Yamato, but you pulled Yamato out of danger and became his….victim, instead," Kogitsunemaru sighs, "Luckily, your wound isn't really deep, though blood is everywhere. Mikazuki could heal your physical injuries, but you stay unconscious. The rest is up to you."

I can clearly feel that they're hesitating to say stuffs about Kashuu. That is fine, they're being considerate. Either way, I don't really mind.

Mikazuki rubs the palm of my hand, gently, softly, looking at me. "Don't move around too much, your wound might open. Though I suppose you heal faster than normal humans, it is still dangerous for your life."

I nod and kiss his cheek lightly, the scent of his hair comforts me. "Mmm. I know." I turn around to do the same to Kogitsunemaru who lets a happy yelp out of his mouth.

I should take it easy for now.

To be honest, I feel relieved to not see Yoshiyuki right away when I wake up. I can guess the things he will say and I'm not in the mood to listen to him. I understand his worry, I know I'm being reckless (*always*), but sometimes that recklessness is needed to finish something. I believe in that - and he worries far too much most of the time.

"By the way…is Kashuu still missing?"

"Yes," Kogitsunemaru replies grimly, "We informed Kousetsu, and he asked for help to other specialists. Some of them accepted the request because it is concerning a *jiangshi* running wild. Even for professionals, searching him is tough, it seems."

I sigh and look at the scenery beyond the window. "…I troubled many people again.

"No, you aren't. This problem isn't caused by you," Mikazuki says, "Besides, everyone else is willing to help, even without your request."

"Still…" My hand grabs the blanket tightly. It's getting hotter in there. "I am still a trouble…such as…"

"Worrying people? Yeah, that's your main problem. Ya sure like to do it *a lot.*"

This voice. I know it all too well.
Yoshiyuki.

He opens the door and enters, a tired expression is clearly on his face. He should be at school, right? Why is he here…?

Never mind that, I have no idea how should I face him right now. What a bad timing.

"Yoshiyuki, you should be at school," Mikazuki reminds him calmly, "What'll happen to the notes if you're here?"

"It's okay. The teacher told me to go home because I look ill enough. As for the notes, Yasu is there. There's also Hasebe to depend on."

Sure enough, he does look like it. His eyes look unusually dead. There are black circles under his eyes, as though he is a panda.

"You do look like an ill fish," Kogitsunemaru says with a joking voice, "Go take a rest, then. You didn't get enough sleep last night."

Yoshiyuki yawns and approaches my bed. He looks incredibly sleepy…how long did he wait without sleeping? He waited…for me to wake up. I think he pulled an all-nighter to play a game, as it is his routine on Mondays (don't ask me his reason, I don't know, either) - then he got a message from brother Horikawa about my injury (he does this frequently after that incident, as he seems to trust Yoshiyuki a lot), and went straight away to my house to check on me in the middle of the night. As Kogitsunemaru said, he stayed, probably awake until he had to go home to get ready for school.

Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what happened.

I feel worse than ever. I want to call him an idiot, but I realize I am also an idiot.

"Sure do," he replies after another yawn, "But I feel so restless…though I'm glad ya are up, now, Yamanbagiri, I'm still deadly worried."

"…I can see that."

I try my best to not flinch every time he comes closer, though I'm pretty sure he notices my nervousness. We've been in a similar situation before.

"Ya were…risking your life again. Do ya still plan to save Kashuu, even after this?"

He wastes no time to get straight into the point.

Holding the blanket tightly, I reply in all honesty. "Yeah."

"Do you know how?"

"No…not yet." I take a breath before continuing, "Don't ask me how I'm going to do it. I will save him, no matter what happens. I'll search for the way or create one."

"Ya don't have to," he says, staring at me, his eyes look frightening and dark, catching me off guard. He is serious. "Ya can let the professionals do their job. Why do ya still want to, even though ya almost get killed?"

A simple question.

A question I've been asking to myself since the first time I helped Ichigo-senpai, someone I didn't
even know a year ago. The first time I helped him was about something normal, but also heavy - 
temporarily maintaining the school's garden. I didn't know him and he wasn't in the student council 
yet. Rumors about him hadn't reached my ears, as it was the very beginning of high school. And yet, 
I helped him to do gardening, even though I have absolutely zero interest in it. In fact, I think it is 
bothersome, but I still helped him - to the point we got close and he introduced his three friends, the 
current main student council members.

Afterwards, he got into supernatural problem - a pretty heavy one - that I almost get killed, similar to 
this. Still, I helped him until he got back to normal. Afterwards, I helped strangers I happened to meet 
on streets - I don't even remember their names and faces - to get out of their small supernatural 
problems as well.

Why? Why did I do it, even though there are no merits for me? It is because their misery, somehow 
connected to my misfortune? How it is even connected? I don't know, I just have that feeling. A 
feeling that says I'm responsible…for their misery.

And now, Kashuu Kiyomitsu. A classmate I don't even want to talk to in the normal days. Why do I 
want to help him and save him from this mess? Because the problem he is in is a severe one, 
endangering everyone in this city? As Yoshiyuki said, I can leave that to the professionals. Then, 
what is my reason? Because I care about him? Truthfully speaking, not really. Prior to this, I have no 
feelings about him, not even the bad ones. How about now? I don't really know. If it is a simple 
sympathy, I don't have to work hard like this.

And yet, here I am, putting myself in danger for him.

Again and again, it repeats - why? Why do I want to do it, no matter what…?

"I…I honestly don't understand my own feelings, though I repeat the same question over and over," I 
reply, a sigh escapes my lips. "But I know one thing for sure….I want to help him. I simply want to. 
I need to, I have to, because I want to."

Though stupid, that is my answer.

"Ya want to do it so much that ya are willing to risk your life?"

I decide to look him into the eyes this time and reply with certainty. "Yes. I don't want to worry 
people, either, but for the sake of someone else's life, I believe it'll worth it."

I gulp, waiting for his answer. Rejection or acceptance? If he does reject me this time, we…our 
friendship will probably break apart, never to return. Even I don't want that - he is precious to me.

"Yamanbagiri, I…" Instead of an answer, Yoshiyuki calls me. He looks at me with teary eyes as he 
holds my two hands, gently warping around the warmth of our skin. "I was so scared… I can't think 
of a future without ya. I can't bear to see ya being in pain."

I listen closely to what he says.

"That time, I felt so powerless. I know ya for so long. I swore to protect ya and always be your side 
before, 'cause I thought I can do it…but no, I couldn't. I wasn't there for ya in your hardest time. 
When I met ya again, in hospital, ya were lying in bed, eyes showing no hope - as though ya were 
lifeless, broken. I couldn't forgive myself for that."

"Yoshiyuki…" I can't help but to mutter. I know he feels guilty about that, but he still does, even 
now, after two years have passed. "That wasn't your fault. We weren't in the same middle school. 
We were apart, and…I told you nothing, even though I could."
"Still! I was too stupid and dense to think that ya were okay, even though ya clearly weren't! I took part in your misery by not doing anything! I failed to fulfill my promise - I couldn't be someone ya depend on…!" Yoshiyuki raises his voice, gritting his teeth, his face is full of anger as his grip on my hand tightens.

"It's…okay. I don't blame you for anything, Yoshiyuki. That kind of thing…many people out there experienced the same. It is a normal occurrence in this world. Someone might be suffering right now, in another part of the earth, even suffering from something worse than what I experienced. I am…nothing but a speck of dust in this world with no real significance, happen to be one of these people to suffer."

My words…shown that I've given up, huh…?

Yes…I've given up to cry over it and instead accept it as one of normal occurring in this world. Accept it as what it is…unforgettable, sure. Though it is still hard for me to bring it up straightforwardly, I start to move on from it.

And to be honest, I don't care about that childhood promise.

"No use wailing over it, Yoshiyuki," I continue, my voice somehow becomes a whisper, "When I think about it, it changed me as a person, both in bad ways and good ways…and I believe everything happens for a reason. I'm sure that it happened for something better in the future."

A realist-close-to-pessimist trying to think and act like an optimist, right - that's sounds really off.

Yoshiyuki stays quiet for a while, his mouth opens only to shut again. This repeats for a few times.

"Even though that kind of suffering is normal occurrences in global scale, I still think that nobody deserves to suffer like that - and any kind of suffering," he finally speaks. Of course he is bothered by my remarks. "It is unavoidable, though. I know…saying that people can prevent it is childish. Reality isn't like that. There are always hidden sacrifices."

He takes a deep breath.

"Ya aren't one of many for me, Yamanbagiri. Ya know that. Ya are an important friend of mine, a part of my life. Ya don't deserve that suffering, no matter how much sins ya've piled up," he continues, full of certainty and determination. This pains me…I'm a sinner, Yoshiyuki, you know that - these words are stuck on my throat. "Yes, there is no use on wailing over the past that already happened. Still, scars stay as scars, they take a long time to heal. I agree that experiences are good for the future, but still, everyone needs a pillar to hold into, so that they can continue walking steadily…and I want to be yours."

He takes a deep breath.

"That's…my only wish, Yamanbagiri. Not a pillar is okay, I just want to help ya…to be a part of your life…that is my selfishness. That promise is just an excuse. Maybe…I want to be your hero - but if I don't, I think that's fine, too, as long as I can help ya."

His confession takes me aback.

I never know…that he considers his desire to protect me as a form of his selfishness. That he wants to be a part of my life so badly and be someone I can depend on.

He is really an idiot.
"You're...an idiot," I finally say it with a chuckle. Yoshiyuki looks at me, confused. "You're already a part of my life. I depend on you...my best friend. That is not selfish, as the both of us wish it. And you're...my hero that saved me so many times."

"Yamanbagiri..."

I can see his face softens.

"I'm sorry for being an idiot for ya," he says with a faint smile, the light comes to his face once again, "Then, in this case, I'm going to help."

"Excuse...me?"

Did I misheard that?

"Ya are free to do what ya want, I'm helping ya." He flashes his usual cheerful smile.

My jaw drops in surprise. I'm genuinely surprised by his answer. I thought he will try to stop me, no matter what. This is better than anything I ever thought, I feel so warm and fuzzy inside, all of sudden - I'm happy. With Yoshiyuki by my side, I won't worry him again. We can stay together...though I don't want to endanger him in any way. If we have each other's back...am I allowed to think that we can do it well?

"Yoshiyuki...thank you," I reply, finally.

We stare at each other, warm smiles on our face.

"The two of you are so cute and sweet, I'm so jealous," Mikazuki hums, out of nowhere.

"Huh?" Yoshiyuki and I mutter in unison, full of confusion.

Kogitsunemaru chuckles as well, "Now, then, the two of you have made up! I'm glad."

"We weren't fighting at the first place," I retort. Yoshiyuki nods in agreement.

Kogitsunemaru waves me off. "Yes, yes. What will you do now?"

Yoshiyuki yawns once again, "I...I want to sleep."

"You better to, but have you eaten yet? If not, you better have lunch first. Yamanbagiri as well," Mikazuki suggests, "The food is ready downstairs, if you've noticed."

"I cooked it," Kogitsunemaru says with a proud smile on his face, "With a little bit of Horikawa's help, of course. I tried my best."

"Hmm, mm. I can't wait to taste it," I say. "Come to think of it, where is brother Horikawa, now?"

"University. He has afternoon classes," Mikazuki replies, "Let's get going, shall we?"

"Yes." Kogitsunemaru looks at me, "Can you stand all by yourself, Yamanbagiri? Just in case, help him, Yoshiyuki."

I think Yoshiyuki is confused on why he is being asked (so do I), but we have no problems. My legs feel numb, but I can move them just fine, though I can't muster strength to stand and walk alone. Yoshiyuki helps me to walk, supporting my body. He is tired and is suffering from lack of sleep, but he stays strong physically. I feel waves of nostalgia are hitting me - this thing, it happened before. Of
course.

He stays strong and warm - and I feel happy.

"Think ya can go to school tomorrow?" He asks when we are heading downstairs. I walk with all of my might, it's really tiring.

"I don't know yet. I hope I can."

"Mmm. Don't push yourself."

"I would say the same to you. Don't worry too much, trust me more. How many years have we known each other, you think?"

Yoshiyuki chuckles warmly, "Ehehe. Okay. Sorry about that. I'm worried about your bad luck, so…"

"Well…there's that," I sigh, "With Mikazuki by my side, though, my life is pretty peaceful nowadays."

"Yeah - except that you came in yet another person's supernatural problem."

"Aah…since when can you counter me like that?" I look at him weirdly, but he just laughs me off.

"I hear your sarcasm every day, Yamanbagiri. Ya are the culprit, I absorb everything I can learn from ya."

"…Why are you learning…?"

"No reason. It's just - like adaptive ability, ya know? When your surroundings - your closest people - act in a certain way, ya tend to learn stuffs and copy them," he replies awkwardly, "Ah, it's not always a bad thing, don't worry!"

"I…really do feel bad, now…"

Another sigh leaves my lips when we arrive at the dining room. Kogitsunemaru re-enters my sight… with a cute apron brother Horikawa usually wears on his body, atop his white *hakama*, looking all proud and happy. I stare at him, unable to decide on a single feeling - I am surprised, disgusted, frightened, and entertained at the same time. My expression probably stays dead flat, though. Yoshiyuki is completely frozen next to me.

"Why are you wearing that?" I ask after a long silence.

"Why? *Fanservice* - that's what it's called, right?" He replies with a bright smile, as bright as the sun, it's so painful. "I thought you'll get more cheerful if I wear this. How do I look?"

"No, no. The appeal of your lover's wearing an apron is, for me at least, when that person is cooking as you wait and watch," I reply with all seriousness, "Besides, *hakama* and a modern cute apron isn't suitable together."

Kogitsunemaru coughs violently, as though he is coughing up blood, and I ignore his pain.

"I'm surprised you didn't join in, Mikazuki," I look at the blue-haired old man now.

He chuckles like he always does. "Do you, perhaps, prefer to see me in a naked apron, instead?"
"N-Naked apron? Wearing nothing but an apron…?" Kogitsunemaru looks confused. He doesn't know the meaning prior to this, but he gets the definition right, and his face turns pale at my silent acknowledgement. I think I hear him mutters about how scary the world of humans is. Oh well.

"Why should I see you in naked apron, Mikazuki? Besides, you can't cook - your existence in the kitchen only brings disaster. How did you know the term naked apron, anyway?"

"That's a secret," Mikazuki sounds playful and secretive. I bet he knew from gossiping around with other oddities or reading some weird comics when I wasn't looking. He is the ambassador of seduction, probably knows every sexual things that exist in this world. He ignores my remarks, but his eyebrows twitch for seconds, before he calmly asks, "In any case, do you want it or not?"

"I-If that's what you want, Yamanbagiri…" Kogitsunemaru suddenly speaks with a stuttering voice, "I'll take off my clothes and only wear -"

I throw a box of tissues to his face. It slams his face perfectly, stopping him before he can completely take off his thin layers of clothes. "No need for that, thank you."

"Yamanbagiri, I'm not into rough play," Kogitsunemaru sighs as he takes the box of tissues from the ground and puts it on the table. He looks pouty - adorable. This side of him is good once in a while.

"I'm just defending myself. It's not a play, unless you want to - and you don't want it."

"I'm alright with it."

"Nobody asks you, Mikazuki." The said man chuckles as he retreats and sits on the chair.

Ah. I feel like I forget something…

Oh, right. Yoshiyuki.

"Earth to Yoshiyuki. Are you there?" I call as I swing my hand back and forth in front of Yoshiyuki's face.

There is 10 seconds gap before he turns around and smiles with seemingly blank eyes, "Yes? What happened? I didn't see or hear anything~!"

He feigns ignorance, and is probably trying to forget it. Yes, stay pure, Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki.

"No, nothing happened. Anyway, let's have lunch."

We take our preferred seats, the food is served on the table, still warm and hot. I sit next to Kogitsunemaru, in front of me is Yoshiyuki, and next to him is Mikazuki. Since Kogitsunemaru is the one who cooked it, lunch is Japanese-styled, your standard ones, but tasteful. I'm surprised he managed to cook something this good, close to brother Horikawa's level - a vegetarian food, even. The said fox looks so proud when I think about this. Too bad there is no tofu, huh?

The lunch goes on quietly, but I notice a weird sight in front of me. Yoshiyuki is eating wildly with a fast pace, while next to him, Mikazuki is eating slowly and elegantly. It feels like seeing two entirely contrasting worlds. I can't help but to chuckle.

When Kogitsunemaru gets up to take a drink, I suddenly remember. "Come to think of it, what happened to gashadokuro?"

"Mmm? Well, I spent about good five minutes holding it off, when it suddenly walked back to the
mountains and vanished. I don't know what was wrong, I'm just glad it disappears with no known fatalities," Kogitsunemaru replies.

"Is that so." I sigh in relief as I put my chopsticks on my empty bowl. I might have injured, Kashuu lost control and is missing, but at least - that night - nobody dies because of oddities. I do hope the same for today and the next day onwards.

"Gashadokuro…a skeletal giant. I can't believe it showed up!" Yoshiyuki comments, he is having his second serving. "Ah, they told me the story."

That makes things simpler. "Yeah. Its appearance is just plain weird, considering its nature. Something artificial must have happened beneath the surface…whatever it is."

"The specialists Kousetsu asked for help is digging into that as well," Mikazuki says as he finishes eating. "They're also searching for Yamabushi's whereabouts, gathering more forces to face the worst case possibility. We can only wait for more information."

I blink and get curious. "What was…Kousetsu-senpai's reaction when he found out I was injured? Ah, Kogitsunemaru, bring me a drink, please."

Kogitsunemaru nods without looking at me and takes another glass, then fills it with water. He places it on the table. I bring it to my mouth and drink the fresh mineral water.

"He seems angry over the phone," Mikazuki giggles, "He stays his calm and cold demeanor, but his voice shows concern towards you. He can't hide his surprise, either. Perhaps you should brace for his speech towards you when you come to school."

I choke. I violently pull the glass away from my mouth and cough a few times. The thought of experiencing Kousetsu-senpai's anger firsthand is…

Yoshiyuki laughs seeing my pale face. "Ahahaha! Don't worry, I'll accompany ya to face him. Maybe he won't get so pissed off like the rumors said."

"Thank you…I hope for the best…"

I eat the last grain of rice and take another gulp on my drink. I'm about to stand up in habit.

"Ah, I'll do the dishes as well. Go take a rest, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says, noticing my about-to-stand-up-form. He takes the plates on his hands.

"Sure." I look at him, turning his back and steps in the kitchen and smiles. "You'll become a good wife, Kogitsunemaru," I mutter in delight.

"Fix that as husband, please," he retorts as he turns away, but he seems happy to hear my compliment.

He actually does it out of obligation, since Mikazuki is completely hopeless, and both I and Yoshiyuki are too tired to do so. Compliments are good to excite him to do the work seriously, not just out of obligation, but also for fun. My compliment is genuine, though - I really do see him as a housewife or some sort at the moment, and it is pleasant to look at. His hair is tied pony-tail style to not get in his way, his hakama's sleeves are tied up for the same reason, and I can hear him humming as he washes the dishes.

I see Yoshiyuki yawns as he drowsily takes a drink. "Yoshiyuki, you can take my bed and sleep."
"Eh? Really? But -"

"It's okay. I slept enough. If you want to help me, you have to take enough sleep. Nobody knows when we have to take action."

Yoshiyuki blinks and looks at me, his eyes narrowed in seriousness, as though he is trying to read my intentions. "Mmmm, okay," he says, "I'll take it gladly, then. Thanks~" He proceeds to go upstairs.

I relax my body as I fix on how I sit. "Sitting around and wait like this...I feel so uncomfortable and restless, even though I slept for hours. I dislike waiting in uncertainty like this."

"To tell you the truth, there is no guarantee that Kousetsu is willing to let you and Yoshiyuki to participate in this. He only said he'll share information to not make you worry," Mikazuki says, eyes looking straight into me, digging me deeper. "Regardless of his rejection or acceptance, you'll still participate independently."

"Of course…I prefer to avoid his wrath, but I think I have to take responsibility for his case as well. After all, I gave him the hope. I feel that I have to end this with my own hands, regardless of the outcome."

There is a worrying pause. "You're very kind."

"It isn't a matter of kind or not. I just…feel like it."

He makes a mumble of agreement before he shifts another glance towards me, his fingers holding chopsticks are unmoving. "You dislike being tied by restrains, but you put restrains around yourself as well, you see?"

Surprised, I gasp, eyes probably wide. His eyes are sharp. He can read my mind, he doesn't have to…stare like that. I feel even more uncomfortable.

"I know. You…you have no need to tell me."

I end it with that.

Mikazuki smiles towards my direction. "I apologize, I don't intend to make you uncomfortable. I said it on impulse. My fatigue got me as well."

I blink and try to cast a smile, but it comes out forced. "It's okay…I don't mind. You're worried about me."

"And you're happy with that fact. You're pretty cruel yourself~"

I look at him unhappily, but decide to admit the truth. "I guess so."

He winks and finishes eating, not muttering a single word. He stands up with plates on his hands and gives them to Kogitsunemaru who yells about his speed when eating. The said shinrei doesn't give a single crap, since the fox is going to wash his plates anyway.

I take the remote control and turns on the television, changing the channel over and over, creating disturbing sounds, mixed with the sound of water. There's nothing interesting to watch, but I'm not in the mood to play games, either, especially with a sleeping Yoshiyuki. Though he can fall asleep basically anywhere and in any conditions, I prefer to let him alone for now. He needs a deep, but peaceful sleep.
"You're so restless," Mikazuki chuckles softly as he pats my head. "I'll make a tea for you, if that can help you relax."

"Sure. Thank you."

I decide to move to the sofa and read a novel I actually finished once. It's titled Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki by Haruki Murakami, an internationally recognized Japanese novelist. I always love his works, especially the dreamy but dark ones, and brother Horikawa is fond of his works as well, so we put his books in a bookcase on the living room. This book, in particular, is pretty painful for me. I can relate so much to the protagonist - it's pretty scary, but fun to read nonetheless.

The noon passes away peacefully, until the bell rings.

Chapter End Notes

*I'm really, really sorry for the very late update! Not only I was stuck and did another story instead, things have been hectic in this new term of school...not to mention writer's block and other stuffs. I'm so tired, but I'll still try to update this every now and then, ignoring the days. Thank you for waiting patiently and reading until this point.

*On another note, I fixed and edited minor stuffs from earlier chapters and added some lines as well. Some aren't very important.
The bell rings. No, that's not quite right.

When the tea Mikazuki made for me has long gone cold, the door bell rings. A sign of a sudden, uninvited guest coming, politely shows its presence. My house isn't a very modern one, so there is no intercom that allows you to speak to the said guest. There's no peeking hole, either. You can check by seeing through the windows, but nah, what a bother.

I'm about a quarter through the book - the scene when Haida, the protagonist's male friend, appears in his dream and give him…err…mouth service. Well, isn't this awkward.

Anyway.

After a minute of silence, the door bell rings once again. Quite a patient guest we have there.

"I wonder who it is." I mutter, but I don't even consider getting up and opening the door to greet the guest. Mikazuki nods, showing no consideration, either. He keeps reading an old literature on his hands.

When the door bell rings for the third time, this time after two minutes of pause, Kogitsunemaru emerges from the second floor. He has just done the laundry, like a good *wife* he is. He looks at me and Mikazuki on the living room, then heaves a sigh.

"Has it been ringing for a while?" He asks.

"Yes," I reply.

"And nobody here wants to see who is it?"

"Yes," Mikazuki replies.

Kogitsunemaru growls and looks at the two of us, unhappy. "I know you're still recovering, Yamanbagiri, but even you have to move around sometimes. Besides, what if the visitor is a human that can't see me and Mikazuki?"

"Huh. You're right," I chuckle and reluctantly stand up. I walk towards the door and open it while asking, "Yes, who is it?"

I find Yamatonokami Yasusada is standing there. Eyes wide, fingers about to touch the door bell again.

"Ya…" He opens his mouth, "…Yamanbagiri?"

"Yes…?" Caught in the moment, I don't even think on why he is so confused.

"Ya…Yamanbagiri!!"

He jumps onto me and hugs me tightly, until I walk back, almost falling. Ah. Right, I was unconscious and he is worried about me. Of course he'll be glad as hell when he finds me alive and well. *Of course.* I feel so overwhelmed, I can't even react appropriately.
"I'm so glad you're…huaaaa…"

Is he crying? Sobbing? Well, isn't this awkward. What should I do? I have no idea.

"Y-Yamato…"

After seconds of frozen movements, Yamato snaps out of it and releases my body, his face is red from embarrassment. "S-Sorry, I…I'm just…I have no other motives than expressing my happiness, o-okay?!"

"Y-Yeah…it's okay." Why would you have other motives, anyway? What kind of motives? I can't ask him that. "Come in and make yourself comfortable."

Yamato nods. He sees Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru and politely greets them. Kogitsunemaru excuses himself to finish the second batch of the laundry and Mikazuki goes to make another cup of tea for Yamato (and extra fill for me).

"A-Anyway, are you alright now, Yamanbagiri?" Yamato asks.

"I'm alright. I've just woken up about three hours ago. My body seems fine."

"Is that so…I'm glad…." He lets out a relieved sigh out of his lips. His complexion doesn't seem really good, but his face softens a bit. Did he have a trouble to sleep, as well? Or getting nightmares? That seems plausible…ah, I feel really bad.

"I'm sorry to worry you."

"N-No, you did nothing, Yamanbagiri," He looks at his fingers, twirling with others, as though he is nervous. "You protected me, didn't you? I'm the one who have to apologize."

I shake my head in disagreement. "No. There are other ways to protect you, yet I chose to to put myself in danger. The responsibility is mine."

Yamato opens his mouth, only to close it again. It looks like he wants to counter my words, but unable to form any good reply. Just in the right time, Mikazuki comes with two cups of newly-made, fresh green tea. He elegantly puts them on the coffee table. I stay quiet and take the cup on my hand, smelling it, before I gulp it down.

Green tea. I'm not really fond of it, but it tastes pretty nice.

I see Yamato is drinking it as well.

"How is it?" Mikazuki asks Yamato after he sits next to me.

"Mmm. It's good! Probably the best green tea I ever taste," Yamato replies with a nod and a happy face.

A smile blooms on his face. "Is that so? I'm glad. Do you drink it often?"

"I don't drink it often, but I like it."

"That's pretty rare, for someone your age. Even your friend here isn't fond of it," Mikazuki shifts his glance at me.

"S-So what," I respond almost immediately. "I still appreciate it, so here, I'm drinking a green tea you made." I take the cup and gulp half of it down, probably showing a satisfied face.
Mikazuki closes his eyes and smiles annoyingly. "You were drinking it with a disgusted expression before, but you can control it this time."

"Did I? I swear I didn't -"

"Oh, you did, alright," he cuts me off. That's rare. "It was so painful for me, you know." He sobs as though he is in despair, but in a dramatic fashion like in television series. Seriously, what have you been watching all this time?!

I sigh in frustration and focus myself on the giggling Yamato, most likely entertained by my exchange with Mikazuki. "Putting that aside - other than checking on me, what are you doing here, Yamato?" I actually ask in curiosity without thinking. Stupid me.

"Ah. Oh," Yamato puts the cup on the table and rummages his bag and takes out a book and some papers - handouts. "Notes for today's lesson and handouts. For Yoshiyuki as well."

"Thank you." I take them and check the notes curiously. I only missed a day and there are this many? The beginning of new term shouldn't be this suffocating. Oh well…

"Can you go to school tomorrow, Yamanbagiri?"

"I don't know yet," I answer as I put aside the notes and papers. "I don't really like missing classes, though. I would like to go."

"I see…ah, if you have any difficulties, I'll gladly help you," Yamato flashes a bashful smile.

I nod. "Thank you, I appreciate it. Was there anything interesting happened?"

"Interesting? Mmm…" Yamato looks skyward as though he is thinking before he snaps his gaze towards me. "The student council vice president, Kuninaga-senpai, came to our class early in the morning. He was searching for you."

"For me?"

"Yeah. He said he wanted to talk to you about something. Ah, he left a message for you to get well soon."

"Is that so…" I wonder what Tsurumaru-senpai wants. I better ask him when I go to school.

Yamato tilts his head innocently. "You know plenty of popular students, don't you? You even befriend them…it's amazing."

"Eh? No, I…"

"That's totally unexpected for someone like him, right?" Mikazuki says, "After all, Yamanbagiri is a loner. He has that certain gloomy aura, combined with his hood."

I send him a death glare, forgetting my bashfulness. "I feel insulted."

"Oh my, I apologize for making you feel like that. I simply stated the objective truth about you."

Ack. "That's true…I acknowledge that, but still…" I leave my words hang, unable to find the right words.

Yamato chuckles. "This is amazing, too. I never saw you so speechless and defeated before, Yamanbagiri. Though quiet, I saw you arguing and won a few times, but now, you completely lost.
It's cute and refreshing."

I fall speechless as my face burns up in the word *cute*. Yamato looks confused by my reaction and Mikazuki's teasing giggles. I can ignore it if the conversation can go on easily, but, now…I have no idea what to say.

"Did I…say something wrong?" He questions shortly after.

Mikazuki shakes his head, "Ahaha. Don't worry, you did nothing. Yamanbagiri is just shy towards the word *cute*, especially if it is for himself. He is weak to it."

I lock my lips, unable to say anything appropriate.

Yamato looks surprised more than anything. "I see."

"Isn't that part of him cute as well?" Mikazuki teases.

"Ah…yes!"

Ahhhh, why do you smile sweetly while agreeing, Yamato?! Though I suppose I have no right to get angry…well, his smile is pleasant to look at, I can't even grumble unhappily. Hnn, I guess I'm weak to…such smiles. Innocent ones, pure ones, bright ones…I'm hopeless. This is a war I can't win.

"I wonder if it is alright to say this, but…Yamanbagiri, your blushing face is nice to look at," Yamato says, his gaze is gentle. "You're really cute. Ah, seeing you in an outfit other than school uniform is refreshing as well."

My face burns even redder. Wait, I don't want to give up just yet. "W-Why are you teasing me, now…?"

"Because I like seeing your reaction…?" Though unsure, Yamato nods and smiles to his own words. He *is* serious…

"Feel free to tease him any time and as many times you want, Yamato," Mikazuki acknowledges.

"Of course."

I take a pillow and bury my face there. I'm so embarrassed, I don't think I can face Yamato right now…why do I befriended people that like to tease me? Or maybe it's karma, because I also like to tease people to some degree…?

"Ah. I-I'm sorry if I upset you, Yamanbagiri. I didn't mean to," Yamato says in worry and chuckles awkwardly, fearing my wrath. "It's fun, but I told the truth. I told you what…I really feel."

"Nnn. It's alright. I'm not upset," I say with a muffled voice, "I-It's just too…embarrassing to show my face right now…"

"Oh…that's also cute - ah, I didn't mean to!"

I take a peek and see that it is Yamato's turn to get flustered and troubled. He waves his two hands, emphasizing that he really doesn't mean to tease me.

"Fu…" My lips form a smile and chuckle softly. "You're cute as well. Way cuter than I am."

"Ehh…" Yamato's cheeks turn slightly red. "B-But as I thought, your smile is way more pleasant to look at."
I flinch, my face is probably redder than anything now. "T-That's even more…embarrassing…you really know how to catch me off guard, don't you?"

"Hmm? I'm glad if that so. Hehe."

Yamato suddenly looks around with a questioning look. "Come to think of it, where is Mikazuki?"

"Huh." I find that he isn't sitting next to me. He slips away without my notice. "Who knows. Kitchen, I guess?"

"I didn't realize that he went so easily," Yamato says, "Did you realize it, Yamanbagiri?"

"I didn't realize, either. Well, he is always like that. Get used to it."

Just then, gentle familiar footsteps come from the kitchen. Mikazuki is holding a tray with…some puddings on it? "Yes, puddings. I thought I would give a good hospitality."

"You're just getting hungry, aren't you?"

Mikazuki quietly smiles and puts the tray on the table. "But of course," he says.

"Ahh, thank you!" Yamato looks happy seeing the puddings. "It has been a long time, pudding…" He says as he takes one with a small plastic spoon. His expression is…ecstatic, should I say. His face reminds me of Yoshiyuki when he sees a newly released game or Hasebe when he catches a delinquent on action. Okay, Hasebe's face is frightening. Yamato's face, although closer to Hasebe's, looks less sadistic than his. I…guess? The aura he emits is the same.

He starts to eat the pudding and Mikazuki and I do the same. While eating the sweet, chocolate-flavored pudding, I stare at Yamato's face.

"Hnggh~ Pudding is the best thing in the world, after all~" He mutters under his breath and I feel myself sweatdropping.

"Do you like pudding, Yamato?" Mikazuki takes the bait.

"Yes! I love it so much."

"Your face shows that," Mikazuki chuckles as he eats the pudding elegantly and slowly as usual. I hold the urge to push him to eat that small pudding faster. "What kind of pudding do you like?"

"I don't care about the brand or flavor, really. I eat any pudding, as long as it's soft and tasty," Yamato replies as he takes another bite, "Oh, but I prefer the packed ones. Like six in a box. They're cheaper, but they have good quality. Though I say I don't care about the flavor or brand, I buy vanilla flavor of Kitty brand the most. It has a good smell, taste, and cheap too! Ah, but Panda one is pretty good, too, though a bit more expensive. Sometimes I'm conflicted…"

"You're a pudding fanatic, aren't you…?" I mutter without thinking. He sounds really happy and even stated what we don't ask, so…

Yamato looks proud instead. "Fanatic, huh. I guess it suits me! Though I rarely buy one, now, my allowance won't allow me to…" Now he looks sad. "I'm thinking to get a part-time job, since it is allowed by school anyway. I'm not in any club, so I have a free time."

"…Maybe you should," I shrug, "Working at the convenience store should be alright. By the way, were you in any clubs before?"
Yamato blinks, he stops moving for a moment before he nods. "In...in middle school. I was in *kendo* club."

Mikazuki looks intrigued. "Oh? You can use a sword? Do you like it?"

"I can...pretty much. I don't know if I'm good at it. People said my style is...weird and heavy, but I liked my own style. I don't like fighting, but, it is good for self-defense."

"Why don't you join our high school's *kendo* club?" I ask, also interested. Also...he used past tense.

He averts his gaze from mine, looking away. He moves faster to finish the pudding. "Well, I...I have some bad memories in my previous *kendo* club. I quit after two years because of that, and...I think I came to hate it."

The cold wind passes.

"I'm sorry," I say after a heavy silence. I apologize because it turns out I asked something sensitive. Whatever happened, it must be pretty bad for him.

"It's alright," Yamato smiles to assure me. He doesn't look faltered even a bit - is he holding back?

The air is still heavy and awkward.

"Oh," Yamato looks at the clock, "It's getting late, I have to buy food and do housework." He finishes the tea in one big gulp and puts it back on the table and stands up.

He takes his bag and starts to walk. I accompany him after I understand what is happening. "Thank you," he says.

"Mmm. Feel free to come any time when I'm here." I open the door for him. He steps outside and smiles once again, this time more pure. "Do you enjoy your visit?" I don't even know why I ask that, *okay*.

"I learn a few things about you, Yamanbagiri. I'm so...happy. But still, I want to deepen our...friendship more."

"...You're pretty straightforward, aren't you?"

"I think so~" he says playfully and he starts to turn around, "Have a nice day, Yamanbagiri, Mikazuki. See you."

He goes away without looking back.

Well, that ends...rather abruptly.

I close the door and start to clean the table from all trashes. Mikazuki takes the cups and puts them on the sink, leaving it to Kogitsunemaru. I sit on the sofa and continue to read the book. I'm too lazy to even go upstairs to my room to put the notes and papers.

Mikazuki comes back after a while. "Are you sleepy, Yamanbagiri?"

I sigh. "Kind of, even though I just slept for a long time."

"Ahaa. Well, your body is still tired, it seems. Do you want to sleep on my lap?"

"Sure." I don't even need to think to accept his offer.
I put aside the book and crawl and lie my head down on Mikazuki's soft lap. I look sideways, so I can't see his face. His delicate fingers slowly pat my head, running through my hair strands. I lean in to his touch. It feels really nice and comfortable…

"You like to be spoiled, don't you?" He says.

"Yeah, of course…once in a while isn't bad."

Familiar footsteps coming down can be heard. It's Kogitsunemaru, obviously. "He left already? That was quick," he comments.

"He has something to do," I respond as I lazily shift my eyes to him. He looks...somewhat pouty, displeased by something. "What's wrong?"

"I want to have your head on my lap, too, Yamanbagiri."

"Ooh, you're surprisingly honest today," Mikazuki chuckles. "Let's switch after an hour."

"I wonder if I'll sleep that long."

Kogitsunemaru just smiles and goes to the kitchen to make a tea for himself. He wants to relax after a very hard housework, of course.

Secretly, I can't wait for an hour to pass.

Before that, though, the door bell rings for...the third time today.

I exchange glances with Mikazuki, wordlessly, to decide that I'm the one to open the door. Of course. I don't think it's Yamato, though. He looked like he wanted to escape when he answered my question about his club, I doubt he can come back shortly after. I'm guilty of that...

I open the door before the door bell can ring again. "Yes, who is -" I freeze and stare at the...two unexpected guests.

Ichigo-senpai's eyes glint up immediately when he sees me. Kousetsu-senpai's eyes are wide open for a moment.

"Yamanbagiri-san, so you're still alive!" That's the first thing Ichigo-senpai says.

"How rude," I reply instantly.

"Ah, I mean, I'm happy you're alive and well," he says, and then he turns to the frozen Kousetsu-senpai, "We're happy, right?"

"O-Of course," Kousetsu-senpai answers after a silence. He looks taken aback. He clears his throat and looks at me, "I am glad that you're alive and well, Kunihiro-san..."

Is it just me, or his eyes are sparkling and he seems brighter than usual?

"How is your condition?" He continues before I can wonder more.

"I'm pretty much fine now. Ah, please come in."

The two upperclassmen step in my house politely. They greet Mikazuki. It seems that Kousetsu-senpai had lent his power to Ichigo-senpai, enabling him to see oddities. That helps a lot. After that incident, Ichigo-senpai turns into a completely normal human that can't see oddities, so he
needs an external power to see again.

By the way, Ichigo-senpai doesn’t know about my real relationship with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. Kousetsu-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai as well. In fact, nobody other than my family knows, though I believe my three upperclassmen have some ideas about it.

"Ooh, so you two are the visitors. Good afternoon," Kogitsunemaru smiles, a cup of tea is on his hands. "Wait, I'll go get another tea." He goes back to the kitchen.

Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are better in giving hospitality to guests than me, the real owner of the house, huh…

"Now then, what brings you here?" Mikazuki asks, completely to the point, "There must be something important other than checking Yamanbagiri's condition."

"Ah. That is correct," Kousetsu-senpai nods and turns in his deadly serious mode. "As you already know, I asked for help to some specialists I know to find Kashuu Kiyomitsu. Truth to be told, the progress is rather slow. His whereabouts are still unknown."

"I see…" I can speak nothing more.

"We haven't determined if he is completely guilty as an oddity or not as well. If he really became a full-fledged jiangshi, he'll probably get executed…if he can't control himself well. That is the worst case possibility. We don't want that."

"If he is a full-fledged jiangshi already…or if he is still in the middle of the process…can he be saved? Can he turn into a normal human?" I ask, tense.

"…Truth to be told, the specialists don't know, either. There are no known cases for such things. Even if there is, the possibility of turning him back is slim," Kousetsu-senpai stands up and bows deeply. "I apologize for my inability to help."

"N-No, it's alright…I'm not the one you should be apologizing to," I shake my head, "If…he is really executed and died, I…I don't know what I should say to his family and friends…"

"I'll help you to my best on that," he turns to look at me, "Also…the specialists said it is alright for you to know about the progress of this investigation and help, as long as you don't endanger yourself."

"…Are you serious?"

Well, I expected them to push me away after who knows how many times I stole their jobs.

Kousetsu-senpai nods as he sits down. "Yes. Although you aren't a certified specialist, your brother is, and you helped to solve some cases before. Think of it as a gratitude and special privilege. It is also because Kashuu Kiyomitsu happened to be your friend."

"I-I'm grateful, but…I don't know what I can do to help…” I feel so mixed, happy and uneasy. I'm glad I can help, because I hate to be powerless, but sometimes I just have no idea what to do.

"It's alright," Kousetsu-senpai smiles softly, it soothes me somehow, "I'm sure you have something to do. A part only you can do. For the time being, rest well and don't force yourself."

I nod. There's really nothing I can do for now.
"Yamanbagiri-san, why didn't you tell me? I want to help as well," Ichigo-senpai says, his voice is playful, as though he is whining to me.

"No, you can't, Hitofuri-san. You're a normal human out of this field."

"That's not going to stop me."

"I know. That's why I allowed you to go with me today."

Ichigo-senpai stares at him; his face is full of questions.

"I personally think you have the right to know what happened. You were once a part of this, after all," Kousetsu-senpai replies, "However, I don't want to see you get too involved other than this and opinions."

Ichigo-senpai blinks a few times in silence before he claps his hands. "Ah! I see, I see. It's alright; I'm content with helping even the slightest. Besides, I owe the two of you. I have to do something."

"Thank you, Ichigo-senpai."

He smiles and starts to rummages his bag. "By the way, here's the book."

"Book?"

He takes out an old-looking, thick book from his bag. The title on the cover seems to be faded out.

"Yes. Thank you," Kousetsu-senpai takes the book and places it carefully on the table. He opens the first page. "This is a book containing notes about youkais. Mine is lost, but thankfully, Hitofuri-san has it." He flips the rusty pages carefully and settles on a certain page. I look closely as he shoves the book to me, now not upside-down. There is a beautiful Japanese girl in the page, surrounded by… oddities? Her name is…

"Takiyasha-hime," Kousetsu-senpai speaks, "She was the daughter of Taira no Masakado, known as a sorceress or a conjurer who raised an army of oddities in an attempt to conquer Japan, rebelling like her father. Her real name was Satsuki-hime. After she studied the scrolls, she took the name Takiyasha-hime. In a different story, it is said that she could summon even gashadokuro."

So that's where the connection is… "Is it possible to summon strong oddities in this day and age?"

"It is possible. However, to summon gashadokuro, the conjurer has to be another oddity…except for Takiyasha-hime, who had an extraordinary amount of spiritual power, combined with deep grudge, I don't think anyone else can do it," Kousetsu-senpai replies, "Another requirement to summon an oddity is a certain object. It is yorishiro, usually normal objects that became sacred after gods and others reside in them. In summoning oddities, yorishiro is used to call upon the oddity. What needed differs from oddities to oddities. Ingashadokuro's case, I believe a skull is used. However, since yesterday's gashadokuro isn't defeated, I believe the skull won't be found. Gashadokuro's weak spot is its left eye, the place where the yorishiro resides. It's hard, but it can be defeated."

"I see…" Kogitsunemaru mutters as he walks from the kitchen with a tray full of cups of tea and some puddings. He listened to the conversation from the kitchen, it seems. He places the heated cups on the table and sits next to me after he shoves away the notebook and papers. "By the way, why do you have that book, Ichigo?"

"After that incident, the curious me went and searched for books about oddities…many are expensive, but I managed to buy that one," Ichigo-senpai answers as he takes a cup, "I'm glad if it
The future is still unclear, but we have good clues as our lead for now. Let's hope for the best," Mikazuki says. "Is there anything else to add?"

"Hmm... I think there's nothing else. I can tell that Kunihiro-san is healthy... but, I want you to report if something is wrong with your surroundings. The specialists said that Suzuran's spiritual state is weird since the past two weeks," Kousetsu-senpai replies.

Should I tell him about what the kodama said? I think there is no use of hiding it from him and other specialists, if they're going to find out anyway.

"Let's do," Kogitsunemaru nods, "Two days ago, the kodama around this neighborhood reported to nurikabe in this area about a mysterious presence of a dangerous tree."

My two upperclassmen seem to be alerted. In fact, Ichigo-senpai almost chokes on his tea.

Kogitsunemaru continues calmly, "The kodama went on an investigation, but they found nothing, though this neighborhood is warped around a dark aura that chased off some usual oddities. If you look closely, the street is almost empty with no oddities."

"You're right... this is my first time coming here, but, I feel something is off," Kousetsu-senpai says.

"The dark aura and the aura of a mysterious tree stay even for days. It has been 3 days since we found out," Mikazuki says, "The kodama also said that whatever the tree is, it can drain your life, somehow."

"I asked oddities around and some of them sensed a vampiric being around two weeks ago, but they found nothing," Kogitsunemaru adds.

I continue. "One of my oddities friends saw a mysterious black roots coming from the river and moved toward west. I found incidents caused by 'mysterious black ropes pulled them' that happened here for the past two weeks. The locations vary, so it is moving. I don't think this is a mere coincidence."

"You investigated it yourself?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

"Pretty much. We gather what we can." I shrug.

Kousetsu-senpai nods. "Good. That might be our only lead for a bigger case regarding this city. Thank you very much, Kunihiro-san."

"It's nothing. I feel like I have to know on whatever is happening here. I'm glad if I can help in a way." 

"Yes. That information is precious. I don't think the other specialists know about this yet... I'll tell them now. Excuse me for a moment." He stands up with his smartphone and walks to near the entrance, pushing contacts and starts to have a phone call.

Ichigo drinks his tea carefully, as if trying to calm himself down. "Anyway, I'm really to see that you're mostly alright, Yamanbagiri-san. When I heard about what happened, I can only picture on how bad your injury is... to the worst case."

"It is certainly bad, I'm glad I'm okay, as well, thanks to Mikazuki's healing power and my regeneration speed that is abnormal. Ah, is there anything weird or interesting happened at school
today, Ichigo-senpai?"

The same question I asked Yamato.

"Weird or interesting? Hmm…other than your absence, I think there's nothing. It's quite peaceful," Ichigo-senpai says with a smile. He blinks as he seems to notice another book on the table.
"Yamanbagiri-san…is that book…"

"Hmm? It's The Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki by Haruki Murakami, my favorite novelist."

"Ah! What a coincidence, he is my favorite novelist as well!" Ichigo-senpai's amber eyes seem brighter, "I love his works. Of course, including that one. It's painfully beautiful."

A silence from me. "I'm honestly surprised, senpai."

"Hmm? Do I look like a type that doesn't like to read books?"

An image of Ichigo-senpai with typical glasses that make him look like a typical nerd appears on my head. Oh, he looks pretty good…

I shake my head as I try to erase the image. "No, you look like a serious type, books suit you well. I'm just surprised to know that you read Haruki Murakami's works as well…and love them. Though he is a best-selling, internationally known novelist, teens nowadays have no knowledge about him."

"Sadly, that's the truth. I'm more old-fashioned, so I think I know? Ahaha," he chuckles, "I bet Yamanbagiri-san likes his works because they're mostly dreamy and surrealistic."

"You know me pretty well, don't you, senpai?" I say, completely defeated in a non-existent battle. I gulp down my cold tea.

Ichigo-senpai looks happy to know it as I can hear him humming softly. He raises his cup; his fingertips are running on the side slowly. "I want to bet on another thing as well. Yamanbagiri-san, you're weak to praises and the word cute, right?"

I violently choke on my tea and let go of the cup. Thankfully, Kogitsunemaru quickly saves it from breaking just a moment before impact. Mikazuki pats my back as I cough, trying to calm myself down.

"Whoa. That reaction…so I guess I am correct?" Ichigo-senpai asks, his face is confident already. He looks so smug that I'm willing to slap his face. I grit my teeth as I send my best death glare to him, but he seems to be unaffected as he smiles sweetly to me. I'm not going to lose on this. I'm not going to -

"Yes, you're right, he is weak to these two things. He is, in fact, very weak to them as he seems unable to accept such praises about himself. He sets himself lower than anything, after all."

"Mikazuki, you traitor."

Mikazuki laughs pleasantly. "Excuse me, your friend here knows you very well. He has to know."

Once again, I take a pillow and bury my face on it.

"Aww~ Yamanbagiri-san is so cute!" Ichigo-senpai chuckles in unison with Mikazuki. "Though the fact that you can hardly accept positive facts about yourself is honestly worrisome. That's bad, don't you know?"
"B-but…" I reply with a muffled voice. "I'm just a speck of dust unneeded for this world, so I don't deserve - "

"Yamanbagiri-san." Ichigo-senpai's voice turns low and gentle, as though he is whispering comforting words to me, though he hasn't said anything. Curious, I take a peek only to see his gentle gaze. I want to curse. Okay, let's do it. *Shit.* "You aren't an unneeded speck of dust. Those who know you think that you're precious. In fact, everyone else is the same. This world is big. Speaking in a bigger scale, it is true that we, humans, are just speck of dusts. However, as we interact with others, we become an important part of that person's life. The smallest scale is family…a blood connection that is unavoidable. No matter how small or big, everyone is a precious person for someone else. And thus, everyone deserves the same thing. Nobody *should* get less, nobody *should* get more."

I shift my pillow uncomfortably as I listen. I'm not surprised to hear his speech. This isn't the first time he tells me something important about my life. This isn't the first time I get to hear such things. Things sure take turn to the most serious way. A topic I'm pretty sensitive at.

"I understand your point, Ichigo-senpai, and I do agree…” I put the pillow on my lap. "But no matter how true it is, I still…I can't look at myself that way. Things aren't that simple. For years, I…” I cut myself off and sigh. "There is no point to continue this conversation. I'm sorry."

Ichigo-senpai stares at me, he looks like he wants to say something, but he refrains. After a silence, I see him clenching his fist. "It's alright. I'm sorry, I might have gone too far. I have no right to point it out at the first place. You…already know, and you've…given up."

He is sure sensitive to the weirdest things…

"The last one stabs me the most," I chuckle awkwardly. "It's okay. I'm honestly happy that you're worried about me, but I'm sorry to worry you as well."

"Mmm. it's alright. It is my choice to worry," he takes another sip and places the cup back on the table. "Say, are you…happy with your current life, Yamanbagiri-san?"

"That's a weird, curious question…but I'll answer anyway. I think I'm pretty much happy now."

"I see. Well, that's good to hear, then. You look the best when you're happy."

"How can you tell that I'm happy?"

"You're smiling brightly. I can't miss that," Ichigo-senpai replies happily. "See? You're smiling right now."

"Eh…?" I trace my lips with my fingers, and *hell*, I am. "I didn't realize it myself…"

He giggles. "That can happen sometimes."

"Isn't that cute?" Kogitsunemaru, who has been quiet since the first exchange, says. Mikazuki laughs along.

I bury my face on the pillow for the third time today. "W-What is this exchange about cuteness. I thought we passed that phase."

And we did talk about it with Yamato…this is like a repetition of before and chapter 1 part 2, don't you think?
"It's okay, right? When can I tease you like this?" Ichigo-senpai winks.

"You keep a good image at school while deep down, you're rotten, I see."

"I'm not that rotten, don't worry! I'll do you nicely."

"W-What does that mean?"

"Oh my, that is a dangerous exclamation, Ichigo," Mikazuki says with a smile, but he honestly seems scary here. He emits a nasty aura. Why is he…? "Though I suppose I trust you enough for that."

No, your face says otherwise.

Ichigo-senpai seems unfazed. "Thank you for your permission, I'll treat him nice and well, do not worry."

Treat me for what? Uhh…I can see sparks of fire coming from their foreheads. Meanwhile, Kogitsunemaru calmly eats a pudding, as though there is nothing important going on.

"What are you doing?"

Kousetsu-senpai comes back at the right time. That phone call sure took a pretty long time. He stares at us in the living room with a questioning look. He feels a something weird is going on, huh…

Kogitsunemaru waves his hands off. "Nothing, there's just a little dispute." He says it as if it is completely normal and peaceful…

"I see." Surprisingly, Kousetsu-senpai accepts his answer as he sits back quietly. "I called the specialists and informed them about the new information. They said they'll look into it. Ah, there is no news about Kiyomitsu-san's presence."

I nod in understanding. "Thank you as always, Kousetsu-senpai."

"It's nothing." I see him smiling faintly. He takes the tea and finishes it in one big gulp. He looks at the clock. "Well then, I guess this is time for us to leave."

"Ehh…" Ichigo-senpai sounds very disappointed. "I haven't seen Yamanbagiri-san's room."

"That's your reason?! Why do you want to see, at the first place?" I shout in reflex.

"Because I want to," he replies playfully and looks at the dumbfounded Kousetsu-senpai, "Aren't you curious as well, Kousetsu-san?"

"W-Well…" Kousetsu-senpai, surprisingly, can hardly answer quickly, as if he is mulling over it. "I can't say I'm not intrigued…"

"So you too, Kousetsu-senpai…" Ugh, I hate this, but I'll have to use my last resort. "You can't. Yoshiyuki is sleeping there. I don't want to wake him up."

A wind passes with a weird silence. I swear I see them looking surprised.

"I-Is that so…why is he in your room, if I may ask?" Kousetsu-senpai asks.

"Ah…he didn't get enough sleep last night because he was so worried about me. He went to school, but since his condition wasn't good, he was sent back to home. He went to my house instead, to check on me."
"How did he get in?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

1. I completely forget about that. I turn around to ask for help to Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru.

"Horikawa gave him a spare key the night before, in case he couldn't take care of the sick Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki answers. Well, that's the only possible answer…

"I see…mm, well then, I suppose we'll get going," Ichigo-senpai gives up. He finishes tea and takes his bag. "Ah, take the book if you want. Next time I'm going here, I'll definitely see your room."

"Sure…as long as you won't do anything weird." As they stand up, I stand up as well to see them off.

"I won't, don't worry…that isn't a promise, however."

I'm greatly worried about his next visit. Someone, please save my room and my private stuffs from him, please.

"Oh, wait, do you want puddings?" Kogitsunemaru offers in the last minute. "There's still plenty if you want."

"Ooh, I'll take one. Thank you," Ichigo-senpai takes a pudding from the table. Kousetsu-senpai, though looks reluctant, takes one as well.

They walk to the entrance. I open the door.

"Ah. Kunihiro-san," Kousetsu-senpai makes the last call, "Are you going to school tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure. I'll, most likely."

"I see. I advise you to not going outside today at all if you can, especially without your guardians." I'm pretty sure he means Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. "Please don't push yourself; it's alright to miss school tomorrow as well. Please tell me if there is something wrong before you act yourself."

"I understand. Thank you, senpai. See you."

I wave them goodbye and I close the door. My house is silence once again.

"I'll clean the cups, so you the two of you can take it easy," Kogitsunemaru says as he stands up and begins to collect the empty cups.

"You're very wifely today, Kogi," Mikazuki comments pleasantly.

Kogitsunemaru looks annoyed. "Yeah, thanks to your incapable self to do housework, I have to do it. Well, if it's for Yamanbagiri, I don't mind doing anything."

"Thanks, Kogi. I don't think I can reward you so soon, but, I'm really grateful," I say.

Kogitsunemaru blinks and stares at me weirdly. "I don't really know what you mean by reward, but if it's an invitation to your bed, I'll gladly take it."

"But you always sleep on my bed…unless you don't want to. By the way, I didn't mean anything dirty by that."

"I'll always sleep on your bed, okay." He waves me off as he goes to the kitchen.
Mikazuki checks the time. "Well then, what are you going to do, now?"

"I don't know." I put the book Ichigo-senpai gave to the bookshelf. "I guess I'll sleep on your lap."

"Alright, come here." He pats his lap and I lie down almost immediately. He brushes my messy hair with his fingers and whispers, "Sweet dreams, Yamanbagiri."

I slept for so long, but I'm going to sleep again anyway…let's rest as much as I can when I still have the time.
"Say, Yamanbagiri. Let me cook dinner for tonight."

The clocks are striking seventeen when Yoshiyuki declares it right after he wakes up. Perhaps he had a dream about it, I have no idea.


"I want to help ya. Also, to settle my punishment the day before," Yoshiyuki smiles brightly, "Okay? Okay?"

"Yeah…sure. I'll message brother and tell him that he doesn't have to, then." I take my smartphone and send a LINE message right away. I also ask when he will get back home. He answers right away. "Brother will be back at seven."

Yoshiyuki nods. "I'll buy the stuffs, then." He pulls himself away from the bed and starts to prepare for departure.

"Wait," I take my new jacket which is identical with the old one. The old one is in brother Horikawa's possession. I don't know what he's going to do with that…blood-soaked and broken jacket, though. "I'll go with you, Yoshiyuki."

"HUH?" He stares at me in disbelief. "Ya need to rest!"

"I've rested enough. I need to move as well. Either Kogitsunemaru or Mikazuki will come as well. It's fine." I stare into his eyes. He stares back at me. We glare at each other.

He smiles and nods at the end. "Okay. There's no point to argue now."

"Before that…go take a shower, Yoshiyuki."

"Oh. Riiight," he laughs, "Can I borrow your shirt?"

"Go ahead."

Yoshiyuki proceeds to take my shirt and towel and goes to the bathroom. Guess I'll have to inform the other two now. I go downstairs to find the two old men are chilling around in the living room, watching television with cups of tea…how many cups of tea can they consume in a day, I wonder?

"Anyway. Did you hear what I was talking about with Yoshiyuki earlier?"

"Yes. You're going to go shopping and one of us is going with you," Mikazuki replies.

Great. I don't need to explain. "Which one of you want to go?"

"Up to you," Kogitsunemaru shrugs. "I'm okay with either."

"Same here. So, who do you choose, Yamanbagiri?"

The way you ask me that is as though I have to choose…my romantic partner or something…err, never mind that. "Alright, then, Kogitsunemaru can come with me. Maybe you want to help in
cooking?"

"That's a good idea," Kogitsunemaru smiles and turns away. "Wait, I'll change my clothes." He goes upstairs.

"Go ahead." Though he'll just wear his traditional outfit as he doesn't have anything else. I'm fine with only adding my jacket as the convenience store is near.

"You're serious to buy us modern outfits, aren't you?" Mikazuki asks with a smile.

"Of course. I'm always serious. In these kinds of things, anyway."

Mikazuki seems to accept my answer as he sinks into silence. I decide to sit next to him and watch the boring television as well. I miss my video games…

"Playing games all day is bad for your body, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki warns.

"Yeah, drinking tea all day is bad for your body as well, Mikazuki," I retort.

Mikazuki chuckles. "I suppose it is. But then again, I am not a human. I won't get such illnesses except being lovesick for you."

"I don't think I'll be happy if you're indeed lovesick about me…"

"Oh? Too bad, I'm already lovesick, and so are you."

I look at his annoying smile. "You sure don't look like it…do I look like it?"

"You just don't realize it," he narrows his eyes and looks even more annoying. "Love is sweet and intoxicating, Yamanbagiri. Even you're lovesick to some degree. You'll only feel it when you're apart from your object of love. Missing that person, I can say."

Well…even I get lonely when Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki aren't around. In fact, I can't imagine my life without them now. There's Yoshiyuki as well…if he isn't around, I probably won't be here right now, and things may differ for my family and friends. Brother Horikawa might not know about oddities until the end. Brother Yamabushi might keep working secretly as an oddity specialist. Yoshiyuki might not be happy for the rest of his life as he has no friends he can share his secret about oddities to. My lovers as well…Mikazuki might not meet any humans and rot away instead. Kogitsunemaru might travel somewhere else. They also might meet someone else and fall in love with someone else…

I get scared thinking about all the possibilities. Why did my mind wander there?

"Does the idea of me and Kogitsunemaru loving someone else bother you?" Mikazuki gets closer to me as he wraps his fingers around mine. I can feel his warmth.

"Kind of…no, it bothers me a lot." I decide to be honest for once. "But I feel bad about it…I mean, I don't have any right to reject your decision."

"Oh? Why did you come to that conclusion?"

"It's your life. It's your freedom to choose what you want. I…I honestly don't believe in lovers' rights or something to force a decision, so I can't ask you to not leave me. But still, if you have to choose, I want you to choose me…it's weird, isn't it?"

I see him smiling softly. "It's lovesick, Yamanbagiri. It's a natural emotion. No, it is too natural to be
called *lovesick* as it can be applied to anything. Contradictions within your own self is but an everyday thing."

"Then, what should I do with these contradictions? What should I choose?"

"That's your decision. You can either pick the most logical one, or the one you feel the most, or you can decide to ignore all of them and create a new option," Mikazuki answers. "You can also ignore every choices and do nothing, or just talk about it with someone without doing the real act."

Well, as expected…

"What are you going to choose in your dilemma, Yamanbagiri?"

He asks right to the point.

"It's okay to be selfish, even a little," he adds, "I'm also selfish enough to agree on sharing you with Kogitsunemaru when you proposed it, because I'm afraid of the possibility that you won't choose me."

"I don't think that's selfish…I'm the one that is selfish. I proposed that because I don't want to lose the both of you and hurt one another...I created a new option, huh." I recall the scenes and the time when I thought hard about it, sorting out all the possibilities. At the end, I realize that I came to love the both of them equally. I don't want to let either go. "Meanwhile, in this case...the both of you said that it is alright for me to get another lover. Or should I say, polyamory relationship. So, I feel really bad if I forbid you to get another as well, because you allow me to."

"So, are you going to let us?"

"Mmm...yes..."

"Even though you actually don't want to?" Mikazuki seems serious and I avoid his gaze. His moon-like eyes are seeing right through my heart and mind.

"You don't want to see me with someone else, either, don't you? And yet you let me to...though I'm not sure I'll ever get another lover, and even if I do, the possibility of that person agreeing is thin...I think it's fair for me to let you do so as well. I read that most polyamory relationships are like that, instead of harem-like with one at the center."

The clock stays at seventeen for moments when Mikazuki is silent. When he does speak, it sounds like a defeat. "If that's your decision...I'll accept that as well. But, you know...it's painful to imagine myself loving someone else than you. No, I refuse to even imagine it. My heart..." He grips my hand tighter, "...is only yours, Yamanbagiri."

I turn my head to see him. It's a mistake. A big mistake. His white, beautiful face, seems saddened by what I said. As if he can't accept it. Even I realize that he is completely serious about it. I want to say, that kind of expression doesn't suit him - but I can't. He is even more beautiful in my eyes, as cruel as I am...I am easily enchanted by his beauty as I try to digest his words.

The more I see him, the more I feel I don't deserve him...and Kogitsunemaru as well.

I can't be certain of my feelings like that, even if I can act like it, I just can't. I'm the worst kind of lover you can get, honestly. I'm full of doubts and uncertainty.

"I - I'm sorry." I can only let out an apology and gasp as I lower my head down. "I love you."
"Don't apologize. I know very well that you love me…" Mikazuki says gently, his fingertips are comforting mine. "...And that is enough for now."

"M-Mikazuki…"

I raise my head once again and our gazes meet. He is smiling. But his smile differs from his usual, annoying one. A genuine rare smile is coming from him…

"You are cruel enough to think about how beautiful I am at this kind of situation, but thank you, I appreciate it."

"Ugh. I'm sorry."

He chuckles. 'Yamanbagiri. Come closer.'

I blink and look at him and obey his command without a second thought. It's obvious enough that our lips are going to meet…

"Why are the two of you talking about that?"

Kogitsunemaru's sudden appearance doesn't stop us from kissing each other. It's only for a short time, but it feels really nice.

"Hey." Kogitsunemaru groans when he feels that he is being ignored. We look at him. He is dressed like usual when he goes outside. With the complexity of his clothes, of course it took a pretty long time for him.

"Is Yoshiyuki still in the bath?" I ask.

"He is. He will finish soon, though. It would be weird if he doesn't take a short time," he answers.

"You're right." I recall the times during field trip with him. He is the fastest to take a bath. It doesn't seem like he is taking a bath at all.

Kogitsunemaru sits next to me. At the end, he stays silent about my conversation with Mikazuki earlier. He doesn't have to ask; he already knows everything. His face looks pretty sour (which is cute), so I pull him and give him a kiss.

"W-What?" He looks surprised as red color starts to appear on his cheek.

"I thought you need one."

He looks like he wants to reject my statement, but he shuts his mouth. I guess I'm right. He is still pouty, but he is cuter that way, so I don't mind. I see his ear twitches, moving upwards and downwards twice before settling in a complete downwards, as if he is folding his ears.

"...Are you teasing me, or you want me to tease you?"

"N-Neither. It's a natural movement!" He hides his ears with his hands, almost embarrassed. He has a human form, but his instincts stay that of an oddity fox.

"You're encouraging me to tease you more, don't you know?"

Kogitsunemaru sends a help signal to Mikazuki, but the other brushes it off when he says, "Now, now, Kogitsunemaru, my friend. You do know that Yamanbagiri is weak to cute and fluffy things, and you happen to be one as well. He'll do anything to get it, so it is useless to counter him. Just
Kogitsunemaru frowns even harder. I can clearly see that he is disappointed in both me and Mikazuki. That's so funny. And cute. Teasing him is fun. Revenge is beautiful - only at this context, alright.

"Yamanbagiri, you're so cruel."

"Indeed I am."

I throw myself into his embrace without a second thought and he yelps in surprise. Even his body is fluffy, I swear, it's so nice here.

He groans. "Unggh… I'm not going to forgive you because of this."

"Oh, really?"

"Nggh…" Kogitsunemaru sounds troubled, but after a few moments, he hugs me back at the end, even more lovingly. I can imagine his tails are waving in happiness. "Yeah, yeah, I give up."

Being spoiled once in a while is nice.

"But you are being spoiled almost every day?" Mikazuki says.

…If you mean getting tortured by the two of you, yes, that is right.

"We don't torture you…" Mikazuki sounds so annoying. I turn a little to see him and send a glare before I bury my head in Kogitsunemaru's chest. He is so fluffy. Fluff. Fluff. A nice pillow. I want to go back to sleep - after I slept for hours and took a peaceful nap…

Then, footsteps from upstairs come. Yoshiyuki is going downstairs. As he can arrive at any moment, I release my hug.

He arrives with an excited voice, "Okay, let's go, now!" He seems a lot better and refreshed now. When you see him now, you might not believe that he lacked sleep before. He is wearing my shirt and jacket. I'm glad they suit him perfectly.

"Yeah, let's. Take care of the house, Mikazuki."

We walk to the door. Mikazuki waves us off. "Have a safe trip."

The door closes and we walk to the convenience store through the same route I take every day to school. The road is empty as the night is around the corner.

"What are you going to cook, Yoshiyuki?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

"I'm thinking to make a Japanese-style beef stew! I checked that you have some beef left."

"Ooh, nice. Stew and rice, right? I can't wait." Though I said that, yesterday we had a stew as well. Western one, though. There's a great difference there.

"Yep! With some roasted potatoes as well. I'm sure it'll turn out nice~"

We arrive at the convenience store and go to buy the ingredients quickly, ordered by Yoshiyuki. He seems really serious on buying them. He looks like a real chef… or something. As far as I remember, he doesn't have any jobs he wants yet. No dreams but to stay alive. Perhaps he can be a chef. A
pretty good one.

We finished buying and go home at 6 P.M. Pretty quick, don't you think? Kogitsunemaru looks excited to cook as soon as possible, trying out a new recipe Yoshiyuki has. He came to love cooking harder than I thought.

"Thanks, Yamanbagiri. Ya can take it easy and wait patiently," Yoshiyuki says.

"That's right. Just sit and watch television," Kogitsunemaru says with his hands on my shoulders, pushing me to sit on the sofa.

I have no objection. And thus, this time, I don't help them and join Mikazuki to get lazy as we wait.

I decide to bring my laptop and continue to play a visual novel I've been craving to finish. It's another visual novel - or in this case, sound novel, a form of kinetic novel - by 07th Expansion. The writer and illustrator is Ryukishi07. All of his games are masterpieces, especially the *When They Cry* series. He is well-known even in the west.

All of his games made me cry at some point. To writers, I think he can be a good role model, especially since his games aren't *galge* and such - they're for everyone to enjoy.

I play the game until the two finished cooking.

When they do finished, a good smell fills the whole room. Tempted, Mikazuki and I sit patiently on the dining room even before they set the plates. The good smell is making me hungry. I expect the best taste, alright. Kogitsunemaru and Yoshiyuki put the bowls of stew, bowls of rice, and roasted potatoes on the table. White smoke can be seen, a sign that they're warm. Fresh from the oven. No, not exactly oven, but you get what I mean.

"I'm home!" Brother Horikawa's voice and footsteps. He peeks from the corridor. "What a nice smell."

"Please go dig it in!" Yoshiyuki shouts.

Brother Horikawa takes off his jacket and bag and steps into the dining room. "Yes, I will."

"*Itadakimasu!*" Yoshiyuki says in excitement, and others soon follow.

The first bite…the stew tastes good and juicy…and warm. Tonight is a bit cold, so the right decision is to make a warm food with fluid, huh. He knows it so well. The roasted potatoes are good as well, perfect for the stew. I'm bad at describing food, but I hope it'll make you hungry.

The dinner goes on quietly.

Yoshiyuki is the first one to finish. "Anyone wants hot tea?" He offers to make.

"Please do," Mikazuki obviously accepts. Brother Horikawa as well.

I drank too many cups of sweet tea today. It's pretty bad. "I'll pass," I say.

"Me too," Kogitsunemaru says.

Yoshiyuki nods and goes to the kitchen to make tea. He comes back when all of us has finished eating. Kogitsunemaru proceeds to wash the dishes and Yoshiyuki helps him. Brother Horikawa seems pleased to take a break from going to the kitchen. The three of us who have nothing better to do laze around in the living room. I copy the notes Yamato gave, brother Horikawa is doing his task...
on his laptop, and Mikazuki reads a book. The television remains untouched. Yoshiyuki and Kogitsunemaru are chatting in the kitchen, but their voices aren't clear. They really control the kitchen now. Not that is it bad,

This situation is pretty peaceful, I'm really glad if this is how the day will end...then I'll probably go to school tomorrow. Wait, if I feel like I'm cursing my own day...jinx, you know what I mean?

After he washed the dishes, Yoshiyuki decides to go home. The clock strikes eight (twenty, I mean).

I go outside with him to breathe the night air, handing him the notes and handouts Yamato gave. The night sky is starless, but bright with the lights from buildings far away. It is really cold outside here.

"Thanks for today, Yoshiyuki. You helped a lot."

"Nah, it's nothing, don't worry! I like to help whenever I can," he smiles warmly.

"Be careful on your way home. Don't forget homework and such, either."

"I'll. Thanks for letting me taking a nap earlier. See ya tomorrow!!"

I smile back. "Yeah. See you - "

A cold, sharp wind passes my neck. No...it is...touching me. When I realize, it isn't a wind - but someone's cold hand, fingernails colored in red, gently caressing my neck. My view is blocked by darkness in seconds, like a cloth of black covering my eyes.

**[Blackout]**

I can faintly hear Yoshiyuki's frantic scream and feel myself being pulled away. When I feel that my foothold starts to change into air, I realize that I am, perhaps, floating.

What is happening...?

I can feel nothing...and see nothing...in utter darkness...

Is the one that dragged me...Kashuu? Why? How...?

I feel my consciousness drifts away, to somewhere far away...

**[Drifting away]**
I wake up with a start and find myself lying on the cold floor. I look around, my body is numb - I don't recognize this empty, dark room. When I regain control of my body, I get up and start to look around clearly. This dark building seems like an abandoned one, or even under construction. I know a few abandoned big buildings like this, but I don't know about construction. I guess this is an abandoned building...without windows whatsoever. A parking building, like in big cities? That explains why there is only one big room, but...I don't know this exists. Hmm.

On the balcony, I look down to the scenery below - buildings and lights, seeing that I'm perhaps on the fifth floor. Well...how did I end up here? Where is this? What happened?

I remember someone - most likely Kashuu - pulling me, but...there's nobody but me here. The eerie sound of drops of water fills my hearing. This is really creepy. I want to call Yoshiyuki or my brother, but I don't bring my smartphone with me...this is really bad.

Maybe I should try to go downstairs first. A plate near the staircase confirms my floor - the fifth floor. Carefully, carefully, I climb down the old-looking staircase. Each step I take creates creaking sounds. I hold my breath. I have to go to the first floor and somehow get out of here quickly. Suzuran isn't a big city, so I might recognize this area and able to go home.


Fourth floor. It is as empty as the fifth floor. A few trashes scattered there and here.


Third floor. It is as empty as the fourth floor. A few iron junks scattered on the corners.


Second floor. It is as empty as the third floor. No, nothing even exists here but shadows.


First floor. It is still empty and dark, but the entrance door is quite lively.

Finally. If the door isn't locked (which is unlikely locked), I can get out of here...!

"...Say..."
I turn around in alert, and find someone stands at the dark corner, his upper body is eaten by the shadows. The person walks forward, revealing his real form. It is…Kashuu. He looks downcast, so I can barely see his face, but it is definitely Kashuu Kiyomitsu.

"K-Kashuu…? What happened?" The question naturally comes out from my mouth before I can debate whether to stay quiet or not.

Kashuu doesn't answer my question. Instead, he says something else. "I'm sorry…for sinning…but I can't let it go. I can't let you go. I want to be loved…" His voice sounds grim.

"Huh?"

When I realize, he is already on my embrace, as though he jumped quickly…I stumble to the floor with my back. Kashuu holds me tightly, burying his face on my chest, spreading a weird coldness all over my body. It should be comforting, but…it's…suffocating…his tightened arms are…choking me…!

"K-Kashuu - "

The second I call him, he gets up and glares at me with eyes that seem like a madman. His red eyes, snapping even bigger than ever, staring into me, piercing me with invisible needles, pressing me with tension. My blood runs cold, shiver down to my spine, my body goes numb. I'm - I'm scared. I let out a soundless gasp as my mouth falls. His hands starts to grip my shoulder, and -

Something wet touches my lips in an instant. This feeling is…Kashuu's…lips…? What…? Are we kissing…? Why…?

Then, a sharp pain strikes my body, coming from my tongue. Something sharp is digging my tongue - ! K-Kashuu's fangs…?! It hurts…! Iron taste fills my mouth, fluid goes down from the tip of my lips. I don't need to see. I know I'm bleeding, hard, but Kashuu keeps on biting my tongue. It's really painful…! But I can't fight, he drains my life force as he keeps on biting me. Forget my kiss with someone that isn't my lover, or how kissing should give pleasure, all I feel is pain. This is torture…

Then, a surge of sleepiness hits me. Is this…my limit? If I sleep…what will happen next? Why did this happen…? Why…I wish I know…

My eyelids feel heavy. I surrender and close them. The pain gradually goes away as my consciousness fades out once more…but there, for seconds…I feel a gentle kiss on my tongue, as if Kashuu is trying to soothe me…

That might be an illusion, though…after all, all of this…is…

I…give up…and let my consciousness fades away completely, once more…

[Blackout]

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[Drifting away]
The sky is bathed in a perfect mix of red and orange. The clouds are hanging up there, slowly drifting away as the wind passes. At the edge of the horizon, the sun is shining. It will never set here. The dawning sky that never rests. This world's clocks will never continue to the night or morning. This world stays eternally at the edge of afternoon...it's sad, if I think about it.

"Can you rest at this place, where time has stopped moving, yet movement isn't? We can speak, talk, the wind still passes...and yet the clock stays still, never moving."

He pauses and looks up at the sky. I have no idea on how should I answer, so I stay quiet. The sky looks so beautiful and out of reach. The green trees are in shades of orange, fluttering along the breeze. Time stops, but movement isn't...but isn't movement a part of time? Time exists because movement exists, doesn't it? If one disappears, one will follow as well, as it is an inseparable pair...right? Did I get that wrong? Hmm...ah, I'm not good at thinking about these stuffs, after all.

"It reminds me of you," he says once again.

"What is?"

"The sky."

"Because it's red?" I furrow my eyebrows and see him nods, almost wavering.

"Probably. Ah, I don't mean blood reminds me of you." He flips his long, yellow bangs that shine even more in the sunset, staring at me straightly. His gaze feels...rather uncomfortable.

"Yeah, yeah. If you do, that would be really creepy." I look at the sky to avoid his blue eyes, "I think the sky is more suited for you."

He flicks his bangs once more, as if annoyed. "And why is that?"

"Your hair color is yellow. It's perfect for orange and red," I walk closer and he doesn't move, looking at me like a doll on showcase. I put my pointer finger on his sealed lips, "Since I'm red and you're yellow, don't you think we suit each other? Just kidding. Ahaahaha."

A sharp pain grazes my chest when I say just kidding. Ah...even though I've decided to throw it away...it always manages to come back, overwhelming me even more each time it pays visit. No, perhaps it has become a part of myself, one that can't be thrown away.

"That's not funny." He frowns.

"Sorry, sorry, please let it slide just this time."
"Mmm. Will do. Let's go, now." He walks forward once more.

I follow him, not knowing our destination. On the road next to a red river, there we walk, to somewhere far away. I see small ripples on the river - ominous, honestly. The road is long, from full of trees and lively sounds, to the quiet and dead trees. As the scenery changes with every steps we take, so does the sky. That once beautiful, orange sky turns completely blood red…the sky and the river blends into a single entity, colored in red. As if blood is surrounding us…

I see his back, walking away from me. His hair, fluttering with the wind, and his cold back… everything seems far away and slowly distorting.

"Maybe…I'll be happier if even blood reminds you of me…anything to make you remember about me…”

I say that stupid thought out loud, but he doesn't turn back even once. At the end, I might be just a speck of dust to him, when he is my world…

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☶ [Obstruction]

After school. As usual, the two of us are hanging around in the empty class. Just to talk secrets and do our own things. We have nothing to do since we're not in any clubs, but we decide to not go home immediately. Partly because Yasusada wants to see him going home. Sheesh, this is what it means to be lovesick, really.

"Am I pretty?"

Yasusada always raises his eyebrows whenever I ask that, and he replies indifferently, "Yeah, you're pretty." As usual, he doesn't seem to care and returns his attention to the magazine he is holding.

"Care a bit, can you?" I sigh. He just shrugs.

I take another look at my nails, colored in red. I love how red suits me. And honestly, I think I'm pretty. But…that doesn't matter if other people around me don't acknowledge that. Without acknowledgement, I feel that I'm ugly, utterly ugly, as if my insides are full of grotesque things. Ugh.

I have to be pretty and everyone else has to acknowledge that. Why am I striving so much to be pretty, you ask?

I want to be loved. Without it, I feel so empty. So empty that I feel like choked to death, unable to breathe, and maggots creep inside me, falling from my mouth, making me feel so worthless and gross. I have enough of that experience. Another thing is…I want someone to stay by my side…and I don't want to be abandoned ever again. Pretty things are being loved and won't get abandoned as long as they stay pretty, that's why I have to be pretty.

Yes, I have friends I dearly love, like Yasusada. But still, still, I feel that something is still missing, that I need it to fill my empty self.

As stupid as it sounds…I think I need a romantic relationship. An actual romantic love between me and a certain someone, developed into a mutual relationship, one that can be unbreakable…that's
What I long for. Maybe because...I think that bond can be stronger than friendship if bloomed rightly, and can be unbreakable...so that I won't get abandoned. Selfish, huh? I know. What I can say for sure is, if I love someone, I'll dearly love that person.

Yasusada isn't the one for me. He knows everything about me since we were children, and I know everything about him as well. We're close as hell, even to disgusting level, as we likely to be together all the time. But our friendship can never go beyond that. I don't wish for him, and he doesn't wish me, either.

No, it isn't because he is a guy and I'm a guy as well. Yasusada is only interested in guys as far as I remember, but I have no actual preferences. I can fall in love with anyone without thinking about genders and all. In fact, I have experiences in falling in love for both girls and guys. I dated a few girls, but at the end, we didn't really connect. As for guys...I obviously couldn't confess, and when I think about it now, my love for them seem like a temporary, fleeting thing, an ascending admiration...that I feel like an idiot to felt that kind of emotion.

Errrm. Anyway, back on topic.

We wish for one certain person. He doesn't know it, but, I love the same person as he does.

And honestly, I feel bad about it. He has been watching him since middle school. I know how much he loves him. Though half of it was born out of guilt, his love is genuine. He feels satisfied by just watching and knowing that he is happy, getting sad when he looks sad, worrying over about him when he goes to infirmary or absent - his love is so pure and genuine, unlike what I felt before. As bad as it sounds, sometimes that purity suffocates me...partly because I'm jealous on how he can feel such a genuine, sweet love.

The opportunity to directly interact with him only came during our second year.

I see his eyes shone when he saw that person entering the classroom, his seat was right behind him. His feelings were as clear as day for me - or for anyone who knows him well enough.

When Yasusada watches him, I'm likely to be there as well. It can't be helped that I started to notice him, to look at him in a different light, especially when Yasusada boasted stories about him. And when I realize, I feel a desire to know him more, to get closer to him...and it bloomed to love, just like that.

At the very least, I think it's love. I questioned this love a few times, since I came to the conclusion that I can never truly love someone, genuinely, like Yasusada does - but at the end, the moment of excitement caught me, and I decided to boat that feeling of fleeting love. No matter how painful the ending is, I'll ride along until the very end. I'll savor the taste of bitter and sweet of this so-called love for him until the time comes for it to wither away.

Yasusada wants to get closer to him, obviously. But he is all over the heels for him, and just looking at him makes him blush fiercely and loses concentration - though he will keep taking glances at him without fail, eyes full of affection. I bet he will collapse due to blood loss from nosebleed or something if they talk one-to-one. It's funny to see him acting out of character, bashful and awkward like that, so I teased him a lot about it.

At the same time, I understand how he feels, actually. Even I like to take a peek at his face, daydreaming about him until break time ends, and get awkward when he gets closer - even if he only passes by, if I'm conscious enough, I feel my heart beating faster as I freeze in place. I want to talk to him, I want to get closer to him, but I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself if I do! Yasusada thinks the same about himself as well. He has less control on himself than me, so it must be hard on him.
Not to mention that…if I get too close to him, I might be unable to control my feelings and burst it out. I mustn’t do that, because…

"Oh." Yasusada mutters as he looks at the window, cheeks flushed red. I follow his gaze.

Obviously, he is looking at him. Even though he can only see his back, even his head is covered in hood, he - and I - can tell that it is him, going home, walking through the field. He watches until he passes the gate.

"Shall we go home as well?" He offers afterwards as he puts the magazine inside his bag. I nod as I pack my bag as well. Then, we proceed to leave the orange-bathed classroom.

…Because my fleeting love is nothing compared to Yasusada's genuine love, and his is higher than mine. He is the one that deserves him, not me. I decided that I won’t make it into a love triangle. I decided to give up on my love and help Yasusada to get closer to him and hope for their happiness. Love is a weird thing, after all, even if he is straight, he might fall for him if he sees his love. Yes, I hope for that miracle. That's all I can do.

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When I realize, I'm pinning him on the ground, pressing our lips together. My sight is so hazy and unclear, but I can tell I am kissing him.

I can taste iron on his mouth. Is he bleeding? Why…? Did I hurt him…?

Confusion and anxiety washes over me, but I keep kissing him, again and again.

Even in the midst of reddish iron, I can taste his sweetness, and it is comforting. I want to keep kissing him like this…to drown in his warmth is like heaven, I feel like crying.

But I have to stop here. Why, again…? Oh well. If I have to, then I will do it.

I pull away, looking at his face. It looks like he doesn't have any energy left. I kiss his cheek, apologizing. I don't think he'll forgive me, but…I can only do that.

Keeping myself together, I stagger and carry him in the darkness, towards a certain light outside.

I drag my heavy, red-stained feet, bringing him along.

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☰ [30]

☰ [Radiance]

I decided to throw away my feelings for him.

So, for one last time…let me tell you how he looks for me, and why I'm so attracted to someone I've
never met directly before (before second year of high school, that is).

The first time I saw him, without his hood, I thought he is an angel.

*He* is beautiful, almost unearthly…and adorable when you know him.

*He* looks like your usual emo guy from at the first glance, as he wears his hood most of the time, even in class. Nobody, even teachers, questioned him about it, nor they lecture him for that. That hood gives him a mysterious aura, a certain charm that pulls me closer. Not to mention that…*he* is very beautiful. **Very,** *he* hides his beauty beneath his hood, but it's obvious enough. His blonde hair, bangs that almost cover his eyes, his pretty turquoise, sharp yet also gentle eyes…and his deep voice, sometimes unsuitable for his face that gives off the cute vibes at the first glance…all of them attract me to him.

But you know, the one I like the most from him is his eyes. His pure, deep eyes…that seem like they've watched the world betrayed him, and yet he still believes in the world and clings to hope…the eyes that full of light I always seek for. From his eyes alone, I can tell his gentle personality, one that care for others first that his own well-being, that he seems on the verge of sacrificing himself for others all the time.

It might be an exaggeration on my part, but that's how I see him, in all honesty.

*He* emits soft, almost unnoticeable rays of light, that (I think) only those who tasted despair may notice. That pure radiance, emitting from the very core of his body…is my hope. My hope to cling to life, to never despair ever again. *He,* indirectly, motivates me to continue living with all of my might. Especially because I know his despair in middle school, though I only heard it from Yasusada, one of the witnesses.

After experiencing such despair, such pain that even took him to hospital, he has regained his composure and color, and seems even brighter than before. At least that's what Yasusada told me. When I look into his eyes, though, I can feel that as well. As if…he was someone who managed to come out alive from hellish torture and keep living positively.

I admire him for that.

Not even Yasusada can move on easily. Hell, he is still stuck on the past, on his guilt. Not that I can do something - the only one who can push him to move is the one he loves alone.

Though he might not get over it as well, at least he can get used to life once more, and even believing in the world, in hopes and dreams, not afraid to get crushed anymore.

That strength is beauty all in itself. I'm not obsessed with beauty, but he is, in my eyes, is brimming with beauty. *He* is so radiant that I might get blind by just looking at him, but I don't mind.

Because he is my sole hope, my sole light in this darkness. Even if he doesn't know that, I'm really grateful for him. For not giving up on his existence…for living earnestly.

Stupid reason, isn't it? Anyone can become my hope…but I don't think I can accept it if it's anyone other than him. And for me to fall in love with him because of that? Well…honestly, that's my selfish part. Love is indeed a weird thing. Someone said that love needs no words, no reasons…and I think that's right.

*If it's true love, that is.*
It feels like a punishment. A divine punishment. I'm not a religious person, but even I think this is like that. A divine punishment for me, a worthless human being. Pfft, am I even a human, now?

When I got it… I mean, when I found out I was infected by jiangshi virus, I hadn't thought about anything. Just a simple, "Oh." and a bit of sadness to unable see myself in the mirror or going outside when the sun is up. A bit of happiness when this condition made Yasusada spoiled me, and even he came - and we became friends, kinda.

But, now… this is a punishment, isn't it?

Since I'm unable to let go of my feelings towards him… I have to swallow this petty jealousy not even worth mentioning. Not just to Yasusada, who spent time with him this morning, but towards the two oddities as well. Yasusada probably doesn't realize, but, the way these two look at him is full of affection like he does. And the way he looks at the two as well… it's clear for me, that they're in love. In a relationship. I avoided thinking about it yesterday, but now, it's as clear as day for me.

On another hand, I'm also betraying Yasusada. Yes, this whole time, since the time I realized I'm in love. I decided to give up because of that very reason. Loving the same person as your friend does taste bad, you know? Even more so if your said friend loves that person so dearly. You realize your love towards that person is way inferior than your friend’s, and you want to support him with all of your might as a friend, and yet you're unable to since somewhere in your mind, you wish for your friend's downfall. Is that even friendship? Why am I thinking like this?

It hurts. I'm scared of myself. I'm scared of the thoughts that told me to push away Yasusada to get him.

*Since I'm betraying him already, can I just go all the way?* No, absolutely *not*! I must not!! How can I hurt my friend intentionally like that?! *Even though it means you're the one getting hurt?* Yeah, it's fine for me! Yasusada has been longing for him for so many years, loving him dearly all this time. Surely, the one that deserves to get his love fulfilled is him, not me.

I know. I still can't give up on my love no matter what, no matter how hard I try. I can't possibly forget about him and my feelings for him in such a short time.

What should I really do, then? I *don't* know!!!

I'm betraying my friend by keeping this love, then having no chance to win even if I manage to actually betray him for real…

…Ah. Then Yasusada stands no chance as well. Probably. The two oddities are clearly in love are in relationship with him. Throuple, should I say. It's amazing to see a true throuple in real life, but I have no time to be amazed. All I feel is pain. Sadness. Despair. Suffocating despair.

If… these two oddities aren't there, and if we - Yasusada and I - made our moves faster, can we manage a relationship with him like they do as well? Then, the two of us can avoid suffering from our love and stay friends, even being lovers with the one we love?

The possibilities are killing me. Regrets - no, delusions of possible happy futures are racing through my mind as my feet bring me across the familiar streets.
I have no destination. I just run and run, stream of tears falling from my eyes, ruining my face. I must be looking pretty ugly now.

Despair cradles me on its embrace.

I want Yasusada to be happy with him at least, to make him happy in my place, but that wish is shattered into pieces now. If even he can't get happiness… it's impossible for me. I can clearly picture the ending… aaaaah. There is no happy end for the both of us… for our love story, there can't be a happy ending. What awaits us is nothing but our ruins.

I should be happy knowing that he is happy, even with someone I don't know, but… my heart can't accept it so easily! Knowing that I'm betraying my friend by keeping this love, and yet he can't be happy and have the same ending as me… I can't possibly accept that!! It's double the pain! No, triple the pain! More pain! The pain of betraying, the pain of your own suffering, and the pain of your friend's suffering as if it's my own -

All of them taste so bitter and sour. They get salty as I taste my own tears. What a mixed taste… it's so disgusting and heart-wrenching. The pain of my and his suffering is so overwhelming. I honestly feel like dying, seeing the end of my life. Fatigue attacks me all at once when I stop running to rest a bit.

I sit by the riverside, calming my mind and heart. Or at least, I try to.

Love story isn't something so important to get all stressed about. It's not the end of the world. I know. I understand it, theoretically, logically - not emotionally.

When you fall in love with someone, that person, unwillingly or not, becomes a major part of your life. As long as that love stays, that person will be an inseparable part of your life. It's exactly what I feel. Like he is a part of my body, flesh, soul, spirit… to take it out means taking a bit of my body attached to it as well.

Hell, Yasusada's whole life now is basically all about him. When he knows about his love that will stay one-sided for the rest of his life, he will surely break apart even more. He might even lost of what formed him, now that he sees hope, only to get shattered again. The end of his love equals the end of his life.

I'm sure it's an exaggeration in my part. I hope so.

But as I'm formed of what other people think about me, as I am nothing without them - I feel that, losing him means ripping apart everything I have. My flesh, my organs, breaking my bones, shattering my psyche, destroying my personality, wrecking my beliefs -

And then I'll be none.

Not just my heart, everything about me will be gone.

He rejecting me equals he abandons me for me. Even though it's stupid. Even though I'm nobody. Even though I don't deserve him in the slightest… I want, want, I want him so bad!

Aaaah, stupid, stupid. Everything is so stupid. Me and my feelings.

I'm an idiot for falling for him in the first place, and fail to throw it away before it rooted inside me. Though I could, I didn't do it… did I choose to feign ignorance? Or did I simply don't realize? I have no idea.
Why am I such an idiot, I wonder…?

Why am I even alive, I wonder…?

The fact that my parents abandoned me struck me once again.

Aaaah. Is that why they abandoned me? Because I'm an utterly idiotic and worthless human being, now on the verge on becoming a monster? Because I'm a bother to everyone and only cause them troubles? Troubles for the one I love and friends I dearly hold? Because I'm hurting both of them, and unable to make myself happy as well?

No matter what's going to happen, though, I'm sure I'll stay unhappy. As long as this feeling stays one-way…

They said you have to become happy yourself before you make someone else happy.

Hah. I guess it's impossible for me after all…

Shit, I really did hope for him to accept my feelings…or Yasusada's…or all of us get happiness without pain in the process…which is, obviously, impossible.

Kashuu Kiyomitsu is truly an idiot for hoping something like that.

My thoughts are so random and weird huh? I'm totally wrecked. My mind is in disarray, I don't even know what I'm exactly thinking about as they're piles of unorganized thoughts…all of them are so idiotic, I know by nature, and yet I can't read them, let alone speak about them. Huh…? Though I can just a few moments ago…

Ah…I see…this is…the so-called losing yourself. It feels…rather peaceful, more than anything.

I feel every bits of myself slipping away by seconds, by each breath I take. I'm losing more and more of my memories and my mind. Everything is covered in a thick fog now, like my surrounding is, I can see and understand nothing.

Only one thing remains clear for me, is that…I love him and I want him, so badly.

At this rate, I'll fall even more. I'll be madly in love soon…and get insane and lose all hope to recover.

But that's alright, isn't it? Yeah…for I'll think of nothing but him, him and him alone…I'll stay as his for as long as this body allows me to…for as long as this love drives me…no matter how insane I'll be, I'm sure I'll still love him…

My last bit of humanity…is my love and desire to have him all for myself.

At the very end, I'm staying selfish all the way…I'm sorry, Yasusada. I don't want to betray you and hurt you more than this as your friend, but…I have no other choice, do I? To stay alive, I need him in my life. You know me the best. And I know how much you love him, either, but…it's not like I'll steal him! I have no power to do that, so do you. That's right, I'll just…

Engrave myself into him, the one I love. With every means necessary. Bad memories, scars, marks, whatever it is…yes, I can make him feel bad about me, so he'll remember me as long as he is alive -

…Huh? Why am I thinking about such thing? Such a twisted form to show one's feelings…?

Huh…? No, I can't get that selfish! He'll be hurt, and that's not what I want.
But every inches of my mind are screaming to accept. You have no other choice, my voice echoes in my mind, as I shut my mouth tightly. You can only gain happy ending like that. It continues to tempt me. Accept it, this is what you need. Accept it, your selfish desires. This is what you truly want all along. For as long as he remembers you forever, you'll be happy. Nothing less, nothing more. Because to get your happiness, you must sacrifice others. Be selfish for once and forget everyone else.

For what you truly want is dragging others along in your own destruction.

At that moment, I feel myself crumbling away entirely. No…perhaps this is my true self. My mask is now destroyed, that's all.

I see invisible spider webs all around me, taking me captive, putting me in the middle of the web. I'm nothing but a weak, good prey for the spider. The spider in front of me is none other than myself, red eyes glazing to pierce me. Without doubt, that person is me. Everything about him is the same as me. His features, his gestures, his outfit, even his cold smile. There's no he - there's only me and me.

I come closer to his prey - me, another part of my own self. I open my mouth, showing sharp fangs I don't have. I accept my demise and let me devour me completely -

Until I am but thoughtless lump of meat, buried six feet under the earth.

"Ah…ahaha. Yeah, that's right."

As I look up at the starry sky, I laugh and laugh.

"I'm not a saint. I'm not a hero. I can't make everyone I love happy."

I get up on my two feet, slowly but surely, as though strings are attached to my joints, until they snap when I stand completely. I'm free now, aren't I?

"But I can't throw away my happiness, either."

I feel roots of darkness have taken my entire body, my entire mind, myself - and it feels so comforting.

"So, I'll just throw away others."

I see that certain tree which brought me to this point. I remember now. It was the cause of everything. It comes to take away what it has changed. To test me.

"Ah, it's so simple. It doesn't hurt any more. This is what I should do all along…I'm really an idiot."

My vision turns black. I feel the ground no more, as though I'm floating. As if I'm free and I'm delighted to feel it. I let myself being sweep away into somewhere far away. All I think about is him and his smile and how will I let myself known.

Inside that comforting darkness, there I see -

I see him, and I smile as I approach him. Ah, don't you know how much I want you, '_____'? Now is the time... I will get you no matter what...
I'm so...tired...

My feet can't stand any longer...my hand can't hold him any longer...

But I mustn't let go of him. I mustn't lost sight of him.

Why?

...I've long forgotten. But is that important?

Nope...as long as I have something I want to do, a goal - I can walk no matter what.

As long as he is there, remembering me dearly.

Once again, I drag my feet, to a gigantic tree near that place.

✎ [29]

✎ [Abysmal Water]

"Let's rest for a while," he says as he sits on the riverside. I just nod and follow him to do the same, sitting next to him. As he watches the river flows, I watch him blinking. His features never fail to fascinate me, gluing my eyes to him. He looks even more fascinating with the sunlight. As if he wants me to keep falling for him.

"Actually, where are we going?"

"You just asked that?" He snorts, "Well, I don't know, either. Just going along the road, as it is straight, no turns and all."

"Then...we have no destination?" I feel anxious hearing him.

"Pretty much..." He blinks and turns to see me, "Or do you want to create one?"

"Create a destination? How?" And why is he talking about that?

"A destination isn't always a place," he takes the nearest pebble and throws it into the river. It plunges in, but soundless. "It can be what you want to do."

I take a pebble and throw it as well. As it drowns, it creates a heart-wrenching sound. Falling leaves are passing by on the water's surface. I have no idea what is he talking about. I stay silent when he suddenly stands up and takes off his shoes.

"H-Hey, what are you doing?"

He doesn't answer. Fearing his disappearance, I grab his arm instinctively. He stops, but he doesn't turn back.
"…What?"

"Ah, um…" I'm at loss for words. I grabbed him without thinking, after all. "I, I…I don't want to see you disappear." I accidentally slip it out. I feel embarrassed with such answer. "N-Never mind, uh - "

"Why? Why are you so scared, Kashuu?" He cuts me off.

The way he calls my name sends shiver down my spine. Out of happiness. Out of fear. I feel my hand is shaking. Does he mean I'm scared to see him disappear right before my very eyes? Of course. "B-Because you're important to me."

He turns around with a smile. "If I am…will you do anything for me?"

That very rare smile he shows, so perfect and beautiful that it makes him looks like a doll, artificial and without…captive me once more. "Yes." It comes out so naturally from my mind and mouth, my voice is full of certainty.

Almost instantly, he pulls me along with him. As I think about his hand gripping mine, the two of us fall into the river. I struggle to breath as cold water and shock wash over me, I somehow able to see, and the moment my eyes meet his, I feel a strong desire to kiss him. I don't understand it myself, but seeing him closing his eyes underwater, seemingly giving up, so peaceful and elegant - I want to reach him, and I do. With our hands still linked, I pull him closer, interlacing our fingers, and our lips meet naturally.

The softness of his lips, almost unreal, along with the coldness from water and warmth from his body envelops me altogether. My mind feels hazy, a fog covering it.

The river is so deep, taking me into the deepest darkness as I drown with him - my sole light. The light from sunset won't reach us ever again. But I'm not scared, as long as he is there with me.

"You don't want me to leave you, right?" He suddenly speaks up, his voice is so clear in the water.

I open my mouth, able to speak as well. "…Yes." It's an embarrassing wish, honestly.

"I won't leave you, as long as you don't leave me either."

For a second, I see myself inside his clear, turquoise eyes, smiling like he does.

"Don't abandon me. Don't give up. Don't be afraid to lose. There is always hope, because the world won't abandon you."

His words echo in my mind as he takes me into the deepest part of the darkness. I can hear the soft sounds of clock in a faraway place.

*Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. The time is moving.*

Unable to stand any longer, I fall down to the earth below me.

I manage to catch him safely, at least. He is unharmed.
I'm glad...at long last, I reached my destination...

Holding him on my embrace, I weakly touch the gigantic tree, brimming with darkness and lives.

And my vision...turns black.

Ah...I don't care what happens anymore, as long as he is there...

My...beloved...

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My intuition tells me that I'm buried six feet under the ground. Or earth? What's the difference? I don't know. My mind is hazy as I lie down inside the still darkness, my whole body is numb, and I can't move it. I'm trapped inside a small place in black, being crushed; but at the same time, not. This place is so suffocating and small, yet at the same time, very open and vast. It's a vague feeling.

Slowly but surely, I can no longer feel certain parts of my body. My fingertips, and then my wrist are gone. A weird scent reaches my nose every time I lose my body parts, as if I'm decaying. Perhaps I am.

Surely, dead people can't feel it when their bodies are decaying. But I can, because I'm still alive. It is the same as being eaten by something when you're still alive.

There is no blood or pain. Just a simple loss of feel. I think my consciousness won't fade away until everything inside me is gone. My mind, my personality, and my memories - I'm waiting for all of them to disappear, leaving me as a speck of dust. Perhaps there won't be anything left of me. Until then, I have to keep still, thinking all sorts of listless thoughts to pass time that feel like eternity. I can't move, talk, or see, so all I can do is thinking all by myself.

I'm so bored.

Just then, my ear catches a sound. What is it...? I try to listen closely, closing my eyes, but darkness is still what surrounds me. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. It's the sound of a clock ticking. Where does it come from? ...It's so faint, yet so clear. So close, yet so far away.

At that moment, my decaying body stops decaying. I can clearly feel it. Whatever is eating me stops the moment the clock moves and makes a sound audible enough for me to hear. The time moves, but also stops altogether...? I'm confused right now. What is happening?

Is someone going to save me? If that's the right word. But you know, I'm here out of my own will. This is a punishment from me to myself.

"Don't get in my way," my mouth moves, but no voice comes out.

"Is this what you really want...?" A worried voice echoes. I might be hearing it from my mind or from outside, I have no idea. His voice sounds so familiar and warm, yet distorted, so I don't know who he is.
"This is a punishment fitting for me," I say, but once again, I don't actually speak. The other person seems to be able to read my mind - or know what I'm talking about, though.

"...No. Nobody deserves this," the voice trembles, "Even if it's fitting for you, there's no way you want it!"

"I want it. I do. I know I do!" I reply harshly. "I do want it because it's fitting for someone like me. Someone as worthless as me who keeps troubling everyone around..."

"Why...? Stop saying that," he says, almost pleading, "Don't you want to be pretty?"

"What does that have to do with this - "

My thoughts are cut off by the sudden change of scenery. As if detached from my body, I look upon my physical body, lying in the darkness. A soulless husk it is. I feel myself trembling when I see the state that I am in - maggots are eating all over my body. These disgusting maggots, even though I can't feel them. From my mouth, butterflies fall down and stretch their wings in freedom. Ah...no. They're moths. Disgusting moths. My two eyeballs, slowly but surely, are being eaten inside and out. Flies are flying all over my rotten body. My face doesn't seem like a human's face anymore as maggots creep into it, going inside my ear and eat my flesh.

I can't feel them, and yet it's really happening to my body...?!

I lose all strength in my legs and fall down, holding the urge to vomit. I keep watching my pathetic state from outside. A striking, disgusting stench reaches my nose. I'm...aaah!! N...no...if this is what it means to actually decay, I don't want this...! If I have to die, at least I want to die peacefully, beautifully, as if I'm sleeping -

"But that can't happen," my own voice echoes throughout the darkness. I - the one outside my physical body - turn around and find another me standing behind. My face must be looking stupid as I grin widely. My blazing red eyes are piercing my body as needles, so cruel and painful. "You know you're a sinner. A punishment must be carried out. And not sleeping until dying, of course! Decaying like that is probably the lightest punishment you can get. Or do you perhaps prefer to become a jiangshi and eat everyone in the town, then life forever as a mindless monster roaming in the streets until the hunters kill you...?"

"N-No! I don't want that!!" I scream loudly. "I...I don't want both..."

"That may not happen," I speak with certainty, smiling. "A punishment for sinners must be painful. Hurtful. So much that they regret their actions, you know? You can't be selfish as choosing your own punishment...because people want the lightest, the most painless out of all. Well, I guess execution with a headshot is better, then."

I'm at loss for words. I'm honestly scared...as I laugh in amusement.

"I know. I know. You don't want to die, do you?" I say to me, looking at me directly. "But you still have to receive a punishment...living to bear with it, can you do it?"

"I..." I should be able to say yes and nod in certainty, and yet I can't...I hang my head even lower, almost kneeling to me.

"No, Kashuu!" That mysterious voice comes again, "Don't hear him! No...don't hear your own self! I understand that you feel guilty. It's your conscience. But that doesn't mean you have to punish yourself like this. You haven't done anything wrong with feeling something, even if it betrays your
loved one."

I shake my head vigorously. "I can't! Even if it's not wrong for you, it's wrong for me…and it's painful since I can do nothing about it! I can't bear my own pain, how can I bear someone else's pain?!!"

"It's not easy, of course. But you aren't alone, Kashuu. There are people who are willing to share your burden. Yes, even your friend himself."

"I - I'm scared if he rejects me! I don't want to know the painful outcome!"

"It isn't certain. He might be able to accept you and forgive you. The possibility exists. After all, the two of you are close friends."

"Ah - aaaaah!!" I grovel on the ground, still black, tears are falling as I remember my betrayal to Yasusada and the pain he might feel. Then, my own pain from my hopeless love. They all are coming back and attack my body directly, stabbing my body with all kinds of sharp objects. My neck, my back, my head, my forehead, my arms, my legs, my chest, my stomach, they're all stabbed. Yet I'm not bleeding at all. It hurts…it's so painful…!! I can only scream and writhe in agony as I look at my own body, hurling as if I'm a baby with condescending eyes. I stop smiling, but my eyes are clearly laughing at me. At my misery. At my stupidity. At my ugliness. At my worthless self -

I can't, I can't, I can't stand it!

With all of my strength, I turn my head towards my body that is decaying. It keeps on decaying, of course, but there's no pain…the invitation to die painlessly with decaying like that and becoming something that doesn't look like human…seems even sweeter than ever…

"Yes. Do it, accept it. Just decay so that you can die painlessly!" I say loudly, "Even if you won't look like a human at the end, it isn't like you're totally a human right now. This is your last chance to die. Take it!!"

"DON'T!!!" Another, distorted voice shouts to reject, almost tearfully. "Kashuu, don't. DON'T GIVE UP AND DIE. Keep standing to the pain, then you can move forward on your life."

"B-But…” I barely manage to let it out, "I can't! I can't stand…this pain…”

I wriggle and fall on the ground on my back, still hugging myself tightly. I bite my lips so hard that it bleeds. It only adds to the pain, not helping me to hold it…

"You can. Believe in yourself that you can, at least until someone who is willing to share your burden appears."

He doesn't know when to give up, does he? Ugh…"T-There's nobody like that. It's impossible…nobody loves me! I'm just a trash…now, just let me die already!"

He falls silent as I sigh. Thankfully, my words seem to shake him up, whoever he is. I'm sorry for my harsh words, but I'll be gone now.

"I…I pick decaying," I say to me, who keeps staring at me. I smile and nod, waving my hand as if bidding farewell.

"Alright, then. You can go back to your body -"
"Stop."

Another voice, as clear as day, comes along with footsteps. That voice…sounds so familiar, and I feel like sobbing, without the pain I feel.

"If you think that nobody will share your burden…then, I'll do it," the once-distorted voice comes out once again as a figure steps in from the darkness. "I'll share your burden. I'll have half of your burden, half of your sins, half your suffering, half your pain - I'll bear them all."

He smiles. As though he is an angel descending to the sinners, offering help to atone for their sins. He smiles, brightly, innocently, as pure as the untouched sea. Yamanbagiri is there, standing in the darkness, offering help to me. His mere appearance sends out light that brightens this dark world.

He begins to speak once more before I can understand what is happening. "I'll bear half of your burden, Kashuu. So, you don't have to suffer all by yourself again. You don't have to cry and keep it all to yourself. If you're scared…you have me, and I will never betray you. I promise. No, it's an oath from me."

His words barely register in my ears. I can only look at him, dumbfounded like an idiot, too fascinated by the blinding light he emits. My tears have changed - from full of pain to deeply moved. I'm crying from the bottom of my heart…in relief and happiness.

"So…what is your answer, Kashuu?" He approaches me and kneels before me, smiling ever-so-gently.

I feel embarrassed to have him see me in this pitiful state, but I don't care anymore. "Will you accept me, regardless of anything?"

"Yes," he answers with a nod, full of certainty. These shining eyes, innocent and pure, tell me that he isn't lying.

"Ahhh…aaaaaaaaahhhhh!!" Without thinking, I jump to his embrace, enveloping me with warmth and light. I sob, I cry, I wail, screaming incomprehensible words. My tears are messing my face even further, but I keep on crying. The stream of tears keep coming.

While I hug him like a baby, snuggling against him like he is my parent, he pats my head gently, not saying a thing. He embraces me warmly, and I keep wailing even louder. He is the one I love, and yet this warmth reminds me of…my mother…no, I've never felt a mother's warm embrace before. This must be similar to it by feeling.

He isn't my mother. He is the one I love.

But it's close enough…he gives me comfort, what I need the most…

"Am I…pretty? Do I deserve love?" I ask between my sobs. It's a stupid question, but I let it slip.

"You're pretty, Kashuu. And of course, you deserve love."

I keep on sobbing. I must be dirtying his shirt now. Too late to think about it. "I…I'm so happy…thank you…" I bury my head on his chest even further, until I can hear his heartbeat clearly.

The thumping sounds are even more calming and comforting. He hums before I know it, his voice is so gentle; a lullaby that invites me to sleep.

Before that…may I give you another confession, Yamanbagiri?
I…I love you…I love you…I really do love you…

I'm sorry…for causing you trouble…please forgive me, and accept me…even as a friend.

These words can only hang in my throat, never to be spoken…as my consciousness fades away.

☶ [18]
☶ [Correcting]

Chapter End Notes

*The lines that appear midway are hexagrams of the I Ching. The words in [ ] are their names in English. There are variations, however, and not all of them means the same as each other, so I only take what's suitable. Don't mind their numbers (they're the hexagram numbers, nothing more).

*I added the tag 'Descent into Madness' thanks to this chapter...also because almost everyone is doomed to meet the same fate. Obviously a spoiler (laughs). Though I like to keep these spoiling tags hidden for my own amusement, I think they also act as warnings, in case some people want to avoid it or need time to brace themselves. Well, Kashuu's madness is mild and it resolved quickly. He is probably the second or third sanest out of all.

*Happy new year to everyone! It hasn't been one year for this fic (it's in April 25th), but thank you so much for sticking around until this point! I will be happy if you read my other works as well. Thank you for waiting. I'm sorry for the late update. This part was pretty hard to do...what a wild ride! It came out straightforward anyway, but I'm pretty much satisfied. Well then, see you in 2017. Have a nice day!
I sigh in relief as Kashuu seems to fall asleep. I gently get up and rest his head on my lap and brush his messy brown hair with my fingers. I'm glad he has calmed down…

A simple, natural emotion can drive you insane. I heard that somewhere before, and I faced it directly earlier. I don't know the details, but, it seems that Kashuu is jealous towards Yamato and he feels guilty about it. Whatever he is jealous about; it's something that only one of them can get…a lover? That's a possibility, but...uh; I mustn't pry further into their business if they don't want me to.

Anyhow, I must think what actually happened earlier and my actions now.

First thing first.

Looking around, I'm not in the same building as I was before. No - I'm not even inside a building. I'm outside, near a gigantic, old-looking tree. I'm resting my back on the wall of a run-down building. This place seems familiar…

Second. I know I passed out after Kashuu took away some of my life force to a close-lethal degree. After that, he most likely carried me all the way here. For what? Well...his mind was in disarray, so he might not realize it. He might just walk here mindlessly, like sleepwalking; an unconscious force took him here. Judging from his soles, covered in dirty socks, he did well on walking to this point with me…and I was unharmed. He might've been carrying him in bridal style…I must be quite heavy for him….why did he bring me? Why did he let me stay alive? He could just leave me there after sucking my whole life force. But he didn't.

So many questions.

Next. Somewhere along the way, I woke up. My mind was still hazy, so I don't remember much, but Kashuu realized it and put me down. I have no idea what happened then, but when I realize, I saw Kashuu decaying right before me. His thoughts flowed into me, along with his past - when his parents abandoned him, his current mother took him in, how lonely he was, and his betrayal to Yamato. I conversed with him, but it seemed he couldn't see me and only heard my…distorted voice. As I talked, Kashuu screamed and realized his real condition and broke down. I managed to step in before things go down to worse and persuade him. If I let him be, he can commit suicide. I'm not joking. The situation was so grave I can barely comprehend it.

Though I have no idea how can I bear half of his burden, when he embraced me, I can feel something…something spiritual and powerful flowed into me from him. And now…I look at his sleeping face.

He is sleeping peacefully; his skin starts to regain colors. I no longer feel malice and oddity's aura from him…well, that aura - which indicates that thing is an oddity - is still there, but less than before. Looks like I somehow managed to really bear half of his burden. Then…am I half jiangshi as well? I feel no changes in my body…and even if I do, Mikazuki should be able to repel it. No use thinking about it right now.

Speaking about him, where is he, right now? I'm pretty sure he and Kogitsunemaru can sense my
location if they're close enough. Hell, Kogitsunemaru can smell my lingering scent…creepy enough. I'm sure they searched for me if I went missing - so, have they searched for this area?

I can't help but to sigh. Questions after question keep on piling up without answers, along with worry and anxiety. I have to calm myself down as well…somehow; brushing Kashuu's hair like this gives me some degree of ease. Maybe because I see his peaceful sleeping face and get even more relieved than I thought.

I'll have to check whether or not he is safe from the jiangshi infection, but, for now, I believe he is safe.

I check my lips with my fingers. Kashuu bit me there. "Ouch…" There's still little blood there, along with little pain. Not as painful as before, I'm glad. My tongue feels fine as well…I guess it healed fast when I was sleeping.

Well then…what should I do? I want to look around this area, but, I can't leave Kashuu alone. Even if I bring him, I'm too tired to do so now. I guess my only choice is to wait.

There's one thing to observe: the gigantic tree in front of me.

It stands with pride on the middle of the deserted grounds, abandoned buildings surrounded it. This seems so unfamiliar…is this place somewhere not in Suzuran? It seems old as it stretches out up to the sky, surpassing the three-story buildings. Maybe because it's old enough, looking at it makes me feel uneasy. As though it emits some aura that frightens me…that being said, this is the first time I ever felt like this towards a completely normal-looking tree. Unless it's really something more, I'm not really sure. Should I check it? Can I believe in my instinct here…?

With nothing else to do, I decide to check the tree. I take off my jacket and fold them, putting it below Kashuu's head as a pillow. He looks undisturbed; his chest rises and falls in a rhythm. Sighing, I stand up and approach the tree carefully.

My body feels heavy and heavier with each step I take, closer and closer to the tree. Something is weighing on my back, wanting me to stop. That something is…certainly something inhuman, probably has no form at all - only an aura. I have enough experience with oddities that I know this feeling - certainly, this is the feeling when an oddity tries to possess you, or tries to hold you down in place. You know, Mikazuki likes to do it, clinging to my legs and all, but he is lighter than this as he doesn't have any ill intent.

I turn back and see nothing behind me, but the heavy air is still weighing on me. The culprit is the aura, I guess. I ignore it - sorry, I have to - and walk closer to the tree. When I'm close enough and touch the wood, a slight pain comes running into me, from my palm to my whole body. Surprised, I step back, but I slip and fall down with my butt. Groaning, I look up at the mighty tree - which looks even mightier. Is it just me, or is it…getting taller and taller? Sensing the danger, I stand up and step back, running to Kashuu, not looking behind me. I have to move him to somewhere safe -

"Ggh?!

Something like ropes wrap around my foot, holding me in place. I look below and find the tree's roots are the cause. They tightly wrap around my foot, moving slightly like a snake. I walk forward with one of my free foot, trying to resist the roots, but when I do, I fall down as I'm being pulled behind, getting dragged, closer to the tree. M-Moving roots…are that tree an oddity?! I dig my nails to the ground, but as it's dirt, it doesn't offer much resistance. I'm still being dragged down across the field. My hands are trying to reach anything to hold on, but there's nothing. I'm powerless.
My foot touches the tree, and at that moment, I feel my energy drains. No…it's being drained away. I remember this feeling - I know what it is. When Kashuu suck my life force out two days ago…yeah, there's no mistaking it. My life force is being drained away, slowly but surely.

Don't tell me…that tree is…a vampiric tree - a jubokko?! But how is that possible?! Oddities might defy logic, but most of them have their own set of rules - their own logic. For example, jubokko can only exist within a land bloodied by war before. It can't exist without that…or so I thought. Did it undergo evolution after all these years in search for food?

What can I do to get free before I lose all of my life force? I don't have much time…! My struggles are pointless. Moving only drains my energy even more.

"Yamanbagiri!"

That familiar voice gives me hope, but at the same time, dread. What is he doing here?

"Y-Yoshiyuki?!" I scream back, seeing him coming out from the door near where I was from - near Kashuu's sleeping body. He is wearing a back up, his expression is unusually tired.

He seems startled when he realizes Kashuu is lying there and the sight of me being dragged by the roots of a tree. "W-What happened?!"

"I have no idea, either. But never mind that, I need help. Pull me before it drains all of my life force, Yoshiyuki!"

"L-Life force? Don't tell me that tree is…" He nods and runs to me, immediately pulling my arms with all of his strength.

But it is proven futile as I don't move even an inch, the roots is holding me tightly. He approaches my legs, the danger of being captured as well is high for him, but he cares nothing as he pulls out the roots with such power that they snap on his hands. The tree doesn't capture him, however, and I manage to be free from that cursed tree. I take his arms and pull him away from the tree before it can get us. The two of us take a breather near Kashuu's body, protecting him in case the roots get to us. They don't move, so we assume we're safe even for a moment.

"…It doesn't seem to attack us anymore," Yoshiyuki mutters.

"We have to be careful, though. Let's move when we can."

For precaution, we carefully take Kashuu inside the building with us, away from the tree.

After he slumps to the floor as the adrenaline leaves him with a sigh, he asks me. "So…what happened, Yamanbagiri?"

"Mind telling me where this is, what time is it, and what are you doing here first?" I ask him back.

"Mmm. Okay," he crosses his legs with a tired expression and heaves another sigh. "It's Thursday now, and as ya can see, it's already late at night. We're in an outskirts of a neighboring city. Yeah, ya went missing for a whole day since yesterday night."

"A…ah. I see. I didn't expect that…I thought this is still Wednesday…" Though I did consider the possibility of this place being somewhere outside of Suzuran - maybe the building before Kashuu attacked me as well. I guess both Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru didn't consider much the possibility of me being outside Suzuran yesterday, so they were late. I lean to the wall. When I relax my body, I can feel my stomach grumbles. "I'm hungry. No wonder, I haven't eaten at all, I guess. I just woke
up a few minutes before you showed up."

"Great timing!" Yoshiyuki grins as he takes off his bag from his shoulders and unzips it, revealing a bunch of foods, ranging from instant food to snacks and some drinks. So unhealthy, but helping. "What do ya want? We can talk as we eat."

"Is that a thermos? Noodle would be nice." The night is so chilly.

"Yep, still warm. Let's go outside for safety, then," he takes his bag and carries Kashuu without asking me, "This way."

He is being careful to avoid being too close with the tree when resting. That's a good option. I follow after him to outside the U-shaped abandoned building. From outside, it looks like a school building. Around it, there are only residential houses. No cafes or restaurants, as expected. We walk further to a small and old building that looks like a shed instead of a house. The creaking door opens, revealing its surprisingly clean inside, with blankets and pillows scattering about. It also has a *hibachi* [1] along with the wood, some charcoals, and old newspapers - so traditional. We don't use that kind of heater anymore, but *hibachi* can be used for almost anything related to heat. We can even boil water here, but I guess it's too much trouble to wait for the *hibachi* to warm up.

We sit on the blanket, putting Kashuu to sleep next to us with a pillow below his head, his body covered in a blanket. It looks comfortable.

Yoshiyuki takes out two cups of instant noodle and a thermos. After we put all the ingredients inside, we pour the hot water in and wait for it to cook. Soon, the aroma of a nice instant noodle reaches my nose and my empty stomach. Eating an instant noodle when your stomach is completely empty is bad, I know, but I have no other choice.

Yoshiyuki wraps his palm around the hot cup, warming himself up. He shivers, his face is red - he feels completely cold, I realize. This isn't even winter. He must have been searching for me in the middle of the night until he freezes.

I take a blanket and wrap it around his shoulders. "...Thank you, Yoshiyuki."

He blinks and looks at me, tilting his head. "For what?"

"You've been searching for me for a long time, haven't you? Thank you."

I catch him off-guard, it seems. He looks at me, dumbfounded. Scratching his messy hair, he says, "Uh, yeah... it's just natural. Ah, aren't ya cold too?"

There are only three blankets - one we're sitting on, one on Kashuu, and one on Yoshiyuki.

"I'm fine."

I say, but I wrap my palms around the hot cup to warm myself up. Obviously not fine...

Giggling, Yoshiyuki wraps the second half of the blanket to me. "It's warmer this way, right?" He smiles widely - a smile that never fails to reassure me even in the worst times.

I nod. "Yeah..." Snuggling against him, I can feel his warmth as well. It really is comforting, more than anything.

"This feels like how we used to do, don't ya think?" He says, checking the time on his wristwatch.
"Used to…” I recall the past. The image of my child self and a small Yoshiyuki walking around in an abandoned building and take whatever we want - pillows, blankets, a lamp, food - to that place - our hideout. One day, we decided to sleep there since it was so late…worrying our families. "When we made a hideout and sleep there, and our families came to get us and scolded us hard?"

"Yep! These times were really fun,” he says as he looks downwards, probably the floor, reminiscing the past.

The past that isn't happy for me, but good enough with his existence.

"I agree. Ah, come to think of it…did you skip class to search for me?"

"I intended to, but nobody will let me. I just search in early morning and night."

"That's good, then. You can't be absent just for me."

"Said the one who skipped school two days in a row." I can see him puffing his cheeks.

"It can't be helped. I was injured and then kidnapped…I bet you tell the teacher I caught a cold or something."

"Of course! Except Yasu, though. We said honestly to him, considering he is somewhat involved." He rubs his palms together, still feeling cold it seems, "He was really shocked and feel so guilty. He helped us searching for ya, though from behind as we don't want him to jump into danger. He is the one who consider the possibility of you being in a neighboring city. Glad he's right."

I can imagine Yamato's panicked face, and how he persuaded Kogitsunemaru and Yoshiyuki to search for me as well. I believe Mikazuki accepted him easily, wanting more manpower. Kogitsunemaru and Yoshiyuki, on the other hand, don't want anyone not too involved in a whole to face danger if possible. Yamato, despite being involved, is at the same time isn't - he is an outsider in the matter, as he is a normal human. He shouldn't know the existence of oddities in the first place. Though he knows now, he isn't used to it. He should has a peaceful life, but knowing oddities destroyed that, even the slightest.

My life is messy thanks to oddities, really.

"So, you part ways with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru to search for me? Where are they now?" I ask, taking a peek at the cup noodle to check if it's done.

"Yeah. Kogi went to another city, Mikazuki stays in Suzuran, and here I am. Oh, I haven't contacted them…” He takes out his smartphone and types something.

"…Since when do they have handphones?"

"Nope, Kogi brought your phone with him. Mikazuki is hopeless with technology, right?"

"You're right. It's better if Kogitsunemaru has it, then." I open the lid and waves of heat and tempting smell burst out. "Look, it's done. Let's eat."

Yoshiyuki nods after he puts his smartphone back to his pocket. We take our chopsticks and begin to eat the noodle. We blow on them to cool them off. The heat warms me up from outside, and when I eat the hot noodle, it warms me up from inside. Especially the hot water. I'm so happy I can cry.

"By the way, what's that tree earlier?" Yoshiyuki asks in-between his eating time.
"A jubokko, I'm guessing. No matter how absurd its appearance is, I believe it is a jubokko...and it is the main cause of some mysteries that happened in Suzuran. Even though this is a neighboring city, it looks like its main target is Suzuran. I don't see any news related to it in other cities."

"I see. Ya have investigated that much? Like a detective! Cool!" Yoshiyuki laughs as he slaps my shoulder. Ouch.

"Well, just in case. With its roots, it targets people all around Suzuran, trying to tie and pull all of them to eat. All of them failed, though. I don't know why." I slurp my noodle.

"Hmm...then, how can its roots move all the way to Suzuran if the tree itself stays here?" He starts to drink the water. He must have finished eating.

"Good point. Maybe there's a portal that allows the roots to go anywhere they want, or the roots that were walking around are different entity from the tree - like a detached body parts that keep doing its work and bring food to the main body."

"That's some cool idea."

"Only theories with no real evidence. Either way, we have to get out of here and inform the specialists. Also...Kashuu is no longer a jiangshi. Or just a half-jiangshi, I don't really know, but he lost his malice. He should be fine for now." I gulp the water, the heat runs down to my throat. It feels really nice...

"Aah..." Yoshiyuki looks at Kashuu who is still sleeping soundly. "You're right. He looks normal now. What happened."

I shrug as I take a bottle of a mineral water from his bag. "I have no idea, either. After I calmed him down, he suddenly hugged me, and I felt a powerful spiritual power went inside me...I said I would bear half of his burden, though I don't know what - it's just to assure him, but when I realize, I think I really have some of his burden now."

"Is that even possible? Yeah if it's about personal problems, but, not becoming oddity..."

I drink the mineral water, clearing my throat. I feel like I've come back to life.

"I don't know, either. It's just a theory. It's harmless, so I guess anything is fine. I feel no changes in my body."

"I sense nothing, either...except how messy ya look," he chuckles as he takes the bottle and drinks it. Taking a pack of chips from his bag, I grumble. "Of course. Kashuu dragged me all the way to here in the span of two days. I'm not injured, but, I didn't take care of my appearance. Not that it matters now."

"Mmm."

I open the pack and start to eat the chips. I offer it to him. "Do you want?"

"Sure." He takes some chips and eats them. It's barbeque-flavored, his favorite flavor.

We eat in silence, putting the trashes in a plastic bag. We're too tired to talk now. We have filled each other with information, so there's nothing left to talk about. After we finished the chips, we really fall silent. The night is getting colder and colder by each passing minutes.
Yoshiyuki rests his head on my shoulder, shivering a little.

"Do you want to warm up the hibachi?" I ask.

"No, I'm fine. We have to go soon, but I'm so tired…" He sighs heavily.

I ruffled his ever-messy hair. "I'm sorry…you've done your best. Just go to sleep. I'll wake you up after an hour."

"Don't be sorry…yeah, will do, thanks."

He takes my hand into his, fingers clasping each other. I'm taken aback by this sudden touch, but I don't mind if it comforts him…and it comforts me as well. I feel strength leaves his body as he starts to fall into slumber. Maybe he should sleep on a pillow like Kashuu instead, but he'll sleep for so long in that case. We can just go back quickly to Suzuran, but I don't think Yoshiyuki can even manage that. I don't know how many hours has he spent to search for me without a break, so he needs a quick rest before continuing at least.

"…Yamanbagiri…"

Huh? Ah, looks like he is sleep talking.

"I'm so glad…you're fine…"

…I really made him worry far too much. I guess he lost the chance to say it or even forgot in the process.

"Thank you, Yoshiyuki."

I don't think he wants me to apologize more, so I won't. Really, I'm the one who is glad that you're here, Yoshiyuki. Thank you so much…for everything. Thank you for caring about me and staying with me after all these years.

The hand holding mine is warm, even in the midst of the cold, night air.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Hibachi is a traditional Japanese heating device, designed to hold burning charcoal. It can also be used as a portable stove.
I lost track of the time long ago. How many minutes have passed here? All I know is the night is getting colder and colder, to the point I burned some charcoals in the hibachi long ago. Both Yoshiyuki and Kashuu are still sleeping ever-so-soundly, even deeper with the heat from the hibachi, their only movement is their chest going up and down in a rhythm and the sound of their soft breathing. I feel sleepy myself, but with the danger that always exists, I have to keep my eyes open in case something does happen.

I eat crackers from Yoshiyuki's bag. It helps me a bit. I miss homemade foods already…sighs.

I take a peek at the window. The crescent moon is hanging up in the air.

Moon-viewing, huh…I remember Mikazuki likes to do it. He is a crescent moon, after all. There's a small cup of tea and sweet crackers. Maybe I should do it once in a while. The sweet crackers can do as a substitute mochi - no matter how different they are.

I feel bad for leaving Yoshiyuki alone, but he really has to sleep on a pillow. Sorry this is late. I lie him down next to Kashuu and make them share a blanket. I don't think they will move around, so they should be fine. I take the warm tea and sweet crackers, huddling myself inside the blanket as if it's a cloak, and move outside. I sit on the doorway, door closed, looking up at the crescent moon.

The night is so cold, I can almost see my white breath. Is this really spring in May? Even though winter has long passed, this night seems like winter night, just a lot gentler.

…Looking up at the moon like this, I realize how lonely I feel without these two oddities…my so-called fiancées. We've been together for years, almost never to be apart, lost in contact for this long…though I feel pathetic, I feel how much I love them now - and how much they've given me their affection…so much that I forgot my loneliness, and just remember it now.

…Thinking about that warms up my body. Or maybe just my face is blushing right now. Sipping my warm tea that gradually gets colder, I think on how much I want them to be here now. Owwh, so embarrassing…

Focus. Focus on the sky, me.

The sky looks darker than in Suzuran. A little. The thin clouds are moving ever-so-slightly. The glittering stars, floating in the air, look less brighter than in Suzuran as well. If I'm not wrong, this city is an industrial city. It's a lot bigger and more progressed than Suzuran.

Though I can't see the sky clearly, the crescent moon looks great. It's shining ever-so-brightly, so proudly, closer than usual. It hangs perfectly in the middle of my gaze, no trees or houses or poles
disturb it.

Well, this kind of thing once in a while is nice as well.

"Hmm…?"

I see something purely white from the corner of my eye in the middle of the residential district. It slowly rises, as if waking up from a deep slumber, slowly but surely, revealing its form. I stand up almost immediately, letting the plastic cup falls to the ground with a thud.

"T-That's…"

It slowly turns its head away…locking eyes with me. No, it doesn't have any eyes…only holes. With its gigantic form, crackling sounds as it moves its body parts…there's no mistaking it.

It's gashadokuro.

It's searching for prey…and it found me.

I grab the blanket and the cup and slam the door open. Both Kashuu and Yoshiyuki are still sound asleep. After I close and lock the door, throw the blanket and the cup to somewhere in panic, I rummage on Yoshiyuki's bag. He has some papers and and a pen. Good. Too bad he doesn't bring any talismans, though.

This is the last option. It's better for us to move to our homes, but we have no time for that. And to be honest, I'm not even sure if this can work well…but considering Kashuu is probably a half jiangshi and Yoshiyuki is…yeah, I hope the gashadokuro won't touch this place.

I draw a bagua on a ripped piece of paper, praying it will work. I draw the second one in another piece of paper.

I have to keep gashadokuro away from them for better effect.

I go outside and slip the papers below the door, putting some pebbles to keep them in place. I take out a Buddhist prayer beads - or pearls - called ojuzu and hold it tightly - thank god I always have it - and face gashadokuro. It was still frozen in place. I run from the shed, far away from it and attract its attention. When I lock eyes with it for the second time, it finally walks to get me. Faster. But still slow enough. I don't want to outrun it, though, so rather than running, it's more like I'm jogging.

Gachi. Gachi. Its bones are chattering about, its teeth are hitting each other in excitement, its feet shake the ground with each slow step it takes. Only I - and those who can see oddities - can feel this.

I'm sure the specialists have caught a wind of this. I…choose to believe so. Until they arrive, I will hold it back as long as I can - until the end.

Then again, all I can do is running about, luring it away from the residential district, to the quiet and dark abandoned buildings area. Wait…this is where the jubokko stays. Not that I have any choice in this matter. This area is the safest out of all where nobody lives. If others can be saved, even if it's risky - even for my life - I'll do it.

Yoshiyuki will probably smack me if he hears this. Please keep quiet - though he'll realize right away when he wakes up. I'll have to finish the business before he runs after me, then. He knows me so well, he probably can find out where I am, even based on instinct only.

A pretty scary thought, honestly. Yeah, he is pretty scary.
Anyway. Back on reality. Which building should I enter? Or maybe not entering is better? …No, entering is better. I can set up a defense in advance. But, which one of the buildings? There are plenty of abandoned buildings here. All of them look similar to each other. I guess it doesn't matter.

If I enter the one with jubokko…can I make use of it…so that it can attack gashadokuro? Gashadokuro was made from blood. It may attracts this jubokko and attacks it…yeah, that's a crazy idea, but definitely possible. I can even smell the scent of blood and iron from far away.

I can feel the gashadokuro is getting closer and closer, walking faster and faster. There's not much time to think.

I'll…take that chance. The risk is big, but…whatever can help me.

I run towards the building I was in just a few hours (or minutes) ago. I know exactly where it is. I dash inside, running upstairs and avoid the center where the jubokko is. In the balcony, I have a bird's eye-view of outside. This is perfect. A perfect point for watching and observing. Gashadokuro is still walking, its gigantic body is creaking with each step it takes, even scarier than before. The jubokko, as if noticing its presence, starts to glow in red, pouring out its bloodlust.

If they're going to have a showdown, I'm going to witness a history. I swear, it's so scary I'm almost glued to the floor, shaking, but I have something I need to do.

I recite some paritta[2] verses in panic as I hold my ojuzu tightly. Its only effect is probably only to calm me down and strengthen me somehow, but…if I can withstand the overwhelming spiritual power and darkness from these two oddities, at least…after all, I can't just run. That would be suicide, the worst choice possible. Both are capable of hunting me, a mere human.

For now, I'll just watch.

Gashadokuro finally arrives at the scene, stopping it tracks in front of the gate. It looks down upon the building - probably me and the jubokko. The jubokko itself is a gigantic one, taller than normal trees, but it is nothing compared to gashadokuro in size. Now I'm starting to doubt that the jubokko can win…ugh, I guess I'll search for a chance to escape when they're occupied with each other.

If they decide to fight, that's it. There's no guarantee they will.

And then it starts. The jubokko strikes first, pulling out many of its roots out of the earth. They fly and wave around like a whirlwind around it, setting up a defense. Gashadokuro steps in, its long and big hands are trying to reach the tree and crush it, but the whirlwind manages to repel them away with a screeching sound. The jubokko seems to have no weak spots at all.

Gashadokuro stays in place, probably trying to search for a weakness. Just then, some new roots fly out and wrap themselves around its legs and pull it down. Its gigantic body can't stay balanced and fall with a loud slamming sound. If it can affect reality of those who can't see oddities, it might have crushed more than 30 buildings now. But as it can't, its body passes through the buildings, most are empty and abandoned.

I hold my breath as I watch in awe. It has a hard time getting up, roots after roots are attacking it again and again, then lock it in place. It has lost the fight in a few minutes. It ended faster than I thought…just a few paragraphs. It still has a chance to strike back, though.
So...I guess I can get out of here safely now? The bloodlust is still lingering in the air, but it's not as suffocating as before.

"A-Ah...namu amida butsu! [3]"

I express my gratitude when I see a chance and run as fast as I can downstairs, then get out of that building. When I step out to the road, I see a familiar figure is standing next to the collapsed *gashadokuro* (more exactly, its feet).

"K-Kashuu...?!"

Just how many times did I call him today and how many times did he surprise me with his sudden appearance? He is supposed to be asleep back at the shed, far away from here!

I run to him and pat his shoulder, "Kashuu, get out of he-"

I leap backwards in reflex when heavy, dark aura bursts out from his body. My body is frozen now, shivers down my spine, and I sweat in the middle of a cold night. I feel a certain kind of hopelessness - I think I've failed. This is the aura of bloodlust. *He is looking for food - for victims.* Can he be saved, now? Does hope still exist for him?

I swallow my despair deep down as I brace myself. I slowly take steps to approach Kashuu when I notice the *gashadokuro*'s feet...are melting. *Melting?* Its white bones, like fluid, are falling to the ground...like a waterfall. As if a flood strikes in, the ground is filled by white liquid that drowns my shoes. It doesn't feel like anything, as though it isn't there, but I feel *something* unsettling. This is weird. I've never heard of a melting *gashadokuro!* When it dies, its bones are supposed to crack and fall off from each other, scattering on the ground. It can disappear in thin air if it doesn't die. But this is...*what is this?*

The world shifts in my eyes. What I see slowly distorts into a spiral and I get a sudden, painful headache. Is this real? What is happening? The world moves in a slow-motion, even voices. Many voices...

My ears are buzzing. I get too dizzy to even stand and fall down. The world is in spiral, so distorted and unknown. Kashuu is there, unmoving. Wait, he turns his head to me...and his eyes...are like what I remember. Pure red - clear and innocent without malice.

...[Onewithred]

I'm drowning.


Bubbles are out of my mouth. Am I breathing? Am I not breathing? Am I alive? Am I *me*? Is this my body? Can I move? Where am I? What am I doing? Why am I here? How much time has passed
My head hurts. I'm so confused. I can't think rightly.

Just then, I can feel my body. I try to move. Perhaps I move. I swim. Suddenly, a light appears from below. Attracted, I swim there without thinking. Longing for light. Longing for warmth. I just want to escape from this suffocating place.

I fall. I fall. Fall and fall. So deep, deep inside the white light. Is this abyss? A light abyss? There is no end to this tunnel I'm falling at. It feels like eternity. Someone is crying. At first, the cries are soft, and as I fall even deeper, the voices got louder and clearer. This voice is familiar. I know this person who is crying. I'm even more attracted now.

Then, my hand passes through a space. Everything is still pure white, but my fingers are nowhere to be seen. I can feel it, though. I'm touching, grasping…nothing.


As if I want to reach something. My hand keeps on wriggling on the other side. My body, up to my waist, slides in through the hole in the space. I hang in the air. Upside-down, looking down at someone below. He is crying. Sobbing. His shoulders are shuddering.

Kashuu. Kashuu Kiyomitsu is there. He is Kashuu. And he is crying. Crying. Sobbing. He looks frail. He is frail. He is in despair. So he cries. Cries and cries. I know. I know. It's painful to hear him crying. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I move my mouth. My lips part ways. I open my mouth. My voice isn't coming out. I can't speak. I can't reach him. My fingers wriggle. I'm trying to reach him. I can't reach him. I can't reach Kashuu.

Why? Why? Why can't I?

Kashuu, Kashuu, please don't cry. Please. I'm sorry. Why am I apologizing? I don't know. But I'm sorry. I'm sorry I can't help you. I'm sorry I'm a failure who can't help anyone. I'm sorry I can't save anyone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Right at that painful moment, Kashuu looks up and notices me. His red eyes and mouth snap wide open, surprised by my appearance.

"N-No…"

He mutters, shuddering even more. He clenches his hair hard, as if wanting to pull it and take it out of its roots.

"Don't…Don't look at me!!"

The white space shatters with no sound. The scenery changes to a room full of full-body mirrors. Mirrors used by dancers to practice.

And I fall. The space of sea that trapped me disappears. I'm free now. I'm free. I fall. Fall and fall. I'm falling to the ground. The ground is still white. I manage to land softly. Behind Kashuu. Kashuu, who is crying even more. Kashuu, who is holding his knees. Kashuu, who is hiding his face with his messy hair. Kashuu, who dyes himself in red.

The mirrors have red outlines. They reflect Kashuu. Kashuu's pitiful state. And me. Me, whose hair is white. White, instead of blond. Is it me? It is. It should be. I believe. I have to.
"Kashuu."

I can speak. I finally can speak! Yes, yes! I'm so happy. I can reach him now. I walk to him. Kashuu, Kashuu, Kashuu.

{ Come. Come to me. I want to save you. I want to. Save you. I want to save you. I'll do anything. Please, come to me. }

Kashuu doesn't move. He lifts his head. From the mirror, I can see - I can feel - maggots crawling out from his body. From his ears. From his nose. From his mouth. Bloody tears out of his eyes. I hear. I hear disgusting and scary sounds. The sounds of meat being eaten. Kashuu is being eaten. By the maggots. By his own self. He looks at the mirror. He sees his disappearing body. And then he screams. He wails. He crawls on the ground. From his lungs, he screams and screams. A terrifying wail.

{ Come. Come to me. Come to me, Kashuu. }

The maggots crawl all over his body. All over his body...until his body as a human being is unrecognized. Unrecognized in my eyes. Is he a human? A human covered in maggots? Alive, wriggling, even as he is being eaten? He is being eaten. His flesh is being eaten. And yet, and yet, he is still alive. He is alive and crying. Crying. Crying. He is crying so loudly. His voice fills the whole space. It echoes in my head. It keeps on echoing.

Flutter.

The flaps of wings reach my ears.


It's suffocating. I'm suffocating. It's painful. My nose doesn't feel too good. What is this stench I'm smelling? What is this disgusting stench? The answer is obvious. But. I don't want to think. I want to feign ignorance.

Because if I don't, I won't ever reach him.

I take a step. Two steps. Three steps. Four steps. Five steps. Six steps.

Seven steps. Some moths decide to perch on me. On my body. On my shoulders. And my arms. I ignore them. Ignore, ignore, ignore. Ignore everything. Even as their wings make buzzing sounds. Buzzing sounds that hurt my head and ears. I keep walking. I keep reaching. Even as my body is filled by moths.

For that short, yet long time, Kashuu doesn't stop crying. His voice is still clear, even in the midst of maggots that might have suffocated him. He is still crying. He is still wailing. So hard. He wants
someone to hear his pain. To ease his pain. To understand him.

How many steps have I taken? Ahh... he is so close now. Wait for me, wait for me. I'm coming for you. Even if you're barely recognized as a human right now... I don't care. I want to save you. I want to be there for you.

My hand reaches out. It reaches out. My fingers tremble as I reach him out with all of my might. Oh, finally -

Suddenly, the ground I'm standing at distorts. It distorts to a spiral and sucks everything outside. The moths are no more. It's so terrifying. So terrifying, I can't move. In the center of everything lies a gigantic tree, eating everything, coloring everything in red.

And he collapses. Kashuu falls. He falls to the deepest abyss before I can reach him.

Just a little. Just a little more. I can save him. And yet, and yet - he is falling to his death. I killed him. The roots underground have successfully taken him. Pulling him. Pulling him far away from me.

"No...Kashuu!!"

[ Buried under the ground might be his wish.

However, I don't want that. I never want that. He has to live. He has to. ]
I take a jump and follow after him. I follow him to the hole. To the abyss. Once again, inside this unknown underworld. Deep under the earth. Is this hell? I don't know. What is this, then? I don't know. I don't know. I don't understand. One thing I'm sure of; *I have to chase after Kiyomitsu no matter what. Even until the end of the earth. Even until…*

I crawl. I swim through the darkness. His figure is there, as if shining. I can't see his face. There is no need to. That person is certainly him. There is no doubt.

I swim. I crawl. My hands keep on trying to reach his body. His body that is falling even deeper.

I have to reach him no matter what. So, I keep swimming. I keep swimming until I can't see anything. Not his figure. Not the lights. Not the maggots. Not even my hand.

*I know, I know, I know, I know, he is there, right in front of me. Ah, he is there…! Just a little more…*

[SNAP]

"Kashuu -!"

I reach out to that light. To the blinding light I've been longing for. Waiting for the warmth I've always wanted.

However…what awaits me is not warmth. It's…

…Pure enmity and insanity…from both Kasyuu Kiyomitsu and jubokko. At that moment, my body goes numb and cold, shiver runs down my spine. My primal instincts are crying out - *I'm going to*
[2] Paritta (Pali) refers to the Buddhist practice of reciting certain verses and scriptures in order to ward off evil fortune/dangerous situations/just calm your mind.

[3] "Namu amida butsu" is nianfo, or nembutsu in Japanese. It generally refers to the repetition in the name of Amitabha. As Yamanbagiri is in Joudo Shinsuu, nianfo here serves as an expression of gratitude to the Amitabha.

*Yamabushi is a member of the Pure Land Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, in this story. I have no idea what Buddhist school his master was in, but as it was one of the most practiced Buddhism in Japan around the time Yamabushi with his master, so I chose it. There are branch schools of Pure Land Buddhism as well, but I chose Joudo Shinsuu for them. For your information, the primary text Joudo Shinsuu uses is Muryouju-kyou (Infinite Life Sutra). Both Yamanbagiri and Horikawa only follow it as well thanks to him.

*Kousetsu and his family are going to be in Zen Buddhism instead.
I'm scared. I'm terrified. I'm terribly terrified. My body can't stop shaking and sweating. Kashuu is in front of me, and *jubokko* is right behind me. I'm trapped between them - two creatures who seek my death. Their aura - their enmity is enough to make me kneel down in fear like a hopeless prey about to be eaten, has given up on its fate to die.

My mind is running wild, thinking about all the possibilities of my loss and death. This won't end beautifully, I'm sure of it. There is no way to escape - unharmed, at the very least. I don't want to die like a hopeless prey!

Suddenly, Kashuu rushes to me with a speed my eyes can't catch. When I can move slightly backwards, his right knee is already raised high, targeting my chin, but I manage to evade him just in time. He moves his leg downwards and his foot jabs on my left thigh with an inhuman strength that I scream. I can almost hear my bones cracking. I jump backwards before he can completely crush my thigh.

"U…ugh…" I groan as I clutch my pained thigh. Why…? Why are you doing this, Kashuu…? Well, the answer is obvious - he has fallen. He has become a jiangshi. But why…? Did I…fail…? Or is everything just my nonsense?

But…I feel *something* overflowing inside me…an energy that isn't mine, yet.

There's no time to rest. Kashuu slams his leg against me, successfully hitting my chin. I fall backwards, completely powerless to attack back as he bends over me and punches my stomach, his fist is digging deep and twisting my stomach. *It hurts, it hurts, it hurts* - !

I can only cough up blood and it seems that's what he wants.

Before he can grab me and do whatever he wants, though, I slap him with my hand and push him away to a fair distance with my foot. I'm surprised by how much power I put there, but anyway, sorry, Kashuu, I must not lose so easily. I stand up wobbly, my left thigh is aching greatly, but I have to go when I can.

*Something* grabs my foot. Ah. I forgot *jubokko* is still there…*shit*.

*Jubokko*’s roots grab my legs and pull me to its place. *This again*. I'm being dragged in a high speed. I move my legs, trying to break free, but it’s all pointless. If only I have something sharp, like a knife…I might be able to cut these roots…ugh!

When I'm finally right in front of it, its movements stop. I guess it isn't going to kill me…? Then, I see Kashuu slowly stands, some blood on his clothes. Oh…don't tell me *jubokko* is restraining me so that Kashuu can have me.

I try to break free to no avail. Kashuu is running to me, his nails and jaws are ready to dig me in. I close my eyes and cover my head instinctively in fear.

The pain never comes, though.
When I open my eyes, what I see isn't my demise or afterlife, but a dog. I can see a fluffy-looking, medium-sized dog bites Kashuu's arm, stopping his tracks.

"Yo…Yoshiyuki…?"

There's no mistaking it. That fur…is undoubtedly Yoshiyuki's.

The dog - I mean, Yoshiyuki in his dog form easily throws Kashuu away. He immediately bites down the roots that are holding me. He furiously defends me from the roots that are coming back when I'm recovering and stand up.

Both of us run for our lives.

"Yamanbagiri! Ya okay?!" Yoshiyuki asks as he runs. Ah…he is really Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki. The one I know. My best friend. Even in the middle of a death match, I feel myself relaxing when I hear his voice. I'm not used to his dog form, so I feel a bit weird…yeah, Yoshiyuki can see oddities precisely because he is one. He is a descendant of inugami. He is half-human half-oddity.

Long story short, we just found this out two years ago.

"Mm, yeah, kind of. Thanks!"

Just when I let down my guard a bit, a root passes by and slices a little of my cheek. God. Jubokko is dead serious. Kashuu is probably chasing us, too. I'm too scared to look back.

Yoshiyuki groans, "Go hide in that building, Yamanbagiri! I called for backup, so just wait!"

"What about you?!"

"I will hold them back! Just go!!"

He is planning to - ?! "No! You have no chance to last for even five minutes against them, Yoshiyuki!"

"That's too cruel…have more faith in me!"

He even has the nerves to say that in a joking manner?! Just then, I sense chill on my back and instinctively jump sideways, evading - Kashuu, who has just thrown himself and separated me from Yoshiyuki. He takes a turn to run after me.

"Go, Yamanbagiri!" Yoshiyuki shouts before he bites Kashuu's arm again. That bite must be deep, as blood is gushing out like hell, but Kashuu seems unfazed as he throws Yoshiyuki away easily. He recovers from that throw quickly and runs for another attack. He regenerates quickly in that form, after all.

I feel bad, but I can do nothing but run. I have to trust Yoshiyuki and search for help.

At least, that's what I should do. My mind screams that it is the best solution. However, my body pays it no mind. I run to Yoshiyuki instead, trying to block any roots that come after him.

"Idiot! Go run for yer life, I said!" Yoshiyuki screams, not even restraining his words.

"No! I can't let you fight alone!"

"What can ya do?!"

He states the truth. The very fact that I'm powerless. But…
"I…" I take a deep breath. "…I can be a decoy, at least!"

Kashuu might already be wounded and it is unavoidable as he harms others, but my selfish desire wants no fatal injuries in both sides, even the antagonist. Kashuu, is, after all, still a friend. Or a classmate at least. I believe he is still human. If he isn't, he won't go easy on me like this. He won't give me the chance to save him. He would have killed me long ago, before Yoshiyuki came to help.

How do I know he is going easy on me? Well, that's…an instinct. My instincts are usually on the mark, so I'll believe it. It's for the best.

And…even if I don't know him too well, I think he is desperately seeking for people to help him. To save him. To pull him out of a lonely darkness. I was in his shoes before. I can feel his loneliness and desperation. That's why, I have to reach him no matter what. I failed once, but I won't let his hand slip this time.

"Being a decoy when ya - ?!"

"I have regeneration powers, too. Just, please, trust me. We're in this together!"

I don't wait for his reply as I run forward, acting all brave and tough. I know Kashuu is after me, so it will be easier if I come to him instead.

In fact, even as an oddity with seemingly no humanity, Kashuu looks horribly taken aback. A prey coming after its predator? Yeah, I admit it is crazy. I have no real plans, either. I'm gambling on my fate and his. If I can somehow use this overflowing energy…if I can weaken him with this…if I can do it again…

Kashuu snaps back and wastes no chance to come meet me.

Even though he has that intimidating, dark and suffocating aura all over him - that basically shows his raw bloodlust - I reach out to him. My hand tremble, afraid if he will reject me and I'll lose my life as the result. I can't step back now. I can only move forward and -

- I embrace his warm body and in an instant, a connection appears between us.

As if I'm in the middle of a sudden explosion, I'm being sucked into somewhere I don't know…

[d e r t h i w e n O]  

"Ah…it's so easy, isn't it? To become one and claim…he won't realize this, but he managed to do it very well. Of course, I'll be doing the dirty job for him. He is me, after all."

He says to no one in particular.

The two of us sit across each other in a room painted with heavy red that makes me feel dizzy. My legs and hands are chained to the chair, while he is completely free, and looks at me with eyes I've never seen before. I feel a bit intimidated, honestly.

"Didn't I tell you? I'll share your burden if it's too heavy for you."

Is he going to lecture me or something? Well, I did betray his wishes…

"I don't want to make you feel…my pain."

He seems to be taking a deep breath. "You…did it already. You've inflicted pain to me. Does it even matter now? Don't you realize that the more you try to hold the burden that is too heavy for you will
only bring pain and misery to everyone around you and your own self?"

"That's - !"

But he is completely right. I can't refute him.

"B-But…still…I can't…I can't share it to you."

I can't make him understand that I'm doing this because I love him. Now that I've come back to my senses, I realize how much of my dark desire to have him have caused him problems and pain. Loving someone so much that you want to pull him into abyss with you…what kind of love is that?!

I'm not angry at him. I love him, after all. I'm angry at myself. At my own self, burned by jealousy and self-hatred…seeking fake happiness. I just want him to love me back so much, to show affection to me…but that won't be realized now, will it?

I know that, and yet I did terrible things to him.

That's why, I want to keep this all by myself - a sign for my sins. And I'll redeem by burdening it.

"I'll keep this burden with me even if it kills me. I want you to be happy. You don't deserve this pain…only I do."

"I don't care about my own self, you hear me? As long as you're happy, I'm happy as well…even if I'm wrecked all over."

Ah.

I should've known it…his nature is…

I almost stand up from my chair if only I'm not chained. "You can't! You must not do that! There is no point if you're the one suffering!"

Despite my desperate screaming, he looks unfazed as he stares at me with cold eyes and says;

"I'm sorry. I don't want to do this, but you've given me no choice…I'll forcefully take it out of you."

"Take out wha-"

Just as he raises his hand, I feel something inside my chest bursts. That something explodes inside of me. It's so painful that I can't see and speak clearly.

I hear his footsteps getting nearer and nearer. A white hand slips and -

- He thrusts his hand inside of my chest. There is no blood or anything, but it's so painful - and it feels weird - as if he is messing around my insides - and I feel like losing something very important.

Unable to withstand the pain, my eyes shut tightly, even though I don't want to.

"Good, good…if only everything goes smoothly like this…"

His hand leaves me. I can feel that. I can feel a hole in my chest after he leaves me, but even that hole slowly disappears - no…the hole is being filled quickly.

But I still can't see anything. And I still feel that something is missing.
My eyes are closed and I only see darkness.

"What…happened…?"

"Don't worry," his voice is so gentle, and yet I feel so terribly scared, "With this…you can turn back being a normal human."

"What…do you mean? Who are you?"

Even though I can't see him, somehow, I think that he smiles when he hears my question. He places his hand on my head and gently strokes me.

"Good night, Kashuu. Sweet dreams. When you wake up, you won't remember your sins to me. Isn't that great?"

[Collapse]

What…just happened?

For a moment, my mind went completely blank, as if there was a shocking explosion, and when I know it, Kashuu collapses on my embrace.

I sit on the ground, completely dumbfounded.

There is no explosion…but then, what was that? And why is Kashuu -

"Yamanbagiri!"

I hear Yoshiyuki screams and the ground shakes, as though an earthquake strikes. I should move, but my legs seem to run out of energy. Yoshiyuki scrambles to his human form, runs and holds me to protect me from whatever is coming. As the ground shakes harder and harder, a white colored being slowly stands up.

"G-Gashadokuro…" He groans as he hugs me even tighter, pushing my head to his chest. I don't resist and look absent-mindedly at the sky.

I thought that it was defeated…but it's standing so powerfully right now. It is clear that the both of us have no chance of escaping, let alone winning.

Even in such a life threatening situation, listening to his heartbeat calms me down. As seconds passed, though, his heartbeat goes faster and faster in panic and his arms are trembling. His face looks completely serious. He grits his teeth in frustration, but he seems eager to fight back, even though he knows he has no chance, especially with his injuries. His clothes are ripped all over, colors of red there and there - when he is in human form, his regeneration decreases significantly.

Gashadokuro is rising. It's standing so mighty and looks down at us.

Anyone will get scared, of course.

"…Yoshiyuki…"

He snaps and turns to look at me and says, "I-It will be fine! I…I will protect ya until help comes." He seems certain that help is going to come, but…

"That's not what I mean. I'm not worried about that - I'm worried about you."
I just spout what I'm feeling without thinking about it clearly. These words are probably the last thing Yoshiyuki wants to hear as his face immediately twists uncomfortably. He bites his lip so hard I thought he will bled and stay silent, gripping my shoulder tightly, trying to wrap me in safety.

The ground shakes harder and harder. The *gashadokuro* is walking, closer and closer to our position. Instinctively, I hold the unconscious Kashuu closer and tighter. We're bracing for whatever is coming for us. Yoshiyuki pushes my head to be buried on his chest, preventing me from seeing anything, to my dismay. I can even hardly breathe. I can't really fight back, though, and let time passes on.

Seconds feel like eternity as a very dangerous oddity approaches us.

We even forget about that *jubokko*, don't we? I wonder what will happen to it…

And then, sounds of clashing.

Curious, I somehow manage to turn my head slightly and take a peek with an eye.

Help…really came.

Far away, too-familiar shadows of people in the air come into view. They clash against *gashadokuro* that tries to catch them. I see sparks of a long, fluffy and pure white hair…and someone with elegant and trained movements…moonlight slowly uncovers these black shadows into colors - into the shapes of people I know.

None other than Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki.

My face heats up for no reason at all. My lips feel like they can form a smile if I don't hold myself back. I can't express my joy on seeing the two of them.

"Kunihiro-san! Mutsunokami-san!"

Kousetsu-senpai hurriedly runs to us.

"Ah…I'm glad the two of you are fine…" He says as he takes a deep breath, obviously tired from all the running. Not in the school, he doesn't wear glasses. He takes a glance at Kashuu I'm still holding tightly. "How is Kiyomitsu-san?"

"He is fine…probably…I hope so. He is just unconscious now, but he's alive," I reply. I don't know what caused Kashuu to fell, but he doesn't emit enmity anymore. All that ends well ends well. When I observe, his skin color, once so pale, now has colors of life. He is sleeping peacefully like a normal human -

Kousetsu-senpai crouches down and gently pats Kashuu's hair, also checking if he is alive and well. He seems relieved. He stands up again and helps the two of us to stand up before he carries Kashuu on his back. "Let's move from here. Now, this isn't our field to interfere."

Behind him, I can see two familiar specialists, far older and more experienced that Kousetsu-senpai himself - also my brother's friend - Ishikirimaru-san and Taroutachi-san. It's the two of them now, huh…

I just exchange nods with them and walk away with Kousetsu-senpai.

A gush of wind passes us. I have a bad feeling that it's *jubokko* attacking, and when I turn around, my guess is correct - it was attacking, but Ishikirimaru-san cuts the roots that came after us in a single hand movement.
"Looks like there is another enemy," he says as he observes the tree. "Do you have any idea of what it is?"

"Jubokko, we believe," Yoshiyuki replies. "It might be the one that infected Kashuu…"

"It definitely smells like blood," Taroutachi-san steps in, "Regardless of how it came to existence, we have to defeat it when we can. Kousetsu, please protect the three of them. We'll handle this."

Kousetsu-senpai nods and urges us to move into the building. It's frustrating that we can't help with anything, but because of that, we must not get into their way.

We move to the very far side of the building. Kousetsu-senpai takes out a first-aid bag and starts to take care of our injuries. He starts with Kashuu's first.

"Did you cause this injury, Mutsunokami-san?" He asks as he slowly lifts Kashuu's bloody arm. It's obvious that something bite it very hard, and here, only Yoshiyuki is capable of doing it.

"Errh…yeah."

"Hmm…it looks like it's slowly healing."

True, when I look closely, his injury isn't as bad as it was, and he has stopped bleeding even without Kousetsu-senpai's help. Kousetsu-senpai quietly continues to treat Kashuu, wrapping bandages and stuffs. His face tells me that he wants to know what actually happened, but he decides that asking now will be bad. Thank you for being considerate, senpai…not that I truly know what happened, either, but I need to take a rest after all of this.

After that, he treats Yoshiyuki, and then me.

I don't really have any visible and deep injuries like Yoshiyuki and Kashuu, but since Kashuu punched my stomach, I'm still feeling a bit dizzy. I have a few small scratches and that's it. Not so life-threatening. And my clothes are totally messed up now. Patch of dirt and some blood there and there…and to think that I'm wearing this for two days…

After Kousetsu-senpai puts adhesive bandages on my scratches, he asks, "Do you feel any pain on other places?"

"I'm just feeling a bit dizzy…that's all."

He mumbles to himself and suddenly puts his palm on my forehead, checking my temperature by comparing it to his. "You seem feverish and your temperature seems higher…you might've caught a cold."

"Well, I think I was exposed to cold air since yesterday, so it's expected," I just sigh.

Kousetsu-senpai takes a medicine pill and a bottle of mineral water. "Please drink it, just in case. Wait…perhaps it's better if you eat something first…"

"It's fine, I had dinner. Thank you." I take them and drink the medicine pill immediately. I hope I'll feel better…well, the cold water is certainly refreshing.

"Can I have some?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"Yeah." I give him the bottle. He gulps down the water as though he is thirsty beyond measure.

When looking at him like that and recalling the events that just happened, I just realize how lucky we
are to survive. Things haven't ended yet, but we're already in the safe zone. We're protected now - we don't have to fight a battle we're sure to lose anymore. And that...makes me so relieved.

I'm so relieved to see him alive. Not so well, but alive and kicking.

When I notice that Kousetsu-senpai takes a distance as he looks around and set up barriers - the sounds of battle from outside is too clear inside, he might be worried - I decide to start a conversation with Yoshiyuki.

"Thank you, Yoshiyuki...I don't know what would happen if you didn't show up back then." You have saved me countless times, if I bother to add. But that won't please him.

Yoshiyuki glances at me and smiles weakly. "No problem. Really, I almost caught a heart attack when I woke up and didn't see ya anywhere...and there's a bagua stuck on the door. That got me worried!"

"How did you know that I'm in this place?"

"This is where I found ya, so..." He shrugs. "My feet took me here, and I'm glad it's the right choice."

What did I tell you before? His instincts are pretty scary. He is pretty scary...but because of that, I was saved so many times. It's something I'm very grateful for.

"But, ya know..." He continues, and all of sudden, his face goes dark. "I never agree for ya to act alone like that."

...Here is it. No amount apologizing can do now. In fact, apologizing will just make everything worse.

"How many times have I said it? Don't risk your life alone like that. Especially for nothing. Ya agreed to let me help, and yet...ya left me...and tried to act alone, almost dying again," he says with clear anger, but his voice is quite low that Kousetsu-senpai might not hear it in the midst of clashing sounds. He stares at me as he clutches his chest. His face looks equally as painful as his voice sounds like. "Ya didn't let me help! Even though ya said ya will! And ya risked your life again! Why...? Why do ya keep doing it, ignoring my feelings?!

I shudder at the intensity of his voice. I can only stare at him, completely dumbfounded.

"Ya are...so precious to me! So...so...why don't ya let me help since the start?! Why don't ya ever depend on me before things turn worse?! Why do ya keep acting alone and face danger head-first...why...why don't ya let me protect ya even a bit..."

I let him sob on my chest for a while before I reply. Is this the right decision? I have no idea, but I'll say it. "...Yoshiyuki. You're precious to me, too. That's why, just like you don't want to see me in danger, I don't want to see you in danger, either...especially if I caused it. Just like back then...I
started this mess, I actually don't want you to get involved."

Yoshiyuki grits his teeth, so hard that it's audible. He clutches my jacket even more tightly, pulling me even closer. "I know…I understand that our feelings are mutual, and I'm honestly happy, but…"

He lifts his face and his eyes lock with mine, "…We can't keep doing this. For one to sacrifice himself for the other is wrong."

He is completely on the mark. But… "Even so, what else can we do?"

Our mutual feelings prevent us from actually helping each other in the healthiest way. I can't give up on mine so easily, and there's no way he will give up easily, either. We're both hard-headed, even to each other.

"Yoshiyuki, if…if there's anything we can do about this - if a solution exists - we would have done it since long ago."

In conclusion, the solution doesn't exist. At least for us with our current circumstances.

"You said that I haven't depended on you, but that's wrong. You've saved me countless times, even when you don't realize it, so…I don't think I deserve more from you. You've given me too much - so much I can't repay. Even though you don't want it, I want to give something to you…but I'm incapable of even doing so. So…"

I close my eyes, unable to look at him even for a second. It's painful to see him…and it's so painful to say this…but…

"I don't deserve your help."

That's my sincerest feelings.

I said it…these forbidden words…aaah, at the end, I broke everything with my own hands.

Yoshiyuki sinks into silence as he wipes away his tears. I turn my gaze to somewhere else when he speaks.

"…I see…so that's how it is…from your eyes."

I try to not flinch when he slowly lifts his head and stare at me.

"I managed…to become your hero. But even so…as long as I see ya suffering, it has no meaning. It has no meaning at all. If I can't protect you at everything, I…won't be satisfied. I won't be happy. Yes, that's so selfish, isn't it…I know…I'm an idiot, that's why…"

Tears are still dripping from his eyes, wetting his cheeks. He takes a deep breath before continuing.

"I…I don't care about how much I've given to ya. I…I'm willing to give ya everything, even if ya return nothing!"

He pulls my collar - and - our lips meet in a kiss. A clumsy kiss, where our lips and teeth hit each other in full force. He pulls away as I turn into a stiff rock, completely frozen.

Yoshiyuki opens his mouth once again.

"I'm in love with ya, Yamanbagiri…since long ago! And that's why…! I want to protect ya! To be someone ya depend on…!"
These words of confession are the last thing I want to hear from him.

Chapter End Notes

*Changed the summary and added a summary for each arc - in chapter 1 of each arc (which is from the main focus character's point of view, in this case, Kashuu's). I like this one better now. You can imagine what is going to come...
*Minor fixes for previous chapters.
*Kashuu's arc is going to end with the next part. It's obvious to who we'll move on, isn't it? Yes, Kashuu's arc has no resolution for his own romantic feelings - it's just the beginning for him to accept that fact.
*Edit: I forgot to center the [ ] transition...I'm sorry...
When I got home, I take off my jacket and immediately collapsed in my bed, face-first. I'm feeling so dizzy... it feels really cold... I'm so tired... I just want to sleep.

But even so, I recall what happened.

"I... I'm waiting for your answer. Anytime."

"I know ya have those two already, but... I'm not giving up."

"Just to let ya know... I... I will stay as your friend even if ya reject me."

Yoshiyuki's sobbing voice resounds in my head - along with his teary eyes.

After Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru defeated *gashadokuro* and the two specialists defeated *jubokko*, we went home safely, and the unconscious Kashuu was taken to Ishikirimaru-san's place. He is going to be treated there.

Taroutachi-san drove us home with his car, and honestly, *it was the worst and wildest ride I've ever experienced*. Taroutachi-san is always so wild when driving, and though not as much as his brother, bad is still bad.

And of course, Yoshiyuki and I were being awkward with each other. He was still smiling as gentle as usual, but it's obvious that he had suddenly kept a distance from me until we got home. He was giving me the space to think deeply and carefully about my answer, saying that *his feelings for me are real* and he wouldn't let me go on without giving him an answer. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru gave me weird looks, questioning what happened, so I explained in my head - recalling his confession.

They just gave me a weary smile and pat my head. I'm planning to talk more about it to them, but....

"Brother."

Brother Horikawa's voice comes in as he opens the door. I roll and find him holding a basket with a towel.

"Here, let me take your temperature. You've drank medicine, haven't you? Then, after you change clothes, you can take a rest."

"Mmm." Kogi and Mikazuki must have informed him. They've probably explained what happened, too, so my brother doesn't ask. They're not in my room, though... Kogi's probably doing housework, but what about Mikazuki? Making tea, maybe... oh well... I let Brother measure my temperature.

"Yep, you definitely got a fever."

"I see...."

Brother Horikawa smiles as he puts the basket next to me, and then he takes out my clothes from the cupboard.

"Here, let me take off your clothes. Then, I'll wipe your body. You didn't take a bath for a day and..."
"you won't for a few days, but it can't be helped."

"I can take them off by myself…." It's embarrassing, Brother… seriously….

He chuckles. "Alright, then."

I proceed to take off my shirt, though slowly as my body is getting heavier and heavier by each passing minute. After that, Brother wipes my body with a towel that is wet with hot water, starting with my back, then my arms. In daze, I speak to him.

"Brother…"

"Hmm?"

"Are you annoyed that I… keep doing this…? Just like brother Yamabushi…."

His movements stop abruptly.

To have two brothers who tend to disappear to get involved with dangerous things doesn't feel good, of course. He would be left alone here, in this house, because he doesn't have the power and knowledge to do what we do. That is for the best. Brother Yamabushi didn't want to see me, who can see oddities since the start, to get involved with them, let alone Brother Horikawa who didn't know of their existence years ago.

But since I would go back to that world, Brother Yamabushi had no choice but to accept me and teach me the ways to keep me safe. If Brother Horikawa forced his way, he might be able to… but I don't think he would do it.

"Well… your actions worry me sometimes, especially when I can't get in contact with you. To do it or not is your choice, though, so I respect your decision," he says as he continues to wipe my body, "I can only pray that everything goes well for you and I'll be waiting in our home to greet you."

"You aren't… angry…?"

"There's no reason for me to be. Besides, Yoshiyuki had lectured, you, right? And I'm sure Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru have warned you many times. And that's enough."

Even though I can't see his face, I somehow can tell that he is smiling, gently, like he always does.

"Thank you, Brother… and I'm so - ack?!

"Nope," he cuts me off with a hard slap on my back, surprising me. "Don't apologize. You did nothing wrong."

"But…"

"No buts, either!" He slaps my back again. But of course, it isn't painful. It feels like a massage instead - and it actually feels pretty nice… my body is so worn out that I need a massage. "You might always worry me, but that isn't a wrong thing. It's a very humanly thing - to have someone act dangerously and to have someone else worrying about that person. That's what we get from having relationships, and it isn't such a bad thing."

"I see… thank you, Brother."

"You're welcome. I'll always wait… that's why, stay alive despite everything, okay?"
"Yeah. I'll try my best."

I can't promise him anything - and it would surely more painful to have promises in case I couldn't fulfill them.

…Promises, huh.

When I think about the word, Yoshiyuki's face flashes before my eyes. I guess I will think of him every now and then and it is unavoidable… how embarrassing. His confession bothers me so much… because it broke our friendship. Because… Yoshiyuki wanted more.

I feel gloomy when I think about him. I don't know… I don't know what I should do. I don't want to completely break off my relationship with him, but it will surely break into nothing if I reject him. But if I do accept him… it'll hurt him if I don't love him back. Either choice will surely hurt the both of us.

How… do I feel about Yoshiyuki, exactly? I think of him as my best friend, my hero, but… what if… what if it is actually…

"Brother?"

I snap back into reality by brother Horikawa's call.

"What's wrong?" He looks at me worriedly, having finished wiping my body.

"Nothing… I'm feeling dizzy, that's all."

He just nods as he gives me a new set of clothes and puts away the basket with towel. I change my clothes and crawl back into the warm blanket.

"Good night, Brother. Rest well. I've told the school, don't worry," Brother Horikawa says with a smile and a gentle pat on my head. I nod. He goes out with the basket, and as if replacing him, Mikazuki comes in with a tray with two cups of tea.

"Oh? Are you going to sleep?"

"Yeah….."

"Hmmm. Even though I've made this tea for you…." He sulks.

"You never get tired of tea, don't you? That part of you is similar to Uguisumaru-senpai…," I get up reluctantly. "It's okay. I'll drink it before I sleep. Come here."

"I don't want to be similar to that person, thank you very much." He approaches me and sits next to me.

"Too late." I take a cup from the tray he offers to me and drink it. The warmth of the tea, colliding with the heat of my body and the coldness of night air… makes me sigh for some reason. It feels quite nice, but… as always, even the simplest actions remind me of…

"Yoshiyuki, isn't it. The two of you have done many things together, so it is a given," Mikazuki reads my mind. "I expect him to have feelings for you, but… to think he'll confess like that in that situation…"

"You already know that he has feelings for me?"
He shrugs with an annoying smile. "I thought he is as oblivious as you, that he doesn't realize his own feelings - but looking at your recollection, I think my guess is wrong. You must have realized this, but… Yoshiyuki had seriously and carefully thought of his own feelings and had had conflicts for a long time, until he came to the conclusion that he really, truly, and genuinely, loves you."

"…Yeah."

"I have no idea how he feels when he watches us being lovey-dovey, but at the very least, I think he is willing to enter your open relationship… that's why he confessed. He took the risk of breaking your relationship forever by confessing. He… he isn't a coward. He is brave enough to accept the consequences of his actions. So, Yamanbagiri…," Mikazuki turns and look at me with serious eyes, "…You have to seriously and carefully think of your answer. Whatever your answer is… it is for the best."

"Even if… my answer will hurt him and myself?"

"There is an answer that won't hurt anyone," he says with a smile. "Really, there is one, and I believe that is what you will choose at the end."

"What… is it…? I don't even know how I actually feel towards Yoshiyuki….

"I know how you feel, but I won't tell you. It's something you have to realize by your own. It isn't something for others to decide." He pats my head and ruffles my hair. "Your fever and dizziness might affect your answer, so you'd better rest for now and get well soon, okay? Don't think about complicated things yet until your mind is clear."

I agree… "Mmm." I finish the tea and slip back into my blanket. "Thank you, Mikazuki. I'm sorry for worrying you all the time…"

"It's fine. I believe that you will survive. As long as we believe, you will, certainly, survive. That's all matters."

He is speaking in riddles… or whatever… being so vague like usual. He is even harder to comprehend when I'm feeling dizzy like this….

"If there's anyone crying when worrying about you, it's Yoshiyuki. Kogitsunemaru panicked, but Yoshiyuki was even worse… because you were being taken away in front of his eyes and he was powerless to stop it."

"Ah… I can imagine."

I want to apologize and thank him, but I can't do so until I answer his confession… really, what situation is this….

"I actually came to touch you, but we can do it when you're feeling well. Or perhaps… you want me right now? I don't mind," he sends me a disgusting wink.

"You're the worst." If I can slap him like a tsukkomi, I would have done so. "But… sleep next to me, okay? And embrace me… and don't leave me alone…"

T-T-That's an embarrassing thing to say! My dizzy head has really affected my decisions… but… I don't mind this….

I see Mikazuki's cheeks flush red as he smiles like a child. "Of course! I'll always stay by your side."
I like that smile the most, rather than his lustful one or his teasing one, really. You being innocent is the best, Mikazuki.

"If I'm being completely pure and innocent, it's probably the end of the world, Yamanbagiri. I don't want that."

I chuckle and hold his hand. "You're right. Oh… where is Kogitsunemaru?"

"He is doing housework for now. Don't worry, when you wake up, he'll be there. So… good night, Yamanbagiri. Sweet dreams."

He pats my head as I close my eyes and fall into deep slumber.

[Blackout]

[Fade into black]

When I open my eyes, I'm inside a watery space… an aquarium I created myself. Yes… it's the usual aquarium. My subconscious mind. Inside a lucid dream.

Unexpectedly, the view isn't as deserted as before - sure, a blue whale is swimming as usual, the coldness and blue of the space is still the same, the portraits and chains stay still - what's different is that he is already waiting for me. He sits across me with a table with plates and cups dividing us. Looking around the space, he blows a bubble-blower, moving the whale and creating a group of colorful koi fishes all around us. As if the deserted place is gone, I feel no loneliness in the colors.

I just stare at him in silence before he finishes playing with the fishes and turns to look at me.

"Hello again, Yamanbagiri." He greets me and chuckle when he sees my face. "You look like you remember something."

"Remember about your existence? Yeah. Always." I say grumpily as I take a cup of tea - which is, surprisingly, already filled - and drink it. The tea is hot and sweet… jasmine tea? My throat feels better, but when I think about it, I don't think the cold that I had caught outside caught me here as well. "Anyway, it's unusual for you to prepare anything and appear before I call you out."

He narrows his eyes and observes me closely. "You seem to be in a bad mood today, so I'm being nice. And why… are you in a bad mood? Yoshiyuki?"

"Of course… who would have expected that he would… confess…" I can't help but to let out a heavy sigh. W-Well, I guess Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru had some ideas, but he chose to confess at that moment - nobody can expect that. "I don't want our relationship to end in that note."
He takes a cup and elegantly drinks it, before saying, "Accept him, then. It's easy."

"It's not. If I just deceive him, he'll surely pick it up... and it'll hurt him even more. Of course I can't do that," I ruffled my bangs a bit in frustration, "And don't you know that I hate such lies? Oh, I'm sure you know. Don't act stupid now."

He ignores my last remarks. "Humans are such complex beings. The point of having romantic relationship is to have mutual feelings of love towards each other, and desire to have both heart and body, am I right?"

"Maybe." I shrug as I take a cookie from the plate and eat it. It's sweet... He took what I said before seriously, huh. "Anyway, that's not important. Let's talk about... that power."

"Mmm? Oh, yes, you succeeded on using it to take half of Kashuu Kiyomitsu's curse. Congratulations." he claps his hands and smiles, but instead being congratulated, I feel like I'm being somehow mocked instead.

"It looks like the conscious me doesn't know, though... why am I the one who acts in that weird world, like how I'm here? And before that... it does confirm my suspicion that we're - the conscious and the unconscious - are somehow different from each other, right?"

"It's obvious why. This is Yamanbagiri's subconsciousness, and you're here, as Yamanbagiri, but not when you're conscious. Of course, you aren't the conscious one. You're the unconscious one that lies deep in subconsciousness. And so, if you're to arrive at someone else's subconscious mind...?"

"...I appear instead...?"

Then, that dark space was Kashuu's subconsciousness? Or was it... the red one, where he fell...? Both felt surreal and dreamy, so I'm not sure....

He seems to read my mind and replies quickly, "Both spaces can be in Kashuu's mind - just in different levels. Well, you don't have to worry about that power for now."

"Of course I have to!" I almost slam the table, but then I remember there are plates of sweets and cups of tea that I can't waste, even in a dream world. "What is that power? Why do I have it...? You know why, don't you?"

He smiles as he takes a sip on his tea. "I might or might not know. At the very least, that power helps you to reach your goal. Simply put, it is a tool to help you. Does why you have that power matter? Do you ever ask why a specific tool exists?"

"W-Well... I did question things about guns, but..."

"Then, let's pick a simple example - you use hairbrush, don't you? Even though you can use your fingers to brush your hair, hairbrush exists in this world. Have you ever thought why does hairbrush exist? No, right?" He chuckles as if I asked a super childish and idiotic question. And it bothers me.

"The level of importance and significance of hairbrush and a mysterious power is different. Hairbrush doesn't harm anyone, no matter how you use it - and even if it doesn't exist, things won't be so different. This power is different. If you have to pick an example, it has to be guns, after all," I retort, "Guns can harm others if used wrongly and history might change if they didn't exist. The same goes for this power... I think."

"Hmm... good argument. My mistake," he waves a hand as he seemingly ponders, "It is true that guns, when used by people with evil intentions, can harm others. History might be different if guns
didn't exist - wars might not be so aggressive. Guns are important tools for humans. However, normally, people won't ask *why guns exist*. They'll simply use them for their own purposes… don't you agree?"

"You… have a point. But even so, some people *did* ask that question. *Normal* doesn't mean I *absolutely* can't question the reason of its existence… just like existential crisis. So… mind answering me?"

He drinks his tea, and then puts the cup down and looks upwards at the ceiling for some time, as if wondering deeply. His face doesn't seem different for me - it's his usual creepily amused face - but even so, I can see a hint of unease in his eyes.

"Well… this is troubling. You're pretty good at making arguments - or perhaps I'm just bad," he admits at the end, "No matter how much you push me, though, I have no obligation to answer."

"It comes down to that after all, huh… well, I can do nothing if you decided that," I sigh as I drink my tea to calm myself down. I got… a bit too heated there. It's obvious he won't answer me even if I cornered him so badly with logic, so… aaaah. Is my mind pretty jumbled because of the cold I caught in real world? Let's not think about that. "Okay, moving on. What do you mean by curse?"

"Misfortune."

"Misfortune…?"

"Negative feelings and real curse, you can say," he nibbles on a cookie before continuing, "At first, you took half of Kashuu's negative feelings - or negative emotions, up to you how to call it - and afterwards, you took half of his infection - the virus, as if curing him. That *jiangshi* virus is basically a curse, too, so you can take it."

"Curses… so it might be similar to my *unluckiness*? That curse is akin to a knot, or if layered curses, akin to a complex web of threads… threads being threads, I can untie them and take them… in this case, I untied half of Kashuu's curse?"

"You can say so."

"I think I understand…," I mumble after some time. "…But where do I put that curse I've taken?"

There is a mysterious pause before he replies, "…Well, who knows?"

He obviously knows, but he refuses to answer. There's nothing I can do, then. I'll just end this tea and cookies quickly and leave - I mean, wake up.

"Now, then, let's talk about the most important thing -"

I instantly know what he is talking about and can't help but to cut him off before he continues. "Yoshiyuki's confession? Like I said, that's not import-"

"Oh, *it is*. At the very least, you believe it is. Your mind wouldn't be so jumbled if his confession didn't happen."

"Ugh…" He is completely on the mark. "But it isn't something for you to meddle in, at least."

"Yes, it is your personal problem. I don't want to meddle in this one. Like Mikazuki said, you have to realize your own feelings and answer. It is up to you to decide, nobody else. However…" He taps on the edges of his empty cup, "You can sort your thoughts by telling me… the beginning, if you
"The beginning…? Of what?"

"Yoshiyuki is an inugami… but when and how did he and you found out?"

Oh… "When and how, huh… it's a story of the past, then. But what about it?"

"If you recollect your past… you might realize something from Yoshiyuki's past actions, how he feels, and how you’ve felt all along."

"…Really?" I feel doubtful.

"Who knows?" He replies honestly, "Well, you can say that I'm curious. The readers have the right to know, too, so please, let us know your past."

"Mmm, there's no harm, so I guess it's fine if I tell you."

I don't know where to start the story, though. Where is the starting point? Is it the beginning of everything? In that case, I would have pulled back even further from when we were in elementary school - from the moment we met. But I think that is irrelevant to the story on how Yoshiyuki awakens as an inugami.

I'll start from here, then. "Two years ago… in our summer break as third years in middle school."

Oh, it might be Yoshiyuki’s story, but it is also mine - as I met two oddities who would become my lovers. Thinking back on it, look how far our relationship has gotten….
Yamanbagiri: "This is what all of you have been waiting for, isn't it? Say it. Say it."

Mikazuki: "This extra chapter marks the end of the first arc."

Yoshiyuki: "Phew. Finally! That was a long, one year arc... really, I wonder what has happened for it to take that long."

Kogitsunemaru: "I'm glad this arc is finished and all, but... why didn't I say anything at the end?! I can't accept this!"

Yamanbagiri: "Okay, okay. Enough chatting. Let's start this information corner now!"

Kogitsunemaru: "...The More You Know section? Why use that name...?"

Yoshiyuki: "Information Corner is a boring name, isn't it? So we changed it."

Kogitsunemaru: "...Ha. Okay?"

Mikazuki: "Let's start with my species, then. As you all - "

Kogitsunemaru: "Wait, wait! Why is this section in this conversation form instead of the usual, wiki-like information corner?!!"

Yoshiyuki: "Eh, that's boring."

Yamanbagiri: "Yup. Like anyone would read that lengthy stuffs! Some kind of entertainment is needed."

Kogitsunemaru: "And that entertainment is...?"

Mikazuki: "Your tsukkomi actions."

Kogitsunemaru: "Wha - ?!"

Mikazuki: "As you all already know, I'm a shinrei - a divine spirit."

Yamanbagiri: "Yeah, this is just a review to make you remember the explanations inside the story, with maybe some extras. Please hang on."

Mikazuki: "Moving on. Shinrei are the spirits of humans who ascended to godhood, either before or after their death. In my case, I was worshipped as a god when I was still alive. All shinrei have different circumstances, but usually their stories are akin to mine - they were born with extraordinary powers in ancient times and people around them thought how godly these powers are. All of that was explained in chapter 1 part 3."
Yamanbagiri: "I narrated it."

Mikazuki: "Yes, thank you very much. All gods are powered by faith to exist, and shinrei are the same. The more people worship gods, the more powerful these gods become. The less people worship gods, the weaker they become."

Yoshiyuki: "And when there's absolutely none, you'll disappear, right?"

Mikazuki: "That's right. Before modern era, gods are visible to humans, even in naked eyes. But now, people's faith in gods is becoming lesser and lesser. Faith becomes more and more invisible. With no faith powering me, I'm slowly dying. I'll disappear if nobody believes in me."

Yamanbagiri: "Is there an afterlife even for gods?"

Mikazuki: "I don't know. I certainly shall perish someday, but even I don't know where my soul is going. Perhaps I'll only lose my human form, who knows. Anyway, all gods have shrines that enshrined them, that worship them. Mine is a small shrine in the mountains of this city. It was… already abandoned."

Kogitsunemaru: "But someone is still guarding there… err, what is his name? Shishiou?"

Mikazuki: "Yes, Shishiou. Just like his name, he is a shishi - or koma inu or shisa, a lion-dog who guards shrines. He has a nue as his beloved pet, so he isn't lonely. They will be explained more in second arc's extra."

Yoshiyuki: "Whoa, that's spoiler."

Kogitsunemaru: "It's not an important spoiler….

Yamanbagiri: "Yoshiyuki is half inugami, but what exactly is an inugami will be explained in second arc as well. By the way, this has been bothering me for some time, but… Mikazuki, is it even allowed for gods like you to have a romantic relationship with humans, same-sex, even?"

Mikazuki: "Of course not! Well, there aren't any spoken rules and such, but if you think logically, it is forbidden. Gods can control humans, so they're higher beings than humans. In any kinds of caste-like social divisions in Hindu - it is forbidden for the lower and the higher people to have intimate relationships, right? It is the same with gods and humans. That being said, it isn't so unusual for shinrei, formerly humans, to love another human. As it is a private matter, nobody wants to interfere, so it's fine."

Kogitsunemaru: "What about the same-sex part?"

Mikazuki: "That depends on your religion and social stigma. In the era I was born, Buddhism and Shintoism were clashing hard against each other, so I studied… both religions. Neither have any explicit and specific rules about homosexuality, so whether homosexuality is wrong or not depend on people's interpretations. Historically speaking, Japan, even when ruled with Shinto in ancient times, is totally open to homosexuality. I'm sure you've heard of samurais and homosexuality. Homosexuality in ancient Japan is a pretty long subject, so I'm not going to explain more, but you get what I mean, don't you?"

Yamanbagiri: "It's fine as long as both parties accept it, huh. Well, that's love for you."

Yoshiyuki: "Modern Japan starts to be more open and accepting to homosexuality, too! Look at these news about it and LGBT in general! I think that's wonderful…"
Kogitsunemaru: "I feel like we're giving unneeded trivia here… really…?"

Yamanbagiri: "Just like the section's title - The More You Know. Or maybe… For Your Information?"

Mikazuki: "Now, your turn, Kogitsunemaru."

Kogitsunemaru: "M-Me? My species, you mean? Mmm…I'm a jiwei hu. Basically, a nine-tailed fox. In Japanese, it's called kyubi no kitsune. Korea calls it kumiho. Mind you, the terms huli jing in China and kitsune in Japan are for general fox spirits, not the nine-tailed ones. I have nine tails with incredible fur I always take care of, if you want to see."

Yoshiyuki: "What's the difference in those three?"

Kogitsunemaru: "Only in names. What names used depend on the place the fox resides at. Though I personally don't want to be called kyubi no kitsune. I'm totally from China, after all. Anyway, fox spirits like me are known to be mischievous and like to trick people, but that depends on their environment as well. In ancient files, it is stated that fox spirits can disguise themselves as attractive women."

Yoshiyuki: "Can you do it?"

Kogitsunemaru: "I've never done it, so who knows… and even if I can, I won't. I'm happy being a man in Yamanbagiri's side. Ah, by the way, as I stated in chapter 1 part 3, my name is a given name, so I have absolutely no relations to the sword forged by Sanjou."

Yamanbagiri: "In this fanfic at least - not in reality."

Kogitsunemaru: "Yeah, yeah. Anyway, in ancient Chinese literature, fox spirits can be either a good or a bad omen. In Han iconography, jiwei hu is sometimes depicted at Mount Kunlung alongside xi wangmu, a goddess of immortality in her role as goddess. According to first-century Baihutong - Debates in the White Tiger Hall - the fox's nine tails symbolize abundant progeny. There are descriptions about transformation into woman as well, but let's not get into that. Both Japan and Korea adapted this Chinese interpretation to their own with their own elements. I guess that's all I can say."

Yoshiyuki: "What's next?"

Mikazuki: "How about the main star of this arc - jiangshi?"

Yamanbagiri: "I've explained a lot of things already, though…."

Yoshiyuki: "It's a review, like ya said. I'll help. Jiangshi is a Chinese hopping vampire - though technically, it's more similar to a zombie, since it is a reanimated corpse. Jiangshi is read as goeng-si in Cantonese, gangshi in Korean, and kyonshi in Japanese. It is typically depicted as a stiff corpse dressed in official garments from Qing Dynasty. It moves around by hopping with its arms outstretched. It kills living creatures to absorb their qi or life force, usually at night. In the day, it rests in dark places."

Mikazuki: "There are two categories of a corpse being reanimated; a recently deceased person returning to life or a corpse that has been buried for a long time but does not decompose. Some of the causes are: supernatural arts to resurrect the dead, spirit possession of a dead body, a corpse that absorbs sufficient yang qi to return to life, a person's soul failing to leave the deceased's body due to improper death, suicide, or just wanting to cause trouble, and lastly, a person injured by
a jiangshi through biting. They are infected with the jiangshi virus and gradually changes into a jiangshi over time. The last is what happened to Kashuu."

Yamanbagiri: "...I have to explain the gradual changes into jiangshi again? Urgh, what a bother... oh well. I'll keep it short and simple. Usually, a day after the infection spreads, the victim will gain sharp fangs and sharp nails. They also will feel scared of light and mirrors. Two days after infection, they will feel super thirsty for blood - qi -. It takes about 6 days after that for someone to become a complete jiangshi - so in total, infected people need 10 days to lose their humanity and become jiangshi. When they do become jiangshi, they usually have no control over their actions, as though their brains are rotting."

Yoshiyuki: "There are various methods and items used to counter jiangshis; mirrors - because they're afraid to see their own reflections, items made of wood from a peach tree, a rooster's call, jujube seeds, fire, vinegar, bagua sign, I Ching, adzuki beans, handbell, Taoist talismans stuck on foreheads to immobilize them, and so on."

Kogitsunemaru: "A funny thing; it is said that if you drop a bag of coins, the jiangshi will count the coins instead of running after you. It is one of the safer ways to buy more time to escape."

Yoshiyuki: "It's literally buying time with money!"

Mikazuki: "Jiangshi seem like greedy people who like money, don't they?"

Yamanbagiri: "Don't say that, they'll be angry at you. Well, if the original jiangshi at China wear good and luxurious-looking outfits of the high class, I don't see why they wouldn't like money...."

Mikazuki: "Next, we have kodama. Kodama are souls that inhabit trees. They're the protectors of forests. They usually exist deep inside untouched forests. These souls can wander outside of their hosts, tending to their groves and maintaining the balance of nature. Kodama are rarely ever seen, but they are often heard - particularly as echoes that take just a little longer to return than they should. When they do appear, they usually look like faint orbs of light in the distance; or occasionally as a tiny, funny-shaped vaguely humanoid figure. A kodama's life force is directly tied to the tree it inhabits, and if either the tree or the kodama dies, the other can't live."

Yamanbagiri: "Yeah, totally not a copy-paste of my explanation in chapter 1 part 6."

Yoshiyuki: "But isn't it?"

Yamanbagiri: "It's called sarcasm, Yoshiyuki...."  

Mikazuki: "I apologize, the author is too lazy to write a new one. Besides, that explanation already covers important facts about kodama. The author said it isn't needed to write another explanation."

Kogitsunemaru: "What a lazy person...."

Mikazuki: "Ehem, next! Introducing; our favorite and beloved nurikabe."

Kogitsunemaru: "B-Beloved, you said... I won't let it has its way with Yamanbagiri! It's not a human!"

Yamanbagiri: "It won't! And you're not a human too! Why am I being the tsukkomi here?!"

Kogitsunemaru: "I'm humanoid, at least!"

Yoshiyuki: "Anyway~ Nurikabe is basically a gigantic wall that blocks a traveler's way at night. It
extends itself as far to the right and left as one might try to go. It can’t be knocked down as well. But, if you tap on the ground with a stick, it will vanish."

Yamanbagiri: "Nurikabe looks soft with wrinkles here and there. It has a face and ears that resemble a dog’s, but its nose resembles a human’s. In ancient times, nurikabe seldom show themselves and usually stay invisible instead. In this modern day, the nurikabe is rather shy - if it encounters a stranger, it won’t show its face and just shows vague face-like features. It has two legs and hands. Its hands are outstretched like a puppy that wants dinner."

Mikazuki: "Some theories suggested that nurikabe might have been just a manifestation of a shape-shifting itachi or tanuki."

Kogitsunemaru: "A passing small information here. Tanuki is a cute and mischievous raccoon dog - or badger- oddity. It can change its shapes, which further strengthens its power in troll - I mean trickery."

Yamanbagiri: "You wanted to say trolling, don't you? Look how modern you've become."

Kogitsunemaru: "Ignoring him. Itachi is a weasel oddity and also can change shapes."

Mikazuki: "Shape-shifter tricksters… the worst pranksters ever, don't you think?"

Yamanbagiri: "The very definition of Tsurumaru-senpai."

Yoshiyuki: "He is a crane, though! His name and hair at least. Speaking of him… should we explain about… whatever Tsurumaru-senpai was talking about in chapter 2 part 5?"

Yamanbagiri: "Well, this is The More You Know section without bounds, so… why not?"

Mikazuki: "I don't remember the details of what he said, though, to be honest."

Yamanbagiri: "Same… err, being a Chinese, do you know wu xing, a Taoism theory of classical elements, Kogitsunemaru?"

Kogitsunemaru: "Okay… like Yamanbagiri said, wu xing is a Taoism theory of classical elements, is similar to godai in Japanese, or even alchemy in general. Wu xing, shortened form of wu zhong liu xing zhi chi or translated as the five types of chi dominating at different times is a fivefold conceptual scheme that many traditional Chinese fields used to explain a wide array of phenomena - and describing interactions and relationships between those phenomena. It is also known as the Five Elements, Five Phases, et cetera. Wu xing has five elements - wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These elements are the states of a neverending series of interactions and processes. They are equally important and should form a balance, while being in constant movement and cyclical changes or phases. They represent five different phases of the qi or chi."

Yoshiyuki: "Hey, that's copy-paste again! The words are exactly the same."

Kogitsunemaru: "Tsurumaru's explanation is already perfect, so… ."

Mikazuki: "That's okay, isn't it? We're just reviewing and combining the explanations, so that people don't have to look for the part with these again."

Kogitsunemaru: "Continuing. All material things are made of a single or a combination of the Five Elements, since these are the fundamental components. The Five Elements were believed to control the change and movement of the universe, and to provide the energy for all the other groups of five in the Chinese cosmology, such as the Five Sacred Mountains of Taoism. The Five Elements are
associated with other stuff. For example, metal is associated with peach, autumn, white, Venus, and west direction. Its symbol is white tiger or Bai Hu, and so on."

Yamanbagiri: "Other examples can be found on the internet. Remember, in this modern era, internet is your best friend."

Yoshiyuki: "Next, probably the worst out of all; gashadokuro! Its other name is odokuro. It is a giant skeleton which wanders around in darkest hours. Its teeth chatter and bones rattle with gachi gachi sounds, which is its namesake. It either crushes humans in its hands or bites off their heads."

Mikazuki: "Gashadokuro originates from bones of hundreds of victims. These victims are usually soldiers whose bodies rot in the fields and victims of famine who die unknown in wilderness and didn't receive proper funeral rites. Unable to pass on, their souls are reborn as hungry ghosts. As their bodies decay, their anger changes into a powerful force - a grudge against the living - and this grudge twists them into a supernatural force. When bones of hundreds of victims gather together into one mass, they can form gashadokuro."

Kogitsunemaru: "Gashadokuro is too large and powerful to be killed. It maintains its existence until the energy and malice stored up in its body are completely burnt out. However, because of the large amounts of dead bodies required to form a single one, gashadokuro is rarely seen in modern eras, unlike in ancient times, when wars and famine were parts of everyday life. Its weak spot is its left eye, where the yorishiro used for summoning resides. Yorishiro is an object used to call upon the oddities. It is usually an object that became sacred. For gashadokuro, a skull is used."

Yamanbagiri: "The earliest record of gashadokuro goes back over 1000 years to a bloody rebellion against the central government by a samurai named Taira no Masakado. After he was killed for his revolt, his entire family was declared as traitors by imperial court and their execution was held. However, two of his children, Yoshikado and Satsuki-hime, somehow managed to escape. They hid in a temple at the base of Mount Tsukuba for years. Satsuki-hime became a devoted nun, but Yoshikado spent time exploring the mountain and played being a samurai….

Kogitsunemaru: "Wait, you're going to tell the legend? Completely?"

Yamanbagiri: "Of course. There's no point if I only give a summary. But this is sure long as heck…"

Yoshiyuki: "Here, let me continue. The legend branches from this point, but I'll tell you only one version that has gashadokuro in it. Satsuki-hime began to perform dreaded curse of ushi no koku mairi - the shrine visit at the hour of the ox. Every night, she snuck into the Kifune Shrine and performed the ritual. After 21 nights, she awakened aramitama - the violent, wicked spirit - of the Kifune Shrine. The aramitama spoke to her, granting her knowledge of onmyodo and instructed her to take the name Takiyasha-hime."

Mikazuki: "Takiyasha-hime and Yoshikado returned to their father's fortress of Soma Castle in Shimosa province. They called on the surviving soldiers who had remained loyal to their father. Using her newly acquired black magic, Takiyasha-hime raised an army of yokai - in other words, oddities - to continue her father's rebellion against the emperor. Oya no Taro Mitsukuni, a warrior who was knowledgeable about onmyodo, heard about Takiyasha-hime's plans and set out to Soma Castle to investigate. When he arrived, Takiyasha-hime disguised herself as a prostitute and tried to seduce him… would you mind continuing, Kogi?"

Kogitsunemaru: "Alright… Mitsukuni suspected a trap and told her about the brutal death of Taira no Masakado. Takiyasha-hime snapped and fled from him. That night, she ambushed him with an army of skeletons and oddities. According to Utagawa Kuniyoshi's famous ukiyoe print, Takiyasha-hime unleashed a gashadokuro upon him. That giant skeleton is as tall as a castle. At the end though,
she was defeated like her father. Phew… that's a long story or rebellion and revenge."

Yamanbagiri: "Legends and folklores are mesmerizing. By the way, onmyodo is a traditional Japanese esoteric cosmology, a mixture of natural science and occultism. Incidentally, it is based on wu xing and ying and yang. It was accepted as a practical system of divination. These practices were influenced further by Taoism, Buddhism, and Shintoism."

Yoshiyuki: "If ya look at history, Japan's main religions seem to be these three. No wonder they affect Japanese culture so much."

Kogitsunemaru: "Taoism lost to Buddhism and Shintoism, but yeah, its effects can be felt even until this day."

Mikazuki: "We'll save the story of the fierce battle between Buddhism and Shintoism for the future. Next up, the culprit of everything: jubokko."

Kashuu: "Really? Is it the true culprit of my suffering?"

Yoshiyuki: "Whoa, ya surprised me for a sec there!"

Kashuu: "I'm the main focus in this arc, right? It's weird if I don't appear at all!"

Kogitsunemaru: "You rarely appear or talk in the main chapters, though…." 

Yamanbagiri: "It can't be helped. Your arc is more like a prologue to set everything up."

Kashuu: "Ugh… so I'm the sacrifice…." 

Mikazuki: "Don't worry, you appear in extra. You're also important for another arc."

Yamanbagiri: "Dropping off landmines, aren't we…? It is still not decided yet if jubokko is the cause of your infection, Kashuu, but it is, most likely."

Kogitsunemaru: "Speaking of that, let's explain what jubokko is. Listen closely, Kashuu. Jubokko is a blood-sucking tree. It was a normal tree, but in an impure land where vast amounts of humans blood were shed - let's say, like in war zones - its roots absorb enough blood to transform into an oddity. There should be piles of human bones under it and its branches are slightly creepy."

Mikazuki: "Other than that, it looks like a totally normal tree. It usually waits for unsuspecting humans to pass underneath its branches. When someone gets close enough, it attacks, snatching its prey with its long, jagged, finger-like branches. These branches pierce the skin of its victims, sucking out all blood with special tube-like twigs. After the body is drained of everything the jubokko can take, the rest is consumed by birds, insects, and other animals, until only bones are left."

Kashuu: "……T-That's…so scary…!! If jubokko is really the cause, shouldn't I be dead now?!"

Kogitsunemaru: "Yep. That's why, if jubokko really did suck your blood, it's a miracle that you survived… though you somehow got infected by jiangshi virus."

Yoshiyuki: "But jubokko and jiangshi aren't related, other than both suck blood, right? What a mystery."

Yamanbagiri: "Oddities evolve according to their environments and their needs. They're still living creatures that seek to live… but yeah, it's really disturbing if an oddity evolved like that… it puts humans in serious disadvantage."
Mikazuki: "We’ll leave the investigation to the specialists. You can rest well, Kashuu."

Kashuu: "Y-Yeah… I should sleep and hope I won't have nightmares…"

Yamanbagiri: "So, we're finished with The More You Know section. Did we forget something?"

Yoshiyuki: "Wait, lemme check… mm, I guess not! We did it all."

Mikazuki: "Inugami and other upcoming oddities are going to be explained in the second arc’s The More You Know. If you're curious, you can look them up on internet."

Kogitsunemaru: "Sources cited are English wikipedia, yokai.com, and en.touhouwiki - wait, why is the author using Touhou Wikia?!"

Yamanbagiri: "The wiki stores some more information that can't be found in the English wikipedia, such as about shinrei and various ideas."

Yoshiyuki: "Various information is also taken from various mangas! Are ya curious what manga they are?"

Kashuu: "Stop it before this epilogue becomes an ads place, honestly… anyway, as the author isn't an expert, we apologize if we take anything wrong! Feel free to correct us and ask anything you want."

Yamanbagiri: "With that, this section has ended. Thank you so much for reading. We hope you learn something good. Next up is extra stories that actually have something to do with the plot. The author can't think of any title, though, but we hope you enjoy it. Well then, see you. Until next time."

Yoshiyuki: "And look forward to my arc where I pin Yamanbagiri to the wall!"

Mikazuki: "Oooh, so bold~"

Yamanbagiri: "Really? Will you?"

Kogitsunemaru: "I think that scene won't exist…"

Yoshiyuki: "Eh, I can do it right now. Here~"

Yamanbagiri: "It's not like I reject you, but please stop it, this Mutsunba is still one-sided. It's not established yet. It's still not in the tag list."

Yoshiyuki: "But if someone reads this chapter after my arc is finished and Mutsunba is in the tag list, then it's not one-sided anymore!"

Yamanbagiri: "Even though the story hasn't progressed to that point? What??"

Kashuu: "Ah! I understand… then… does it go the same for me? I can flirt with Yamanbagiri right here right now because Kashunba will certainly exist in the future! Even if Kashunba isn't established as of 2017, if someone reads it when it already exists in the tag list…"

Mikazuki: "A relationship that goes beyond time and dimension… how marvelous."

Kogitsunemaru: "Please stop making the readers confused!! Wait, I'm confused too! What the hell are you guys talking about?!

Mikazuki: "Now, then, everyone, this section officially ends! See you!"
Kogitsunemaru: "Wait?!"

{ Extra Illustrations (Doodles) }
*As you can see in extra illustrations (doodles), Mikazuki's outfit remains largely the same as his game counterpart, but Kogitsunemaru changes dramatically. There is a reason for that. If you want to see Kogitsunemaru's full design, maybe I'll add it.
[Monday, May 25th. After Yamanbagiri and Yoshiyuki went home.]

Yamato runs upstairs back to Kashuu's room and slams the door open.

Yamato: "Kashuu, Kashuu!! I-I-I - !!!"

Kashuu: "Yes, you what?"

Yamato: "I managed to make Yamanbagiri call me Yamato!"

Kashuu: "Oooh, congratulations, then."

[He doesn't look amused.]

Yamato: "T-T-This is bad, Kashuu! My heart can't stop beating! It's beating so fast!"

Kashuu: "Well~ If your heart stops beating, you're dead."

Yamato: "That's not what I mean - !"

Kashuu: "Yeah, yeah. I know. You're embarrassed but also happy to hear him calling your name like that, right? Sheesh, you're so simple."

Yamato: "I-It can't be helped... I've always wanted him to... call me like that..."

Kashuu: "Yeah, good for you. You can be friends with the Yamanbagiri you always like. Unexpectedly, my condition has a positive side, too, huh?"

Yamato: "K-Kashuu! That's not nice..."

Kashuu: "I'm joking. This condition or whatever isn't good, I know, but... at least you've become closer with Yamanbagiri now. You don't have to see him from afar like some stalker... oh wait, you are one. But you can stay by his side now."

Yamato: "Hmm."

Kashuu: "What's wrong? You don't sound that happy."

Yamato: "...I think Yamanbagiri doesn't remember me. I feel even more guilty if I have to approach him. When I think about it, I'm the worst... to love him until now even though I've abandoned him. I have no right to have him. But still, I... want to stand by his side and make him mine."

Yamato: "...I'm really the worst kind of human. I'm so selfish."

[Kashuu stays silent, understanding Yamato's conflicted mind.]
Kashuu: 'No…I'm the one who is the worst. Yamanbagiri doesn't know me, my best friend loves him, and yet, I also…'

[Tuesday, May 26th. After school.]

[Yamato slams the front door open and screams.]

Yamato: "Kashuu, Kashuu!! This is bad, this is bad - !"

[Kashuu is in the living room, playing play station with his body wrapped in thick blanket, a controller is on his hand.]

Kashuu: "Welcome home~"


Kashuu: "Well, yeah. I think it's time to play the unfinished games~"

Yamato: "Sheesh, I worried over nothing. Yamanbagiri is worried about you, too, you know. Don't do anything too hard for your body."

Kashuu: "Yes, yes~ I can't just despair all day, you know."

Kashuu: "Anyway, what's with the scream? Have you managed to touch Yamanbagiri or something?"

Yamato: "…"

Kashuu: "…"

Yamato: "AH."

[He blushes heavily.]

Kashuu: "WAIT, YOU WHAT - ?! Tell me, tell me!!"

Yamato: "T-This morning, morning duty with him… uh… we held hands."

Kashuu: "For what?!"

Yamato: "H-He wanted to comfort me somehow… since I can see oddities now. U-Uwaah, thinking about it, I can feel the warmth of his hand again…"

[Kashuu looks incredibly disgusted by Yamato who is in the seventh heaven.]

Kashuu: "And what else? I'm sure there's something more."

Yamato: "Ahaha, well, yeah… we got closer, you see. I touched his bangs, I touched his, and he brushed my hair…"

Kashuu: "That sounds really girly, I tell you."

Yamato: "I don't want to hear that from you. Anyway, it was awkward, but, we managed to get
close…! I'm so happy…! And ah, I think I got closer with Yoshiyuki and Hasebe, too. They hang around with Yamanbagiri, after all. Yoshiyuki is friendly, so I'm okay, but… Hasebe is kind of scary."

Kashuu: "Hoo. Congratulations, then! You're one step closer to your beloved Yamanbagiri. I'm surprised he can tame Hasebe well, though~ That's amazing."

Yamato: "Yoshiyuki is the one to pull Hasebe in, but I guess he is there because of Yamanbagiri. Seeing their close relationship, though, I got jealous somehow…"

Kashuu: "Ooh~ You really do like him a lot, don't you, you stalker?"

Yamato: "I-I'm not a stalker!!"

Kashuu: "Oh, really? Then what about his photos inside your room?"

Yamato: "T-That's… a photography practice…."

Kashuu: "No way. These photos aren't good for a pratice, you stalker. Just admit it."

Yamato: "Uh…. Uh… huuuu…. I only take photos of him when he is at school, nothing more…."

Kashuu: "Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Kashuu: 'I wish I can get close to him, too, but… he is already taken, you idiot… we cling to the hope that we can get close to him and have him love us, but it's impossible now. We have no chance. Being his friend will only hurt us… and Yamanbagiri as well. '

Kashuu: 'But even so, I can't tell Yasusada about this… even though I can push him to forget about Yamanbagiri, so that he won't get heartbroken so hard… I chose to not do it, after all… I'm really the worst.'

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[Tuesday, May 26th.]

[Akashi enters a hospital with a grim look on his face, a bouquet of flowers on his hands. He goes to the pediatrics ward.]

Nurse: "Kuniyuki-san, are you visiting your brother again?"

Akashi: "Of course."

Nurse: "…I hope he can regain consciousness soon."

Akashi: "…I hope so too. Thank you."

[He passes the nurse, deeper into the ward, to the room number xxx. He enters the cold room, the smell of antiseptics reaches his nose.]

Akashi: "…I'm back."

[He smiles sadly at his brother that is lying on the bed, his body attached to various liquid and machines to keep him breathing and alive, but he has never opened his eyes in the last few years. He
doesn't talk or move the slightest. He stays still on his cold bed.]

[Akashi takes a vase, fills it with water, and puts the flowers he brought inside it.]

Akashi: "Look, it's the flower you like."

[There is no reply. Akashi smiles bitterly at his brother's face and brushes his hair with his fingers.]

Akashi: 'Today is…the day you were struck by a truck 4 years ago. You should be in middle school, now, but… here you are, lying in bed. As months and years passed, the possibility of you ever opening your eyes decreases…'

[He heaves a sigh as he turns his head to the window, looking at the distant past.]

Akashi: ‘…Is there… no hope for you, after all…? Is there… nothing I can do to save you?’

[Mikazuki watches from behind him, having followed him from the flower shop.]

Mikazuki: "…Well, isn't this interesting."

Chapter End Notes

*April 25th marks one year for this fanfic. Nothing can express how grateful I am to the readers who have followed this story from the beginning until this point and my beta-reader, Cyanblue475! I sincerely thank everyone for their support. Without all of you, I won't make it this far. Thank you for keeping up with my mistakes, forgetfulness, and laziness. That was a long first arc, indeed. I'm surprised by how long it turned out to be, but I'm glad I could end it rightly. Well then, I hope you enjoy the continuation as much as you enjoy this first arc. See you!
Chapter Summary

"Is it wrong for me to desire the one I love and want to help him with all of my might - even if it means denying his wish?"

Under the bursts of cicadas singing, an encounter with two mystical beings changed their peaceful daily lives forever. A curtain rose for a certain truth about his true identity and his undeniable true feelings.

"I want to be someone ya can depend on, your pillar - or even your hero. I can't stand seeing you in agony for the second time."

Before, they have always been together, but slowly and surely, their feet begin to move in separate directions.

He isn't willing to let him go alone, even though he knows how selfish it is. Their mutual affection and feelings for each other is what actually stopping them from moving forward - and so, in the name of love, he destroys their old bonds to make anew.

Even if that simply means being restrained by more chains.

To be with him, he'll do anything.

"I will stay by your side, forever and ever."

Email (Sent August 1st 9:00 AM JST)

To: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: Summer break

Hello and good morning from here.

Finally, it's summer break! I'm so happy to be free from school... well, not really, there is homework. How are you doing there? How is school? I can catch up easily in my new school. In contrast, Yoshiyuki isn't doing so well... well, he is always bad at math. Of course, I'll help him in any way I can.

Speaking of school, his class is actually pretty nice... I'm only close to Yoshiyuki, but the other classmates are kind, energetic like Yoshiyuki, and they have such big smiles on their faces that I feel so warm inside. Even looking from afar, I can tell how close and easygoing his class is... which I'm now a part of.

They don't question further about my sudden transfer, too. I'm so relieved. This class is so different from my previous class... the school atmosphere is different, too. I'm glad I transferred here.
It has been about two months since you moved there, right? Time sure flies so fast. Can you speak the native language better now? I remember how weird you sounded and… how you, who are usually so full of confidence, stuttered and blushed in uncertainty when speaking in another language. Ahaha. It's cute, I don't mind, but language barrier brings trouble there… I hope you can catch up with your studies, too.

If… if you want to, you can speak to me when you're troubled. I mean, email me about whatever is bothering you. I don't mind.

Ah, right, the country you're in is using DST time zone in summer, right? Whatever it is… I really don't understand Western countries… I think I heard somewhere that summer is hotter there than in Japan. You dislike summer because of sweat, don't you? Well, I wish you luck to stay alive in a scorching summer.

By the way, tomorrow, Yoshiyuki and I are going to the mountain… not so high up to be called hiking or climbing, but yeah. We're going into the forest. Adventure time, you can say. He said he wants to search for a rare beetle like a child, but as I have nothing to do, I'll tag along. I can't leave him alone, anyway. Who knows what kind of dangerous actions he'll do?

Wish us luck so that we won't encounter anything weird, okay?

Shh, I know I bring misfortune, but let fortune comes at times like this at least!

Well then, see you later.

P.S. Please don't feel bad about leaving me that time. Really. You've helped me a lot and I don't want to take away your future just for me. I'm happy right now. Everything is fine. So… please don't blame yourself, either….
"Ahh… haa… Yoshiyuki, are we really doing this…?"

I stop in my tracks for a while and try to catch my breath.

"Of course! Ya agreed yesterday. Don't take it back."

"Unngh…" I groan hard and sigh. At times like this, Yoshiyuki seriously can't be stopped with my power alone. Walking up the seemingly endless stairs, I contemplate on my life and wonder why the heck I accepted to tag along with him. Oh, right, I'm worried about his idiotic antics out of my watch. "Seriously, you're like a little child, hunting for beetles… ."

"That beetle thing is just a lie. If I told ya the truth, ya won't come no matter what!"

"What?" I stop walking once again, almost falling back. I look up at him, a few steps away ahead of me. "T-That explains why you don't bring that thing to catch beetles, but… then, why are we here? What do you want to do?"

Yoshiyuki grins widely. "We're not hunting anything. We're just visiting."

"What do you mean?"

"Ya will see when we get up."

I grumble, but of course, he says nothing more. Well, this stairway is clearly a path to a shrine, but, what about it? I never knew a shrine exists here, but, does that matter? Hah… looks like I have no other choice but to follow him and see what he wants to do. I walk a little faster to catch up to him and walk upstairs next to him.

Yoshiyuki is humming so happily and honestly, I feel so annoyed.

"You don't look tired at all," I comment in displeasure.

"Mm? I'm tired, really! But this is like another kind of sport," he smiles as he holds his other upper arm, as if showing off his unnoticeable muscles. "It's fun, ya know?"

"Ha…" I don't understand. Well, I'm never a sports type in the first place, unlike Yoshiyuki. I rely more on my brain than my muscles… hmm? "Oh. You muscle-brain."

"What kind of insult is that?" He chuckles.

"If I can't go down later, you have to carry me, okay?"

"Piggyback ride? Whoa, that's hard. What if I fell when carrying ya?"
"We'll fall together. That's fine."

"That's scary… well, I'll catch ya somehow!" Even with these words, Yoshiyuki's smile is undisturbed. Seeing him like this always makes my heart warm and fuzzy, honestly. Yoshiyuki being energetic and positive is… the best… probably.

"But really… whatever your intentions are, why choose summer… I'm melting here," I keep on talking, my mind is hazy already.

This heat is really bad… and this is just the first week! This is why I prefer to lock myself inside my air-conditioned house all summer… Yoshiyuki usually says something along the lines of "You will be a hikikomori if you keep locking yourself! That won't do!" and drags me out whenever he can, like today.

"I can't wait until winter break, so~ Anyhow, I'm glad ya decided to stick with me. I would feel a bit lonely without ya." He can say such an embarrassing thing without any hesitation or blush on his face, I'm honestly jealous.

My face is hot because of the heat, I swear. "Really… I can't just leave you to go alone, after all. Who knows what kind of disaster you will bring upon yourself?"

"But ya are the unlucky one who keeps getting disasters, not me."

"But you're the clumsiest idiot."

"But your unluckiness bring upon disasters."

"But your idiocy can bring disasters as well."

"Uhh…” He scratches his cheek, "Fair, then?"

"Double disaster, yeah. Why do we stick together again?"

We laugh as we arrive at the top of the stairs onto the shrine grounds. We rest for a bit, catching our breath (laughing when walking upstairs isn't a good idea) and drink our water.

"Now that we're here… tell me, what do you want to do?" I ask as I look around the shrine grounds. There is a small well near the old-looking shrine building. In front of it stands a torii gate, its red colors are washed by age. In front of the gate, there are two statues of shisa, or koma inu, the guardians of shrines. Everything about this shrine is old. Even I can tell that it's not being used or maintained regularly, unlike actively operating shrines. Perhaps, this shrine is abandoned already. Just what is Yoshiyuki thinking, visiting an old shrine?

"Well…” Yoshiyuki steps forward, passing the statues and the torii gate to the main shrine and stops in front of the offering box. "Like I said, we're visiting. Like paying respects to our elders."

"Visiting… what?"

"Don't ya feel it? A presence here…” He replies as he takes out a 5 yen coin and throws it to the offering box, the sound of clink makes me think the box is empty before his coin came in, and claps his two hands in prayer.

I blink a few times, confused, but when my mind is clear enough - sure, I can feel a faint otherworldly presence here. Alarmed, I stand up and approach Yoshiyuki, looking up at the roof of the shrine where the presence is, but I can see nothing out of ordinary. There's only blue summer
"Maybe ya can pay respects too."

"Fair enough." I throw my 5 coin yen and claps my hands, only to pay respect anyone who is resting there. Lifting up, I still see nobody on top of the roof. "So? We're here just to throw our coins?"

"Mmm, well, if that person isn't coming out… I'm just curious what kind of oddity is still staying here."

"Curiosity kills the cat."

"Said the one who regularly throws himself to supernatural problems."

"Heh. True. I'm not in a place to tell you, huh," I shrug, "So, you spotted something here and decide to check it out, that's all?"

"Pretty much. There's only one presence now, though… that day, I saw two shadows."

"The other one is out, then," I say as I turn around, "Well, let's go back, then. There's no point if they don't want to show up. It's none of our business."

"Mmm… okay."

Yoshiyuki sounds hesitant, but in the corner of my eyes, I can see him sighing and turns his back as well. After that painful journey, all we did is throwing our coins as offerings? Sheesh… I should've rejected him, after all. This is barely a dangerous action… and I don't think anyone will refuse offerings.

"Hmm… nghh?"

Just then, I hear an unfamiliar moan coming from on top of the shrine. I turn around in alert, only to see a translucent being shaped like human… no, his features are exactly like a human's. Is he the God that is enshrined here? Before I can react, though, he seems to slip and… falls right onto me?

Before I know it, I'm already pinned on the ground, strands of blue hair are tickling my cheeks, and something soft is touching my lips… huh? Is this… another person's lips?

Too dumbfounded, I can only freeze as the other person moves slightly, his lips move and I feel a weird tickling sensation on mine - confirming that we are kissing. Finally realizing that my first kiss has been taken in an accident, I immediately try to push the other person away from atop me, but my hands are shaking for some reason, unable to draw out power. Being conscious of his lips, I feel my face is so hot and dizzy even more than before, and I feel like choking as I'm too shocked to breathe through my nose.

"Oh."

The stranger, who has only just realized that we're kissing and my rejection, to my relief, parts away from me - but he is still atop of me, looming over with eyes that seem have captured something interesting - the eyes of a beast that has caught something weird and out of ordinary, if I may say. Instead of being scared or really angry, though… strangely, I feel rather calm. His blue eyes, with tints of yellow, are beautiful, sucking me deep inside his gaze. We keep locking eyes for no reason at all, wounded up not moving at all.

"Umm…? Sorry to bother ya when things are hot and all, but…."
I see Yoshiyuki raises his hand, kneeling next to me. Snapping out of the stranger's charm, I push him away with all my power and back away in panic, and wipe away my lips in frustration. My first kiss was taken by a stranger. Probably an oddity, on top of that.

The blue-haired man blinks his blue eyes a few times with a blank look, as if confused, before he mutters something and approaches me with suddenly sparkling eyes.

"Hey, hey. You can see me?" He says with an excited voice. "You can, can't you?"

"I can, but… uh…" 

"Before that, ya gotta apologize after ya struck him from above." Yoshiyuki continues what I can't say… I'm glad he can read my mind sometimes.

The man looks at Yoshiyuki, as if just realizing his presence, then slowly stands, his fluttering side hair and golden ornaments make him even more otherworldly and unreal. "You."

I point at myself in confusion. "M-Me?"

"Yes, you. What is your name?"

"Y-Yamanbagiri Kunihiro…"

"Excuse me for my sloppiness. It was a total accident," he says as he bows with a practiced movement, swift and elegant. "My name is Mikazuki Munechika. I'm a shinrei that is enshrined here."

"Shinrei… uh, you were once a human?" I confirm.

"Yes, that is correct. I see you have knowledge on oddities." Smiling, as if confirming something good, the shinrei named Mikazuki nods to himself. "So…what about you? Who are you?" He turns to Yoshiyuki next.

"Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki. Call me Yoshiyuki, though. Yamanbagiri's friend."

"What are you doing here, in an abandoned shrine?"

So it is abandoned… I shoot Yoshiyuki a look as I stand up and he replies, "Actually, I saw two shadows here before from afar, so I thought I should check it, just in case it's dangerous or something. Paying a visit, ya can say."

"Hmm… I see, I see," Mikazuki nods once again. "And the two of you… are able to see oddities. Since birth?"

I answer this time, "Y-Yeah. As far as I remember my childhood."

"Interesting… over the past few years… no, hundreds of years, perhaps…I've never seen anyone who can see oddities before, let alone coming here to a far away, abandoned shrine."

"There are few others, but yeah, still a minority… what about it?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"Don't you see my translucent body?" Mikazuki stretches his arms, making the scenery beyond his body even more striking - he is see-through, "I'm about to disappear."

"Seems like it… why?" I ask.
"Oh, you don't know?" He asks back as if in surprise, and clears his throat like it's some kind of big problem. "Gods are powered by faith - that is, people who believe in them. Believers or followers, you can say. When that faith decreases, meaning that less and less people believe, the gods' power decrease as well… until eventually, they will disappear. This goes the same for me, a shinrei. As you can see, my shrine has been abandoned by humans for a long time… nobody believes in me anymore. No humans know about my existence anymore."

I don't know the full story, but seeing his melancholic face and eyes that gaze towards a distant past of happiness makes me feel empathy for him. Being forgotten in such a remote place… must be hard for anyone. Especially because he was born a human, and turned to a god with long age… that loneliness must be even more suffocating.

"That is, until the two of you came and confirm my existence. I'm slowly regaining my form now. It is hard to say, but… I am saved by two mere humans. Well, that's a god for you. No matter how lofty we are, even with our mighty powers… we can't live without humans. How ironic."

"…Huh?" I feel confused by his sudden… err… sharp remarks.

"And one of them kissed me. Interesting, but… as a shinrei, it really is… embarrassing. I won't say further to disgraceful, but… it is just hard to accept."

Is he attacking me now?! After condescending me and Yoshiyuki - mere humans below him - now he wants to put the blame onto me?

Yoshiyuki doesn't seem to notice the insult, but he looks somewhat confused by Mikazuki's change of tone. Actually, Mikazuki's voice doesn't change that much, but he sounds more annoyed now.

"By the way, Yamanbagiri, was that your first kiss?"

W-Why that question? And why did he call my given name right off the bat?!

After hesitating for some time, I give in to reply honestly, "…Yes, it is."

"I see. Your first kiss is with a god, how do you feel?" He asks as he covers his mouth with his sleeves. Seeing his eyes, though, I'm positive that he is grinning. "You should feel grateful, honestly. It's a rare chance for these accidents to happen. You must be feeling pretty lucky, hm?"

"Wha…" I feel my blood starts to boil real fast. "E-Excuse me?"

"Don't you understand?" He looks at me, his eyes are so sharp they might as well slice me. "I'm saying that you should thank me for that kiss."

"…And why should I?"

He suddenly walks forward, closing our distance, looking down on me as our noses graze each other - so uncomfortable - his face is darkened, "Like I said - "

"Aah!! Aaaah!!!"

Another unfamiliar voice comes - screams - right behind our backs, interrupting whatever Mikazuki wanted to say. We look behind to the entrance of the shrine and find a young man with a long and tied yellow hair is standing there, holding plastic bags, his mouth gape.

"Oh. Shishiou, welcome back."
Mikazuki's face somewhat softens by the appearance of… his friend?

"O-Oh, yeah, I'm back… wait, what happened here?!" The man called Shishiou walks to us so fast, he arrives in an instant with a confused face. "Why are there humans here? And… what are you doing, old man, standing so close to him like that?"

Mikazuki smiles as he backs away from me. "This young man here wants to fight me."

HAH?! What the hell is he saying? He says it with such calmness, but… he is the one who wants a fight!

Yoshiyuki waves around his hands, "No, no, Yamanbagiri won't do that. Please save him from that wicked god!"

Somehow, Yoshiyuki is able to pull out the fact that Mikazuki is wicked. Well, he gets Mikazuki's animosity easily, I guess… thanks for standing up for me. Sobs.

Before Mikazuki can respond, Shishiou cuts him off.

"Aah~ I understand. Mikazuki-dono has been bothering you, hasn't he? I apologize in his behalf," Shishiou says as he bows politely, so deep and in regret. He knows Mikazuki well, doesn't he. He shoots a glare at the blue-haired shinrei, "At least bow, old man. I'm sure you're at fault here."

"Eeeehhh…"

Moaning in disdain, Mikazuki doesn't seem able to refuse Shishiou and bows slightly with a pout. What is he, a kid…?

"Anyway, I'm Shishiou, this man's guard, you can say," Shishiou begins as he points at Mikazuki, "You see these lion statues in front of the shrine? They're called shishi or koma inu. I'm their head, you can say. We guard shrines, and we happen to guard his."

After I look at the statues he mentioned, I nod in understanding. "I'm Yamanbagiri Kunihiro."

"And I'm Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki. Nice to meet ya."

Yoshiyuki and I proceed to shake hands with Shishiou. Thank God, he is a normal person - well, an oddity, but he has a normal personality. Unlike his master…

"Oh, by the way, this is Nue, my friend, say hello!" Shishiou says as… something with black fur around his neck moves upwards and downwards in a greeting. I feel a bit shocked, but I've seen something way weirder, so I just nod and greet the said nue back. Both are oddities, huh… even oddities have a pet?

"Whoaa! A nue? A real nue? I never thought it looks like this!" I act normal, however Yoshiyuki is brimming with joy and excitement. He ruffles the nue's fur happily, his own hair seemingly moving like a tail. "So soft~!"

"Ehehe. Nue said he likes the touch! He is usually shy around strangers, but you're good!"

Shisiou and Yoshiyuki proceed to laugh merrily for no reason at all. They seem kind of… similar to each other in that regard… I mean, their laughter.

"Anyway, what are you two doing here?" Shishiou finally asks and Yoshiyuki explains the same thing he told Mikazuki. "I see, I see. What, are you two specialists in training or something?"
"N-No, we aren't. My brother is a specialist, though, so maybe… Yoshiyuki isn't, at the very least," I reply.

"I'm just curious, ya know. If things are dangerous, we’re gonna call the real specialists, but thank god everything’s normal," Yoshiyuki continues.

Shishiou smiles widely as he pats our heads - but he is shorter than us, so he has to stand on tiptoes. "Really, you two are such good children!"

I'm kind of confused, but he is complimenting us, so I can only enjoy his touch.

"Well, now that all’s said and done… let's go home, Yoshiyuki. We haven't had lunch yet." I state as I turn around, ignoring the seemingly sulking shinrei in the background.

"Yeah, we got nothing to do now. Glad that ends well," Yoshiyuki says as he turns around.

"Wait, wait," but Shishiou stops us from leaving, "How about having lunch here? We have to make up for the trouble we caused."

"R-Really? Are you sure we can?" Yoshiyuki's eyes immediately sparkle in hope, baited by food. This simpleton…

"Of course! I'm good at cooking, you see. I would be happy if other people eat my food!"

"Y-Yamanbagiri. Let's not turn down his generosity," Yoshiyuki says as he turns to face me, his puppy eyes stab through me. I can't really refuse these eyes, can I….

"U-Uhh, alright. Just this once."

"Good! Come in!"

We follow Shishiou to shamusho, the shrine's administrative office, all the way to the dining room. Looks like it's used as a house now.

Taking an apron, he says, "Wait there. I will prepare it right now." And he goes into the kitchen.

The three of us - Yoshiyuki, Mikazuki, and I - sit on the old-looking but soft cushion pillow, awkwardly circling around the table. I'm sure that when it's cold in winter, they would put kotatsu blanket. How nice… my house doesn't have it anymore.

I look around the interior of the shrine. It looks like a normal and old-styled house you can find anywhere, though nowadays there is barely this kind of traditional houses in residential area. There is a pretty big and wide altar placed on the middle of the room with a set of framed photos and incense. People who used to be the head priest or something, maybe…? Though, in top of it, hanging on the wall, are another sets of framed photos. Who knows who these people are….

The interior is simple, almost seemingly empty. Other than a mini shimenawa [1] rope - why is that there? I wonder, the altar and the photos, I see nothing else… I mean, absolutely nothing. No sofa, no television, no cupboards or plants… there is simply nothing else. If the house isn't clean and sparkling, I might think that this is an abandoned shrine. Well, it is abandoned by humans, but there are still the oddities inhabitants.

With the windows open, revealing swaying green trees, though, the shrine looks less empty at least.

"Ah, please have a tea. It's cold now, though," Mikazuki offers, pointing at a teapot and some cups
on the table.

I didn't realize there is a tea set there. "I'll help myself, then." I say as I take a cup and pour tea into it, and then I take a sip. Ugh. Green tea. I can't really stand green tea… but hopefully, it doesn't show on my face. Old folks like green tea, right? It might be rude for Mikazuki… hey, I don't want to have a problem with a god.

"If there are ice cubes, it'll be perfect," Yoshiyuki says, waving his hand as a fan to cool himself down, but the sweat just won't stop coming down. Oh, there is no air conditioner or an electric fan here… what is this place, a sauna?

I nod in agreement. "Or maybe a fan to cool down."

"How can ya wear such thick-looking clothes and not sweat even a bit, Mikazuki?"


Yoshiyuki flinches with a forced smile. He looks like he wants to get close to the shinrei, outright calling him with his given name like that… "Y-Yes, M-Mikazuki-sama… yeah. Aren't ya feeling hot with these clothes?"

"I can barely feel weather now because my form is disappearing, so I'm fine."

It's sad that he is disappearing, but maybe it's fortunate for him?

Speaking of disappearing… there is a way to keep his existence, isn't it? The idea just flashes in my mind.

"So, um… if the two of us… now know you and keep remembering you… you'll be able to stay? I mean, not disappear?" I ask hesitantly, my fingers are playing with the wavy texture of the cup.

Mikazuki looks at me, his eyes are a bit wider as though he is surprised, before he sips his tea and answers. "Theoretically speaking, yes. The process is slow, but I can keep my form at least. What about it?"

"Nothing. Just a passing thought."

"Just to let you know, I don't mind disappearing or existing… either way, one day, I'll perish. So will you."

"That's a…." I shut my mouth. Negative remark. Pessimistic? Maybe. I feel like he is subtly rejecting humans because they're inferior. Then does he not want to be saved or what? Somehow, I get a feel that he actually wants to be saved, wants to stay alive and exist, but… perhaps his pride doesn't allow him to.

Uh, disappearing from existence means death, isn't it? Or did I get something wrong here?

"A what?"

"Please forget it."

Thankfully, Mikazuki doesn't press further. Just in time, Shishiou comes back with a tray full of steaming bowls.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Here it is, lunch," he says as he puts the bowls on the table. He goes back to the kitchen to get the main dishes and then serves them. Afterwards, he sits on the cushion
next to Yoshiyuki and claps his two hands. "Well then~ let's eat!"

We do the same and I look at the dishes. It's a simple menu for lunch, consisting of a bowl of rice, a bowl of miso soup, some pickled radish, some potatoes… I guess that's what you should expect from a shrine.

"Sorry for the simplicity. If I knew we're going to have guests, I would have brought something more luxurious," Shishiou says with an apologetic smile.

Yoshiyuki shakes his head. "It's okay! We are uninvited guests, so… having lunch here is more than enough for us!"

I nod in agreement. "We should enjoy what's served." I take my chopsticks and starts digging in, starting with the pickled radish and sipping miso soup. It's warm and good, even in the middle of summer, it doesn't burn me. Nice… "It's good."

"Thank you." Shishiou smiles with faint colors of red on his cheeks, looking proud of his work. "Feel free to have seconds."

"Okaay, maybe I will. I'm almost finished now," Yoshiyuki chimes in.

I look at his bowl in disbelief. In just a few minutes, his bowls are almost empty. In what inhuman speed does he eat?! Meanwhile, I look at Mikazuki and see that… there’s almost no change in his dishes. I see him taking rice with his chopsticks, then the main dishes, and eat it, and munch it ever so slowly. His movements are so refined and elegant, his figure is enough to fill the emptiness of the interior. Seriously, shinrei are so scary… though I feel somewhat annoyed by that even-slower-than-snail speed.

When I'm halfway to finished, Shishiou is finished, following Yoshiyuki who ended up having seconds and munch it down in mere minutes. Shishiou smiles happily seeing his appetite with the eyes that remind me of… a mother.

Not that I remember my mother, but Brother Horikawa has the same eyes when he takes care of me. These genuine eyes that show affection….

"Aren't you glad you have a good caretaker?" I whisper to Mikazuki as he is right next to me.

Mikazuki takes a long side-glance at me and he faintly smiles, looking somewhat proud. "Of course. He is too good for me sometimes."

"Yeah, too good."

"Are you insulting me?"

"Who knows."

He glares at me, demanding a clear answer, but I don't say anything, totally pissing him off. Don't worry, I have an escape route. Having finished my lunch, I stand up, planning to go to the kitchen to get some drinks as the teapot is now empty when Shishiou calls.

"Oh. Are you going to get more tea?"

"Yeah."

"Let me get it," he stands up, taking the teapot along with him and goes away before I can respond.
Well… alright… I sit down again and wait with Mikazuki's gaze piercing me, but even his gaze slowly dissipates. Shishiou soon comes back and puts the supposedly heavy tea pot on the table easily. He pours it into my cup. "It's hot out there, isn't it? I'm sorry, we don't have any ice cubes."

"That's fine, thank you." I take the cup from him.

Good hospitality is so nice… though I prefer mineral water rather than green tea, I can't really reject him. Sometimes drinking green tea isn't bad.

I see Yoshiyuki taking tea as well and gulps it down before he falls to the tatami mat, yawning. "I'm so full….”

I look at the table. How many bowls has he eaten? "Are you sure you can go downstairs while looking like a cow?"

"Calling me a cow is too much!" He slowly stands up and laughs, "I can, I can, don't worry. The food's so good I couldn't help myself, ehehe."

Well, he is happy, at least. The food isn't bad, sure, I enjoy it myself. Especially the potatoes. They're perfect.

"I'm glad you like it!" Shishiou says with a smile - wait, it's almost like he is smiling all the time here.

"I'm just curious, but, Shishiou-san, are you the only one that take care of this shrine?" I ask.

"Yeah, though my underlings help sometimes. They're good kids too."

"Housework and taking care of that kind of shinrei… to be able to do everything so well, you're cool," I spout my genuine words of admiration.

Mikazuki glares even harder at me, angry at my (hopefully subtle) insult. I can almost see his veins on his hands that are gripping a cup. Yeah, he has just finished eating. So slow.

"Eh? I-It's nothing really… ehehehe…." He replies, his blush is even more obvious as he scratches his head shyly. "I've always strived to be cool. At first, I thought doing housework isn't cool at all."

"Really? Why?" Yoshiyuki joins in.

"It's something that women usually do, right? The social stigma is that women do housework and men work outside, but there's nobody capable of doing housework here, so I take over the role."

"Ooh…Shishiou-san, how old are you?" I ask, tilting my head as I think. "In this modern era, these kinds of roles are almost non-existent, even in this traditional Japan. Women have freedom to have carriers outside the house and men have freedom to stay at home, as long as it's balanced and the family can survive."

"I've heard of that before, but I lock myself here most of the time, so…” He chuckles. "I guess I'm as old as this building is, so about 800 years old. When it came to existence, I came to existence as well. I've served other people before and am currently serving Mikazuki-dono."

Whoa… so old. How many hundreds of years are that? I managed to keep that to myself. I'm amazed that the shrine managed to exist for that long, though. Shishiou must have taken care of it without break….

"So cool!" I swear I see twinkling stars inside Yoshiyuki's eyes as he leans closer to Shishiou,
closely listening to his story. "Do ya remember your first master?"

"Of course! So, about 800 years ago…"  

Shishiou starts his story-telling session. He looks like even more like an old man now, especially with that proud face of his. He must be so happy that a youth is interested in the story of the past. His memory must be good, though, remembering what happened 800 years ago, even a bit….

"He calls me old man, but he is the eldest one here," Mikazuki whispers, probably directing it to me. Ho? What is this? He is willing to start a conversation with me? I'm genuinely surprised.

I follow along. "How old are you?"

"300 or 400, perhaps. I never count my age," he replies while pouring fresh tea into his empty cup. "I'm old for human standards, but I'm still green for other gods."

"I see… wait, I just realized something. Isn't this shrine was made for you?" If so, how can Shishiou had another master before Mikazuki?

"No, actually. This building existed long before I was born, exactly Shishiou's age. Villagers decided to use and renovated it for me, because of course, building one was a pain," Mikazuki answers easily, lifting his cup and stares at it for a long time. "There was no god enshrined here before… there were only humans."

"Shishiou's first master was… a normal human?"

As if it's a sad story, Mikazuki replies as he looks down, casting a shadow over his face. "Yes. He wasn't a shishi before, since the shrine hasn't existed yet. He was a mere wandering spirit when an old man took him in."

"And over the time, when the shrine was built and the statues were made, he became a shishi?"

"Yes."

"I never knew oddities can do that…."

"Now you know. Revolution and evolution exist for oddities. His feelings and ties with this building were so strong that he was accepted to become the head of shishi."

"I see…." What a fascinating summary. I look at Yoshiyuki and Shishiou who are still immersed in their own world. I think they should be able to hear us, but they're too concentrated in their conversation that they don't hear it, I guess. And it might be good for the both of them.

"If you're interested in the details, you might want to join your puppy friend."

"Puppy… pfft, that suits him." He has a pretty good humor sense for once. "But, nah… that summary is enough for me."

"And why is that?" As if intrigued, for the first time, he looks at me when we're talking.

"Well… even though Shishiou is so open to tell us his story, it's ultimately none of my business and I feel that I'm better off not knowing. Based on your summary, it's impossible to tell a story of the past without digging into his old wound, so I would like to avoid that."

"I see. Wise decision. Though your friend there is biting into wound right now."
"He might be. But that's fine. I'm sure he knows - the two of them know. And they can withstand it… better… than me."

The way I am now, there's no way I can bear knowing someone's deep wound, even if that person is a total stranger. Yeah… I'm so weak, I know. I'm still recovering, so things are unstable within me. Knowing that, I have to be careful when interacting with others.

Mikazuki sinks into silence, sipping his tea calmly.

After this conversation, I feel that the animosity between us goes down somehow. I feel somewhat calm next to him right now. Maybe the chirping wind chimes that calms me down have something to do with it. I'm still mad at his attitude and at the loss of my first kiss, though - never forget that.

I also stay silent as I watch the two excited people in front of me talking to each other with grinning faces. I can hear them, but as I'm not focused on anything, their words sound like unclear mumbles that succumb into the sea into bubbles in my ears.

That feeling is strikingly familiar. However, this feeling of peaceful solitude isn't something I've experienced before.

Closing my eyes, I closely listen to the sounds of wind chimes and passing summer breeze that slips through opened windows. The sounds of mumbles, the sound of bubbles, they soon disappear in the calmly swaying sea.

Before, sinking into the sea where nothing I hear is clear is nothing but a sign of how weak I am. It's an escape that only makes me feel more horrible. The sea I usually see is so empty and dark, the vast emptiness where I'm all alone scares me even more than real world, and yet I can't get out easily.

Right now, this sea is peaceful and calm. Sunlight peeks through the surface and lights up even the darkest bottom, showing underwater that is filled with colorful lives. Just watching the colorful fishes pass by, the plants swaying, the lukewarm water touching my skin… make me so calm, somehow.

Well, it's that kind of peaceful feeling.

After enjoying that sensation, I take a sip at my even-colder tea. Mikazuki and I have nothing to say, so the two of us watch Shishiou telling his past to Yoshiyuki.

And then, Shishiou suddenly looks at the clock and says, "Ah! Look at the time. It's time for the both of you to go home, right?"

Looks like story-telling time is over. I glance at the clock - yeah, it's almost 4 PM already. Time sure passes fast.

"Yeah, let's."

I stand up, opening the door. Yoshiyuki catches after me.

Shishiou sees us off with waving hands. "Be careful on the way home." He looks normal, there's no trace of pain from the past on his face. Maybe he really doesn't feel it now, or he has accepted it, or he is just hiding it. Well, none of my business.

We nod. Just when we're walking down a few steps, I notice Mikazuki's presence behind us and turn around, seeing him floating behind us like he is completely innocent.

"Old man," Shishiou says as he holds onto Mikazuki's collar, stopping him on his tracks. "What are
"You doing, about to follow them?!

"I want to follow them~ I have to make them my followers!"

"No, no, you can't! How can a god leave his shrine?!!"

"Besides, that Yamanbagiri stole my first kiss. He has to take responsibility."

"So that was your first kiss too. And please don't say it like I'm at fault, you're the one who fell onto me…" I sigh in exasperation.

"Gods can't make mistake."

"They can. Well, congrats, then, old man. But that doesn't mean you can just go!" Shishiou says in utter rejection while pulling Mikazuki back on the shrine. "Sorry for the trouble, guys. Have a nice day!"

"Please visit again tomorrow!"

_Not sure about that. Probably never._ Goodbye, Mikazuki Munechika. Let's not count our kiss as first kiss.

"It ended well, didn't it?" Yoshiyuki smiles as we go downstairs in a leisurely pace, kicking some pebbles on the way. "It was something I wanted to do in a whim. Sorry to drag ya this far, Yamanbagiri - and thank ya."

"No problem. I have nothing to do, anyway, and I'm used being dragged around by you," I reply with a nod. "Though I lost my first kiss to someone like him… I'd rather have you as my first kiss, Yoshiyuki."

Yoshiyuki's movements stop in mid-air, his leg is still hanging in the air, as though he is petrified for a while. I look at him, confused, and see his face flushes red for some reason as he awkwardly scratches his head, "Ah, ehe… I'm happy that you like me that much."

I blink a few times, still bewildered by his unusual reaction. At the end, I decide that he might be still hungry, so he acts a bit weird. "Mmm. That goes without saying - we've known each other for a long time. We're comfortable with each other, so… at this point, I might as well spend the rest of my life with you… hmm? Yoshiyuki, what's wrong? Your face is so unnaturally red."

Yoshiyuki waves one of his hands while his other one covers his mouth, but it's obvious the way his cheeks are red. "Uwaaa, I've been charmed. This is bad, isn't it? Or is this summer heat's fault?!!"

"…What are you talking about?"

"Don't think too hard about it. Anyway, let's visit them again tomorrow."

"Okay… wait, what?" Putting aside how first kiss and that relates, what I'm asking is, "Why?"

"Ya don't want to? Man, your first impression on that shinrei must be so bad!" He chuckles, snapping back to his usual self I know. "I mean, we have nothing to do, and… ya said it. Ya want to help him."

"Did I?"

"Subtly, yeah. I know ya so well that I could catch that earlier."
"Earlier… uh… in the dining room? Really?" I scratch my cheek, uncomfortable, but thinking about it… he might be right. I asked if Mikazuki can exist if two people know him, after all… it is, subtly, asking to help him.

I feel like scratching my hair in frustration. Why did I think of even helping him?! That guy, that condescending shinrei….

"Uuugh. You might be right," I answer, "Well, there's no harm done, so it's fine, I guess…"

"Hmm mm." Yoshiyuki smiles warmly as he hums happily as he goes downstairs, faster than me. "Glad it's easy to help him, isn't it?"

"Yeah, kind of. We can visit him anytime we can and… make some memories, maybe. I don't know if he is willing to cooperate with us, humans, but… let's just do whatever we can." I shrug.

We go home with our bicycles, which thankfully, aren't stolen even though we put them on the streets for so long. Cycling after going downstairs is a bit painful for my legs, thanks to the distance from the shrine to home, but it's better than when we went upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Rice straw or hemp rope used for ritual purification in Shinto. Usually hung with shide (zig-zag shaped paper streamer) and indicates a sacred or pure space, such as shrines. It is believed to ward off evil spirits.

*I decided not to use past tense even in the flashback. It can be good to confuse readers in the future, too…and I'm actually bad at using past tense (laughs). As a foreigner, using present tense is much more easier in a story.

*By the way, feel free to ask me anything - about this story, the details, or even about myself. If you're too shy to comment here, you can visit my Curious Cat here. It's so empty, I would be happy if you ask or confess something.
"Good morning, Brother."

"Good morning, Yamanbagiri! Kakaka, you're awake early today, for a summer break. Want to go to morning training with me? Morning runs and meditation, of course. Or do you prefer the chanting sutra one?"

Brother Yamabushi greets me soon after I walk downstairs from my room to the dining room. He is there with his casual clothes, his teal hair isn't covered with his usual... uh... cloth hat? Whatever the name is. He is reading the newspaper with a cup of tea on the table.

"Next time, maybe. I have a plan with Yoshiyuki today," I reply as I slide a chair a sit there. That being said, out of ten times I said that, I didn't practice with him for seven times. Yeah, sorry, Brother, your youngest brother isn't interested in the deeper spiritual teachings. Neither does brother Horikawa, though.

"Kakaka, sure. I'll be waiting."

Hmm? Wait... maybe the usual training is good for me now? Now that I'm involved with a shinrei, I have to think of a countermeasure against something... or something. Hmm. My pessimistic mind thinks of so many ways things can go down to hell, I'm kinda paranoid now...yeah, better do it than sorry later.

"Brother, can you train me tomorrow morning? How long will it take?"

"Hmm? Sure, of course! About two hours, maybe, up to you. Full course takes a whole day, though."

There's enough time, then. I can meet Yoshiyuki in the afternoon. Wait, I don't even know if I'm going to the shrine tomorrow too... if I don't, I can take the full course, then.

"Okay, tomorrow morning, then."

Brother Yamabushi nods in understanding. Now I have a schedule for tomorrow.

"Good morning! I'm happy you woke up early, Yamanbagiri," Brother Horikawa says from the kitchen with a high volume, sounding busy. "Mind helping me out?"

"I don't mind." When he asks that, he is actually commanding me, anyway.

I walk to the kitchen and bring over the plates and rice bowls Brother Horikawa told me to take and place them on the table, then take my own seat. Brother Horikawa follows with more plates and takes his seat.

"Let's eat."

We clap our hands, say our prayers, and start to dig in with our chopsticks. Today's menu is a vegetarian one, as Brother Yamabushi is here. Unusually, he hasn't been going anywhere for the
past two weeks, so Brother Horikawa has been wracking his brain to make various menus every day. It isn't easy to cook vegetarian menus, it seems. This isn't a bad thing, of course. After all, thanks to his job, Brother Yamabushi likes to go missing for days, weeks, or even months without any contact whatsoever. This has been going for almost five years now. He has his own outdated flip cellphone, but he rarely uses it. Even with that, he likes to go to places without a good reception, so the cellphone will be unusable... anyway, this is a pretty rare occasion for the Kunihiro family to eat breakfast with the three members, so I'm happy.

What about our parents, you ask?

They died in a train accident when I was three years old. The train they were at derailed from its tracks, fell to the cliff, and... I'm sure you can imagine how messy it was. Around fifty was killed and many more were injured. An investigation revealed that the tracks and the wheels hadn't been maintained very well... well, that's the gist of it. I think they were on the way back to Suzuran after visiting an exhibition. Because it was a work, they left us, the siblings, home, and the accident happened.

I take a peek at the batsudan [2] - an altar, a big shelf containing their framed photos, an incense burner, candles, flowers, a plate with fruits and a cup of tea as offerings, and a small rin gong [3]. It's not decorated luxuriously as we're pretty tight on money - okay, batsudan are mostly expensive, but our father was a dedicated monk so he got a discount long before I was born - but enough as a reminder for our deceased family members.

My future self might rarely narrate it, but of course, as a proper ritual, I rung the rin gong, light up the incense, and pray for them every morning. I pray for my parents and his safety in the other world.

"How is it?" Brother Horikawa asks.

"It's perfect as usual, brother," I reply after I taste the sweet potato miso soup and rice with bamboo shoots. I take a good look at the dishes - there are a variety of radish dishes, even oden made of radish and konjac. Simple, but seasoned and cooked so well. Everything is so delicious. Brother Horikawa is a cooking genius. No kidding.

"Kakakaka! I can tell you're getting better at cooking, Brother!" Brother Yamabushi says after he eats the sesame tofu in delight. "I'll never get bored eating your food!"

Brother Horikawa smiles, "There are still plenty, so feel free to take seconds!"

"This is still morning, you know...."

Well, that's how every morning with Brother Yamabushi goes in my house. Brother Yamabushi likes to tell stories about his journey, especially about what kind of foods he has eaten in the mountains. He is a specialist - that is, his job involves oddities - but he never tells us about the cases. Brother Horikawa doesn't know about oddities and such - he can't see them, unlike me and Brother Yamabushi. All he knows is that Brother Yamabushi travels around as a normal monk.

"Well, I'm going, then. Thanks for the food." I say after I put my empty plates and bowls in the kitchen and take my bag - which only has a wallet, a mineral bottle and a portable fan inside.

"Will you come back for lunch?" Brother Horikawa asks.

I think for a bit, but at the end, "Mmm, I don't know. But can you wrap me a lunchbox, just in case? Also another for Yoshiyuki."

"Sure, wait a minute."
He packs me two lunchboxes from breakfast's leftovers, which is quite plenty. He gives the wrapped boxes and takes me to the entrance.

"Be careful on your way."

"Yeah. I'm off."

"Kakaka! Yamanbagiri's off to an adventure, I'm so happy!" Brother Yamabushi's voice echoes from the living room.

"Really, I'm just going to play with Yoshiyuki….

I wear my outdoor shoes and take off with my bicycle, going to my usual meeting spot with Yoshiyuki - a park not far from our houses. When I arrive there, Yoshiyuki is unexpectedly already waiting.

"Yo," he greets me with a smile. "Ready to go to that shrine again?"

"Mmm. By the way, I brought us lunch. From Brother Horikawa. I don't want to decrease their food supplies."

"Ahaha, you're right. Thanks for bringing one for me," Yoshiyuki says as he rides his bicycle, "Let's buy some popsicles on the way. We need it. It's going to be hot today."

"Yeah."

I have no idea how will we spend our time until afternoon in that shrine - I'm thinking that we should do our summer homework, but I'm sure Yoshiyuki's going to cry, saying that a holiday should be used for fun times - so I'll tag along with him for now. I never get bored when I'm around him.

"Hey," Yoshiyuki greets Shishiou who is sweeping the shrine grounds with a broom. I, meanwhile, wave my hand as a greeting.

Shishiou looks completely dumbfounded, "Whoa, you two actually come again?!

"Well, yeah. We're here to… kill time," I just nod, "Do you mind?"

"N-Nope… in fact, I'm happy to have a visitor again!" He smiles widely. "This is a shrine. Anyone is welcome here. Aren't you happy, old man?"

"I would be delighted if you offer money again," Mikazuki says as he steps in, coming from the shrine building, smiling. "That's one of the main reason gods need faith."

"Seriously?" Yoshiyuki chuckles awkwardly and lifts the plastic bag on his hand, "We have popsicles, if ya want."

"Pop…sicles? A cold food like ice cream?"

Well, at least he knows. "Yeah. We have enough for everyone. For you too, Shishiou," I say as I rummage the plastic bag and takes a popsicle, offering it to Shishiou.

"So gracious! Thank you. Guess I'll take a break," Shishiou says as he takes the popsicle, "Oh, I
gotta serve some drinks too."

"It's fine, don't bother."

He already runs off before I finish my sentence. Uhh… he seems like he really wants to serve us something, so I can't just refuse his kindness. I guess it's fine…

After taking a popsicle from Yoshiyuki, Mikazuki quietly leads us on the way to the office building we visited yesterday. Hmm, he is more open that I expected him to be. Maybe he doesn't see any harm in inviting us.

This time, I bring a small, portable fan that runs with battery. I'm well prepared. I bought it a few weeks ago, but I haven't gotten any chance to use it, so it still has enough energy to run today. After we sit on the cushions, I immediately feel so hot inside the boiling old building and turn on the fan. I lay my head on the table in front of it as I eat my popsicle. Yoshiyuki grumbles, he obviously wants to shower himself with the fan's coldness too, but he lets the owner feel it first. Good kid. He continues to eat his own popsicle.

That being said, the fan only gives a small breeze. It's not as good as a big fan or AC.

Mikazuki looks curiously at me - at my fan, to be exact. I stare back at him. After a few moments, he finally asks, "Yamanbagiri, what is that?"

He easily calls my given name… I already knew this yesterday, but it still feels a little uncomfortable.

"A portable fan."

"A… fan? What is that?"

I slide the portable fan to face him and blow him with cold air. Experience speaks better than words. Feeling this, he mutters, "Oooh…"

"Normally, there is only the big ones, but this portable small fan that can be carried everywhere exists too. It's not much, but better than nothing anyway."

"Come to think of it… there's really no fan or other air conditioning to help in summer here, huh?" Yoshiyuki asks, having finished his popsicle. "By the way, where's the trash bin?"

"In the kitchen," Shishiou replies as he steps in with a tray full of filled cups. "Here it is. It's orange juice I bought last night. I didn't say this yesterday, but we actually have ice cubes in the fridge, so here it is!" He puts the cups on the table - unlike yesterday, the cups are made of glass, and of course, we can see the orange color inside.

"Thanks!" Yoshiyuki goes to the kitchen.

"Why didn't you bring the ice cubes yesterday, then?" I say as I take a glass and drink it after I finish my popsicle. Phew… how refreshing. It tastes pretty nice and the coldness is so good for my throat.

"Mikazuki-dono said it was a disgrace to put ice cubes inside green tea," he chuckles.

"…Wow, so old-fashioned." I just blurt that out without thinking. Whoops. Not old-fashioned, really, but I mean… come on, just ices on a tea, what's so wrong?

"Oh, what do you know," Mikazuki groans almost immediately, anger is clear in his voice, even as he smiles elegantly. He is sitting next to me, so I can clearly feel his thick menace. I feel sweat fall
down from my forehead for another reason than the heat. "As an old-fashioned person, of course I highly appreciate the original culture that has existed for decades. I've been drinking green tea without such extras for hundreds of years, and I'm completely fine with it. I see no point on adding such extras."

"But without extras... green tea, or matcha, won't be such a trend now, I think. It's popular with young people nowadays as it's made like other modern drinks - with cream and other variations," I reply without looking at him while tapping my glass in anxiety. Why are we arguing again? "Without these variations, green tea might as well be forgotten in this era."

"I'm glad people like it and remember it, but still; pure, authentic green tea is the best. It's the very culture of the elegant Japanese tea ceremony. I see no reason why people should alter the original. And so... there is no need for any variations. I will not change my statement."

I take a quick glance to see his face - he looks serious with closed eyes, holding his cup tightly. Ugh.... "...That's called stubborn, to not accept the changes in the new era."

"Speak as you like. I have no power to stop inventions, anyway. There's no harm on anyone but me to reject the changes, right?"

"Even so..." If you know how painful it is going to be, why shut yourself even more in your own shell? When I'm about to say that, Shishiou claps his two hands to take our attention.

"Okay, okay. Calm down, you two. Old man, I know you're happy to meet someone who sees you as an equal like Kunihiro-san - "

"I'm not."

"- And Kunihiro-san, I don't know you very well, but I can tell that you genuinely want to help this old man, and I'm very grateful, but there is no point in arguing over subjective opinions like that. People have different preferences that might clash with each other, which is normal, but arguing won't result in a definite answer. After all, your own preferences are your truths. There's no point in attacking each other for no reason at all."

"I-It's not like I want to help him..."

That's my defensive answer, okay. Obviously tsundere-like, and when I realize that I feel like banging my head onto the wall.

"E-Erm, anyway, I agree that it's pointless... I-I'm sorry, Muneshika-sa - ma, I got too heated there." I slightly turn around to face Mikazuki and bow deeply to hide my messy face. And I don't want to see him. Not yet.

I hear Mikazuki taking a deep breath before he replies, his voice is low as though he is mumbling awkwardly, "...It's fine. I apologize as well, I said too much... lift your head."

I lift my head just as he told me to, but I'm still avoiding his gaze. I turn away and gulp down the last drops of my orange juice, trying to shake off the awkwardness. In the corner of my eyes, I can see Shishiou grinning seeing the two of us as he sits and eats the popsicle.

Sighs... really, I don't think I can get along well with Mikazuki. Our conversations so far somehow naturally turn into a conflict.

Putting the glass on the table, I see Yoshiyuki peeks from the kitchen, as though he is checking the situation, and then finally goes back to his cushion with a blank look on his face. He...must've heard...
our arguments, and decided to stay still for a while until we calmed down… and he doesn't want to get involved at all! I can tell from his smiling lips yet blank eyes! …Well, I can't blame him. That was a stupid and personal conflict….

Yoshiyuki takes his glass and drinks it. It must be rather lukewarm now. "Are there other ice cubes, Shishiou?"

"Yeah, in the fridge. Go back to the kitchen."

Yoshiyuki grumbles in displeasure that he has to go back to the kitchen (though it isn't far), but he stands up anyway. "Who else wants ice?"

"Me. Also throw the stick away for me, please." I give him my glass and a stick from popsicle. He nods, goes to the kitchen, and after some time comes back with two glasses now filled with ice cubes. "Thanks." I take mine from his hands and refill the orange juice from the… what is it name… err, big glass? Like teapot, but not for tea. You get me, don't you?

I drink the now-cold-again juice in delight, sighing happily along with Yoshiyuki.

"Haaa… cold drinks are the best…." He mutters with closed eyes.

"It is… I need more popsicle now…"

Shishiou laughs seeing the two of us. "You drink like the juice is a hot tea in winter or sake, really."

"We've never drunk sake, but yeah… it's a bliss, ya know?" Yoshiyuki says with a smile. "When your throat is burning and the sweet, cold liquid runs through… it feels so good!"

"Oh? Want to drink sake here? I have some good ones in the storage! Just take your pick."

Shishiou looks so excited. sake in a shrine, seriously? I can only sweat, waving my hands. "We're still underage, so we have to decline, thank you."

"Oww, too bad. I'll make sure to save some sake for you guys in a few years, then! Drinking sake together makes people closer, you know."

Yoshiyuki proceeds to laugh and I just nod a few times, having no idea what to say. After that, he sends a glance to me and I move the fan to him, knowing that's what he wants. He slides his head on the table lazily as he feels the wind. Now I have nothing to cool me down….

"Old man, aren't you eating your popsicle? It's gonna melt."

"Oh? Ah, yes…."

Turning my head a bit, I can see Mikazuki awkwardly takes the popsicle and opens the wrapper - he tries to, anyway. He fails to do so. He tries a few times again, but still fails. His face is filled with questions now - he seems to be having a hard time to open it, but he also seems reluctant to ask for help.

I can't help but to giggle and take the popsicle from him. "Like this." I show him the way, open the wrapper, and give it back to him.

"M-mm… thank you."

It might be just my imagination, but I can see faint colors of red on his cheeks as he reluctantly takes the popsicle and eats it. Well, he is unexpectedly cute when he is being shy, isn't he? I feel like
teasing him, but I refrain for now and drink my orange juice to the last drops.

Yoshiyuki takes the bait and asks, "Is it good?"

Mikazuki doesn't reply immediately. He looks at his half-eaten popsicle, turns to see me, and looks at Yoshiyuki with a weird face. "...W-Well, not bad, at least."

"That's good, then!"

When I notice, my glass is now empty and my throat is dry. Uuuh... I look at the clock - it's almost 12 now.

Shishioh seems to notice the time and stand up. "Well, time to cook for lunch. What do you guys want?" He asks me and Yoshiyuki.

"We brought ourselves lunch, so we only need drinks."

"Alright! We'll eat lunch together, so please wait until I finish cooking." He goes to the kitchen and all sorts of sounds are coming out from there. Better not disturb him, eh.

"Yamanbagiri, let's walk to the forest. Aren't ya bored?" Yoshiyuki suddenly speaks up, leaning closer to me and slides the fan along. The wind brushes my cheeks and hair. Nice....

"Yeah, I'm bored. Let's go, then. It's rare for us to wander around the forest. Please take care of my fan, Munechika-sama." Urgh, it's still hard for me to call him like that.

The two of us slowly and lazily stand up when Mikazuki says, "Just a warning - be careful to not lose your way. There are also hunters inside. Human predators, you can say. It's better if you stay near the shrine."

"...Human predators?" I repeat in doubt, "What kind?"

"All sorts of creatures," Mikazuki smiles and finishes his popsicle. "Take care, you two. A forest isn't a safe place to wander about mindlessly... especially a sacred forest like that one."

I feel like I have to inquire more about the sacred forest part, but Yoshiyuki impatiently tugs on my sleeve, quietly asking me to go with his puppy eyes. Welp, I've lost before the battle even started.

"Okay, okay. Let's go."

Anyway, I think it's an accomplishment that we got Mikazuki to say these warm words, but there's also a part of me that thinks he is actually teasing us with evil intentions. Which one is he, really? Well, I only have to keep his warning in mind for our safety.

We get out of the office building to the courtyard. Yoshiyuki stops walking in front of the forest's entrance - that is, rows of trees that stretch out to the sky. Even I'm feeling a bit disheartened seeing how thick the forest is from the outside... there's no actual entrance, of course. We have to make our way.

"Want to go first, Yamanbagiri?" Yoshiyuki asks, stammering. He must be feeling a bit scared now that the real thing is in front of him. He is an adventurous boy, but Mikazuki's warning must be too scary, even for him - which might be why he doesn't want to hear more and pulled me away.

"No way. You invited me, so you go first."

He groans unhappily, but he steps forward anyway. The hot breeze passes us, swaying his long back
hair and green leaves. The cicadas' cries buzz in my ears as the moment seems to stop in front of me.

*Yoshiyuki is about to leave. If he enters that forest, he will never come back.*

That thought suddenly passes by my mind as I see his dependable yet childish back that has protected me countless times, seemingly walking to somewhere far away without me. His back is swaying, as though he'll scatter into petals of flowers. When I think that he'll leave me and *I'll leave him*, I can't help but to stretch out my hand and let out my voice.

"Wait!"

Everything happened so fast beyond my conscious thoughts.

When I snap back to reality, Yoshiyuki is looking at me weirdly, tilting his head. "What's wrong?"

"No, umm…"

He looks completely normal. The forest looks normal. There should be no harm if I keep my eyes closely on him… right?

"It's nothing. Sorry, did I surprise you?"

"Yeah, ya sure did! His warning really got ya, huh?" He laughs.

"Said the one whose legs are shaking the most."

"Ssh!! That should be a secret!!"

Well, at least he is honest. I just smile and laugh along with him before I push his back. "Now, now, let's go together."

Yoshiyuki smiles and nods, taking my hand along as he steps forward into the forest. Ahh, I should be standing by his side, yet here I am, always hiding behind him… unconscious acts, isn't it?

I carefully walk faster and move to stand by his side, and then slip my hand away from him.

His existence is my only salvation during dark times. For a sinner like me, having a warm light that guides and protects you is almost like a miracle.

Now that I moved to his class, the closest person to him is me. He stays by my side most of the time, clinging onto me, sometimes doesn't even want to let go. Some classmates said it looks like I'm pampering him, a clingy puppy - but that's wrong. I'm the one who is clingy to him. I'm the one who needs him the most. He knows that, so he stays with me… and he also feels responsible. I can tell that he wants to see me happy.

I feel that I don't deserve to have him all by myself. At the same time, I don't want to push him away. I'm so happy to be around him that I don't want to let go. It's selfish of me.

So, at the very least, I want to stop hiding behind his back. I can't let myself be the one who is always protected - I have to protect him, too. That's why; I shouldn't be watching his back and praying for the best, I have to be someone he can depend on, like how I depend on him.

We have to stand on equal grounds, side by side -

"Ah."
"Yoshiyuki?"

I ask, snapping out of my train of thought when I notice Yoshiyuki stops a few steps behind me. His face turns pale.

"D-Did ya… hear that?"

"Hear what…?"

"That sound! Uh… like an animal's wail…?"

Now I'm getting worried. "Which direction did you hear that?"

"I…I don't really know," Yoshiyuki sounds and looks like he is about to panic, or maybe he already is already panicking, "That wail sounds kinda close, though…"

"Maybe we should get back?" We aren't that far from the shrine, and so far, there are only green bushes and trees all around us. "If you're so troubled, maybe we should."

"W-Well…."

Just then, I can see something blurry is running straight to Yoshiyuki from left.

"Yoshiyuki, beside you - !"

That warning is too late. When he turns around, that something already strikes him in full speed until he falls backwards. Dumfounded, I can only stare until I finally understand… that thing has light fur, and its features tell me that it is a…

"…A dog?"

As if to confirm me, the dog starts to lick Yoshiyuki's face. "Ahaha! That tickles! Wait, time out!!" He pats the dog's head and the dog finally stops sitting on him, moving sideways with excited movements. He moves slightly and looks closely at the light-brown-colored dog. Its tail sways around happily as it barks softly. Yoshiyuki stands up, patting the dog, and sighs in relief. "Welp, that really surprised me."

"Yeah. It's only a… harmless dog." I approach the dog and softly pat its head, feeling the softness of its fur. The dog nods happily at me. Ah… so cute… I can have a pet back home, but, it's too bothersome at the end. "This is shiba inu, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Japan's original breed of dog! Pure loyalty! Good natured!"

"What are you saying so proudly about? Anyway, ahh… so cute… the fur is so soft… so fluffy…."

"Man, ya really can't hold back against fluffiness, can ya?" Yoshiyuki laughs and ruffled the dog's back (because I'm still patting its head).

"You're no different."

"So the hunters he mentioned are shiba inu dogs… well, they're originally bred for hunting, but…," He puffs his cheeks, seemingly angry, "They aren't human hunters! That's so cruel of him…"

The tone of his voice tells me that he is just joking around, but maybe he is really a bit annoyed at Mikazuki.
"There might be other hunters, too, like bears."

"B-Bears?! Please stop scaring me - !!!"

"Oh, I honestly forgot you're easily afraid of real life animal hunters," I chuckle at his cute, frightened face. "You have the face of a hunter yourself. Your wild personality helps, too, but you're not good with seemingly-scary wild animals. Don't judge the book by the cover, Yoshiyuki. Bears can be unbearably cute, you know?"

"This and that are two different things! And that pun only works in English! Sheesh… hmm?"

Yoshiyuki looks down when he notices that the dog is biting his sleeve and slightly pulls him, as if asking him to go along. "What's wrong? You want me to go some… awawa?!"

The dog pulls him forcefully and although he looks surprised and confused, he follows it carefully. I follow him closely behind, wondering where the dog wants to take us to. We're slowly going further from the shrine… and maybe because of that, I'm getting anxious. Is going with the dog a good idea? Are we safe in an unknown place?

"H-Hey….

When I'm about to ask, the dog stops walking, so does Yoshiyuki. I look around, seeing that we arrived at a rather big space without trees. The dog lets go of his sleeve and walks around while barking. After that, rustling sounds are coming out from the bushes.

Startled, Yoshiyuki and I instinctively get closer, our backs hit each other. We're surrounded by something. We can feel it. When we're high on caution and scared, the things show their forms, coming out from the bushes.

A bunch of other cute shiba inu dogs. They're looking at the two of us with sparkling eyes.

I feel stupid for being so cautious. Of course there are other dogs here!

Some of them jump right on Yoshiyuki. I avoid the collision and let him fall on the ground, but then another dog strikes my back and I also fall on the ground. I feel no pain, but I feel a tickling sensation on my back and start to laugh with Yoshiyuki. We're being attacked by the dogs' soft fur. I feel more pressure on my back and then a paw touches my cheek. And another paw. Again and again, as if curious.

"I don't know what's happening, but, this is heaven of fluff."

"Wait, don't leave me alone, Yamanbagiri!!"

Yoshiyuki gets up, shooing away the dogs that surround him and comes to my rescue. He frees me from the dogs and helps me to sit on the ground. He waves his arm around as if to tell the dogs to not jump on us again, which somehow works. The dogs keep enough distance for us to catch our breath.

I take my mineral water bottle and drink it. Now that I've calmed down, I look at the great number of dogs. "How many of them are here, really…?"

"Thirty or maybe more… I've never seen something like this," Yoshiyuki says, frantically drinking his water. "Haa… I thought my heart's gonna leapt out of my body! And though they're soft, they're also too heavy for my body!"

"I agree… now that we were invited here, I feel bad for not playing with them, though."
"Yeah, maybe we should make them happy. I mean, who can resist these eyes?!!" He sounds really excited as he squeals like a fanboy. I've only seen this part of him in gaming events, so it is quite rare.

"Let's play with them, then. We have plenty of time until lunch."

Yoshiyuki nods and smiles. He stands up and approaches one of the dogs. God knows which one is the dog that took us here. He pats the dog, saying, "We will play with y'all, but there are limits, okay. Be kind with us."

The dog barks, as if it understands what he said and the other dogs follow. He then throws rocks around and start to play with the dogs. He looks like a natural pack leader, I'm so surprised that I can't move, but that scene also warms up my heart somehow. He looks like he is having fun playing with the dogs.

As someone who resembles a cute puppy, especially with that kind of wild hair, Yoshiyuki has always wanted to have a pet back home. However, his mother is allergic to dogs and cats, so he has to refrain from having one. He usually plays with stray dogs on the streets and parks. Every dog he meets is always docile to him, even if it's their first meeting. It might be one of his unexpected qualities to be loved by dogs anywhere - even in the middle of a forest.

"...Hm?"

I notice a dog slowly walks up next to me. I turn to look at it - a shiba inu dog with white cream color, the only one that is different from the rest of the pack. There might be other dogs in the pack that has the same color as this one does, but I didn't see any so far.

"What's wrong? You're not going to play with Yoshiyuki?"

The dog only stares back at me, its dark eyes somehow looks sad. I feel that this dog has a different aura from the rest... I wonder why. I feel intrigued. When my outstretched hand almost touches the dog, Yoshiyuki yells at me.

"Hey! Ya gotta help me here, Yamanbagiri!"

I turn around, seeing Yoshiyuki is surrounded by excited dogs. Some pulls his sleeves, wanting to take him somewhere, but the others pull him to another direction. He smiles awkwardly, sweat falling down from his forehead, looking as though he has a hard time. I stand up and stretch my arms.

"What should I do?"

"Just get them off of me first, please?" I do as he asked by shifting their attention to me. It succeeds as the dogs let him free. Yoshiyuki smiles happily as he pats my shoulder, "Thanks! Now, then... we have to play with them. Man, their numbers are kinda scaring me, but we can do it together."

"Tell me what to do, okay? I'm lost here."

"Just leave it to me!"

I look at my resting place before - the cream dog is nowhere to be found, probably already blending with the other dogs. I decide to not think about it.

After that, we play with the dogs - running around, throwing things, patting them, and everything else Yoshiyuki can think of. I'm not too familiar with handling animals, let alone a pack of excited dogs, so I have a hard time, but Yoshiyuki is there to actively help me.
He really helps me so many times, too many to be counted… my debts to him just keep on piling. I'm not good at anything, but if I can make him happy and keep him safe, then at least… that's my only way of returning the debts, returning everything he has given me.

"Uwaah, look at the time! No wonder I'm so hungry…"

Yoshiyuki's voice snaps me out of my daydream. He is looking at his smartphone.

"Let's go back, Yamanbagiri. They might be worried and too hungry to wait for us."

"Yeah, let's."

We part ways with the dogs after patting them one by one. They might have realized that it is parting time and they accept it, waving around their tails and bark softly, as if telling us we're accepted to come back someday. They're all good dogs.

The two of us go back to the direction of the shrine. I fortunately remember the path with confidence so that we don't get lost. Even when I'm thinking hard, I can still take notes of my surroundings, you know. Besides, I'm pretty familiar with wandering in a forest because Brother Yamabushi has taken me to many adventures before.

"That was fun!" Yoshiyuki says on the way back, "What about ya? Did ya have fun?"

"Yeah, I think I did. It was hard, but these dogs are nice. It was a good experience… and I was able to see another part of you."

"Huh? What part?"

"A natural born pack leader."

Yoshiyuki stares hard at me, his face is colored with various mixed emotions. He looks funny like this. "I know that's a compliment, but I feel like I'm being treated as a dog, so my heart is kinda hurting right now."

I just smile at him. "You're a human, of course. You watch Dog Whisperer, right? That show from America. The pack leader for domesticated dogs is human… at least that's what I got from the show."

"Hmm…well, whatever. I'll take that positively and maybe become a dog whisperer someday!" He says as he raises his fist to the sky.

"Good luck with that."

"Eeh, why are ya saying that as if it's impossible?!"

"I never said that. It's possible, so I'm cheering you on."

"O-Oh…." He looks suddenly embarrassed now, with his cheeks going slightly red. "W-Well, I'm glad if that's the case, then. I'll do my best, for ya too."

"Yeah. It's probably the only thing you're suited for, anyway."

"That hurts way too much!!"

"Just kidding. If you try, you can become anything."
With my compliment, he sulks because he is embarrassed. "Mmmu, that attack was so unfair."

"It's way too fun teasing you."

I chuckle as we finally reach the shrine grounds. Shishiou is waiting for us in front of the offering box.

"And when I'm about to search for you two… geez, don't make me get worried for nothing!" He says, running up to us when he notices our presence.

"Sorry about that," Yoshiyuki says with a wave of a hand, "Now, let's have lunch. I'm hungry!"

"Ahaha, sure. I made some sweets as well."

We make our way to the dining room, where dishes are served on the table. We sit in our respective seats and I take out two lunchboxes wrapped in a cloth - the ones Brother Horikawa prepared. I give one to Yoshiyuki and open it, revealing a variety of radish dishes with white rice.

When I look at the dishes Shishiou prepared, they look quite similar. He points this out as he peeks into my box, "Still radish, huh? Is your family connected with shrines?"

"My eldest brother is a Buddhist monk, so he is a vegetarian. When he is around, we have vegetarian food, too."

"Oooh… can I have some?"

"Sure."

I let him take some of the radish with his chopsticks and after that, I start eating myself. The rice isn't as warm as it was before, of course, but it still tastes delicious with the radish and some sweet potatoes.

"Nn…!! It's good, even better than mine! Your brother is great!" Shishiou's eyes are wide open when he tastes the radish. "I might ask for recipes someday."

"Go ahead."

"Still, I think I have to change our meals a bit, Mikazuki-dono. Having radish every day is boring, isn't it?"

"It is. But we have no money to buy more ingredients. We're barely living like this."

"Please work, too, then. Or at least help me with housework so that I can work full time."

"No way. Why should a god work? Housework is an absolute no, too."

Whoa, I feel so bad to Shishiou now… ah, he is pouting now.

"Shishiou-san is working? Where?" Yoshiyuki asks, pointing out what I'm about to ask, his cheeks are stuffed with food. He munches it down quickly.

"Mm? Yeah. A part-time job at a bookstore near here."

"That means normal people can see you, even though you're an oddity? How?" I raise a question. "Well, without that, you won't be able to buy ingredients too…"
"Yeah, normal people can see me, because I have a real body."

"A real… body?" I repeat carefully.

"I'm originally a statue, of course, being a shishi. As long as that statue is there, I'm visible to normal people's eyes. All oddities that have real bodies like me, be it inside a statue or tools - anything physical - can materialize their spirit form in front of normal people."

"Ooh, so your human form is your spirit…," He nods in understanding. "So, can ya turn your visibility on and off?"

"What am I, a switch?" Shishiou chuckles, "I can, though. It took some time to master it, but now I can do it freely."

"Hee…." Yoshiyuki sounds like he is fascinated. Well, it's our first time knowing that oddities can do that.

"What about your… uh… nue?" I ask out of curiosity of a thing that is wrapping itself around his shoulders all the time. And uh, he is feeding it with chopsticks, too… whoa.

"He can turn visible, too, of course, but he stays hidden most of the time because he's shy."

"Well, it'll look weird if you have a black scarf made out of fur around you all the time…"

Shishiou laughs. "It can be fashion, too!"

"By the way, speaking of real body… do ya have it, Mikazuki-sama?" Yoshiyuki asks to Mikazuki, who is eating lunch ever-so-slowly and so-elegantly.

"No. That's why I'm translucent now - I only have a spirit form. My real body turned into spirit form when I achieved godhood. Gods who have physical bodies are almost unheard of," Mikazuki replies with a rather bitter look on his face. "Some have vessels they can enter, but I have nothing."

"I see… how does it feel being a spirit?"

That question is probably asked out of genuine curiosity.

"How? Hmm… it feels like you're there, but aren't at the same time. Well, not always that negative. You can fly and float, so your body feels lighter, which is good, I guess. You can also pass through walls."

I'm glad he didn't leave that with a negative note….

"Can you fly, Shishiou-san?" I ask this time. Judging from Yoshiyuki's face, it seems that he wanted to ask the same question. I went ahead, excuse me.

"Me? Nah, I can't. I can only walk with my legs, so that's why I have to walk these stairs every day… it's so tiring!" Shishiou replies with a complain. "I wish I can fly even a bit, really."

"So not all spirit forms can fly, huh?" Yoshiyuki concludes. I nod in agreement. "I wonder how it feels to fly…"

"It's not so good, especially when the wind is strong enough to blow you away," Mikazuki says with a chuckle. "If you can't land rightly, you might get injured."

"That's scary! That left a bad taste in my mouth!"
"…Oh, right, dessert!" Shishiou suddenly says in realization. Oooh, I can't wait now. He quickly finishes eating. He puts the bowls and plates away and runs to the kitchen. He comes back with a plate of skewered *dangos*, covered in some sort of sauce. Sweet sauce, maybe? He serves it on the table.

"It has been a long time since I last had them…" I take one stick after I finished my own lunch and starts to carefully eat it. "It's so sweet and soft…"

"It's delicious!" Yoshiyuki comments as he eats the dumplings in a pace nobody can keep up with. "I've never had *dangos* this good before."

"Same here…it tastes completely different from what I've eaten before."

"Sheesh, you guys are praising me far too much!" Shishiou says with faintly red cheeks, scratching the back of his head, showing an embarrassed smile. "I usually made more *tsukimi dango*, though, for full moon viewing. It's the main dish, after all."

"Full moon viewing? Like cherry blossom viewing, ya mean?"

"Yes," Mikazuki replies, also munching down on the skewered *dangos*. He looks amused, his eyes are glinting with passion all of sudden. "It is called *tsukimi* [4], a celebration of honoring the mid-autumn moon. We usually only do it when it's full moon, though."

"Hee… so we have that kind of tradition…" Yoshiyuki mumbles. "It's unheard of nowadays… but eating food together while enjoying nature seems nice."

"If we have the time, we should do it together. All four of us," Shishiou says, as if creating a promise - one I don't mind. "Sometimes we have *sake*. Maybe that's when you can finally taste the greatness of *sake*."

"You're still trying to invite underage people to drink? Please stop," I say with a soft chuckle. "Anyway, I want to do it, too, someday."

"Me too! Mainly for the food, but, watching nature is also great!"

"At least you're honest," Mikazuki smiles, "The aristocrats' version of *tsukimi* includes writing poetry and even watch the moon aboard boats to see the moon's reflection on the surface of the water, but the simple version is enough. What's important is the grace and honor to the moon."

Speaking about the full moon while eating *dangos*, I can almost imagine its round shape, shining on the sky. *Dangos* are, just like the moon, round like a ball. Maybe that's why it's the main food in *tsukimi*.

"By the way, sometimes we also eat *soba* or *udon*. *Tsukimi* version, of course," Shishiou continues with a grin. "Sometimes we have mooncakes, too! Anything's good for *tsukimi*."

"That sounds so delicious…" Yoshiyuki says, drooling already. "Uwaah, I'm getting hungry again now…"

Shishiou laughs warmly. "There's plenty of *dangos*, go ahead and dig them all!"

Yoshiyuki and I happily take up his offer and eat more *dangos* than we usually have. It feels like a feast. After all of the *dangos* are eaten, the two of us fall back to the *tatami* floor, completely full.

"Yoshiyuki, let's become cows together."
"I don't mind if it's with ya… let's sleep…"

"Oi, at least tidy up your own lunchboxes," Shishiou scolds us as he stands up with plates and bowls on his hands. He goes to the kitchen and starts to clean them.

"Ya do it, Yamanbagiri~" Yoshiyuki mewls.

"Okay, okay."

I lazily sit and close the lid of my lunchbox and Yoshiyuki’s, wrap them again in the cloth and put them inside my bag. I shift my gaze to my portable fan which is facing Mikazuki.

"I thought you're fine with the heat?" I ask him, seeing him using my portable fan so happily.

"I was, but now that the two of you - humans - know me, my form is slowly returning, and I feel a bit hot," he smiles as the wind blows his deep blue hair. "Weather is slowly affecting me again, for better or worse."

"I see. That's an unexpectedly quick comeback."

"I'm surprised by this as well. Two people can affect so much… imagine ten or even hundreds of people know me. I'll gain most of my godly powers back."

He looks quite pleased by the result. I'm glad if everything works well.

"What happens when ya gain most of your god powers?" Yoshiyuki asks, slowly sitting on the cushion, after finished his short break on floor.

"What happens, huh… nothing will change drastically, really. I'll gain more believers, more faith, and in turn can prosper the crops and harvest, prevent major disasters… these kinds of simple things," Mikazuki replies, the tone of his voice is unusually light, "I'm just a local god. I don't have a big influence - I don't have that much power to begin with. As such, all I can do is to make my land stay in peace. It isn't like what you thought, is it? It's a bit low as a god."

"It's not low. That's still… sounds wonderful." I express my honest thoughts. "With that power, you can make everyone happy to a degree."

There is a slight pause as he clenches on his tea cup. "…That's right. I want to make my people happy, even for a bit… unfortunately," he looks at the windows, to the far away blue sky, "Now that I'm invisible and without power, I can't make the people around here happy. I can't protect them. And that is… a disgrace as a god." He grits his teeth, as though he is genuinely annoyed at how powerless he is now.

That scene makes me want to help him even more. I don't doubt it now. My resolve is renewed - I have to empower him, even a bit. Judging from Yoshiyuki's stern, determined face, I can tell that he is thinking the same. Mikazuki might be prideful and hurt my pride as a human sometimes, but at the very end, he is a responsible shinrei seeking his people's happiness. And that is not a bad thing at all.

"By the way, Yoshiyuki, are we going to come here tomorrow as well?"

"Yeah, that's my plan. Did ya have any plans?"

"Mm, I'm thinking to train with brother Yamabushi. I think you should come, too. It should only last until noon."
Yoshiyuki looks like he is getting disheartened for some reason. "W-What kind of training?"

"Physical training. Buddhist training, you know… but it might enhance our spiritual power, which might help us in troubled times," I reply as I pat his shoulder a few times, encouraging him, "Don't worry, I've done it a few times. It's not painful, especially in summer. Just take it easy."

"I'll take your offer, then! Please take care of me." He nods a few times with a smile.

"By the way, you have to come to my house by six tomorrow. You can do it, can't you? And don't have breakfast yet."

"Uuum… I'll try." Yoshiyuki doesn't look convincing at all. He smiles awkwardly, as if knowing he'll be late tomorrow.

"I don't believe you, so I'll give you a wakeup call." That's my last resort. "Hmm, wait, if you're coming, then it might be better to do full-day training… I've done the training a few times, but this is the first for you. If you don't do it regularly, it won't help."

Yoshiyuki holds his chin with a hand, thinking deeply, making a weird sound. "Uuuh… it sounds so scary and hard, but… let's do it, then! It's better to get all sorts of experience, isn't it!"

"Alright. Then, we won't come tomorrow;" I say as I take a glance at Mikazuki.

"Yes, yes. We won't get lonely, don't worry, just do your training rightly," Mikazuki says with a smile, waving his hand as if swatting bugs, "Buddhist training, isn't it? Are you sure you aren't going to become a specialist someday?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I haven't decided on anything. It's a pretty dangerous, secluded work, without much pay too….

"Certainly, it isn't a job for the weak - both physically and mentally. But, if you like to help people, it might be suitable for you. Or maybe, if you're adventurous and want to see all kinds of wonders in this world. It's a pretty tough job, especially for this era. But if you choose to do it, do it rightly and thoroughly… there's no room for hesitation."

I feel like he is hinting that I like to help people. "Yeah… the future me can decide, I guess. For now, I want to do whatever I can."

"Now then~" Yoshiyuki stretches out his arms to the sky, "Wanna go home? I actually have something I want to watch."

"We should, then." I take away my portable fan and put it inside my bag after I stand up.

"It looks like you two will bother us again for the next few days. I'm happy that tomorrow will be a breather," Mikazuki speaks up with a smile. This time, his smile isn't intimidating whatsoever - it's actually pretty warm.

"Or even a few weeks. Yeah. Sorry about that!" Yoshiyuki grins.

"I don't mind. Bring me that fan again, and I'll comply."

"I think you better buy an actual, big fan….

"We have no money."

"…Good luck saving it, then."
Yoshiyuki approaches the kitchen and yells, "We're going home, Shishiou-san! Thank you so much for today!"

"See you!" Shishiou shouts back in-between the sounds of pouring water.

The two of us go outside of the shrine all by ourselves. Mikazuki obviously won't see us off. I thought he'll take the chance to follow us, but I guess not. Maybe Shishiou has pressed him to give up on that idea.

Yoshiyuki looks at the forest surrounding the shrine. "We should play with those dogs when we come again. And bring food for them!"

"Yeah, we should. I'll leave the food for dogs to you."

"Leave it to me!"

"Oh. Speaking of dogs… did you see one dog with cream color?" I remember a dog that approached me. It looked different from the rest of dogs… I feel curious for no reason.

"Hmm?" He looks up at the sky, thinking, but shrugs anyway, "I don't really remember… what about it?"

"That dog approached me before, but it soon vanished… and I didn't see it again. I feel that there's something off with it. It might be just my pessimistic thoughts, though, so let's put it aside."

"I'm getting a bit worried now, but okay."

We go downstairs, get to our respective bicycles, and take off.

"What do you want to watch, anyway, Yoshiyuki?"

"A cooking show, ehehehe." His laugh is a bit weird. He must be embarrassed. "Ya know, my TV has no function to record stuff, and this is the last airing episode as far as I know, so I must watch it!"

"I see. You're really passionate about cooking, aren't you? How about making me lunch two days from now on?"

I can see his face light up. He smiles widely. "S-Sure! I'm not confident, but I'll try my best!"

"I'll be waiting, then. It's my first time tasting your food. Don't disappoint me or I'll break you in that game."

"P-Please don't, master~!"

When we're about to reach our parting point, I notice something white approaching me from the sky. I look up, searching for the thing. I see a man in the sky, wearing traditional Japanese clothes, with swaying, long white hair, and… are those cat ears? Real cat ears? On a human?

When I stare at him, he stares back at me.

I instinctively stop moving my bicycle. Yoshiyuki does the same, noticing the stranger's attention to me. As he approaches me, closer and closer, I'm entranced by his otherworldly appearance. At the first glance, I can tell that he isn't a human, but I've never seen an oddity like him. He is… charming. No, it might be just me getting entranced by his silky hair that looks soft and my urge to touch these ears makes me so itchy, but… for some reason, I can't stop staring at him.
"Y-You!!"

The white-haired man holds my two hands, his face is so close to mine. Oh… his sharp red eyes are so pretty. Oh, he has little fangs there. That's pretty cute… I'm so dumbfounded I can't think straight.

"Umm, this might be sudden, but… please be my wife! No, I mean, please marry me!!"

"…Ha?"

Yoshiyuki and I speak at the same time, confused.

Chapter End Notes

[2] A Buddhist altar for deceased family members. It was usually as big and wide as a bookshelf or even more, but nowadays you can find smaller ones. Like a normal shelf, it can have doors or not. It usually has a religious icon inside, typically a statue or a painting of the Buddha or a calligraphic mandala scroll. It contains religious accessories for daily rituals, such as a platform for offerings, candles, flowers, hanging lamps, incense burner, and a rin gong. Members of some Buddhist sects place ihai or tablets engraved with the names of the deceased within or next to the butsudan.

[3] Also known as a singing bowl (because it looks like a bowl), it is a type of standing bell. It is played by striking the rim of the bowl with a padded mallet.

[4] Tsukimi (also known as Otsukimi and Jugoya) is a Japanese celebration of the mid-autumn moon, like Japanese version of Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival. The full moon celebration takes place on the 15th of 8th month of traditional Japanese calendar. The waxing moon is celebrated on the 13th day on the ninth moon. These days normally fall in September and October of the modern solar calendar. Tsukimi tradition includes displaying decorations made from susuki (Japanese pampas grass) and eat dishes. The dishes include tsukimi dangos, taro, edamame, chestnuts, sweet potatoes, and other seasonal foods, plus sake as offerings to the moon in order to pray for an abundant harvest (as the mid-autumn moon is also called harvest moon). These dishes are known collectively as tsukimi dishes. When the moon is not visible, it is called mugetsu (no-moon) and ugetsu (rain-moon), but tsukimi parties are still held.
After plenty of skipping, I'm somehow stuck with the fox spirit now on the way back home. Looking back, how did things turn out like this….

Long story short, the fox spirit asked me to marry him. Of course I refused, but he didn't budge. He even kneeled in front of me! He wanted to come with me to see how I live. Welp, that's so absurd… what is this? A plot fresh from a low-quality romance drama? Seriously?

"It's fine, right? He looks harmless. How about giving him a chance? And don't ya always love cat ears? Isn't it perfect that ya have something to tease now? Hahaha!"

Yoshiyuki's voice before he left me alone resounds in my mind. You traitor, I curse him resentfully for leaving me alone with this trouble. Besides, he isn't a cat, even if he has cat-like ears… he is a fox, and fox happens to have ears similar or identical with cat.

After that, I tried to drive the fox away, but he insisted on coming with me anyway. I guess I'll see where this is going first.

"So, um… what's your name?" I decide to ask for politeness' sake.

"Ah! I'm sorry for my rudeness! My name is Kogitsunemaru," he says as he floats next to me, smiling widely and innocently. This is why I can't reject him harshly, uwaaah… so adorable… "Nice to meet you."

"Mm. I'm Yamanbagiri Kunihiro, nice to meet you too. So, uh… are you going with me all the way to my house?"

"Yes."

"And after I arrive at home, what are you going to do?"

"Eh? Isn't that obvious?" Kogitsunemaru tilts his head, as if my question is stupid. "I'll follow you anywhere, so naturally, I'm going to your house."

"I see… wait, what?" I look at him, stopping my bicycle. From other people's eyes, I'm speaking to air right now, but I'm glad nobody is around in the quiet residential area. "Why are you coming to my house?!"

"Um… to deepen my relationship with you?" He smiles without hesitation. "I'm serious with my proposal, you know… even after knowing that you're a human of the same sex, I won't budge. I love you. Please marry me."

I sigh heavily and hold my head, which is aching painfully. "You know… that can't be love. Love at the first sight? Are you kidding me? You don't know anything about me, how can you be in love? And marriage? That's jumping way too much! We barely know each other! We aren't even friends!" I raise my voice a bit too much, how uncharacteristic of me - but really, I'm tired, and this nonsense has to pop up.
After a *shinrei*, now a fox… just how unlucky can I get in a week?

"That's right, but I know my feelings don't lie. This is the first time I felt such an explosive emotion. When I saw you, I couldn't help but to approach you… well, you can also say that I'm going to know you better if I follow you everywhere, right? And then, I can decide to keep pursuing you or stop. And maybe, in the process, you might fall for me - which means we can start a mutual relationship. Isn't that great?"

"…That's a very good excuse, I'm impressed."

I didn't expect him to be *that* smart. Foxes are sly, indeed.

"Ehehe!" Kogitsunemaru grins, looking proud of his reasoning. It looks a bit annoying, actually.

So, at the end, he is coming to my house, huh… it can't be helped… hmm? "Wait, are you going to live inside my house, too? *With me?""

"Naturally!"

That answer without even a slight pause makes me want to slam my head to the nearest wall.

"Umm… my elder brother can also see beings like you. It'll certainly brings trouble… I don't even want to imagine it," I say with an exasperated sigh.

"Really? Well, I think it would be too soon for me to ask your brother to get you, but…"

"We aren't talking about marriage, stop blushing."

"…Let's try meeting him! I'm sure he can understand!" He smiles widely, suddenly brimming with positive energy, "After all, your happiness is the top priority for him…!"

"*My safety* is the top priority, *please.*" I feel even more in danger than in the forest earlier, somehow… even though he does look harmless, he can harm me… in another way… oh my god, don't think about it! Cease the dirty thoughts, now, me, and you!

When I realize it, I'm already in front of my house.

"Ku-ni-hi-ro… so this is your house," Kogitsunemaru reads the sign and looks at my house. "Looks normal."

"What did you expect? Haa… well, come in."

I walk alongside my bicycle, pushing the gate open and let him in. Our courtyard - or garden - isn't that big, of course, but enough to put my bicycle safely. I walk to the door and open it.

"I'm home."

"The door isn't locked!" I hear Kogitsunemaru mutters that. I ignore him and step in.

"Welcome home, Brother! …Hmm?" Brother Yamabushi greets me, having returned from the second floor. His eyes snap wide open, his face turns unusually dumbfounded… seeing a floating white-haired fox - Kogitsunemaru - floating behind me, of course. I've bought oddities to my house a few times before, but I never bought humanoid oddities like this, because even my younger self knows how dangerous it is.

I feel the air becomes tense as Brother Yamabushi scans Kogitsunemaru with his unusually sharp
eyes. I can see Kogitsunemaru whimpers feeling his glare. I step in to break the ice. "Umm, Brother, this is…"

"This isn't the right place. Let's go to my room."

I nod and quietly follow him back to the second floor. Kogitsunemaru floats with an anxious look on his face. The three of us sit on the floor - as Brother doesn't have a bed, but a futon instead. Brother and Kogitsunemaru sit across each other.

"Please introduce yourself, white fox. I'm Yamabushi Kunihiro," Brother begins.

"Oh! Umm… I'm Kogitsunemaru… I have no last name."

"Why are you following my brother?"

"I… I…" Kogitsunemaru sits on a stiff seiza, straightening his back, and looks at me before he looks at brother again, stuttering. He bows down until his head reaches the floor. "P… Please give me Yamanbagiri!"

He is already calling me by first name?! No, wait, more importantly, he isn't explaining at all! Why is he acting like he is proposing me?! We aren't even dating!

"No, no! That's not it!" I wave my hands around in panic. "We've just met! And… yeah, he just confessed out of blue even if we've just met a few minutes ago… and he didn't budge, so I brought him here… as he requested. I don't know what to do, brother. He kept on following me."

"T-That's right… we might've just met, but… I know for a fact that I… love him."

Brother Yamabushi glares sharply at him. He winces, keeping his forehead glued to the floor.

"U-Umm… I came here because I have nowhere to go, and… because I want to see how Yamanbagiri lives. I want to get close to him, to convince him that I love him, and to see if I can keep on loving him. And maybe… make him fall for me as well."

Hearing that in front of Brother makes me embarrassed.

"You understand what you're saying, don't you? It's a great responsibility," Brother says, crossing his arms with closed eyes. "I don't mind a relationship between an oddity like you and a human like brother, but… do you really love him?"

"That's what I want to find out. Living with him can sort out my feelings. I'll leave if my feelings are false."

Brother nods. "Hmm, and you have nowhere to go… where did you live before this?"

"Ah, oh, I came from China… I just arrived a few months ago. I lived in an abandoned shrine, but it really wasn't the best place."

"You're a jiuwei hu, then?"

"Yes, I am."

What is that? Chinese fox, maybe? Brother Yamabushi nods a few times again, before he claps his knees and smiles widely. "Well, there's no problem, then! I don't feel harm coming from you and you seem genuine. You're welcome to live here."
"Huh?!

That was awfully quick!

Kogitsunemaru lifts his head, eyes sparkling in hope. "R-Really?!

"Yes, kakaka! Of course, don't forget that… you must not, absolutely not, touch my brother before the two of you enter an official relationship." Brother keeps his smile, but a shadow is cast on his face. "You must not hurt his feelings in any way, or… you know the consequences." The threat is clear. Even I shudder hearing him saying that - it's a rare and terrifying moment.

"O-Of course. I'll keep that in mind. Thank you very much!!"

He bows down once again, forehead hitting the floor.

"Now, then… where should you sleep?" Brother Yamabushi looks at me, a hand on his chin. "What do you think, Brother?"

"No idea. I have no complains if you decide it."

"Then… how about your room?"

Silence passes. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds.

"W-W-Wait, what?!?" I squeak after recognizing what he means.

"No, no, no, sleeping together is too soon!! I'm honored, but it's way too soon!!!!" Kogitsunemaru screams, waving his hands around after he lifts his head, his face is completely red. "I-I'm sure I can restrain myself, but it's way too soon, even for me….

"Said the one who proposed to marry out of blue!"

"This and that are different…!!"

Brother Yamabushi laughs. "Kakakaka! No, you two aren't going to sleep in the same bed. I'll prepare a futon for Kogitsunemaru."

I sigh in relief, a hand holding my chest where my heart beats way too quickly. "Ooh, that… I have no objections, then."

Kogitsunemaru, however, keeps on stuttering. "B-B-But I'll still sleep on the same room as Yamanbagiri… uwaaaa….

"No, umm, you don't have to be that embarrassed."

He fidgets. "Y-You're the one I love right now, so… I'm happy…"

Ah, shit, I'm getting embarrassed seeing how he acts. Isn't this bad…?

"Kakaka! It seems Kogitsunemaru is far more pure than I thought. I'm glad," Brother Yamabushi says, "However, please keep in mind that I allow you to be with him for another reason. A request… no, consider it a mission for me to accept you completely. Something you have to do to stay in this house."

"W-What is it?" Snapping back to serious mode, Kogitsunemaru gulps.
"Protect Brother Yamanbagiri. If possible, I want you stay with him all the time. Protect him from any kinds of harm. He is reckless, you see, always jumping to oddities-related problems even if he has no power to solve it. So, I want you to be there and help him, make sure that he is alright."

"Brother…"

He is worried about me, huh… well, that goes without saying. For someone as suicidal as me, after everything that happened… although everything is good for now, who knows when I will… mmm… of course, I have no plans to, but I can't afford to worry my brothers - my only family - even more. Perhaps this is for the best.

Kogitsunemaru stares at him, nodding and clenches his fist on his lap. His eyes look so determined that my heart feels like jumping for some reason. "I understand. I'll protect him. I swear on that."

Brother smiles and pats his shoulder. "Thank you. I'm counting on you. Welcome to Kunihiro house."

It's a pretty much one-sided decision. Well, I did say I have no complaints if brother decided it, so… and it doesn't sound so bad.

I miss having someone close with me all the time.

"By the way, what about Brother Horikawa, Brother?" I raise an important question. "He doesn't know about oddities or our ability to see them…"

"If the two of you begin a relationship, we'll tell him everything. For now, just lay low and secretly bring food to your room for Kogitsunemaru. We can't make him starve, can we? Kakaka!"

How can I do that…? Brother Horikawa can't see oddities, but he has an unnaturally sharp instincts. I'm pretty sure he can somewhat hear things as well. He has the power, but it just doesn't grow.

"I'll help, so don't worry, Brother."

"Well, I feel a bit assured… by the way, Brother, what's jiuwei hu?"


"I can show you my nine tails if you want," Kogitsunemaru says, scooting over to me with his tail waving around excitedly behind, ears twitching. S-So cute… he is a fox, yet he acts like a cat… or a dog… "They, along with my fur, are my pride! Though it's bothersome to have nine tails all the time, so I usually hide eight."

"Then… show me?"

I can't resist the prospect of feeling otherworldly fluffiness.

Kogitsunemaru smiles, and with a snap of a finger, eight white tails - as fluffy-looking as the first one - appear on his body, filling the space behind him in an instant. It almost looks like a bunch of pillows rather than fur, except that they move and wriggle at will (which is actually a bit creepy. They look like tentacles). He actually looks like a legit nine-tailed fox now.

"How is it?" He says proudly, stroking a tail. "I take care of them regularly, of course, so they're all top-grade."

"C-Can I touch them?"
"Go ahead."

I'm hesitant on touching them, because in fiction they're usually a sensitive spot, but I can't resist… not with such fluffiness being shown in front of me and it's real. Considering Kogitsunemaru proudly presents his nine tails, it seems they aren't such sensitive spots for him. My shaking hands reach out for a tail closer to me and carefully rub it. It's as soft as I thought, or even more - the sensation is like patting a cat's fur. So soft and thick. So great.

"I'd like you to be my pillow…"

"Huh?"

I gasp when I realize what I just said. That must sound incredibly wrong at this kind of situation.

"S-So bold, Yamanbagiri…” Kogitsunemaru covers his face with his two hands, embarrassed. "I'm happy you said that, but…! Like I said, it's too soon!"

"N-No, I mean - "

"Kakakaka! Glad you accepted him, Brother. But sleeping together in the same bed is still too soon, so don't do it yet, okay?"

"Hear me out first, geez!"

Of course, I end up being teased all over by Brother Yamabushi while Kogitsunemaru acts embarrassed, fueling more shame inside me. I have no idea how I am supposed to live while withstanding this every day. Honestly, Brother Yamabushi seems like he already accepted the idea of me and Kogitsunemaru dating….

After I managed to run away from Brother Yamabushi while pulling the fox along (now with only one tail), I go inside my room and take off my beloved jacket, putting it inside a shelf. It is a mistake to wear a jacket in summer, but I can never let it go.

"Anyway, just be at ease, Kogitsunemaru."

"O-Okay…"

He doesn't look like he's at ease, fidgeting as he shifts his head left and right, looking around in curiosity.

"I have no secrets, so feel free to look around. Just don't mess it up."

He nods and goes to my bookshelves, probably searching for a book he is interested at. "So many novels… and uh, what are they called again, light novels and comics?"

"Oh, you know?" I ask as I charge my phone and put it on my desk before sitting on bed.

"Even I can tell what they are. Back in China, I used to read novels and all sorts of books to kill time. Oh, I know this one! You have a good taste," he says, picking up a thick novel with soft cover. I recognize it as The Wind Up Bird Chronicle. Ah, good novel, weird but amazing, as expected from the master.

Actually, other than classic novels such as Wuthering Heights, I only have Haruki Murakami's novels. The rest is light novels and comics… and games.

"Who would have thought you're a nerd, huh…"
"Nerd? What is that?"

It's not surprising that he doesn't know. "It's a slang term for people who like to read a lot of stuffs, I guess. Not just read, but usually that."

"I see." He continues to read the book, flipping pages in a quite fast pace. He might be a fast reader or he is just skimming. Well, he said he knows that novel, so he might have read it. I just stare at him, having no idea what to do.

What should I say in this kind of situation? There's no way I can just let this end in silence.

"Um… Kogitsunemaru. So, you lived in China before?" I resort to that question.

"Yeah." He slides the book into the shelf, as if disinterested in it now, and turns around, looking at me. "Can I sit next to you?"

"Go ahead."

He awkwardly sits next to me, keeping a certain distance. Well, I guess he is nervous…but I'm feeling the same because the way he acts. It's contagious. I guess it can't be helped… I've never had a stranger in my room before, other than my friends like Yoshiyuki. Meanwhile, Kogitsunemaru is a complete stranger. We've just met today, like a few minutes ago… but I don't feel too awkward or scared. There's something familiar and warm about him, making me at ease around him despite being strangers. It feels weird….

"I lived in China before, but I actually don't remember much except killing time, running around the packed city. I hate how crowded it is, how much pollution is there, despite the advanced technology. I'd rather go to an out-of-touch place rather than staying in that suffocating place, so I went across the sea and happened to arrive here."

I'm a bit glad that Kogitsunemaru continues first, because if he didn't, I don't know what to say. I kind of want to ask where he stayed, but considering he said crowded and pollution, it's safe to assume he stayed in a big city.

"How is it? Is Japan different from China?"

"Well, I only stayed in Tokyo for a few days, so I can't really decide. It's crowded, but I like it more than China, I think. But I want to go to somewhere quieter, so I went to smaller cities and finally stayed here." He swings his legs as he stares at the floor, looking at nothing in particular. "I said I'd rather go to an out-of-touch place, but I ended up liking this place, which is somewhere between modern and rural. There are enough things to see and enough nature to be enjoyed."

"I see. I guess I'm glad you like it here… it's my hometown, after all. Oh, speaking of that, don't you want to go back to China?"

"No. Sure, there are lots of small cities and villages too, but… now that I came here and met you, I suddenly feel reluctant - and I never consider it as my hometown, either. It's weird, isn't it?" Kogitsunemaru lifts his head and stares into my eyes, his face is somewhat unsure - probably directed at his own self. "Come to think of it… the first time I saw you earlier, I feel immediately attracted… because you look familiar. Well, I feel that you're familiar. I have no recollection of meeting someone that looks like you, but for some reason I don't know, I feel that way."

How weird. That's what I feel about him as well - although I realized it just now. I decide to keep it a secret from him. "Is that why you fell for me on the spot?" I feel the need to doubt on this every now and then.
"Perhaps… but I feel other attraction. Other than the curiosity because you seem familiar."

The way he stares at me with serious eyes makes me feel uncomfortable.

"…And what is that?"

"…What else makes me love you? It's obvious, isn't it? I… I know for sure that my romantic attraction towards you is real." Kogitsunemaru leans closer to me, our eyes gaze at each other intently. "It's not like I'm trying to make you replace that someone, because I've never met such person. It's just… I can't help but to feel attracted to you. I want to know more about you."

I blink a few times, trying to swallow everything he said - probably from his heart, pure and genuine. I can feel that. I feel a bit bad for breaking his words. "But that doesn't mean like or love."

"That might be true, but I can already feel it. Even though I don't know you, I feel a strong affection towards you. It might not be romantic love. What is it exactly, that's what I want to find out."

"How can you like someone you just met?"

"It happens sometimes, doesn't it?" He looks at his own hands, clenching down the sheets, before he turns to see me again. "When I look at you like this, I feel a strong desire to make you happy. It might be selfish, but I want to see you happy. That desire is growing even stronger inside me now. Something bad… happened in the past, didn't it?"

My shoulders shake and slump down. "…You can tell?"

He nods, staring at my wrist covered in a purple wrist band, and I know he isn't joking. "Faintly. I don't know what happened, and it isn't my place to, but… I really, really, want to see you happy and smile brightly… you're beautiful, so you'll shine even more like that."

…Is he flirting with me now? I realize that, but I'm in no mood to respond to his compliment.

"I… see. How can you… feel that way to a stranger? Why?"

"There is no reason. I just feel like it. Does a heart speak of reasons? I don't think so. Reasons only exist in your mind, not your heart… heh, I just said something cool." He looks proud with that. "It's not like I want anything in return. If I can see that comes true, it's for my own satisfaction as well. Ah, of course, I want you to answer my love if possible, but it's okay to take your time and reject me."

My head falls down, looking at the cold floor. I don't hear his last words. "Unconditional love and kindness isn't it."

I've long forgotten unconditional love and kindness from someone that isn't related to me. Of course, there's Yoshiyuki, but we've been together for so long that we might as well be family. It's beyond my wildest dreams to know that a stranger feels that way towards me when people who see me regularly might want me dead.

Kogitsunemaru might be joking or lying, but somehow, I don't feel that. He is completely serious. I can feel his unwavering genuine feelings. It's odd and surreal… but it's so warm, I can't help but to hold it close to my chest.

"Even though… you don't know me at all."

Normally, people wouldn't feel like that towards a stranger, and yet he does, as if it's so natural.
"That's right. My first impression of you might be false, but I don't think that will change my feelings drastically."

I wonder how he can say it in certainty. I want to reject him, I want to push him away - like saying, 'What if I'm worse than what you can take?' but that won't bring anything for the two of us. I can keep making excuses and I'm sure his answer will stay the same.

Why do I want to reject him so strongly?

It's simple.

I'm scared to get close again. I don't want to feel betrayed again.

Because it's... so painful, so suffocating, the worst feeling on earth - to be broken by someone you trust. The thought is so terrifying that it brings back bad memories. I swallow down that old despair. It's okay... I'm careful now. That won't happen again.

More than that... I don't want Kogitsunemaru to hate me. Rejecting him further with whining will surely make him annoyed. Even though I want to push him away, I don't want him to hate me, to get too far from me. Why are human's feelings so complicated?

I'm weird as well, am I, to long for a stranger like him to stay by my side? Is that how broken I am, despite having my brothers and Yoshiyuki? Is that how much I long for affection from others? Is that how much I want to depend on others once again, despite being terrified by the pain it might bring?

Human feelings are so complicated... I hate it.

"...Yamanbagiri?"

Noticing my long silence as I look down at my past reflected on the floor, Kogitsunemaru calls me.

"Are you okay? You look a pale all of sudden."

He says with a gentle voice, his hand is trying to reach my shoulder, but he stops halfway. Perhaps he realizes a contact will make everything worse... no, perhaps it'll make me feel a bit better. Either way, I'm already feeling a bit better to know that he cares about me to realize my condition.

How embarrassing.

I shake my head, swallowing down the bitterness of regret and old scars. "It's nothing... for now."

Kogitsunemaru doesn't look convinced, but he quietly nods. Silence falls upon us before he breaks it all by his own - with a growl from his stomach.

It's so comedic that I can only stare at him, dumbfounded. His face turns red when he realizes what just happened.

"Ah, umm..."

"Are you hungry?"

"...Y-Yeah."

At least he is honest. I chuckle and stand up. "I'll bring you something, then. Brother Horikawa isn't home yet, so it's good... are you fine with anything? There are probably only leftovers and radishes."
"I'm fine."

"Okay. Wait here."

I go downstairs to kitchen, taking a bowl and put rice there, and then take more plates and fill them with dishes. As expected, there are only radishes left... oh, I found one sesame tofu left. I wonder if he likes it. I put the bowl and plates on the tray and go upstairs back to my room.

Kicking the door slightly to open the door, I find Kogitsunemaru standing in front of my desk, looking at something, holding something... which I recognize as a photo frame.

I'm pretty sure I hid that one somewhere in my desk drawers... or maybe I forgot and instead put it on my desk. Either way....

"Ah." Kogitsunemaru turns his head to look at me, his eyes wide open and shaking. "I'm sorry, this is...."

"It's fine. I did tell you to look around." I approach him and put the tray full of dishes on the desk. "Here, eat up."

"U-Umm..." He nods, but he stares at me, mouth soundlessly gaping open, before he finally squeaks out his curiosity. "Yamanbagiri, this is...."

"A photo of my family when we were complete, yes."

"I can see that, but... I thought you only have two brothers?"

"As you can see, I have three." I have no idea what kind of face I'm making right now, but seeing Kogitsunemaru's frown, it must not be good. I clench my fist.

"Which one is Horikawa?"

I walk closer to him and point at the photo. "This - he still looks like this, so you'll be able to recognize him. And this one is me."

"So this one is your other brother... where is he now? Come to think of it, where are your parents?"

"My parents died when I was three... and my elder brother died when I was five. They were all accidents. Unfortunate accidents that robbed other people's lives as well."

"I...I see. I'm sorry." With an apologetic smile, he puts down the photo frame on the table. "Your elder brother looks like you, I'm a bit surprised."

"We're said to be identical, yeah."

"Also, Yamabushi's hair wasn't teal here. I almost couldn't recognize him."

"Ah, yeah. He painted it a few years ago for some reason. It suits him, though."

Kogitsunemaru nods and claps his two hands, as if dropping the topic. "Okay! Time for lunch!"

"Brunch."

"Can I sit here?" He points at my study chair that looks like it can collapse any moment. It's pretty old, after all.
"Go ahead."

"Thank you for the meal."

I take my laptop and sit on the bed, my back leaning on the wall as Kogitsunemaru sits and starts to eat the dishes I brought him. I can only see his white hair from this position, so I don't know what kind of expression he is making, but seeing him moving his chopsticks continuously, I think he likes it. I hope.

"Uooh… tofu! I'm so happy…!"

Yep. He likes it, alright. "Do you like tofu?"

He turns his head and I can see his glittering eyes. "Yes! It's the best food in this world….

"Ha… I see."

Isn't liking tofu a trait of Japanese foxes? I wonder if he has Japanese blood as a fox… does oddity even have bloodline? But then again, China isn't very different in terms of cuisine with Japan, so I guess it's normal. I've tried Chinese food before, including tofu, and it was great. Such luxury.

I play my laptop and wait for him to finish his food. When he is done, I approach him.

"I'll wash them, so you can do whatever you want in the meantime."

Kogitsunemaru blinks. "Can I wash them myself?"

"Huh? Why?"

"I want to do it… um, I'm a resident of this house from now on, so I want to help in housework at least. I don't want to bother you. I can do it… so, please?"

Seeing him asking me - no, pleading with such sparkling eyes, I can only stand frozen admiring his cuteness and innocence. I'm so weak….

"…Okay, go ahead, but I'll watch over you."

He smiles and nods. "Thank you."

"I should be the one saying that. One less burden on me."

The two of us go to the kitchen downstairs. I sit on the chair in the dining room where I can see him working in the kitchen. Huh, it seems he really can wash dishes properly. Seeing that, I wonder how he will look with an apron. A funny image of him with a frilly apron pops to mind.

I have to restrain my laughter. He might be cute, but his body is way too manly for that.

After that, we come back to my room. Mmm, it's still too early for a bath, but what to do… mmm? Bath?

Just then, I realize something crucial.

"Do you have change of clothes or anything, Kogitsunemaru?"

Kogitsunemaru, who is looking around my bookshelves again, looks at me and nods. "I do. Why?"
"Well… I don't see you bringing anything."

He blinks and stares at me, stunned, before his eyes snap wide open. "I left them at that shrine! I only intended to take a stroll and nothing more, after all…." "I see."

"I-I'll bring them now!" He walks to the window and opens them with a panicked face. "Be careful."

And off he goes, flying from my window. This is the first time someone has done that in front of me. Interesting. "Kakaka! Brother, can you open the door?"

Oh? I open the door as Brother Yamabushi asked, finding that he is holding a futon and bedsheets. Just in time. I'm wondering what took so long… maybe he prepared it first. "Thank you, Brother." I hold the futon and sheets from him and put them next to my bed. "No problem. Hm? Where is Kogitsunemaru?" He asks, looking around my room. "Going to the shrine to pick up his bag - his clothes and all." "I see. Well, I'll be going now. Have fun with him, Brother!" He says as he slaps my back. "What does that mean…." He just laughs and exits my room. As usual, I really can't read what's on his mind… doesn't he feel worried about leaving me alone with a stranger who proposed to me out of blue? Honestly, I'm a bit worried about my safety and chastity. My eyes aren't pure, sure, but… argh, why am I thinking about this?! I decide to play laptop and vent my complicated feelings with playing games. After what seems like 20 minutes, Kogitsunemaru comes back with a bag. "Welcome back." It feels a bit weird to say this to a stranger.

He smiles and nods, slipping into the room through the same window and puts the bag on the floor. "I'm back." He turns to see rolled futon next to my bed. "Futon, isn't it…"

"Hmm?"

"Nothing. I'm just thinking that it'll be my first time sleeping on a futon. I slept in a sleeping bag before." How modern. "Do you want to switch with me, then, if you're not comfortable? I don't mind to sleep on futon."

Kogitsunemaru waves his hands, shaking his head, another panicked expression is on his face. "N-No, that's too much. You're the owner of this room. I can't possibly do such thing."

"I see." Well, he has a point. I'm glad he has common sense and seems polite… unlike a certain shinrei.
"Umm… where should I put my clothes?" He looks around.

"You can put them in my shelf… there's only one, anyway. There's an empty space. I don't think we'll mix them up, don't worry."

He nods and goes to the shelf, opening it. "Ooh, you're right."

As he puts his clothes in the shelf, I continue with my own thing - games. Having Kogitsunemaru in my room at times like this…makes me feel nervous, like I don't know how to act. I wonder why….

After we successfully I ate dinner with my two brothers, I have to bring dinner to Kogitsunemaru, who is patiently waiting in my room and rummaging whatever he is interested at.

The question is how, with the sharp Brother Horikawa now washing dishes.

What is my excuse to bring food to my room?

I approach Brother Yamabushi and whisper. "Brother, how can I bring dinner to him?"

"Leave it to me."

He pats my shoulder as he smiles and stands up, going to the kitchen. I can feel a bad premonition coming.

"Brother! Can I have an extra serving? But I'll eat it in my room because I need it for meditation."

This isn't the first time he asks for that, but… today, it's a lie. I feel bad for making him lie. And, uh… what excuse can I make when he is away someday?

"Mm? Sure."

"I'll serve them myself."

"Don't forget to wash it yourself, then."

"Of course. I'll let Brother Yamanbagiri do it, kakaka!"

"Why me?!!"

I just follow along, even though indeed I should be doing it. After a while, Brother Yamabushi comes back with a tray of food, giving it to me with a wide smile.

"Thanks, Brother…."

"When I'm away, you can use the same excuse - that you imitate me on practice. It's better if you can store the food in your room, though."

"Yeah. Thanks again, Brother."

With a smile, I go upstairs to my room while Brother stays in the dining room.

"Sorry for the wait. Are you hungry?" I say as I open the door.
"Ehehe. Thank you." Kogitsunemaru walks to me and takes the tray from me, putting it on my desk. Seeing a towel around his neck, his seemingly damp hair that brings a familiar sweet scent and his plain *yukata* that is different from his outfit before - I think he just took a bath.

"Did you just take a bath?"

"Yes. Sorry I went ahead."

"It's fine… uh, what shampoo and soap did you use?"

He scratches his cheek with a finger, looking awkward as he averts his gaze away from me. "…I used yours. I don't have them, so… ah, but, I have my own toothbrush and towel."

"Ah. Oh… I see. It's fine."

No wonder his smell is familiar now. I feel a bit uncomfortable about it, but I don't see any problem. It can't be helped, after all.

Looks like he has been playing around with my laptop after that… I allowed him to and told him the basics (he saw it before but never used it), and I trust him well, but who knows can happen in the hands of a beginner. I take a peek at the glowing screen showing a homepage of… a webnovel? Wait, that title… that's the webnovel I bookmarked and is on my reading list. I haven't finished it - still far from the latest chapter.

"You're reading a webnovel?"

"Ah, yeah. I accidentally opened it, so I took a look, but it's very interesting so I keep reading."

"You're about to pass the part I'm on… can we read it together? I don't want to miss it and get spoilers from you."

"Sure."

I take my laptop and put it on my bedside. I roll the *futon*, setting it as a carpet."Let's read it here."

Kogitsunemaru pulls the chair to set the tray on and sit next to me on the *futon*. Reading a webnovel together is almost unheard of, honestly. People usually watch or play together, not reading something on the same laptop… but there's nothing wrong with it. As Kogitsunemaru eats, we stare at the screen, reading the words intently.

Even if the two of us stay silent - of course, he is eating - I feel like we're getting closer to each other.

After he finished eating, the two of us stop reading and talk about the webnovel. I'm neglecting my duty to wash the dishes… just for a while, okay.

"It has been published into a light novel and it was a hit," I say, pointing at my bookshelves. "I have 19 volumes there. The artwork is beautiful. I got a poster and other merchandise as well."

"19?!"

"Yeah, up to… err… chapter 115 or something close."

"Wow… what's the difference between the one on the website?"

"It's more polished than the webnovel and is in physical form, of course, and it has artworks."
"Can I read it?"

"The development isn't very different, but... if you won't get bored, go ahead."

He stands up and goes to my bookshelf, searching for the said light novel.

"I'll wash the dishes and take a bath, then."

Kogitsunemaru nods and waves his hand to me who take a leave with a tray of empty bowl and plates. I go downstairs, finding that my brothers are away. They're probably resting already in their own rooms. I think Brother Horikawa has an assignment... university students are sure busy even in summer break.

It's now 10 PM. I decide to sleep early after taking a bath because the day is so tiring, my mind is about to burst.

But I can hardly fall asleep with a fox spirit just next to my bed on the floor.

The lights are out already, but I don't feel sleepy as my body rests on bed. I can clearly sense Kogitsunemaru's aura as an oddity in the dimness. It feels a bit scary, so I'm at unease. He seems harmless, but he is indeed an oddity, after all. His aura is pretty sharp right now, as if it can tear me to pieces anytime - so heavy and cold, this pressure is killing me... I guess he is unconsciously on guard because he is going to sleep. Sensing it right next to me makes me shiver even in the hot summer night.

"...Kogitsunemaru?"

"Yes?"

Oh, so he isn't asleep yet. "...Nothing."

"What's wrong? You can't sleep?"

"Mmm. It's a bit hard."

I hear him sighing below. "I'm sorry... to bother you like this, and even make your life harder."

"N-No. It isn't such a bother, really. I'm just not used on having a pure oddity like you so close with me at night."

"No one ever bothers you at night?"

"Some did when I was a kid, but not now. It has been a long time. I don't remember how I cope with it before."

"They must have liked you."

"I guess... I try not to get too involved with oddities, but you can say I'm close with those who stay in this neighborhood, as this is my home. By the way, almost everyone ran away when they see you this afternoon."

I hear rustling sheets, so I guess Kogitsunemaru moves. I roll my body to the bedside, with a hand on
my chin to support my weight. I can see him below, looking at me. Even in the dimness of the room, it's obvious we're staring at each other. I see him smiling wryly. By the way, his hair is unusually tied, but he still looks fluffy.

"Do they feel scared?"

"Of course."

"Ugh. I'm a bit sad… am I that intimidating?"

"You can be, but I believe they're scared of you for proposing me out of blue. I'll try to listen to any rumors about you tomorrow. I'm sure they already popped up. They like to gossip, after all."

I'm not joking. Many oddities just have way too much free time, so gossiping had become their habit. In that sense, they aren't so different from humans, eh.

As if he was just stabbed with a sword, his face contorts in pain. "I have to introduce myself to them and clear some things up before it spreads like wildfire."

"I think it's a bit too late, but good luck."

"Ack… will do."

I chuckle seeing his funny expression. He is sure pretty expressive and honest to someone like me - a complete stranger. I don't sense any malice or lies behind his words and actions… I'm not so doubtful towards him, even though I seriously should be. I wonder why I'm so soft with him… maybe because of his fur?

The pressure in the air lightens after that conversation, and drowsiness comes back to my body.

I'm glad Kogitsunemaru is that kind of person. He isn't bothersome at all… sure, he can be awkward in sometimes, but things went pretty smoothly for us, didn't they? We naturally clicked.

"Well, I think I can sleep now."

"That's good." He shoots me a smile, which somehow makes me feel somewhat embarrassed. "You look better when you smile. You're so pretty."

Now that's what I'd call an embarrassing thing to say.

I roll my body away from him, having no strength to deny him. "Mm. Good night. Don't ever think of peeking my sleeping face and climb my bed, got it? When I wake up, I'll make sure to punch your gut. I'm confident in my skills."

"I-I won't do that, don't worry! Really, I'm not that pushy… I'll wait for your consent. I didn't even ask for your hands, even though I want to… I know the limits."

"…And that kinda bothers me, but okay."

"Well, good night, Yamanbagiri. Sweet dreams."

With that, my first day - and night - with Kogitsunemaru ends peacefully.
*Hello and good day. How are you? It has been a while since the last update. I deeply apologize for that.

*This is a long note, but I hope you'll read it. I believe it is pretty important for those who have waited.

*As some of you might already know, I joined Touken Ranbu Big Bang 2017, and wrote a manbaharem story that spun for 74k words in three months, Dioramic Eden (the minimum is 10k words, but god knows how I went so far). If you want to read it, it's here. As stated in that piece, I was reluctant to join, but ended up anyway - because I need to quench my thirst for manbaharem. Although I love writing Miniature Garden, the real harem hasn't started yet, especially in this flashback arc. I'm honestly happy to excuse myself from Miniature Garden and took the opportunity to write such a self-indulgent thing.

*I really wished Dioramic Eden didn't take so many words and time, but it did...although I love the result, it took away my time to continue this, even more so when my stupid self decided to open a request. However, I believe it'll be easier to balance Miniature Garden and requests than Miniature Garden and Dioramic Eden. These two are way too heavy to be put together.

*My main priority will always be Miniature Garden, but I really hope I can write more stuffs for Dioramic Eden and explore many things. Dioramic Eden is fun because unlike Miniature Garden, I haven't actually planned anything in the middle and ending, making it an open space. Although Miniature Garden is pretty loose in the middle, I have set the characters (Yamanbagiri's lovers) and their potential stories and time in the story. I can't add anyone else after that and I can't deviate from the theme(s) I've strongly set. In Dioramic Eden, however, the possibilities are endless, both for the past and future. I already thought of many scenarios involving different characters, exploring different themes and genres (my root actually lies in such things). It is truly a self-indulgent, fanservice story for me. The plot is just an excuse to prolong the three chapters, but somehow it got way too long.

*That being said, I love Miniature Garden far too much, and writing it is already a part of my daily life, so I really can't abandon it at this point. I've put so much power, time, and ideas into making it, so I want to make it come true no matter what. It is my number one priority, and I'm very grateful for everyone supports me by reading it, including that anon who sent me that ask. I freaked out a bit, thinking my time to get that has come, but I'm really glad you like it so much to ask that. These kinds of comments are what drive me to continue the most. Knowing people still look forward to it make me feel my sacrifice is worth it.

Thank you for reading and supporting this story this far! I'm really happy, and I'll be happier if you enjoy it. I hope you continue to read Miniature Garden from now on.

*Random note: Dioramic Eden's protagonist is Kogitsunemaru, and yet here I am writing a full chapter about him again. Kogitsunemaru fever. They're different, though. I was worried if I mix them up (along with Yamanbagiri and other characters as they share the same cast), but I guess not, fortunately.
"Oh my…how cute."

I told Kogitsunemaru not to take a peek at my sleeping face, and yet here I am, looking at his sleeping face. I'm sorry I'm playing unfair.

It's early in the morning. I somehow woke up before my alarm. When still drowsy, I sensed something off next to my bed, so I took a peek - of course, there's Kogitsunemaru lying down on the futon, with his head looking sideways, mouth slightly open, hands cradling a hugging pillow, messy blanket that doesn't cover his tail that somehow wraps around his leg… I think my heart was about to leap. Or it did already.

It's already time for me to get down and start activities, but I can't bring myself to wake him up. I slowly approach him and fix his blanket to cover at least his waist and down. It must be pretty hot, but he doesn't sweat that much. I didn't ask him whether he felt weather or not, huh… I think that yukata is thin, though. I wonder why he doesn't wear a jinbei or something more comfortable. This isn't an inn, after all.

After changing clothes, I go downstairs to dining room. There's no smell of cooking, so I think Brother Horikawa hasn't cooked yet.

"Morning, Brother! It's a good day to practice, isn't it? Kakaka!"

"Morning, Yamanbagiri!"

Brother Yamabushi greets me as usual, but what's unusual is… Yoshiyuki, who is sitting on the chair in the dining room, waving his hand towards me with a smile. I expected him to look tired for a lack of sleep, but he doesn't look like it, so I'm glad. His hair is even messier than usual, though. I recognize it as his bedhair.

Well, no problem. It'll soon get drenched in water anyway.

"Morning, Yoshiyuki. I thought you'll be late."

"That's a bad assumption, how cruel! Though I can't deny that I thought the same," he shrugs, "I somehow woke up earlier than my alarm, so I just went straight here. I just arrived a few minutes ago, though."

"Kakaka! I'm glad you're passionate about this, Yoshiyuki."

Yoshiyuki just awkwardly scratches the back of his head.

"You haven't eaten breakfast yet, right, Yoshiyuki?" Brother Horikawa asks, stepping out of the kitchen. Maybe he has finished preparing the ingredients and decided to show up. "I'll cook your portion too, then."

"Thank you! I'm sorry for the trouble."

"It's not a trouble at all." Brother Horikawa smiles. "Thank you for taking care of Brother Yamanbagiri. It has been a long time since all of us eat together, right? It feels nostalgic."
"That's right…"

It has been so long that I've forgotten. We're childhood friends, after all, so we regularly ate together in each other's houses countless times. That routine broke down when we were separated in middle school, trapped in our own busy routine… although we're back together now, in the 3rd year of middle school.

I think it's sort of a miracle for the both of us to get together like this and still feel strongly about each other. It's a good thing, though, and I'm very grateful for that.

"Yoshiyuki was still small back then," Brother Horikawa continues.

"Eh, really?"

"Fufu, I still remember how small you were and how you cried when…"

"Stop!! Stop!! Childhood mistakes are so embarrassing!!" Yoshiyuki screams.

"Brother, you're like a doting mother. Kakaka, it's fine, I understand what you mean," Brother Yamabushi says. Even though Brother Horikawa is only 5 years older than me… his memory is frighteningly sharp. "Well, let's start our training now. We can't waste more time."

"Brother, I'll help you prepare. There's still time before I start cooking," Brother Horikawa says.

"Thank you, Brother. Wait here, you two."

I nod, and the two of them go deeper into the house.

"What are we going to do?" Yoshiyuki asks, poking my cheek when my two brothers' figures vanished.

"You'll see later. For now, take off your clothes."

His face turns pale at an instant. "…Huh?"

"You brought your swimwear, didn't you? I messaged you."

"Oh, right. Change into that?"

"Just what did you think before? Anyway," I yawn and take a glass, pouring mineral water into it. "Just change. Oh, but… you can't change in my room, so just go ahead and use bathroom."

"What's wrong with your room?"

"Kogitsunemaru is still sleeping."

"…Who?"

Why is he asking that with such a scary face? "The fox spirit we met yesterday."

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds.

Yoshiyuki's face twists into something unexplainable, his mouth gaping open in shock and I can see his arms visibly shaking. "W-W-What?! Why is he in your room… how… what happened?!"

"Oh. I haven't told you yet." I just realized my mistake. "Sorry, too many things happened yesterday."

"Wait. You're not going to tell me what happened!"

"Just a little bit later. Right now, let's prepare our training."

Yoshiyuki looks horrified and gives me one more look before I turn my back to him.
I barely remembered to tell you to bring swimwear, either."

"Okaaay… fill me in the blanks."

"Let's go upstairs for now. Brother Horikawa doesn't know."

Standing in front of my room, I tell him everything that led me to this point. He bursts out laughing at the end. "Ahahaha! Yamabushi-san is sure carefree, to let someone like him with ya like that… and in the same room… man, I can't imagine how he felt."

"I don't find it too funny."

"Sorry, sorry…" He hugs his stomach as if he's having the best laughter in his entire lifetime. "Man, your family never ceases to amaze me."

I frown. "What's that supposed to mean?" And why does he seem unbothered by the fact that Kogitsunemaru is here because he (supposedly) loves me even though we're strangers and of the same gender? Although that living together in the same room is also an important point…

"Nothing, nothing. Anyway, he's sleeping in your room, right? Let me take a peek!"

"Go ahead, just don't wake him up roughly… and prepare your heart."

Yoshiyuki tilts his head in confusion as I open the door, letting him go inside my room he is familiar at. He immediately notices a futon next to my bed and runs there, squealing like a shameless fangirl when he sees Kogitsunemaru.

"W-What is this?! An angel?! Kaworu Nagisa?!"

"Sheesh, not so loud. And Kaworu doesn't even have tail and such ears," I chuckle seeing his face. That's the kind of expression whenever he meets dogs and cats. And please, ignore his Evangelion remarks.

"And after ya said it… his fur sure looks great… ."

"I'm sure he'll gladly allow you to touch his fur. He seems very proud of it."

Yoshiyuki hums happily. "I see ya and him are close already."

"A bit closer, I guess. Like I said before, he is kinda a nerd. Perfect for me."

"That's great. I can get along with him too!" He clenches his fist with burning eyes as if he is going to a gaming tournament, ready to take down anyone.

"Glad you like him, then."

Yoshiyuki isn't the type to hate on anyone on the first meeting, anyway. He is too oblivious to even make assumptions.

"Brother?"

That's Brother Horikawa's voice. I step outside my room just before the stairway, "We're changing now!"

"Oh. We're about to finish the preparation, so please be quick!" He shouts back.
"We will."

Coming back to my room, I push Yoshiyuki to the bathroom. "Change already before Brother Horikawa gets mad."

Yoshiyuki pouts. "What, we aren't going to change together? Like the old days?"

"I already wear it, so I just need to take my clothes off."

"Even better! So, why no~"

I slam the door close.

"Yamanbagiri~!!"

Even though he cries out like that, I won't be swayed… no matter what. I love how childish, innocent, and carefree he is and I let him get closer to me than anyone else, but… we aren't children anymore, Yoshiyuki. If possible, I don't want to see your naked body ever again.

After all, I realized I'm not normal. I can accept the fact that Kogitsunemaru confessed to me so quickly without questions, even though we're both boys… because I'm also interested in boys. Yes, I swing that way, if it isn't obvious enough.

I see no problem with that and I accepted my orientation quickly, but it's a bit hard to look at Yoshiyuki in the eye now. I don't want to fall for him romantically because I want to stay with him. I have to keep this friendship.

He is the only one there for me… I can't let him slip from my grasp, now, can I?

While thinking about these stuffs, I take off my clothes and only wear a swim pants, and then wait for Yoshiyuki before we head down.

"Ya didn't have to push me so roughly like that," he immediately complains after exiting bathroom.

"I'm not rough, really. Let's go now."

I turn around, averting my gaze from his somewhat muscular body… why does he, a normal teenager who likes to play games, have such a nice body?! I'm feeling a bit jealous, so much that I want to punch him if I can. I want to be as strong as he is.

I'm fine seeing just his chest, but completely naked is totally no, okay. It's way too embarrassing. It's common sense, isn't it? Even I can hardly show my naked body to my brothers.

Anyway…

We step outside the house to the courtyard, chilly morning wind brushes our skin as we're greeted by unusual view, other than the still dim sky - two small inflatable swimming pools that look like they're for small children. If the two of us get into each, only our feet will get wet when we stand, and even if we lie down, we're far too big for the swimming pools. Normal people will surely wonder what the point is, but I know better.

Brother Yamabushi is holding a hose, standing in front of an inflatable swimming pool, while the other is placed at the edge of the courtyard below a faucet higher than usual, even higher than me, that looks like a shower, with Brother Horikawa standing in front of it.

"Okay, Yoshiyuki, come here," Brother Yamabushi says with a grin. Yoshiyuki, with a
dumbfounded face, step forward and approach him. "Stand in that pool."

As Yoshiyuki does as he asked, I go to Brother Horikawa, already knowing what I'm about to do.

"Good luck!" Brother says as he gives me a paper covered in vinyl to protect it from water after I got into the pool. It's a sutra.

I see Brother Yamabushi gives the same thing to Yoshiyuki and gives him instructions. "Chant this sutra."

"Oh… okay."

And he turns on the hose, cold water suddenly rushing and pouring his entire body from his head. Yoshiyuki screams.

"W-W-What?!"

"Read it, Yoshiyuki! You can do it!" Brother shouts with a voice that is filled with encouragement.

With a doubtful face, Yoshiyuki starts reciting the sutra he reads while stuttering from the cold and shock.

"I have to start, too. Please, Brother."

"Mm."

Brother Horikawa turns the faucet and water drops onto my head, dousing my entire body. This faucet was made to mimic a waterfall for Brother Yamabushi's daily meditation, so the water it pours is far harsher than the hose. How he and the mechanic made it is a mystery. This just shows my higher level, huh? Ufufu.

Anyway, I start to recite the sutra, shivering a bit from the morning breeze.

.

.

Brother Horikawa turns the faucet, stopping the water, and I awake from my daydream.

Time passes so quickly from my point of view. I blink just like three times and then two hours have passed. I'm getting used to this sudden feel of time jumping forward (even though it isn't at all, it just feels like that).

"Good work, Brother," he says as he gives me a towel. I take it.

"Thanks, Brother."

"Okay, you're done. Good work, Yoshiyuki. Two hours have passed, kakaka!" Brother Yamabushi says after he turns off the hose.

"H-Huh? Two hours?" Yoshiyuki blinks a few times, completely confused as he looks around to left and right. As if confirming Brother's words, the sky had turned bright blue, the sun is shining hot, and the light wind feels hot. It's not early morning anymore. "Did I… do it correctly?"

"Yep. You recited it well, even better than Brother Yamanbagiri when he first started."
Yoshiyuki stares at him, eyes wide. "It doesn't feel like two hours... ah, ugh, my legs feel weird."

"Kakaka, be careful." Brother takes his shoulder and helps him get out before giving him a towel. "Let's have breakfast now before it goes cold. You should take a bath first, but, you must be hungry."

"Yeah...."

After we dry ourselves and change clothes, we immediately sit on the dining room and have breakfast with my brothers when the food is still warm. Today, there is meat exclusive for me and Yoshiyuki - although Brother Horikawa can't resist and eat as well. Only Brother Yamabushi doesn't as he only eats vegetables.

We're not in religious training, so it's fine to eat a lot of meat. We need nutritious meal to strengthen our physical strength first, and later, our spiritual energy will also strengthen naturally. Without physical strength, we'll collapse even if we have strong spiritual energy. That's what Brother Yamabushi told me before.

Yoshiyuki chomps down the dishes served all at once until his mouth is full.

"Mm nnn bbrrg fggh - "

"Yoshiyuki, swallow the food first," Brother Horikawa sighs. As usual, his role is to fix any of Yoshiyuki's misbehavior. It has always been like that since long ago.

He swallows down the food as asked, punching his chest. "Horikawa-sama's cooking is so delicious! So heavenly! I am reborn!"

Brother Horikawa chuckles, "There are plenty, so feel free to have seconds."

"Yes, gladly!"

Brother doesn't really react about the way Yoshiyuki calls him. Once again, it is usual. For Yoshiyuki who also likes to cook, Brother Horikawa is someone he looks up to greatly. Yoshiyuki used to join Brother whenever he was cooking and even had cooking lessons a few times. What a good memory.

Yoshiyuki is the only child in his family, but his parents are pretty useless in housework, even his mother, so he is used on doing everything all by himself, and grew to like cooking in that process. It's a bit surprising from his wild appearance, isn't it? He is a good boy, though.

"Then, I'll take seconds too!" Brother Yamabushi says, lifting up his empty rice bowl.

I look at him in disbelief. His speed never fails me. Sometimes I wonder if devoted Buddhists really are allowed to eat so much, even vegetarian food. "Already?!"

"Kakakaka! I only eat slowly, really."

"Um, that's impossible!"

As we eat peacefully in a warm atmosphere, I realize that something... something is off.

Kogitsunemaru.

It'd be amazing if he is still asleep at this time, although even if he is awake, it's safer from him to not appear near Brother Horikawa.
"By the way, where have you two been going the past two days?" Brother Horikawa asks after giving seconds to Brother Yamabushi.

"We've been going to an epic adventure!" Yoshiyuki replies with a pump of his fist.

"No, it's nothing that grand. We're just… playing around abandoned shrines and forests." There's no way I can say we visit an abandoned shrine to talk to its residents.

"As long as the both of you know the dangers and avoid them." Brother Horikawa shrugs.

"Kakaka! That's a great practice."

"Speaking of practice… what was that before?" Yoshiyuki asks. "That training, I mean. It felt like only five minutes for me."

"That's because you went into a state of trance. You can achieve that in meditation as well. You were concentrating so hard that time seemed to pass quickly," Brother Yamabushi replies.

"Eh? Is it that easy to go into a state of trance?"

"That depends on the situation. Chanting sutras helped as well - and it's because you have the qualities, Yoshiyuki. I'm sure you can be a great monk if you want to, kakaka!"

Yoshiyuki looks amazed. "Hee… I see… like when playing a game or eating…"

"When eating, time flies fast… as expected from Yoshiyuki. Not that I can deny it, though," I say.

"Hey! Don't say it as if it's a bad thing and it's the only hobby I have!"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Oh." Brother Horikawa looks at the clock, "I have to get going soon."

"You're sure busy in the beginning of summer, Brother. You even took a part-time job…"

I have no idea why he took a part-time job when we're pretty stable in economy. I feel bad for leaving him to do it and get busier, but I'm not allowed to take any part-time jobs for an understandable reason.

"You'll also experience it later. University is something different altogether," he replies before he immediately finishes his breakfast. He stands up after his bowl is empty and takes his bag. "Brother Yamanbagiri, can you clean the dishes today?"

"Of course."

"I'm off, then."

"Be careful," Brother Yamabushi says, walking up to him and see him off at the door. After he closes the door, he comes back to the dining room and takes away the empty plates to the kitchen.

"Brother, have you seen Kogitsunemaru?"

"Oh? Yes, he woke up an hour ago and pouted because you were busy, so he went upstairs again. Can you get him for me? I'll prepare his breakfast."

"Yeah. Thank you, Brother."
I finish my breakfast and go upstairs, but not before I notice an excited look on Yoshiyuki's face. Sheesh, he is so easy to read.

"Good morning… Kogitsunemaru? Uwaah!"

Just right after I open the door, something hits my chest. Something fluffy but also hard at the same time. I look down and find a white something pressing onto my chest while two hands are gripping my waist tightly. After some time, my mind finally can think, and I see how familiar that color of white is.

"Kogitsunemaru?"

Yeah, this is him, alright.

"What are you doing, hugging me like this? I thought you aren't going to touch me without my consent?"

He quickly pulls away, but he is still kneeling on the ground with his head down. I can't see his expression like that, so I also kneel before him and pat his head. So soft.

"I'm joking. I don't mind that innocent hug. What's wrong?"

He finally lifts his face, and oh my god, he looks like he is about to cry. Is this even legal?

"Nothing… I just… missed you, that's all."

How honest. Too honest and straightforward that it's so embarrassing and I'm at loss for words.

"We just parted for a few hours…"

"I-I was worried when I didn't find you on the bed, so I panicked… and… uh…"

Oh… I should've told him what my plan is for the day.

"I rushed to get downstairs, but then I met your brother… Horikawa, isn't it? He really couldn't see me, but he seemed to notice my presence and… it was so scary!! What was that?!! That isn't human!!" He trembles with a pale face, completely looking terrified. Well, of course… there's no way he'll hug me just because he missed me… right?

Or wait, don't tell me it is his real reason…?! I mean, sure, he looks like an idiot who likes to overreact, but….

"I don't know how Brother intimidated you, but I'm sorry for that. I understand."

I've seen how scary he could be firsthand. It was… traumatic.

"Anyway, Brother went out, so you can eat breakfast downstairs."

"Oh. Okay…"

He trails behind me as we step outside the room.

"I… I went outside before meeting your brother. I saw you under that faucet… and…"

"That was a training to strengthen my spiritual energy. What about it?" I turn to see him, finding him twirling his hair with his finger, his face colored faintly red. His lips stutter as if he is trying to say
something. What with this reaction?

"I… I saw your body… I'm sorry!"

He bows deeply and I can only stare at him, dumbfounded. Uh-oh. I wasn't exactly naked, but seeing my bare chest might be impolite. Depending on the situation, it is a private zone, after all. He might be worried that I'll get angry at him for seeing me. Yeah, I understand.

"No, you don't have to apologize. I wasn't naked, after all, and there are others too. It's not such a personal thing. Besides, being outside like that, I'm ready to be seen by others."

He lifts his body and sighs in relief, shoulders slumped down.

"Why are you so worried, anyway? Is there something wrong with looking at me?"

It's just my chest. Even I'm fine seeing Yoshiyuki's and my brothers'… uh, Brother Yamabushi is so muscular that my jaw dropped when I saw that for the first time. He looked like a wrestler I've seen in television shows. A monk's life is hard.

Kogitsunemaru fidgets, looking down at his feet, his fingers touching each other. I can see how nervous he is, but why? "W-Well… because you're the one I love, I… I….

He trails off as he bows down, I can see his ears twitching, but that's all.

I have no idea what he is talking about. Because he loves me? So what? Is there something about that…? Or is there something on my chest? Nah, I'm pretty sure the last one is false.

"Um…? It's okay. I don't mind…" I scratch my cheek awkwardly. I can't possibly ask him what he meant when he didn't have any intention to explicitly say it. "Lift your head. Let's have breakfast now."

"Mmm…"

We awkwardly continue our journey and descend the stairs in silence.

Kogitsunemaru breaks it with a whisper. "I said that, but… even without such thing, even without my feelings, you're really, naturally beautiful, Yamanbagiri."

Even without such a thing? I don't know what he means, but I understand he tries to cheer me up, somehow… although all he did is throwing me deeper into the sea. I can feel these words pierce my chest - straight to my heart, and I clench my fist. That word brings so many bad memories and thoughts.

"Don't say that."

"Huh?"

"Don't say that I'm beautiful or pretty. I hate it."

He stops walking, and although I can't see his face, I'm sure he has a shocked expression right now. "Alright… I… I'm sorry."

"It's okay…"

I feel a bit bad for saying it with such intonation. I didn't mean to, but I sounded angry… and that's what Kogitsunemaru might have grasped. He did nothing wrong, really. There's no way he knows
the pain that word brings me… and yet, I… because I'm so sensitive to that word.

"I'm sorry."

I mutter that, but I don't know if he hears me or not.

We enter the dining room in a rather gloomy mood, all because of me. When Yoshiyuki sees us, he gets up from the chair and runs to Kogitsunemaru, not having a clue about the dark mood. It isn't such a bad thing, though. Rather than being suffocated in negative feelings, I prefer to have him lighten everything up, even though he doesn't know anything.

He cheerfully grasps Kogitsunemaru's hands and shakes them. "Hello! We've met before, haven't we? I'm Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki, Yamanbagiri's friend! Just call me Yoshiyuki. Nice to meet ya!"

"Ah…oh…" Kogitsunemaru blinks a few times. "I'm Kogitsunemaru. Nice to meet you."

Yoshiyuki smiles widely when Brother Yamabushi comes out of the kitchen and puts the filled plates and bowl of rice on the table.

"Kakaka! Good morning, Kogitsunemaru. Sorry about earlier. Here, have a warm breakfast now."

"Thank you." Kogitsunemaru bows down before he takes a seat and claps his hands, takes chopsticks, and starts to eat when Brother Yamabushi goes away. I'm sure he is about to meditate now (it should be at early morning, but he took his time to help me and Yoshiyuki. I feel bad). "I assume you've eaten already, Yamanbagiri?"

"Yeah." I take a seat across him, next to Yoshiyuki who is drinking cold milk from the fridge. Huh, I thought he is still eating another serving, but I guess not.

I take a glass and also pour the cold milk into it and drinks it. Hah… it tastes great when it's cold. Summer morning, at this hour, already feels so hot. The coldness of two hours ago feels like an illusion. I should be washing the dishes, but I'll wait until Kogitsunemaru finished eating so I can wash his plates too.

Yoshiyuki hums at he watches Kogitsunemaru eats. He looks like he wants to say something, but patiently waits for him to finish eating. Kogitsunemaru, noticing his gaze, stops moving and awkwardly looks up.

"Is there something wrong… Yoshiyuki?"

He shakes his head. "I'm just wondering about your ears and tail~"

"I'm sure you want him to show you his nine tails," I mutter. I told him about it, after all, and he looked ecstatic. Like me, Yoshiyuki can't resist fluffy things.

Kogitsunemaru's eyes light up. "Really? I can show you later."

"Yay! I can't wait~"

"In the meantime, Yoshiyuki, you can go take a bath first."

He turns his head to me. "Ya sure ya don't want to get in together?"

I see Kogitsunemaru freezes from the corner of my eyes. Okay, I know Yoshiyuki is so pure and innocent, so he doesn't mean anything weird, but Kogitsunemaru might have thought otherwise.
"Stop joking like that. We aren't children anymore… unless you want me to slam your head into the water, and keep you there for minutes?"

"What kind of punishment is that?! Ya want to kill me?!" Yoshiyuki cries out. "Geez… okay. I'll take bath first." He stands up and takes his bag, going upstairs to the bathroom. I wonder why he is so intent to take a bath with me…. Sure, I'd like to brush his hair, but that can be done outside.

"…The two of you seem close," Kogitsunemaru says after Yoshiyuki is gone from our sight.

"Well, we are. We're friends since childhood. We've been together for as long as I remember. Ah, he is just an innocent boy, really. Too innocent that he spits out things without thinking many times."

"Since childhood…"

"Yeah. We used to play together a lot since we're in the same neighborhood, same school, and same class… but of course, that gradually vanished when we got busier and he moved to another district. We just recently got back together… it's embarrassing, but, I guess you can say that he is my only true friend."

There are a lot of memories with Yoshiyuki. Gentle ones. Happy ones. Sad ones. Almost everything. Some are painful, but they're still dear to me.

"I see. I thought such bonds only exist in fiction."

"How honest… same, though. We drifted away from each other for years, though, so it's true that that kind of relationship is hard to maintain if you don't meet regularly. That affection gradually disappears."

In the midst of despair, even I forgot about the existence of my past light, Yoshiyuki. That's how far we were.

It was still a bit awkward for the both of us to hang out together like yesterday, honestly, because it has been so long - but at the same time, it feels like we're back to our happy, childhood days. It's not bad.

Kogitsunemaru stares at me, as if observing my entire being. "How old are you, Yamanbagiri?"

"Why so sudden? Uh…" I'm a bit surprised he doesn't know. Do I perhaps look a bit older or even younger? "I'm in third grade of middle school now."

"Ohh… you're younger than I thought."

"What did you think?"

"High school student."

"Well, it's close… but I look older, huh…?" I feel a bit sad.

Kogitsunemaru, noticing this, continues in panic, "N-No, you aren't! I'm just being careful to measure your age."

"It's okay, it just feels a bit weird."

"Hmmm…"

He looks down and starts eating again, but this time with slow movements, as if he is bothered by
something. I can feel something ominous lurking behind him, but I can't seem to grasp what it means, so I just stay quiet and wait for his next move. I'm sure he has more to say.

"So, the two of you have been friends for at least 10 years?"

"Even more, yeah."

That's the first time someone asked me that. Feels a bit weird.

"He was with you yesterday, wasn't he? When I met you."

"Yeah. We just went home from a shrine. Our houses are in the same direction, so we naturally go together."

"A shrine? For what?"

"Keep this a secret, but... we met a shinrei. Basically, a human who has reached godhood. The shrine was abandoned, though, and nobody visit it anymore."

"But there is a god inside it?"

"Yeah. He is about to disappear, so we feel kind of bad. Other than because we have nothing better to do in early summer holiday, we want to keep him alive in this world. Though I don't know if completely vanishing equals death."

"I see... do you usually get involved in oddities like that?"

I tap my knuckles on the table, uncomfortable with the question. "You can say so... I really don't want to, but sometimes I end up getting involved anyway. That's why Brother said I'm reckless."

"That's why he told me to protect you...?"

"Yeah, I think. I don't have any wish to become a specialist like him, but I just can't stay still when I see someone in need... especially when it's about oddities. I don't know why. My body usually moves before I even know it... this time, Yoshiyuki was the one who dragged me. He was curious, you see, so I just went along."

"I see... a shinrei should be a good person, though. I don't think there's anything to worry."

"I know, right... Brother just worries too much. It's fine, though. You can follow me there tomorrow. There's nothing to do at home, anyway."

There's a pause before he replies.

"Is that... fine? I feel like intruding your time... and your life overall, Yamanbagiri. Maybe I shouldn't be here... I can just stay here while you live your own life. I don't want to bother you any further than this."

He lowers his chopsticks, making it slides into the bowl with a clink. A shadow is cast on his face... what's with this gloomy mood?

I understand his worries, though. It's perfectly natural to feel that. "Well, you're... a bit of a burden, but I don't mind. It's not bad. Brother Yamabushi doesn't mind as well, so it's fine. I know you aren't a bad person. It's pretty rare for me to say this to someone I've known only for days - it's almost like a miracle, so take that as a compliment."
There's just something inside Kogitsunemaru that makes me unable to doubt him. As if I know him very well. This feeling of familiarity surpasses even my feelings with Yoshiyuki. I don't know why and I can't find the reason.

Even though I should doubt my decision to trust him, I just can't.

"As long as you don't destroy my room or the house, you aren't a bother."

"That's a pretty high standard… ahaha…" Kogitsunemaru chuckles awkwardly, but I can see tension is going away from his face. He moves his chopsticks a few times before muttering, "Thanks…"

"…No problem."

Besides, having a bodyguard sounds nice.

With silence falling upon us, I decide to turn on television and watch news. It's better than being stuck in silence with him - it'll just be awkward.

I can't help but to take a glance, though… and our eyes meet in that instant.

For some reason, I feel my cheeks get hot, so I avert my gaze immediately and put a hand on my nape. Totally awkward….

"Yamanbagiri."

"Y-Yes?"

I can't help but to jolt when he calls me.

"I'm done… and I'll wash them along with others."

"But that's my job - "

"Let me do it. This is the least I can do for you."

I look at him, seeing his earnest and determined face, I can't turn him down. "Okay, go ahead - uh?"

When I look at his plates, I find that his plates are still full of pickled radish. Since there's meat in today's menu, the pickled radish is smaller than usual, but there are still plenty. The meat is gone, though, so it seems he only ate it, leaving the pickled radish.

Huh. Did he also avoid eating vegetables yesterday? Wait, yesterday's menu mostly has radish… mmm, I didn't realize.

"Kogitsunemaru, why didn't you eat pickled radish?"

Kogitsunemaru looks down at the table. "Uh…"

"You didn't like it?"

His cheeks grow visibly red. "Yeah… I'm not fond of it."

"I see… I never thought you have that kind of dislike. That's fine, but I'm sure Brother Horikawa will get angry… if he can see you, anyway. I'll eat them just in case."

At times like this, I need the glutton Yoshiyuki.
I take a pair of chopsticks and start to eat the pickled radish on Kogitsunemaru's plates. "Did you also avoid eating radish yesterday?"

"Y-Yeah… I only ate a bit, but I really couldn't finish all. I'm sorry."

He looks shameful and guilty at the same time. I should be feeling guilty for only having radish dishes yesterday, honestly. He might just not like it without allergy or something, but I'm not fond of forcing someone to do what they dislike, especially in food. I mean, I hate yoghurt with burning passion, and I don't want to drink it ever again. It's the same.

"It's okay. I think I'll make something for you whenever Brother's menu is full of radish."

Kogitsunemaru stares at me with wide eyes. "H-Huh?"

"Even I can cook to a degree… and there's Yoshiyuki who likes cooking. I can ask help from him."

"I'll help. I've never tried cooking before, but I can't just let you do all the work."

I expected him to say that. "That's fine too. More help, the better."

Before long, I finish eating all of pickled radish left on Kogitsunemaru's plates and he takes them away to be washed. At the same time, Yoshiyuki emerges from the second floor, going downstairs with excited steps, and then steps into the dining room with a bang.

An actual bang on the wall, I mean. He slams the wall for some reason. Maybe he is acting like there's a door to be opened there.

"I'm done, Yamanbagiri! Thanks for the bath~"

"Quick as usual, I see. I'll take a bath, then."

"Where's Kogi?"

"In the kitchen, washing dishes. You can accompany him or help him if you want."

Yoshiyuki frowns. "Whaat, are ya slaving him to do housework?"

"No. I'm not that cruel. He really wanted to help and do it, so I can't refuse." I shrug my shoulders as I stand up. "Well, the lighter the burden is on me, the better."

He covers his mouth with a hand, looking at me in disdain as if I'm a villain. Of course, this is an exaggerated pose and expression just for jokes, but it hurts.

"He wanted it, okay! It's for our mutual benefit!"

"Ooh, really…."

"Are you implying that you doubt me?"

I say it with a sad face, but deep down I am smirking, *eat shit, Yoshiyuki.*

As expected, Yoshiyuki panics. He erratically waves his hands around with a troubled face. "No, um, it's not like that! I trust ya, really! Ya are the number one in my heart! All of my experience points went to trust ya!"

"Ahaha. I know, I know. Just teasing you."
"Yamanbagiri~!!!!"

I escape to my room upstairs before Yoshiyuki can hit me. Teasing him never gets boring.

When I get back from bath to the dining room, I find a surreal scene unfolding before me.

Kogitsunemaru is sitting on the sofa, looking a bit nervous as Yoshiyuki next to him is braiding his hair. On his hand is a recipe book, which I can see as Yoshiyuki's. Kogitsunemaru is flipping the pages, occasionally pointing at the page and Yoshiyuki responds. I can't hear them well from here, but I can see that they're interacting closely.

Just what happened when I was taking a bath? Sure, Yoshiyuki is a sociable person, so it isn't impossible for him to get Kogitsunemaru to open up easily (in fact, Kogitsunemaru doesn't bother to hide everything with me, so to Yoshiyuki, getting close to him must be a breeze).

What a rare sight.

I approach them.

"I see the two of you are having fun."

"Oh, Yamanbagiri!" Yoshiyuki shoots me a smile as bright as the sun. So blinding. "Look, look, I'm braiding his hair! It's so soft and great! It's so long, though, it'll take a long time to braid it all."

"I can see that."

I sit on the sofa next to theirs, staring at them. It doesn't seem like they have any intention on telling me what happened or what exactly they are doing, so I have to ask.

"Why are you holding a recipe book, Kogitsunemaru?"

"Ah, I told Yoshiyuki I want to try cooking. You said he likes cooking, so I thought he'd be able to help," Kogitsunemaru replies. "I'm about to pick something easy and tasty to try."

"I happen to bring the book, so why not," Yoshiyuki adds. "I'm thinking of making dessert. It's the easiest and the tastiest!"

"We can make that for dessert after lunch. It'd be great."

Ah, innocent souls that know nothing. No, that is just a quote. "No, that can't do."

"Huh? Why?" Yoshiyuki asks, he sounds disappointed.

"Our lunch will just be a toast because our next training might make us vomit." I tell them bluntly.

He stares at me for a moment, as if to grasp the meaning of my words before he takes a deep breath.

"That sounds dangerous!"

"Not really. I never vomited even once, so you can do it as well."

"Well, if ya say that..." He nods a few times to himself as his fingers are still actively braiding Kogitsunemaru's white hair. "Then, Kogi can learn how to make a toast first! It's not exactly
cooking, but let's make it taste unique and good."

Kogitsunemaru turns to see him and nods in agreement.

"Don't overdo it, okay? I'll tell Brother that you'll make it, then. By the way, the drink is usually vegetable mix, can you make it too?"

"Oooh, I've made that once, but I'll ask Yamabushi-san for details."

Lunch has been decided.

We spend the rest of that morning playing with Kogitsunemaru's hair. Yes, I braid his hair too at the end. I'm more hardcore than Yoshiyuki when it comes to fluffy things, don't you know?

After lunch with a burned toast (but it still tastes good thanks to Yoshiyuki's magic and Kogitsunemaru's funny reaction as he is about to cry) and vegetable juice, we step into a small room at the edge of the first floor. It's located next to the storage room, and it's rarely used, so it is pretty desolate and cold even in the heat of summer.

In the dimly lit room, there is a single candle in the middle of the room. The curtains are closed, so there is only faint light seeping into the room.

"Sit around the candle," Brother Yamabushi says as he sits in front of the candle, his hands resting on his lap.

After we sit like he does, he gives the both of us a piece of paper. It's another sutra.

"This time, I'll read it with you."

He starts to recite first and we follow him, reading the text in the paper. Even though it has been a few times, I still don't remember everything in this sutra. Meanwhile Brother can chant it without tripping with just his memory... it still amazes me how monks like him can do such things.

Before long, the words from the paper seem to come out of existence, swirling around my mind.

It makes nausea rising up to my stomach. If we didn't have only a toast as lunch, we really will vomit. Even now, I can still feel that nausea, almost pushing whatever inside my stomach, even though I've done this a few times. It's pretty bad and hard, if you ask me.

No idea why we need vegetable juice, though. It tastes...unique.

"We're done."

I snap back to reality with Brother Yamabushi's voice and a clap of his hand.

"Good work, the both of you. Five hours have passed now."

"N-Now five?!!"
Yoshiyuki can't hide his surprise and amazement. Sure enough, beyond the windows, there is a distinct color of orange and the warmth of sunset is seeping into the room even with its curtains closed. I can hear the lazy cries of cicadas echoing outside.

It's evening.

"O-Ow, my legs… so cramped…" Yoshiyuki whines. I'm amazed he still can get to his knees, though. I couldn't do that the first time and fell to my butt.

"Can you walk?" I ask while offering my hand.

Brother Yamabushi pours water from the bottle to a cup of glass. "Kakaka. Don't move too much now, Yoshiyuki. Here, drink this."

Yoshiyuki gladly accepts the cup and drinks it immediately.

"What is this?! I feel like I'm revived!"

I chuckle. "After reborn it's now resurrection, isn't it."

"Great, isn't it? Now, go take a bath. Can you walk? If not, I'll carry you all the way to the bathroom, kakaka!"

"E-Eeh?! I… I can! It isn't necessary to - ack!" He screams when he tries to move his legs, and instead falls to the floor, lying with his chest down.

"It seems you can't." I don't even try to hide my smirk.

"Okay, Yoshiyuki! Hang on tight!"

"Waaah!"

Brother Yamabushi lifts Yoshiyuki up as if he is as light as a cat, carrying him on his arms in princess (or bridal) style. Even Yoshiyuki is embarrassed with this, so he hides his fully red face with his hands.

"Take care."

I wave them off and Yoshiyuki sends me one more glare before Brother walks away.

I clean up everything in the room and leave. There are actually two bathrooms, in the first floor and second floor. I'm sure Yoshiyuki is going to take the one in the first floor (he didn't before because he wasn't used to it, and the second floor bathroom was empty anyway). Let's take a bath at the second floor, then.

I pass the dining room on the way, smelling something good from inside. Brother Horikawa must be home and is cooking right now. Mm, I can't wait.

In my room, I don't see Kogitsunemaru anywhere. I don't think he can be free with Brother Horikawa around, but he can just go through the windows. He might be taking a stroll right now. I take a towel and change of clothes before I open the bathroom door.

"Hyaa?!"

There's a yelp from inside the bathroom and the sound of splashing water. No, it isn't my voice. It's someone else's.
Hmm, that's weird, there should be no one… I blink a few times. Is that an illusion? Are my ears playing on me? Slowly, my eyes catch a glimpse of a blurry figure. Over the time, the figure gets clearer, exposing the details.

Ah. Ah. Ah!!

After some time, I finally recognize what is happening before me.

There's Kogitsunemaru inside the bathroom. He is sitting on the stool, his hands clenching on the white towel that barely covers his big body. His hair is up inside a shower cap he is wearing. I can clearly see his skin and drips of water running on the floor and his skin. His face is completely red, in shock and disbelief.

Whoops.

"Y-Yamanbagiri…?"

"Oh… sorry. I thought there's nobody inside. My bad."

I close the door calmly, but I feel my heart is about to explode after that.

Mistake of the century. Not really, it's a common mistake… in fiction at least, as a trope, most notably in romcom shows. What is this?! Am I in a romcom show too?! I never know! Besides, talking about how this is a harem series where I'm the bottom, shouldn't I get that role of being the one bathing instead? Wait, what the hell am I thinking?!

That's my first time in years to mistakenly open the bathroom door when someone else is inside. I think I did that with Yoshiyuki before, but that was when we were children.

Aaaah, how embarrassing. How am I supposed to face him now?!

I lie down on my bed, putting the pillow in my face to suppress that feeling. The image of Kogitsunemaru's almost naked body, please go away… please…… oh wow, he is pretty muscular, when I think about it. Wait, wait, go away! Go away, that thought! Forget his body!

I roll a few times on my empty bed when the door opens.

Taking a peek, I can see Kogitsunemaru at the doorway, his neck is wrapped in a towel.

"Y-Yamanbagiri… I'm done."

The anxiety in his voice is as clear as the day.

"Y-Yeah… sorry about earlier." I get up and walk away, trying to not have any kind of eye contact with him.

"It's okay. I was suprised, but…."

He says that with a low voice when I pass him. Thinking that he'll continue, I stop my legs, but after a while, he doesn't say anything. What does he want? Perhaps I can find out from his expression, but I'm already facing his back. If he doesn't want to say it, then… fine.

I take a bath with a complex feelings swirling inside my chest, my body moves automatically to wash my body as if in auto-pilot mode. The image of his almost naked body and his muscular arms can't help but to appear every now and then, making me dip myself inside the water in bathtub, almost swallowing water in the process. Ugh, not even the heat of water can calm me down. My eyes and
Finding Yoshiyuki and my brothers are something I can be calm about, but Kogitsunemaru is a stranger. I essentially have just breached his privacy. Not to mention that... he said he is interested in me. I become conscious of him as a love interest. What if... I have a chance with him?

I slap myself as hard as I can when I realize that thought. Don't fall, me! Hold on, you can do it!

I don't think it'll be so bad to be with him, but... he is an oddity. He is fundamentally different from me, even though our outer appearances are the same. The question is basic - can we even get together in the first place? There are many hurdles.

And then there's the question if he indeed loves me or not. I have to wait before everything becomes clear. This whole living together thing was started for that, after all.

Okay, after thinking all of that, I think I'm a lot calmer now. Just think of Kogitsunemaru as a small, cute, fluffy pet... for now. Yes, that's right. Don't forget the greatness of his hair, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro! Just like his name, he is just an adorable little fox!

Wait, that sounds so wrong, somehow....

After dipping in water long enough, I get out, dry myself, wear my nighttime clothes and go out with clearer mind. The night is falling and the temperature drops, so fresh out of bath feels great. I visit my room first before going downstairs.

I find Kogitsunemaru playing my laptop, wearing a headphone. All he does is playing my laptop, honestly... well, I can't blame him. He seriously has nothing else to do.

Kogitsunemaru looks at me when he notices my presence. "Ah, Yamanbagiri." He slides down the headphone and smiles. It seems the awkwardness before has gone out for him as well. Good.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I put the towel back to its place. I mean, I know he is playing laptop, but what exactly? This is probably the first time I see him with a headphone.

"I found some anime in your folder. This particular one is so interesting!" He says excitedly, his tail swinging around behind him.

I walk and peek at the screen. There's a paused video I know very well. It's an anime set in a fantasy world, but about war and old-styled society, like how Europe was before Church Reformation.

"Ooh, this anime. Yeah, this is great. I never get bored rewatching it."

"You really have good tastes."

"Thanks, I guess. Well, I'm going to have dinner now. I'll bring your dinner later."

"Ah, it's okay. When you were training, I've gathered leftovers."

"Do they suffice?"

He looks uncertain. "I think so...."

"I'll bring you some just in case."

"Thank you, Yamanbagiri." He sees me off.

Going downstairs, the thick smell of cooked meat and vegetables are tickling my nostrils. When I
step into the dining room, I'm greeted by a great scene of hot foods lined up on the table. There are plates of fried chicken with beansprout, bamboo shoots, pickled eggplant, spinach, steamed egg with summer vegetables, dried plum and pickled radish, **oden** made of radish and konjac, sesame tofu, and lastly, sweet potato **miso** soup. It's rare to have so many varieties of dishes for dinner - yeah, I know, traditional Japanese dinner has many dishes, but it's usually not *this* many. It's almost like a party.

"Looks extravagant…." I mutter as I sit on one of the chair, across my two brothers, next to Yoshiyuki. Mmm? Yoshiyuki seems down… no, he really is, hiding his face with his palm like that. How rare. "Yoshiyuki?"

"Kakakaka! He's still embarrassed from before," Brother replies for him.

"My dignity… my dignity is…!" Yoshiyuki mutters under his breath.

"Don't be so down. It can't be helped, you couldn't walk at all. Besides, didn't Brother carry you like that before? Your dignity is still intact because you still have clothes on."

"That was years ago, and no, that's not what I mean!"

For someone who wants to take a bath together with me, he is sure frantic over this little thing. Isn't bathing together is more embarrassing than being carried like a princess?

"Yoshiyuki is still light. It doesn't feel much different, kakaka!"

"That's just your superhuman strength! In reality, I'm way heavier. It's amazing that ya can lift me so easily, but that's another thing!"

Even though there's nobody but me and my brothers to see. Heh, he is a maiden deep down, isn't he?

"What's so wrong with being princess-carried?" Brother Horikawa asks. I have no idea if he is playing innocent or not, but I bet on all of my money that it's all intentional.

"Rather than being the one carried, I want to be the one carrying someone else!"

Brother Horikawa puts a shocked face, his palm covering his mouth. He looks like a mother gossiping. "You want to carry Brother Yamabushi?!"

"No, that's not what I mean, of course! I'll die if I do that!"

I decide to join in. "No, um, you're exaggerating. Your arms can break, but that's all. Nothing more."

"That's still terrifying! Don't say it as if my arms can heal so fast!"

"Carrying me can be a good training, Yoshiyuki. Why don't you do it?" Brother Yamabushi flashes a smile.

Yoshiyuki crosses his arms in front of his chest, creating a X mark. "I'm not going to do it, never!! Impossible!!"

"If you can lift Brother, you'll get a new world record! And lots of money!" Brother Horikawa says excitedly.

"That's even more impossible! And why do you look so excited, Horikawa-san? It's a bit scary…." Seeing how troubled he is with my two brothers, I have to chirp in again. Triple hit from Kunihiro brothers! "Ooh, Yoshiyuki as a *tsukkomi*… what a rare sight. Did you hit your head or something?"
"No, I didn't! And if I hit my head, shouldn't I get more stupid?!

"So you realize you're stupid?"

"That's not… augh, Yamanbagiri~!!!!"

As usual, he has no words to counter me. Ooh, so cute. He looks like he is about to cry for real. I admit he is stupid some degree, as his failure in math is pretty amazing, but that's normal for your everyday middle-schooler.

"Now, now. Let's eat before the food gets cold." Brother Horikawa chuckles as he puts rice on the bowls, passing it to the owner. He's usually a *tsuukomi*, the rational voice, but whenever Brother Yamabushi and I act as *boke*, he'll join in naturally. He has a talent as both.

"Uuu… thanks for the meal." Yoshiyuki claps his two hands and starts to eat, munching down the food with closed eyes. "Mmm… your cooking is so great, Horikawa-san… I feel like crying…"

"I think you want to cry for another thing." I pat his head and laugh. We might have gone too far. His heart is fragile. Yoshiyuki doesn't reject my hand, instead nodding as if he likes it. He eats vigorously, not stopping his chopsticks. I can see rice grains on his cheeks. I can just take it with my fingers but meh. I just let them be because he looks cute with that.

Brother Horikawa smiles. "Feel free to eat a lot. Brother Yamanbagiri too. You have to regain your energy."

"Of course. Brother's cooking is to die for."

Aah, it'll be bad if Kogitsunemaru misses this delicious food. I have to steal some for him somehow.

"Brother Yamabushi, do you think Yoshiyuki should train again?" I ask. "Training has to be done regularly to have some kind of effect, right?"

"That's right, but I have something to do tomorrow. Two days later, then?"

"No problem," Yoshiyuki nods. "I have nothing better to do in summer holiday anyway."

"Let's not forget our summer homework, Yoshiyuki."

"Y-Ya don't have to remind me… ahaha…"

He forgot homework's existence, huh. We'll be high-schoolers soon, so we're getting busy. Holiday is a long-awaited, celebrated thing that must be filled with enjoyment, free from school works. Unfortunately, reality is harsh, instead dumping us with a stack of homework. As if we're going to do that in a month. We usually cram it in the last week.

We have a peaceful dinner. Even the hot *nabe* and soup are great at summer night. It feels a lot hotter than before, but I eat delightfully without stopping. I've just realized how hungry I am when I eat… training one's physical strength with such methods is as exhausting as exercise.

After dinner is the same as usual. Brother Horikawa goes to wash dishes, Brother Yamabushi watches news on television, and Yoshiyuki plays a game in his smartphone. Apparently, there's a game event, but he missed most of the time since he was training, and pouted about it. After stuffing Kogitsunemaru's dinner into a box (somehow managing to smuggle it), I turn and take a look at the clock.
"Yoshiyuki, shouldn't you go home now? Or do you want to spend the night?"

"Eh? Oh, you're right." Yoshiyuki moves his fingers once again before stopping, putting the smartphone on his pocket and stretches out his arms.

"If you're still tired, you can spend the night, you know."

"Naaah. I didn't bring anything to spend the night here, and I don't want to bother ya guys more than this." He smiles as he takes his bag.

"It's not a bother. I'm happy to see a youth training, kakaka!"

"There's that, but eh... if I stay, won't I sleep in Yamanbagiri's room? It's pretty crowded already, so I have to refrain."

He means Kogitsunemaru. I bet he actually wants to interact more with him and braid his hair again, but there's no time left today. Even though he can just sleep with him on the same futon... and then he can grab his hair anytime he wants. I'm sure Yoshiyuki can do that, sleeping with another person without any tint of shame, as he is way too innocent and only cares for the actual sleep and the comfort of bed. Kogitsunemaru might not think the same, though... it'll be interesting to see his reaction.

"But you can sleep with him. It sounds good."

"Don't tempt me!"

I got it right.

The two of us walk to the courtyard, Yoshiyuki pushing his bicycle to the empty and dimly lit streets.

"Thanks for today, Yamanbagiri," he says as he gets on top of the seat, gripping the handles with his two hands. "See ya tomorrow at the usual spot, then?"

"Yeah. I'll bring Kogitsunemaru as well. Good night. Be careful on the way home."

"Good night!"

He waves one arm as his feet move the pedals, moving the bicycle, until his distance to me is far enough and he is swallowed up by the darkness of the night. I lock the gate and step into the house, going upstairs to my room.

"Kogitsunemaru, have you eaten dinner yet?"

Just in time. I see Kogitsunemaru lying down on the carpet-covered floor, opening a box I recognize as breakfast's leftovers. He stares at me, tilting his head in confusion.

"I'm about to eat. What's wrong?"

"Here. I stuffed some. Tonight's dinner is great, you can't miss it." I give him the box. Kogitsunemaru's eyes light up when he sees what's inside. I stuffed odon, miso soup, sesame tofu, some meat, and hot rice - separated by plastics for those with broth. No vegetables. I'm not a mother type that'll tell people to eat everything served, anyway. I have my own preferences with food as well.

"Oooh, thank you!" His menu is almost double sized now, but he doesn't seem to mind it. Maybe he is confident he can finish it all. He hums as he claps his two hands. "Thank you for the meal!" He
starts to move his chopsticks, picking out the dishes he wants the most first and eats delightfully.

It's never boring to see someone as expressive as him when eating, just like Yoshiyuki. I can see why cooking shows are a thing.

I sit on my chair, going to play my laptop. It seems Kogitsunemaru has been taking care of it pretty well. I see the browser is open with webnovels tabs open. He went ahead of me, didn't he? Oh well. Time to read as well. I want to play some games, but it's time to read before he spoils me anything.

And then, I just realize something. Continuing a conversation from this morning. I've just remembered.

"Oh, Kogitsunemaru."

"Yes?"

"We're going to the shrine tomorrow. You're coming too. I take no objections."

I turn to see him and he straightens his back. "Okay. Your brother told me to, after all."

"And you have nothing else to do. Being locked up in my room like a NEET isn't good." I don't want to imagine Kogitsunemaru as a person wearing a white T-shirt and just lies down while playing laptop all day, eating potato chips or the like, hardly moves except going to the bathroom. That thought is too terrifying.

"But I've been going outside too, don't worry."

"When?"

"When you were training."

Well... I guess there's no way he'll just stay and get locked in this house. For him, going in and out is easy. All he needs is to slide open the window and flies out.

He continues when I offer no reply. "I didn't want to worry you, though, so I returned early... but to my surprise, you were still training. And it was around 5 PM."

He doesn't want me to worry about him when he disappears without any notice. I see. It's pretty normal and thoughtful of him, although honestly, I won't think much about it. "Ah, yeah, the second part lasts for 5 hours. You should try it too sometimes."

"S-Someday, maybe...."

"I'll tell Brother Yamabushi, then. It's settled."

"E-Eh?!"

Kogitsunemaru is about to complain more, but he looks down at his dinner and continues to eat peacefully, slightly pouting. He is similar to Yoshiyuki in this regard. Maybe that's why I can't turn him down.

That night passes without any incident.
"S-So hot…so hot…" Kogitsunemaru complains as he floats lazily next to me, his usual vigor is almost completely gone. He ties his hair with a yellow ribbon, but his flowy long hair still covers his nape, so it must be real hot for him.

I stare at him as I turn on the portable fan next to my neck, the wind blowing my skin feels nice. "I thought you can't feel temperature at all, judging from your clothes."

"Your room is cold and nice, so… but the outside world is a blazing hell… haa…" 

"That's true… it's getting hotter day by day…" Yoshiyuki nods at his words, looking as dead as he is. "Man, at times like this I wish I can fly… going up these stairs is suffering…"

I honestly think we can just ask Kogitsunemaru to carry us all the way to the top, because he flies, but seeing how tortured he is, I bury that wish. Flying seems a bit terrifying, anyway….

"Come on, Yoshiyuki. Where's your usual optimism? Who is going to play with these dogs if not you?!” I pump a fist at the bright blue sky. It's cloudless, so the sun directly cooks us. I'm feeling a bit disheartened myself now….

"Ah, yeah! I'll do it for them!" Yoshiyuki raises his fist as well, smiling, slowly regaining his strength. "I can't fall here… there are tons of games to be played!"

"It's not like you're going to die, and your priority is a bit off. Where's homework?"

"Don't be a hypocrite, Yamanbagiri! I know ya think the same."

Damn, he is right. He is right about how I feel, but that doesn't mean I can just not tease him.

"Dogs?" Kogitsunemaru looks confused, saving me from shame. Thank you.

"There are wild dogs up there. They're cute."

"I see…"

"Dogs vs cats, huh. How great, how great," Yoshiyuki hums, speeding up his legs to go upstairs, now passing me. He sways his arms, looking completely happy, as if his complain before never happened.

"How is a fight great?" I ask, but he doesn't reply.

"I'm a fox," Kogitsunemaru retorts immediately, frowning. "I'm fine with dogs. There should be no problem."

"What if they bite your hair?" I ask in whim.

He replies with a clenched fist, eyes burning with rage. "That's unforgivable. The biggest sin towards me! Heresy! Well, jokes aside, now that you said that, I'm getting worried."

"Don't worry, Yoshiyuki is a dog whisperer. He'll protect us."
"Eeh, me? Well, dog whisperer is a good title, so I guess...."

I can see him being a little happy, even if I only see his back. If he has cats' ears and tails, I can imagine them swaying right now. It's simple to lift his spirits.

"Yamanbagiri, can you give me that fan as well?" Kogitsunemaru asks, going closer to me.

"Sure." I give him the portable fan, letting him use it and place it next to his neck. Now I don't have anything to cool me off. I can just make it so the fan's wind reaches me if I didn't give it to him, but that means I'll be standing way too close with him... that would be too much.

Before long, after a painful journey, we finally reach the top with heavy breaths.

"Welcome, wel - hmm?"

Shishiou approaches us with a broom on his hand, stopping his greeting as he observes the stranger with us from head to toe. Kogitsunemaru visibly whimper at his unusually sharp gaze.

"Ah, this is Kogitsunemaru. He is harmless... so far. For various reasons, he's living with me now," I introduce him. "And this is Shishiou, the guardian of this shrine."

"Nice to meet you." Kogitsunemaru lands and bows.

"Kunihiro-san's friend, then?" Shishiou smiles, extending his hand, which Kogitsunemaru awkwardly shakes. "Nice to meet you. You're a fox, aren't you? How rare. What happened?"

"A long story. Can we just go inside now? Yoshiyuki is dying."

I take a glance at Yoshiyuki who is on all four on the floor, looking like he is about to vomit. Halfway through the journey, that idiot ran for a one-sided race. Of course I didn't mind him or catch up to him, yet he kept on running. This is the obvious result.

"Of course, of course." Shishiou laughs and leads us to the office building as usual.

"So you people came again... oh?"

Mikazuki is sitting comfortably next to the table as usual, lifting his face slightly to see us. His eyes narrowed when he sees Kogitsunemaru (who else will catch his attention?). Kogitsunemaru straightens his back, feeling the pressure from his gaze. Yeah, Mikazuki is intimidating by default, and now that he stares at him like he is a criminal, it's even more terrifying. Even I can feel that.

"This is Kogitsunemaru. For various reasons, he's living with me now." I use the same introduction as before. "And that is Mikazuki Munechika, this shrine's god."

Kogitsunemaru just bows deeply and politely, not saying a word. He probably has no idea what to say to someone far greater than him. Yeah, I understand....

"I see." Mikazuki immediately turns his head away and sips something on the cup. Probably tea as usual.

Kogitsunemaru moves behind me, as if he is getting smaller and tries to hide. He must be afraid, somehow. That's no use, of course. He is far bigger and taller than me.

"What are you doing? Just sit anywhere you like," Shishiou says, chuckling, "I'll pour you juice now." He walks off to the kitchen.
Yoshiyuki sits first on the cushion, just next to Mikazuki. I follow, also sitting next to Mikazuki, thinking that Kogitsunemaru probably doesn't want to. Kogitsunemaru looks a bit relieved as he sits next to me. There are actually five cushions around the table, so there's space for Shishiou to sit on.

I put the portable fan on the table and take out books from my bag. Yoshiyuki visibly shudders at the sight.

"S-Summer homework? Seriously, Yamanbagiri?"

"I'm the type to do homework at the beginning of holiday. You know that."

"Yeah, but… I….

"I didn't tell you to bring it, so of course you can't do homework. That's fine. Let's split the homework in two. I'll do my part and give the answers to you, and you do your part and do the same."

It's an old plan, actually. I did this all the time with him before.

Yoshiyuki nods with a smile. "Okay!"

"Make sure you do it before holiday ends. I'll remind you every now and then."

"Leave it to me!" He puffs his chest, putting a hand there. Honestly, I'm not really convinced, as he is always forgetful when it comes to school. "Time for game, then~" He hums, taking out his smartphone from his pocket and starts to play it.

Kogitsunemaru awkwardly sits in *seiza* next to me, looking unsure on what to do as I open my notebook and do homework. Math first. I guess I can give him something to do… I take out my smartphone and offer it to him.

"Kogi, I'm sure you're bored, so you can use my smartphone to read something. Go finish that webnovel."

I see his ears twitch twice. "Can I?"

"Yeah. I'm entrusting it to you."

"Thank you." He takes it and starts to tap on the screen. He used my smartphone a few times before, so I know he can use it well. I think he'll just read and look up something, so there's no room for mistake… I hope.

Shishiou comes back just then, holding a tray full of glasses. He puts it on the table and we take the glasses filled with orange-colored liquid and chunks of ice. I guess it's still orange juice. I don't mind, though. Better than strawberry juice for me. I see Yoshiyuki drinks it and finishes it in one big gulp, sighing like an old man being revived from near-death experience and asks for another. Kogitsunemaru takes a sip normally like me, before putting the glass on the table and plays my smartphone in slower movements, probably afraid if playing it is rude in front of Shishiou and Mikazuki. Even though Yoshiyuki does it without any care in the world.

Shishiou stares at Kogitsunemaru before asking, "So, what happened that he is now living with you, Kunihiro-san? If you don't mind telling us."

"I don't care, either way," Mikazuki says.
"Old man!"

"I really don't want to get involved with oddities so much, and yet here I am. Anyway, long story short…"

I tell them the story from the beginning, everything - except the part where Kogitsunemaru confessed to me. There's no way I can tell them that, and I don't think Kogitsunemaru wants people to know and laugh at him. I lie with "He is interested in how humans live, and finally got the courage to ask when he met me." Kogitsunemaru nods to make it seem more real, and he shuts his mouth about the lie. So does Yoshiyuki, though I doubt he actually listens to everything. I say, "Brother Yamabushi allowed him to live together with me, maybe thinking it's good for him and me to learn something from each other."

I believe that last part is true.

"I see… your brother seems to be quite whimsical." Shishiou smiles wryly.

"Indeed he is. Going missing for days and months without any news is normal. And then he'll come back with gifts from somewhere far away, not telling us what he did. Mysterious."

"Perhaps that's why he let Kogitsunemaru to be with you." Unexpectedly, Mikazuki responds. "To ensure that you're safe. Kogitsunemaru is acting as a guard."

I don't expect him to think that so quickly. "I thought so too."

"Yamanbagiri can be reckless, especially when it comes to oddities," Yoshiyuki adds. Oh, so he is listening, after all.

I'm a bit embarrassed to hear that extra detail. It's true, but still…

"Well, I don't see any harm in Kogi, so if I were your brother, I think I'll do the same," Shishiou says. "Not only Kunihiro-san, but Yoshiyuki-san as well. The both of you seem like reckless, adventurous teenagers."

"Only when you said that I remember you're old…" I mutter. Shishiou chuckles hearing my reply.

"By the way, Shishiou-san, just call us without any honorifics, please. It doesn't feel comfortable for me," Yoshiyuki says. Oh right, 'Yoshiyuki' is his last name… I've been calling him that for so long that I've forgotten. I can just call him 'Mutsu', and it sounds cute, but 'Yoshiyuki' just stuck, and he wants to be called that, anyway.

"And call me with my first name," I add.

"Sure. Yoshiyuki doesn't want to be called by his first name? It's… Mutsunokami, isn't it?"

"Naah. I don't really like it, and it's too long! Just call me Yoshiyuki."

"Or inu."

"That too, one of my beloved nickname - wait, it's not a nickname at all! That's an insult!"

"No, dogs are great. Loyal and cute. What if I say it's just like you?"

"T-That's…" he stutters, turning his gaze away from me. I can see his cheeks are getting red. "So unfair!" As expected, he has nothing to retort me.
Shishiou laughs. He sure laughs a lot. "I see, I see. Then, just call me Shishiou as well! Kogi too, just call me that."

Kogitsunemaru jolts when he hears his name suddenly being called. "O-Okay….

"Is calling you Kogi fine?"

"It's fine."

"Anyway, don't be nervous. Just think that this is your home."

Kogitsunemaru nods. He said he lived in an abandoned shrine before, so it might not be different from this one. I guess there are actually plenty of abandoned shrines in this city….

"What are you doing, Yamanbagiri?" Shishiou asks.

My fingers are still moving the pencil as we're talking. No wonder he is curious. "Summer homework."

"Ooh… I forgot it exists. Man, that's so sad, having to study so much in holiday. Children of man are having it rough now."

"I know, right!" Yoshiyuki leaps. "School is far too cruel! Even though we're going to graduate soon and have entrance exams to high school, it still mercilessly gives us tons of homework! As if we can do all of them while going somewhere to have fun!"

"At least we can cheat, like sharing and helping each other," I add.

"Imprisoning young people in a building for more than 8 hours, cramming every information, even ones they hate, into their heads… it's terrifying. I understand the importance of knowledge, but the method sounds wrong. What can be gained from force?" Unexpectedly again, Mikazuki says that. "I'm glad I don't have to go through that. This is one of things I'm glad about being an old person." Well, of course he went there!

Anyway, at least he knows what school is. I guess there's no way he is so secluded that he doesn't know normal things in modern society.

"Imprisoning is a strong word, but I agree."

"Talking about school makes me depressed, so let's forget that!" Yoshiyuki hums, tapping his smartphone vigorously.

Shishiou stands up after finishing his own juice. "I'll go back to sweeping shrine grounds, then. Enjoy yourselves here." He walks off outside.

He is sure doing housework with such responsibility, even though the grounds don't seem dirty, and the heat is high out there… although the strength of heat is no different here, I think.

The room falls into silence, only the sounds of pencil scratching paper and fingers tapping smartphone can be heard. Without Shishiou here, no conversation is going on. I have bad communication skills, which is obvious, and the only one who can start a conversation is Yoshiyuki, but he is busy playing a game. A gamer won't budge while playing. Kogitsunemaru is still nervously reading something on my smartphone as Mikazuki is just looking at something beyond the windows. These two won't be able to start a conversation at all.
I feel that Mikazuki is less friendly today… it's a bit scary. I wonder why.

Oh, he is moving the portable fan to reach him and looks relieved as the cold wind brushes his skin.

I… guess that's normal. He's been living for hundreds of years without anything in particular to do, just staring at the view outside. I don't know how it feels, but I think it's sad. When he was abandoned, I think he just lived, stayed in this shrine, waiting for death to come. Like a sick person and a deathbed. So he did nothing, just waiting, staring from the cage called this shrine without any desire to live.

I wonder how he actually feels about me and Yoshiyuki for destroying that long-awaited death.

"Yamanbagiri, did you bring an earphone?" Kogitsunemaru suddenly asks in that silence, shattering my sentimental thoughts.

"I did. What is it? Have something to listen to?" I rummage my bag and take out a white earphone. I have headphone at home, but for portable uses, I always use earphone…though it's significantly easier to break. "Wait, did you stream or download something…? There's no wifi, please don't do that."

"I didn't, don't worry. I know you'd hate that." He smiles as he takes the earphone. "I just find an interesting song in your playlist."

"Oh… let me hear it, too, then. Do you mind?"

"I don't."

As Kogitsunemaru sits on my right, I take the earbuds for right and put it on my ear. Kogitsunemaru takes the left one and plays the song. I take a glance at him, seeing that…obviously, his ears are slightly above human's ears, and they're shaped like cats' ears, complete with fur. This is the first time I see such scene in real world, so I can't help but to be amazed.

Going back to homework, the song he chose is one of my favorites, and it's a relaxing song perfect to be listened to when doing homework or study. Heh, he has good tastes.

Somehow, I can feel a sharp gaze piercing me… and when I slightly look up, I can see both Mikazuki and Yoshiyuki staring at me - no, at Kogitsunemaru as well. Yoshiyuki quickly shifts his attention to his smartphone again, but Mikazuki keeps on staring. It's… uncomfortable. Why is he staring at me like that? I have no guts to look into his eyes, but I'm sure he knows that I realize his gaze. And yet he doesn't stop staring.

What's with him? I might've known him only for days, but even I know this is unusual. He is acting weird.

Kogitsunemaru notices that unsettling gaze as well, as his fingers tap on the screen slowly and I can see anxiety on his face. Similarly, like him who can only stare at the screen, I can do nothing but to keep doing homework.

After what feels like hours (just a few minutes in reality), Mikazuki stops staring, instead focusing his gaze on Yoshiyuki as he scoots closer to him, probably watching him play, eyes glinting in interest. Just like a cat, having his attention go somewhere else so quick… I really can't understand him so far.

In fact, Mikazuki asks some questions about the game, which Yoshiyuki excitedly replies. I can't hear all of their words, though, as the music drowns out their voices. They're speaking in a quite low volume (although Yoshiyuki's voice is loud as usual, Mikazuki is almost whispering).
After some time, Yoshiyuki screams out, "Aggh! Stamina ran out! I cleared the event, but… mmm…?"

"No items?" I ask.

"I'm saving them up. I've used them plenty of times already today."

"Well, that's bad."

"What to do now, what to do…." He puts his hand on his chin, thinking as his body slightly sways to left and right. "Ah! I know! Kogi, bonding time with me! Let's level up our social link!"

Whoa, he can say that so straightforwardly without any tint of embarrassment…. 

"Eh? Social link? What is that?" Kogitsunemaru is confused. He might be into literature, but it seems he isn't really interested in games. Even at home when I'm playing, he doesn't look intrigued.

"A term from a game, but that isn't important. Yoshiyuki just wants to play with you… and your hair."

At the mention of his hair, his face goes slightly panicked. "M-My fur….

Oh? Right, he calls his hair fur… it's not wrong, but it sounds weird for a humanoid creature.

"It's fine, right?" Yoshiyuki smiles. "Let's go outside."

"Sure, but what are we going to do?" Kogitsunemaru doesn't intend to refuse. Well, he has no reason to.

"I want to braid your hair again. But it's too hot in here. Do ya want to go too, Yamanbagiri?"

Ooh, simple. "Nah. Go ahead. I want to finish this one homework."

Yoshiyuki stands up with a jump and hums. "Okay, I'm counting on you for math. Let's go, Kogi!"

Kogitsunemaru takes off the earphone and puts it carefully on the table before standing up and following Yoshiyuki. He stops halfway before stepping outside, turning his head to me with a worried expression.

"Is it okay for me to leave you, Yamanbagiri?"

He legit sounds like a bodyguard.

"It's fine. I'm not completely alone. You better worry about your hair instead of me."

He doesn't look convinced, but after some time, he nods and vanishes from my view, hidden away by the walls.

Sheesh… he doesn't have to worry about that. If I didn't allow him, that would mean I stole his freedom. I don't think bodyguards should be treated like a bird inside a cage like that… he has the right to do anything he wants. It's not my right to stop him unless he disturbs me.

I peacefully do homework, now without any disturbances. I turn off my phone and music. Although I like listening to music while working, I don't want to waste my phone's battery. Besides, I like to hear the clinking sounds of wind chimes. There are some placed here… around three, I think?
"Yamanbagiri."

"Yes?"

I look up to find Mikazuki walking before sitting next to me, as elegant as usual. Why does he bother to move from his own seat? He fixes his hair before continuing, "Where did you meet Kogitsunemaru?"

Why is he asking me that, all of sudden? "Well… like I said before, in my neighborhood. He was taking a stroll when he saw me."

"I see…" he pauses. "So, he said he is from China, and that he is a jiuwei hu?"

"Yeah."

"Did he tell you why he came here?"

"A bit, I think. He said he was tired of the crowded China."

Mikazuki nods in understanding, but his sharp eyes are looking at somewhere far away. He isn’t finished yet. "He is a fox spirit. I can feel that. However, there is something off about him. Don't you realize, Yamanbagiri? He is odd… an oddity among oddities."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't feel like a complete fox spirit. He is indeed a fox spirit, but there's something else... as though he is a half of another spirit I can't comprehend. Anyway... what I want to tell you is... be careful. He is dangerous. Whatever his true reason is for staying with you, he isn't what he looks like. I guarantee that."

Kogitsunemaru is... dangerous? In what way? Okay, I know he isn't talking about my chastity - there's no way Mikazuki will say that, and he doesn't know. Sure, we didn't tell him about his true reason (that is, because he loves me), but... how can he say that with such certainty? From all fronts, all I can only see in Kogitsunemaru is a harmless fox. I don't sense anything weird on him, either... he just feels like a normal oddity.

Mikazuki just smiles seeing my confused face, sipping his tea, and I feel that I've lost my chance to ask more. I don't think he has any intention on telling me, anyway.

While I do homework, his words stick with me, but no matter how hard I think, I don't see Kogitsunemaru as dangerous. What's so off about him? Can I trust Mikazuki's words?

My concentration breaks, but I have to keep going.

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A little before lunch, and after I somehow managed to finish homework, as Shishiou cooks in the kitchen, Yoshiyuki comes back with Kogitsunemaru next to him... whose hair, resting on his chest, is fully braided. Oh wow. The result amazes me. If his shoulders aren't wide and his body isn't muscular, he would look like a girl.

"Yoshiyuki, are you a wife?" I mean, that skill to braid such a long, thick hair....

In a comedic fashion, Yoshiyuki's eyes snap wide open, his shoulders shake violently. "What does
that mean?"
"Are you a hair fetishist?"
"Certainly not!"

I kinda wish I was there when he braided Kogitsunemaru's hair now….

"Anyway, what do you want?" I finally get to the point.

"Let's go play with the dogs! There isn't much time left."

"Oh. I forgot that."

I stand up, glancing a bit at Mikazuki, who is still sitting next to me. After that… warning, maybe, he didn't talk much. He just observed me doing homework. It was very uncomfortable, until Shishiou came back and the two chatted. Honestly, the only one who can get along with Mikazuki is only Shishiou. That's hundreds of years of years of friendship for you.

"W-Well… we're going, Mikazuki." I say awkwardly, deciding it's best for me to say farewell at least.

"We'll come back at lunch," Yoshiyuki adds.

Mikazuki just nods and waves a hand with a rather mysterious smile. "Be careful."

The way he said that is unsettling, as usual. The three of us exit the office building, with Yoshiyuki at front. I take time to talk with Kogitsunemaru. His eyes are sparkling, it's obvious that he wants me to comment.

"That braid suits you."

"T-Thank you."

"Can I touch it?"

"Go ahead. It's okay to not ask for my permission… I'd be glad if you touch it." Kogitsunemaru's expression when he said that makes me embarrassed. He looks bashful for some reason… no, because he looks at me as someone he romantically loves. I realize that… ugh, I'm conscious of that fact now! I have to be strong… this is going to frequently happen….

Slowly, I lift my right hand, my fingertips shakily poking his hair. I can feel the softness of his white hair, but it's also pretty thick. I already know this, but he really maintains his hair very well… you can say that it's his source of pride and happiness.

I stop touching his hair and we continue to walk to not lose sight of Yoshiyuki who is far ahead. Gosh, that boy doesn't look behind at all.

"Is it okay to let your hair like this? It's hot, isn't it?"

"It's fine. Even if it isn't braided, the heat is still the same."

"I see. Why don't you cut it? I'm sure it'll suit you."

"Eh?" Kogitsunemaru turns his head and look at me, his cheeks are suddenly colored red. He scratches his cheek with a finger, awkward. "If you say so… maybe I'll try."
I can imagine him with a short hair. Looks cool and breezy….

"Y-Yamanbagiri."

"Yeah?"

"Hey! What are ya doing?" Yoshiyuki shouts, finally noticing how far we are from the bushes, waving his hands.

"Ah, coming! Let's go, Kogitsunemaru."

"Y-Yeah….."

The two of us run off to catch up with Yoshiyuki. I feel bad for Kogitsunemaru, though… it seems he wanted to say something before Yoshiyuki cut him off. I have to ask him later.

Yoshiyuki stomps his feet in annoyance. "Why were ya just standing around? I almost left ya."

"Sorry, sorry. Besides, you walked so fast without looking behind."

"That's true… at least tell me. I'll get lost in the forest without ya." So that's what he is worried about.

"I understand. I was just playing with you."

"Oi!!"

Yoshiyuki turns around, crossing his arms and pouts. He walks with exaggerated stomping, mumbling something under his breath. Kogitsunemaru and I just follow him calmly. Our surroundings turn to be full of green, bushes and trees high up looming over us. It feels colder here because of the vegetation, which is great.

"Do you remember the way, Yoshiyuki?" I ask, because after two days, I don't remember much. Even if I can recall on the way, it's better if we have a second plan in case I forget. Who knows, after doing that math homework, my brain might be temporarily damaged and overheated. I'm feeling a bit dizzy already.

"Nope!" I should've expected this… "I think that dog will come to us again and lead us."

"That's possible… well, let's just walk around for now."

Kogitsunemaru anxiously looks behind, seeing that we're going further from the shrine, and the gap that shows the shrine's courtyard soon vanishes. "Yamanbagiri, are you sure we know the way home?"

"I think I still remember the way, but….."

"Let's make signs on trees, then."

"Signs?"

"Ooh, like scratches that show the direction, right?" Yoshiyuki asks. Kogitsunemaru nods. "Good idea!"

I remember Mikazuki's warning. This forest should be a sacred forest… is it fine for us to do that? It basically hurts the trees… but I guess a little won't hurt. It's safer for us. "We have nothing sharp to use, though."
"It's okay. I can."

In a blink of an eye, Kogitsunemaru slashes a tree nearby, creating a straight line. It's not really big, but noticeable enough. When I look at his hands, he has sharper nails than before, and I can see wood pieces stuck on his nails. Being able to make a line with just one slash, his nails must be as sharp as a blade, and he has such strength and precision. It's astonishing, but he grimaces a bit afterwards and hurriedly cleans his nails from any strange object, and soon his nails get short like normal.

"I said that, but it hurts my nails a bit…"

"That's cool, Kogi!" Yoshiyuki says in excitement, his eyes are sparkling. Almost too bright.

"Don't push yourself too much. A sign every seven or ten trees is enough," I say. "Since we aren't too far away from shrine, that line is fine as a starting point."

Kogitsunemaru nods, and we continue our journey through the dense forest, going in a relatively straight line, or only slightly curved, this time with making marks on the nearby trees. There isn't anything interesting on the way until a dog approaches us… when we've marked about 8 trees.

The dog barks as a greeting. It almost looks like it's smiling. Yoshiyuki approaches the dog, kneeling down, and strokes its head with a smile that doesn't lose to the dog.

"Ooh… shiba inu, isn't it?" Kogitsunemaru says, looking like he's intrigued. Is this the first time he sees shiba inu? Most likely.

"Why don't you pat it?"

At my words, Kogitsunemaru leans forward, hesitantly stretching out his hand, but touches the dog anyway. The dog doesn't seem to mind his touch, so he proceeds to stroke its fur just like what Yoshiyuki did, tension slowly leaving his face.

After I pat the dog, it leads us to the… probably same place as two days ago. Kogitsunemaru doesn't forget to make a signs on the way. A bunch of dogs have been waiting for us in that wide space, looking more excited when they see us. Among that pack, I search for a cream-colored one, but I don't find it. Hidden or is somewhere else, maybe? So far, there are only brown-white and white dogs.

Kogitsunemaru gasps loudly when he counts the dogs. "So… so many?!"

"I know, right. It's okay, we have the dog whisperer Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki by our side."

Kogitsunemaru chuckles wryly at my words.

"Let's just follow Yoshiyuki's lead."

He nods. "Yeah. I have no idea what to do, anyway."

And so we play with the dogs. Just like that day, it's absolute happiness and chaos at the same time. This time, there's Kogitsunemaru as extra helper, so I guess it goes pretty smoothly.

Lunch went smoothly as well. This time, Yoshiyuki cooked food for me and Kogitsunemaru, and
packed them in lunchboxes. It's full of meat and it's great - but there wasn't any rice, so we took some rice Shishiou cooked. Yoshiyuki collapses on the floor right after, but I have no strength to scold him.

"Yamanbagiri, what's that?" Kogitsunemaru asks, pulling my sleeves, pointing at something at the corner.

"Mmm…?"

I look at the direction he is pointing at. There's a folded wood board there, looking rather old but still seems good for its age. I narrow my eyes to focus on the thing.

"Oh, a shogi board."

"Shogi?"


Kogitsunemaru nods in understanding, "I see…" He is still staring at the board. It seems he is interested in it… pretty obvious even when he says nothing. He really is expressive.

"Do you want to play it, Kogitsunemaru?" Unexpectedly, Mikazuki says that.

"Y-Yes…."

"I'll play with you, then. Can you go get it?"

He is actually closer to the board than Kogitsunemaru… but this action isn't surprising.

"Really?" Kogitsunemaru's eyes glint with happiness. I can almost see actual sparkles inside his eyes.

"Yes. I'm itching to play it as well, but Shishiou refused no matter how hard I ask."

"You can just play it yourself, old man… my mind will break if I play that with you," Shishiou says, gathering plates and bowls to be taken to the kitchen. "I have so many things to do." Mikazuki smiles hearing him.

Kogitsunemaru walks up to the board and holds it before going back next to Mikazuki, his tail is visibly swinging around in excitement. So cute. I wonder if he is not a jiuwei hu but instead a puppy… or cat? Does a fox swing its tail to express emotions as well?

"Okay. Let's play there."

They move to a wider space, away from the crowded table.

"Do you even know how to play it, Kogitsunemaru?"

"I don't."

Well, of course… not surprising at all.

"Oh? I'm not going to teach you, though," Mikazuki says.

"Huh?"

Wah, I should have expected this. Mikazuki seems a bit wary of Kogitsunemaru, almost hating him.
Don't tell me… this is just an excuse for him to crush Kogitsunemaru? Evil.

"I'll help, then." I crawl to them, in front of the board. There's no way I'll just let destruction unfold in front of me without doing anything… Kogitsunemaru has no chance to win, though. I'm sure of that, but at least he has to lose after trying. "Just proceed and I'll explain along the way."

"Thank you, Yamanbagiri."

After I told him all the basics and the importance of thinking, I let the game naturally unfold. I only watch.

Right now, Kogitsunemaru has a terribly pale face, mixed with tints of anger as he grits his teeth when thinking about his move. In contrast, Mikazuki is sitting elegantly with a smirk on his face, completely undisturbed. The pieces on board show that Kogitsunemaru is losing. Yeah, he just wants to crush his spirits, alright. There's absolutely no reason for him to invite Kogitsunemaru to play, but maybe he is also bored, and nobody but Kogitsunemaru shows interest in playing shogi.

Before long, Mikazuki moves the final piece. Checkmate. There's nothing left for Kogitsunemaru.

Kogitsunemaru groans in displeasure. He looks like he might cry, but nah, no way he'll cry just like that. I don't think Mikazuki went all out to crush him. There were times where he could give in to the kill, but he didn't, so he might be holding back. I guess he isn't as evil as I thought.

"Well played for a beginner, Kogitsunemaru." I clap my hands.

"I'm thoroughly destroyed, though…"

"How is it? Is it fun?"

"It's fun, but… I don't think games that require hard thinking is my thing. My mind feels dizzy," he replies as he massages his forehead with his fingers. Seems painful.

I wonder how good or bad he'll be at go. That game is even worse than shogi with its endless possible moves.

"Well done, Kogi," Shishiou says with a big glass full of orange juice. Refill! "Why don't you take a break and drink now?"

"Yeah, thank you."

Kogitsunemaru walks wobbly to the table, sits on the cushion and takes the glass. Shishiou pours him the juice and new ice cubes. I just realize that… Yoshiyuki is sleeping on the floor. He is snoring. Sleeping so peacefully, I see… this is what he got that I didn't scold him. Oh well. It's fine. I have no guts to disturb his sleep.

"Are you up for a game with me, Yamanbagiri?" Mikazuki asks. I turn back at him. He is smiling as usual.

"Well, I guess it won't hurt." I move across Mikazuki and start to clean up the pieces, putting them back to their starting places.

"How about this? The loser has to do anything the winner says," Mikazuki suddenly suggests.

"Normal. Challenge accepted."

Not in my dreams would I think Mikazuki will suggest something like that, though. He is more
humanly than I thought.

It becomes a fierce, heated battle. Mikazuki was really holding himself back with Kogitsunemaru, but for some reason, he goes all out with me. Moving in to the kill whenever he can, but I manage to block him and attack back. We're almost... almost equal.

I lose in the end and Mikazuki just chuckles seeing my defeat. Evil.

Kogitsunemaru pats my back with a pitying look.

"So, what do you want?"

Mikazuki covers his mouth with his sleeves, but his eyes are smiling, looking down upon me. "I want your portable fan. Give it to me."

"Ah... oh. Okay, go ahead."

That's even more unexpected! He fell in love with the fan?! They really need to get normal fan... anyway, it's just an old portable fan, so I gladly give it to him. I'm glad he didn't ask for anything outrageous.

Mikazuki's smile when he receives my answer looks genuine for once.

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After spending the whole afternoon until dawn at shrine, slapping Yoshiyuki to wake him up and go home, I take a bath. After that, I fall to my comfortable bed.

Beyond the windows are colored in darkness. It's already night.

As a rural city, there aren't many lights and sounds coming from outside at this hour - especially not at residential area like this one.

Finally, this tiring day will be over. Of course, training yesterday was tiring, but walking up the stairs and dealing with Mikazuki drain my energy. Even games can't heal me. I need sleep.

"Yamanbagiri, you'll catch a cold if you don't dry your hair."

Kogitsunemaru can already scold me like this. He is sitting on my chair, doing something in my laptop. He is also drying his own hair... with a towel too. I'm amazed it can get dry at all. I'm sorry I don't have a hairdryer....

"I know, I know."

I get up and press my head against a towel. Honestly, leaving my hair wet sounds a bit nice for a hot summer night, but it can be way too disturbing.

"...Yamanbagiri."

"Mmm?"

"Mikazuki... is basically a god, isn't he?"

"Ssh, call him with -sama when he is around. He will scold you. But yeah, he is a god, What about
"It doesn't seem that he has much power."

"Well… he doesn't. You can see his translucent body. He was close to dying, so he is still recovering. Gods are powered by faith, and he has little faith, so of course he doesn't have much power as a god."

"Ah. You're right…. What… do you think of him, Yamanbagiri?"

"What do I think?" That's a weird question. Why did he ask that? I stare at Kogitsunemaru, but he averts his gaze, instead staring at laptop's screen. He looks nervous for some reason. "I think… he is a bit scary. Mysterious. His smile is annoying and he is evil… a bit. That's all, I guess."

"I see….

He falls silent.

I really don't understand what's going on his head sometimes.

"Anyway, Kogi. Tomorrow Yoshiyuki and I will train again, so you can just go anywhere you want when we're training. It's boring just staying here."

He nods, still looking a bit melancholic. His aura is a bit off tonight, I wonder why… did something happen without my knowledge? I have no courage to ask, though. I don't think he wants me to know. I should just leave him alone and have dinner now.

But… I can't just leave him alone.

I walk up to him, now only seeing his back.

"Kogi?"

No response.

"Kogi?"

I poke his left ear. So soft… it just struck me that his ears are real. It's great.

"Uwaah?!"

Finally, a reaction. A quite adorable one. His shoulder shake as he instantly turns his head and his body along as the chair squeaks to meet me, his mouth wide open. Ehehehe. What a nice reaction.

"W-What's wrong, Yamanbagiri?"

I reply by tugging on his two ears. At first, a gentle tug. Next, rougher, more and more. This is fun. I wonder if I can put my finger inside… that'll be too much, huh. No matter what, his ears must be like mine. Seeing his reaction, it must be his weak spot. I have the same weak spot as well (I discovered this thanks to Yoshiyuki, but let us forget about that embarrassing scene).

"Y-Yamanbagiri…?! Stop it!"

Kogitsunemaru covers his ears with his two hands, eyes teary and confused, his cheeks are completely red. Now that his ears are out of question, I tug on his long tail, slowly brushing it with...
my fingers. It feels just like his hair, now that I think about it.

"Hmm, no good reaction."

"My tail is full of fur, of course, so it feels good to be stroked at… wait, that's not important! Why are you doing this in the first place?!"

"I wonder why."

I chuckle and pat his head one last time. I can't just say I want to cheer him up or at least make him forget whatever he's worried about, can I? It's embarrassing. My body just moved on its own. I guess the temptation of fluffiness is too much.

I'm afraid my move was too bold, but rather than angry, Kogitsunemaru's annoyed face is more like a friend getting angry to another friend. Affectionate.

"Sheesh… you're so…"

"So what?"

"N-Nothing!"

Seeing him turning his head away, mumbling something with an annoyed face, complete with folded ears and still-red face, it seems my mission is a success. One step closer to him, I think. What a good day.
The next day, when I'm resting on my room before the second training, Kogitsunemaru tells me, "I want to cut my fur - I mean, hair. Can you help me?"

I turn away my attention from my laptop to him. What? What did he just say? "Huh? Cut… your hair?"

He nods, swinging a scissor lightly. "Yeah. I considered your words yesterday… my fur falls out during summer, anyway, and it's hot, so I think I better cut it." A finger plays around with his long side hair. "It can grow back fast, so… what do you think?"

"If you want it, I'd be glad to help, but I'm not good at cutting hair… I'm scared I'll make mistakes."

"It's okay. Let's try. I believe in you."

Seeing his optimistic face, I can't refuse. He sits on chair looking at mirror and I stand behind him, a scissor in my hand. I wonder if I should comb his hair first… hmm, I think I should. I take a hairbrush and comb his hair, putting his hair on my palm. It's so thick and soft, like a high-tier fur in pillow… it's a waste to cut such a beautiful hair. I feel sad.

"Are you sure you want to cut it?"

"I'm sure. Don't worry, when summer ends, it'll grow back quickly."

"Hmm…” Oddities are sure magical. "Okay. How do you want it?"

"Short until it only reaches my shoulder. Or even less than that is also fine."

How vague…

I look up for 'how to cut hair' on internet on my phone and memorize the steps. I see, combing hair is also necessary. After I comb his hair, which actually doesn't have to be combed as it's totally straight and good, I slowly position the scissor on his hair. With just a movement, his hair will be cut… a small part of it, anyway. My hand trembles at the thought. I said that he'd look good with short hair, but this and that are different things. If I fail, I feel like I'll keep this sin forever.

Kogitsunemaru's face on the mirror is tense as well, but he speaks up, "It's okay, Yamanbagiri. Just cut it the way you want. I believe you."

"That's pushing even more pressure on me…"

"S-Sorry. But it's the truth. I'd be happy with anything you give me."

I want to ask why, but it's not important for me, and it might just make me even more nervous. I take a deep breath.

"Here I go…"
Slowly but surely, I start to cut his hair. The scissor is brand new and big, so it cuts his thick hair easily, but I can't just cut everything on one go, of course. One by one, his hair strands fall down, thinning the part of his hair that passed his shoulders. As my finger and scissor move together, cutting the next part, I wonder if I'm doing this correctly. I try to make the edges look natural, so it takes time. My heart feels like it's stabbed by a blade when I see a big part of his hair finally falls down to the floor, scattering the strands.

From here, it looks like a heavy slump of white fur. Like a pillow or some kind. That's just how long his hair is.

"Is it done yet?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

I take a look at his reflection. I was so focused on his back that I didn't see the mirror when I should… no, maybe I'm scared to see if he looks bad. But no, although there are rough edges, he looks… good and fresh with short hair. His hair is hanging, not even touching his shoulders - just barely reaching his nape… uh-oh, I accidentally cut too much, but he looks great.

"Wait, I'll cut the rough edges."

I carefully cut short strands to make his hair looks better. After I'm finished, I look at the mirror and sigh in relief, smiling proudly.

"Pretty good for an amateur, huh? How about it? Do you like it?"

Kogitsunemaru touches his now short hair before completely st He pulls his hair to the side as usual, but of course, it's also short now. "It feels breezy and light… feels fresh. Thank you, Yamanbagiri."

His smile gets even more dazzling, somehow. I can feel my cheeks getting hot for some reason.

"You're welcome." I stare at the lump of white below my feet. "What should we do about this?"

He stands up and smiles wryly seeing his own hair on the floor. "I'll take care of it."

"You'll throw it away?"

"And burn it. I don't want anything weird to happen to my hair. I usually do that whenever my fur falls out."

"I see. You can take it, then. We can burn it on an empty field near this place. I'll sweep the floor for any leftovers. Do you need a plastic bag?"

"That'll help."

After I take a broom and a plastic bag, the two of us start to work to clean up the mess of white scattering on the floor. The plastic bag is thankfully big enough for that lump of hair, but it looks so heavy… well, Kogitsunemaru can lift it easily.

There's still time before training starts again, so we go downstairs to burn his hair.

Yoshiyuki is still sleeping peacefully on sofa, undisturbed. I told him to just sleep in my room, but he refused for some reason. I'm glad now he refused because he'll definitely reject the idea of Kogitsunemaru cutting his hair.

I wonder what kind of reaction he'll give when he wakes up and sees Kogitsunemaru's hair.

Ahaha, I can't wait.
We quietly exit the house.
"Follow me."
Kogitsunemaru nods.

Come to think of it, he isn't as talkative as before… since yesterday, I think. When we're alone like this, he usually talks a lot. He looks somewhat sad, looking down on ground like that. I wonder what happened… I'm too afraid to ask. Can I even ask? Am I close enough to him to ask?

Sigh.

I hope it's nothing serious. I have a bad feeling…

I'll watch over him for now.

(Later, Yoshiyuki screams and tears up at the sight of short-haired Kogitsunemaru.)

A week passed in an instant. During that time, as if it's scheduled, Yoshiyuki and I trained under Brother Yamabushi's guidance for a day, and the next day we went to the shrine. Playing with the dogs at the forest also became our routine. We even added our time by playing with them for a bit before going home. We also gave them food.

We're getting accustomed to our new routine.

Time sure flies fast.

Today, just like usual, we're going to play with the dogs.

Yoshiyuki ran back to the shrine because he forgot something - toys for the dogs probably, even though it's unnecessary - so now there's only me and Kogitsunemaru. It's safe to leave him and wait at the usual place because there are scratches as sign. We left him before to test and he came back safely, so it'll be fine. Yoshiyuki is a natural adventurer, so even if there aren't any signs, I'm sure his instincts can guide him to the right way.

Of course, Kogitsunemaru sticks with us, just like usual. His presence isn't odd now, blending in perfectly with everyday life. I managed to push him to play some games. Hopefully he can fall as he seems to like it so far. He is a quick learner at using technology.

Speaking of Kogitsunemaru… yeah, my bad feeling came true. Even though he looks normal, adorable and expressive, sometimes I see him sighing and looking at somewhere outside when he's not engaging in any conversation, a gloomy mood enveloping him. It has been like this since that day we went to shrine for the first time. At first, I thought it had something to do with me or his new haircut, but as we got closer and that mood continues, it's most likely something very personal - coming from his deepest self.

I don't know what's happening in his mind, but I can tell it makes him melancholic, and it can be worse than ever.

He looks like he is tired whenever we go out, but he keeps trailing behind me. Is that because he feels it's his responsibility to follow me? To protect me? He looks like he is being tortured instead… I
can't stand it.

Moreover… Kogitsunemaru said he has no problems with dogs, but he shows a disgusted face… or a frightened face from time to time. Is that an after-effect of his bad mood? Or is it his real reason?

This might be the right time to ask as we walk to our destination. Only the two of us.

If he is alone with me, he is far more honest. I know it.

"Kogitsunemaru, if you don't like it, why don't you just stay at the shrine? It's fine to not follow me anywhere."

"Huh?"

"I mean, you don't look like you're fond of dogs, and it seems your mood is down nowadays. If you're tired, you can just stay and rest."

"I can't do that."

There's no pause at all. I stop walking and turn to look at him. "What?"

"I can't do that… I can't leave your side. It's fine inside house, as long as we're near, but this time is out of question." He clenches his fist, looking downcast. I can see that he is serious.

"And why is that? Because my brother told you to? He said if possible. It's not absolute. You don't have to force yourself. Brother won't know, anyway."

"Yes. That's correct. But I'm not forcing myself. I do this because I want to. Because I love you."

Our eyes meet in silence.

I think I forgot about his feelings as I got used to his presence. Stunned, I can only look down as my cheeks get hot.

He is really persistent, huh… even though I've treated him as nothing more than a friend…

"I love you. That's why I can't bear to part with you. I know it's selfish. The fact that I'm here was also because of my selfish wish. If you don't want me here… just tell me. If I'm bothering you, just tell me. There's no meaning on staying if you don't feel comfortable."

"No, uh… that's not what I -"

"I see, I see. So that's the real reason."

A voice that isn't ours suddenly reaches our ears. When we turn around to the source of the voice, we find Mikazuki walking away from behind a tree. He must've been hiding there before. Of course the two of us are surprised, even Kogitsunemaru. He might not sense his presence at all - Mikazuki is still far too translucent. He makes no sound as he steps on the leaves on the ground.

Kogitsunemaru steps forward and stretches an arm, pulling me behind him. This is a stance to protect someone - with that someone being me. His tail, as if an electric shock is running through it, is standing up, even the smallest hairs. It looks almost spiky. I have no idea what's happening… Mikazuki's smile seems dangerous, sure, but is it enough to be a threat?

"Um, Kogi…"
"Yes, that's my true reason. What about it?" Kogitsunemaru says, his voice is full of hostility, cutting me off with no mercy. I can see he is getting tense.

"What about it, mm..." Mikazuki tilts his head, still smiling. "I understand why you hid that truth. It'll be awkward to admit that when the both of you aren't in a relationship yet."

"Yeah, so?"

"But is that all? I don't think so. Both of you... are hiding something."

In an instant, Mikazuki jumps, closing their distance and swings something. Kogitsunemaru pulls out something to block the attack.

$Clang!$


The sound of metal hitting metal echoes in the forest. When I realize, the both of them are holding swords on their hands, swinging them high. As if they pulled swords out of thin air... I don't remember any of them bringing swords anywhere. Mikazuki swings again, reaching for Kogitsunemaru's head, but it is blocked again. He pushes his sword upwards, bringing momentum to swing his own sword to slash Mikazuki, but he jumps backwards before it can reach him.

"I see, so you are also using a sword. Moreover, it looks high-quality, and you seem to be trained," Mikazuki says with a smile, his eyes trailing Kogitsunemaru's sword.

Kogitsunemaru just glares at him. He swings another attack, this time from the right, but Kogitsunemaru blocks it again. $Clang!$ And then another from left. $Clang!$ Another from below. $Clang!$ And another one. All happen in an instant, my eyes can hardly follow all the movements, until Kogitsunemaru pushes Mikazuki back, who lands elegantly as he walks backwards, carefully keeping a distance.

They put their swords in front of their chest, in a stance ready to attack, but they keep their posture for who knows how long.

"W-What are you two doing?!"

I can finally scream that out, getting out of my awe.

"And the both of you have swords?! Since when?!!"

I obviously can't keep my head cool. I can feel spiritual energy imbued within their swords, which is as expected since they're oddities, but the imminent danger feels different. My instincts are screaming for me to run away right now, it'll be something more dangerous than I ever thought, but my legs are frozen.

On top of everything, I can't leave them alone and let them fight to death. I know they're capable of doing that. Mikazuki might be still... supposedly weak as a god, but he must be stronger than a human no matter what. It seems that he has equal strength with Kogitsunemaru.

I still have no idea how and why this suddenly happened, but this is the best thing I can do. I have to stop them.

Mikazuki huffs, slowly putting the sword back into its black sheath. The sword on Mikazuki's hand vanishes into thin air just as quick and magical as it appeared. Seeing this, Kogitsunemaru relaxes,
but he keeps the sword on a hand, still not letting me to take a step forward as he pushes me with his other hand.

"My bad, my bad. I was just curious and testing you," Mikazuki says, closing his eyes and waves his two hands around.

"…What?" Kogitsunemaru still glares at him, even more intense than before.

"I followed you because I'm curious on your activity here. I happened to hear your true reason, that's all."

"…And what about testing?" At least Kogitsunemaru is willing to hear him out.

Mikazuki smiles once again, tilting his head as if he is innocent. "To see your resolve to protect him… and I must say, you pass. You're pretty good, not moving an inch to block and attack me. Oh, I am weak right now, but I'm still stronger than a normal human, and my body still remembers how to fight."

Why does he want to see Kogitsunemaru's resolve and strength?

That's not what I ask, though. I'm sure he won't tell me, so I have another question. The implication that…

"You've fought before?" I ask hesitantly.

"Of course. That is why I have that sword. The world of gods isn't simple. Just like human's world, there are wars and such. I had to protect my territory - that is, this place, this village. Before."

"Oh… is that so."

I really didn't expect that. To be honest, he… as beautiful and elegant as he is, he looks like a decoration more than anything. As if he is a work of art that has to be preserved and protected, locked away safely… so I thought he won't be able to fight, only to be protected by his followers.

Other than that, I thought gods can just use their own otherworldly powers to make miracles, but I guess even they need objects - weapons to use. Of course, these objects aren't normal, and are way stronger than the ones humans made. I can feel that from the overwhelming power his sword emitted. Even after it disappeared, it's still lingering on air.

It makes sense for a god to have a weapon, now that I think about it, and that sword suits Mikazuki to a terrifying degree. It makes him seem more inhuman… if that's a good thing.

"Then… what about Kogitsunemaru?" I turn to look at Kogitsunemaru, whose face is still hard as before. He still doesn't trust Mikazuki, it seems.

As a fox spirit, I don't think he needs a weapon… well, he might use it for collecting purposes if he likes it, or as self-defense weapon, but considering how strong Kogitsunemaru is (as far as I can see), does he even need a sword? His nails are enough as a stabbing and slashing weapon. With sharper senses, he is like a beast.

And beasts - in animal kingdom, at least - don't need weapon other than their body parts.

Speaking in fantasy fiction, as far as I know, there are instances where fox spirits possessed weapons - swords or other traditional weapons, but they have their own reason to have and use it. Mikazuki as well - he has a reason to use that sword.
What about Kogitsunemaru?

If I may satisfy my curiosity… wait, wait. That's very selfish of me. It's none of my business.

"Wait, you don't have to tell me if - "

"This is given by someone important in the past…” Kogitsunemaru replies, looking down at the sword on his hand. "My memory is vague, but I remember fighting… for that person, who gave me this sword."

Whoa, he is answering me honestly. I'm supposed to feel happy, right…? "Who?"

He shakes his head. "I don't remember much. It's like… hundreds of years ago, but I know that person is dear and important, and this sword is the only thing to make me remember his existence."

"I see."

If he said he forgot who that person is, that's fine. It's not my problem. My question was answered. I need to know how they take out these swords out of nowhere, though. Pocket dimension? Oddities are indeed odd….

"I rarely pull this out, because I think I'm strong enough without it, and I want to keep it as a memento. Earlier, my body mindlessly took it out. Thinking about how bad it might be for Yamanbagiri sends shiver down my spine."

Uh, he's talking about me now… I'm a bit embarrassed, but I'm also happy to know that he cares about me. How weird… "You protected me. Thank you, Kogitsunemaru."

He nods with a bashful smile.

"Don't worry, I'll never harm a human unless he threatens me," Mikazuki replies. "Now, can you put down that precious sword, Kogitsunemaru? I swear I'll never hurt your crush. I won't say the same for you, though."

"That's fine." Kogitsunemaru puts the sword on its sheath and it vanishes into nothing. "I'll protect Yamanbagiri no matter what. Even without my sword, I can do it."

"That's a good confidence." Mikazuki smiles.

The mood lightens.

When I see Kogitsunemaru, he has a determined eyes, which makes me feel… even weirder. Warmth is spreading in my chest, and my heart beats so fast for some reason. I'm not really happy about being protected, but it really feels… good. To know that someone cares about me - that makes me happy the most. I can feel that Kogitsunemaru's desire is genuine.

I'm still feeling extremely embarrassed, though. Every time I remember him, his sweet words ring in my head.

Honestly, the way Kogitsunemaru is easily flustered, while he is pretty smooth at his words and says it with a straight face…

"That's unfair."

"Huh?" Kogitsunemaru looks confused as he turns to face me, who have a sour face and a pout.
"You don't like to be teased… and yet you can say such embarrassing things like it's normal, it's…" Wait, why am I speaking so honestly?! There's no going back. I glance at him, whose face slowly turns read. I guess I managed to make him realize how embarrassing it is and tease him.

Kogitsunemaru waves his hands around in panic. "I-I'm sorry! It's just that… those are my true feelings."

"…I know."

"When I see you like this, I can't help but to say it… because I…"

The two of us stare at each other. There's some kind of tension between us as our faces are red, and yet we don't look away from the other.

What… is this feeling?

My heart is skipping many beats. This is bad, isn't it?

"Oh my. Flirting in front of me, don't you have any shame?" Mikazuki chimes in.

"We aren't flirting!!"

The both of us scream that out from our lungs.

Now that Mikazuki knows about the truth, I can see a grim future where he teases us all the way… how terrifying…

"I'm back! Huh, what happened? Why is Mikazuki-sama here?"

Yoshiyuki comes back before Mikazuki can retort, looking left to right and in front of him, observing the three people there.

When nobody replies, Mikazuki smiles and runs forward, thrusting his sword once again to Kogitsunemaru, who instantly blocks it with his sword. Appearing as sudden and as magical as the first time. Yoshiyuki's eyes snap wide open.

"What are you doing?" Kogitsunemaru squeaks, barely holding his footing. That surprise attack must be worse than before.

Mikazuki swings his sword again, once from above, once from left, once from right - in speed my eyes barely follow, even more intense than before, all are blocked easily. He jumps back and puts his sword on its sheath before Kogitsunemaru can attack back. He looks amused more than ever. This is the first time I've seen him like this - brimming with excitement. "Oh, I'm just replaying what we did for Yoshiyuki."

"No, no, that's more extreme than before! Seriously…" Kogitsunemaru sighs, also putting his sword on its sheath.

"Uwooh…! A real swordfight!" Yoshiyuki squeals, his eyes are sparkling in interest, like a fan that found the thing he loves the most. He steps closer. "Are those swords real? Can I touch them?"

"Sure, go ahead… as long as you don't break it," Mikazuki replies, giving him his sword.

"Aye aye sir!"

"I have no reason to refuse, so here." Kogitsunemaru offers him his own sword.
After Yoshiyuki observes, touches, pokes, and (basically) worships these two real swords, he turns around to look at me, and tilting his head, he asks, "Wait, what happened so it went down to swordfight?"

"Your brain is running rather slow today it seems…” I sigh before I tell him everything.

Kogitsunemaru fidgets in embarrassment. Mikazuki keeps on smiling. Yoshiyuki just nods in understanding, not saying anything more.

After we had lunch, Yoshiyuki brings out a pamphlet excitedly, slamming it on the table as soon as he arrives in the office building. He has a stupid grin on his face. He didn't tell me what's going on, but seeing that pamphlet, I can tell.

"What is this?" Mikazuki asks, lifting his head to look at him.

Yoshiyuki puffs out his chest. "Look here, there'll be summer festival tomorrow!"

"Yeah, so?"

He spreads his two arms wide. "There'll be stalls! Various street foods! Cheap! And the main attraction is the fireworks! They're the core of summer!!"

"Not really, but I understand. You want to go there," I say. "No problem for me. The shrine where the festival will be held is owned by my brother's friend, so I will help to prepare the stalls there."

"Really? Good timing! Can I help, too?" Yoshiyuki asks, slamming the table once again. He is getting a bit too excited, I think, but that's so like him. Perfectly natural.

"Of course. By the way, if we help, we'll be given free pass for food stalls."

"That's even better!! Free food, free food~" He turns to look at everyone else in the room - Kogitsunemaru, Mikazuki, and Shishiou. "Are you guys coming?"

"Sounds interesting. It has been ages since the last time I went to summer festival, so let's go!" Shishiou replies excitedly.

"Hmm… but we can't be seen by normal humans… how can we get food?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

"Steal, of course," Mikazuki replies calmly before he sips his tea.

"There are plenty of workers there who can see oddities like us, and from previous experience, they allow oddities to gather and have fun. I remember seeing tons of oddities flying around in festivals," I reply, "So don't worry about it. If you help to prepare the stalls, you can get free pass legally. I'm sure they won't refuse."

"Really? That's great. I'll take your offer, then." Kogitsunemaru smiles.

"I suppose there are more humans that can see oddities in modern times more than I thought…” Mikazuki mumbles. I wonder why he is so fixated on humans and oddities… probably because he was a human. "Well, I have nothing to lose, so I'll join… but I refuse to help set up the stalls."

"That's fine. I'll help too, so you'll get the free pass with me, old man," Shishiou says with a wave of
a hand. He is sure generous as always. Then again, Mikazuki can be said as his employer.

"It's decided, then! When will the preparation start, Yamanbagiri?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"11 in the morning. Lunch is provided."

"Let's meet up below the stairway of this shrine and go together, then."

Nobody objects. The shrine isn't far from here, and the road to go there passes this shrine, so it's a good meeting spot. We'll naturally meet without even putting a meeting spot, anyway.

"Yamanbagiri, wear a yukata, okay? Festival spirit!" Yoshiyuki says with a clenched fist.

"No way."

"Instant rejection. Ouch."

The next day, after meeting up, we arrive at the spacious shrine grounds used for the festival. Brother Yamabushi is here as well, but not Brother Horikawa (he'll come at night for the festival itself. Mikazuki too). We arrive early, and yet there are many people working at the shrine grounds, working and moving around with heavy equipment. It feels like a festival even before festivals. I see that the first few stalls have been installed already, but there are still no decorations and stuffs to be sold. There should be paper lanterns hanging as well, but there aren't even any ropes yet.

"This looks like it'll be a tough work." I scratch the back of my head.

"It'll always be. Ah, there you are!" Brother Yamabushi says, waving his hand around as his eyes are fixed on one point between the colorful crowds. When he walks, we follow him.

Just in front of the wide shrine, there are people dressed in Buddhist monk's outfit gathering, most likely this shrine's monks. As you can tell, this shrine is a Buddhist one. Buddhism is bigger here than Shintoism. Brother Yamabushi talks to those people before turning his head to look at us.

"This is my brother, Yamanbagiri, and next to him is Yoshiyuki, his friend."

Yoshiyuki and I bow politely.

"And this is Shishiou."

Shishiou bows this time. He is using his physical body, so he can be seen like a normal human.

After more talk, most people leave, leaving only a small group. One person with a long light blue hair steps forward. He looks young because he is young, just a year older than me. I know it because I know him. I've met him a few times. Among Buddhist practitioners and specialists, there are only the two of us who actively work (okay, I admit, all I do is making more problems) who are close in age.

Kousetsu Samonji. His two brothers are behind him.

"Good morning," he says solemnly, eyes downcast. He looks as gloomy as usual… no, even worse. I can see bags under his eyes. Does he lack sleep?
"Good morning, Kousetsu. I'm sorry, but can you take care of all of them? They're a noisy bunch, but I hope you'll take it, kakaka!" Brother Yamabushi points at us.

"Of course." He nods before lifting his face, staring at Kogitsunemaru, "That one too?"

"Yeah. The fox one is Kogitsunemaru."

They exchange awkward nods as greeting.

"Yamanbagiri Kunihiro-san, you sure like to bring oddities anywhere you go," Kousetsu says. He can't just say 'Kunihiro-san' because it also refers to Brother, but calling me with my given name is out of question as we aren't close, so this is the only option to take. I understand, I have to do the same with him and his brothers as well.

"Ugh, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's no problem at all." He, unexpectedly, chuckles, before his expression falls flat again. "Please follow me."

Brother Yamabushi waves us goodbye as we follow Kousetsu.

"Kunihiro-san, Shishiou-san, can you go with my brother? Kunihiro-san is experienced in this, so I'll leave them to you," Kousetsu says, turning his head after we're away from the crowd. He pats my shoulder.

Errgh, I'm lazy, but I can't refuse him after he gave me such eyes, screaming that he trusts me.

"Which brother?"

"Both."

Souza Samonji and Sayo Samonji, I see. I've met them a few times, but this is the first time they help for festival. Souza is as old as I am, so there's no problem, but Sayo is still so small and young, while most activities are heavy labor… what can he do? Hmm…

"I take the lantern job, then?"

"Yes. After that finished, you can either rest or help the stalls."

"Okay. I'll trust Kogitsunemaru and Yoshiyuki to you. Thank you."

I turn to look at my group as Kousetsu and the other two walk away. The blue-haired small Sayo is clinging to his brother's sleeves while Souza smiles and pats his head. Shishiou just smiles widely as usual, looking around in interest. Honestly, though, I'm closer to Kousetsu than Souza - or more like, I can read Kousetsu better (in fact, he is quite an open book), so I have no idea how to face him.

"Well… I guess we should go to the place where the lanterns are made. Do you know where?" I say.

"I think I saw it nearby," Souza says.

"Lead the way, then, please."

We walk to the back of the shrine, finding a crowd of people sitting on a large piece of cloth with unfinished paper lanterns scattered around. There is still plenty of work to be done. Sometimes I wonder why we have to make the lantern ourselves instead of the professionals… but then again, Suzuran is pretty rural… this might've been the tradition for ages.
I sigh, and hearing that, Shishiou pats my shoulder, smiling.

"Well… let's do our best!" He pumps a fist to the sky.

"Oi~"

I follow him for no reason, so the other two follow as well. Sayo's face when he says "Oi" is so cute. It brings forth my desire to protect cute and small things.

We take a seat, and after getting instructions from the leader, we start to work from scratch. Folding paper is the first step. To be honest, I'm bad at handcrafts like this, even though I've done this before.

"Haa… I really want to do an exciting job, though. To sweat and do heavy labor, that sounds fun," Shishiou sighs. He is an old man, but he wants adventure… it's a bit something. I mean, look at Mikazuki. "Do I look weak?"

"You're slender, so I guess…"

"Oh, right," he turns to the two brothers with contrasted hair colors, stretching his hand. "We haven't introduced ourselves yet. I'm Shishiou, glad to meet you!"

"I'm Souza Samonji. This is Sayo… hey, greet him too, Sayo." His voice drops significantly in a good way, softly whispering to his little brother and pushes him to approach Shishiou.

Sayo shakes Shishiou's hand shyly. "Nice to meet you…"

Aww, so cute. Shishiou must be feeling the same as his face is one of being happy from fluffiness and cuteness. Really, I wish I can see Sayo more and play with him. I wonder how to do that… I'm not so straightforward, after all… but I have good relationship with Kousetsu, so he might allow me to… and by extension, Souza will as well. And then, I can safely secure…

Wait, why am I planning to play with Sayo like I want to kidnap him?! Secure what?!

That just shows how anxious I am in social situations. How depressing.

I really have no idea how to interact with these people. I wish Yoshiyuki is here to help me… I sigh while folding paper. I thankfully remember the steps, so I have no problem. We were told to fold 10 papers before going through the next step. It's a pain of rinse and repeat process. That's origami for you. All this folding is making my head confused, but I manage, somehow.

Just then, I feel an intense gaze directed at me. I look at the source, which happens to be the three people with me.

"…What?"

"You're skilled in this. I don't remember what to do at all," Shishiou says.

"Same. My memory is good, but I'm bad at this," Souza nods, and Sayo's confused face says the same as well.

"It's quite simple, really. So, here…"

I begin to show them how to do it. Why am I doing this again…
After hours of hard work, when the night falls, the festival is about to begin. People have started to come early to enjoy the food and games. The fireworks section needs help to prepare, but many people have volunteered, and I'm tired anyway, so I take a break near a goldfish scooping stall. There's a bench next to it. Hey, it's not like I only did lanterns off-screen. After we're finished, we helped with heavy labor too. Except Sayo who became a cheerleader.

I drink a bottle of mineral water I bought. Haa… I can finally relax.

I'm currently all alone as Yoshiyuki and Shishiou are excitedly helping with fireworks and Kogitsunemaru tagged along - or more like, he was taken away by these two. He has no other choice but to follow.

I stare dumbfounded at the shining paper lanterns. They sure look beautiful.

Come to think of it, obon[5] is tomorrow. I guess that's why this festival is held today, with these lanterns as one of the main attractions.

Obon, huh… that time has come again.

To meet face-to-face with my sins.

I usually get anxious as obon approaches, but this year, there were a lot of things happening that I forgot about it. I wonder if it's a good thing or bad to forget about something that worries you…

"Can I sit here?"

On my right, I find a striking pink hair - oh, it's Souza. He is wearing a yukata, complete with a paper fan on his hand. I swear he was wearing a normal shirt before. His aura feels different now…

"Sure."

He sits next to me and silence falls upon us. I don't have to repeat that I can hardly interact with him, do I? As someone with bad communication skills, introverted on top of that, what do you do when you're alone with someone as quiet as you and you don't know him very well?

Awkward silence it is.

"So, uh… that outfit…"

Damn, I just spouted what I'm curious about without thinking.

"Ah. Kousetsu-nii-san forced it, saying you have to follow tradition of wearing yukata in a festival! It's the spirit of festivals! or something." He smiles wryly.

"Hee…I never thought he is that kind of person." A new light shone upon my view on Kousetsu. Pumping a fist while excitedly saying such things… yeah, what an interesting thing to see.

"He looks very tame outside, right?" He chuckles, but speaking in a low voice. "He is very uptight, though."

"Where's Sayo, by the way?"

Because Sayo is a little kid, I can call him by his first name easily, and it is allowed. How can I refer to him with his last name when the person I'm speaking to has the same last name, anyway?
He points at the stall next to the bench - goldfish scooping. Sayo is there, crouching with a blue *yukata*, with Kousetsu next to him, smiling and helping him to catch the goldfish. Sayo tries his best to catch it, his cheeks puff in annoyance when he fails, and Kousetsu assures him that he can catch it. Ahh, so cute. Innocence.

"You aren't joining?"

He shakes his head. "I want to take a break. I like to watch, anyway."

"Well, I feel the same."

Silence falls again. What to say, what topic, give me ideas, or this uncomfortable silence will continue -

"*Obon* is tomorrow, isn't it?"

The one who says that isn't me, but Souza. That's what I'm thinking as well… what a coincidence.

"Yeah. I assume your family isn't going anywhere?"

"Yes. Your family too?"

"Mm. This is our hometown, after all." I swing my legs, looking upwards. The sky is darkening and there are stars glittering already. "Just like my parents… I guess I also will live the rest of my life here and die here. Ah, ah, I mean…"

That goes down real quick.

But he smiles warmly. "I understand what you're talking about. Although… aren't you going to become a specialist like your brother? Then, you can go to many places."

"Eh? No… I haven't thought about it. Sure, I tend to make a mess with oddities, but it's all accidental… I guess. I don't want to, but I end up helping in oddities-related things because… I can't help it. My body just moves on my own. And then there's times when these oddities just come at me… like I'm a magnet for trouble."

And why am I saying this to him?

"It seems that these oddities love you."

"That's the second time someone has told me that… it brings misfortune for me, though." I sigh and scratch the back of my head. "Enough of that, what about you?"

"I have no plans to become a specialist. I've never involved myself in such cases and Kousetsu-niisan never forces me to. In fact, he prefers if I live a normal life."

"I see. That's why I rarely see you."

He nods. "Say, Kunihiro-san. We can see oddities… but have you seen your deceased family spirits? Ah, sorry for the weird question. It just popped up in my head."

"It's okay…"

I pause, the faces of my parents coming to my mind. I don't remember their faces, but there are photos to show me how they look. Whenever *obon* comes… they do visit us at our home, staring at us quietly. However, there is no warm reunion. My parents died in an accident, but they
aren't onryo[6], so they have limited time and ability in this world of living beings. They can't speak to us, Brother Yamabushi and me, who can see them.

Seeing them makes Brother tear up, though, and I can see my parents cry when they see me as well.

I feel a little bad. Although I'm touched, I've never felt anything for them...and I'm sad that Brother Horikawa can't see them. Unlike me, Brother Horikawa remembers our parents. There are memories...and the day they died, he suffered the most.

Clapping my hands together, I reply. "...Yeah, I've seen them before. A few times."

"Same here. I wonder why we can't interact with them, when we can interact with other oddities, even all kinds of yurei[7] and onryo. Kousetsu-nii-san said something about limit for them pure spirits, though."

"Brother said the same. They aren't supposed to be in this world, but they're allowed to return just in these days, in return of being unable to speak and interact with us. I think that's for the better...I can't imagine how my brothers and I would feel if we can talk to them. Seeing them already hurts."

Souza stares at something distant, and I look at where he is looking at. Kousetsu and Sayo are wandering around, buying things from various stalls. He stares at me. I flinch a bit. His gaze is intense. "Excuse me if this is a sensitive topic, but...it's your parents, am I right?"

"Yes. They died when I was a child, so I don't remember much about them."

"So they couldn't see you grow up."

"Yeah. Seeing me growing up into a fine teenager must be a blessing for them. They always cry when they see me...even though I don't feel much about them, I can't help but to get touched. I'd cry if they can talk to me. I need to know why they named me Yamanbagiri as well, that's important."

That name is almost like a curse, both good and bad.

Being a slasher is cool, but I don't really want to face an actual yamanba, unless I become a specialist for real.

"Ahaha. I understand. For me, it's my mother. She died when she gave birth to Sayo. It's saddening, but we're happy to have him. The birth of someone is always a blessing." He smiles sadly, swinging the paper fan on his hand. "Sayo can see oddities as well, so whenever obon comes, he always sees mother. He really wants to talk to her, but he can't. Mother just smiles, but I can feel that she is asking us to take care of ourselves and Sayo."

He looks down at the ground, so I can't see his face, but that stance is that of someone who is crying or about to.

"You remember your mother, so you feel..."

I cut off there. It's obvious, so I don't have to speak about it.

Just like Brother Yamabushi...

"Yeah. Whenever I see her, I feel my heart shake. Sometimes I feel that I've disappointed her, so I don't want her to see me, but she comes to me anyway, and her smile reassures me. At these times, I feel like she's still alive, and I want to hug her. I miss her and her cooking. But more than anything...I feel that she accepted me no matter what. That's what parents should do, right?"
I relate with the first part… that last part though. It makes me smile. He lifts his face, also smiling, somewhat forced, but he doesn't look sad.

"Mm. That's right. I feel the same… even though I don't remember about my parents, and that makes me feel bad, but more than anything, I feel that I've disappointed them with my actions… but they seem to love me no matter what. Sometimes I feel even more disheartened about myself…” I smile wryly, my chest tightens when I think about them.

Not only because I feel bad for not feeling anything about them, I feel like I've disappointed them. I spent last year's obon at the hospital and they visited me… when I was at my lowest. They're my parents who raised me with love - even I can tell that from my vague memories and photos, so I want to make them proud of me.

And yet, I disappointed them.

Their eyes when they saw me laying on the hospital bed breaks my heart further.

He looks at me, eyes wide, as if in disbelief, before he soon turns to normal. "I see… well, the past stays in the past. Because they love you and trust you, you have to try your best and don't repeat your mistakes. Right?"

"…You're right."

How did we end up talking about our families like this?

I wonder if this is alright. It's a private matter and we don't know each other very well… but I feel that we're alike, and neither of us reject the other, so I guess it's fine. Sometimes a talk like this is what I need. Sharing each other's stories with unbiased view, just talking normally. I feel my anxiety lighten.

Just about my parents, I feel like I can see them tomorrow.

I don't know what about the other, though - he rarely appears, but… it's hard to think about him.

"Say, Kunihiro-san. What do you think of eternal life, where you won't die - because you can't?"

"Huh?" The topic shifts really quick. Okay, it's still about life and death, but it isn't about our families anymore… I can hardly keep up with him. Ugh, but I think I'm as random as him sometimes…

When I'm about to reply, he is already talking.

"In many religions and beliefs including Christianity, phoenix is a sign of immortality, isn't it? Although, it's more like death and rebirth, uh… anyway, in Taoism, it's a crane."

"Yeah. What about it?"

He shifts his gaze to the sky, lifting his head. More people are walking around us. It's getting crowded. "I'm just wondering… if you can attain eternal life, what will you do? Will you attain it or not?"

I blink a few times, trying to process his words. Uwaah… "…That's heavy."

Souza just smiles. He keeps on smiling, it sends chill to my spine, but at the same time, he always looks melancholic. "I'm sorry for asking weird things. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."
"It's fine. It's not every day that I can talk about it." I pause to think, looking at my left hand and stroke a purple wristband there. This is a sign of my sin… being envious of the deceased, because of a fleeting feeling of wishing death. "I… I'm honestly scared of death, but I also want to embrace it. I don't think I'll attain eternal life even if I can. All lives have to perish one day. Even most of oddities can die. Even shinrei. Besides, isn't it lonely for the person? Everyone around them is dying. If the world ends, will they die? If they don't, then they'll wander in space all alone… that's sad."

"Will you accompany that person going through eternity? Sometimes it's fate that forced eternity upon them."

Why is he asking me all of this?

"I…I don't know. I want to experience how death feels like, but, living eternally is another kind of death. If it can ease that person's pain, then I guess… that means we aren't alone, so it's… okay, I think."

He stares at me intently before smiling with a huff. "You're so kind, Kunihiro-san."

"I'm not, that's how most people will think."

"No. Most people won't be able to reply, moreover agreeing to help. Most will refuse. You don't, even though you know the consequences and are unsure about it, you have good intentions."

"Thanks…I guess."

I scratch my cheek awkwardly. I can never get used to get compliments like this… moreover, it feels genuine. I can feel my cheeks getting hot, damn it…

"We can see oddities, but we're the odd ones for talking about this, huh? Although I started it." He chuckles, lightening the mood. Haa… I can sigh in relief. The pressure is gone.

"You're right. Because we can see oddities, we're also odd for normal humans. You can say that we're also oddities in some way. It isn't a bad thing, though."

Just then, two people approach us slowly. Kousetsu and Sayo. Sayo is holding Kousetsu's hand… ahh, so cute! I want to pinch his cheeks and pat his head whenever I see Sayo. He is even cuter now with a fox mask on his head and four candied apples on his hand. Huh, I thought they bought more… ah, they must be inside the plastic bag Kousetsu is holding.

"I'm glad to see the two of you are getting along well," Kousetsu says with a smile.

How am I supposed to react to that?

Thankfully, Souza is the one who replies. "Of course, we're similar, after all."

That's true, but is that an appropriate reason? No, there can't be any reason at all. It's just natural to act good when you're facing someone you don't know very well for good impressions. Besides, I have no reason for not talking to him.

"Thank you for taking care of my brothers, Kunihiro-san," Kousetsu continues, bowing his head.

"Ah, no problem at all." I wave my hands around, uncomfortable.

"Sayo has something for you."

Sayo steps forward after being gently pushed by his brother. He takes a candied apple and offers one
to me. His cheeks are red, but his wide eyes are determined. "For you… thank you for taking care of me, Kunihiro-nii-san."

Aaaah, so angelic, so adorable!

"I did nothing, really, but thank you!"

I take the candied apple. Really, my help when we were working on the lanterns aren't worth mentioning, but I'll gladly accept gifts.

"And this is the free pass. You haven't gotten it, right?" Kousetsu gives me a paper. 'Free pass' is written on it. Very simplistic. I forgot about the existence of the free pass…

"Yeah. Thank you."

Staring at the paper, I feel like my hard work today is worth it and I'm happy. Is this how it feels to get the first paycheck from your job?

"Oi~!!"

I look at the source of the voice, and see Yoshiyuki - now wearing a yukata - running to me, waving his hands. Kogitsunemaru follows behind him, not much different other than having a tired face. Shishiou is there as well, and next to him is… huh, Mikazuki? I see, so he already came but went straight to Shishiou's group.

I wonder where my brothers are…

"Oh! Hey there, the Samonjis!" Yoshiyuki says.

"You can't just greet them like that…" Kogitsunemaru sighs next to him. Taking care of Yoshiyuki all day must be tiring. Thank you for your hard work, Kogi.

"Hello," Kousetsu says, representing his two brothers that only nod as response.

"You're really wearing a yukata, Yoshiyuki…" I say, peeking at the one behind him. "Even Shishiou?"

"Festival spirit, Yamanbagiri! Spirit!" Yoshiyuki pumps a fist to the sky, followed by Shishiou. These super healthy people… for a split second, I can almost see Kousetsu's eyes light up, but he soon returns to normal. What was that? When I'm distracted, Yoshiyuki suddenly pulls down my hood. "There, ya look more lively like that!"

I grumble as I put my hood again, hissing at him. "Shut it, this is my love. Anyway, have you seen Brother Yamabushi?"

"We haven't."

"The last time I saw him, he was at the back of the shrine," Kousetsu replies.

"Oh, thank you. I'll go and get him, then."

Souza stands up from the bench, approaching his brothers. "Then, I shall be off as well."

"Thank you for your hard work today, all of you," Kousetsu adds.

"Mm. See you. Have fun."
I wave my hand, walking to Yoshiyuki's group. The three brothers wave their hands back and we go separate ways.

"Hey, hey," Yoshiyuki whispers next to me. "What did you talk with that pink-haired one? You looked close earlier."

"Just random stuffs. Nothing much." Lies. Talking about death is a heavy matter. It is random, though… or not, because obon is tomorrow.

"Hmm…" He doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't ask for more, much to my relief. He stretches his arms upwards. "Well then, let's enjoy the festival to the fullest! Free food, free food!"

"It's getting very crowded…" Kogitsunemaru says before he floats away, deciding that it's best for him to not be in streets like Mikazuki, who is yawning next to him. "How can we oddities buy things, though?"

"We'll buy it for you, of course," Shishiou says, waving his free pass around.

"Some people can see oddities as well. You can interact with them," I add.

"True. The number of people who can see oddities overwhelmed me today. I didn't know there are that many," Kogitsunemaru mumbles.

"Not everyone is from Suzuran. Many came from outside, associated by specialists' organization. It can be for work or holiday, or even both. Festivals are fun, anyway."

"I see…"

"Speaking of oddities… there are many others gathered now," Mikazuki says, covering his mouth with his sleeves. It feels like it's been ages since the last time I heard his voice.

I look around at the sky, and sure enough, there are all kinds of creatures floating. No, even around me, walking around, there are non-human creatures blending with normal humans. The orange lights from the hanging lanterns make the scene even more surreal.

It has been a long time since the last time I saw this scene.

Oddities and humans blending in together.

This feels like festival now. I somehow feel pumped.

After we get Brother Yamabushi at the back of the shrine and went to the front of the shrine to get Brother Horikawa, we take a look around the stalls for real. I finished the candied apple Sayo gave me during that time. As expected, Yoshiyuki gathers a lot of street foods - takoyaki, dorayaki, cotton candy, and chocolate banana - all on his hands and mouth. I feel bad for having free pass now…

We have this "Aaah~" look that shows how much we're accustomed of Yoshiyuki's gluttony habits and let him suffer to eat all of them alone. He is a professional, so he won't choke. I pray.

Shishiou walks to the shooting stall and Mikazuki steals a mochi from mochi stall, eating it happily. Brother Yamabushi buys takoyaki while Brother Horikawa looks around accessories stall, so we're pretty much spread out.

Well, no problem. We've decided to meet up at a good spot to watch fireworks at 8 PM.

I walk around with Kogitsunemaru, who follows me no matter what. Yoshiyuki trails behind,
occasionally stopping to see food stalls. I ignore him. He can find me with no problem, so leaving him for a bit should be fine.

Aah… I really have no idea what to do, so I only walk around. That's when I see Kogitsunemaru's eyes glint at goldfish scooping stall.

"Do you want to try it?" I whisper, trying to act like I'm not talking all by myself.

"Can I?"

"Go ahead."

"But what if the stall keeper can't see me?"

"Hmm… I'll do it with you, then."

"Huh?"

I pull his hand and crouch in front of the water tank. After some talk with the man who stands the stall, I take the poi[8]. I glance to Kogitsunemaru, tapping the handle, asking him to hold it with him. He reluctantly does, holding the handle with me. Our hands brush each other, and it makes me nervous, but it can't be helped. I lead him to dip it in the water, trying to get goldfish. The goldfish near us run away and we struggle to get it. The poi paper breaks a few times in the process, much to our chagrin, but we keep on trying. Somehow, we can move in harmony, so other than our hands holding poi, nothing else hit the other. After minutes of struggling we catch a goldfish and the paper on poi doesn't break. The seller takes it and puts it in a cutely-decorated plastic bag filled with water.

Kogitsunemaru smiles shyly when he looks at the goldfish.

I take the goldfish and walk away with him. "We have an unused aquarium at home, so make sure you take care of it well." I give the goldfish to him.

"Yes, I will." He nods. He looks so happy.

He looks around and his eyes stop at a shooting stall. He looks like he wants to do it, but it'll be hard to do it since he is basically invisible.

I wonder if I can do the same thing as earlier with goldfish scooping.

I've seen two people holding the gun together in fiction, but, can that be done in reality?

"Yamanbagiri, Kogi, here!"

Yoshiyuki's voice comes. I'm not surprised that he has a fox mask now, but Kogitsunemaru yelps. He gives us hot croquettes. Oh, so that's why he looked around the food stalls again and again. He knows the two of us are too busy with each other to actually buy foods. "Thank you, Yoshiyuki."

"No problem."

Kogitsunemaru is still staring at the shooting stall - to the gun, to be precise. Yoshiyuki notices this.

"Do ya want to play it, Kogi?"

"Eh? Ah, y-yeah… I want to try it, but…"

His ears fold down. So cute, but that's a sign he is sad.
"Do you want to get something or just want to try shooting?" I ask.

"I want to try shooting."

Aaah, there's no hope. Kogitsunemaru frowns. I can't stand that very sad face.

I guess I have to try it, for all or nothing. If it's possible in semi-realist fiction, it can be done in reality! …Right?

"Come, Kogi."

I pull his hand, approaching the shooting stall.

"What is it, Yamanbagiri?"

"Let's try shooting."

"Huh? Is that possible?"

"Just like earlier…I don't know if it can work, but well, let's try it. When I hold the gun, you hold it as well next to me."

"Mm…okay."

Kogitsunemaru gives the goldfish to Yoshiyuki and I also give the foods back to him.

"What prize do you want, Kogi?"

"Anything is okay as long as I can shoot."

So simple…

After waiting for the person in front of us to finish shooting, I pick up the gun - a shot gun, and load bullets into it. It's heavier than I thought… okay, I rarely do this, so I'm sorry. It's just a toy gun, but it feels so real on my hands. I try to pose with the gun like what I've seen in fiction, before prompting Kogitsunemaru to hold the other side. He imitates my pose, just on the opposite side, and inevitably, our hands brush against each other. No, in fact, his hands are on top of mine - holding the barrel and the finger on the trigger.

I instantly feel shiver all around my body, my heart beats a skip.

W-Wait, this is even more intimate than I thought… I'm not ready for this…!!

"S-Sorry, is this not okay…?" He asks nervously.

I shake my head. There's no helping it now.

I look at the shelf. There are a lot of cute plushies there. It'd be easier to shoot these big stuffs rather than the small ones. I slowly move the gun to a doll of cream-colored shiba inu. Kogitsunemaru follows my movements and adjust accordingly. I trust him that we can make it fall.

Aaah, I feel even more nervous. My hands are trembling.

But I have to do it now.

"One… two… three!"
We pull the trigger and shoot the doll, the recoil pushes our body back, but we can stand firmly, just a bit surprised. The bullet (which isn't a real bullet, of course, but I have no idea what should I call it) successfully hits the doll and it falls backwards.

Whoa, in one try.

Even I can hardly believe it.

"Congratulations!" The stall keeper says, handing us the doll of shiba inu.

I take the doll. It's so soft and seems brand new. "Thank you."

We walk away with the doll. I look at it on my hands. Cream-colored shiba inu, huh… it's rare. It reminds me of the very same dog from a few days ago. I've never seen it again, and that makes me even more nervous.

I don't think these dogs in the forest are normal. There must be… something far scarier there.

"Wah, in one try! So cool, Yamanbagiri, Kogi!" Yoshiyuki says, smiling. "It's a very cute shiba inu, on top of that!"

"Ehehe. Maybe I can be a good shooter, or even sniper," I say proudly.

"Let's try survival games and such someday, then. I won't lose!"

"Survival games? Ah, oh, like that one anime, right?" Kogitsunemaru says.

We walk around while talking.

I buy more food - or more like, take because it's free for me - not at Yoshiyuki's level, of course, and when the clock says 8 PM, we get to the meeting spot, climbing the slope to a cliff. A cloth is laid there and everyone else has arrived. This is a high spot, so nothing will obstruct our view of the fireworks on the sky.

"Oh. We meet again."

I turn around, seeing Souza next to me, with his brothers preparing a cloth next to him. Since when are they there?! I'm a bit surprised, but it'd be impolite if I say that. When I look around, there are other people other than our group. Ah, of course… I remember now. It is a popular spot for watching fireworks and relaxing.

"Hello."

I can say nothing but that and sit on the cloth Brother had laid out. He does the same as the two cloths are close enough, so we're sitting side-by-side. The way he sits is so elegant, close to Mikazuki's level… but the said shinrei is floating right now.

How awkward… what to do when you're in this situation… help…

"Yamanbagiri, can I have a bite of your takoyaki?" Kogitsunemaru says, slowly sitting next to me.

"Ah, sure. Here." I take a ball with toothpick and offer it to him, just in front of his mouth, asking him to open his mouth.

His face flushes visibly red, but he munches down the ball anyway. It tastes good, so his expression turns to be a satisfied one. I finish the takoyaki, feeling saved by him from the awkwardness. I'm
somehow more sensitive and nervous when it comes to someone like Souza. I feel the same towards Mikazuki as well… they're both elegant and pretty, I feel out of place with them.

…Wait. Did I do the right thing (feeding Kogi), considering Brother Horikawa can't see him?

I turn around and find that my two brothers are talking with Kousetsu, busy with their own conversation. Huft… saved.

"Yamanbagiri~"

"Hmm?"

Yoshiyuki crawls in front of me, smiling with red cheeks. A fox mask is on the side of his face. Just like that, he takes the shiba inu doll from my lap and hugs it and rests his head on my lap without saying anything else. Feeling the sudden feel of tingle on my lap, I yelp, almost dropping the box of takoyaki.

"O-Oi, Yoshiyuki…” Kogitsunemaru mumbles, his face visibly gets even redder.

"Ehehehe~"

Yoshiyuki acts innocent as usual, humming in amusement.

"Geez… you spoiled puppy. Look at how similar you are with that doll." I sigh, resigned to my fate. This isn't the first time he did this, so you can say this is normal… very Yoshiyuki-like. I gently pull out the mask out of his face to brush his hair. Still rough and wild. "At least warn me first."

"But ya will refuse if I say it."

"I won't… maybe. No promises. It depends on my mood."

"See?" He chuckles. Seeing him on my lap, staring at me from below always succeeds on making me feel weird and even more ticklish, but I can hold it.

"Just until the end of fireworks show, okay?"

"Okay!"

If Yoshiyuki has tail, I'm sure it's swinging right now.

I'm really weak towards Yoshiyuki, allowing even this kind of embarrassing skin contact. I can only pray that strangers won't look at think about weird things… Kogitsunemaru is too stunned to even speak, though, it seems. I'm sorry to make you so shocked.

"You two are shameless," Mikazuki says from above, grinning for some reason.

"Aaah, shut it…"

"Haha…"

I turn around to the source of the sound - Souza, next to me, is chuckling. Sayo is looking at us as well, his eyes are wide open as usual.

"W-What…?"

It feels so uncomfortable, so I just spout that out.
"I'm sorry. The two of you seem really close, I'm a bit envious," he replies.

"This puppy will jump and ask for pats to anyone."

"Ehh, I won't," Yoshiyuki complains.

"I'm not sure about that."

Sayo climbs to his brother's lap, resting his head there, also asking for a pat. So cute… how many times have I said this now? Well, I'm thankful if Yoshiyuki's action can brings forth this scene. But instead of a dog, Sayo reminds me of a cat, mostly from his eyes.

Kogitsunemaru is still stuttering next to me. I'm getting worried, but he speaks up.

"Yamanbagiri…"

"Yes?"

He fiddles around with his fingers, looking down at the ground, but I can see his face. Still red. After a few minutes, he shakes his head. "N-Nothing… sorry."

"Okay…"

Weird. He looks like he still wants to say something, but I can't push him to say it.

Then, a flash of light, followed by a heart-jumping bang sound appears on the dark sky, brightening it just for a moment.

It's finally time.

That one firework is only a test to attract attention.

"Finally, fireworks to end the festival," Yoshiyuki says, staring at me with a gentle smile. That smile is different from his usual over-excited smile. It's the one he uses whenever he comforts me. His smile is mostly genuine, but this one is full of affection, it makes me feel… warm and embarrassed. "It's been a long time since the last time we watched fireworks together, right?"

"Yeah… it has been a long time."

"I'm glad we can watch it together this year."

"Me too."

A set of fireworks fly away, bursting with different shapes and colors at different heights. The sounds aren't as surprising as before anymore. I see everyone's attention turn to the fireworks, and I stare at the sky as well. The fireworks illuminate everything beneath the dark sky, which looks less lonely now.

Even if they only last for a few seconds before falling apart, the colors and shapes are undoubtedly beautiful. The sparking sounds are noisy, but lively.

I heard that people are attracted to fleeting things.

Many short-lived, fleeting things are beautiful, so people are attracted to it, watching it closely before it fades away. Just like cherry blossom trees in spring, which bloom for only a few days. The fireworks are the same, not staying on the sky for even a minute.
I wonder why people are attracted to fleeting things, when we know we'll feel empty after they vanish.

It's painful to be apart from it, isn't it?

Or maybe… because people are fleeting things as well. Because we have fleeting lives, we're attracted to even more fleeting things. Humans, animals, plants, and oddities, both have an end - limit, lifespan, whatever you can say. Even technology has a lifespan. Humans are especially fragile and short-lived. Who knows when someone will die.

But maybe that short lifespan is what makes life beautiful. What makes life worth it. Because we have short lives, we have to do our best in living to the fullest.

That's what Yoshiyuki once said, anyway.

Sheesh, what am I thinking? Instead of enjoying the fireworks, I'm contemplating about life.

But, I think… it's good for me to think about it.

If I'm not seeking death anymore and finally embrace life once again, that's a development for me. I didn't think life is beautiful before, but now I consider it. Slowly but surely, I can walk forward and appreciate life. The sad times, the happy times, the bittersweet times… I can embrace all of them.

Yeah, that's good.

I feel a burden on my back lightens.

I'm not alone. Not anymore.

I believe I can walk to the future now. Because there's happiness to be found in this world.

"Yamanbagiri…"

"Hmm?"

I snap out of my daydream, looking down at Yoshiyuki. The fireworks have stopped for a while.

"What is it?"

Yoshiyuki's hand reaches for my cheek. His eyes look sad, somehow.

What is this? What is happening?

It seems serious.

"Yamanbagiri, I li-"

His lips move to form a word, but I can't hear it, because a firework blasts all of sudden, its sound covering his voice. I can't read lips movement in the first place, so I have no idea what he is saying.

"Sorry, Yoshiyuki, I didn't hear that. Can you repeat?"

"Aaah, it's nothing!" He smiles, "I'd like to pinch your cheek, like this." He pinches my cheek, but gently, so I don't feel any pain.

"Random as usual, I see."
Said the one who just thought of life out of the blue earlier, eh.

I let him poke my cheeks as the firework show is still going. Despite touching me, Yoshiyuki is also watching the sky closely.

Fireworks are indeed beautiful. They're captivating. It is a good way to end the festival full of spirits… in two meanings as oddities are scattered around, also watching the show.

Chapter End Notes

[5] Obon is a Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the spirits of one's ancestors. This has evolved into a family reunion during holiday. The spirits of the ancestors are supposed to visit family during this time. Based on lunar calendar, it falls on 13 August, but on solar calendar, it falls on 13 July. It's also celebrated in 15th day of 7th lunar month, so it differs each year. It depends on the place for when it's celebrated.
[6] Onryo is a vengeful ghost that wants to take vengeance for reasons.
[7] Yurei is ghost, basically. There are several types and onryo is one of them.
[8] Poi is the thing used to catch goldfish. It consists of a round plastic frame with a hand grip and paper on the frame. This paper easily beaks. Some stalls have unbreakable poi with a net instead of paper.
During obon, we do various customs.

The first thing is mukaebi, lighting a welcome fire to guide the spirits back to their homes. In this case, we set out small lanterns outside our house. Inside our house, we have offerings, such as fruits, rice, green tea, sake, and sweets, especially in lotus shape - placed on the altar. Food shared with the dead is called ozen, an attempt to treat the spirits as if they're still alive.

Yesterday, I saw my parents, just like usual. It's still somewhat painful, but I'm glad I can see them.

Sitting in front of the offerings, they looked at the three of us gently. After Brother Horikawa went away, Brother Yamabushi talked to them about what happened in that year. He looked excited. He even talked about how an oddity (Kogitsunemaru) fell for me and now lives with me… my parents' faces turned pale for a moment. Okay, they're already pale, but it seemed like they'd fade away.

Someone fell for their youngest son, and it's an oddity, on top of being a man! And they now live together!

Dang it, Brother, don't make them worried like that!

Just like usual as well… I don't see him. He rarely appears at home for offerings. I wonder why… but it actually helps me. It's hard for me to look at him… so he might be considerate of me. Sigh… being helped by the spirit of my own brother…

Today, we're going to do ohakamairi - visiting and cleaning the graves.

My family's graves are located in the same place. A local cemetery, one out of the three cemeteries in Suzuran. This cemetery is usually for Buddhist followers, so there are Buddhist statues and the likes around the field.

We bring offerings and flowers, put them on the three graves and clap our hands together in a prayer.

I start cleaning my brother's grave while my two brothers clean our parents'. Cleaning it off from dust, dirt, and then pour water on the stone. By the way, Kogitsunemaru is sitting on a nearby tree, just watching.

My fingers trace the name carved on the stone.

Nagayoshi Kunihiro.

My third elder brother, just 2 years older than me, died when I was five - so two years after our parents passed away. We look alike, despite not being twins and having an age gap. We even had the same height. The only difference was our hair color. His hair was black, just like Brother Horikawa.

As brothers, we were the very opposite of each other.

Brother Nagayoshi was a popular kid at school. He was easy to approach, very sociable, kind and
honest, and everyone adored him. He was smart and good-looking, on top of that. Meanwhile, I was - no, I'm still - your common introverted child, whose existence might as well fade away on the background.

Despite our differences, we were close. In fact, I was closer to Brother Nagayoshi than Brother Horikawa or Brother Yamabushi. He was kind, always playing with me, and pushing me to go out of my shell. He was my brother and my best friend. I always depended on him.

However, as we all know, it ended abruptly. He died in an accident.

And I remember it was all my fault.

And after that as well, I did many more sins, making people die one after another… I realized I am cursed. The harbinger of disasters. Brother Yamabushi said I just attract more oddities than normal, and they cause mischief, but… after so many times disaster happened around me, I think I might be cursed for real. Sometimes these oddities didn't even appear. All sorts of things just happened out of blue.

I'm nothing but trouble whenever I'm around.

My brother's death. My friend's brother's death. Some accidents. It was all my fault.

It was all because I exist…

"Yamanbagiri?"

My eyes snap wide open, returning to reality. Brother Horikawa is looking at me.

"What's wrong?" He smiles, but I think he knows why I was frozen. Even without being able to see oddities, my feeling of guilt is as clear as day.

I shake my head. "Nothing… I'm okay."

I start to clean off the stone from dust and dirt with a brush before pouring water on it with a ladle.

This is why obon with visiting his grave is hard. It reminds me of my sins. It's impossible for me to redeem, to ask for forgiveness… that time will never come, because he is dead, they are dead.

Nobody around me can forgive me. A murderer can't be forgiven by society. The only ones who can forgive him are the people he killed.

Sometimes other people took over to forgive, but even so, it isn't complete redemption.

The victim's family and friends might forgive, but does the victim feel the same? Yes or no, both are possible. Or, most of the time, the family and friends can't forgive. Perhaps the victim forgives, but we can never know that. Because we have no way of knowing, it isn't really redemption, even if the murderer doesn't do anything bad for the rest of his life.

Redemption doesn't exist for a murderer.

That one sin will stick like a stain, unable to be erased.

A gust brushes my hair, my bangs swinging to cover my eyes. After I recover, there, behind the stone, I see a human figure. A very familiar figure.

Black hair with hair style like mine. Red eyes. Small stature, one of a seven years old boy.
Brother Nagayoshi…

He smiles gently when our eyes meet, a wave of nostalgia hits me. Time has stopped for him, so his every-thing is just like what I remembered. He nods and turns his back away before he vanishes into thin air.

Although that happened only in a few seconds, it felt much longer for me.

It's still hard to look at him, but I have to accept it. I can't run away after all of these years. Just because I blame myself for his death doesn't mean I can't look at him and remind myself of my sins. No matter how many times I apologize, and no matter how many times he forgives me, it doesn't erase my mistake. There's no hope for that, so I have to face it bravely instead cowardly looking away just to make myself feel better.

That's right…

I know I'm stupid all this time.

Averting my eyes didn't help anyone, not even myself. I was just deceiving myself.

It was always so simple, and I always know that, but I also pushed it away.

I clap my hands in a prayer once again. For my brother and for my parents.

Thank you, and I'm sorry.

Not only is your youngest son and brother gay, an oddity is crushing on him, he is probably going to go deeper into oddities hell like Brother Yamabushi without a care in the world. I still hate myself, and probably will always do until the end, but that's fine. If that can make people around me feel better, I'd rather sacrifice myself. Because I don't think my life has any worth, I can do it.

Lose one for a thousand.

It's fine, isn't it?

My existence is nothing but a nuisance. Perhaps a sin all by itself. This is the best way for me to redeem for my sins and mistakes that cost people's misfortune and lives.

My brothers and friends will be sad if I'm gone, so I'll try to stay alive as long as possible.

I can't save anyone by risking their lives. I have to risk only mine. I have to.

That's the best way for me.

Finally, I arrived at the answer.

So, I have to train hard under Brother Yamabushi. It's fine if I'm not an official specialist. Yet. I just want to help people around me. This might not be any different from before, but this time, I know for sure why I have to do it, and how to do it. Perhaps I'll lose or forget this reason in the future, but I'm sure my body will keep on moving. I'm sure my heart will stay the same deep down, even if I lose or gain something.

If I see people in trouble, I have to help them. I can't stand to see them suffering in the first place, and this just makes me more determined. I want to help those who want it. Those who need it.

So that nobody else has to suffer on my watch.
Engraving this promise to myself, I take a step forward, feeling a little better about myself. The conversation yesterday with Souza was nothing but simple and random, but it helped me to be a little more daring. Knowing someone else shares the same pain as you do is really... relieving. It helped you to stand more firmly.

Surely, this might be my reason for existing all along.

To take in others' misfortune.

"Yamanbagiri? What's wrong? Um, your face looks a bit scary…"

I blink, finding that Kogitsunemaru is now in front of me, his face is close to mine. Since when is he there? That surprised me.

I shake my head lightly and reply in a whisper. "It's nothing…"

"You've been looking down since yesterday, I'm worried…"

"Mm. Thanks, but I'm fine. I'm just feeling blue because of obon, that's all."

I've gained the answer, so there's no need for me to get depressed over it anymore.

Kogitsunemaru stares at me worriedly before finally nodding, not saying anything more.

Now that he is by my side... I don't want to see him sad, either. He's already someone close to me, and I feel relaxed around him. So I don't want him to put that face again... for me. It's just a bother for him to worry about me like that. I have to stay strong.

"My mood will get better, Kogi. I'm okay."

"Hmm...okay."

Suzuran is a small city, but there's bon odori as well, held at night. It's nothing extravagant, though; just dancers at the same shrine as the festival a few days ago. There's a small wooden scaffold set up - called yagura. There are taiko drums set up on it. There are some torches around the shrine grounds for the source of light. It is a rare occasion for a quiet city, so many are gathered at the shrine, including my family and Yoshiyuki's - this time with extra people.

"Even after a festival, it hasn't ended... amazing!" Kogitsunemaru looks excited in particular. He was a bit gloomy because of obon's nature about death before, but he is in high spirits today.

"It should be performed during festival, but there were some technical difficulties, so it was postponed. Sometimes it doesn't even happen at all, so everyone is glad there is one this year."

"I see...well, it seems there's still festival spirits. No problem at all."

"Bon odori, huh... it has been a long time. So they're still doing it," Mikazuki says, his face looks like he is reliving a nostalgic past.

"You've shut yourself up, so you have no way of knowing. Too bad, it actually gets merrier as time passes," Shishiou says. It seems he has watched bon odori for decades... all alone because of his NEET master. I feel even sadder for him.
I wonder if it's really getting merrier each year, though. I don't think so.

By the way, Shishiou is in his spirit form today, so normal people can't see him. He brought his beloved pet, the *nue*, along with him. The black fur around his neck wriggles happily. I can never get used to this view.

"I see. It saddens me that I can't see it, but it had happened. There's nothing I can do."

I wonder if he regrets his decision to shut himself up, even only a bit.

"Oh, it's starting," Yoshiyuki says.

Sure enough, people dressed in *yukata* are coming out. There are *taiko* drummers with blue *haori* and dancers, most are female. They have fans on their hands, positioning themselves around the *yagura*, circling it.

*Bon odori* dances and songs can be different in each place, even unique to one place only. The same is true for Suzuran.

Just like its name, Suzuran is a place where lilies of the valley bloom naturally. Even on lower grounds, there are a lot of lilies of the valley in bloom if it's the season. It has its own lily of the valley parks, albeit small. So, the dancers have lily of the valley decorations, such as the white bell-shaped flower as hair ornaments and images on fans. The shrine maidens, gathered in small numbers, have *suzu* [11], but the bells are white instead of the usual yellow to mimic lily of the valley. They also have long cloths with white color on their arms, I don't know what they're called.

When the *taiko* drummers start, the dance begins, and the singer sings from atop the *yagura*. The music is like any folk music in Japan. Nothing weird. Completely normal, but it's original from Suzuran. I forgot its title, though…

Everyone watches closely.

We can join and dance, but not now.

The shrine maidens in front of the *yagura* move their hands and bodies, ringing their *suzu*, following the music's rhythm. The light from the torches illuminate them as they recite something and swing around their *suzu* and white cloth. I don't know if this kind of thing is normal outside Suzuran, but here, *bon odori* is still thickly religious here, so there's some kind of procession by the shrine maidens. A kind of purification or something. At this time, nobody can join and dance except the dancers with fans on their hands.

The dancers move clockwise following the music and the ring the bells, moving their hands and fans. Their movements are smooth and elegant, nothing is wasted. After a while, the shrine maiden stops, puts their *suzu* on the ground and kneels down, bowing deeply.

It's a sign that the procession has ended successfully. The music instantly changes, from melancholic to full of spirit. The dance also intensified, and when the shrine maidens walk away, people start to come closer and circling around the *yagura*.

"Let's dance, Yamanbagiri!" Yoshiyuki says, smiling, pulling my hand before I could reply. Well, I missed this dance last year, so I have no problems.

"Okay. What about you…?" I look at the fox spirit floating on the sky. He nods enthusiastically.

"I'll follow! I'll try my best!"
"I'm joining too!" Shishiou says excitedly.

"Kakaka! Let's go, Brother Horikawa. We can't lose to the youngsters!" Brother Yamabushi says.

Brother Horikawa smiles, unaware of the oddities around him. "I'm also young, Brother." He is usually sharp, so I'm just glad he doesn't feel anything today… and at the festival too. Maybe because there are a lot of oddities gathered, but full of festival spirits, so he can't feel their malice. Well, that's good for me.

Yeah, there are other oddities here. It's just natural that festival attracts oddities. Shrine might be a holy ground, but as long as they aren't onryo and the likes, they can enter and exit freely, especially if they don't have any bad intentions. Who can have bad intentions in a rare festival?

We join the circle of dancers. Nobody but the official dancers has fans, but that's okay. The dance can be done without it.

As expected, Mikazuki doesn't dance when we do. He is just observing from the sidelines, smiling and clapping his hands. Kogitsunemaru struggles to follow, but he learns fast, so now he is smoothly dancing with a satisfied expression on his face, his movements unexpectedly elegant (sorry for saying this, Kogi). Even though I didn't see it last year, my body still remembers the dance, so I can do it right. Shishiou moves with closed eyes, as if the dance is engraved into his body. So does Brother Horikawa and Yamabushi. They're natural. Meanwhile there's Yoshiyuki, whose movements are always rough and energetic from long ago.

You can see someone's personality just from the way they dance. It's amazing.

Other than dancing around, we also sing along - at least for those who know the lyrics. Kogitsunemaru can't keep up with singing, so he only dances. I still remember the lyrics as well.

The dance lasts a few minutes more, before it stops in a burst of clapping hands. I'm so tired… we all must be tired and sweating, but there's a hint of satisfaction. Hmm, moving around is really good once in a while, especially if you do it with a large number of people like this. It's fun.

It's a great way to end summer festival overall.

"What do you think about the dance, Kogi?" I whisper before we all go home.

Kogitsunemaru smiles, probably the brightest from what I've seen. "It's fun. The dance is actually simple, but energetic. I love it."

"I'm glad if you do."

"The procession by shrine maidens is amazing, too. There are sure a lot of rituals to be seen here. Ah, it isn't a bad thing, of course! I like seeing and seeing customs and such. Culture is always interesting."

"I see."

He sounds like a tourist, but in a way, he might be.

The last thing to do on the last day is toronagashi, at the time the spirits of the ancestors return to
where they came from. Basically a lantern festival, with candles lit inside. Most of the lanterns used are the lanterns from festival to cut cost. There's a river, so the residents gathered there with lanterns given by shrine people.

One by one, people set out their lanterns on the water, illuminating the river as they drift away. Now that there are tons of them, the river is bright at night. It's a breathtaking sight, as always. I pray for the safety of my deceased family members and set my lantern on the water, watching it going away with the other lanterns before sitting on the grass. My brothers are still busy talking with their acquaintances, so I'll wait here. Kogitsunemaru is floating around, looking at the lanterns with interest like a curious child. It's adorable.

Just like him, I won't get bored watching the beauty of the drifting lanterns.

I haven't seen Mikazuki or Shishiou, though. They might not come or just observe the lanterns from above. I can imagine.

While I'm relaxing, a lantern suddenly lands on my lap.

"Wahh?!"

"Ah! I'm sorry!"

I look up, seeing a young man - probably around my age - with a green hair as green as leaves, his bangs covering his right eye, and the edge of that bangs seem sharp. He looks worriedly at me before kneeling and takes the lantern. His eyes are colored in amber, almost glowing in the dark. I've never seen him before, but somehow a tingle of nostalgia suddenly hits me.

"I'm sorry, are you alright?"

"Mm. I'm fine. Just a bit surprised."

"I'm really sorry!" He bows down deeply and frantically. Ooh, this type of person, huh.

"It's okay, so raise your head."

He raises his head, but his eyes are still worried. Almost like a puppy, but way gentler than Yoshiyuki.

"I'm sorry…"

"Ssh, it's fine. I'm not harmed or anything, so just forget it."

He nods painfully, but of course, he is still fidgeting. The worry-wart type.

"If you don't hurry up and set out that lantern, more people will come and you'll have a hard time to do so. The time limit is still far, but it's better to set it out quickly."

"O-Oh? Is that so?"

"Yeah. Are you new here?"

"Yes… I've just arrived at the beginning of August."

"Oh, very fresh."

Hmm. This kind of custom exists outside, too, though… well, there are certainly a few differences.
"I see. Do you want help, perhaps? For setting it out. I see you have two lanterns."

Yeah, he is holding two lanterns, alright. No wonder one fell.

It's a weird pretense, I know. I just want to know more about this stranger. Why did he move to this small, countryside city? I can't help but to get curious. Nah, I don't think this stranger is dangerous. My radar didn't go off. Besides, there are many people around us. He can't just do anything weird.

"If it isn't a bother, then I accept." He smiles, and the two of us slide down closer to the river.

I set out a lantern of his and he follows, watching the two lanterns drift away.

"It's beautiful," he mutters, gazing, at the distance.

"It is." I look at him. He looks young, and the more I stare, the more I realize how handsome he is. Oh, don't tell me my attraction radar brought me here. It's awkward now that he fell silent, so I try to speak up. Remember, my social skill is the lowest in my stats. "So, uh… are you alone?"

He turns around and smiles wryly. "I have an elder brother, but he is busy at the moment, so I was told to set the lanterns all by myself."

"Sounds like a bossy brother."

"Indeed he is. Shame on him, though, for being unable to see this scenery. I'll brag about it to him."

They sound close. "The two of you can come here next year."

"Next year, huh…" He scratches his cheek awkwardly. "Yeah, we should do that. Joining bon odori sounds good, too."

"If I may ask, why did you move here?"

He looks a bit troubled to answer, but replies anyway. "Ah, uh… our parents passed away, and our relatives are here, so we moved here. It's a nice change of pace from the crowded big city."

"I see. My condolences."

"Thank you…"

"What school are you going into?"

"Oh, I'm first year of high school. I forgot the name of the school I'm going to, though…"

"I see." A year older than me, huh… maybe we'll go to the same high school. There aren't many schools here, and good ones are even rarer. I'll probably just go to a school close from home, though.

"Oi, Yamanbagiri~!" Yoshiyuki shouts, and I can see his figure from far away, waving his hand as he approaches me. Kogitsunemaru is following on the sky. "Aren't we gonna play a game together?"

Oh, right. I promised him that we'll do it.

"Well then, I'll be off. Have fun in Suzuran."

He nods awkwardly, waving his hand because I also wave mine.

"I hope… we'll meet again."
He whispers that and I can hear him well. Yeah… I guess I hope so. I won't refuse seeing a handsome man at my school. Eye candy.

"Be careful, Yamanbagiri."

Huh?

Did he just call me? How? Why?

I turn around, but I don't see him anywhere. He isn't at the spot where he was at seconds ago, as if nobody was there at the first place. A cold wind passes me.

How… weird. Maybe it was an oddity playing tricks on me, as they like to do that without my notice, but…

I don't think so, somehow.

This isn't a prank.

I have a really, really bad feeling.

"Yoshiyuki, it's almost 10 PM. Are you sure you're not going home?"

"Eh? AH?!" Yoshiyuki looks at the clock on the wall after pausing the game, his face visibly turns pale. "It's already so late… uwaah."

"Sorry, even I just noticed the time just now."

"It's okay… can I stay here for the night? I'll message my parents."

"Sure, but, where are you going to sleep? Wait, I think you can stay in my room… I'll get the second futon. I think Brother has it."

"Mm. Let's finish this chapter first!"

We're playing a fantasy RPG, and although there aren't any save points - instead, we can save anywhere we want, we're close to the next chapter, so we'll end it for now. After we're finished, Yoshiyuki messages his parents and I go to Brother Yamabushi in his room, asking for a second futon. Fortunately, he has it, so I bring it to my room. Item GET! or something.

I struggle to open the door of my room, but I can do it.

"Huh, where's Yoshiyuki?"

"He went downstairs. Taking a drink, maybe," Kogitsunemaru replies before yawning. He is sitting on his futon, so he might want to go sleep soon. We always go to sleep together… I mean, at the same time, for convenience's sake.

"Hmm…" I set down the futon next to Kogitsunemaru's futon. "Is this position alright? Yoshiyuki can be wild when he is asleep, though, so you might get kicked."

"Ah, it's fine. I don't mind… I mind getting kicked, though!"
"Ahaha. Well, just be on your guard."

Seeing him yawning again, I automatically yawn. It is indeed contagious. I awkwardly sit on my bed. Kogitsunemaru glances at me, sitting in seiza for some reason. I can see him tapping his lap.

"Y-Yamanbagiri, if this isn't… shameful of me… no, it's shameful, I know… but…"

"What is it?"

"Can I… ask you …to do something…? O-Or not like that, but…"

"If I can do it, yeah."

He stutters, closing his eyes, his face is completely red. "C-C-C-Can I rest my head on your lap?"

"Oh, sure. You can." And when I thought he'll ask for something outrageous and private.

His eyes snap wide open before sparkling. "R-Really?! Are you sure?!!"

"Yeah. I see no problem on it."

I mean, I do that all the time with Yoshiyuki and sometimes my brothers…

I see Kogitsunemaru's ears flick happily. Ears… oh, oh! I got an idea. I go to my desk and take a cotton swab.

"Can I clean your ears when you're on my lap?"

"H-Huh? Why?"

"I just feel like it."

I can't say that I want to legally touch his ears, right…

He looks troubled, his body stiffens, but he nods at the end. "Y-Yeah…you can." I sit next to him, patting my lap when he doesn't move. "Then…excuse me."

He slowly rests his head on my lap. It tickles, especially because this is the first time with Kogitsunemaru, but the feeling goes away over time. Before I clean his ears, I stroke his head and hair, brushing it with my fingers. Right, I allowed this because I want a reason to pat his head. I'm sorry I have ulterior motives, Kogi… if only his hair is still long… just the thought makes me feel happy, but this is fine, too. His hair is silky and soft, it's so great and unearthly. I can see his tail swinging around, probably happy. I can see his cheeks are red from here.

I touch the edge of his ear, stroking the fur on his ears, before I put the cotton swab inside.

"W-Waah…"

"What's wrong?"

"It tickles… nobody has ever done this to me before…"

"Really? Mm, I rarely do this either…probably twice so far. Am I doing it right?"

"I think. It feels pleasant."

"That's good, then. Just stay still, don't struggle or it'll be painful."
"Alright."

The inside of a fox’s ears are similar to those of human’s… in terms of cleaning it, anyway, so I just stir the cotton swab like usual, just gentler. This is the first time I take a close look to cat-like ears like this. Eh, what's the difference between fox’s ears and cat’s? I don't think they're much different.

If only Kogitsunemaru's hair is still long, my other hand will surely have fun stroking his whole hair. Well, I'm the one who gave him idea to cut his hair, so I can't complain. His hair is still great, despite being short now.

Why did he accept my idea and even do it so quickly?

Don't tell me… because I'm the one he loves?

No, no, no, don't think about that! It might be rude for him, but thinking about his feelings is bad for my health!

The door creaks open and Yoshiyuki is standing on the doorway, tilting his head with wide eyes. "Whoa. What are ya doing?"

I can feel Kogitsunemaru stiffens at that moment.

"I'm cleaning his ears."

"I can see that…” Yoshiyuki scratches the back of his head, yawns, and closes the door. He walks wobbly to me and sits next to me. "I'm not gonna ask why, because it's probably random, anyway."

"You know me so well."

"Can I have a turn after him?"

*Turn?* Weird choice of word. "I don't mind, but you might want to sleep soon."

"It's okay, I'll wait."

He really does wait, sitting next to me like a good kid, smiling bubbly. "You're weird…"

"Ehehe. I just want ya to pamper me sometimes."

"I just did a few days ago."

"Then… I want ya to pamper me every day!"

"That's impossible."

"Don't reject it like that! Huhu, my heart hurts…” He makes an exaggerated gesture, clenching his chest with a sorrowful expression and voice.

"Oh. I see."

"And that cold reaction is even more painful! Double damage taken!"

I end up chuckling anyway. "Double attack just for you, Yoshiyuki."

"That doesn't make me happy, sorry.” He crosses his arms, pouting.

"You'd be even weirder if you feel happy."
"So I'm already weird?!!"

"Of course."

Yoshiyuki groans, but of course, it's an exaggerated move. A joke. We chuckle after the whole thing ends. Really, with Yoshiyuki around, I can just forget about my worries and slowly get relaxed.

During that time, though, Kogitsunemaru doesn't speak at all.

"Kogi? I think this is enough, but what do you think?"

I take out the cotton swab from his ear.

A few seconds pass, but there's no reply at all. I'm getting worried. Did I move the cotton swab wrongly and make him lose consciousness or something? Is that even possible?

"Kogi?"

"Ah!" Kogitsunemaru finally responds when I turn his head to me, so we're facing each other. His face flushes red when my hand strokes his head. "Y-Yamanbagiri…"

"Yes?"

"It just… felt so amazing… that I think I went to heaven…"

Hearing that makes me feel weird, especially because his expression is… so… mild. If you want me to say it straightforwardly; lewd. "Uh, thanks, I guess… I'm glad if I did it rightly."

He slowly gets up, his expression is that of someone in a daze.

"Me next!" Yoshiyuki raises his hand excitedly.

"Okay, okay. Come here." I pat on my lap while Kogitsunemaru falls down next to me. It's his futon, after all. Maybe we should move, but it's a bit too late for that. "Thank god I have 2 cotton swabs, huh? It's a bother to clean one first."

"So prepared!"

Yoshiyuki smiles and lies down on my lap. I stroke his hair, brushing it with my fingers, cutting off any tangles on the way. Now that I touch his hair right after Kogitsunemaru's, the contrast is even more striking. Kogitsunemaru's hair is like an extremely soft and comforting furball, while Yoshiyuki's hair is not even smooth. Wild and rough, rarely being treated, but it reflects his personality. It suits him to a degree… at least he regularly washes his hair, even though he doesn't really care about it, so I can touch his hair without fear.

…Wait, the way I speak of their hair…

I swear, I don't have hair fetish! I'm just a sucker for fur, which is Kogitsunemaru's hair, so I can't help but to compare them! Please believe me!

There's lie in believe?! Who said that?!

"U-Uwaah… Yamanbagiri, you're so good in this! No wonder Kogi died!"

"I'm still alive, but my HP is at 1 now…” Kogitsunemaru says.
Aaah, he can retort with game references now…! My education (read as contamination) paid off…!

"Is that so? I'm happy to hear that… hmm, I'm actually not the kind of person who’d let others to touch my ears, let alone clean them, so this is a surprise, even to myself. Who knows I can be good?"

"Ahaha. I'm the same, really. Ears are off limits! But if it's Yamanbagiri, I don't mind. We're really close, anyway," Yoshiyuki replies, smiling. "I believe in Yamanbagiri."

"Me too… if it's Yamanbagiri, I have no objections," Kogitsunemaru says weakly.

Yoshiyuki is one thing, but Kogitsunemaru is another… it just reminds me of his feelings. My heartbeat rises again. This is bad… focus, focus on cleaning Yoshiyuki's ears…! You can do it, Yamanbagiri!

"W-Waah, Yamanbagiri, ya getting too rough there… waaah!!"

"Eh? I-I'm sorry!"

That night ends just like that, so happily, full of laughter and smiles.

Maybe that sense of foreboding is but my imagination… yeah, I hope so.

Chapter End Notes

[9] Bon odori is a dance performed during obon, originally a Nenbutsu folk dance to welcome the spirits of the dead.
[10] Just in case, NEET is a young person who is "Not in Education, Employment, or Training".

*Suzuran is Japanese name for lily of the valley, but it is a fictional town here. I just made up whatever I want about it, even some traditions.
Obon has ended, and we're back at our routine. That includes going to the shrine and play around with the dogs.

"Haaa~ I miss these dogs! Good dogs! Thanks for waiting for us!" Yoshiyuki says, hugging one of the dogs, almost crying. Dramatic as usual. "Hey, hey, do ya all miss us as well? Ya sure do!"

The dogs bark at him excitedly and some jump to him. Yoshiyuki laughs as he pats them. He is sure loved, surrounded by dogs, meanwhile Kogitsunemaru and I are watching from the sidelines, sitting, sipping water and flipping fans since it's so hot, even more so inside the forest.

"I already know, but… Yoshiyuki is sure amazing," Kogitsunemaru says, leaning on the trunk of the tree. Even though his hair is already short, it still covers most of his neck, so he is still being cooked by the sun.

The two of us are dying while Yoshiyuki starts to play with the dogs.

"To be energetic in this heat… and being so loved by the dogs… yeah, I get it. He's the embodiment of dogs, after all."

"I can hear that, oi!!"

"It's a compliment."

Yoshiyuki's stern face turns into a smile. "…If you say so."

"We sure like to repeat this kind of conversation, don't we?" I sigh before drinking water.

"I blame it on ya."

"I blame it on the lack of variety in your answers."

"The same goes for ya, then."

"Ah, fair enough."

He claps his hands, changing the topic with a big smile. "Okay, finish your rest, guys! We're going to an adventure around this forest!"

Kogitsunemaru and I look at each other, and then to Yoshiyuki surrounded by dogs, and back to each other again.

"…Huh?"

Yoshiyuki grins and points at the trees next to him. "Like said, we're going to walk around the whole forest!"

"W-Wait…are you serious?" Kogitsunemaru says, in disbelief. His mouth is open for good seconds.

"Yeah. No problem, right? We won't go too far! We have Kogi, too, so we won't get lost."
We've gone pretty far from the shrine already, so I am worried about the way home, but I think that's a small problem... and Kogitsunemaru might've thought of the same thing.

"Don't you feel it, Yoshiyuki? This forest isn't normal," Kogitsunemaru says, standing up. "Even in this place we're standing at, there's something... something unsettling. Even I don't know what it is. Going further from the shrine is the same as suicide, even if you can go home. Can't you feel the oppressive aura from all around us?"

"That's right. We don't know what's in the wild of the forest. We shouldn't take the chance." I nod, agreeing with Kogitsunemaru. "Besides, it's fine to do the usual, right? Not going too far."

I am curious about the forest, but... curiosity can kill the cat.

"I feel that, but..." Yoshiyuki looks at the dogs with a sad face. "Just this once, please? Not too far, I promise! Please, for these dogs... let's take a walk with them for once!" He claps his two hands and pleads with his puppy eyes attack.

"That's unfair." I waver immediately.

"Stay strong, Yamanbagiri!" Kogitsunemaru says, but his expression tells me that he is wavering as well.

Yoshiyuki picks up a smaller shiba inu and holds it to face us, hiding his face but his eyes. "Please?"

"Uugh... Yoshiyuki, you piece of..." I grumble unhappily. That dog on his hands somehow has a sad expression too! Double attack!

"If you want to go so badly, I'll come along."

Mikazuki appears from behind a tree. Once again surprising us with his sudden appearance. He smiles and approaches us, not feeling guilty for making our hearts leapt.

"Going alone is dangerous, but I can be insurance for your safety. Of course, Kogitsunemaru is a guard as well. If everything goes well, there should be no problems," he continues.

"If and only if everything goes well..." I sigh. What can I do if a shinrei - moreover, someone who lived here, said that? I have no power to oppose. I can imagine him pulling the two of us away forcefully. Very possible. "What do you think, Kogitsunemaru? I gave up."

"Y-Yeah... if Munechika-sama said so..." He also sighs and nods. "Okay. Just this once."

"Yaay!" Yoshiyuki cheers happily. It's his win today. "Thank you, Munechika-sama!"

Mikazuki smiles. I feel like he just wants to tease us, honestly... what an evil being.

And so, the four of us along with all dogs walk away. Mikazuki leads the way and Yoshiyuki leads the dogs. Kogitsunemaru and I just follow behind, making sure no dogs get out of formation. It must be hard to lead such a big pack, but as expected from the dog whisperer, Yoshiyuki manages to do so as if it's easy.

"So, where are we going?" I ask.

"To a certain border."

"Border? What's that?" Yoshiyuki asks.
"You'll see later… and you'll understand why going all by yourself is dangerous."

The more we walk, the more my bad feeling comes true. Like a shadow creeps closer to us, I feel an incoming danger. My head is ringing, instincts screaming to run away. My stomach convulses, but I hold the feeling. This isn't the first time I feel this - fear and disgust to unknown things, but this is way more painful than I've ever felt before. It usually means something bad and dark is in front of us, getting closer. No, we're getting closer to it, so I'm getting worse.

Just what are we going to face?

Am I just too sensitive today…?

Yoshiyuki looks fairly normal, even though he is usually keener to oddities than I am.

"Yamanbagiri? You look pale. Are you okay?" Kogitsunemaru whispers, getting closer to me.

Before I know it, I'm already covering my mouth with my hand. "Ah, uh… I'm okay…"

"You don't look like it. Do you need a support to walk?"

"No… uhh…"

I walk wobbly and almost fall, tripping a rock just when my legs feel so weak, but Kogitsunemaru holds me before my face can touch the ground. He grips my shoulder and hand.

"Of course not. Hang onto me, okay?"

"Okay…"

Wrapping an arm around his neck, he supports me to walk. Sheesh, look at how much I trouble him and others now… how pitiful. I hate this…

"Yamanbagiri? What's wrong…?" Yoshiyuki realizes my bad condition and turns around, confused.

"You… you don't feel it at all, Yoshiyuki?"

"Feel what?"

"I don't feel anything weird, either… sure, the aura surrounding us is getting thicker, but that's all," Kogitsunemaru says, "Or is Yamanbagiri more sensitive today?"

"Perhaps. It isn't his imagination, though." Mikazuki says.

"Huh?"

Mikazuki stops and points at the trees in front of him.

"Look at that."

A few meters away from where he stands, there are trees lined up, connected by *shimenawa* ropes and *shide* papers hanging on it. It's like a police 'do not enter' tape. It's obvious what that means - this is the border.

"It's… the barrier," Kogitsunemaru mutters, looking up at one of the sacred tree. I look there as well. It's taller than any of the trees, seemingly stretching to the heavens. The sunlight barely slips in from the gaps between leaves.
"There are others as well, lined up across this forest in a pretty wide area. It made a square shape."

"What are the barriers for?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"To ward off evil spirits and the likes, of course... for everyone's safety. The malice piled up beyond this barrier is... terrifying, you can say. Even gods can't face it straightforwardly."

Beyond the barrier, I can see wrecked, Japanese-styled houses. It looks like an ancient village. On the ground... uh... there's something like a black liquid... moving around creepily. I suspect that's the malice Mikazuki is talking about. That malice spreads on the ground as far as I can see... that's the first time I've seen it.

Seeing that slowly moving liquid, I feel like vomiting even more.

Usually, malice is just an aura or stench, but to have a physical appearance... it means the malice is heavy. High-grade, you can say, but it isn't a good thing.

Just what happened here to create such... darkness? Yeah, that name is more fitting.

Kogitsunemaru slowly makes me sit on the ground and pats my back quietly. That kinda comforts me, thanks.

"So, uh... Munechika-sama, that black thing... is malice?" Yoshiyuki says, repeating what I think.

"That's correct. You can tell how heavy it is."

Even from this distance, I can tell Yoshiyuki's face goes pale. "How can I... not feel it?"

"Because the dogs love you, perhaps. They can be said as remnants of the lives in the other side, and guardians on top of that. They might not want to make you feel anything weird, so they protected you. That's their main job as guardians before. However, it seems their powers aren't enough to keep Yamanbagiri feel normal... or he's just too sensitive today."

Yoshiyuki looks at the dogs. So they aren't normal dogs, after all.

"What...are they?" He finally asks after a long pause.

"Inugami, the divine dogs. This whole forest was a village... their territory. A place where humans and inugami can live peacefully... but it's gone now, and only these dogs are left."

"I suspect so..." Kogitsunemaru mutters. "It's faint, but I can feel some kind of holy power from them."

"Even after hundreds of years, they still have that instinct and power to protect someone they care for. Their powers are far weakened now, but they're still stronger than normal humans. Spirits can't go down so easily."

A dog approaches me. It has the same fur colors like the rest. I pat its head, and at that moment, I feel better all of sudden, like a burden has been lifted from me... is that its power? To heal? The dog gets closer and brushes its head against my legs. That tickles. It then goes to Kogitsunemaru and does the same to him.

Mikazuki smiles and turns around to face the barrier again. "As you can see, it'd be bad to cross over this barrier."

"Who wants to jump to that black lava..." Yoshiyuki shrieks. "So... what lies beyond this point?"
"Wrecked houses and malice. And some trees. That's all. There's nothing interesting to be seen."

"So… you brought us here just to show us this?" I ask.

"Well, yes. It's better to tell you soon before you accidentally cross it out of curiosity."

That's a very plausible scenario, one I'd like to avoid.

"Wait, we can cross it?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"Of course. The barrier only blocks those with malice."

"What a loose barrier…" Kogitsunemaru mumbles, seemingly disappointed.

Mikazuki shrugs. "With such a wide area, this is the only thing the kodama and inugami can do to keep the barrier standing. I can't do much because I'm weaker. But the most important thing is… there are rarely any living creatures roaming around here, and animals have sharp instincts to avoid getting closer to the barrier, so the barrier was made with the function to only lock the malice inside."

Sure enough, the pack of dogs don't come closer to the barrier, and instead put a pretty far distance than Mikazuki, who is practically standing before the rope. They move around rather erratically. But wait, they're not normal dogs… it's a bit hard to think about that fact, ugh.

"Who built the barriers?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"Ancient priests before I became a god. I don't remember the exact details, but this barrier has been standing for more than my age. All I do is maintain it regularly. I think the forest was born to hide away the village and malice stored on its ground."

"Wow… that's a very long time…"

"But that just shows how dangerous that malice is," Kogitsunemaru grumbles. "It doesn't seem to be weak even now."

"Yes. It's weakened now, but it's still boiling and hot."

"I can't imagine how it looked like before…" I shudder thinking about it.

"Now you understand, don't you? There's nothing interesting but the things beyond the barrier in this forest. And of course, there's no way I'd let you pass this barrier…" Mikazuki turns around, furrowed his brows, glaring at us one by one. That's the coldest stare he ever gave me. We can understand without words.

The consequences of trespassing are no laughing matter. I get the feeling that it'll affect Mikazuki and the surrounding environment as well, not just ourselves.

Passing the barrier equals suicide, no matter how strong you are.

"I-I understand." Yoshiyuki nods reluctantly. "But I can step closer to the barrier, right?"

"As long as you don't pass the rope."

Yoshiyuki steps forward, standing next to Mikazuki, just a few centimeters away from the rope. He reaches for the rope and grips it curiously.

Is that even allowed?
At that moment, Mikazuki's face distorts to something I've never seen before - utter shock, before he screams, "Kogi! Protect Yamanbagiri!"

"Eh?"

Before any of us understand what he is talking about, a bright light flashes from beyond the barrier. I can feel Kogitsunemaru wraps his arms around me as he throws me along with him, jumping forward to the direction we came from. I have no time to react to his forceful action. I see the light swallows Yoshiyuki, and my hand automatically reaches out for him.

But it's futile.

"Yoshi - !"

*BAM!*

An explosion.

I close my eyes in reflex as dust, fire and pieces of wood fly away to our direction. Kogitsunemaru pushes my head onto his chest and I clench his clothes, unable to think of anything. I can feel wind passes my skin as he runs, until suddenly, my feet don't feel the ground anymore, and the wind goes upwards.

D-Don't tell me… are we flying?

"K-Kogi! What happened?"

"It's okay. Open your eyes now."

While holding each other tightly, I slowly open my eyes, adjusting to the bright sun once again. Before long, I can see the scenery once again - cloudless blue sky and sun shining. When I look below my feet, I see… green trees. A black smoke can be seen rising. When I realize I am totally not touching the ground, I panic.

It's my instinct telling me to search for a ground.

"W-Waah?!"

I move erratically, letting of Kogitsunemaru's clothes, so he puts his hands on my waist and shoulder, locking me in place. "Hold onto me tightly, Yamanbagiri! It's fine, you won't fall."

I immediately grab him again, trying to calm myself down.

I'm still scared to see the scenery below, but I have to. I stare at the rising smoke.

"What… exactly happened?"

"I don't know, but I think it'll be dangerous to just go back there. Let's get Shishiou."

"Y-Yoshiyuki…what about him?! Is he alright?"

"Munechika is with him. I'm sure he is alright."

I'm not entirely convinced, of course, but for now, the best course of action is to get Shishiou. I nod as he puts his hand below my knees, carrying me in… princess carry style. I'm so embarrassed and I hate it, but there's no time to lament.
This is an emergency.

"Hold me tightly."

"Yeah."

I close my eyes and Kogitsunemaru flies down in a speed I can't comprehend. The wind brushing against us is wild. In a blink of an eye, we arrive at the shrine grounds. Kogitsunemaru puts me down gently. Touching the ground feels… great…

"You guys! What happened? I think I heard an explosion… and is that smoke I see?" Shishiou immediately approaches us with a panicked expression.

Kogitsunemaru nods. "There's an explosion in front of the barrier. We have no idea what exactly happened after and what triggered that. It happened all of sudden."

"Yoshiyuki grabbed the rope, and then there's this light, followed by explosion."

Shishiou's eyes snap wide open at my words before he turns around, looking at the forest.

"Damn it… don't tell me…!"

He takes off, running at a speed my eyes can't match. Kogitsunemaru pulls me and we catch up to him, going back to the depths of the forest.

"Do you know what happened?"

"Maybe… Yoshiyuki might be a suitable vessel… for the evil inugami across the barrier! By touching the rope, he slightly passes the barrier, enough for the malice to take over!"

Just touching the rope is enough?! What kind of useless barrier is that?! And wait, evil inugami exists?! …Well, that's possible… of course…

"What's that explosion, then?!
Kogitsunemaru asks before I can protest.

"I don't know! Maybe the two sides of inugami's powers met each other and clash! That light usually happens when darkness and purity meet each other, but it never happened before!"

"So you basically know nothing!"

"Yeah!"

At least he is honest, but I'm far more anxious now.

Are Yoshiyuki and Mikazuki fine…? What about the dogs - I mean, good inugami? That explosion must have blasted them away. I'm sure the barrier is strong enough to withstand the explosion, but… I'm worried…!

Shishiou suddenly stops running. Kogitsunemaru almost hits him. "Something is coming!"

I hold my breath.

What is that something?

I'm scared…
I hear barking sounds along with familiar running steps… of dogs. No, in this case, only one dog. As it approaches, we can see its figure clearly. A normal white and brown *shiba inu* runs to us. Even though I'm not as good as Yoshiyuki when it comes to handle dogs, I've spent plenty of time with them to understand their body gestures. This dog is panicking.

It stops in front of Shishiou, who kneels down and pats its head.

"What's the situation?"

The dog barks, and he, seemingly understanding it, nods. He turns to face me and Kogitsunemaru.

"The pack is scattered, surprised from the explosion, but they should be able to gather soon. It seems old man flew away somewhere, but he should be alright."

"What about Yoshiyuki?! Is he alright?"

Shishiou clenches his fist, looking down at the ground. This is the first time I've seen this kind of grim expression on his face. I feel blood drained from my face. "Nobody saw him after the explosion. As if he just disappeared… ah, but he might survive! Mikazuki might've thrown him too far, and maybe even one of the *inugami* did that, too!"

"Y-Yeah…"

For now, I'll cling to that one hope. Otherwise I'll collapse.

"The barrier seems fine, but we're all confused. For now, let's join the pack and search for Mikazuki."

We nod and once again set off, with that one dog leading us. I can't keep up running with oddities, I'm the slowest, so Kogitsunemaru ends up carrying me again. Before long, we arrive at the barrier. There's nobody there. It looks messier than before, obviously because of the explosion, but the *shimenawa* ropes and *shide* papers look fine.

The dog barks again and other dogs emerge from the trees and shadows. I think all of them have gathered now. Shishiou coughs to catch our attention.

"Okay, so let's get to the point. Have any of you seen Mikazuki?"

A dog barks and walks to somewhere on our left. We follow after it and soon find Mikazuki leaning on a trunk of a tree, holding his right shoulder. When he notices our presence, he lifts his face and looks at us one by one. I'm not sure what he is feeling just by seeing his face, but he sure looks dirtier than before. His outfit is tattered as well.

"Old man! Are you okay?" Shishiou approaches him.

Mikazuki visibly winches. "I'm fine… I think I dislocated my shoulder, though. Can you fix it for me?"

"Sure. Bear with the pain, okay!"

Shishiou swings his leg and kicks Mikazuki's right shoulder. A crack sound can be heard clearly as Mikazuki bites his lower lip. I shudder seeing and hearing it.

"Is that enough?"

"Yes. Thank you."
Mikazuki swings his arm, cracking it even more.

"We better treat it now…" Shishiou says worriedly.

"Later. Now, we have to discuss on what to do next."


"I don't know Yoshiyuki's whereabouts. I was sure I pushed him away from the barrier, but he was gone the moment I realized I flew and hit the trunk."

At this moment, I'm sure I look pale. I can't stop my rising heartbeat.

"Then, what about that explosion?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

"Yoshiyuki is a suitable vessel for the inugami… I don't know the reason, I'm sure one of the dogs at our side tried to possess him earlier. He was holding the rope, so malice outside can reach him, even a bit. Since purity and corruption clashed, that spark - explosion - happened, but it seems Yoshiyuki's body rejected the spirit at the beginning, so the explosion was much bigger. How he disappeared, well, even I want to know the answer."

"Wait… from our side? Are you sure?" Shishiou yelps.

Mikazuki nods. "Yes. I'm sure. The reaction on his hand was way too quick for inugami outside. I haven't even seen them manifested, so they couldn't be the culprit."

"Then…" Shishiou looks around, focusing his gaze at the dogs. "We have a traitor."

"It might just want to save Yoshiyuki, though, but there should be a better way…" Mikazuki sighs. "We have to find him to find out the truth."

"True…"

"Inugami possession… is it dangerous?" I ask.

"It can be dangerous…especially if his body rejects the spirit so strongly. If the spirit is not removed soon, his life might be in danger, regardless of the spirit's intentions."

I feel weak all of sudden.

Damn it…

Why did this happen? To Yoshiyuki, out of all people?

Sure, I think he is like a puppy sometimes, but being possessed by an inugami is…

Kogitsunemaru supports my weight with his hands. It's a bit comforting, but my mind can't stop running to Yoshiyuki. Where is he now? Is he alright? What's the time limit? Can he be free?

Yoshiyuki…

I'm feeling so depressed and worried.

"We can find him… no, we have to," Mikazuki says, loudly and firmly this time.

Shishiou grins and stretches out his arms. "Okay! Time to get fired up."
"Yamanbagiri, you should go back to the shrine," Kogitsunemaru says, "It can be dangerous, and you don't look well."

"B-But…"

I can't stay still when they're searching for him. I can't wait. There's no way I can. I have to know the updates real-time or I'll lose it…!

Last resort it is.

"If… if I'm alone, who will protect me? Anything dangerous can happen."

"Ah…" Kogitsunemaru looks troubled, but he gives in at the end. "Okay, you can come with me. I'll protect you no matter what, but run away when things seem dangerous, okay?"

I nod happily. These words are embarrassing as always, but that's what I need now. In order to go with them and search for Yoshiyuki, I'll do anything.

We split up into five group, each being led by a dog. I'm with Kogitsunemaru, of course. Our group walks along the barrier, observing what's beyond, while others go deeper into the forest. The barrier stretches far. We start from the edge. So far, there's nothing out of ordinary… well, that black ground is out of ordinary, but it's normal beyond the barrier. The black lava - let's call it that rather than malice for imagery purposes - is still boiling, moving slightly and something like bubbles pop up every now and then. It's really… creepy and disgusting.

Halfway through the journey, I see something moving behind a wrecked house. I stop my feet, What's that? Is that my imagination?

"Yamanbagiri?" Kogitsunemaru stops and stares at the direction I'm staring at.

"I saw something there…"

"What is it? I see nothing."

I stare intently at the house. I'm sure there's something…

Kogitsunemaru pushes me to his back when the something moves again. Now, we can see… some kind of shadow… or dark aura emitting from its body. It feels heavier than the black lava.

The thing finally walks away from the cover of the walls.

I know that figure. I know that person.

The one we're searching for.

"Yoshiyuki!"

The moment I scream that, the dogs bark, louder and louder while Yoshiyuki, with shadow around him, just stands still. He looks downcast, so I can't see his face. I'm relieved to see him, but he's beyond the barrier… and covered by some kind of darkness. His clothes are dirty and tattered. He can't be fine.

And…

Is that a tail I see swinging on his back? Are those ears on his head, and not his weird hair?
If yes, then…

With disgusting sounds, shapes of dogs emerge from the black lava, slowly becoming real dogs - *shiba inu* - with black color and red eyes.

What... are these? Evil *inugami*? But they came from that malice…

Suddenly, Yoshiyuki falls to his knees, black liquid splashing all over him. He clutches his head and screams - but it sounds inhuman, almost like a wolf’s cry. So shrill and painful, it breaks my heart, and makes the leaves flutter wildly. It seems he is in pain.

Just then, I notice claws and teeth marks appearing all over his body, covering even his face.

That's...?!

"Yoshiyuki!!"

Without thinking, I push away Kogitsunemaru's hand and jump to hold the rope, about to pass it.

"Wha - Yamanbagiri!!"

Kogitsunemaru reaches out for my hand, but it's too late.

I run across the barrier to Yoshiyuki, but then I trip and fall to the black lava... just when I'm about to reach him.

Just a little more, but my face meets the ground.

Darkness envelops me in mere seconds.

[Blackout]
Email (Sent June 1st 9:00 AM JST)

To: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: Report-Kashuu jiangshi and god help me!!

Hello. Sorry for the late update - err, I mean, report. Email. Whatever.

Long story short, I was kidnapped by the vampire Kashuu. I was somehow able to calm him down (if this is even the right word) and regroup with Yoshiyuki…but it was the next day when I woke up. He was searching for me along with the others, but I only met Yoshiyuki. When we were resting, I saw gashadokuro, so I ran to attract its attention to the place where Yoshiyuki had found me. There was a tree at the building grounds and it was… most likely jubokko, and probably also the culprit of turning Kashuu into a vampire.

An epic battle started! Gashadokuro VS jubokko! …Or not, since jubokko easily tripped gashadokuro. The battle was over in seconds (lol). And then Kashuu attacked me out of nowhere, but Yoshiyuki saved me.

Skip skip skip, very long skip, and help came! The specialists I know and Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru came….

So Yoshiyuki and I took shelter inside the building while our injuries were being treated. My injuries were light, and I got fever, that's all… ah, yes, that's why this email is so late. I needed to rest from the fever first.

Anyway, my dear friend.

The most pressing matter right now.

Yoshiyuki has confessed his love to me.

I repeat. He confessed his love to me. In that building. And he wasn't joking.

He told me to take time to answer him… and I'm in dilemma right now. Yoshiyuki is someone I hold dear, my best friend, so I don't want to destroy our relationship. If we date, it might just break everything… and I can't lie to him. What should I do?

I don't understand my own feelings, even now….

Do I love him in a romantic way like he does to me?

If you can help me, I'd be glad.

P.S. I… I miss you too. Your voice, I mean. It has been ages since we last talked on the phone. It's not a bad thing, I think… right?
I wake up with a start, damp with sweat, greeted by a very striking lamp on the ceiling.

"Haa… ha…"

My breathing is hard and ragged. My heartbeat is faster than normal. As if I've woken up from a nightmare.

Perhaps it is a nightmare. A very clear replay of my past… my life two years ago.

After that, what happened to me? What happened to Yoshiyuki? The clear recollection cut off all of sudden. My memory is vague, somehow, but I remember slapping Kogitsunemaru while crying sometime after that.

I guess I was rescued, woke up and wasn't allowed to search for Yoshiyuki again, so I slapped him out of fury.

I sure have tortured Kogi a lot before… ahaha… no, even now, I still do, but he keeps following me.

But more importantly… how could I forget…?

My reason. My drive to do all of this. My very, very selfish desire to self-destruct. It isn't because I simply don't know anymore… but on that day, I swore to help everyone I see if they need it, for a simple reason, or even for no reason at all. It's not like I do it for them - I do it for my own self-satisfaction, because I don't want to see them suffer, and to reassure myself of my own existence.

When Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki filled the void in my heart, overtaking my dependence to Yoshiyuki, I slowly forget that promise.

Now that I remember… I feel just, slightly, happy.

My past self is right.

I never change much at all. Even when I forget, my body keeps on moving.

How terrifying.

Okay, let's shake off that depressing thought. It'd be bad if either Mikazuki or Kogitsunemaru hear my thoughts… or not. I cut off our connection so that they won't get my fever as well (yes, it's possible, based on experience). I remember that, but my mind is a bit messy.

Well, I've just woken up from a long dream and hazy days.

Nobody is inside my room but me at the moment.
My memory is hazy, but I remember about 3 days have passed since then. I’ve recovered fully just now. I stretch my arms, feeling better than ever. Taking a look at the clock, it's 8 AM now. I wobbly stand up (after 3 days being pampered, walking around alone again feels weird) and open the curtains and windows when the door creaks open.

"Yamanbagiri… good morning."

I turn around, finding Kogitsunemaru smiling warmly to me.

I nod. "Good morning, Kogi."

"How are you feeling?" He asks, approaching me. He is holding a tray with plates and medicine and puts it on the desk before he places his palm on my forehead. "Your fever has gone down. I'm glad."

"Yeah. I feel a lot better now, thanks."

I stare at him intently, taking some strands of his hair on my fingers. White and silky as ever. Touching him always feels comforting, and it never fails to make me calm. He looks at me in confusion, but lets me to play around with his hair and touching his ears. Now that I'm back to the present, Kogitsunemaru… looks a bit different than before. He is a lot more aggressive, but is openly cute.

We’ve come a long way.

By the way, I regularly cut his hair during summer after that.

I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my face on his chest. He just strokes my head silently.

Even though he - and Mikazuki - has pampered me for 3 days full, I feel like… I miss this touch. This warmth. This comfort.

"Yamanbagiri. I'd like to hug you all day, but you have to have breakfast and drink medicine first."

"Oh. Yeah."

I sit on my bed when Kogitsunemaru takes the tray and puts it next to me. Of course, my breakfast is porridge. He takes a spoon and takes the bowl, taking some porridge on the spoon and blows it before he offers it to me. "Open your mouth."

"Mm."

I open my mouth and let the spoon enters my mouth, gobbling down the porridge. It's delicious… as expected from Brother Horikawa.

Ah. Come to think of it….

"Where's Brother Horikawa and Mikazuki?" I ask as I let go of him.

"They're speaking with Yamabushi-san downstairs."

I feel cold all of sudden, even though it's a warm morning. "…Brother Yamabushi is here?"

"He just came home."

I'm about to jump from the bed, but Kogitsunemaru grabs me before I can run.
"You don't have to go there and talk. Leave it to the two of them. I know... you're angry at Yamabushi-san for being late, aren't you?" he says solemnly, his grip around my wrist tightens. "Because, if he isn't late, maybe all of this pain... won't have had to happen. And oh, I'm sure you're not thinking about yourself, but about Kashuu and Yoshiyuki."

I grit my teeth.

"Mikazuki and Horikawa-san are angry as well, for your sake and everyone else's. Let them do the talking. You should rest, Yamanbagiri."

"I'm sure Brother has his reasons like always, but... but..."

Seeing the pain and injuries both Kashuu and Yoshiyuki had to go through... seeing how hopeless I was....

The only one who could truly help them was Brother Yamabushi, a full-fledged specialist. I'm lost without him, and I don't have other people's contacts other than Kousetsu-senpai, who is still in training. He couldn't do much... and so, this happened.

All of this.

"Both of them are fine. I heard that Kashuu got a fever as well, but his condition is getting better. It's all right, Yamanbagiri. Nobody is at fault for this outcome. It's a happy ending," Kogitsunemaru says gently, his fingers reaching for mine.

"...Yeah..."

I nod and painfully continue to eat.

I want to know why Brother didn't come without any message, that's all... well, I'll know later, so it's fine. I don't want to snap at him, so I have to calm myself down.

"Let's take a bath together, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says after I finished breakfast. "You haven't taken a proper bath in days, after all."

"Ahaha...yeah. How embarrassing."

After we take off our clothes, we step into the bathroom. The bathtub is already filled with hot water. Oh my, Kogitsunemaru has planned all of this....

"Do you want me to rub your back... and everything else?" he asks, his fingers trailing my back. That tickles, although I know his intention is to tease me in another way. I see him grinning.

Sly fox.

I chuckle. "I don't think I've ever cleaned myself alone since you guys became my lovers. I don't mind, though. Make sure you massage me."

"Okay, okay. A special service for Yamanbagiri."

After he washes me clean plus giving a pretty good massage for my tired body (no other stuff happened), as usual, Kogitsunemaru washes himself while I get into the bathtub, staring lazily at him. When he finishes, he just waits for me to get out of the bathtub. Of course, this is how the usual days go on.

"Kogi, this is an order. Get into the bathtub with me."
"Huh?"

I put my hand on the edge of the bathtub and scoot closer to him. He is sitting pretty close to the bathtub, after all. I tilt my head, staring at him, trying to be as cute as possible. "Come, Kogi."

It works; he groans unhappily, cheeks red.

"Ungh… just this once, okay?"

Kogitsunemaru reluctantly stands up and enters the bathtub after I get to the other side. The water splashes us and I see him flinching. It's not like he absolutely can't enter a big puddle, he is just somewhat afraid of it. However, when I ask him nicely, he won't be able to refuse and gives in, especially after I got ill like that. He'll pamper me all the way.

The way he wants to grant whatever I wish was worse before we dated. It reached the level of creepy one time.

Ahaha, I'm glad he can't read my mind now. He'd cry if he heard me.

"Ehehe." I can't help but to smile as I lean to his chest. Since it's wet, it feels a bit weird to my bare back, but over the time, I get accustomed to it. Skinship with them feels like breathing, completely normal. "This is nice."

He wraps his arms around my waist while sighing. "I really like to hug you, but in water… no…."

"You won't die or anything, really."

"I know that, but it's really uncomfortable for my tail…."

"Even shower will make it look weird." I giggle. "It's a pain to dry even your tail, huh?"

"Yeah… but I have to in order to keep it in high quality," he replies proudly.

"I wonder what'll happen if you let your fur in water for hours?"

"I don't even want to imagine that, please! Don't torture me like that!"

"Hmm… maybe I'll cut your tail someday. I'm sure it'll grow back."

I feel dark aura behind me appearing all of sudden. "Do that and I'll tickle you… like this!" He moves his hands, tickling my stomach. It's nothing sensual, thankfully, but remember, I'm extremely ticklish.

"W-Wa-ahaha! Kogi, stop, that's illegal! Take this - ears attack!" I pinch his ear and rub it wildly.

"Anything but that!!"

After a few more bickering and splashing water like children, we finally finished bathing and wear our clothes. I help Kogitsunemaru to dry his tail with a hairdryer. Those actions in bath actually make me kind of dizzy, but holding Kogitsunemaru's fur is enough to make me calm down.

I kind of want to clean his ears now that I remember our first time doing that. It happens regularly now, after all. Now that I look back at it, he must've be dying when I did that to him….

And… about Yoshiyuki. Don't tell me he was jealous of Kogitsunemaru, so he wanted me to clean his ears as well? That's… possible.
I was far too oblivious because our skinship is on a really high level even as friends.

Kogitsunemaru's tail dries quickly and I get cotton swab, sit next to him and pat my lap.

"Let me clean your ears, Kogi. Come here."

"You look excited. What is it, all of sudden?" Kogitsunemaru asks, but he rests his head on my lap anyway.

"I had a dream of 2 years ago, when I did this to you for the first time."

"Oh… that's embarrassing." He smiles wryly as I put cotton swab inside his ear.

"I realized I tortured you so badly with my irresponsible actions and wishes."

"Ah-ahaha-ha… that's true. But it just makes me fall in love even deeper with you. I like how oblivious and caring you are," he says. I take that as a compliment or now. "And now that we're together, I have no regrets. Everything is good with you, Yamanbagiri."

"Mmh. Thanks for sticking with me all these years, Kogitsunemaru."

"No problem. In fact, I should be sorry because I basically stalked you….

"You finally said it."

Kogitsunemaru groans in displeasure.

"Oh my? While I was having a hot talk, the two of you were flirting around, I see."

The door creaks open and Mikazuki steps inside, wearing a tired smile.

"Good morning, Mikazuki."

"Good morning, Yamanbagiri. I see you're fine now… and you've just taken a bath."

How can he tell that just by seeing me? I just nod.

"Thank you for taking care of me the past few days, Mikazuki. Earlier too."

Mikazuki sits next to me, kisses my cheek before he rests his head on my shoulder. "You're welcome."

"Do you want me to clean your ears too?"

"I'll take that offer. Later, then."

At this point, cleaning their ears is comforting for me. When I don't want to play games or read books, I can do this to comfort myself. They like it, so it's a win-win situation, full of happiness. I heard that this kind of ear cleaning… especially when someone rests their head on the other's lap… is a romantic situation. I always feel flustered when I remember that, but now we're true lovers. This is a good way to spend time together.

…Though that means another thing when I did it with Yoshiyuki.

Aaaah, he keeps on coming to my mind… my heart is about to explode.

"How is it, Mikazuki?" Kogitsunemaru asks all of sudden. Yeah, they can't read my mind now, so
they can't comment on every single thing I think… but I'm sure they know I'm thinking of Yoshiyuki, even a bit. Brother Yamabushi is also a problem, though….

"What to say… it's a bit hard to describe, honestly," Mikazuki sighs, his hand is resting on my waist for some reason. "As expected, Yamabushi-san had a tough job to do. He has bandages all over his body. Some still has blood spots."

"R-Really?" Whoa, I feel bad for getting angry now… so there's no way I can blame him like this. It's stupid and pointless, but my emotion screams to get angry.

"Yes. He immediately apologized for being unable to help and promised that he'll resolve Kashuu's incident. He'll be the bridge to other specialists."

"I see…." It ends so simply. Of course. "Where is he now?"

"He took off to visit Kashuu."

"I can't even see him, huh…." Mikazuki pats my head. "I'm sure he'll come back soon. You can see him then."

"Yeah…." I miss him. It has been a while since the last time I saw him… and heard his voice. I have a feeling that I won't be able to see for a long time in the future, somehow… it makes me sad. That possibility is high. Brother is busy.

Ugh, let's not think of depressing things. I should focus on my lovers for now. They've taken care of me the most while I was ill.

"Okay, Kogi, turn around and let me do your other ear."

"Can I push you, Kogitsunemaru, so that I'll immediately get my turn?" Mikazuki says, his hand is already on the position to push Kogitsunemaru away.

"Don't! Especially not when the cotton swab is inside my ear!"

"Be patient, Mikazuki."

He sulks and mumbles incoherent words under his breath.

Mikazuki got a lot more honest and cute as well. I feel so blessed.

.

After all of the pampering and slapping Mikazuki away from my body (he clung like a leech, for god's sake), I go downstairs, Kogitsunemaru trailing behind me with the tray of empty bowls. Brother Horikawa rarely visits my room whenever Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are inside, for, umm, you know… private reasons. He is being considerate. I peeked on his room earlier, but he wasn't there, so he must be downstairs. Mikazuki said he has nothing to do now after all.

Sure enough, I see him on the sofa, watching morning news.

"Good morning, Brother."
"Good morning," Brother Horikawa replies with a smile. I can see that he is tired. "How are you? Is it fine for you to walk around?"

"Yeah, I feel a lot better already. Thanks."

"I'll wash the dishes, so you can just relax, Horikawa-san," Kogitsunemaru says, quickly walking to the kitchen.

He wants us to have a brotherly time, it seems. But I've already heard what I want to know last night… Oh well. I sit next to him after I make a cup of hot tea for myself, blowing on the steam and sipping it carefully.

"I heard… Brother Yamabushi was here."

"Yes. He just went out. He checked on you before you woke up, by the way."

"Oh…” Well, of course he did.

"Really, when I saw his condition… full of bandages, but keeps on smiling and standing anyway… I feel like your similarities with him are far too much, Brother," he laughs dryly. "Blood is thick, after all."

"Ahaha…” I fidget awkwardly.

"Honestly, the two of you never fail to make me worried… ."

"Sor - oops."

Brother Horikawa smiles, looking at me. "Remember to not apologize."

"Yeah, that was close." I shift my body to get a more comfortable sitting position and turns to see him. "So, uh… what did he say? Mikazuki only told me a little… like he apologized and will resolve Kashuu's incident. I thought it's mostly resolved already, but I guess a jubokko that turns people into vampires has something to be looked further into."

"Mm. He said that as well. The specialists still have to take care of Kiyomitsu-san and observe his condition for a few weeks. Brother Yamabushi volunteered to do it and other jobs about the case… like he feels he is responsible for it."

"He is just a workaholic. If Kashuu can go to school, I can monitor him as well. I'll make sure to tell Brother that when he comes home."

"Shh, you're also quite the workaholic, Brother. Don't you know that?" He chuckles.

I cross my arms, not feeling really nice about it. "Uuuh… I guess I am."

Brother Horikawa takes inhales and exhales before he speaks up, "Are you… going to be a specialist, Brother?"

"W-What is this, all of…?" uh, not so sudden, though. That question has been asked many times by him and others. "…I still don't know. I think… there's a high chance of me becoming one, though."

"You can't just ignore people in need, after all. Brother is so kind."

"N-Not really…” It's always hard for me to take compliments like this. I've never considered myself as a good person. In fact, I'm not one. "So, what about it, Brother? Why did you suddenly ask me
that question?"

"Brother Yamabushi asked…" he furrows his brows, looking downcast. "He is worried about you, so he wanted to know if you want to become one. He is reluctant to let you keep doing this, you see, but if you say firmly that you want to become a specialist, then he would offer help and protection - even when he is away, the others in his group will help without objections. If you keep on going, there's a high chance that the danger will raise as well. You'll have a hard time without their help."

That's true….

I've been doing as I pleased all these years. I know some specialists are pissed at me, stealing their work like that. Even in a hidden community, they have legal trainings and certificates. Being a specialist has its own set of rules to be followed if you want to join, and members of the group have to approve you. Not everyone can become specialist and freely help people. Not all priests are specialists. Shrine maidens as specialists are even rarer.

But… do I want to become a specialist? Do I want to live like Brother Yamabushi?

I remember that question was asked 2 years ago as well.

After all of these years, my answer is still I don't know, as pathetic as it is.

"I really… don't know, Brother. All I know is that I want to help people."

Lies. I just want to seek comfort in myself, so that I won't feel regret ever again. Because I'm indecisive, if I don't make decision right here right now, I'll just run away without any answer, and later wanting to do it - but it's already too late. It's stupid of me, so I must not think and waver. Just do what my mind tells me at that moment.

All for my selfishness.

If people can be happy, I'll do anything. I'll be happy as well.

…I'm glad I haven't connected my mind to Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's yet. I can see them slapping me if I do. Thinking of this behind my lovers' back… I feel disgusted towards myself. I just keep piling on sins, don't I? And now that I remember my real reason, I have to consciously try to not think of it so that they won't find out.

Life is hard.

"I expect that answer. That's fine. You can take the time to think about it carefully. But, never forget, Brother…" Brother Horikawa suddenly embraces me, his hand patting my back gently, "you have us to help you anytime, so don't worry about anything. We'll accept any answer you give and support you, okay? Even if you don't want it now, I'm sure the specialists will help you anyway. I think you're already a part of them."

I feel warmth spreading in my chest.

It feels nice, but also painful at the same time.

Kindness hurts, and I understand that grimly.

"…Thank you, Brother…"

Brother Horikawa releases my body and smiles warmly… until a shadow is cast on his face. "And
don't forget to contact me for updates. I'll pinch your ears if you don't contact me like Brother Yamabushi always does."

How terrifying! That smile is a devil's smile!

"Y-Yes, Brother. Of course. I'll keep that in mind."

Brother Yamabushi comes home before dinner.

"Welcome back, Brother." I greet him immediately, as I was watching TV in living room.

"I'm home."

Brother Yamabushi smiles at me.

I feel nostalgic seeing that. It feels like forever since the last time I see him. Just like Kogitsunemaru said, he has bandages on all over his body, such as his arms. How worrying….

"Dinner is coming," I say, walking to the living room.

He nods and follows me, before putting his ever-ragged bag on the sofa. The two of us sit on the sofa while Kogitsunemaru helps Brother Horikawa cooking, and Mikazuki is reading a novel on another sofa.

Having no idea what to say, I go straight to the point. "Did you go to see Kashuu, Brother?"

"Yes." Brother nods.

"How is he?"

"He is conscious now, and his fever has gone down. Just like you."

"What about… his vampiric state or whatever?"

Brother Yamabushi takes off his white bandana and ruffles his hair. "Unfortunately, I'm not entirely sure yet, but… he retains some fangs, and I can feel faint bloodlust from him. That's all. We decided to observe him for now, in case he gets better or even worse."

"I see…"

I'm glad he sounds alright… for now.

"I've heard the entire story from Yoshiyuki, Brother."

"Mm…."

"I understand your feelings, and you know the consequences well, so I won't scold you. I'm sure Brother Horikawa and other people had done that."

"Ahaha… yeah…."
"You can be reckless, but what happened in this case is out of everyone's predictions. What's important is that you and everyone else made it out alive with no grave injuries. That's the best outcome, especially for an amateur like you."

"Yeah…"

Brother Yamabushi pats my head roughly, but it's warm. He smiles widely. "You've done well, Brother. Thank you. I'm sorry I couldn't be there when you need it."

"Mm… it's fine. It can't be helped." I look at him, staring at his bandages. "You've had it rough as well."

"Kakaka, this is nothing. I'm very sturdy, Brother, but you aren't."

"I'm pretty sure I'm sturdy enough. I've been stabbed on the stomach and then got punched on the same spot in the span of a few days, you know."

"Kakakaka! Experience makes you stronger. That's good."

"Being stabbed isn't, though….."

Brother Yamabushi smiles warmly. "Have you heard my offer from Brother Horikawa?"

I nod.

"Just take your time to think. I'm still a bit reluctant on letting you go and become what I am, but… I have to admit you got a knack in it, Brother. I can see that you'll be even better than me and other old specialists."

"T-That's an exaggeration, really… but thanks."

"If it's your decision and fate to go down that path, I'll support you all the way." Brother clenches a fist and offers it to me.

Huh? Don't tell me this is….

"Brother, since when are you up-to-date to trends?"

"Hey, this is a pretty old thing, isn't it? Come on."

I chuckle and clench a fist, knocking his fist with mine.

"Thank you, Brother."

I'm really glad I have such supportive brothers… and of course, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, and… Yoshiyuki.

Without them, I might not come this far. No, I might not have any intention on surviving, and just choose to self-destruct.

Now, at least, I have a will to live. A reason to live.

For them.

And for those who need and seek help.
I stand frozen in the hallway just in front of my class' door. It's early morning.

Damn, I'm nervous… being absent for so many days feel actually great, so to come here again is… ugh….

"Come on, Yamanbagiri. You've missed so many lessons. You can do it!" Kogitsunemaru says, pumping a fist.

I know that, b-but… Yoshiyuki….

"I'm sure he'll act the same. He's good at acting. Well, he might distance himself from you a bit, but that's all," Mikazuki says. "Besides, he can't be here this early."

Y-Yeah… that's right. Calm down, me. I slide open the door. I nervously look around the classroom, finding that there's only one person there, cleaning the blackboard and putting chalks on their place. He turns around to see me.

"Good morning, Yamanbagiri. It feels like a long time since we last meet."

"Oh… Hasebe. Good morning."

He didn't look surprised or particularly happy. Just flat.

Indeed, it feels like forever. So many things have happened.

"You caught a cold, didn't you? I was planning on visiting you today if you didn't show up, so it's good to see you now. Well, don't force yourself. Just go to the infirmary if you're still not feeling well."

"Yeah…" I walk to my desk and sit there. "Can I borrow your notes from when I was absent?"

Hasebe claps his hands, brushing away any dust that's left from chalk. "Already thinking to get notes, huh. Sure, go ahead. But why not use Yoshiyuki's?"

Ack. Did I flinch when Yoshiyuki's name is mentioned? I didn't, right? "Your notes are way more readable."

"I see. His handwriting is a mess, that's for sure." He walks up to his desk and takes out a few notebooks, handing it to me. "Here's the important notes that'll be used today. I'll take photos of the other notes and send it to you later… if everything goes well. Did you do the homework?"

_If everything goes well?_ What does that mean? I can't ask that now, though.

"Yeah, I did. Thanks."

Of course I _did_ it. Not only he sent me photos of the questions, he gave me the answers as well, and went further by explaining things I'm confused about. My brain was too tired to think, so I just
copied his answers. Lifesaver.

I immediately jolt down the notes. Man, there's plenty of English notes already… this teacher's a sadist, to be honest.

While I'm busy writing, Hasebe takes a seat on the chair in front of me and stares at me with lazy eyes. He tends to be like this, just observing and watching, but he'll get bored soon… or not! Minutes have passed in awkward silence and I feel his gaze stabbing me.

"Umm… Hasebe? Your stare is a bit annoying. It's uncomfortable."

"That's so direct it hurts."

"Your face says otherwise."

He smirks, a hand on his chin. "I have nothing better to do, so let me stare at you. No, I don't think you have any way to stop me from staring, so I don't need permission to do so."

"Haah… that's true. Whatever."

"Oh. Yamanbagiri, you wrote this wrong."

"Ah. Thanks."

"It's rare of you to make a typo."

"I'm a human too. And you know English isn't my forte…." Even though this story is in English, it's just automatic translation from Japanese of this world, so I'm not good at English. Not at all.

"Hmm. Are you sure you're already healthy enough to study?" Hasebe says, suddenly leaning forward, brushing away my bangs with his hand and puts his forehead onto mine. "Your temperature seems normal."

….Eh?

What is this?

Umm… is his forehead… touching mine? Oh, this is hot, but also a bit cold. Yeah, it's touching me. His forehead is really wide… it's a compliment. Uh, is this the feel of his nose…? Hmm, his eyes are really sharp. It's a bit scary sometimes.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait.

Isn't this way too…

"?! Too close, too close!!"

"Oh."

After I register what happened, I back off immediately, my hands pushing the desk, but the momentum almost throws me to the floor. I manage to hold on the desk and carefully fix my position before screaming in disbelief.

"W-What were you doing?!"

Hasebe just calmly brushes his bangs with his fingers and stares at me with eyes judging that I'm
weird. "Checking your temperature, of course."

"There are better ways to do it! And at least warn me first… that was dangerous. What if our lips meet or something?"

He blinks a few times before replying in certainty. "I don't mind if it's you."

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

*Yamanbagiri_Kunihiro.exe has encountered an error.*

*Retry*

*Loading…*

My mind goes dizzy all of sudden. What happened? Did Hasebe just… seriously say that? *About kissing? That it's fine if it's with me?!* It's obviously not normal for him to say such things. Who is this? Is that really Hasebe or his duplicate? Did my cold reach him somehow?

Uh, my head is kinda spinning… how the heck am I supposed to reply to that?

Hasebe stares at me, furrowing his brows. "What's with you today? I'm just joking."

"Ah… oh."

Yeah, *of course* he is joking! There's no way he wants to kiss me!

"Geez, you surprised me," I grumble unhappily. "I almost thought your mind is corrupted or something if you're serious."

"Mm. I guess your blushing face is cute."

…Did I blush earlier?

More importantly, that *cute* whatever has passed its expiration date. "Hasebe, I think you need some checkup on your head. Some parts might be malfunctioning. I'm sure there are spare parts that can replace the broken ones."

He frowns. "I'm not a robot."

"Just saying."

"I'm not joking… for the last part, you know."

I have no idea if he is being sincere or not. His face tells me that he is enjoying this situation. It doesn't feel really good for me, you know.

"That tease has passed its expiration date, Hasebe."

"There's no expiration date for that."

"There is. I created it just now."
"It is a fact, not a tease."

"I'm sure you have the intention to tease me."

The two of us glare at each other, having no intention to back down. Perhaps there's a spark between us in visual form. We keep staring at each other until Hasebe pulls down my hood and in an instant ruffles my hair.

"Hey!"

He smirks. "Now that's what I call a tease."

I brush my hair with my fingers before pulling up the hood again. "You devil."

"I've been promoted in your eyes, I see."

"Just… let me write this thing, please. Don't bother me."

"Okay."

Silence falls upon us. Finally. Even Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are quiet. Oh, they've come back inside me without my notice… I guess I'm really still a bit dizzy.

Seriously, Hasebe is being extremely weird today. I'm a bit terrified.

But… it's not bad. I can forget Yoshiyuki when we were talking earlier. Even though the mention of kiss should make me remember him, I forgot him only for that moment out of embarrassment. As you can see, I remember him well now, for better or worse.

I've wasted 3 days without thinking of anything.

I have to think carefully about my feelings and answer now.

…What is this feeling on my skin? Oh.

"Hasebe, why are you poking my hand?"

"Your left hand is free. I'm bored."

I heave a sigh and just let him do whatever he wants as I continue to write. Just a bit more and I'll be done. "You're the one being weird today, you know."

"I know."

He falls silent and just pokes my hand again, before his hand slowly slides on top of mine. It's as if he's reluctant or scared of something, the slowness makes me flinch. It tickles. He finally settles on the position like when you're holding a computer mouse.

Okay, this isn't the first time he plays with my hand like this, so I don't feel really uncomfortable.

I know it's weird for us, normal friends, to do this. I've… done this a lot of times with Yoshiyuki, of course, because we're closer friends. Hasebe is further away than Yoshiyuki for me… but I don't mind, we're quite close as well.

Skinship is but a way of communication. I think it's an important thing to keep one's relationship close. Gestures also, of course, show closeness and how open one is to the other.
I think it's a good thing.

…Not when Hasebe rests his head on my desk and just slumps, though. He seems… gloomy.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"…It's nothing."

"I know it isn't."

"Just… let me rest for a bit."

He doesn't want to tell me for now. That's fine. I pat his hair with my right hand when his hand slides to hold my left hand, not only resting on it, his thumb stroking my skin. Whoa. So intimate. I'm embarrassed… because of Yoshiyuki, I'm more self-conscious of this kind of skinship now, even with someone other than him. Is this what normal friends really do? Sometimes I wonder about that, but if it brings comfort for him, then there's no problem.

I continue to write until the door slides open and more students come in. That's when Hasebe releases his grip, but keeps resting his head on my desk.

I'm sure other people will take it as he is in a bad mood. Indeed he is, but it's more like he is under the weather.

"Here, Hasebe. I'm done, thanks."

I pat his head with his notebook. He takes it, lifting his face.

"No problem." He brushes his bangs and looks at me, pausing. "Say, Yamanbagiri -"

"Aaah!! Yamanbagiri!!"

With that voice, someone steps closer in a disturbing speed to my desk. I turn around and see Yamato with sparkling eyes, standing… next to me already?!

"Good morning, Yamato."

Hasebe greets him as well. "Good morning."

"Yamanbagiri…" Yamato's eyes get teary all of sudden. "I'm so worried! I'm so glad you look okay…"

"Mm. Thank you."

Yamato smiles widely before going to his desk and puts his bag there. He comes back with, his face looks completely happy, and it seems he like he is hopping to me.

"Say, want to go somewhere after school? To celebrate Yamanbagiri's recovery," he suggests.

"No, there's no need for -"

"Sounds good to me," Hasebe replies. Looks like he and Yamato are getting closer when I was away. That's good, but it's not good to cut me off.

They stare at me, seemingly intent on doing it. How can I not give in under this pressure?! "Uh… okay."
"Hmm… there aren't many places to hang out here," Yamato mumbles.

"Arcade maybe?" I suggest. "Oh wait, Hasebe isn't that kind of person…"

Hasebe blinks a few times and looks at me, "I don't mind tagging along with you."

"What's the fun in doing that?"

"I'd have fun watching you. And maybe if there are crane games, I can get something…"

Yeaaaah, Hasebe is 100% being weird today.

"Don't look at me like that, both of you," he frowns, looking disappointed, "Even I can play crane games."

"No, um, that's not the problem here…"

Besides, most crane games only have dolls and the likes. You want a doll? I'm too scared to ask that, unfortunately.

Hasebe crosses his arms and grumbles, "Well, arcade is the last resort for me. Let's hear other options."

Yamato awkwardly chuckles before he clears his throat and suggests, "Okaay, then… a cafe, maybe?"

"That's okay for me."

"Me too," Hasebe says. "Let's choose the place when Yoshiyuki arrives."

I flinch hearing his name. Ugh… it'd be awkward for us to even sit close to each other. I'm not sure how to act in this kind of situation. I wonder if Yoshiyuki will come…?

"I have a good place in mind. It's cheap, too," Yamato says, waving around a finger. He looks so proud.

"The cheaper, the better."

Hasebe nods, agreeing to my words. "Yamanbagiri will treat us if we don't have enough money."

"Deal."

"Wait, the person in question never agreed to it!" I say. My face must be pale now. I don't have that much pocket money to begin with, and I'm still saving up to buy Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's modern clothes…!

And, umm, please don't ask me why I haven't bought them some clothes when we've been living together for two years. It just that… I bought so many games, comics, and merchandises that I had no time and money to even consider buying them clothes… ahahaha… ha…………………. and they look good in their normal outfit anyway, warm and soft. There's the fact that things were messy before, too.

As if my rejection is unheard, Hasebe looks at the watch on his wrist. "Hm… I'm sure Yoshiyuki will be late."

Another flinch.
"Yeah, it's already this late. Let's talk during break time, then," Yamato says, looking around the now packed classroom. He frowns seeing Kashuu's empty seat.

And just like that, the bell rings.

Yoshiyuki steps into the class two seconds after that. But he is safe, so he drags himself to his desk and drinks water before teacher comes. Barely safe as usual. I can't help but to stare at him, and when homeroom is starting, he looks at my way... and our eyes meet.

He just shoots me a wry smile.

I turn away, unable to look at his eyes.

"So, Yoshiyuki, we're going to a cafe after school to celebrate Yamanbagiri's long recovery! What about it?" Yamato doesn't go around the bush as soon as he sits on chair, placing the tray of food on the table. "Do you want to come?"

"Oh! Food..." Yoshiyuki looks excited, but his face soon turns sour. "I don't have much money on me, though... I'm broke, thanks to all of the games released."

"Yamanbagiri will treat us," Hasebe says.

"I never agreed to it!"

"Don't bully Yamanbagiri like that, Hasebe~! Ahaha... too bad, I have another plan, so I have to skip."

"Is that so? Aw..." Yamato looks sad.

I wonder if Yoshiyuki is being considerate. I feel uncomfortable already having him sat across me. Yeah, Hasebe is next to me today. He took the seat next to me after I sit, so it looks natural... I hope.

"I don't mind if ya buy something for me and give it the next day. A cake, maybe!" Yoshiyuki says with a smile.

He can act like he always does, it's amazing... but I feel even more disturbed because of it. He acts normal, but at the same time, he is keeping his distance. Sometimes I find myself staring at him and he stares back with a sad look.

"No way, the cake would taste bad already," Yamato says, crossing fingers making an X shape.

"Really? I put cakes in fridge every time," Hasebe comments before eating his lunch.

"That's blasphemy to cakes! What's so good eating freezing cold cake?!"

"Umm... the coldness?" I speak up, trying to act normal and follow the conversation.

"You guys are heretics!" Yamato says agitatedly, his face twists into something scary and dictator-like. He points at us one by one, including Yoshiyuki.

"Hey, I'm innocent!" Yoshiyuki protests.
"Those who say nothing are as guilty as the others."

"What kind of dictator are you?" Hasebe grumbles.

As the silly talk continues, I feel how much they've grown closer in the past few days. It's a bit surprising, but Hasebe might just click with the considerate Yamato, and Yoshiyuki is obviously getting along well with everyone since he is a natural.

It's a noisy lunch time, but I don't hate it.

Because it's warm and nice.

Still, there's this awkward aura between me and Yoshiyuki. I hope the other two don't notice it.

"I want to eat, too…" Kogitsunemaru says in a tearful voice, "I want a waffle… a pancake… a cake….

That's a lot of expensive food! I'll get the two of you some food, but not everything in your list, Kogi. Don't worry, it'll still be delicious. What will you guys do when I'm with them?

"Just like usual. Waiting," Mikazuki says, smiling.

"It's not like we want to part ways from you," Kogitsunemaru adds. "Who will protect you if something happen?"

Don't jinx it, I've just recovered!

"Well then, have fun, Yamanbagiri." Mikazuki waves his hand before vanishing, and Kogitsunemaru follows. Honestly, though, they're rather quiet today. It's not a bad thing, of course. It's not like they can jab in and punch me in the gut every time.

"Yamanbagiri? What are you doing?" Hasebe says, noticing me still freezing on my seat while everyone else has gone. He approaches me and forcefully pulls my hand and forces me to stand up, although it doesn't hurt. "Let's go."

"Y-Yeah."

He releases his hand from mine before we step out of the classroom where Yamato is waiting for us. Oh, there's Yoshiyuki too. Uh-oh. Uuhh.

We walk to the gate together and part ways with him there.

The cafe Yamato mentioned is a bit far away from the school, as it's inside the shopping district. The cafe is pretty small. The building looks like the fancy cafes you'd see in Western movies. When I step inside, the interior is as I expected, comfy and brown, with a few plants here and there, and a few paintings. A bit retro-like. The waitress leads us to a table and give us menus. The menu looks simple, but gives off an RPG feel somehow. Maybe because of the yellow-brown paper color and the style, and of course, the music that is echoing inside the building.

A calm and comforting BGM of a RPG; I get that feel, somehow.

I sit between Yamato and Hasebe in the round table, with an empty chair between the two.
"Ooh, this is quite cheap," I say, looking at the price tags.

"The food is good and fulfilling. Trust me," Yamato says.

"Hmm… there're many good selections, I have a hard time deciding," Hasebe says, staring intently at the menu.

After we decide on what we'll eat, we order the food and drinks. We've had lunch, so we have light meals and desserts. I kind of expected this, but Yamato orders chocolate pudding. Hasebe orders sandwich. I order 3 slices of red velvet cakes - one for myself and the other 2 for Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru.

I'm sure Mikazuki will like Japanese sweets more, but this cafe doesn't have it.

Of course, Yamato and Hasebe think that I'm buying these for my brothers. The truth is, both of them don't really like sweets like cakes. When it comes to snack, they prefer salty ones. They can't stand red velvet cakes at all.

"This place is nice," Hasebe says, closing the menu book after ordering. He looks around the cafe.

"Right? It looks like an expensive cafe but it actually isn't. It's a good place to hang out. There's free wifi too," Yamato replies excitedly.

"Do you often come here? I'm a bit envious. All I do with… Yoshiyuki… is playing games." Oh no, I messed up when saying his name. I hope they don't notice it.

"Yeah. Kashuu has extensive knowledge on hangout places."

"Where is he now? He has been gone even longer than Yamanbagiri."

Yamato looks a bit troubled, because he can't mention a thing about oddities, so he has to pretend that Kashuu is absent because of fever. "Ah… I just got a message from him. He said he can go to school… either tomorrow or the next 2 days."

"That's good."

"It seems fever is in the run now. Many people are absent in the past few days, even though the weather is good," Hasebe says, sighing, a hand on his chin. "You should be careful, Yasusada. And this Yamanbagiri might spread it to us….""

"I won't, I'm healed already."

Yamato chuckles. "Both Yamanbagiri and Kashuu missed so much lessons."

"I feel doomed." I sigh. Catching up is always a bothersome thing. "Can you give me notes? Other than English."

"Me? Or Yasusada?" Hasebe asks.

"Either one is fine, I don't mind. Both of you are diligent students, I'm sure your notes are neat and complete."

"Okay… Hasebe!"

Yamato clenches a fist. Hasebe nods and does the same. What are they going to do?
"Rock, paper, scissors!"

Yamato's hand is a scissor while Hasebe's... also a scissor. It's a draw.

Oh.

Oooh.

The simplest way to solve a dispute... but is that a dispute in the first place? I mean, they can just split up giving me the notes. Well, that might be bothersome as well, so this is the quickest way to decide.

"Two more times. Rock, paper, scissors!"

Yamato's is paper while Hasebe's is scissor. Hasebe grins. One win for him.

"Last one...."

Yamato's hand opens a paper again while Hasebe's hand is... ooh, a rock. Another draw.

"One more time. Rock, paper, scissors!"

His hand is a scissor while Hasebe's hand is a rock.

It's Hasebe's win.

Yamato slumps on his chair while Hasebe smiles bubbly. He turns his head to me and says, with a very creepy smile that sends shiver down my spine, "I'll take photos tonight and send them to you."

"Okay. Thanks."

I turn way to see Yamato. He looks so depressed and devastated for some reason. I wonder why...?

"Excuse me...."

Just then, our orders come. That's pretty quick. The waiter puts our orders on the table, including drinks and my take away red velvet.

The striking red color of red velvet looks delicious. Whoa.

Yamato looks ecstatic seeing the big pudding.

"That pudding is cheap, but look at the size," Hasebe comments, as bewildered as I am.

"Yes! It's great!" Yamato adds. "Usually, pudding in restaurants and cafes are small or medium-sized. But look at this magnificent pudding... aah, heaven...."

"Well, it's certainly big for one person to have." I chuckle.

Yamato can withstand such sweetness. That's cool. I'd just get sick if I eat that much sweet chocolate.

"Too bad Yoshiyuki isn't here," Yamato says, taking a piece of pudding and munches it down. "I wonder what's up with him today. He seems... a bit weird."

"Since a few days ago, actually. While Yamanbagiri was still away."
"Really?" I raise a question.

"He might be just way too worried about you," Hasebe continues.

"I see…"

"He looks a bit down today, though," Yamato says.

"He might not be feeling well," Hasebe says before sipping his ice tea.

"Might be… even though he'll recover if he eats delicious food."

"I'm sure he'll just eat too much that his stomach gets hurt," I conclude. "He knows that, so he refrains from going today."

No. I know that he is avoiding me… because he wants me to think about my answer thoroughly. He doesn't want me to escape. He wants an answer, no matter how painful it might be. He gives me a space to think… to remind me that everything isn't all right. Something will change no matter what.

"Ahaha, you're right."

I'm a bit glad the one to act weird is Yoshiyuki, not me… or at least that's what they think.

Even though I'm sure I act far more awkward than he does.

I know I can't stay like this, though. I can't let our distance just get wider, until other people realize that we're drifting away from each other. That'd be bad. I have no idea what to answer if someone asks me about that. So… I have to answer, at least by the end of this month. I can't stand being all awkward around him.

But what's my answer? What's my feelings toward him?

I'm still lost.

I don't want to let him slip away from me, that's for sure….

Suddenly, I feel a cold hand touching my forehead.

"Whoa!"

"You're spacing out. What's wrong?" Yamato asks, pulling his hand away from my forehead.

You… "Your temperature seems normal, though."

Geez, what's with these people today? Touching me all of sudden like that….

"It's nothing, really."

"Just tell us if you still aren't feeling well," Hasebe says, stirring up the straw in his cup, "Or do you want me to carry you all the way down again?"

"WHA-"

Why is he mentioning it now?! Look at how shocked Yamato is!

"Carry…?"

"Hase-"
"Yeah," he glances at Yamato, a faint smirk on his face. *What the heck?* "I carried Yamanbagiri before. Once, from third floor to second floor. You know what it's called? Princess carry or something."

"Oh… I see…"

Whoa, whoa, Yamato's face is clearly dark now! He must be thinking we're creepy…!

"Do you have to say that embarrassing secret? Seriously, Hasebe…"

"Hmph."

What's with that reply?!

*You are* even weirder than me today, Hasebe! Even more so than this morning! More than 100% now! I wish I can say that, but Yamato is here with us now. We can't have our usual banter, especially not when I already said it… right? Well, it seems he has something troublesome, so I guess it can't be helped if he acts weird, but please don't drag my embarrassing secrets into this….

Yamato grumpily eats his pudding. "I see, I see. I got a long way to go."

"Long way to what?"

He just smiles as an answer.

Yamato is being weird as well! Just what's happening today? The air feels heavy for some reason now….

"Yamanbagiri, do you want a piece of my pudding?" He suddenly offers with a cheery smile, as if nothing happened. "It's good, you should try it."

"I-I guess I should…"

Just when I'm about to pluck a piece with my spoon, Yamato offers his spoon, a piece of pudding already on it.

"Come on, say aaah."

"T-That's embarrassing… I can feed myself."

*But you didn't refuse Kogitsunemaru yesterday!* Well, he is my lover, we've been together for so long. How many embarrassing things have we done, do you think? Meanwhile, Yamato is just a friend… a pretty new one, on top of that. I guess he's *that* kind of person in friendly acts like Yoshiyuki, who just goes straight across the line when he's comfortable, but still….

"Come on."

That smile is pressing me so hard, just like Brother Horikawa's smile. These people are terrifying, killing someone just by a gentle smile….

"Ngh… okay."

I end up letting the spoon into my mouth, eating the pudding.

"Oooh, it's really good. No wonder you like it so much."
"Ehehehe~"

Just before I can enjoy my own cake, something is shoved to my mouth. Yes, directly to my mouth without warning. It… Its texture is like…. bread? There's tomatoes and meat as well. I munch it down. Mm, delicious.

Hasebe releases the fork from my mouth when I finished eating it.

Eating sandwich with a fork and plate, so elegant. But then again, that sandwich is pretty big. I'd rather eat it with a fork as well.

"How is it?" Hasebe asks.

"It's delicious… though I prefer if you warn me first before shoving it in my mouth."

"Sorry."

I look at his weirdly smug face, and then I see Yamato glaring intently at him. What's with them today? They look fine earlier, so what happened that they act like this now?

"Um… you guys want my cake too…?"

They instantly turn their heads to see me with hopeful eyes. Yamato smiles widely while Hasebe's face just stays flat, but it's obvious that he wants it too.

They're really weird today….

"Okay, here, Hasebe." I slice a piece of cake on my spoon and offer it to Hasebe. He munches it down immediately. I take another one for Yamato and give it to him. The piece of cake is also eaten immediately.

"Mmm, it's good!" Yamato says. "Especially with the crumbs….

"A bit too sweet for me," Hasebe says.

"You're the kind of person that likes salty snacks, then? Blasphemy!" Yamato says, pointing at him with a terrified expression on his face.

"Is everything that not sweet for you is blasphemy?" Hasebe sweats.

"Yes!"

"You'll get diabetes or something someday."

"That's fine!"

"It isn't!"

Huh, they talk normally again. I guess that kind of thing is normal for them? A way of bonding? Well, as long as they're peaceful with each other.

I have fun with the two of them. They have even more silly talks than… Yoshiyuki and I.

Without Yoshiyuki with us, though, it feels off….
*This is still early, but happy new year to everyone! Also Merry Christmas for those who celebrate it, and happy holidays! Thank you for reading and enjoying Miniature Garden until this point. Have a good day.
"Kunihiro-san."

"Oh. Kousetsu-senpai."

I accidentally meet Kousetsu-senpai at the hallway after school when I'm on the way to IT room. Yes, it is rare. The school population is pretty big, you know, and since we're on different grades, we walk around on different floors most of the time.

"Good timing. I forgot to see you yesterday," he says. "Do you have time to talk with me for a bit?"

I nod and take out my smartphone, typing quickly that I'll be late for a bit to the club president before I follow Kousetsu-senpai. I promised to go to club after days not going, so I don't want to get kicked for being late. He'll understand if I'm being called by Kousetsu-senpai, right…? I hope so.

Or not. I can't imagine President being so kind.

Kousetsu-senpai slides open the door to student council room. "Go ahead."

"Excuse me…"

There's nobody but Kousetsu-senpai inside the room. I sit on the sofa while he sits across me.

"Do you want tea, Kunihiro-san?"

"N-No. That's unnecessary. Thank you."

"Okay. So… first of all," he pauses, rummaging something from the bag next to him, and takes out an envelope. He offers it to me. "This is for you, Kunihiro-san."

"This is…?"

Even without asking, I can tell from far away that it contains money.

"Uh, senpai, I don't need-"

"But we insist," he cuts me off with a firm gaze, pushing the envelope further to me. "You've done so many things alone this time, Kunihiro-san. You even put yourself in danger, and we were helpless to prevent that. This is our apology and thanks to you." He bows his head deeply, until his face is covered by his bangs.

"O-Okay… I'll take it." I reluctantly take the envelope from his hand, feeling the weight of quite thick money and shudder.

This isn't the first time they - the group of specialists that know me - paid me for something, and every time, I'd reject it, but ended up taking it since they're so stubborn. I'm grateful for the money, honestly, but I feel kind of bad… I mean, I barely did anything to help the case, and instead caused more trouble by getting kidnapped and injured. Oh well… I can't strongly reject someone else's
kindness, right? And especially not money.

Kousetsu-senpai usually acts as the intermediary between me and these specialists, just like this, giving me information that my brother usually doesn't even give. I feel a bit sorry for having him doing this when he doesn't need to, but the older specialists just order him around… I guess I do feel more comfortable having him around, someone close to my age.

He clears his throat after lifting his head. "Moving on. Have you heard from your brother about Kiyomitsu-san?"

I nod. "Kashuu will come to school next week and I'll have to observe him, yes. His condition is stable for now, but he still has vampire characteristics. He can go out safely in the day, though. It doesn't seem like he seeks blood… yet."

Kousetsu-senpai nods. "I just got a report. The specialists tried to make him drink blood."

"What?!"

Well… considering that's the only way to know for sure… I feel sorry for Kashuu, though.

"Don't worry, it's with his consent."

"Yeah, of course…"

I'm too scared to ask whose blood is sacrificed.

"His body accepted it easily, and although he didn't go into rampage, he said blood tasted nice, and his strength went up. He screamed when he was shoved with talismans. His paper cut injury healed far too quickly in mere minutes."

Hmm…? The direction this conversation is heading to…

"So, in conclusion…?"

"He is… most likely half vampire now. Half jiangshi."

"…T-That's… possible?"

Kousetsu-senpai nods grimly. "Halves aren't unheard of, but they're rare. His case is special, though."

"I see…" I'm a bit bewildered. I pushed out the oddity from Ichigo-senpai before, and many, many others too, so I thought Kashuu would end up the same, but… I guess I was a bit too late to save him…? Heck, what did I even do to help him? I don't remember. Yoshiyuki is an exception, by the way. "Other than the things you've mentioned, Senpai, what else did… that state affect him?"

"We don't know yet for sure, but… we suspect that his lifespan is extended to that half of an actual jiangshi's. He might be somewhat immortal because he regenerates fast and won't die because of an illness, but he will still die from a lethal injury. Kiyomitsu-san already knows this."

So… he'll live longer than humans. Just like Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru.

As people they love around them die, they alone keep on living…

That's sad and lonely.
"I see…"

This is my fault. Because I was far too late, he has to bear this burden… although he isn't completely inhuman, he is still isn't a complete human. I'm sure that's not what he wants. Nobody wants that. Nobody wants to be half inhuman and be doomed to see people around them die.

"Kunihiro-san. None of this is your fault. You've done your best. It's already a miracle that he retains his human side, so please don't blame yourself," Kousetsu-senpai says gently after a long pause, as if he reads my mind… I think it's a normal thing people would've thought of, though. "The other specialists are in awe on what you did, although you don't remember much yourself."

"Mm… yeah."

"You already know this, but for now all you can do is to observe and befriend him."

"Yeah."

I nod a few times to myself.

I've failed to take back Kashuu's normal life. I've created yet another sin, so I have to redeem for it.

"Also, I know this isn't my place to, but…" He pauses, scratching his cheek, looking for words. "… Umm, I accidentally heard your conversation with Mutsunokami-san in that building… from start to finish. I'm sorry."

H-He…heard my conversation with Yoshiyuki in that building?! Don't tell me…

"S-So, Senpai, you heard when Yoshiyuki…"

A faint color of red spreads across his cheeks. "Yes. When he… confessed to you, and kissed you… I-I saw that as well. I'm really sorry. I didn't intend to…." He bows deeply.

That scene appears in my mind, and the sensation of kissing Yoshiyuki comes back. I immediately brush it off.

"N-No, it's fine. It's a public place, after all." I wave my hand around, a bit panicking.

He lifts his head, still blushing. He looks so innocent like this… no, he is innocent, always… I'm getting embarrassed myself! Aaaah!!!

"So, umm… I won't pry, but… if you have anything you want to talk to me about, or just vent about it… I'm here for you, okay? I'll try to help if I can and if you need it, so, um… good luck, Kunihiro-san," Kousetsu-senpai clenches a fist, pumping it in front of his face. "And if you decide date Mutsunokami-san as well, I'm sure it'll work out. I… I'll support you, so…!"

That gesture is so genuine and cute, I'm a bit moved.

"Thank you, Senpai…"

Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru refused to help me in this matter. I can't tell my brothers, either. I have nobody to confide in (how to explain to Hasebe? Will he even accept it?)… so this feels quite nice.

"I'd like to vent, then, but… Presi - I mean Akashi-senpai is waiting for me." And I can see that he is furious. Definitely. My phone had been vibrating all the time while we were talking.
"Oh, club… I see. I'm sorry to take your time."

"It's okay. Thank you so much for your help, Kousetsu-senpai."

"Mmm. See you… oh, wait!"

In erratic movements, he rummages his pocket and takes out his smartphone.

"Um, Tsurumaru-san has been searching for you… but he didn't come to school for the past few days. He asked me to give him your contact when I see you. It seems he wants to talk about something…"

Ahhh, I remember. Yamato said he visited my class when I was away.

"Okay. Give me his ID."

I wonder why I haven't asked Tsurumaru-senpai his contact. I have the other three… I feel kinda bad.

"I'll give you his LINE ID, but he wanted you to call him, so I'll give you his number as well."

"Oh, sure, thank you."

Why does he want to be called? After sending his contact info, Kousetsu-senpai nods and puts away his smartphone, and I take my leave. I open the door and exit the room, waving my hand to him. He is such a good senior… if only president is like him. Mitsutada-senpai is nice, but he can be quite… something.

"You're really loved, aren't you, Yamanbagiri?" I hear Mikazuki's voice resound inside me.

Yeah, whatever… I'm just happy.

"Sorry we can't help in that matter about Yoshiyuki," Kogitsunemaru says, "But we believe in you. Go ahead and go to Kousetsu if you need to sort out your thoughts."

Yeah, thanks.

Pushing Yoshiyuki matter away now, I have another thing to face. President's wrath. I missed so many club meetings, and when I finally I come arrive late instead… President doesn't explode when he is angry, fortunately, but he becomes an even crueler slave-driver. My reason for being late doesn't really matter… he takes enjoyment from someone else's suffering, honestly.

Just what kind of punishment awaits me? I'm scared to think.

I walk to the IT room and anxiously slide the door open.

"Ohh, you finally came," President's voice immediately comes… from right in front of me? Whoa, he is standing on the doorway, smirking like he always does. So annoying. "And I was about to get you. What did Kousetsu talk about?"

"It's a secret. Ask him if you want to know."

"So cold. I missed you, you know?"

"Oh, really?" I glance at him "More importantly, you're blocking me, President."
"Yep."

"Then move, please."

"No."

I don't hate him, but at times he can be… ahaaha… damn this person.

"Since you're late, my beloved Yamanbagiri Kunihiro…" President fixes his glasses and smiles, "… how about you help me?"

I knew it. I see it coming.

I once was asked to bring him specific tea and snacks. I had to run from the school to convenience store a few times because he kept on changing what he wanted. What a troll.

"Okaay, what is it, President?"

"It's a very easy thing. I'm being generous today, just in case you're still sick." He moves sideways, making a path for me to go through. I see Mitsutada-senpai waving his hand towards me in the gap.

"Support me in a game, please?"

"…Okay."

What, today's activity is just… playing games?

"What's with that look," President sulks, "Do you want to jump straight to codes? This is an important part, you know. Debugging."

"Oooh. Tell me that sooner, please."

I remember a few upperclassmen were working on a game. I guess they finally finished it long before graduation. They wanted the game to be in their portfolio or something, I don't really remember, but it's pretty important to them. If I remember correctly, Mitsutada-senpai also helped to create it. I think President didn't join, though, that's why he is the debugger this time.

"A few others are also debugging right now," President says, walking up to his favorite seat at the first row. That seat is always empty as it's reserved for him, but the next one is also usually empty as long as President doesn't ask anyone to sit there.

"Is it a long game that needs multiple debuggers?"

"Pretty much."

"Hmm. Let's see it, then."

It turns out to be a pretty awesome danmaku [1] game, which has 2 people team option using local network. I see why it needs a multiple debuggers now… this is bullet hell, after all. There's still a lot of bugs, weird patterns and all, but it's amazing overall.

"How is it?" Mitsutada visits us when we're on stage 3. He looks cheerful. "I designed the patterns, you know."

"I can see your… aesthetic," I reply, "Still buggy, though. I suddenly have unlimited bombs."

"That's what debugging is for," President says.
Mitsutada glances at our computer screens. "President… you suck at this."

President grumbles as he presses the keys and moves his character to just barely dodge a bullet. "Ugh. I know, that's why I have Yamanbagiri to help me."

"If only this is VS mode, I can beat him easily," I say.

"I'll take revenge if that happens."

"Oh, Yamanbagiri-chan. Do you have time after this? Let's talk for a bit."

"Hm? Sure."

I wonder what he is up to. Well, hanging out with him won't be bad. It's been a… pretty long time, after all. And since I'm… not with Yoshiyuki for now, I have more freedom.

Speaking of Yoshiyuki… today was the same as yesterday.

I guess you can say that we… the four of us, that is - me, Hasebe, Yamato, and Yoshiyuki - are in the same group now. We hang around together most of the time, so of course, Yoshiyuki is there. He doesn't talk much to me, however. It pains me a bit, but I'm still awkward around him as well.

Hhh… I don't want this continue. Two days and I already feel like dying.

Moreover, not only awkward… now that I'm conscious on how he looks at me, the way I look at him change as well. I can't help but to blush when I see him, remembering our kiss… what, don't mention that I didn't when Mikazuki and I kissed 2 years ago! That was an accident and we both decided to forget it, but this is different! First kisses are memorable, you know, I still remember when Kogitsunemaru….

"Yamanbagiri, that place is - ! Ah. You died."

I blink blankly at the screen, seeing that my character is gone after being hit by a random bullet. "Oh."

"You spaced out for a bit there. What's wrong?" President asks with a smile. "Is it so hard that your mind is going awry?"

"I'm just thinking about stuffs, that's all." I check my screen again, realizing that I should be revived as I have 3 lives, and I only lost one just now… but nothing happen. My screen just freezes in place. "Uh-oh. The game froze."

"Whoops." Mitsutada-senpai chuckles awkwardly.

President pauses the game and pulls my sleeve, "Continue play here, then, Yamanbagiri. I'm not confident I can pass stage 4 in lunatic mode."

"I'll do it since you're honest for once… but then please get out of that chair."

He pats his lap instead. "Why don't you sit here?"

"…President."

"…Akashi."

"I'm just joking! Don't look at me like that, you two!" President stands up and points at the chair,
"Go ahead, Yamanbagiri."

I sit on the chair grumpily. Seriously, president likes to say these things, but because… such thing reminds me of Yoshiyuki… it feels really… ugh.

Focus on the game, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro! Beat the bug-ridden lunatic difficulty!

At the end, I can only reach stage 5 since the stage 6 is full of bugs with random bullets all over the place, impossible to dodge, and then the game closes all by itself. That's sad.

I check my bugs list. "I guess that's all. Here, Mitsutada-senpai."

"Thank you." He sighs seeing the list. "Long way to go, huh…"

"It's all about trial and error, after all. Good luck!" President says, patting his shoulder.

"Yeah…"

"Can I go home now, president?"

"Know some shame, Yamanbagiri…"

"Uh-oh."

"It's already this late, though…" President checks the time. "I guess we can wrap things up now."

IT club is a very relaxing club, so we can just go home whenever we want, like I did a few days ago. But of course, it's better if we go home after president allows us to… uhh, that day is an exception, okay. Urgent matter. And I can't just run away now that I just come again after a long time.

"Yamanbagiri-chan, let's walk together. Kuri-chan misses you, you know!"

Looks like Mitsutada-senpai is really eager to talk to me since hours ago. Well, no wonder. He couldn't talk much to me because president dragged me straight to work.

"I don't!" Ookurikara shouts immediately from the back row. Isn't he embarrassed, shouting so loud that everyone in the room can hear him? Then again, it's a normal occurrence, so most people don't pay any attention to him.

Mitsutada-senpai chuckles.

"See you tomorrow, President," I say, taking my bag and stand up.

"Don't you dare skip on me, alright? Look out for your health, though."

"Oooh, so you can be a normal and caring senior as well."

"Why do you have to be so cruel with me?" President sobs in exaggeration.

I just wave him off and walk away with Mitsutada-senpai. Ookurikara is already outside, leaning on the wall, waiting for us. We walk to the gate together, with Mitsutada-senpai at the center.

"Are you fine now, Yamanbagiri-chan? I heard you caught a pretty long cold," Mitsutada-senpai says.

"I'm fine, as you can see."
"Be careful, I know you're prone to illness."

"Yeah, of course."

"We were planning to visit you yesterday, but then you messaged us saying you're going to school. I'm relieved to hear that! Too bad we can't see each other quickly, though."

"I see. Thanks." Hmm? Wait… "Do you know where I live?"

"Oh, Kuri-chan asked Yoshiyuki."

I glance at the ever-silent Ookurikara, who just turns his gaze away from me. Well, of course they asked Yoshiyuki… Hasebe knows where I live, too, though, so maybe Yamato knows from him.

"You seemed busy before you got sick, Yamanbagiri-chan. Don’t push yourself too hard."

"I'll do that."

See, he is such a good upperclassman, caring for his juniors like that. I feel motherly love coming from him, like Brother Horikawa.

"Yamanbagiri, you…” Ookurikara finally speaks up after a long time, his voice is hoarse for some reason, "…have something bugging your mind right now… right?"

I flinch.

"A-Am I that obvious…? Wait, I remember this conversation before."

"Mmm." He nods. I can see faint color of red spreading on his cheeks now. What? "I'm just… worried about you… even more. You're that kind of person who wrecks yourself when you have a problem. I'd hate it if you get sick again because of that."

"Aww, Kuri-chan is being honest and shy! So cute!"

Ookurikara immediately jabs him in the stomach with his elbow. This is also daily occurrence.

"A-Anyway… if you want help, you can ask me."

"Us! Me too," Mitsutada-senpai says with a pained smile, holding his stomach. "Yamanbagiri-chan is our important friend, after all."

Uwaah… I feel so moved. I never thought they'd feel that way. It feels… warm.

"Thanks, the both of you. I can't say much about what bugging me, but I'm happy you care for me."

Mitsutada-senpai smiles and Ookurikara has a gentle expression on his face. I don't remember how I bonded with them, but I'm glad I did.

"Okay! I should do my best to fix that game, too," Mitsutada-senpai says. "But before that, what's tonight's dinner…?"

"A very motherly concern." I chuckle. "Oh, Mitsutada-senpai lives alone now, right?"

"Yep. There's a small and cheap apartment near here, and I thought it's perfect for me to try living alone."
"It must be tough."

"He still comes to my house to bang on the door and tell me to wake up, though. It's scary," Ookurikara says.

"Not every day! Besides, don't you come often to my room just to escape your parents' wrath and play games all day?"

"I don't!"

"Ahaha. I can imagine that."

"Yamanbagiri-chan is welcome anytime, too," Mitsutade-senpai says with a smile, he looks excited more than anything. "I'll cook you luxurious dinner."

…Cook… dinner.

Yoshiyuki's face flashes on my mind. His smile, his voice, and his promise -

It's all too painful.

"I'm looking forward to that, then."

"And then… maybe sleep with me? I-I mean sleep over, you know!"

"I don't see any problems with that."

Ookurikara shakes his head. "Yamanbagiri, you shouldn't just accept his invitation so easily… it's dangerous."

I blink, seeing his troubled face. "Huh? Why?"

"Because he is dangerous, so if that time comes, I'll go with you."

Mitsutada-senpai pouts, looking adorably pissed. "I swear I won't do anything weird to Yamanbagiri-chan! Take my heart if I fail to fulfill that!"

"I can't imagine you doing weird things to me, senpai…""

Ookurikara shrugs. "Just in case. We never know. Better safe than sorry."

"I'm not some kind of accident or disaster bringer, you - !" Mitsutada-senpai slaps his shoulder, but it's so light that it might as well be a massage.

I can't help but to chuckle seeing their exchange. Fresh and full of affection as always.

Before long, we arrive at the gate.

"I'll be off, then."

"Wait, Yamanbagiri-chan, you're going home alone?"

"…Yeah."

"That's rare. Don't you always go home with Yoshiyuki?" Ookurikara asks.

So even he realizes. I guess it's obvious, but it's not like we always go home together…. "Mm, well,
yeah…"

"Did you have a fight with him?"

Mitsutada-senpai hisses at Ookurikara for saying it straightforwardly. Despite his obvious tsundere tendencies, the way he speaks bluntly about other stuffs is refreshing. That's what I like about him.

Aaaand that kiss scene appears in my mind again. T-Time to calm down.

"I-It's fine… yeah, we got in a fight, kind of. Not too serious, though, this happens sometimes."

"I see…” Mitsutada-senpai shoots me a sad look. "I hope the two of you can make up soon. Tell me if you need someone to mediate, okay?"

I nod. "Yeah, thank you. See you tomorrow."

I wave my hand before walking away, my steps heavy. I feel happy that he shows such concerns for me, but….

"Haaa…” I sigh. Thinking about Yoshiyuki makes me extremely sad… and what is this emotion? Very heavy and gloomy.

"Just relax, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says, appearing next to me with an unusually gentle smile. "Just take your time thinking. We're here for you."

Sheesh, plenty of people have said that to me already today… I'm about to explode out of embarrassment.

"You're loved. Remember that," Kogitsunemaru says, also appearing next to me and pats my head.

Mmm… thanks.

But really, I haven't made any progress at all regarding Yoshiyuki! How many days have it been, you think?! Whenever I think about him, I feel sad, pained… but also… my heart feels like it's about to burst, somehow.

"Just think carefully like you did before you decided to confess that you couldn't choose between either of us and fell for the both of us," Kogitsunemaru says.

Hmm, that's true…I don't remember much on how I arrived at that conclusion, though. OTL. My memory is bad, but I remember how embarrassing it was.

"Perhaps you can think of it this way; whatever you're feeling about us, around us even now, if you feel that as well with Yoshiyuki, then you love him," Mikazuki says.

H-Huh…? Me, loving him…?

"There's always the possibility that you love him. You just don't want to admit it to keep your friendship, perhaps unconsciously. Now that it's been broken, if you do love him, it'll go up to the surface."

And… if I do love him, will you accept it…?

"We've talked about this before," Kogitsunemaru says, "We're ready to accept it. Anytime. Even more so if it's Yoshiyuki, whom we've known for as long as we know you."
Mikazuki nods. "If it's someone else, we might not be able to accept it easily, but Yoshiyuki, we can entrust you to him without worries."

I see….

"For now, just take it easy and take mental notes about what you feel whenever Yoshiyuki is around," he adds.

I'll do that. Whenever he is around, I feel so uneasy that I can't think straight. Even the mention of his name makes me stiff… but I'll try to calm myself down and think about what I truly feel. It's all mixed up when my mind is a mess.

Once again, thank you. I'm really glad the two of you are here.

Hey, you guys ended up helping me, didn't you?

"Ah! That's true," Kogitsunemaru chuckles. "We have a soft spot for you, after all."

"It's minor help, so it's allowed," Mikazuki says. "I'm getting tired seeing you frozen in place, anyway."

Ugh, sorry.

"You're cute when you're troubled, so I just watched for a while."

That doesn't make me happy!

"But, Yamanbagiri…" Kogitsunemaru wraps his arms around me and rubs his cheek against me like a cat, "Err, drop that like a cat. I mean, when we're flirting, please think about us and not anyone else."

I can't think of anyone else when we're flirting, don't worry.

"Hmm, I wonder about that. You're thinking about Yoshiyuki when we're together now," Mikazuki mumbles.

That's different!

"See, the troubled you looks cute."

"Especially at night, right?" Kogitsunemaru winks.

Oh, I'd like to see you troubled with bad pull in F/GO [2], Kogi. I'll spread my unluckiness to you so that you'll never get Merlin. I'll curse you so bad so that you have to resort with your own money and waste everything! I'll also stop you from getting that new SSR Chikage in Yuyuyui! [3]

"N-Nooo!! Don't be so cruel, please!! Besides, don't you want her too?!!"

"I've given up in mobage already because I'm so unlucky I didn't get any SSRs at all. So now I'll take revenge."

"Hmmmm, you have nothing to curse me with," Mikazuki hums happily.

If anything, you can just purify it, so there's no need to.

"Ooh, I'm glad you love me so much."
Kogitsunemaru glares resentfully at Mikazuki.

I'll have to think about how I should take revenge to Mikazuki as well. What a challenge… what kind of reward will this quest give me, I wonder?

"Before that, Yamanbagiri, don't forget about Yoshiyuki," Kogitsunemaru says.

…And just when I'm getting relaxed here! Give me a break, won't you?!

Ugh. Anyway, let's stop by the riverbank, so please drop that issue.

"Oh, Hotarumaru?" Mikazuki asks. "We visited him when you were missing to find out if he saw you, also when you got a fever so he wouldn't get worried."

I see. Thanks for that.

The sun is about to set. The riverbank is empty as always.

"Manba-niiichaaan!!"

As expected, Hotaru, with glittering eyes, jumps on me immediately.

"I'm so worried! Are you okay now?"

I stroke his head. "Yeah, I'm fine now. I'm sorry for worrying you. How are you when I'm not here?"

Hotaru releases his hug and smiles sweetly. "I'm fine~ Hello, Mika-niichan, Kogi-niichan!"

Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki smile as reply.

"Oh, Yoshi-niichan visited me a few times and played with me."

"Yoshiyuki did…?"

"Yep! It was unusual, so I'm happy!"

"I-Is that so….

Yoshiyuki knows Hotaru, but he rarely goes to see him and plays with him, at least as far as I know. I don't know why he is reluctant to play with Hotaru, but maybe it has to be because he keeps a fair distance between himself and oddities. He doesn't want to get too personal with them. It'll be hard to part ways.

…Yeah, I should do that as well, but I can't help it.

I can't leave some oddities alone. Especially not someone like Hotaru.

Suddenly, Hotaru pulls my arm, "Sit, Manba-niichan! Let's talk a lot!"

"Okay, okay."

There's no way I can leave this innocent smile alone in the middle of dangerous world. Or maybe I'm just too soft.

Hotaru talks about his days and I respond. Just like usual, until I remember something.
"Come to think of it, did you remember anything after that, Hotaru?" I ask.

"About when I was alive? Nope," he shakes his head, "Sometimes I see that scene again, though."

"I see."

I want to ask if he wants to remember everything, but I don't think it's the right time, so I drop that topic… let's just spend time peacefully like always. Just talking and sitting side by side, my mind feels relatively calm.

"Tsurumaru-senpai?"

"Oh, Manba-chan."

"What's with that seemingly-disappointed voice?"

After having dinner, I immediately call Tsurumaru just as asked.

"I'm just a bit surprised," he chuckles on the other end. Hearing his voice somewhat unclearly through phone feels weird. "So, you've heard from Kousetsu?"

"Yeah. What's wrong?"

"Actually, I wanted to meet you face-to-face, but who would have thought you'll skip school for so long!"

"I caught a cold, it can't be helped. Why didn't you come to school today, anyway?"

"That's a secret." I'm pretty sure he's grinning right now. "I miss you, Manba-chan. Don't you miss me as well?"

"No, I don't."

"At least say yes to comfort me~! Anyway… let's meet tomorrow if possible. I'll try to come."

"Why did you tell me I have to call you, then?"

"I just want to hear your voice. W-Wait, don't hang up just yet! …Manba-chan, do you have something on your mind? Something troubling you?"

No way it reflects in my voice, right…? The thing with Yoshiyuki… "…What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling. Uh, then... I'll wait."

"…Huh?" What is he saying now?

"Sorry, sorry. I just want to hear your voice and talk to you, really! But it's getting late, so… um, see you soon, I think… Don't mind this conversation."

"Uh…okay. See you soon, Senpai, if you come to school." I have no idea what's happening, but if he says that, then….

"Manba-chan. Can I say that… I...."
"What?"

"...Nothing. I miss you."

"I don't know why you'd feel that, but thank you."

"Geez, acting like it's very normal... as expected from you. This is a compliment! Anyway, good night. Have a good sleep, don't play games until late at night."

"Those are my words for you, honestly. Good night, Senpai."

I hang up, wondering what he actually wants, but I find no answer.

"He is so random," Mikazuki comments with a rather nasty glare unfit for his face, sitting on bed just next to me. "I feel like you're in danger with him, Yamanbagiri. Please be careful."

"What are you talking about? I'm safer with him than with you."

He just glares sharply at me, somewhat sulking.

"Well... it's getting late, so we should sleep soon," Kogitsunemaru says, stretching his arms.

I nod. The day is about to end.

I have no time to think about what Tsurumaru-senpai wants.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Danmaku literally means bullet hell. It's a genre in shoot 'em up game where you have to dodge tons of bullets with little space. Touhou Project makes it popular, especially with its lunatic difficulty.
[2] Fate/Grand Order. You know what is this, right? The gacha mobage that has taken so many people's lives and money.
[3] Yuuki Yuuna wa Yuusha de Aru: Hanayui no Kirameki. Currently the only gacha mobage I play other than Miracle Nikki, and Chikage is my favorite character. She's almost like Yamanbagiri in so many good and bad ways (hence she becomes Kogitsunemaru's favorite because she reminds him of Yamanbagiri). The original stories (Yuyuyu, Wasuyu, Nowayu, Kumeyu) are all great, and the universe is still expanding, so please watch the anime and read the light novels if you're free! Yes, this is a shameless promotion. Excuse me.

*Once again, happy new year to everyone! I drew a thing for new year here, but I don't know if I should embed it here or not...well, maybe in extra chapter. Since 2018 is the year of the dog...fufu, it suits Yoshiyuki so much.
**Email** (Sent June 2nd 11:00 AM CET)

*From: 89-75-83-78@mail.com*

*Subject: Re: Report-Kashuu jiangshi and god help me!!*

Hello, Yamanbagiri. I was getting worried when you didn't reply, but I'm glad to hear that you recovered from your fever. You never fail to make my heart leap through dimensions… okay, I admit that's too hyperbolic.

I think you skipped way too much, but that's fine. I get the gist of it. That sounds rough.

You… didn't take a proper bath at all when you were kidnapped and rested from fever…?!

Ehem. That's not the problem.

I see… he finally confessed to you. I've always had this feeling that he loves you, but you're way too oblivious to notice it. No, maybe because you hold him dearly, you ignore his true feelings. Who knows. I bet you're just too oblivious, though.

He seems serious about his feelings to you, so please think about your answer carefully.

Have you talked to Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki about it? What did they say?

I can't help much, but if you want to sort out your thoughts, feel free to message me. I don't know much about love, but you're dating someone right now, so you should know better.

I wish you luck.

I'll support you no matter what.

P.S. It's not a bad thing, of course. Want to see a video of me singing?

>>Reply

For the… god knows how many times, I re-read his email. I've replied, but only about Mikazuki's and Kogitsunemaru's replies (that they accept if I date Yoshiyuki), and that I want to hear him sing.

Just now I realize how many people support me. Saying that it's fine for me to talk to them. That they'll help whatever they can… small numbers, but plenty for an introverted person like me. I feel happy. It's like a miracle.

I've never thought myself as someone that people will help unconditionally like this.

I'm grateful, but at the same time, I feel conflicted.
Their kindness is already... too much.

I don't deserve this... especially not from people I'm not really close with, like Kousetsu-senpai. I'm just trouble for them... and I have nothing I want to talk about to them. It's embarrassing, and moreover....

...Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru have provided a hint to me. At the end, the help I got from the two of them is enough.

So how can I repay for others' kind intentions, now that I know for sure I won't talk to them about Yoshiyuki? I have no idea... but maybe I shouldn't think about it.

They'll stop worrying if I make up my mind about my answer... yeah. That's right.

I should focus on understanding my own feelings towards Yoshiyuki and answer his confession.

That's the best course of action for me to do.

So that this thing is resolved and nobody will worry about me anymore. I won't be a bother anymore.

"You have quite the twisted determination, Yamanbagiri," the young man speaks, interrupting my thoughts. In this world in my dream, there's only the two of us underwater... the whale is away for now. "But well, that's why I like you. Chaotic and impulsive, destructive and - "

"Shut up. I don't care if it's twisted or not. It's my true feelings. And it's for the best."

"Is that so... all I can say is... good luck!"

His cheery smile and attitude just pisses me off.

"Come on, don't be so angry."

I'm in a bad mood to hear him out, for some reason... although his appearance alone annoys me. "Why am I here? I have no business to be here. Just let me wake up from this dream."

"I thought you want to ask me something, so I brought you here with your smartphone...."

"I ended up thinking what I can't think consciously with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru around, thanks for that... but I want to wake up."

I feel guilty for hiding more and more things from the both of them, honestly, but I'm quite good at hiding unconscious desires. Cutting off our connection is an option, but without a proper reason, they'll suspect something... it's not an option at all.

Perhaps this place is my salvation, and I'm truly grateful for its existence.

"But... this is enough for now."

"Okay, if you say so," he flicks his finger. "Don't regret this, Yamanbagiri. I'll always wait for you, though, don't worry."

I have no idea what he means, but my mind can't think as I fall into deep slumber.

I'll forget all of this when I wake up anyway.

[F a d e o u t ]
"Aaand I'm back!"

Kashuu shouts as he slides the door open. He is fearless and shameless to do that… but then again, he is pretty well-liked in class, despite the rumors around the whole school. The girls immediately go over to him and ask all sorts of things, like why he was away for so long. Yamato's eyes light up and he walks up to him as well, away from us. The group looks cheery.

I'm glad he is back now, but my task is to observe him. There's possibility he might snap and attack someone, so I have to watch him closely.

"Leave it to us. You can just relax," Mikazuki says, patting my shoulder.

…If you say so. Okay.

Mikazuki smiles and goes inside me once again, hiding.

"So he is back. Wonder what happened," Hasebe says. He is sitting in front of me again (I'm sorry to the owner of the seat), looking around with bored eyes. I have no idea why he is there and just does nothing, but I have no reason to shoo him away.

"Who knows. Maybe illness, plus family reasons," I reply. Of course it's a lie. I know the reason.

"It must be tough. Final exams are coming soon. There are other tests and assignments too."

"Yeah. I'm sure he can catch up, though."

Thinking about exams, my midterms from before seems okay for someone who kept playing games during exam week. Yoshiyuki… has no red marks as well.

Hasebe stares at me, furrowing his brows.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I ask, feeling uncomfortable.

He shrugs. "Nothing."

Of course it's nothing, but it seems he doesn't want to talk. He's been acting like that since the day I finally go to school again. I wonder what happened, but if he has no intention of telling me, I might never know, no matter how much I press him to do so.

"Hello."

Kashuu is suddenly right next to us, with Yamato peeking behind him. I feel normal with him getting close to us, since we've bonded somewhat, but for Hasebe… yeah, he looks uncomfortable. I have no idea what to say if he asks why I let Kashuu act so friendly with me.

"I heard you guys took care of Yasusada when I was away. Thanks!"

"I'm not a child," Yamato pouts.

"No problem," I reply.
I wonder if Yamato will keep hanging out with us now that Kashuu is here. Kashuu might even hang out with us too - and if that happens, the question is, will Hasebe be alright? I think he will have a hard time getting along with someone like Kashuu… but, mmm, Kashuu is a good kid. I shouldn't be worried, right…?

The more the merrier, and the better for me. So I can divert my attention away from Yoshiyuki.

"So, why are you away for so long, Kiyomitsu?" Hasebe asks. He is curious about that, huh.

"I got… multiple sickness! You know, I'm allergic to shrimp, but unknowingly ate it, so that kind of thing happens - no, I don't want to describe it… and then I caught a cold and high fever. That was so unlucky," Kashuu says, sighing. He looks natural on saying it… a good actor, I see. He might be allergic to shrimp for real, but I have no way of knowing.

All I know that he looks fine, and I'm glad to see that.

"And then you were feeling so good at home that you skipped school," Yamato says, shrugging. "What a bad kid!"

"I didn't! Don't spread lies!" Kashuu jabs his arm with his elbow, "Hmph, getting cocky just because you clung to Kunihiro when I was away, huh?"

He calls me Kunihiro for now, huh. Going back to the starting line.

"W-What?? What do you mean…?"

"You know, Kunihiro," Kashuu shifts his attention to me and smiles, speaking in a quite low voice, "Yasusada here has a crush on you. He’s wanted to befriend you for so long."

…Crush.

Yoshiyuki's face pops up for some reason, and I feel my cheeks getting hot.

"N-Not that kind of crush! I admire him, that's all..." Yamato fidgets before he lightly punches Kashuu's back. "Geez, Kashuu, you don't have to say it!"

Kashuu chuckles. "Why not?"

"Oooh," Hasebe grins to me, "You sure are popular, Yamanbagiri."

"I-I'm not…"

I glance at Yamato, and our eyes meet. His face tenses up and he averts his gaze away, and so do I.

W-Why am I getting even more embarrassed…? My heart feels like it's about to explode. I-I mean, there's no way Yamato likes me, like Yoshiyuki does… we haven't talk to each other until recently, so why… m-maybe because I pictured Yoshiyuki when I hear crush, so I just…?

Uuurgh, Yoshiyuki just messes with my mind all the time!

"By the way, just call me Kashuu," Kashuu continues, snapping me out of my daydream. "In return, can I call you guys by your given name?"

"Not me. I hate my given name," Hasebe replies in all honesty. Granted, he is always frank about his name. It's almost like an automated reply.
"For me, feel free to do it," I reply.

Kashuu nods. "Okay… Yamanbagiri and Hasebe, then."

Just when we ran out of topic, the bell rings.

Homeroom is about to start, so everyone goes back to their respective seats. Yoshiyuki slams the door open just before the teacher comes in. Close to doom as usual.

…Yoshiyuki….

I miss… actually talking to him and genuinely joke around with him… and it's only been a few short days.

"Aww, Yamanbagiri, you sure adore Yosshi," Kogitsunemaru says from inside me. That startled me.

Don't break the melancholic mood, damn it! And what kind of nickname is Yosshi?

As I expected, Kashuu hangs around with us during break time. He takes care of his… fans and girl friends before walking away with us to cafeteria.

"Do you always bring a lunchbox, Yamanbagiri?" he asks me on the way, noticing the lunchbox I'm holding.

"Yeah. My elder brother made it."

"I see… how nice. It saved up quite a cost, didn't it?"

"Yep, that's my main reason for bringing it in the first place… and Brother's food is to die for."

"It's really delicious," Yamato says, leaning forward.

"Can I take a bite later?" Kashuu asks.

"Sure. Later."

As usual, the cafeteria is packed. I find an empty spot near the entrance and immediately claim it while others go to order foods. Yoshiyuki, Yamato, Hasebe, Kashuu, and me… what an unlikely group to be seen. I feel like this group will just expand someday, somehow.

I don't mind it, but it feels weird.

It's usually just me… and Yoshiyuki. Sometimes Hasebe joins in, but this time, he joins in every day, and it feels completely normal. And then Yamato comes… and now Kashuu. For me, five people is a pretty big group.

I've never thought I'll be in such group, really. Especially not with people I don't share interests with and haven't spent time together for at least a year.

Yoshiyuki and I… of course, we're close since we're childhood friends. We like to play games, watch anime, and read manga - we're kind of up-to-date with these kinds of pop culture. Simply put, we have similar hobbies, and because we grew up together, each other's presence feels normal no
matter what differences our eyes see… yeah, until recently, that is. It just feels awkward now.

Ehem. As for Hasebe… other than because we're in the same (actually unneeded) disciplinary committee, you can say we have a similar mindset. We just click. Hmm, I believe I've told you that we're in the same class last year, and as lone wolves, we usually ended up together in groups and stuffs. I like his company, and he seems to like mine too, so we stay together sometimes, even in silence.

Since we're in the same class as Yoshiyuki this year, we're getting even closer because of Yoshiyuki’s intervention. We aren't simply lone wolves anymore.

As for Yamato… honestly, no idea. I guess he is the kind of person who goes along with the flow, and somehow, his appearance brings me peace. He is cute and considerate, can be quiet and fun at right times. Quite perfect for someone like me, so maybe we also click.

Kashuu… I don't know much about him, but based on our interaction weeks ago, I can safely say that I quite like him, even more so than before (it was "okay" before). He is friendly, so I'm sure we can get along… or so I hope.

….Wait, why am I thinking about them in the first place?!

"What is this, are you trying to see your affinity with them?" Mikazuki says, popping up from… behind the table?! He peeks like some kind of suspicious pervert….

What are you doing? And what do you mean by affinity?

"In love, of course. Perhaps you can say… chemistry."

W-What… that's not it! Not at all!

…Well, maybe for Yoshiyuki… but not others, okay.

"Hmm…whatever you say, then."

Don't grin like that! Get back now, it'll be awkward if Yamato and Kashuu see you. Didn't you and Kogi usually hide since days ago because of them?

"Yeah. I'm sure they're just barely adjusting oddities into their normal lives," Kogitsunemaru says, appearing next to me. His finger is playing with his own hair. "But it's tiring to be inside you all the time. We want to be right next to you."

"It's not fun," Mikazuki adds. "Besides, don't spoil them too much, Yamanbagiri. If they can't get used to our presence, then they will have a hard time getting used to other oddities."

"It has been a week and more, so they should be getting the hang of it by now," Kogitsunemaru continues. "And of course, Yoshiyuki won't even bat an eye seeing us… right?"

Uhh… knowing our awkward relationship now, I don't know. I mean, you guys are basically his rivals.

"But he still loves you so deeply even after knowing our intimate relationship," Mikazuki says, standing on the chair. Oi, that's bad manners. "I said it before, didn't I? He is willing to be your lover even if it means sharing you with us. He decided this, just like what we did before. He is more than ready, Yamanbagiri. Now is your turn to reply."
"Of course, just take it easy and think carefully," Kogitsunemaru says, patting my shoulder. "He is waiting for your answer, but not a half-hearted one, so don't disappoint him on that."

…Yeah. I will… try to do it.

I hear familiar voices waking me up. I find the four walking to me. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru gets out of the way, but they're still visible. I can see Kashuu's and Yamato's eyes snap wide open seeing them, but they immediately try to keep poker face.

Huh, I haven't eaten my own lunch at all. I open my lunchbox and eat the food in a rush. It's Japanese style this time, rice with egg roll, sausages, and vegetables. Very normal.

"Haah… I'm sad I couldn't get the special menu," Kashuu says, sighing as he sits down.

"That one sold out way too fast. I want that too," Hasebe grumbles, looking angrier than ever. He sits next to me… again?

"Now, now. There's always Yamanbagiri's lunch to be eaten," Yoshiyuki says with a wave of a hand, sitting across Hasebe and next to Kashuu.

"I thought you said bullying Yamanbagiri is bad?" Hasebe asks.

"I never approved to give you guys my lunch," I retort.

"Aww, too bad. It's really delicious too," Yamato sulks. He sits next to Kashuu, so it means Kashuu is in the middle - being sandwiched, you can say.

"Ooh? Let us fulfill our promise and let me take a bite of it," Kashuu says with a smile, his hand holding chopsticks is ready to stab food in my lunchbox.

"Here." I push my lunchbox towards him. He takes egg roll immediately and munches it down.

"Mm… so soft. It'd be better if it's still warm, though."

"It's the downside of bringing my own lunch, unfortunately."

"Maybe I should cook my own lunch…" Yamato mumbles.

"If you do, cook one for me too, please?" Kashuu says.

"I cooked my own lunch before. But I'm always late to school, so it's rare now, ahaha!" Yoshiyuki laughs.

As the conversation shifts, I slowly eat my lunch. My eyes are fixed on Yoshiyuki. He looks just like he always does, bright and charming.

Seeing his smile and hearing his laugh… make me nervous, for some reason. I want to look away, but I end up glancing at him anyway. Are my cheeks getting hot? And whose heart is beating so fast right now? …Mine. There's still a tinge of pain, but… it's overwhelmed by my rising heartbeat.

What is this?

How weird… I've never felt this way about him before. I was acting the same just yesterday, so why today….

Is it because I remember his confession and kiss, so I get embarrassed, or is it something else…?
Okay, form a pair, everyone.

When the teacher says that, I feel blood has been drained from my face.

In times like these, I usually go with Yoshiyuki, but because we're in awkward terms now, what should I do? I'm a lone wolf! No, wait, there's Hasebe... Yamato and Kashuu should pair up together as usual, so....

"Yamanbagiri."

Speak of the devil, Yoshiyuki approaches me.

"Do ya... want to pair up with me?" He asks. He has an uncharacteristically melancholic face. It just stabs me right in the heart. "...Or is it too much?" He frowns this time.

Ahh... despite what we're going through, he still wants to be with me?

My chest hurts... my heartbeat is....

"No, uhh..." I lift my head, trying to look into his eyes, but I end up looking at his chest instead. "If you don't mind... I-let's be together."

Wait, that comes out so wrong!!!

"I-I mean...!"

Yoshiyuki chuckles. "Yeah. I know. Let's get started, then." He sits in front of me as the owner went to another seat.

The teacher gives instructions and tasks. We proceed to do it. Yoshiyuki searches for the answer from the textbook and I write them down.

"So... here...." I jolt down the answer. We're halfway through the task now.

"Yamanbagiri."

I look up when he leans closer to my ear and whispers, his hot breath tickling my ear.

"I love ya."

My pencil falls down from my hand to desk, rolling. Yoshiyuki stops it with his hand.

Did... did he just...?

Yoshiyuki gets back to his place and smiles, a hand supporting his chin. In my eyes, his smile seems so devilish now... and yet he looks somewhat calm and amused. And then, he opens his mouth, making soundless words.

I love you.

H-H-He-

Oh my god.
"I really want to kiss your cheek, but I have to refrain for now. I'm always waiting for your answer, okay?"

I'm stunned. Shocked. Frozen. My face must be totally red right now.

He chuckles awkwardly. "Ahaha… was that too much? Sorry, I couldn't hold myself back, so I just…"

"Ah… um…"

He stares at me for good seconds before looking away, scratching the back of his head. I can see his cheeks are faintly red now. "If ya show me that face, I might just jump on ya right now."

"Ah…” I snap back, realizing what he means. H-He looks at me that way… I'm feeling so… "G-Geez… that was so sudden. And you've been acting normal and keep a distance, too…"

That was so unfair. I never thought he'll just… say that again… in class, out of all the possible places!

"I was trying to restrain myself, agonizing over it, ya know. It just leaked earlier, sorry… impulse is something, eh?" He smiles, looking honestly unapologetic, "But… I guess I'll say it every now and then. I don't want ya to forget about me, so I'll keep reminding ya. It's fine, right?"

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

How many exclamation marks do I need to express my surprise and heartbeat going off-charts?! "You're evil… I can never forget about you after that, you know…"

In fact, he is all in my mind for the past few days.

"Hehe. I'm happy if ya think so."

I try to write again, but oh man, my hand is shaking.

"I'm getting tired keeping such distance with ya. I hate to be apart from ya… but it can't be helped, huh? I'll keep a distance at times, don't worry. More like, I'll try to. Feel free to remind me."

I slam my face on the desk.

"How can you say it with such a straight face…?"

"Aww, ya are so cute."

"S-Shut up…"

Yoshiyuki is more aggressive than I ever thought. How many people out of 10 would dare to do this when the person they confessed to hasn't even replied? I'm sure it's no more than 3. It feels almost out of character, but if that's how far he goes for the person he loves (namely me), then….

What's with this sudden development?

Who is this reincarnation of evil?
Almost a week has passed since then, and it's Wednesday.

You can say there's been some kind of progress… but that's just in Yoshiyuki's side. He gets close to me just to say that he loves me and grins before he walks away. I can hardly think about how I actually feel since I get way too embarrassed to function properly. He just messes with my mind. I end up trying to keep a distance instead, but Yoshiyuki just gets closer again, either stubborn or just oblivious, since I can't straightforwardly tell him to take more distance (who can refuse that face?).

Sigh….

I wonder if Hasebe, Yamato, and Kashuu realize that we're acting weird. It's a lot more subtle than our lack of communication (what I initially thought), but… Hasebe is unusually sharp. I don't know about the other two, though.

Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru just laughed at my reaction… geez, these two, enjoying my suffering….

Today as well….

"Yamanbagiri, we're changing room now, Music class," Yoshiyuki says, tapping my head with a notebook lightly.

"Oh. Right."

I take my book and stand up. The class is empty already. I was too deep in thought. Maybe Hasebe, Yamato, and Kashuu are outside already, leaving Yoshiyuki to do the task of dragging me out. Haah… I dunno if I prefer others than Yoshiyuki.

"Let's go, Yoshiyuki."

I walk to the door, but then I realize Yoshiyuki isn't following me.

"Yoshiyuki?"

I turn around, and then -

*Chu.*

…? Hmm…?

What is that… soft sensation on my cheek?

Yoshiyuki is suddenly so close to me. If either of us moves an inch, we'd be - *oh.*

Did he just… kiss… my cheek?

Yoshiyuki is stunned, as shocked as I am. He touches his lips, dumbfounded as his face reddens.

"A-Ah…".

I'm too shocked to even say anything. He gasps before taking a few steps back. He waves his hands around, unable to hide his embarrassment, "I-I'm sorry!! That was an accident, I swear! I wanted to whisper to ya again, but then ya turned around and…"

*A very soft and quick kiss happens.*
"I-it's okay."

I mean, we've kissed on lips… but that's not something I can say!

"I-if I remember correctly, kiss on cheek means… friendship or something, so… i-it's fine," I continue, stuttering. I can't stare at him, either, so I look down on the floor.

"Y-Yeah…"

I touch my cheek. My mind can't help but to replay the sensation and remember his dumbfounded expression. Even though it's just… a kiss on cheek… I already feel like dying…

M-My heart is…!

"Yoshiyuki, I understand Yamanbagiri is irresistible, but please be gentle with him," Mikazuki says with a smile, suddenly appearing on the window, sitting on the sill like some sort of king. "He is so frail he can collapse out of embarrassment."

"You're really aggressive, aren't you? It's unexpected, but it's not bad," Kogitsunemaru adds, also appearing out of nowhere, this time on the teacher's platform before he walks to the door. "Oh, and sweet, too! Innocent Yosshi is still best Yosshi."

"T-T-That one earlier was an accident!" Yoshiyuki retorts, his face is getting even redder. "I have no plan to touch Yamanbagiri before we go out… except that one kiss before, which was just impulsive…!"

An image of his tear-soaked face appears on my mind along with the sensation of his lips (and teeth) touching mine.

I'm going to explode if this continues!

"Still, confessing your love to someone almost every day in such an intimate manner… it's aggressive," Kogitsunemaru says, nodding to himself. "I'm surprised you'd even take that action."

"Ahh… I guess I've been overdoing it lately…" he says, scratching his cheek as he looks down at the floor.

"You've done well holding back all these years. I can say it's impressive," Mikazuki says, jumping down from the window sill. "It seems your piled-up desires have been leaking out lately."

"A-Ahaha-ha… how embarrassing."

"I don't know why you didn't confess sooner, or when exactly you realized you're in love with Yamanbagiri, and I don't need to know. I can see that you hold Yamanbagiri really dearly and love him so much you don't mind seeing him going out with me. I sense no hostility from you to me or Kogitsunemaru. Ehem. So, I'd like to ask this to you, Yoshiyuki…."'

Yoshiyuki straightens his back, sensing the serious air. "What is it?"

"If Yamanbagiri doesn't accept your feelings, what are you going to do?"

I feel my body gets stiff.

The time seems to stop as no sounds can be heard.

"I…If possible, I'd like to stay next to Yamanbagiri," Yoshiyuki replies after a pause. "I'd be happier
if he returns my feelings, but even if he doesn't, it's fine. Love doesn't need anything in return most of the time. I love Yamanbagiri so much… I want to see him being happy, even if it isn't with me."

Yoshiyuki….

He looks at me and shoots me a warm smile, and yet I can feel a tint of sadness on it.

"Of course, it might be awkward for Yamanbagiri, but I don't mind. We can't restore our previous relationship, so even if I'm not next to him, at the very least… I want to be selfish and watch over him from afar."

I can tell that he is serious. His eyes show no hesitation.

Thump.

My chest tightens again, but even harder than before. It hurts. But also….

…I feel happy. I'm so happy to know that Yoshiyuki cares about me that much. I hide my mouth with my hand, but I'm sure I'm smiling and blushing right now.

Unconditional love, isn't it?

I already know it feels great to be on the receiving end, but it's not familial love this time - because Yoshiyuki loves me romantically, and yet he doesn't expect anything in return. W-What can I say? I'm overwhelmed with happiness. Joy and embarrassment. Maybe flowers would bloom all over me if this were some *shoujo* story.

I find many things in him that I like. This just adds more to that list.

His kindness. His gentleness. His ever bright smile. How he smells nice despite having a very wild hair… and now, the fact that he loves me without wanting anything in return.

Finding all those things as nice… and not wanting to let them go… is natural, isn't it?

But then… what is my reply to his confession? Do I look him at the same way he looks at me?

"Ohh, it seems you've killed Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says, giggling. "That's a good answer."

Yoshiyuki turns to see me once again and smiles bashfully. "I really, really, love ya, Yamanbagiri."

"I-I know… mm. T-Thanks, I guess….

He claps his hands after a pause. "Okay, we've wasted too much time. Let's go, before anyone searches for us," he says, walking to the door, facing Kogitsunemaru.

"Y-Yeah."

"Wait."

Kogitsunemaru's voice stops us from moving, his expression serious this time.

"One last question from me, Yoshiyuki. If Yamanbagiri dies, what will you do?"

I can't see his face from behind, but I'm sure he has a sad expression from his voice. "What kind of question is that? …I'll probably follow him to death."
With that, he pushes Kogitsunemaru away and rushes outside the classroom, so I catch up with him in panic. I just walk behind him, because walking next to him would be far too awkward. His last answer shakes me. I have no idea if I should be sad or happy….

Seeing his back, I remember. I've always seen his back since we were children. Perhaps our relationship has been stagnant since long ago.

That time too….

…_That time_? When? Two years ago?

Ah, that's right. I haven't remembered what happened to me after I fell. What happened until we found out that Yoshiyuki had been possessed by _inugami_ long ago, and then finally awoke his _inugami_ self on that day? My memory is vague. I feel like… the conclusion would be important for me to finally make a decision.

There's no way I can ask Yoshiyuki about it, though.

Anyway, I have to understand what I feel towards him. What is this pain on my chest, with a tinge of sadness? And what is this warmth accompanying it?

"…Say, Yoshiyuki."

"Hm?"

"What do you like about me… that makes you love me that much?"

Eh. Ah?

Why did I ask that…?

Sure, I have things I like about him, and I'd like to understand if my affection might mean love, but….

Yoshiyuki's eyes snap wide open, but he relaxes and smiles. "I love everything about ya."

"Everything?"

He nods. "Your face. The softness of your hair. The color of your eyes. The way ya tease people. Your smile. Your kindness. Your recklessness that made me unable to leave ya alone. Well, there are too many to be listed. Everything made me want to protect ya… making ya precious to me."

_Thump._

Ugh… my chest is… and my stomach feels weird. My heart is about to leap. How many times in a week has this happened? What does this mean?

When I think about it, it feels like… when I was with Kogi and Mikazuki, before I started to realize that I love them… the feeling is the same, isn't it? These feelings made me conclude that I love the both of them, that I want to hold them, and want them to take care of me… except this weird striking pain.

I've never felt this way towards Yoshiyuki before. Maybe it's because I'm being conscious of him as _not_ simply a friend, but… it feels… heavy.

All I wanted was to stay with my best friend. It's just a natural thing to long for, isn't it? Especially
for someone as lonely as I am... or was.

What if... all this time, I....

Suddenly, Yoshiyuki takes my hand and walks, pulling me to walk as well.

"Y-Yoshiyuki?"

"Sorry, we can't waste any more time. I can take ya to infirmary if ya want, though."

"N-No, that's unnecessary..."

"Then, I'll bring ya to class."

I take a look at our connected hands. His hand is holding mine tightly, and it feels... comfortably warm. Ahh... t-this is really bad for my heart. Even though we're just holding hands, which we had done a few times... why am I feeling like this just this moment?

I'm embarrassed, but I don't want to let go of this warmth.

At the same time, I'm scared to grasp it back. Because, at this point, if I also hold his hand... doesn't that mean I accept his confession? I'm not... I'm not ready for that. I still have no idea how I feel towards him. Perhaps I love him. Perhaps I don't and only act for my satisfaction. I don't know.

All I know is that I want to feel his warmth forever.

I don't want to let him go.

I think... I've always felt this way about him. I might've forgotten because Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru came to my life, but like my past self said... I never change. This time, though, I can feel something entirely different is growing inside me. Something familiar and yet not at the same time.

There's my own grim selfishness, and....

And... and what?

"Sorry, Yamanbagiri."

Yoshiyuki mumbles that, and I just walk silently, unable to let go and grasp his hand, just letting him pull me all the way to class.

"Yamanbagiri, that kiss wasn't so bad, was it?"

I have to cough a few times as I almost choked on my drink.

"W-W-What do you mean, Mikazuki?!"

It's night, the day is about to end, and I'm resting in my house - my room, to be precise. I put the bottle of water on my desk, turning my head to see Mikazuki.

"I mean what I said," he taps the bed sheet with an annoying smile on his face. "That kiss with
Yoshiyuki wasn't so bad for you, am I right?"

"W-What makes you think of that…?"

And what is this, all of sudden?

"Well, you rarely think about it… nowadays, at the very least. You think about it sometimes, but it doesn't bother you so much, since you snap to think about other things quickly. You don't focus on the kiss and agonize over it. Instead, you think about other skinship, even more innocent, like holding hands, and stuffs like his charming personality."

"…I guess that's true, but that still doesn't show what you said. There's no point in agonizing over that kiss, anyway, when he's going all out confessing and teasing me like that…""

"Are you bothered by his teasing?"

"Of course! You know very well how I flinch whenever he approaches, trying to brace myself, wondering 'will he do it again today?' with a sigh."

"Did you think very hard about our first kiss?"

Jumping topics again….

"Unggh… I don't think so. It doesn't really bother me since it's an accident."

"Then, what about your first kiss with Kogitsunemaru? My memory is still good, so I remember that kiss closely resembled Yoshiyuki's. It's not an accident, but it was before you two started to go out."

Kogitsunemaru's pained expression flashes in my mind.

Yep, that resembles my situation with Yoshiyuki, alright. Except that Kogi was getting impatient of my indecisive self and kind of snapped and kissed me. I know it. Of course. I remember it well, even the sensation.

It was rough just like Yoshiyuki's, but at least our teeth didn't hit each other.

Through his lips, I could feel his intense feelings towards me… and it made me realize I shouldn't keep him - and Mikazuki - waiting for much longer. I was getting tired of our unknown relationship as well.

Yes… if I let this be, Yoshiyuki might have to wait for a year. That'd be bad. I can't let that happen. The more time he waits, the more he hopes for a chance, no matter how pessimistic he is.

I felt that as well.

"Wait, that's not the point," I shake my head, snapping myself out of my thoughts. "That kiss was… meaningful, you can say. It didn't bother me like Yoshiyuki's kiss, too, but it made me think."

"You aren't really bothered by it..." Mikazuki stands up and walks to me, putting his thumb on my lips as he leans closer. "…Why? Don't answer me with because it doesn't bother me. I'm sure you felt something other than that."

I stare into his eyes, as deep blue and surreal as always.

"…You're close. And didn't you say you won't help?"
"You're getting closer, so I want to give one last push. I'm getting impatient, you see."

"Sheesh…"

Regarding that question, though, even if I felt something, I have no idea.

"Yamanbagiri, when I do this…" he presses his thumb on my parted lips, almost slipping inside my mouth, "…your heart doesn't beat so fast."

"Not anymore, yeah."

I'm already used to it. Even though I get embarrassed sometimes, which is a given, my heartbeat never get crazy anymore… before Yoshiyuki came and hit me like a truck, that is.

Mikazuki giggles hearing my thought. "So, going back to the road. When I do this…” He moves his head, kissing my cheek softly. I tremble as his lips go down to my neck.

"Mm… what's this all of a sudden…"

"Your heartbeat just rises slightly, but… does it feel good?"

"It feels… good."

His other hand goes down to my thighs, stroking them. Even though they're covered in fabric, I can feel his fingers very well, making me whimper. It's a very natural reaction, especially since he is still kissing my neck right now. He rises again to my cheek, and then to my ear.

"If I do this again and again, would you ask for more?" Mikazuki whispers right next to my ear.

Whoaa, what kind of question is that….

"I hate to say it, but yes."

"Fufu. I love it when you're honest. Now, imagine Yoshiyuki doing it to you. How would you feel?"

My heart feels like it's stopped beating for a moment.

Yoshiyuki… doing this to me? I can imagine kissing, but touching even more is… nope. Since my image of him is usually pure, it's almost unthinkable. Almost impossible.

Almost.

However….

It's just my image of him, at the end. It's very possible for the real him to do that. After all, he had kissed my lips and cheek. He teased me. He said he'd jump on me if I show him a meek face… and even I know what he means by jumping in that sense.

It's very unusual for romantic love to not be accompanied by sexual attraction and desire.

No matter how seemingly pure Yoshiyuki is, he must've had thoughts about dirty things as well. He is just better at restraining himself than others. In conclusion, he can just do these stuffs to me if we ever go out.

Just like what I do with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru.
Kissing, hugging, cuddling, holding hands, and… and… and…. "Hmm, mm," Mikazuki mutters as he puts his hand on my chest, "It's beating very fast. Your face is so red, Yamanbagiri."

"Uh… huh…." "If only it's that easy to get that reaction again…." "H-Hey, I'm sure I still show that no matter what when it's CENSORED BY RATING scenes."

"It's a given, isn't it?" Mikazuki strokes my head before he backs off, "So, will you hate it if the one who touches you is Yoshiyuki? What if he goes further than these teases?"

"I…." I know I should hate it, especially since he isn't my lover. Sure, he is my best friend, someone I admire, my savior, hero, but he has no right to just touch me like that.

And yet….

"I'd feel… happy?" Yes. This warm feeling spreading in my chest is undoubtedly….

O-Oh no. Oh no. Am I a - "No, it doesn't mean you're a slut or anything, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki stops me before I can continue with a troubled expression on his face. Hearing that word out of his mouth shows the sense of urgency. "What would you do if Akashi touches you like that?"

"I'd hate it and slam him with a chair, kick him, push him, and maybe give him some misfortune."

"See. It's not like you want to do it with everyone." He smiles as he sits on the bed again. "Yoshiyuki is special for you, just like how we are to you."

"Special…." Come to think of it… his actions for the past few days bother me, but I don't hate it. In fact, I might be fond of them, it's just bad for my weak heart.

Then….

"Okay, that's enough!"

Kogitsunemaru suddenly slams the door open. He is back from washing dishes. "Mikazuki, we aren't supposed to help him that much!" He says, stomping his feet as he approaches us.

"What can I do? I want this to end already."

"I understand that, but… nggh, it's too late now, anyway."

He turns his head to look at me and pats my head gently.

"Do you understand now, Yamanbagiri?"
I shake my head. "I get that you're telling me that I love Yoshiyuki, but I have conflicts about that."

"I can see that. And we can't help you on that. You should think about the past this weekend and maybe ask others about it. There're many people willing to help other than us."

"Mm… yeah…"

"Let's sleep for now. You're tired. Rest well so you can think."

Kogitsunemaru suddenly pulls my body, carrying me on his arms. That action surprises me, but more importantly,

"Wait, I haven't saved the game! The save point is near!"

"Games with save points instead of usual method where you can save anywhere are such a hassle, geez. Why do people make such games?"

He ends up putting me back on my chair and I fiddle with my laptop.

"It's challenging. It is frustrating sometimes, though."

"And here, Kogi is ready to eat you. Pfft," Mikazuki chuckles.

Kogitsunemaru shoots him a glare with a red face. "I'm sure you're thinking the same!"

"We don't share consciousness, but I agree on that point."

"Just let me play peacefully, please. I'm playing on hard mode. I'd slam you guys onto the desk if I fail here."

The two fall silent as they wait patiently.

"Yamanbagiri, um…" Kogitsunemaru speaks up after a long silence - or not completely silent since the game is running with BGM and sound effects.

"What is it?"

After a pause, he sighs. "…Nothing."

…What's with him? Come to think of it, he speaks less nowadays, like he has less fighting spirit… hmm. Might be thanks to the changing weather, I guess. It can push people to get gloomy, after all.
Who should I talk to, I wonder….

Maybe I should take up Kousetsu-senpai’s offer? Mitsutada-senpai? Ookurikara? But it'd be weird if I just ask out of blue, "What does it mean to love someone?". Okay, maybe there's a better question out there, but I have no idea what else to ask, and my lovers won't help. Kousetsu-senpai might, but I'm too embarrassed to even ask him. He looks like someone innocent that'll blush and faint just from seeing a kiss, you know….

Time passes, and before I know it, the school ends, as indicated by the ringing bell.

Hey, I haven't done anything at all!

It passes so peacefully because Yoshiyuki leaves me alone, only talking to me whenever he needs to. After the days when he clings to me, it feels almost surreal, but perhaps it's for the best. At the end, though, I think of nothing. Just like a zombie, I just zone out and go in auto-pilot mode, writing like a good student is supposed to do, but my mind is completely blank.

Wasting time like this seems to be my specialty. That's bad!

My usual group (as I'm too lazy to say the names since you already know) walk together to the entrance, but I stay far behind them. That's when Kashuu approaches me and whispers, "Yamanbagiri, do you have any plans after this?"

"No, I don't."

"Then, how about we go home together? There's something I want to talk about… only the two of us."

"Sure."

We haven't talked about his condition at all even after days and weeks. Too occupied with our own troubles, I guess. I have to slap myself out of my daze and face what I should face right now.

When we get to the entrance, raindrops start to fall, and in mere seconds, it becomes heavy downpour.

"Oh. It's already the rainy season, huh," I mumble. "I didn't bring umbrella."

"Didn't you check weather?" Kashuu asks, rummaging something from his bag.
"I didn't."

"I didn't bring mine as well," Yoshiyuki says with an embarrassed smile.

"I'll share one with Yamanbagiri, then," Kashuu says as he takes out an umbrella from his bag. "You don't mind, right?"

"Yeah."

"Running ahead before everyone else can, I see. Well, I still have something to do at school, so I'll excuse myself now," Hasebe says, waving his hand as he walks away.

"…What thing, I wonder?" Yamato mumbles after Hasebe is gone at the corner.

"I don't think he'll ever say it, eh," Yoshiyuki says, "Anyway, so we'll share an umbrella again, Yasu!"

"So it seems. You can use it after I get home, but don't forget to bring it tomorrow."

"Of course!"

I'm really glad both Yoshiyuki and I are uncaring about weather so we don't share an umbrella… it'd be totally awkward. I'd like to avoid that at all costs.

Kashuu and Yamato open their umbrellas, but then Yoshiyuki gasps.

"I forgot a textbook!"

"Really?" Yamato shoots him a tired look. He seems to be under the weather today. "Go run and get it now!"

"Aye aye sir!"

Just as he is told, Yoshiyuki runs off to the stairs.

"We'll get going first," Kashuu says, "Come here, Yamanbagiri."

"You don't need to hurry," Yamato pouts.

"Come on, let me have quality time with Yamanbagiri alone just this one time."

"Nggh~ Okay, whatever!" He acts like he is pissed off as he crosses his arms, but then his body relaxes. "I understand. There's a lot of things to be talked about, right? It can't be helped."

Kashuu smiles. "Don't worry. Someday, you'll be able to share an umbrella with Yamanbagiri."

"Why with me?" I ask.

But Yamato's face flushes red and he pushes Kashuu in panic. "Go ahead already!"

"Ahahah, okaaay. Let's go, Yamanbagiri."

I nod and walk to him, adjusting my position to be below the umbrella, and turn my head to Yamato. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye bye!"
Kashuu and I walk through the school grounds, the rain gets heavier with each step we take. As expected, the ground is slippery now. We walk slowly like others, careful to not get wet and slip. It's inevitable that Kashuu's shoulder hits mine a few times, but it feels… a bit uncomfortable. What a narrow space… but I certainly don't want to dive with just my jacket in this downpour.

I notice Kashuu walks wobbly, his hand holding the umbrella shakes after we leave the gate.

Oh. Right.

"Kashuu, shouldn't I be the one holding the umbrella?"

"H-Huh? Why?"

"I'm taller than you, so it should be easier for me to hold it instead."

Kashuu frowns, face full of dipleasure. He somehow looks like Hasebe with that expression. "You're just a bit taller! Just let me do this."

Why does he look angry? It's a bit scary.

"I have a feeling that if you hold it, you'll tilt the umbrella to my side and so you're the one getting wet. I'd hate that. None of us should get wet."

It's not like I have a plan to do that, but… that's very like me. How does he know that?

"Uhh… okay."

I don't want to make him angry, so I just accept it.

Just then, the sound of raindrops hitting umbrella is getting louder.

"The rain is getting heavier. How about we take shelter first? It's not good even with umbrella," Kashuu says, "Besides, I want to talk to you in a peaceful place, not in the middle of rain."

"Mm. Let's do that."

"Let's go to a cafe. It's near here, a bit further away than my house, though, but we can make it."

We walk a bit faster to the shopping district. It's unusually vacant today… well, that's a given. Kashuu leads me to a familiar-looking cafe.

"This place is….."

"Yasu told me. He brought you and Hasebe here before, right?" Kashuu says as he closes the umbrella and puts it at the entrance. "It's my favorite place long before his, you know."

"I see."

We sit on a sofa, with a window next to us.

"It's cold, so hot drinks sound nice," Kashuu mutters, "And maybe soup too."

"Sounds good… but I kind of want noodles now. Hmm…" I'm surprised to find all kinds of noodles here.

"I recommend this hot ramen if you likes spicy things. Udon is good too - oh, I guess I'll order that."
"Okay, I'll choose ramen."

I order hot tea while Kashuu orders hot chocolate for drinks. Just thinking about the warmth of drinks and foods make me happy already. Wait, maybe combination of spicy ramen with hot tea is bad…? L-Let's be optimistic for now.

"Man, it sure pours down heavily. I hope it stops soon," Kashuu says, looking at the window. Sure enough, the rain is falling harder and harder. It'd be hard to go home under an umbrella in rain like that.

"Yeah…"

Silence falls upon us.

This is probably the first time we're together, just the two of us, so it's awkward. Sure, I was with him before, but that was when he was unconscious. That's different, of course.

"So…" Kashuu starts speaking, "First of all, thank you for everything you've done to me. I don't remember clearly, but I heard that you saved me, in one way or another… even when I attacked you. I… I'm sorry for attacking you. I really don't know." He bows, hiding his face with his hair.

"It's fine. No problem. You had no control of yourself at that time."

"Even so, I… I shouldn't do that…"

"I understand. I accept your apology, so lift your head, Kashuu."

Kashuu lifts his head and smiles wryly. "Really, thank you very much. I don't think I can sit here at this moment without your help."

"You're praising me too much. The specialists do all the hard work, you know."

"And paperwork. Yeah, I saw that. I never expected them to do paperwork. It's an amazing sight to see people dressed as monks writing frantically and work on piles of papers."

I chuckle. "All organizations are the same in that regard."

He nods. "So, um… I added another work for you, huh. You have to observe me… well, I guess it's better than being locked in my house and put illusion for my mother, but…"

"It's fine. Observing is easy. I believe you're a good person, so there's no problem so far. You look completely normal. If you feel the urge to drink blood or anything violent, please tell me quickly."

"Yeah."

Our drinks arrive at that moment. The waiter put the cups of steaming drinks on the table and leave.

"Haa… so warm," Kashuu says, putting his hand around the cup.

I stir the tea with a spoon and carefully take a sip. My tongue almost burns, surprising me, but the tea tastes great. I look at Kashuu, who is staring at the scenery beyond the window. Did he invite me here just to say that? I might be dense, but I realize he has something more to say.

"Say…" Kashuu speaks up after a long moment, turning his gaze to me, "are those two oddities here? You know, the ones who keep following you around. Or should I say your guardians?"
"Oh. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. They are here, well, inside my shadow."

"I see… uh, I forgot their names."

"You never talk to them again, after all. Yamato too."

"Yasusada and I can see oddities now, but it still feels weird…" he says as he moves the spoon in his chocolate. "…We're still scared to interact with them. I guess I'm half oddity now, but it's different."

"It's a given. Don't worry about it. You'll get used to it soon. Keep in mind that interaction should be limited in public. In people's eyes, you're talking alone, after all."

"So it's hard to interact with oddities, huh..."

"Yep. Unless you can… well, say, communicate through minds. For real example, I can communicate with Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki easily because they can read my mind - telepathy, in cooler terms. I can read their minds if I want too as well, but it's a bother."

Kashuu's eyes snap wide open. "Really? That's cool! It really feels like fiction."

"We're bound in a contract, after all."

"I see..." For some reason, his face looks sad, but it soon vanishes, and I think I might just imagined it. "Uh, do you mind telling me what is contract you speak about?"

"No problem. You can say it's similar to a written contract in real world that has something to do with laws and pact in fiction, like between familiar and master. After we discuss the terms and conditions - like making a promise - our souls are bound in that promise, and should one of us break it, there's punishment. Of course, this requires magic. There are all kinds of contracts, but mine with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru leans heavily to contract between familiars and a master."

"Hmm mm. Looking at fictions, familiars are long-live partners, right? So it's possible…or even normal…to share senses with them."

"Yeah. They can also feel my pain and emotions, and in return, I also can know theirs."

Although we downgraded feeling each other's emotions, since we can read each other easily even without it….

My contract with the two of them are… filled with mundane conditions, though, like me brushing Kogitsunemaru's hair at least once, Mikazuki drying my hair, good morning and good night kisses, and we sleep together every night unless something blocked that, and so on. I have the notes in my phone and PC.

…It almost feels like we're living a married life here! I'm getting embarrassed.

I suppose that isn't so far away from the truth, since one condition is like… a marriage oath… well, this is why they're my fiancés… gaaah, so embarrassing!

"I see, I see," Kashuu's voice wakes me up, "I learn new things everyday. The more I know about this new world, the more I realize how big the world is. I'd be happy if you teach me more, Yamanbagiri."

"If you like… just ask me anything."

He nods. "Thanks..." He uncomfortably shifts his position. "Um, so, I have other things I want to
talk about other than that. This... might be just me prying into your problem, but..."

"Hmm?"

"You have something on your mind, right? To the point where it weighs on you, troubling you. I don't exactly know what it is, but..." Kashuu stares at me, his hand stirring the spoon in his chocolate, "you can talk to me, if you don't mind. I'm worried about you."

I blink a few times, looking at him weirdly, before my brain can process what he had just said. I'm shocked. "Is it very obvious?"

"Not really. I don't think Yasusada or Hasebe noticed it."

"Oh..."

Well, I'm glad if that's the case. Now that he knows, I'll just have to spill the beans.

"Thanks for being worried about me."

"It's not something to be thanked about, really... think of it as me paying my debt to you."

"Debt?"

"For helping me. Saving me. And many more." He smiles. "So, go ahead, tell me anything. I'll try to help to the best of my abilities."

"Well, this is embarrassing..." I look down at the table, tapping my knuckles a few times. I have no idea what else to ask, so I will just... ask this. I take a deep breath. "Kashuu, um... do you know... what does it mean to love someone? Romantically speaking...?"

Kashuu's eyes snap wide open as he stares at me. How uncomfortable... but then a smile forms on his lips, and he starts to laugh. He teasingly leans closer to me, a grin is visible on his face. "Oooh, my. So it's a problem about love? I see, I see."

"No, uh, umm..." I can feel my cheeks are hot. My face must be red now.

He puts a finger on his lips. "Don't worry, I'll keep it a secret, I swear. I won't even ask who is this lucky person."

"I believe in you, then... uh, so for the background... this person is someone close to me. My best friend, you can say. He confessed to me, after years of being together as friends. It's not like I've never fallen in love, but... this time, it feels different, so I'm confused."

"Confused? Why?"

"Well..." I'm troubled, searching for the right words as I look down at my hands. "I know that I'm scared of destroying our relationship, but more than that, I just feel like... this feeling can't be love. It hurts... in a different way. I've never felt this pain before. Sure, I've felt pain from longing, which just shows affection, but this is far from that."

Kashuu stays quiet, but he is focusing on me, listening.

"It's suffocating. And I don't know why. I realize I've always wanted to reach out to that person. Seeing them happy is enough for me... that's what it should be. I know that... I don't deserve them. I don't deserve their feelings. So I shouldn't be selfish. I shouldn't wish to stay by their side. Despite that, despite knowing that, I..."
And then, I just realize. It's so simple and obvious. Really, all this time, this pain has always been with me. I was just unconsciously averting my eyes, because it's Yoshiyuki, and I thought it's different. No, I wanted to believe it was different. As usual, I'm so hopeless. I know the answer all along. It's all... so simple, and it's not different from the usual situation.

Pangs of guilt pierce me, but more than that, I'm glad to find the answer to this pain.

This pain is…

"...I still wish for their existence next to me. I'm selfish to the core. I can't forgive myself for that."

...Conflict between my selfish desires and my self-loathing... or whatever you'd call my desire to not bother anyone.

Wanting to be with him, and wishing to not bother him at the same time. What else can I do to not bother him, other than going further away from him?

And that... I can't bear to see him in pain.

I hear Kashuu taking a breath before he places his hands on the table, solemnly looking at his hands before he looks at me. "Are you saying that you aren't allowed to be selfish and wish for them, when they also wish for you? If you reject them, you'll just lie to yourself and hurt that person."

"Y-Yeah... I understand that logically... but it's hard, Kashuu. I... I hold them dearly, and I know very well that if they date me, they'll just get dragged into more problems. You know, oddities-related ones. I'm a magnet for troubles. Because I... love them, in whatever sense, I don't want to see them in danger ever again. I want to keep them safe."

Kashuu nods, finally understanding. "I see. Love is a very, very hard thing. There are all sorts of contradictions."

I nod sadly.

"And then, you probably fear that your relationship might be over even if you accept them, because who knows if you break up and such."

"I guess so...."

"Honestly, I don't know what kind of advice I can give to you...."

Ugh. Well, I expected that....

"...But if I can say something... I felt it too. The pain. The contradiction. Just because I love someone I can't possibly reach."

I look up at him, seeing his melancholic expression as he smiles wryly.

"It hurts knowing that I can't be with the one I love. It hurts knowing that I've hurt them, now unqualified to stay with them, and yet they still accept me. It hurts when I know I can't possibly reach them, my heart still longs for it, and even thinks of bad things just to reach them by any means...."

"...Kashuu?"

That agonized expression on his face is something new for me, tugging at my heartstrings.

Realizing this, he chuckles awkwardly. "Ahaha, what am I saying? Sorry for rambling... what was
my point again? Err, anyway, I just want to say that… that pain is normal to be felt. Wishing to be together since it's painful when being part, and yet afraid to reach the said person, and scared to hurt them, they're normal… or something like that."

"I see… then, what… should I do?"

"I don't know. That's something you have to decide alone."

I feel my shoulders slumping down. "Ahh… yeah, of course."

"All I can say is that you have to follow what your heart wants the most above anything else… without whatever factors."

"What… I want the most."

Repeating these words, I feel an ache in my chest.

"Kashuu, what… what do you want the most?"

It might be a cruel question, but I realized it just after the words escape my lips.

Kashuu looks at me, smiling, as if unfazed by my question.

"You see, I'm quite a dangerous person. I'm sure I'll bring all sorts of trouble too… but, I still want to stay with them, see them every day, talk to them, and see them smiling and happy… even though that happiness in love is not with me. It's painful, sure, but I can't let go of this feeling so easily, so I'll cling to it until the very end… until it vanishes entirely."

His smile pains me, because he looks sad, and yet determined at the same time.

I don't understand, after all….

Why didn't I feel the same pain towards Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru? Yoshiyuki is stronger than me, he can take care of himself better, but I'm still afraid to drag him further to my hell. Sheesh… I just get more confused now….

That's when the waitress comes and brings us our foods - udon for Kashuu and hot ramen for me.

"Okay!" Kashuu claps his hands, "Let's put aside that topic and fill our stomachs. You can't fight with an empty stomach."

"Yeah, you're right." I take chopstics and look at the bowl of hot ramen. "Um, is this legal? The color is so red, it reminds me of paint….

He laughs seeing my face. "Sorry, I forgot to tell you that there's no level for the spiciness… and so, it's in the highest level."

"I'm pretty sure you didn't simply forget… evil."

"Hahaha. Just try it."

I grumble and slowly lift some noodles with my chopsticks, watching the swaying hot steam and gulp. There's tint of red there and here on them. Considering how red the broth is… I gulp, slowly but surely swallow the noodles.

"Mm, this is not bad? It's not as spicy as it looks."
"Right! Try the broth."

I take the spoon and fill it with the suspicious-looking red liquid and sip it. "Whoa… it's hot, sure, but not too spicy too… in fact, it's perfect?"

Kashuu grins before he eats his own udon. "Don't judge food by its appearance alone. That ramen is the most popular menu for a reason."

"You're right. It's delicious."

"Eat up and forget your worries for a moment."

"I'll do that. There's no way I can let this delicious food go waste."

Swallowing down the noodle, I remember that Yoshiyuki is bad with spicy food. He probably wouldn't even last for two minutes eating this, even if it's relatively tame… thinking about that time when he accidentally ate spicy chicken and cried a river makes me smile. We've shared a lot of memories together, from sad ones to happy ones.

I want to stay with him and go on an adventure like we always do.

…I can't keep this up. I have to answer him as soon as possible.

I have to make clear of my feelings towards him.

To do that, I still believe I have to remember what happened two years ago. I believe it's important, like a piece of puzzle. A key to discover something beyond the door. After I lost my consciousness, what exactly happened? Everything is vague for me.

Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru… I know you hear me. Why don't you answer? Even days before that….

"We don't know what happened," Kogitsunemaru says, his voice echoing inside my head, but I can see him mentally shaking his head. "When you fell to that malice, you just vanished, completely swallowed. I searched and finally found you after 2 hours, leaning on a tree just in front of the barrier."

"I grouped with Kogitsunemaru when you disappeared and split up again, and then he came back with you unconscious in his arms. You know the rest - when you woke up in the shrine, you slapped him," Mikazuki says, his voice slightly mocks the said fox at the end.

"So, the missing puzzle you're searching for is most likely the gap in that 2 hours. We can't answer because we don't know."

I see… I kind of expected that, but disappointment hurts.

Thank you.

"The one who knows what happened might be Yoshiyuki," Kogitsunemaru continues, "Or he might not remember as well. We've never asked him about it, thinking it might be traumatic."

Yeah….

At the end, I have to search for it myself.

"Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki calls, "Do you remember when did you and Yoshiyuki make that promise?"
What promise? The one Yoshiyuki was talking about?

"Yes."

I remember vaguely it was… 2 years ago? When I was still in hospital before I moved to his school. Oh, he made a promise with me way back when we're children too.

"What's the content of the promise?"

I stop moving my chopsticks and drink hot tea carefully while mulling over my answer. Well, uh, it's about… Yoshiyuki will help me, protect me, and stay by my side no matter what happens. What about it? He already said that the promise is just an excuse, so it doesn't really matter now… it's really just what he wishes for.

"Hmm… I see."

I continue to eat, feeling slightly disturbed by how he ends the conversation, like he isn't convinced.

"So, Yamanbagiri."

I look at Kashuu who suddenly adresses me after a long silence. He clears his throat and stares back.

"I'm sorry I can't help much."

"It's okay. I think I'm getting closer to a decision. Thank you."

It feels like that, but more questions appear in my mind. I hate this… I hate how indecisive I am, because I'm afraid of letting go and grasp an unknown thing. Even so, I don't want to mess this up and hurt Yoshiyuki. I must not. So, I have to answer him quickly. There's not much time left until his patience runs out.

No, I'm sure he'll wait for my reply, no matter how many years it takes… but I can't let him wait for that long.

Kashuu might've noticed my thoughts as he smiles bitterly. "Remember what I said? Just think about what you really want above anything else… and what is the best for both yourself and that person."

"Yeah…" I sigh and take one last sip of the broth. "You're amazing, Kashuu… to be able to make a decision like that. That person, too…"

He looks taken aback at first, I can see faint color of pink across his cheeks, but he laughs it off. "It's normal, really! The dilemma you're facing right now is also something that everyone who falls in love have gone through… so, you can do it, Yamanbagiri. Believe in yourself." He pumps a fist to encourage me, and it works a bit.

"Thanks."

I wonder if he notices that the one I'm talking about is Yoshiyuki. If he does, what does he actually think about same-sex relationship? I'm scared to think about it, but that's not what I should be thinking about. Priorities, Yamanbagiri… my mind sure wanders off real quick, it's dangerous.

"If you have anything else on your mind, you can tell me."

I nod. "Mm. Thanks again, Kashuu. I'm glad for talking to you."

"Eehh, you say it too many times… well, you're welcome, but I've done nothing, really," he smiles,
"Oh, by the way, today's on me. It's my treat as thanks."

"Eh? You don't have to - "

He puts a finger on his lips, stopping me from continuing. "Shh. Just let me do this one thing for you."

"…Okay." I'm sure he'll keep on insisting if I refuse, and free meal is good.

Kashuu finishes udon with a smile and claps his hands before looking at the window. "Oh, the rain has stopped."

I look at the same direction as he does. "You're right…"

"Ahh~ I guess our little date ends here."

"Yeah." I smile hearing his words. It isn't a date, of course, and considering the topic, it's actually a risky move, but my heart feels somewhat light. "…Thank you, Kashuu."

"Stop that already, I'm blushing here."

"Ahahah."

Shortly after, I finish my ramen (it's quite spicy after eating all of that without drinking), and after our cups are empty, Kashuu pays at the cashier. He kind of… shrieks when he sees the price, but he pays nonetheless. He takes his umbrella and folds it before I push the door open.

"Nggh~ The air after rain is nice," he says, stretching his arms. "We part ways here, then, Yamanbagiri."

"Yeah."

"I'd like to visit your house someday, since you've visited mine."

"I don't mind if you visit now." He scratches his cheek awkwardly. "Nah, I'll pass for now. Someday. I'm not ready yet."

Why does he have to be ready? I feel like it's something that I must not ask.

"Anyway," he pats my shoulder a few times. "Good luck, and see you tomorrow. Be careful on your way home."

"See you tomorrow. You too, be careful."

He walks to the same direction we've gone through, and although I can go that way, the nearest path is to go to the opposite way. I see him waving his hand in the distance, prompting me to do the same before turning and walking away.

…I'm really glad I have a kind and caring friend like him.

I don't think I use the chance rightly, though. In the end, it's my own decision.

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says kindly, manifesting next to him and places his two hands on my shoulders. "You'll overheat and be unable to decide anything."
Y-Yeah... I'll try to. Easier said than done.

"Focus on the road or you'll hit a pole again," Mikazuki says, appearing and chuckling.

That pole accident only happened once, so I'll be fine!

"Hitting walls and doors? I've counted 40 times for the past two years...."

J-Just 40-ish. Shut it!

I can only sigh seeing them laughing at my reaction, but I can feel my body is getting relaxed. Really, with just this kind of normal interaction... nothing is resolved, but at least I can be calm, putting aside Yoshiyuki's weird teases, and make a renewed resolve.
Hello. We're still in the same day as the previous chapter, for some reason, and I have a bad feeling.

"Who are you talking to?" Kogitsunemaru asks, turning his head slightly as I brush his long hair from behind. The thick white hair on my hands feel so nice. I like this daily routine, even though I still think it's unnecessary to brush his hair when we're about to sleep.

"Nothing. Don't mind it… there, done." I flick his ears once.

But there's no meaningful reaction. "Hmm… Mikazuki, can you leave the two of us for a bit?"

Mikazuki looks at him in confusion. Kogitsunemaru gets off from bed, turning his body so I can see his serious expression and feel my body stiffens. Noticing his seriousness, Mikazuki folds his clothes and puts them on desk with a sigh.

"Okay. Don't do anything weird to him, you hear me?"

"I won't, really."

"I'll kill you if you make him cry."

"…Please just slap me if I do."

He walks away and closes the door. With that, Kogitsunemaru heaves a sigh before he sits next to me.

"What is it, Kogi?"

"Uh, umm." He scratches his cheek awkwardly.

I press him further, unable to take the pressure and silence. "What do you want to talk about to even send Mikazuki away?"

"Unggh…" He groans, shifting his position uncomfortably, his finger twirling his hair. "I really hate to say this after all I've said, but…uh. I can't hold this in any more. I've been thinking about it. Just think of it as an opinion, okay? It's not very concrete… it's just how I honestly feel, because I just want the best for you."

"…Okay…"
With that preface, he takes a deep breath.

"Yamanbagiri, I believe your relationship with Yoshiyuki is self-destructive. In other words, it'll just destroy him and you… at least if the both of you stay this way forever."

"Ha…?"

It takes me five seconds to swallow what he said.

"M-My relationship with Yoshiyuki… is… self-destructive…?" I repeat the words in disbelief.

He nods with a pained expression.

"You might not see it, Mikazuki might not see it, others might not see it, but I do. Your relationship with him is unhealthy, Yamanbagiri. I mean… how can a relationship that pushes the both of you to sacrifice yourselves is healthy and not destructive?"

"W-What are you… talking about….

Seeing me trying to avert my gaze, Kogitsunemaru holds my shoulders, so tightly that I feel a bit pained.

"Look at my eyes when we talk, Yamanbagiri," he says with a somewhat rasped voice, "I understand that you love him so much that you're willing to sacrifice yourself for him, and he feels the same way about you. I understand, I think the same about you. But just like Yoshiyuki said, it's not right for one to sacrifice himself for the other. Do you understand that?"

"I, I…I know. I understand that. But that's why I said, there's no solution, because we….

"The two of you refuse to budge from your belief to sacrifice yourself for the other. Yes, that's the problem. You know this, but you… seem to avoid thinking about it. Yoshiyuki didn't touch the topic, either, but I think it's an important matter for you to talk and think about before deciding to reject or accept his confession."

"A… that's…"

I want to retort, but my words trail off, because he is right. I consciously try to not think about it, averting my eyes from the uncomfortable things… yes, that's very much like me, and very human… and I hate it. Even knowing this, someone else has to wake me up to see reality… really, I'm….

Kogitsunemaru gasps audibly. He must be reading my thoughts. "Y-Yamanbagiri… I'm sorry, I'm not… trying to push your self-hatred or anything, I just….

My head feels dizzy, I can't think straight, and I can't answer him.

Even knowing all of this, I can't just swallow it easily.

"…I want you to love and take care of yourself, Yamanbagiri. I'm glad that, even if you hate yourself, you accept me and Mikazuki… even if at first, it's only to fill your emptiness. You let us love you, and in return, you start to love us. And as I said before, I can't change your perception of yourself so easily, so I can only act passively - I can't judge you for hating yourself… and I think you've become better in that regard. I can feel that you love us genuinely now, and I'm so happy, but….

He inhales and exhales air deeply.
"When it comes to Yoshiyuki, you're at your worst. Even in general - like oddties-related-cases, your principle of saving everyone that doesn't include yourself is already bad, but it's far higher with Yoshiyuki, to the point I can say suicidal... don't you realize it? Being selfless and putting others above yourself is one of the things I love about you, but you usually take it to the extreme. Mikazuki and I can prevent you to self-destruct, but it's hard to do so when it's between you and Yoshiyuki... and the fact that the both of you lean to self-destruct makes it worse. And, just as he said, it's wrong for the both of you to do that."

I can only stare blankly at his face, wrinkled in pain and sadness, feeling that my chest aches.

"I just... want everyone to be happy..." 

"Sacrifices like that won't make anyone happy."

"B-But... sometimes, there's no other way..."

"There is, if you don't give up. Your mind and heart are just too weak, so you tend to give up without trying out everything. You just go to the easiest way in your mind, to just satisfy your desire to - "

*I don't want to hear more!*

In that instant, I lightly slap his cheek and push him away from me, and cut our connection before I stand up, clenching my fists. He can't read my mind now.

Negative emotions are swirling inside me. I can feel them taking over me.

Kogitsunemaru, realizing that our connection has been severed and he had just got slapped, pales.

"Y-Yamanbagiri... y-you, you just..."

"...I don't know."

"Huh?"

"What is right or what is wrong, what I should do... I don't know anymore. I just... do whatever I think is right for everyone's sake... and now, you just... denied everything I did...!! My hard work, my tears, my pain...!"

"No, that's... I mean..."

My voice raises. "You did! You're saying what I think and feel are wrong! My actions are wrong! Everything I've done is a mistake! That's what you mean, right?!! Because fundamentally, my principle is wrong! So, everything I've done, you rendered them pointless!"

"This isn't about right or wrong, Yamanbagiri! And they aren't pointless at all - you've produced real results!" He stands up and grips my shoulders again, and though I try to shake him off, he grips me tightly. So much it hurts as his face twists... an expression of anger and something else I don't know.

"However, it's bad for you to continue like that! You'll just destroy yourself! Not everything can be solved with self-sacrifice!"

"So what?! I know that, I understand, but if that saves even one person... I...!"

"Saving equals happiness for you, right? Remember what I said just a few seconds ago? It won't make anyone happy! Never! You won't save anyone with sacrifice, and instead you just create more misery!"
"And how did you know that?! Surely, that's not absolute, and there's other - "

"Yamanbagiri!" He shouts, for the first time, raising his voice to the maximum - it has been a long time since the last time he directs this emotion to me. As if being slapped, I stop talking, my eyes wide open from the unexpected power of his voice. "Yoshiyuki said he'll follow you if you die… and I'm sure he is serious. Don't you ever consider that? I'm sure that, if he dies, you'll gladly follow as well."

"T-That's…"

…I guess… that's true. Sadly, unfortunately… that's the truth. There's no way Yoshiyuki can bear the guilt of letting me die, and he said so himself. I know myself well, and I feel the same about it… it's the truth.

Like everything else he said.

Even so, my stance, my ideal, my own self, I can't just…!

"So, tell me, what's happiness in that? You want everyone to be happy. Absolutely everyone… so, why do you choose a path that will make families and friends agonize over your death?"

"B-But, you know…" I gasp, trying to search the words to retort. "There's no guarantee that I'll die no matter what. There are risks, sure, and I might get injured - hell, I usually get injured, but as long as I'm alive and the results make people happy, what do I care?!"

"Just seeing you having injuries make people who cherish you sad! When you aren't home yet without news, they'll feel anxious and scared for your fate! That whole process is agonizing and painful!"

"They are only temporary things! As long as I'm alive, I can make them happy!"

We come back to the start, shouting from the top of our lungs. I don't care if my brothers can hear it. I have to retort everything he says.

"I…It's fine if the job is simple and not life-threatening, but don't you realize you're taking more and more dangerous tasks?! The risk of your death gets higher and higher! Not to mention that you're just worsening your mental health more than anything else!"

"If I die in the job, I'm sure they'll understand… my friends, my brothers… so, even if they're sad, I'm sure they'll understand… and I'd be happy to leave behind something worthy of my worthless self! My legacy! It's my way to show that I existed here before!"

I slap his hands from my shoulders, and as if taken aback, he takes a few steps back with wide eyes, speechless.

"This is all… also for myself…!" I scream, "This is what I truly want, how I want to use my short and meaningless life for!"

Kogitsunemaru grits his teeth and visibly clenches his fists.

"If I can just save one more person… then I'm sure my life would not be meaningless. Nobody else has to suffer… if it's just me, I'm fine with it. So, the world can be a better place, even a bit…."}

A cold breeze passes us with a thick silence. He seems to be at loss for words, and in the meantime, I take a few deep breaths, my throat hurting.
"Even if you save people, and they're saved physically, mentally, they might not be able to take your
sacrifice," Kogitsunemaru says after regaining some of his composure. "Even if you live, if you let
yourself get hurt so much for them, that will just become a burden and debt they'll have to carry for
the rest of their lives. And, oh, I can assure you, it's so heavy that you feel like suffocating."

"…Hk."

I can only respond with a strangled weird voice. Of course… of course that's possible. I, personally,
would feel the same if someone else sacrifice themselves for me. However….

"That's the more reason I have to be the only one to fall… because I hate to see someone else get
hurt for me. After all, I'm just a worthless human that'll just bring about misfortune to everyone." I
feel my nails digging into my skin. "My existence is a mistake. This is the only thing I can do to
redeem for my sins… I’d be better off not born at all."

Kogitsunemaru's face becomes darker even more than before, both angry and pained. "What sins?
You've done nothing wrong! And don't say that your existence is a mistake, that it’s better not to be
born at all….

"I'm just saying the truth."

"That's just what you think about yourself! For me, Yamanbagiri, you're…"

"What?" For the first time, I finally look straight into his teary and shaking eyes. "I'm nothing but
trouble for you as well. You have to put up with my selfishness, many times, even sharing me with
someone else you kind of dislike….

"That's… I can't deny that. It might be trouble sometimes, but it's nothing. You're someone very
precious to me. Someone I love more than anyone else in the world. So, I'd gladly put up with
anything you want as long as it's good for you and me." He takes a step forward closer to me. "If you don't exist, I don't think I'll be still alive and happy
like this. You're my everything, Yamanbagiri… I can't imagine a world without you. I'm scared to
think of that."

I stare at him dubiously. "Really?"

"Yes. If you die, I don't think I'll be able to live anymore. There's no meaning to my life if you aren't
there." As if realizing he just said something that shouldn't be told, he shakes his head. "I-I mean…
you saved me, Yamanbagiri. You saved others as well. If you don't exist, we might not be here at
this moment. So I can't accept your words about yourself. Your existence is meaningful and
priceless, so you, too, deserve to be saved."

Me… saving him? What is he talking about?

"I don't… I don't deserve that."

"You do!" He swings his hand and punches the bed, just making it creak, but loud enough to echo in
the room. "I don't know whatever sins you've mentioned, and I don't know if they are indeed grave
or not - I don't have to know if you don't want me to, but I know for sure that you're just a normal
human. Everyone, without exception, deserve happiness and to be saved. It doesn't matter whatever
sins they've committed. Remember what Ichigo once said?" "…I do."

"You aren't an unneeded speck of dust. Those who know you think that you're precious. In fact,
everyone else is the same. This world is big. Speaking in a bigger scale, it is true that we, humans, are just speck of dusts. However, as we interact with others, we become an important part of that person's life. The smallest scale is family... a blood connection that is unavoidable. No matter how small or big, everyone is a precious person for someone else. And thus, everyone deserves the same thing. Nobody should get less, nobody should get more."

Ichigo-senpai's gentle voice echoes in my mind. How am I able to remember his very words? Perhaps because they stabbed me to the core.

However.

"...But... that's...."

"You can't accept that? It's all just in your mind. It's just what you want, to torture yourself, to justify your sacrificial actions, to satisfy yourself in your circle of self-hatred... selfish and conflicted, aren't you."

"...I know." I bite my lower lip. "I know. That's why I'm the worst kind of human. I'm just a sinner, so I have to redeem for it somehow."

"Even so, you're - !"

Even without hearing the continuation, I know what he's going to say.

Just a repetition. You're precious, your life is full of meaning, priceless, and so you don't have to do these kinds of things anymore. Just living as yourself is enough for redemption.

"I'd rather die than hearing that. My redemption is the point of my life."

Kogitsunemaru's face hardens. He bites his lower lip before a sword suddenly appears in his hands. "I see you're so thick-headed. I don't want this, but... you leave me no choice."

He suddenly thrusts me the sword. "What?"

"If you want to die that much...then go ahead. Take this sword and cut open your stomach. You don't have to cut your wrist anymore... it'll be painless and quick, unlike cutting. What about it? Or do you prefer me to stab you?"

I stand frozen with wide eyes, looking at his serious expression in disbelief. "What are you saying?! Besides, I - "

"I know. You've never cut your wrist again since we started to live together with you... but sometimes, you feel the urge to, don't you? That's why you scratch yourself, or poke your wristband covering your scars, or have the point of a mechanical pencil poking your arm. You're smart, so you lighten our connection at these times so we don't find out... and indeed, I'd never know if Mikazuki had never told me."

My breathing stops for a moment. It hurts, it hurts, hurts... my nails are scratching my arm right now, aching with my thumping heart.

"...Since when have you known?"

"Just around 4 months ago." He looks at me and smiles sadly. "Can you imagine how I felt when Mikazuki told me that? It was devastating, knowing that you can't completely get rid of your suicidal tendencies, even after all of these medicines and therapy, and no matter how much we love each
other… I feel helpless. I can’t even help the one I love the most… and now you’re telling me to help someone else, forsaking you? There’s no way in hell I can accept that!”

I shudder at the intensity of his voice. My mind feels like about to burst… I put my hands on my ears and close my eyes, to stop hearing this and seeing this scene. It’s too painful, no, no, no…!

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry… I’m - “

“I don’t need your apology. The one who needs it the most… is yourself.” I hear him stepping closer, so I step backwards, away from him, but he keeps coming closer. “Yamanbagiri. What do you want? Take this sword and die, or continue to live, but from now on consider yourself more?”

“I… I… I don’t know…”

With my eyes closed, I can’t see his face, and yet I can tell what kind of expression he’s making right now.

"You know, when you opened up to us about the truth behind your wristband, about your depression and suicide attempts, and said that you've been going to therapy every time we must not follow you before... I was so happy. I was happy knowing that you trust us enough to tell us your darkest side. You depend on us to tell you when to take medicine, want us to help you to make some decisions, and want us to comfort you... I was really happy. I still am. I thought that, now we can help each other and be happy together...” His voice cracks up, like he is about to cry.

My heart shrieks hearing his pain.

"If you can depend on us on these times, why can't you depend on more things? You trust us enough, so why, on this case, you keep on... shoudering the pain yourself...!" I can hear him clenching the sword tighter. "I want you to understand, I... Mikazuki... and the others... feel the same towards you. We hate to see you in pain as much as you hate to see us injured. There’s another way other than self-sacrifice, Yamanbagiri... a way to create true happiness."

"I... I... gh." I don't know what to say, my throat feels like being strangled, I can only gasp as I slowly open my eyes, my sight blurry for some reason. I feel dizzy and heavy, my chest aching and I can't stand rightly. "I'm... sorry... I..."

Ahh... I'm sure he hates me now, saying all of these painful facts. I've hurt him. This is a point of no return. I'll be all alone again, and then....

"Yamanbagiri... I know all of your bad sides. Your weakness. One of your lowest points in life. It’s painful for me, too. Even so... I still love you, and I'll never leave you."

Before I can react, Kogitsunemaru closes our distance in a single move and jumps on me, hugging me tightly while his sword hits the floor.

"I want to make you happy. You aren't alone, Yamanbagiri. You can depend on others to share your burden, just like how you have others' burden on you. You don't have to despair and suffer all alone."

"K-Kogi...."

His body is warm and nice, slowly calming down my blazing heart for a reason I don't know. I'm angry towards him, and yet I can't push him away, and feel my body getting relaxed in his embrace. Perhaps it's also because his voice, sounding so fragile and weak....
"So please… depend on others more? That's what Yoshiyuki wants too, isn't it? He wants you to depend on him… I also want you to depend on me and Mikazuki. That way, nobody has to sacrifice themselves for others…"

No sound comes out of my mouth. I can't reply. I can feel his kindness and overwhelming affection towards me that I honestly feel like drowning. Being loved feels nice, but it's heavy at the same time… it's a bit suffocating and make me anxious, fear of abandonment piercing me, and yet… I don't want to let him go.

Why is love such a contradictory feeling?

"So, regarding Yoshiyuki," he releases his hug, "I'm not saying you can't bond with him… in fact, I support you and him to be together. But… if this continues, the two of you will just end up in a bad situation. I don't want that. I want to see you happy, just like you want to see us happy. Because I - and others - love you! So, please… just consider our feelings before you act, and maybe depend on us when you feel your burden is too heavy… nobody wants you to destroy yourself, Yamanbagiri."

My mouth gapes open, letting out a sigh.

"I'm sure you're not convinced, and that's fine. It's hard to change such beliefs and perception, especially about yourself. I just want to say it, so you can consider… but I got a bit too carried away there, so my points might be messed up, I'm sorry… I hope you understand," Kogitsunemaru takes a deep breath. "I'm sure Yoshiyuki has considered this, because he said it's wrong to sacrifice yourself like that. He might've given up on his ideal to sacrifice his own self, even if just a bit. So, it's your turn to consider it, Yamanbagiri… before you answer him. If you can't do it for your own self, maybe… you can do it for us who loves you. In return, we'll do whatever it takes to survive as well, so you don't have to be worried all the time."

Only a sigh escapes my lips. I'm still speechless, unable to say anything to him. Everything he said is true, and I try to swallow it fully, slowly but surely, with my anger going down… until I feel my cheeks are wet.

"Y-Yamanbagiri?"

I touch my cheek, and of course, I feel trail of tears from my eyes. Realizing that I'm crying. I start to sob… that's why my eyesight was blurry, I see… well, of course. I should've noticed it. Holding back tears isn't my specialty.

"T-This is… I'm sorry… I just…"

Kogitsunemaru halts his movement, his hands about to touch me. He bites his lower lip before he hugs me again, pushing my head to his chest. Warm and dependable, I cling to him as I sob. I'm always frustrated at my own weak, helpless self, and Kogitsunemaru did stab me right in the core… I'd be lying if I said I'm not angry at him. I still am. It's unreasonable, but my heart is still burning… however, more than that, this feeling….

"Kogi… I'm sorry, I'm sorry, so please…"

"Hmm?"

"Please don't leave me…"

Fear of abandonment. Anxiety. Knowing that I've hurt him badly and he knows my faults, he might hate me now, and then leave me… though I've never told him what happened, or what my sins are… because I'm a coward, I'm not ready, and afraid of these possibilities.
Now that I've tasted how sweet love is, I don't want to let it go to become alone again.

"Of course. I said it already. I'll never leave you… and it's in our contract, remember?"

"Yeah… but… I've hurt you like this, always, with my actions… and indecisiveness… it's, so… painful…hha. You have the right… to hate me now, so…hk."

My chest aches and tears can't seem to stop. What's with me today?

He strokes my head gently. "See, you think about me first before yourself… this is why I love you, really. I don't always feel hurt, you know? I respect your decision, and sometimes I feel that you're awesome for taking such risks. Still, I want to see you happy and safe, so I'd stay by your side and protect you in case something happens… it's my own desire as well. You're not a bother at all."

"No… I'm scared of being left out, so it's all just selfish of me… ahaha, how embarrassing….

"That's good. I don't think you're selfish at all, so it'd be good if you're more selfish. Being selfless has its values to keep yourself sane and alive."

"But didn't you say that I'm selfish…?"

"That one is a bit different. You're both selfless and selfish at the same time, so it's quite complicated… but if I have to measure it, I believe your selflessness is way higher than your selfishness, so you have to be more selfish… on many things."

"That's… weird."

"Life is strange. It's nothing new… you'll understand sooner or later."

I'm honestly not sure. I'm way too selfish, so I thought I have to sacrifice myself for others to redeem for that, and for my other sins… I've always thought that humans can't be selfish, so that we can mingle and interact with others peacefully. Selfishness will just cause a ruckus in public, so being selfless is better… but if I say that, we'd just get into an argument again. I have no strength to retort.

"Thank you, Kogi…"

"No problem. I'll do anything for you."

His hand strokes my cheek and lifts my head, wiping away tears from my eyes. I stare at him as he smiles and pats my head, filling my heart with fuzziness and warmth.

After a few moments when I've greatly calmed down, the door slams open. Mikazuki steps in with a dark face, and in an instant, Kogitsunemaru flies - literally flies - sideways, slamming to the bed with a loud sound that I'm amazed the bed is still standing. I can only watch dumbfoundedly as he slowly gets up while groaning in pain.

"W-Wha…" Kogitsunemaru grumbles, touching his red, swollen cheek, "What are you doing?!"

"You said to slap you if you make him cry, didn't you? So I did. Be grateful that I didn't kill you."

"That's a punch, not a slap!"

"Ooh, right, my bad. Yamanbagiri slapped you, so I thought you need more."

He doesn't feel guilty at all, even with that gentle smile… as expected. Wait, this is not the time to be amazed!
I walk to Kogitsunemaru. "A- Are you okay? Ah, of course not… uh, I'm sorry for slapping you too earlier…"

"Ahahaha," he chuckles bitterly, shifting his body to take a more comfortable position on the bed, a blood dripping down from the edge of his lips. "This is nothing. Actually no, a god's punch feels 50 times more painful than anything else in the world, but this isn't the first time I've tasted this kind of punch, so I'm okay. I expected that."

"Sorry…"

He smiles and pats my head. "You're not at fault, so you don't have to apologize."

"Mmm…"

"Can you bring me the first aid kit, though?"

"That's not necessary." Mikazuki approaches us. "I'll heal you."

"Repairing what you've broken, I see…" Kogitsunemaru grumbles with a doubtful look.

"…Perhaps you want to taste it once more?"

"N- No, thank you! I'd be happy if you heal me!"

Still standing, Mikazuki raises his hands around Kogitsunemaru's face, and a faint yellow light starts to shine from his palms. Sparkles dance around in the air before passing through Kogitsunemaru's face. A comforting wind blows even though the windows are closed. This is one of Mikazuki's power as a shinrei, healing injuries. You can say he's a holy creature, so he can do this kind of thing… but of course, with limited power.

"I believe this much will suffice," Mikazuki says after a long silence, heaving a sigh as the light vanishes from view. Sure enough, traces of wound is almost gone from Kogitsunemaru's face, no blood or swelling, just a faintly red cheek.

Kogitsunemaru rubs his cheek and nods, "Thanks… saying that to the person who punched me feels weird. But really, thank you. I'd hate to have a swollen face for days."

"You're welcome."

As I help Kogitsunemaru to stand up, I glare at Mikazuki.

"Mikazuki, you went a bit overboard earlier."

"I admit, I did… seeing you crying made me unable to think straight. I apologize, Kogitsunemaru," he says, with a voice that still holds back a grudge. His eyes barely look at the said fox.

"…It's fine. Making Yamanbagiri cry is unforgiveable of me. I really got too carried away earlier and said things I shouldn't have said, only to hurt him."

"But you said nothing wrong. I just… it's still hard to take. I'm stupid, so…"

Kogitsunemaru suddenly hugs me from the side, and he whispers right next to my ear. "Shh. It's okay. Let's drop the topic here. There's no need to go further."

"…Okay."
Mikazuki doesn't want to lose, so he hugs me from the other side, his cheek rubbing my cheek. Soft and tickling. So now I'm getting sandwiched between two soft and warm bodies....

"W-What is this?"

"Just for comfort... and I need to charge my energy again."

"O-Oh...."

For me, the situation is still awkward, my body is still stiff in alert, even though the tears have dried up. I mean, my lover just told me of a painful truth, and my other lover just punched the heck out of him... and now we're cuddling like it's nothing.

"What, you don't want to hug us?" Mikazuki teases. "I can tell what you're thinking."

I shake my head. "That's not what I mean. I like your hugs, warm and comforting, but the situation is a bit...."

"There's no need to fight. We've passed that stage already, so it's pointless... and I deserve it and I want it, Yamanbagiri, so everything is fine. You worry too much sometimes," Kogitsunemaru says.

"You... want to get punched?"

"Don't say it like that with a disgusted face! I don't mean that!" He panics, shaking his head with a scared expression on his face, "I mean, making you cry... it doesn't matter why, seeing you cry hurt me, even more if I were the cause of that. You can say it's to make me feel better about myself, because I feel guilty."

"I see... I kind of... understand that."

He smiles bitterly.

"Well, I must admit punching Kogitsunemaru make me feel better. A lot better. All of my pent-up frustrations just went out..." Mikazuki says with an innocent chuckle, "so it's a win-win situation."

"N-No wonder it's so painful and deadly, you put your heart into it!" Kogitsunemaru sweats, stroking his cheek, as if feeling the pain again.

"Fufufufu."

"S-Scary...."

I smile seeing their exchange and feel clouds over my mind have lifted up. No matter what and when, they never fail to make me calm and relaxed.

"Thanks, the both of you."

"We did nothing of note, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says, "But you're welcome."

"Anything for you," Kogitsunemaru adds, hugging me even tighter, and I can feel his silky hair on my cheek and head.

"Ehehe. I love you."

"That's rare... we love you, too."
"We should sleep soon, and continue hugging while sleeping," Mikazuki says, releasing his arms from my body.

"Right…ah, before that, Mikazuki…" I tug on his sleeves. "Did you… ever think of what Kogitsunemaru have told me?"

He pauses before he nods. "I'd be lying if I never thought of it. Well, I'm the one who told him about what you tend to do since you can't… cut your wrist." He kind of hesitates there, but it's understandable.

"I… see. Right…." I feel like he cares about me so much to notice such things. It's embarrassing… but of course, I feel happy… someone cares that much about me… it's to be expected, I guess, since he's my lover. I'm just way too pessimistic, unfortunately….

Although I'm calm and warmed up right now, it's still hard to swallow everything Kogitsunemaru has said.

Trying… might not be so bad, though.

If that's what they want me to do, and if I can make them happy with doing that… there's no harm in trying out.

"Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki calls, pulling my arm gently, "Let's sleep. I'm sure you're tired."

"Yeah… let's sleep. Good night."

I kiss the two of them, bidding good night… as if nothing major happened, except that I haven't allowed them to read my mind again, because I'm not ready for that. Ugh, I'm sure a bad person….

…There it is. Damn it. I should rest for real and think about all of this tomorrow.

I'm so exhausted.

Life is strange, but there's no need to think about it. I should enjoy their warmth when I can, and that's what they want me to do. To feel them, knowing that they're by my side, is sure comforting… I don't want to let them go.

[ Fade from black ]

Opening my eyes, I instantly know where is this place, and what I have to do. The memories of the time spent here come back to me like rushes of waves, aching my head for a moment… but I have no time to stay still. I have to do what I need to do quickly.

"I have to remember."

"Remember what?"

The young man, as usual, sits across me, pouring a tea for himself. My cup is filled already.
"Help me remember. What happened two years ago."

He puts the teapot on the table before gazing at me, as if trying to pluck out something from me. "You look refreshed and determined, even though your lover had just said such a thing. Wasn't that painful, to be criticized, especially about your ideals?"

"It was painful, even more so coming from the one I love," I reply before taking a deep breath, feeling my chest tighten in pain. "But I need to hear it to wake up from… my daydream. Or even delusion. What he said is the truth, fact, the one I have to face to actually move on."

"I see… you've accepted it quite easily."

"Well, if you consider me arguing with him and slapping him as accepting it easily…" I just sigh, knowing that he surely knows the reason.

"Ahahah… So…" His knuckles tap the table a few times, "Why do you need to know about the past? Now that you know your mistake and part of your feelings, aren't these enough for you to make a decision?"

"I just… feel unsettled. I'm not sure about it myself, but my gut told me it's important."

"Gut…huh." He mumbles, cheery expression vanishes from his face. Instead, he looks unsure as he looks down at the table, holding his cup. "It wasn't a nice experience… and it might confuse you even more. Even so, are you sure?"

I straighten my back, gulp, and nod. "I'm sure."

"Are you ready to face it?"

"I'm ready."

After a while, he sighs and sips his tea. "Alright. I appreciate your wish."

"Thank you…!"

He smiles, warm and gentle like he always shows. "I can't wait to see your answer. Now… have a great journey."

I'm sure there's nothing great about this journey. My gut told me so.

I close my eyes and feel my consciousness drifts off somewhere.

[ Fadeouttoblack ]
'Love' is a violent word.

Phrases like "I love that about you" and "If you did that, I would fall out of love with you".

The word 'love' is like a shackle.

It's nothing but a burden. Imposing unrealistic expectations and hopes to someone... it's a selfish and stupid thing to do. The person receiving it will just choke and suffocate. Being loved feels nice, yet at the same time, it comes with certain expectations, weighing and stressing people down.

It's scary. I don't want to get wrapped up in that mess.

I live my own life as myself. Why do people have to tell me what to do? As long as I don't cross any norms, I should be fine, right? My rebellious self asks for freedom, as childish as it might be.

Honestly, I'd rather not have anyone love me and put expectations. Putting up with my parents and normal life, acting happy-go-lucky, acting like I don't know oddities. I've had enough. I'm tired already. I'd rather not impose that on people, either, because I know how suffocating it is.

However, here I am, imposing it to Yamanbagiri... not to mention I also crossed a norm - at least what society thinks as normal and acceptable. I am in love with another boy, after all, but I've accepted it long ago.

I truly do love him, and the feeling is unbearable.

I'm willing to do anything for him, to the point I bind myself with promises to him. One-sided promises that I cling onto, to make myself believe that I have a role in his life, and so I won't part with him.

How selfish of me.

I want him to know how much I love him. How much he is loved. How precious he is to me... not only for myself, I want to believe. He needs it. He has to know that many people love him so much.

When I realized that I love him, we were in middle school.

Since we went to different schools, we rarely met, but I tried to keep in touch with him. I sent him random pictures of dogs and cats in LINE, and sometimes internet memes. I asked if he can hang out whenever I could, and he rejected most of the time, saying that he was busy.

Well, of course. He went to a private school for smart kids. I had no hope of getting there. It was quite far from the neighborhood, too, unlike our high school.

Yamanbagiri has always been smart for as long as I remember. Always at the top of the class even though he was always slacking off with me, playing games....

I couldn't catch up to him no matter how hard I tried. Our specs are different.
So, I could only watch his back as he got further away from me… and when I thought of him, I realized that… maybe I was in love with him. I'd never thought much about sexual orientation, and I'd never fallen in love before, so I was completely confused.

As I tried to keep in touch with him, just then I realized I desire things I've never noticed before.

I wanted to see him because I missed him.
I wanted to spend time with him.
I wanted to see him smile.
I wanted to hear him laugh.
I wanted to see him happy.
I wanted to hold his hand.
I wanted to pat his head.
I wanted to brush his hair.
I wanted to hug him.
I wanted to tease him.
I wanted to poke his cheek.
I wanted to see him sulk cutely.
I wanted to kiss him.
I wanted to stay by his side.

We had hung out a few times before, but when we were about to meet up again that day, my heart was beating so fast even before I met him. I thought I was dying at first. My stomach felt weird, but then I remembered the phrase 'butterflies in the stomach', which is, honestly, quite scary to picture… I thought there were real butterflies inside my stomach! But of course not. Then, I wondered… is this what they meant by *butterflies in the stomach*?

The feeling of loving someone?

The desire grew stronger and stronger when I saw him. I wanted to leap onto him and hug him.

He looked tired, but since he smiled when he saw me, I didn't feel anything weird at that time. *Being in a top-grade school must be tiring for him.* That was what I thought.

So we hung out like the old days, all the while I tried to act normal, questioning what was happening inside me.

I regret how stupid and ignorant I was at that day. When I look back, the hints were there. But I was so overwhelmed by happiness that I ignored his clear suffering.

That regret is still with me today, lingering, choking me every time I see him.

…Aaah, geez, waiting made me think of the past. Depressing. I guess it can't be helped in this
I take a look at my smartphone, the clock showing 4 PM past 15 minutes.

"Yamanbagiri is late…" It's unusual, especially when he was the one asking me to come here… well, he might be nervous, because I am too. It's obvious that he'll answer to my confession.

Will he accept me, or will he reject me?

I decide to sit on the riverbank while waiting for him.

Choosing this place near the bridge, that's quite cruel of him. I'd rather not remember *that day*, but the scene ended up playing in my mind anyway. It must be painful for him, too… it was the day our lives changed. Of course, it goes without saying that the day I awakened as *inugami* changed me, but that's a different story.

I hate that fateful day. I condemn it. I wish I could turn back time and save him just in time.

Regrets are dragging me down, but I keep on holding onto them.

They're the signs of my mistakes. I should never forget it. I should never forgive myself for letting it happen.

"*It's not your fault,*" he said many times, and yeah, it *isn't* my fault. But I can't let it go. My sense of responsibility and love for him are too strong for that. I believed I have to redeem for my helplessness… no, I still believe in it even now.

I thought the only way to pay for my mistake… was to protect him at all costs.

I thought I had to keep that smile on his face.

I thought I had to make him happy.

I thought I had to do anything I can for him.

Well, that's what I promised long ago. I swore with my soul. It's an oath for me, and I just renewed my resolve to do it that time.

I didn't care if I get hurt. I'd gladly sacrifice myself for him. As long as he is happy, I'm fine with anything. Even if I die, I don't care as long as he can be saved. That's my genuine feeling.

But….

I've realized just recently that it's wrong. My mindset is wrong.

Sacrifices won't bring happiness. I just learned that the hard way. Being at the receiving end of Yamanbagiri's sacrificial acts was awful, I felt like dying and digging my nails on my head in frustration. Okay, that might be an exaggeration… only a bit.

Because I love him so much, I can't bear to see him in pain and danger. Injuries are complete no-no. I felt my heart sinking and aching when he was stabbed and then *kidnapped*, overwhelmed by fear and worry. I wonder just how unlucky he can be… knowing that he's unlucky, and yet he kept jumping straight to danger so easily….

He can be rash and stupid sometimes.
Somehow, things would go and end up well most of the time. Like the newest case with Kashuu… so I'd usually ignore his rashness, thinking that his two lovers would lecture him - um, okay, except in Kashuu's case. I know I lectured him, alright. Ehem. I'm sure these two did. They're as worried about him as I am, after all, so I trust them.

But.

It seems their words and actions aren't enough. I understand, Yamanbagiri is hard-headed when it comes to his actions, and I'm the same.

His suicidal acts can't continue any longer.

So I have no other choice but to say it directly, to break our friendship and make him realize how idiotic his actions were. After that confession, though… I couldn't really bring myself to talk to him, make him consider about his actions which won't make anyone happy - because I know it'd hurt him… and automatically hurt myself. I don't think I'd be able to forgive myself if I hurt him that way.

Instead, I rode along my overwhelming feeling of love… it was too much. I could hardly control myself. It just happened, and the feeling is… amazing. I can't describe it in words. My heart is filled with warmth, even though there's no guarantee he'll accept me… somehow, I'm content with just watching him and telling him that I love him.

Restraining someone with love feels great.

Now I understand that well.

I don't have many expectations on him. I love him the way he is, so I need nothing more.

But, I know. There's one thing that needs to change if we want to walk forward, together or not. We have to leave the idea that our sacrifices will save everyone. Everyone includes ourselves. It pains me to make that decision, but I have to. Yamanbagiri has to do the same if he is to accept my hand, or at least make his two lovers happy.

I have to do this - confess to him - to make him move away from his idea that sacrificing himself is fine. To break his dependence on me once for all.

Since I can't say it to him, I asked Kogitsunemaru to do it. It's underhanded of me, really, because I'm a coward… but there's higher chance Yamanbagiri will listen if he's the one who said it.

When did I ask him to do it, ya ask?

When I pushed him out of the way about two days ago, after I accidentally… kissed… Yamanbagiri's cheek.

Just short words, but I'm sure he gets it. I want to believe so. There's no way he and Mikazuki don't understand Yamanbagiri's inner problems. It's quite obvious when you spend a long time with him and if he trusts you enough to show his weakness.

They're his lovers. They want to make him happy, without question. They'll take this chance… or so I pray.

Yamanbagiri said I trust people far too easily. Maybe I am, and this trust is childish. In a sense, they're my rivals, but I just can't see them that way. They've saved him when I couldn't, they stay with him when I can't, and Yamanbagiri loves them. That's enough reason for me to believe in them as much as I believe in Yamanbagiri… well, just sliiightly less.
Whenever I see him flirting around with them, my chest aches sometimes, but more than that, I feel happy to see him enjoy life.

So, if he were to accept me… I'm ready to share him with these two. And maybe with more. I admit, I'm as dense as Yamanbagiri is, so I have no idea if there are other people crushing on him, but I feel there are. Just my gut feeling. My instincts are strong, ya know?

Impatient, I take a look at my smartphone again. Around 6 minutes have passed.

Where is he? This is way too off -

When I turn around, I see him standing on the road, in a place higher than the place I'm sitting at. He looks… absolutely perfect with the color of sunset on his back that I can't say a thing.

"Sorry to make you wait, Yoshiyuki."

"Uh, it's okay… it's just unusual, ahaha."

Yamanbagiri smiles and walks down, but instead of stopping on my place like he usually does, he arrives on the road - just next to the river. The true riverside, you can say. He walks even beyond that to the stone steps on the river. Feeling that this is unusual, I also jump down from my place, but keeping a fair distance to him.

A wind passes as silence falls.

W-What's with this tension?

Asking me to come on Sunday, making me wait, and then not saying a thing when he arrives….

"So, Yamanbagiri… what do ya want to talk about?" I begin, unable to take the silence any longer.

"I'm sure you know the topic," he says as he turns around, looking at me. "Well, before we get to that point… may I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

The wind waves his hair, his expression is calm and peaceful. Even though I can say that I know him very well, just at this moment, I don't know what he'd ask and what his answer to my confession is.

"Yoshiyuki, do you love me?"

"I do."

"You just confessed to make me realize how stupid am I, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you agree that I'm selfish and idiotic?"

"Yes, totally."

"Even so, you truly do love me?"

"I do."

"How much?"
"So much I can't count it."

"...Geez. Answering without pause and hesitation like that..." he chuckles awkwardly. Is he blushing? I can't tell from the color of sunset. "Okay, then. Another one. Do you remember your promise? The one you told me?"

"...Yeah."

I can't see where this is going.

"Then, can you... promise me something?"

His voice sounds fragile more than anything, and I feel a bit scared that his figure will fade out so easily.

"Honestly, when Kogitsunemaru told me what you actually wanted to achieve by confessing to me... it was so painful. I feel like... I'd rather die than be told that," he continues before I can reply, and I feel my throat going dry. "In fact, I told Kogitsunemaru that and my mind was a jumbled mess. We got into a fight."

"I see...."

"Don't apologize. After thinking clearly, it was... the best decision. For me and you both."

"I... I've hurt ya." I say, clenching my fist. "It's okay if ya don't forgive me...."

"I've hurt you too. Always... and yet you keep standing by my side, and do everything you can to help me. Even in this case, you hurt yourself by choosing this option, but because it's for my sake..." Yamanbagiri clutches his chest. "As always, you gave me too much, Yoshiyuki. I'm grateful, but it's so heavy at the same time. Especially after knowing how much pain you went through."

"I don't give so ya can pay me back, Yamanbagiri."

"I know. And that's why it's far harder for me."

"You've been doing the same for people... and I got a part of it, too."

"I still can hardly accept what Kogitsunemaru said and what you meant, but, so I still don't think so. After all, I'm doing it for my own sake."

I'm a bit disappointed hearing that, but I expected as much. "Yeah...."

"But I know I have to change thanks to that. I've always known, but I was afraid. I'm weak and soft-hearted, a coward who just likes to hide behind the comfort of an invisible wall...."

"There's nothing wrong with being weak and a coward. Those who recognize that weakness of theirs... are powerful people."

He blinks a few times, as if surprised by my words, before he nods. "I knew you'd say that. You're always kind."

"You're way kinder."

"But you - um... okay, okay, let's stop with throwing the ball at each other for now. The conversation won't continue if we keep doing it."
"Ahahha… you're right." I remember we tend to have this useless back-and-forth of compliments. We're just similar in that regard, way too hard-headed that we keep hitting each other pointlessly, and then laughed when we realized what's happening. Thinking about it makes me feel warm. I just want to see him smile and laugh like that, and for him to know his worth, so I can't help but to retort. "So, about your previous question, Yamanbagiri….

"Mm."

"What is it? What do ya want me to promise?"

"Many things." He waves his hand, telling me to come closer. I hesitantly follow what he wants and step closer, but not walking up to the stone steps. We just stand there and stare at each other, once again silent. "You promised to stay by my side and help me when I was in hospital. I just remembered that."

An image of him lying on that bed flashes in my mind.

"…That's right."

"My memory is kind of vague about that, but I know you made a promise to me, full of emotions and genuine."

"…Yeah."

"And before that, you made a promise to me when we were still little. Knowing that your feelings haven't changed after so long… I'm so happy. Thank you, Yoshiyuki."

"It's nothing to be thankful about… but you're welcome."

His lips form a faint smile, melancholic and happy at the same time. Complicated. "You gave me so much and intend to do more, but this is the only thing I can give you…"

Here it goes.

At long last.

He is going to answer to my confession.

Stretching out one arm, he says…

"…I love you, Yoshiyuki."

…

"I just realized how much I love you. Just like how much you love me… you mean so much to me. That's why I can't bear seeing you in pain."

…Loading.

"Just like how you want to make me happy, I want to make you happy as well. Just like how you gave me so many things, I want to give you many things too. So, even though it's still hard for me, I want to walk forward just like you want me to - because it makes you happy and it's the best for me. This is selfish of me, as I've hurt you a lot, and might not repay all of your kindness, but… I don't want to see you going away from me. I want to have you by my side as I walk forward."

…Still loading.
"So, Yoshiyuki… I want to change our old promise. Or, better yet, let's make a new one."

…Change?

I'm being overwhelmed by happiness that I feel like my sense of reality is going off… but I know for sure this is real.

"Will you… stay by my side?"

I take a step forward, attracted by his face pleading for help and acceptance.

"Yes."

"Will you help me when I need it?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me help you?"

"Yes."

"Will you keep loving me?"

"Yes."

"Will you protect me?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me protect you?"

"Yes."

"Will you stop me if I'm being reckless by any means?"

"Yes."

"Will you take my hand and promise me all of these?"

"Of course."

I smile and take his hand. The warmth I long for.

And the day we can finally walk forward hand-in-hand finally came.

Now… there's nothing to be afraid of, holding his hand like this.

"I love ya, Yamanbagiri."

"I love you too."

"I promise to fulfill all of your wishes, and I swear to not break my promises. In return, can ya do the same?"

"Yes." Yamanbagiri moves his hand slightly and twines our fingers. "I'll do the same. I promise."

"Promise me ya will never act to sacrifice yourself ever again? That you'll think about how others
feel and consult to us first before ya act?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Promise me to not get hurt alone?"

He leans closer and smiles, his hair waving with the breeze. "...Yes. I'm not alone anymore. And I'm very grateful for that."

I'm glad.

I feel my whole body relax, losing the rush of fear... although my heartbeat is still so fast and loud. It can't be helped, because I'm holding the hand of the one I love the most... overwhelmed by joy and happiness, I don't really know how to act right now.

But, maybe this is what people call as good timing.

Seeing his smile, feeling his warmth, so close to me, and now that we're officially dating... I can do it, right? All of these years holding myself back, but now....

"Can I... ask for one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"Can I... can I kiss you?"

Yamanbagiri looks stunned for a moment before he chuckles. Am I making a stupid face? I'm sure I am. "Ehehe... of course, as long as you tilt your head and kiss me gently."

H-He is referring to our first kiss, didn't he? "Even I know how to kiss, ya know...."

"Prove it, then."

Making a playful smile like that...!! "You're seducing me... that's unfair!"

"I'm not."

I grumble and touch his cheek and lean closer, feeling his skin and strands of hair on my hand. His face is even closer now, I can feel his breath tickling me, his blue eyes seemingly sucking me inside. I can smell his scent, and it's quite... intoxicating, maybe that's the word. He's terrifyingly beautiful from afar, and from this close, he's just even more dazzling, stunning, and....

"Yoshiyuki, your face is completely red. You're cute, you know that?"

"!!!!" That caught me off-guard so bad. I know he's capable of throwing stuffs like that with a straight face, but... "Y-Ya are cute too...."

"Mm."

Yamanbagiri puts a hand on my shoulder and closes his eyes, while our other hands are still connected.

He is waiting for me to make the move.

What, the, hell... he looks so cute and tempting... and this mood is way too overwhelming for me!!
But... there's no way I will let it pass. Especially not when I'm the one asking for it.

I lean closer and tilt my head when our noses almost hit each other. There's no stopping it now... my heart is about to burst, but this is necessary...! Ya can do it, Mutsunokami Yoshiyuki! Just a little more, be a man, and then, and then....

I close my eyes when our lips meet. I can clearly feel his soft lips grazing against mine. It's tickling and weird, but I don't hate it. This isn't a forceful kiss. This isn't a kiss from impulse. I'm embarrassed, but I'm happy more than anything. It's a dream coming true, after all.

Even I have imagined how it would feel to kiss him like this. It's greater than I thought. Not sweet unlike things I've read, but it feels so nice.

Just a very quick peck, but it feels like forever for me.

When I pull away, I feel a tinge of regret. I want to kiss him more and feel his warmth, hug him and never let go.

"Yoshiyuki? What's wrong?"

Yamanbagiri tilts his head, confused that I'm stiff frozen. Seeing his round eyes looking straight at me snaps me out of my thoughts.

"Did the kiss kill you? A maiden, aren't you."

"It didn't! Well, I admit, I almost..." Especially when I realize that we're still holding hands.

Damn, his hand is so warm... now that we're dating, it's hard for me to not be conscious of him and this kind of skinship... and there's his scent too, tickling my nose... where did the me who can hide my desires go?! Probably withered away the moment I heard his reply.... I-it's so weird. I could easily hide my feelings and act, and yet I can't right now.

But, it isn't such a bad thing to bare myself open in front of him.

I think it's necessary.

"There, there." He strokes my head when I slump my shoulders, tired. "I don't mind if you keep showing me this cute side of yours, so it's totally okay."

I sulk. He's way too unfair, saying that with a smile. "But I want to look cool in front of ya."

"You're already cool."

"I have to be even cooler!"

"I love you the way you are, Yoshiyuki. Although it might not be bad if you get cooler."

Wha-

My face feels even hotter than before, but my eyes are wide open I can't look away from his refreshed face. My mouth gapes open but no words are out.

"Have you always been this sensitive?" Yamanbagiri chuckles after observing my face for a while. He pokes my cheek. "It's so fun teasing you."

"I-I'm just waaaay too happy, okay! Being conscious of the fact we're dating right now, I...."
"I understand." He smiles and puts my hand on his cheek. "I'm happy as well, Yoshiyuki. Thank you….

I don't know why he's thanking me, but I feel the same. "Thanks, Yamanbagiri… I love ya."

"I love you."

I take his other hand and holds it, swinging it lightly. Feeling the warmth of his body makes me smile.

"Ehehehhe."

He also swings my hand, like we're about to dance. Children's dance - just staring at each other's eyes and smile. It looks weird, but I love this. I want to do all sorts of stuffs with him, whether as friends or lovers. Going on an adventure, or going on a date… I want to keep doing things we like together.

As if realizing something, he blinks a few times in amazement. "Yoshiyuki, you're way too excited."

"W-What?"

Yamanbagiri lets go of my hand and points at something on my head with a giggle. I grasp the air - or not, since I grab a fur instead. This triangle-like shape is… oh nooo. I frantically try to reach my back, and sure enough, I can feel a soft fur on my hand.

My human ears were replaced for that of a dog's. A tail grew out of nowhere, and undisturbed by my clothes, made its way to slip out from my pants.

I'm so glad I don't have to make a permanent hole in my outfit for my tail like Kogi, but….

Yeah. This is my weakness.

When I get too excited, my ears and tail will pop out, and it takes time to bring them back. I have to say it was a miracle that they didn't come out when I accidentally kissed his cheek, because I sure was excited as hell. It was really hard to hold myself back… uggghhh.

"This is so embarrassing…" I say, placing my hands on my ears to hide them. My face must be red right now.

"It's cute, so don't hide it."

"H-How about ya pull down your hood, then?"

He glares before shrugging and pulls down the hood covering his head. "Just for you."

I know that's a very easy thing to do for him, especially since we're so close… but a man can't take back his words. I resign to my fate and let my ears go, hoping that nobody will pass the road and see me… or if they do, hopefully they think I'm just cosplaying!

Yamanbagiri hums as he strokes my head, tickling my ears. He likes to do this for some reason. I heard that he likes to tease Kogi's ears too… does he has a thing for ears? Or for furry animals? I should ask someday.

"Yoshiyuki, do you remember?" He suddenly speaks up, still stroking my head. "That day when you awoke as inugami…"
"I remember only bits, since I'm unconscious. What about it?"

Just two years have passed, but it feels so long ago.

My family has inugami blood running through our veins, and once we had our own inugami familiars. I think my extended family still kept the dogs, but not my family. We were kinda... thrown out by our main household, so we moved here before I was born. That's why I have the sight to see oddities, but my parents can only faintly feel them. Not that I know that before.

When I touched the barrier on that day, the holy and protective blood in my body reacted wildly because the malice had immediately tried to possess me. Because it could take over me, my inugami blood just awoke and took control of my body so that my own human self stayed unharmed. It could corrupt my mind, after all.

I was unconscious the whole time, so I don't remember much of what happened. Only vague images and voices.

"I see," he pauses and lifts his head slightly, "I remembered something. Well, uh... your inugami side, at that time, was basically your subconscious, right?"

"Yeah... I don't understand exactly how, though." I'm totally bad at this kind of thing.

"Mm... you've heard that I passed the barrier to go to you, right? I passed out afterwards, only to wake up 2 hours later. But... yesterday, I just remembered what happened. I'm a bit doubtful about my memory, but it felt real."

I wait for him to take a breath before continuing.

"You protected me all the time when the spirits tried to possess me, even as your body took so much damage."

Ah... I remember waking up with my clothes messy, a few holes here and there, and pain all over my body. The mental fatigue was so great that I fell asleep a few minutes after waking up.

Is that... the reason?

"I remember clearly. Your voice. You said something along the lines of, I love you, so I'll protect you. Don't worry. And you stroked me gently, comforting me before you held off the attacks."

"H-Huh? I said that?"

He nods with slightly redder cheeks. "Yeah. Even though you looked so scary, you were the Yoshiyuki I know... and I felt comfort in knowing that. I can see how much you care about me in your actions too. But, realizing that you're half inugami, it's just like..."

"...I'm your loyal dog. Your own inugami is that it?"

"Yeah."

"...I guess ya can take it that away. Being protective of the one I love is just my nature, it seems."

"Everyone does that, but you're a bit more extreme because of your blood. I think it's cool. Your dog form is cute, and when you have your human form with dog's ears and tails, too..." he smiles as he says that, as if daydreaming.

"I'd pout if you think of me as your pet, though."
"Huh? Why?"

"If I were your pet, we wouldn't be able to kiss or love each other like this…"

It's just natural.

....

Wait.

Wait *wait wait*. What am I saying?!

See, even Yamanbagiri is too surprised that he is frozen right now! What the hell am I thinking?! I have to slap myself out of it! I've always had this suspicion that when I'm in this form, my mind gets wackier, but…!!

"P-Please forget what I said!"

He soon snaps and crosses his arms. "No way. You've just said something great, so I'll always remember it. It's fine to keep saying these embarrassing stuffs from now on."

"Ya are kinda shameless."

"Now there's no need for shame, just bare ourselves naked."

"Out of context, that sounds completely *dangerous!*"

Yamanbagiri only chuckles. I know he can be like this, but… sheesh. I think I'm gonna die young if he keeps teasing me like this. My poor heart.

Though that's also a part of him I love.

Adorable when being teased, but can also tease others like it's nothing. He's a natural at it.

"Oh?"

When we're busy laughing warmly, I see pink petals falling onto me, and then to my palm. No way, this isn't the season… huh, wait, the texture aren’t like the natural petals.

Yamanbagiri's face visibly twists into a disgusted one. He's pretty expressive at this kind of emotion. "…What are you guys doing?"

I turn around, knowing there's someone he's talking to. A few meters away, I find -

"Ah, don't mind us. Act like you're in a movie," Mikazuki says with a wave of a hand. Next to him is - Hotarumaru?! - scattering pink petals from a bucket with a happy face. Next to him is Kogitsunemaru, flapping a paper fan.

"Now that we've noticed you, we can't just act normal," Yamanbagiri says, shrugging his shoulders.

"Congrats, nii-chan!" Hotarumaru says, still scattering more petals to the air. "I knew you'd get together someday! I'm so happy for the both of you!"

"Ahaha… thanks….

Hearing that from a kid feels *sooo* weird.
"But then, what about Mika-niichan and Kogi-niichan?" Hotarumaru continues, tilting his head sideways, looking to the two oddities he mentioned. "I've heard about three-way relationship before, but….

How did he know the term three-way relationship? When I was his age, all I knew was Gundam. Seriously. Times have changed.

"It's complicated, but they're still my lovers."

"Eh? I see…" His wide eyes still look confused, but he nods anyway. Understanding it might be hard, since it's very unconventional and all… in some cases, it's a taboo. Monogamy rules our world, after all.

"I'm glad everything turns out well," Kogitsunemaru says with a smile. "You guys had me worried. Yamanbagiri didn't let us read his mind for the past few days, and he didn't tell us his decision."

"Ahaha." Yamanbagiri says, taking my hand into his. "After mulling it over, this is the best for us. I think it's necessary to keep it a secret from the both of you. You know, surprise, surprise."

"You started to sound like Tsurumaru," Mikazuki comments with raised eyebrows.

"That's kind of… a bad thing, isn't it?"

"It's okay, we still love you, even if you change slightly," Kogitsunemaru says.

"I guess that's reassuring…" Yamanbagiri sweats, most likely having no idea how to reply. "Anyway, since we're done now, we should go home."

"Why don't you introduce him to your brothers? They're here for dinner tonight," Mikazuki says, raising a finger, as if it's a very good idea. "I mean, tell them that you're finally dating him."

"Ah… that's…" He scratches his head awkwardly. "I'm not ready yet. Dating two people at the same time is a thing, but now I've added more… it's just….

I imagine seeing his two brothers, looking at us with questioning and demanding looks. A terrifying scene. "Yeah, me too."

"Don't be a coward. If not now, when will you do it? Come on." Kogitsunemaru says, still flapping the paper fan for some reason, even though there are no petals left (since Hotarumaru have stopped scattering them and only watches us talking with interested eyes).

"But - "

"No buts!"

Hotarumaru waves his hands, seeing us off as we're getting dragged. "Good luck!"

. . .

And so, we're forced to come here. I am, to be exact, since this is Yamanbagiri's home - after I calmed down and my ears and tail vanished from view.

Closing the door, Yamanbagiri says in a stutter, "I'm home."
"Welcome home!"

That's Horikawa-san's voice, coming from the kitchen.

"Welcome home, kakaka!"

And that's Yamabushi-san.

I visibly sweat, feeling so nervous and anxious, more than how I felt during entrance exams. I'm scared I'll spout out nonsense or something wrong and make their impression of me bad, and then they'll reject me, and then -

"Yoshiyuki." Yamanbagiri holds my hand tightly, noticing my anxiety. "It's okay. I'm here."

My body relaxing as I feel his warmth, I smile wryly. "I feel like our usual roles are reversed here."

"Well, I'm much more experienced in this than you."

"I'll rely on ya, then."

I said that, but I know I can't depend on him to say it. It will be a bad impression if I do.

"Is that Yoshiyuki?" Yamabushi-san asks from the next room.

"Y-Yes. Excuse me!"

Yamanbagiri and I stare at each other before nodding and brace ourselves. We walk forward while still holding hands - Kogi and Mikazuki are trailing behind us - and walk into the living room, where Yamabushi-san is, sitting on the sofa while watching TV. He turns around and his eyes snap open when he sees us.

"U-Um, Yamabushi-san…" I start, stuttering, my palm is so sweaty, my heart is beating so fast and I feel like collapsing. H-How should I say it? Ugh, there's no time to think! I bow deeply and, "P-Please give me Yamanbagiri!"

W-W-W-Wait, that sounds even more wrong, and I've said it!! It's like marriage proposal, right?!

I can't take it back!

Stupid me, stupid, stupid, stupid - !

"What he means, is… we're dating. Just now," Yamanbagiri says, taking over my mistake as he lifts our hands. God, my face feels so hot. "What… do you think?"

Horikawa-san steps out from the kitchen with a tray full of plates and bowls, his eyes almost blank as he observes us. Yamabushi-san has almost the same look. W-What's with this reaction… they're completely frozen!

"I… see," Yamabushi-san lets that out after a long silence. He takes a deep breath before…”Kakakaka! I see, I see. The two of you are finally dating!"

"Y-Yes, that's what I'm saying…" I say, a bit confused with his changing reaction.

"Oh… you surprised me a bit there," Horikawa-san says, putting the tray on the table. "I expected this to happen sooner or later, to be honest."
"R-Really?"

"The two of you are quite obvious," Mikazuki says, slipping from behind us to sit on the chair, with Kogitsunemaru following him. They seem hungry.

"Yeah, you two are so obvious, kakaka!" Yamabushi-san stands up and approaches me. I flinch, thinking negatively about what he'll do, but he just pats my back while laughing again. Ouch, he has such strength that my back hurts. "I'm happy for the both of you!"

"T-Thanks…"

"There's no problem if it's Yoshiyuki. We trust you. Please take care of Yamanbagiri," Horikawa-san smiles gently. "I assume Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are still…?"

"Y-Yes," Yamanbagiri replies, his body stiffening, "Um, I know it's weird, but I also love them…"

"I don't mind if that's what you guys choose and agree on. As long as it works out. I've heard of stories about that kind of relationship, and it doesn't seem so bad."

Haaa… I sigh in relief. Man, Yamanbagiri's brothers are so accepting.

"We're about to have dinner, so how about joining?" He continues, "I made extra servings, so it's enough for you."

"T-Thanks! There's no way I'll reject food!"

That glutton part of me is because of inugami blood, by the way.

There are problems because of this blood, but at the end, I'm glad I have it. I'm glad I'm half inugami, because now I have a power to protect Yamanbagiri and everyone else I love.

So, I'm happy right now. The happiest in my life so far.

I don't mind getting tied up in this love.

It's a shackle, but it feels so nice.

As long as we communicate, everything will go well. I know Yamanbagiri isn't a demanding person, and I'm not demanding anything other than skinship.

"Yoshiyuki, your ears and tail appear again," Kogitsunemaru says, pointing with his chopsticks, giggling.

Sure enough, I can feel my soft fur on my hands when I reach out. "W-Wah!!"

"My, my, Yoshiyuki is so shameless," Mikazuki says with a smile. I kinda want to punch his face and that annoying smile right now. Now I understand how Yamanbagiri feels every time he shows this kind of smile.

"What are you excited about?" Yamabushi-san asks.

"T-That's…"

"I hope it's nothing naughty, hm?" Horikawa-san says with a smile… and a shadow on his face. S-So scary!! I see it all the time, but now that it's directed to me… nightmare fuel. Imagine how he'll slap me if I do anything that make Yamanbagiri cry… well, I already kinda indirectly made him cry.
"Brother, please don't scare him right away." Yamanbagiri pats my shoulder. "Come on, let's sit down and have dinner, Yoshiyuki,"

"Yeah."

I sit next to him and take my chopsticks.

"Thank you for the meal."

We clap our hands and start to eat. Eating together like this, like a true family, makes me feel so warm inside. It feels like a long time ago since the last time I ate together with them, even though it hasn’t been so long.

Now… Yamanbagiri and I are taking a step forward in our lives.

Looking at him, he looks so normal, like he always does. But, he is considering changing, so that he doesn't think to sacrifice himself anymore. I'm the same. It's still hard for me to do that, and it must be even harder for him. Now that we have to consciously stop ourselves from acting with that kind of mindset….

But, I believe we can do it.

For a better future.

And I hope we'll always be holding hands in that path.

Chapter End Notes

*Mutsunba is finally canon here. Cheers!! I'll update extra chapters tomorrow, just because I'm tired right now.*
5.5-The More You Know

Chapter Notes

Two chapters update. This is the first one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

=Extra Chapter=

{ The More You Know }

Yoshiyuki: "Ooh god, my arc has finally ended! That was so long!"

Yamanbagiri: "Well, there's 3 months break for Dioramic Eden. I think it's a miracle this arc is finished before April."

Mikazuki: "That break is Kogitsunemaru's fault, everyone."

Kogitsunemaru: "Why are you dumping it on me?!"

Yamanbagiri: "Because you're the protagonist on another universe."

Mikazuki: "I'm sad I didn't appear. How cruel of the author…"

Kogitsunemaru: "Okay, okay, let's not self-promote our alternate selves now."

Yoshiyuki: "It's time for The More You Know extra chapter! Yaaaay!!"

Kogitsunemaru: "There aren't many oddities-related things, unlike the first arc, though…"

Yamanbagiri: "And that's why we'll have some trivia about ourselves in this world to fill the chapter. What is it about? You'll see later."

Yoshiyuki: "Fiiiiirst up! Let's talk about me, although I'm only half-oddity. **Inugami** is a spiritual possession by the spirit of a dog, widely known about in western Japan. It's also theorized that Shikoku, where no **kitsune** could be found, is the main base of the **inugami**."

Mikazuki: "I wonder where Suzuran is."

Yamanbagiri: "Let's say somewhere in Shikoku just because."

Kogitsunemaru: "Adding what Yoshiyuki said, **inugami** is more commonly known in areas where foxes are not found, such as major population centers. There is even evidence of an ancient tradition of Inugami worship stretching from Western Japan down to Okinawa. Powerful sorcerers were said to be able to create these spirits through monstrous ceremonies and use them to all sorts of nefarious deeds. Inugami serves their masters loyally, performing tasks just like a faithful dog. They are loyal to one person or one family only, and unless seriously mistreated they remain loyal forever; these spirits can be passed down from generation to generation like an heirloom."

Mikazuki: "The technique for creating these fetishes was passed down along bloodlines, and such
families are known as *inugami-mochi*. These families would keep their *inugami* hidden in the back rooms of their houses, under their beds, in dressers, or hidden among water jars. It is said that a family owned as many *inugamis* as there were members of the household, and when a new person joined the family, they too received their own familiar. *Inugami* was treated like family member by *inugami-mochi* families. Like a real dog, though, occasionally a resentful *inugami* might betray a master that grew too abusive or domineering, savagely biting him to death. And while *inugami*, like other familiar spirits, were created to bring wealth and prosperity to their families, occasionally they might also cause a family to fall into ruin.

Yoshiyuki: "My family is *inugami-mochi* then. When I was a kid, my parents told me that we had dog familiars. But because we were kinda thrown away by our main household and moved here, well… I don't know if main household still keeps them, but we don't have them. I've seen photos of the main house, and it was so big and luxurious."

Yamanbagiri: "How can you have *inugami* blood running through your veins, though?"

Yoshiyuki: "I don't really understand, honestly, but I think it has something to do with spirit possession."

Mikazuki: "There exist bloodlines of families that easily get possessed by an *inugami* as well as bloodlines of *inugami*, though the details of the latter are unclear. The idea came from regional tales told by the bloodlines of the sorcerers, *yamabushi*, priests, and *fuko* that engaged in *kodoku*."

Yoshiyuki: "*Kodoku*?"

Yamanbagiri: "You don't even know it? It's a ritual for employing the spirits of certain animals."

Kogitsunemaru: "There are various ways to do it. One, cutting off the head of a starving dog and burying the dog at a crossroads to inflame its grudges as people pass over its heads so that its spirit would turn into a curse that could be used. Another method was to bury the dog alive leaving only its head sticking out or attach the dog to a supporting pole, put some food in front of the dog, cut the dog's neck just when it is about to starve so that the head would fly towards and bite at the food, burn the dog into mere bones, put the remains into a vessel, and deify it. By doing so, it will spiritually possess that person forever, granting their wishes. Another method was to set several dogs to fight against each other, give the one dog remaining alive some fish, cut off that dog's head, and eat the remaining fish. In Yamaga, Hayami District, Ōita Prefecture - or now Kitsuki, there were actual cases where a *miko* did cut off a dogs' heads this way, dried the maggots that gathered at the heads, and sold them calling it *inugami*, and there were also people who were thankful for these and bought them."

Yoshiyuki: "That's scary!! Blasphemy to the dogs!!! My family did that before?! Nooooo!!"

Yamanbagiri: "Yoshiyuki's in denial mode!"

Kogitsunemaru: "That's why it was feared and banned in the Heian period."

Mikazuki: "Anyway, going back to *inugami* family. In many cases, it shows how those nomadic peoples who engaged in folk sorcery would earn trust and respect and at the same time be treated with discrimination. This is because *inugami* follows people into their descendants, and it was normal for everyday villagers to consider it taboo to marry into an *inugami* bloodline, and even associating with them was normally seen with apprehension. In various parts of Shikoku, there is a custom during marriage to check the bloodlines for *inugami*."

Yoshiyuki: "I'm… sad…."
Mikazuki: "Normal people nowadays wouldn't have known this or even believe in the existence of inugami bloodlines, so don't worry."

Yamanbagiri: "I'd happily marry you, Yoshiyuki!"

Yoshiyuki: "Yamanbagiri~!!"

Mikazuki: "Yamanbagiri also wants to marry one more person… note taken."

Yoshiyuki: "When is the ceremony?"

Yamanbagiri: "We have to graduate first."

Kogitsunemaru: "Okay, okay, before this turns into a wedding plan, let's move on to the next oddity."

Shishiou: "And that's me!"

Kogitsunemaru: "Whoa! Where did you come from?!"

Shishiou: "******'s pocket."

Kogitsunemaru: "Censored?! What are the censored words?!"

Yamanbagiri: "Anyway, it'd be weird if Shishiou isn't here, so he's invited."

Yoshiyuki: "I probably won't appear in next arc's extra chapter. Sad life."

Yamanbagiri: "You've done well, so please rest."

Yoshiyuki: "Don't say it like I'm gonna die~!"

Shishiou: "I'm just a minor character, don't mind me and flirt all you want!"

Mikazuki: "That's embarrassing."

Kogitsunemaru: "Your face says otherwise as you're ready to jump on Yamanbagiri… so anyway, please start, Shishiou."

Shishiou: "Okay then, putting aside my list of complaints. As you all know, I'm a shishi, the guardian lion of shrines! Alternatively, my kind is also called koma inu. Statues of guardian lions have traditionally stood in front of Chinese Imperial palaces, Imperial tombs, government offices, temples, and the homes of government officials and the wealthy from the Han dynasty, and were believed to have powerful mythic protective benefits. They are also used in other artistic contexts, for example on door-knockers, and in pottery. Pairs of guardian lion statues are still common decorative and symbolic elements at the entrances to restaurants, hotels, supermarkets and other structures, with one sitting on each side of the entrance, usually present in China and in other places around the world where the Chinese people have immigrated and settled, especially in local Chinatowns. The lions are usually depicted in pairs. When used as statuary the pair would consist of a male leaning his paw upon an embroidered ball - in imperial contexts, representing supremacy over the world - and a female restraining a playful cub that is on its back - representing nurture."

Yamanbagiri: "So you're basically the guardian of places."

Shishiou: "Pretty much. Mostly holy areas. I happen to guard Mikazuki-dono's shrine."
Yoshiyuki: "Ya are in pairs, but where's your female companion?"

Shishiou: "…"

Mikazuki: "…"

Yoshiyuki: "What's with this ominous silence?!"

Shishiou: "Well, uh… the circumstances… are quite… ahahahaha…"

Kogitsunemaru: "…I feel like I get the gist of what happened, considering you have to work all by
yourself while taking care of the troublesome god…"

Mikazuki: "Troublesome? Me? What a joke."

Shishiou: "You are a trouble. I'm honestly glad I don't have to take care of you 24/7 now, but it feels
lonely. You guys should visit me sometime!"

Yamanbagiri: "Yeah, the author just remembered you exist, so… hopefully next arc."

Mikazuki: "You should also visit us again."

Kogitsunemaru: "Ehem. Before we get to ask Shishiou questions, I assume the trivia about oddities
are over now?"

Shishiou: "Wait, wait, don't forget about my nue!"

Nue: "Chirp."

Kogitsunemaru: "Chirp?!"

Shishiou: "Nue has character for bird and it flies, anyway. He just doesn't know what to say earlier."

Yoshiyuki: "Cuuute!"

Shishiou: "I won't talk much about his kind since it's not really important, but here's a legend
connected to me! My sword self, I mean. One famous nue attack occurred in the summer of 1153 in
Kyoto. Emperor Konoe began to have nightmares every night, and grew very ill. Neither medicine
nor prayers had any effect on his illness, and the source was attributed to some kind of evil spirit
which was visiting the palace every night and left early in the morning. These events climaxed some
days later in a storm which appeared over the imperial palace around 2 AM. Lightning struck the
roof, setting it on fire. The emperor summoned the legendary samurai Minamoto no Yorimasa, to
deal with the evil spirit. Yorimasa brought his trusted companion, I no Hayata, and his legendary
bow which he received from Minamoto no Yorimitsu, to hunt the best he could. During the night, a
strange wind came over them, followed by a black cloud. Yorimasa fired his arrow into the clouds
above the palace, and out from the sky came a horrible scream as a nue dropped to the earth. I no
Hayata leaped upon the body, dealing it a finishing blow. The emperor immediately recovered from
his illness, and rewarded the heroes with the legendary sword Shishiou for their service. This event
has been immortalized in numerous paintings and ukiyoe prints. After the nue was slain, the
inhabitants of Kyoto were afraid of a retaliatory curse for killing the best, so they loaded its body in a
ship and sent it down the Kamo river."

Yoshiyuki: "That's long!"

Mikazuki: "Poor nue."
Yamanbagiri: "Is that why you keep a nue now?"

Shishiou: "Who knows. I'm just lonely here, and he's very cute and fluffy, so why not? Oh, by the way, the boat with the nue's body washed up on the shore near the village of Ashiya in Hyogo prefecture. The good citizens of Ashiya removed the nue's body, built it a burial mound, and gave it proper funeral. You can still visit the mound known as Nuezuka today!"

Yoshiyuki: "Let's visit it someday!"

Kogitsunemaru: "We're advertising places now?"

Mikazuki: "Anyway, that concludes all the important information that appeared in this arc."

Yamanbagiri: "Next up is useless trivia about ourselves."

Kogitsunemaru: "To be precise, it's Q & A section, but the one asking are author and Yoshiyuki."

Yoshiyuki: "Maybe we should ask readers to ask us something?"

Mikazuki: "The questions took account on what the readers might be wondering about, although they're trivial, since important information is being kept as a secret."

Yamanbagiri: "That being said, feel free to ask in comment section or even Curious Cat or Peing regarding anything. Even about us. Whether the answer is honest or not, though… no promises."

Yoshiyuki: "Without further ado, let's get started! I have invisible papers here - "

Kogitsunemaru: "How can you see them if they're invisible?"

Yoshiyuki: "I mean they're invisible for the readers! Ehem, first up is for Shishiou, continuing our convo before."

Shishiou: "Oh? What is it?"

Yoshiyuki: "Now that Mikazuki lives with Yamanbagiri, where do ya live and what are ya doing?"

Shishiou: "What a personal question!"

Yamanbagiri: "You work part-time at convenience store, right? Do you still do it?"

Shishiou: "Yeah, I still do it, and I still live at the shrine. I've been going around to other shrines' and holy places' shishis, you know, wanting to take a job as shishi if they're short on hands, and although I'm accepted in some of them, they're still part-time jobs."

Kogitsunemaru: "...You can work at another shrine as shishi?"

Yoshiyuki: "MIND BLOWN."

Shishiou: "The era has changed, after all. We gotta adapt. Guarding shrines and holy places are important jobs, but sometimes they're short on hands, especially at this era where we're kinda not needed anymore. Oh, I've also contacted some specialists and offer them my service if they need it."

Yamanbagiri: "Thanks to my contacts. Winks."

Shishiou: "Yep. I'm very grateful to you, Yamanbagiri!"
Yamanbagiri: "No problem."

Kogitsunemaru: "This kind of progression is amazing but also scary at the same time."

Mikazuki: "Life is strange."

Yoshiyuki: "Okay! The answer is clear, so let's move on! Next up - I said that Kogi has to make permanent hole on his clothes for his tail, but what does that mean?!"

Kogitsunemaru: "It means what it means. Since my outfit here is… uh, like this… I have to create a hole on my pants for my tail to go through."

Yamanbagiri: "Meanwhile, Yoshiyuki doesn't have to do it since his tail is quite more flexible, not permanent, and his outfit isn't like Kogitsunemaru's and will never be."

Yoshiyuki: "That's right! But speaking of that hole, how did ya create it?"

Kogitsunemaru: "Simple. Magic. I don't think you want to know the details."

Yoshiyuki: "Yeaah, let's skip that part, I'm kinda scared. Next up! Kogi plays mobages, but Yamanbagiri plays it too, right? How do ya guys play them when there's only a phone and a laptop?"

Yamanbagiri: "That's easy. Kogitsunemaru obviously uses my phone and laptop, but we switch when playing. We keep bind codes so it's safe to swap like that. It works very well with Yuyuyui."

Kogitsunemaru: "At home, I usually play in laptop if Yamanbagiri isn't using it. If he's using it, I use his phone."

Yoshiyuki: "Oooh, emulator?"

Yamanbagiri: "Yeah. It's a gaming laptop, after all."

Yoshiyuki: "Very powerful! Anyway, what about Mikazuki? Do you play any digital games?"

Mikazuki: "It's quite obvious that I don't. They're fun to watch, but I'm not suited to play it. I can say that I'm not suited for advanced technology in general."

Kogitsunemaru: "You almost broke Yamanbagiri's laptop the first time you're using it…"

Mikazuki: "Tehee."

Yoshiyuki: "What are ya doing when they're busy playing, then?"

Mikazuki: "I might read books, stare at the scenery, talk to other oddities, or watch TV. I'd prefer to embrace Yamanbagiri as he plays if possible, though, and it happens occasionally."

Yamanbagiri: "We can do that too, Yoshiyuki, now that Mutsunba is official. I can sit on your lap and we play, or vice-versa."

Yoshiyuki: "Sounds good! I've always wanted to do it with ya~ Cough. What about Shishiou?"

Shishiou: "Thanks to you I've been playing some console games. I'm saving up to buy more."

Yoshiyuki: "What about a phone? Mobages?"
Shishiou: "I have a phone. A flip phone. I can only use wi-fi at the store and cafes. Mobile data is expensive, so... ahaah. Console games are better for me. Besides, I’ve seen many news of people destroying their lives to gacha, so I’d rather not play it."

Yamanbagiri: "Like Kogi."

Kogitsunemaru: "I don't use money and whale. You do."

Yamanbagiri: "Tsk."

Kogitsunemaru: "What does that mean?!

Yoshiyuki: "Yamanbagiri's just a dolphin, really."

Yamanbagiri: "Well, I guess so. There are console games I have to buy, after all. At least I don't grind until late night anymore, now that there are Kogi and Mikazuki."

Yoshiyuki: "Ya calling me out now?"

Mikazuki: "Yoshiyuki is still the no 1 gamer out of all of us, isn't he?"

Yamanbagiri: "Still less than President, though."

Yoshiyuki: "President? Kuniyuki-senpai?"

Yamanbagiri: "Yeah. As far as I know, anyway."

Yoshiyuki: "The road to become the king of games is still so long...!"

Yamanbagiri: "The king is obviously always Yuugi, duh."

Kogitsunemaru: "We're going a bit far from the question now. Is there any other question, Yoshiyuki?"

Yoshiyuki: "Lemme see... oh! Where's the scene where I kabedon Yamanbagiri?!"

Yamanbagiri: "I told you it doesn't exist."

Yoshiyuki: "This is blaspheeemyyyy!! Blasphemy, I say!!"

Mikazuki: "I suppose that's all. Perhaps we really need readers to ask us things."

Kogitsunemaru: "I agree."

Mikazuki: "As usual, sources cited are English wikipedia and yokai.com. Feel free to correct the author if there's something wrong."

Yamanbagiri: "Well then, see you in the next chapter, everyone. As always, thank you for following this far, and we hope you will still enjoy what's going to come. Fufu, I wonder who the next arc's focus is... I'm sure you'll be surprised. Or not."

Shishiou: "For now, enjoy the extra stories!"

{ Extra Illustrations (Doodles) }
Happy New Year 2018!!!
Chapter End Notes

*As always, many thanks for the readers who have kept on reading for the past 2 years-ish!
*My proofreader, Cyan475 is going to have national exams soon, so they're going to take a break, but don't worry, this story will keep on continuing.
*My curious cat is here, by the way. Feel free to ask!
*I actually have a mutsunba drawing WIP...but that's for later. Feel free to stalk my tumblr or twitter for it, ahaha.
Two chapters update. This is the second one. 
Man, I should've put this kind of note since long ago! It's been 2 years and I just got the idea...

=Extra Chapter=

{ Extra Story }

[Two years ago, some days after the incident.]

[Yamanbagiri and Yoshiyuki are setting up a Xbox 360 on TV in the shrine. It's a new TV Shishiou bought a few days earlier, a secondhand, so it's old, but still usable.]

Yoshiyuki: "Ok… there! Try to turn it on."

[Yamanbagiri turns on the Xbox 360, puts the game disk in it, turns on the TV and changes the channel. The screen changes into a flash of logos and an opening of the game.]

Shishiou: "Oooh, it works!"

Yamanbagiri: "Nice. We can play games now."

Shishiou: "Is it okay, though? Isn’t your holiday going to be over soon?"

Yoshiyuki: "And that's why we gotta end it with a bang!"

Kogitsunemaru: "That incident was a bang already, though….

Mikazuki: "You sure recovered quickly, Yoshiyuki."

Yoshiyuki: "I'm a healthy, growing young boy, after all!"

Yamanbagiri: "Okay, let's play already, Yoshiyuki."

Yoshiyuki: "Sure, sure."

[They sit and take the controllers on their hands.]

Kogitsunemaru: "What game is it?"

Yamanbagiri: "A 2D fighting game, but there's also a story."

Shishiou: "The title is… Golden… Fantasia [4]?

Yoshiyuki: "Something like that. Want to play, Shishiou?"

Shishiou: "I want to!"
Yamanbagiri: "Then, after me and Yoshiyuki, okay? Do you want to try too, Kogi?"

Kogitsunemaru: "If you allow it….

Yoshiyuki: "Let's just go with VS mode."

[Yamanbagiri and Yoshiyuki pick their characters and the battle starts. Their fingers move and click the controllers, shouting as they fight. Kogitsunemaru's and Shishiou's eyes are glued to the screen, watching their heated battle with childish excitement and curiosity. Mikazuki peeks slightly from behind.]

[After a few minutes, the winner is decided.]

Yoshiyuki: "Yay!! It's my win!"

Yamanbagiri: "Ahh… I'm so rusty. I have to practice again."

Shishiou: "That was a close fight. The both of you are so cool!"

Yoshiyuki: "Eheheh~ It's your turn now!"

Yamanbagiri: "Here, Kogitsunemaru. Just read the manual first and then leave the rest to your instincts."

Kogitsunemaru: "O-Okay….

[Kogitsunemaru and Shishiou swap places with the two of them.]

Kogitsunemaru: "Who should I choose? That girl with a scythe and twintails seems cool, but….

Yamanbagiri: "She is kind of hard to play, yeah. You can use a sword, so how about picking Williard?"

Kogitsunemaru: "Ah, this one?"

Yamanbagiri: "Yep. You can choose alternative colors too."

Kogitsunemaru: "I'll just leave it."

Shishiou: "And… me… hoooh, this red-haired girl seems badass! Ange, isn't it?"

Yoshiyuki: "She is! Why don't ya try using her?"

Shishiou: "Seems interesting, so I will."

Yamanbagiri: "Williard vs Ange… what kind of nightmare is this?"

Yoshiyuki: "Anyway, you choose a partner too. Battler is Ange's older brother if you want him."

Shishiou: "Hoo… okay."

Yamanbagiri: "Williard with Dlanor, perhaps? This girl. They were once working together."

Kogitsunemaru: "Okay."

Yamanbagiri: "You can choose anyone else, though, even if they aren't directly related."
Shishiou: "I feel like I better choose the directed ones."

[They read the manual with Yamanbagiri and Yoshiyuki teaching them before the battle starts.]

Yamanbagiri: "Use that combo, Kogi! Yes! Avenge my loss!"

Yoshiyuki: "Don't lose, Shishiou! I trust you! There, stun him!"

Kogitsunemaru: "U-Uaaah!! Y-Yamanbagiri, you're too close!"

Yamanbagiri: "Focus on the game, please!"

Shishiou: "Chance!"

Kogitsunemaru: "Aaaah!!"

Yamanbagiri: "Don't panic, you can counter… here!"

[Yamanbagiri grabs the controller.]

Kogitsunemaru: "Y-Y-Your hand is touching my hand…!"

Yoshiyuki: "Don't let him win!! Do this!!"

[Yoshiyuki, doesn't want to lose, also does the same, almost tackling Shishiou.]

Shishiou: "O-Oi, it's hard to control her now…! And you're scaring my nue!"

[Nue is shriking in the background as it leaps off from Shishiou's shoulder, running to Mikazuki's lap.]

Mikazuki: "Oh my, that turns into a chaos real fast."

[He says that while sipping tea calmly.]

Yoshiyuki: "Because we - !"

Yamanbagiri: "Must not lose!"

Shishiou: "I appreciate your youthful energy, but my old self can't take this!!"

Kogitsunemaru: "Our hand… our hand…!"

Mikazuki: "You're still stuck on that? What's with that red face?"

Kogitsunemaru: "B-Be quiet!"

[After a few minutes of struggle, the winner is Kogitsunemaru and Yamanbagiri, but everyone is panting heavily and sweating.]

Shishiou: "That was… so intense…"

Yamanbagiri: "Haa… revenge completed."

Yoshiyuki: "Grr…!!"

Yamanbagiri: "What, you still want to go, Yoshiyuki?"
Yoshiyuki: "Of course! I can't live with this loss!"
Yamanbagiri: "Good, that's what I want!"
Kogitsunemaru: "Okay, okay, I'm... out of here.
Shishiou: "Me too. Have fun, the two of you."
Mikazuki: "Youth is so terrifying, isn't it?"

[June, after Yoshiyuki and Yamanbagiri have started dating.]
[The usual group is at the cafeteria, sitting and eating their own lunches.]
Yamanbagiri: "Yoshiyuki, you have a grain of rice on your face."
Yoshiyuki: "Huh? Where?"
Yamanbagiri: "Next to your lips."
Yoshiyuki: "Here?"
Yamanbagiri: "No, here."
Yamanbagiri's thumb moves to sweep the grain of rice away from his face, and then he proceeds to eat it. Yoshiyuki is dumbfounded, but he smiles bashfully.
Yoshiyuki: "Thanks! Ya have something too...."
Yamanbagiri: "Eh, where?"
Yoshiyuki: "There... ya have your face. Ahahahah!"
Yamanbagiri: "Yo-shi-yu-ki!"
[Hasebe whispers to Kashuu next to him.]
Hasebe: "It's weird, they suddenly get so lovey-dovey like this lately. I wonder if something happened."
Kashuu: "R-Really?"
Hasebe: "Yes. I'm sure of it... they've been acting weird around each other for weeks, but this is new to me."
Kashuu: "Isn't it good that they're closer now? I mean, I thought they kinda got in a fight before, but now they've made up, everything is alright, and they're acting normal."
Hasebe: "...I guess you're right. I didn't realize they had a fight, but now that you said it... yeah, you're right."
Kashuu: That was close... Hasebe is so sharp. I already know it, but it seems he likes Yamanbagiri too. What a popular guy. Anyway, so the person Yamanbagiri mentioned is Yoshiyuki after all... I
see. Now that they look even closer than before, I can assume that they're dating now? But then, what about the two oddities following him? Huh? I'm confused... I know three-way relationship, but more?? Should I ask him about it? But it'd be awkward....'

[His confusion is left unanswered.]

[And of course, Yamato doesn't really notice the change.]

[Meanwhile Shishiou, in the midst of all the chaos from May.]

Shishiou: "What a great morning! I'm sure today will be a great day! Isn't that true, Nue?"

Nue: "Chirp!"

Shishiou: "Aww, you're so cute~! Okay, okay, let me brush your fur... hmm? Are you asking me if I'm lonely living here at this shrine all alone now? Well... I'm not alone. I have you."

[Nue is visibly blushing.]

Shishiou: "I can't lie and say that I'm not lonely, though. I guess it's my nature to take care of people... but that's fine! They're happy together, so all I can do is support them! I have new jobs now, anyway."

Nue: "Chirp chirp!"

Shishiou: "Ahahha, you're really a good boy~"

[He leads a happy life with his pet and is meeting new people at work.]
Chapter Summary

"Would you let your beloved one be with someone else?"

He has always watched from afar, being kind and caring, ignoring the swelling feelings in the depths of his very being. He thought he was content only by watching. After all, knowing that the one you love is happy should be enough.

However, it all began to collapse.

His earnest and pure feelings, a simple, childish desire of possession and affection, starts to warp as darkness takes over. Losing balance, he succumbs to the darkness of his heart and acts upon it once again.

Out of jealousy and hatred, the leaking container is split into half.

Taking everything down with him to the abyss, he believes this is the happiness he seeks with the one he loves.

"I will grant whatever you want."

In the midst of pouring rain, he sacrifices everything else just to be with him.

Whether it's wrong or not, he has no way of knowing, and he doesn't care.

"I will never let you go. That's why, don't leave me alone...stay with me, forever and ever."

Chapter Notes

As usual, two chapters update. This is the first one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Email (Sent June 17th 09:00 AM CET)

From: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: Re: Decision and...

I see. You decided to date him because you realized you love him. Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru accepted your decision, and now you're dating the three of them. Sounds good.

Congratulations, Yamanbagiri.
I expected this outcome, but I was at my edge waiting for your reply.

I'm glad to hear that everything worked out well.

But now that you have three lovers…are you alright? Mentally and physically speaking. I'm afraid if they might cause a ruckus or fight over you too much. It can be dangerous if any of them are the overly-jealous type. I've heard many stories in the news about such things…the world can be scary.

Well, I believe it'll be fine. They've known each other for a pretty long time. I pray that everything will be alright.

A few fights will show just how close they are. Like friends. That's what you like, am I right?

For the last part…hm. Your senior is a xian? I googled it, but…I'm still a bit confused. I can't help if you're as confused as I am, either. Perhaps he told you the truth because he wanted your help, or because he trusted you. As long as you're not in danger, I think it's okay to let him do whatever he wants.

Just like you said, these kind of people are the hardest to read.

So keep your guard up.

I wish you good luck, Yamanbagiri.

>>>Reply

Chapter End Notes

*I decided not to show Yamanbagiri's sent emails unless necessary. I don't think this one is necessary, and I can hide some information conveniently like this, while you still get the context.

*As I've stated before, my beta-reader/proofreader has changed temporarily. It is now my friend, WastefulPhoenix (or just call him Doggy). Thanks for taking my offer, you're a life-saver. With this, I hope I can learn many other things and make less mistakes.

*If you've noticed, yes, I added 2 new tags. They're fair warnings, really. This will get darker and edgier.
"So…Sadamune-senpai…mind to explain this?" Hasebe begins his interrogation, a stack of R18 books are piled on top of the desk. I try my best to avert my eyes from the lewd covers and instead focus at the culprit - an upperclassman with glasses, smiling innocently at us, Kikkou Sadamune.

Looks can be deceiving. I learned it the hard way with him.

"What do you mean? As you see here, these are my collections," he replies, puffing out his chest, showing his utter lack of shame.

"That's not something you should be proud of, even if you created some," I say, sighing as I look at his record. "So, um, this is the…50th time you've been caught with them at school…since you were the first year, senpai."

"And the 20th time we caught you." Hasebe ruffles his hair. "Damn it, I wish the teachers were the ones to interrogate you, not us. Our tasks are meant to only deal with small fries…"

Words so unlike Hasebe came out of his mouth. That's how frustrated he was. "They're too tired to deal with him."

"And then dumped the hard task on us youngsters. These irresponsible adults….""

When he is grumbling like this, nothing I say can make him calm. I share the same sentiment as him, though. Kikkou-senpai is a serial troublemaker. I'd be happier if he was just a delinquent, but no. He is a genius, the top of his grade, diligent, good-looking, very neat…and yet, all of them have to be destroyed by his antics. He draws R18 books and often sell them to his peers (obviously, he also sells them outside). Sometimes he opens requests to draw as well. *Openly*. He also brings other R18 magazines, showing off his enormous collection. All 2D, though, but still…it's clearly a violation of school rules.

"What's wrong with me? Don't you miss me?" Kikkou-senpai says, sulking. It's cute, but it doesn't work at all, and only further pisses Hasebe off.

"I'd rather not meet you ever again in this room!"

"That's a cruel thing to say!"

He hugs himself with a pained expression, but that expression soon turns into a quite ecstatic face. Yeah…this person is a masochist. Telling him kindly or not kindly doesn't matter. The result stays the same. He's happy either way.

"Senpai," Hasebe massages his forehead, exhausted. "You don't learn at all, do you? 50 times getting caught with this…you know the consequences."
"I can't help it. It's my job."

"At least don't show them off before class or put them in your locker first so you won't get caught during inspection," I offer an idea.

"Yamanbagiri, don't help him." Hasebe slaps my back. Ouch.

"He's hopeless, so this is the only way…"

"That's right! I'm hopeless, I never learn, and I'm going to graduate, so I have to go all out! Yamanbagiri-san understands!" Kikkou-senpai pumps a fist with sparkling eyes. He's even calling me with my given name right off the bat.

Hasebe glares intently at him. He flinches, but keeps on smiling… or smiling even wider. There's some kind of spark between the two of them.

"Kyaa~ Don't stare at me like that, it's embarrassing…" Kikkou-senpai says, smiling bashfully, with cute gestures to support it. "Why don't you read these books instead? They're great!"

"Gaaah!! Yamanbagiri, I'm leaving it to you! I'm going to take care of the other violations. You handle this one. My sanity can't take this." "E-Eh?" Before I can refuse, Hasebe already yanks the door open and walks away. "Wait, Hasebe - !"

My voice is left unheard as he closes the door.

"Ahaha, now you're alone with me, Yamanbagiri-san."

"Uh, um."

I sweat and look at Kikkou-senpai, a smile is always glued on his face. This is quite… uncomfortable.

"Your friend has quite the temper. It's adorable."

"So please stop teasing him, senpai… to make my job easier."

"But I want to be alone with you, so this is a good tactic."

“…..” I stare at him in disbelief.

"Just kidding~!"

For a second I thought I have to call Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru to protect my sanity!

"I'm about to leap here!" I hear Kogitsunemaru's voice crying out from inside.

Yeah…

"That's not even funny…” I sigh and flip the pages of his record book, writing down his 50th violation. "Okay, then. You know the process, senpai. I'm going to take your books away and the teacher will take care of them."

"Yes, yes."

"At the worst case, they might finally burn these books. I heard talks about it."
His smile finally falters with that threat. "Even though these are the softest books I have…"

Having people tied up is the softest? Really? Just what kind of things he does he love? I'm scared to find out. Then again, as far as I remember, all of his books involve ropes…of course, I only see the covers. I guess that's his kink, being a masochist and all.

I take a plastic bag and shove the books inside, trying my best to not stare at them.

"I'm sure you'll repeat this, senpai, so I have no words," I say

"Please believe in my redemption~!" He squeals.

"I can't when you say it like that…and I sure remember that you said you're going all out."

"Tehee."

He knocks his forehead in a cute manner, acting innocent.

This violation is actually minor and the punishment is up to the teachers (other than confiscating the books for a while), so his grades and school life is safe, but…he repeats his crime so much that everyone is too tired to lecture him, and just lets him do as he pleases after we collect his books. Rinse and repeat. As I said before, Kikkou-senpai is hopeless in this case, and he's going to graduate soon anyway, so we're going to be free of him soon. …Or not for me and Hasebe, since we have his LINE (he forced it on us!), and he occasionally sends random messages. Yoshiyuki has his LINE too - another victim of his. What a mess.

The door creaks open when I'm about to put all the books away.

"Oh. There you are."

"Akashi-san!"  

President - as I usually call Akashi-senpai - leans on the door. "I'm here to pick you up and get the games I left in your house. Are you done?"

"Thank you~"

"Just a bit more," I say, pointing at some books on the table.  

That's right. President is friends with Kikkou-senpai. These failures of handsome men in glasses…they live in the same neighborhood, so they tend to go together, or so I heard.

"Heh. So hardworking, aren't you, Yamanbagiri-chan?" President says, snickering. "So much that you skipped club again."

"It's all Sadamune-senpai's fault…and since when did you call me like that?"

"Just now."

…He's as random as Tsurumaru-senpai and Kikkou-senpai! Why are most upperclassmen I know like this? Am I magnet for weird people? Then again, I'm also weird…and maybe that's why. Sighs.

After a while, I finished the task, "Okay then. You may go now, senpai."

"Thank you." Kikkou-senpai stands up, approaching me to take his bag away. Before that, though,
he strokes my head…through my hood, thankfully. "Good work today."

"W-What is this?"

"Just a pat you deserve."

I'm embarrassed, and I'm sure I'm blushing right now, but I can't shake his hand away. In fact, it feels quite nice…

"Oi, don't take my cute underclassman away from me," president says, sulking on the doorway.

"I won't, unless he wants me to~"

"What's that supposed to mean…?"

I don't understand them at all. What a weird duo where's the both of them are boke…

"How about going home with us, Yamanbagiri-san?" Kikkou-senpai suddenly says, clapping his hands as if it's a very great idea.

"I already have plans, sorry."

And just then I remembered Ichigo-senpai. If my memory was right, he once said that he wanted to walk home with me, right? …That was a few weeks ago though. I wonder if he still remembers and still wants to do it, since even though we've met a few times, he never says a thing about it.

"Aah, too bad." Kikkou-senpai smiles and walks away, waving his hand. "See you then, Yamanbagiri-san!"

"Go to club tomorrow, okay?" President says, and then the two of them leave.

"I'll try to. Bye."

I see them off before checking the book one more time and take the plastic bag, intending to go to the faculty office. The record book logs student’s achievements and…err…failures? Violations, anyway. There's one for each student, but at times like this, we in the disciplinary committee hold it before giving it to the teachers. At this point, I think our committee was made only because they're too lazy to do it by themselves…well, there aren't many teachers here. I guess it's understandable.

When I step into the corridor, on my right, I see a row of students are being lectured by Hasebe. So this is what he means.

"So, Otegine-san, tell me why you brought in that thing again," Hasebe says, crossing his arms.

"This isn't that thing. It's my pet…" Otegine-san responds.

"Why did you bring it to school, then?"

"I thought it must be lonely at home…" The tall man named Otegine says, holding the thing in his hands close. It's a…little squirrel.

"Who cares about that?! You know it's against the rules! And this is the 3rd time - !"

I just watch them and chuckle awkwardly. Bringing a pet to school and bringing R18 books you drew to sell them…the students at this school are weird. Some of the disciplinary system is weird too. Record books? I don't know if this exists in other schools - not in my middle school at least, but it
exists in author's high school.

Just for your information, don't mind me.

"Excuse me...are you Kunihiro-senpai?"

I turn to the source of the voice, finding a boy with a very long black hair standing next to me. It seems he has been waiting, leaning his back to on the wall.

"Yes, that's me. May I help you?"

He doesn't look like a problem child, unless his hair gets stuck on something regularly.

"I arrived late today and the teacher told me to go here after school." He says.

"Oh. Okay. Give me your record book."

He gives the book to me and I check his name on the cover.

"Izumi...nokami...Kanesada, huh?"

What a long name. Kanesada...that name sounds strikingly familiar. Did I hear it somewhere else before? I feel like I should remember it, but ungh...

Okay, focus on the task first, Yamanbagiri Kunihiro! Ooh, he is a year younger than me. Underclassman. I flip the pages and write down his violation - that is, being late to school. It seems this is his first time. His records are clear of any negativity.

"How many minutes were you late?" I ask.

"Just around 3 minutes after the gate is closed." He answers simply.

"That's so close."

"It sucks to be here."

"Well, this is your first time, so just take it easy. But be more careful next time." I give him his book after I finished writing.

"Yeah. Thanks."

He takes the book and walks away, his long black hair swaying. That hair seems so silky and beautiful, I'm tempted to touch it, but of course I can't without his consent...hm. A boy with a long hair, huh. There are plenty of people like that here, and it's somehow allowed. I think it suits them, like this Kanesada guy. He looks elegant and all.

"Yamanbagiri has a hair fetish, it seems," Mikazuki whispers, coming out of my body and giggles.

No, I'm don't!

"Putting aside your questionable fetish," Kogitsunemaru says, also appearing next to me, "You seriously don't remember, Yamanbagiri?"

Remember what?

"Kanesada's last name." Kogitsunemaru responds quickly.
I don't.

Wait, don't stare at me with such cold and disappointed eyes!

"Yamanbagiri is forgetful, after all," Mikazuki laments.

Sheesh, I'm sorry about that. Mikazuki is a lot more forgetful than me, though.

Mikazuki lightly jabs my stomach. **OUCH.**

Kogitsunemaru smiles and pats my head, "You know that last name, because…"

He whispers the thing I know.

...

...

**OH. OH. OOOH.**

I just remembered.

How can I be this forgetful?

"Finally." He crosses his arms and sighs in relief.

"So, do you think that's his brother?" Mikazuki asks.

That's highly possible, but...I don't remember if he has a brother. Younger, on top of that.

Hmm....maybe I should ask. For now, we should get away from here. Before the students begin to look at me weirdly.

"Hasebe, I'm going home after I put these books on faculty office." I announce.

Hasebe turns to look at me, still glaring. Angry mode. "Okay. See you tomorrow."

I feel kind of bad for leaving him now, but I can't resist the temptation to go home.

.

.

I walk to my class, but then -

"Oh! Yamanbagiri-san."

A voice calls out to me as he slides open the door.

"Hello, Ichigo-senpai." I respond.

I'm passing by the student council's room. Ichigo-senpai looks a bit surprised to see me beyond the door, but his face soon relaxes. "Good afternoon. Are you about to go home? Disciplinary committee was busy today. Good work."

"Thanks. Yeah, I'm going home."

"I'm going home, too. How about we go home together?"
"Oh, sorry…" So he remembers…I feel like I should grant his wish as he still wants it, but, it's time for me to spend time with Yoshiyuki as lovers, so…I already promised him too. Ugh. "…I already have plans today. Tomorrow, maybe?"

Ichigo-senpai doesn't even hide his disappointment, but he smiles. "Oh. That's too bad."

He looks so sad…I feel incredibly bad for rejecting him now. Ugh.

"Tomorrow after club, I promise, senpai." I put out, trying to reassure him.

His eyes light up when he hears that. "Promise?"

"Promise."

He smiles and pats my shoulder. "I'm looking forward to it. See you tomorrow."

"See you."

Walking away with a hum, I wave him goodbye. Ichigo-senpai is kind of readable, but I have to wonder why he wants to go home with me so badly. Not that I mind to go home with anyone.

I proceed my journey to my class.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Yoshiyuki."

I slide the door open. Since it's been a few hours since the school ends, the class is almost empty. There's only Yoshiyuki sitting on his chair. He smiles at me.

"No problem. Good work today, Yamanbagiri. I managed to finish homework for tomorrow!" He replied joyously.

"That's good. Let me copy it, then?"

"Sure. I'll send the photo later." He shoves his books in his bag before standing up. "What about Hasebe, though?"

"He still has something to do."

"I see."

Before we step out of the classroom, Yoshiyuki leans closer to me, pecking my lips. Since we've started dating a few days ago, kissing at school like this has become a routine. I'm always anxious if there are people who see us, but Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki assured me that they keep a lookout.

"Let's go," Yoshiyuki says, pulling my hand slightly. He is still awkward and embarrassed doing this, it's really cute, but at least he doesn't get so excited that his ears and tail appear.

"Mm."

We know the school building is almost completely empty, but we there's always chance to be seen by someone, so we don't hold hands until we exit the gate. Better safe than sorry.

We walk down the corridor, bathed in sunset.

"It's good that it isn't raining today, huh?" Yoshiyuki says. "And I've brought an umbrella too…"
"I'd like to share an umbrella with you, though. It's romantic."

"And leaving us alone in rain?" Mikazuki jabs in. I jab his stomach with my elbow.

"You guys have me as a shelter," I whisper.

"That's not enough!"

He laughs seeing our exchange. "Ehehehe. Me too, but getting wet sucks."

"The coldness is nice, though."

"Yeah, we can cuddle and maybe have hot noodles."

"Don't forget playing games."

"Speaking of games, I haven't played Yuyuyui today…Yamanbagiri, give me your phone," Kogitsunemaru says. "I heard there's new SSR. I should roll."

"My poor mobile data…okay, here," I give him my smartphone. He has no smartphone of his own so he uses mine. It can't be helped. I'm the one who introduced him to the beautiful world of games.

Before, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru were hiding to not bother us. They said that since we've just started dating, we need more time alone at first, even though Yoshiyuki said it's fine to have things the way they were before. At the end, it was decided that they'll hide for a week, and that limit is over, so now things are going back to normal.

"By the way, Yoshiyuki, it pains me to say this, but…I'm going home with Ichigo-senpai tomorrow."

"Huh?"

"I kinda…promised him. I feel bad since he still wants it after weeks."

Yoshiyuki pouts, looking sad, but he nods. "Ah…well, it can't be helped then. We can flirt all we want during break time!"

"Sorry and thanks."

He pats my back. "Don't worry about that. I understand. Come to think of it, have you heard any more news from him?"

"Him? Who are you talking about - no, wait. I know. I understand." I shake my head. "No news. He didn't come to school today, either. It has been two days since that day."

"There's something seriously off with him," Mikazuki says solemnly, "If he is an oddity and thus can see us, why didn't he tell you sooner?"

"I don't know. He might not want to get involved in any trouble."

"And you're a magnet for troubles."

"Exactly." It pains me to think that he might've noticed that fact.

"I can't tell what he's thinking, but I hope it's nothing bad," Yoshiyuki adds nervously. "I want to believe in him."
"And I can't exactly call him since I have no concrete reason to...all I can do is just wait for him to open up to me."

Mikazuki and Yoshiyuki nod. Meanwhile, Kogitsunemaru is silent, most likely absorbed in the game, anxiously tapping the screen or something. He's always frozen for at least 20 seconds before tapping the roll button. Yeah, I know him pretty well.

"WAAAAH!!"

There he is. His scream.

"What's wrong, Kogi?" Yoshiyuki peeks at him.

Kogitsunemaru's face is pale, his body shakes as he shows the phone screen. "I got...four...new SSRs!"

...God, I really hope that's my account.

Oh, of course not. Kogitsunemaru would've never make that mistake. Mikazuki might, though.

"Four...FOUR!! It's my lucky day!!! There's one I want too, aaah..." He exclaims loudly.

"Clap clap. Congratulations," Mikazuki says flatly. He's never interested in RNG games, but if he plays it, I'm sure he'll take away all of our luck and win the game easily. Whenever I roll, I always have him next to me, having him lend some luck to me...sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.

Now that we've passed the gate, with nobody around, I take Yoshiyuki's hand and holds it tightly.

"...Let's ignore Kogi for three days, Yoshiyuki."

Yoshiyuki's eyes are almost dead. "...Let's."

"WHY?!!" Kogitsunemaru wails.

We just laugh as response. I'd like to see him crying and screaming so bad right now.

"I heard you, Yamanbagiri! You're so cruel..." He crosses his arms and looks downcast.

Seeing him pouting and sulking like a child, I can't help but to chuckle and stroke his head. "Sorry, sorry. I'm just joking. I'll play with you at home, okay?" The last part is quite unneeded, but I just see him as a cat sometimes, so it slipped. He still looks angry, but of course he leans closer to my touch. Adorable. Like a cat, he likes being patted.

"What kind of play - nevermind," Yoshiyuki says, as though he notices something and decides to shut his mouth.

I shoot him a questioning look, but Mikazuki says with a shocked expression, "Did you just think - "

"Don't say it, don't say it! I thought of an innocent thing, okay!" Yoshiyuki cuts him off, waving his hands around with a red face. "That was stupid of me...for not thinking of the possibilities..."

"Possibilities?" Now I'm even more confused.

He heaves an exasperated sigh. "Yamanbagiri, there's a limit to how dense or ignorant ya are."
That hurts. "I don't want to hear that from you…"

"I'll let these two answer it later!" He pulls my arm and speeds up, clearly has no intention to pick up the subject again, "Come on."

"Okay, okay."

Meanwhile Kogitsunemaru sticks close to me with a bashful expression, holding my other hand.

"…Wait, where am I supposed to go?" Mikazuki says, even more shocked than before - finding that there's nowhere for him to stick on me, now that we're walking like this.

Welp. This is the downside of having the three of them together with me, I guess…

At night, since he didn't get a turn this afternoon, Mikazuki is glued on me. He lies down on my lap as I clean his ears…just because he told me he wanted it. Meanwhile, Kogitsunemaru is drying his hair.

"Aah, this feels so good," Mikazuki says slowly, his voice reminds me of an old man being relieved at hot springs, "Your lap is the best."

"Thanks, I guess? Do I really have to clean your ears like this, though?" I ask as I move the cotton swab. Sheesh, just because it's something a couple usually does…not that I mind to please my lover.

"I want to be pampered like this sometimes. It feels pleasant. You're quite good at this. How about I clean your ears next?"

"If there's the time, alright."

"I want to get a turn too," Kogitsunemaru says, slightly puffing out his cheeks as he struggles with his hair and hairdryer. The sound of the blowing dryer forces him to speak louder than usual.

"Please?"

"Okay. Once again, if there's time - when I'm not very sleepy."

"I'm waiting patiently," he says, his tail swinging around. This guy is way too cute for this world, honestly.

When I'm about to finish cleaning Mikazuki's ears, my smartphone rings loudly and vibrates violently on the table. Because he's the closest, Kogitsunemaru takes a look before giving it to me worldlessly. Stopping my activity, I take my smartphone and look at the screen.

"A call…and this number is…"

I immediately pick it up, sensing that both Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are tense when they know who's calling.

"Good evening, senpai. Why do you call me at night?"
After that sudden phone call, I end up going outside pretty late at night - to the place senpai asked me to come. It seems urgent. Of course, I'm not supposed to do this, so I slip out secretly like usual. Because the place is quite far away, I ride - I mean, Kogitsunemaru holds me as he flies.

"Were you just about to say *riding me?*" Kogitsunemaru asks, narrowing his eyes.

"I did. So what?"

"…Nothing."

"You just thought of something dirty but can’t say it aloud, huh?"

"…Yeah. It's obvious. Other than that, you can ride me if I'm in my fox form. Again."

"Riding you when you're like that is quite fun, but I like this better." I wrap my arms around him tightly. "I feel safer when you embrace me. If you were in your fox form I'd have to…hold you all alone. That's a bit scary, considering we're flying."

"That's true. Anyway…" He glances at the road straight ahead as the cold wind brushes our cheeks, "It's sure weird. For him to ask you to come to such a desolate place *without* Mikazuki."

"Yeah…all of sudden. Poor Mikazuki."

I remember his expression as he glared and sulked upon knowing that he couldn't come with me. We can just lie and have Mikazuki inside me, but apparently senpai can detect that, and he'd…do something to me if I didn't do as he asked. I'm pretty sure the both of them can fight him if something happens to me, but nobody wants to take the risk. Kogi is enough to protect me, anyway.

"I feel like he wants you to stay out of it, too, Kogi, but I have to fly to get there if I want to arrive quickly."

"I feel that too. I'm just glad I'm allowed to be with you."

"Me too."

After a few turns, we finally see our destination - an abandoned steel tower at the outskirts of the city. It's not used anymore, so it stands there, frozen, and it rots. As we get closer, I can see the shape of a human atop it. With striking white hair, Tsurumaru-senpai stands, looking down at the small city sparkling with lights. When he notices me coming, he smiles and waves his hand. I think this is the first time I’ve seen him with casual clothes…

Kogitsunemaru lands gently on the tower, a few meters away from Tsurumaru-senpai. He helps me stand and I shiver when I feel the cold wind. It's even colder up here.

"Yo, Manba-chan, Kogi," Tsurumaru-senpai greets us, "It seems Mikazuki really stayed. Thanks."

Kogitsunemaru just glares silently.
“Tsurumaru-senpai, what do you want? Asking me to come at night like this…” I grumble to break the uncomfortable atmosphere.

"Come on, holiday is soon, isn’t it? It’s not really late at night," He says, slowly approaching me, "What if I said I wanted to meet you?"

Kogitsunemaru pushes me back slightly, keeping the distance. Honestly, I'm not afraid of Tsurumaru-senpai, but… "Then come to school."

"I want to, but unfortunately, there are some problems."

"Problems?"

Tsurumaru-senpai just smiles and shrugs. "Kogi, can you lend me Manba-chan for a bit?"

"Why should I comply?" Kogitsunemaru replies, animosity is clear from his voice.

"Well, I’d kiss him and take him forcefully if you don't want to."

K-Kiss? Why would he kiss me at the first place?

Kogitsunemaru glares harder, his voice is louder, "You think you can beat me?"

"Oh, of course! I’m quite confident in my abilities. I’m sure you'd be surprised."

When the breeze passes by as silence falls, I realize that… whoa, this is getting bad.

"O-Okay, calm down, calm down. I don't want pointless fights here." I step forward between them. "Kogi, I don't see the harm on doing as senpai wants." What he wants is vague, but I don't sense danger from him. He's just being nonchalant as he always be.

"But - !" Kogitsunemaru exclaims.

"If something happens, I'm confident you can run to me immediately. So it's fine. I’d be fine." I turn to look at Tsurumaru-senpai, "Senpai, what exactly do you want to do?"

"I just want to hold you, Manba-chan." He says in the usual tone.

"…What?"

"There's that, and I want to show you something."

It doesn't sound dangerous except that hold. I can't tell if he's joking or not, though.

I turn to Kogitsunemaru again. He is still hesitant, but seeing me resigning, after a while, he finally sighs and gives up. "If that's what you want, Yamanbagiri. Alright."

"Actually, Kogi, you can follow us." Senpai gestures towards Kogi.

"Say that sooner!" Kogitsunemaru screams, clearly frustrated. He's very bad with the kind of people like senpai.

Tsurumaru-senpai laughs, seemingly satisfied. Still a troll to the very end… I guess he really is confident in his abilities. "Well then, Manba-chan. Come here."

I approach him wordlessly.
"I actually want to do this a few weeks ago, but it seemed like you had something on your mind, so I refrained," he says.

"Oh…” I remember. He called me when I was struggling with Yoshiyuki's confession.

"It is a simple thing, but I think it's better when you're relaxed like this. I know I'm still a trouble for you, but ahaahha, let's let that slide for now."

At least he's aware that he's a trouble.

"Manba-chan, do you remember my explanation? That I'm a xian [2]?" He starts.

"Vaguely, yeah…"

"Can you repeat it, then?"

Why should I? I think for a bit. "Not at all. I'm forgetful. I did say vaguely.."

"Aren't you honest. I'll repeat it, then." Tsurumaru-senpai spreads his arms, his white hair and complexion are in contrast with the black night sky. "Xian is basically an enlightened human attaining immortality in Taoism."

Yeah, that'd explain why he knows a lot about Taoism, but…

"That's…you oversimplified it. I'm pretty sure there's more." I raise a brow.

"Well, you already heard it, and what I said covers almost everything." He shrugged a little.

The readers haven't, though.

"Err…I remember you can attain immortality through various ways, like alchemy. You said you're as old as Mikazuki, too."

"Yep. That's why I'm smart! And you do remember, Manba-chan," he says, puffing out his chest. "Coincidentally, crane in Chinese mythology are sometimes linked to xian, who can transform into a crane. My name is Tsurumaru, and so, it's perfect."

"Huh - ?"

Before I know it, Tsurumaru-senpai hugs me. My face burns up when I feel his arms wrapped around me, pushing me against his body. His build is only a bit larger than me. I can even smell his scent…t-this is…but before I can scream, my feet slip away, unable to feel the floor. My heart screams for a whole another reason when I feel my body - and Tsurumaru-senpai - fall down the tower with a speed that causes a violent wind to hits me.

Ultimately, I hug him back. "S-Senpai! Wh-What is this?!"

"Hold on. You don't like the sensation of falling?"

"Of course I don't! Normal people won't!"

"I guess that's true. But it's fine. I'm a crane, remember?"

"And what does that have to do - aha."

Slowly but surely, I feel my body stop falling, and instead begin to float, slowly but surely going up.
It's a sensation I kind of know, but then we suddenly speed up to the sky, the wind becoming violent again. Afraid to look down, I hide my face on Tsurumaru-senpai's chest, clutching his shoulders, and I can feel his arms around me tighten. J-Just what he's going to do…?!

"Ahahaha. Manba-chan, it's okay now. Sorry, I just wanted to see your reaction." His unexpectedly gentle voice calls out when I feel the wind calming down. He strokes my head. "It'd be better if you open your eyes."

I'm still scared, but I want to trust him.

So, I open my eyes.

The first thing I see is Tsurumaru-senpai's smiling face, with white…things…no, white wings spreading from his back, almost covering the sky from my view. Just like his hair, these wings are completely white, undisturbed, looking completely pure and soft. It looks like bird wings.

He is…stunningly beautiful.

These wings suit him perfectly.

"What is this, Manba-chan? Admiring my coolness?" Tsurumaru-senpai winks.

"….Ah! Um…" I must be blushing right now.

"It's okay, you can stare at you want…or not, since that's not what I want to show you the most."

So it's one of things he wants to show, then.

"Are you afraid of heights?" He asks.

"A bit…"

"Hmm. It's ok, I'm holding you. I won't let you fall, so look at the view, Manba-chan."

"I…I'll try…"

Tsurumaru-senpai moves slightly, one arm still around my waist, moving sideways so I can look the view far more clearly. His hand is tickling me, but I slowly look around like he asked.

The night sky looks the same as always, cloudless with glittering stars there and there. Nothing unusual.

I look down.

The rural town is sparkling with lights, brightening the silhouettes of buildings, as if they're stars on earth. We're at the outskirts of the city, so there are more normal sized houses than tall city buildings. I can almost see the entire town due to the round sparkles of lights with the mountains far away. I feel like I could see this view from the steel tower, but I was taken here instead.

Needless to say, it's still breathtaking.

"…It's beautiful." I gasped.

"Is this your first time seeing this?" My carrier asked.

"Yeah."
Tsurumaru-senpai's hand moves to my shoulder, holding me closer. I can feel the soft feather of his wing tickling my neck slightly. "I wanted you to look at this. I'd be happy if you liked it."

"I like it." Though if I saw my feet and the buildings below I'd be scared as heck. "Why did you want me to see this?"

"There's no actual reason. Oh, I want some company to see this sometimes, so that might be why."

He sounds certain yet his answer is doubtful.

I don't understand him at all...but this is a nice view, so I'm grateful for that.

"By the way, you said xian transform into crane -?"

"For long-range flights, yeah, but I'd hate to change into a crane. How would I hold you if I became a crane?"

"I could ride you?"

He makes a shocked face. "Oh my, Manba-chan is so bold!"

"What the heck do you mean?"

Only then I realize there's Kogitsunemaru next to us, frowning.

"Kogi?" I call him, but he just stares at me with a sad expression. He probably feels left out. I turn to Tsurumaru-senpai, sliding away the previous conversation. "Is that all, senpai? Your wings and the scenery are beautiful, but..."

"Nope. One more. He should come out soon...hmm." He looks around, narrowing his eyes, as if searching for something or someone.

"He?"

"You'll see."

Kogitsunemaru floats to me and links his arm with me, puffing out his cheeks.

Tsurumaru-senpai laughs seeing this. "What is this, are you jealous, Kogi?"

"Other than that, I can't leave him alone." He didn't deny that he was jealous. Well, it was obvious. "What's the point of you doing this?"

"I want to get a piece of Manba-chan's heart."

Kogitsunemaru shoots him probably the most murderous glare to date that even makes me shiver.

"My heart?" I ask. Does he mean literal, or -

"Ahahaha. It's complicated. You'll see. Oh. There he is."

"Where?" In this dimness of the night, I can't see a thing...

Tsurumaru-senpai points at something on the ground, pushing me closer to him so I can see. "There."

My eyes follow his finger to the ground...oh. I see something. It's still quite dark, but I can make out
a human shape.

"That's…Ichigo-senpai?" I ask. "What is he doing so late at night?"

"Look closely. That's not…Ichigo. It's him, but not really him. Remember last year?" He responds

Last year…I shouldn't be surprised he knows but kept silent all this time. "Don't tell me…"

"Yep. That's his other self."

"He became ikiryou [1] again…" Or more like, he has ikiryou again. This is quite hard to describe.

"But why?" Kogitsunemaru asks, as confused as I am. "It was safely resolved."

Tsurumaru-senpai smiles sadly, "I don't know the exact details, either. He looks normal as far as I
know and he told me nothing. It might be something he pushed down into his unconsciousness
again."

"Do Kousetsu-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai know?"

"No. I haven't even told them the truth about me…well, Uguisumaru knows about me, though."

I feel like I should ask about why and how Uguisumaru-senpai knows, but that's not what I should
focus on.

"Ichigo doesn't know, right?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

"Yeah. I think it'd get worse if he knew." Tsurumaru-senpai coughs a few times before continuing.
"I've been observing him. So far, he just walks around the city. Nothing dangerous yet."

"I'm glad if that's the case, but this can't go any longer," I say.

"I agree."

"Do you know what caused this?" Kogitsunemaru asks once again, "You said you don't know the
details, but you seem to get something."

"That's right…well, this is not certain, as it's just my assumption, but…" Tsurumaru-senpai looks at
me, "I think he wants you, Manba-chan."

"…What?" Kogitsunemaru and I ask at the same time.

"Ikiryou appears due to intense feelings, be it passion or anger. His anger should have been subdued,
so I can't think of anything other than you to be the cause this. Of course, I might be wrong, but…
you want to save him, right?"

Me…the cause? "I want to save him, of course. I still remember last year when some specialists were
about to kill him instead of saving him. I want to avoid that at all costs."

"Even back then, he didn't want to be saved. He closed himself off, even from his friends. Yet he
opened up to you, and at the end, you were the one who saved him."

"Luck was on my side that time, that's all." Even though I almost died.

"Putting that aside, you're a special person for him, Manba-chan. I believe he only wants you to save
him," Tsurumaru-senpai says, his face tense and serious. I know he isn't joking around.
"But why? I'm not really close to him."

"Manba-chan…don't make me say this," he heaves a sigh. "The reason is simple, but I can't say it. It's not my place to."

"H-Huh?" I'm even more confused now.

"Yamanbagiri, let's slide away your obliviousness," Kogitsunemaru finally speaks up. That hurts. "Are you saying the only way is to have Yamanbagiri ease whatever worries he has?"

Tsurumaru-senpai nods. "Maybe staying with him and letting him vent is enough. I don't know, but I think that's the best course of action if you want to save him."

"So…I have to hang out with him? That's all?"

"Simply put, yes. Make him open up to you."

That sounds simple and easy, but I have a hunch this won't go so smoothly. A bad feeling.

"Well, that's all I want to show you. There's nothing dangerous for now."

"…Senpai, may I ask something?"

"Sure."

"I understand that you're worried about Ichigo-senpai, but why did you open up to me? You can maybe put me in a situation where I can see Ichigo-senpai's *ikiryō* without having to know that you set me up and that you're an immortal - an oddity. I think that's more beneficial if you want to keep living peacefully without anyone knowing what you truly are."

Perhaps it's an insensitive question, but I want to know.

Tsurumaru-senpai looks a bit surprised hearing my question. Having a troubled face, he mumbles, "Hmm…" as if mulling over his answer. After a seemingly long silence, he bursts into smile, "You're special for me, Manba-chan."

"Special?"

"Well…" His hand reaches for my cheek and our eyes meet, "…You remind me of someone I once knew. That being said, it's not like I don't like the current you. In fact, I love it. You've become even dearer thanks to that."

I don't know how to respond. He is smiling, but his expression looks sad, as though he's lonely…this is the first time I've ever seen him making that kind of expression.

"I can't help but open up to you," he continues, his other hand stroking my head gently, "And I think that's for the best."

"I don't understand."

"Ahaha. That's fine. You'll understand sooner or later."

"Are you done yet?" Kogitsunemau says with a displeased expression.

"Pretty much~ Unless Manba-chan has something else to say."
"I'm holding him too, so why don't you move your hand away from him?"

"Nooope. I'm not gonna do it as long as Manba-chan says nothing. You're free to touch him anywhere, you know? You don't have to get jealous over someone unimportant like me."

Kogi is jealous?

I see his face twists to that of embarrassment and disgust all at once, but he ends up sulking like he tends to do. "Yamanbagiri, tell him to knock it off!"

"I don't see why, so um. That's enough, Tsurumaru-senpai."

As if giving up, Tsurumaru-senpai releases his hand from my body. In turn, Kogitsunemaru holds me closer in a protective way.

"Why did you forbid Mikazuki to come?" He asks.

"I thought he's the one who's easily jealous. I guess I'm wrong. Getting jealous over someone you love is normal, though, so don't worry. That's fine."

So he knows our relationship. I shouldn't be surprised.

Mikazuki is easily jealous, sure, but Kogi doesn't lose at that aspect. That much is clear, even for me. The two of them are similar in that regard, but I'm sure they'd hate me if they heard this.

"I heard you…" Kogitsunemaru stares.

"I know." I respond.

I hear him sighing but I just ignore him. I stare at Tsurumaru-senpai, whose wings still exist and flutter at times. Seeing them from this distance, they're…quite big. Unexpectedly big. I wonder how far they can stretch out. Bathed in white and a few shadows, with shining amber eyes - he looks otherworldly. He's always pretty, but this is on a whole another level.

"Have fun admiring me, Manba-chan?" He smirks.

If only he didn't have this kind of personality.

"Yeah, I'm having fun. Anyway, about Ichigo-senpai…what's the plan, other than hanging out with him whenever I can?"

"How about you go out with him this Saturday? Hanging out somewhere, maybe."

"That's also hanging out."

"Hanging out during holiday is a good way to become close, though," Kogitsunemaru says, "But…"

I nod. "I already have a plan that day."

"Is that so? How disappointing." Tsurumaru-senpai frowns a bit.

I get the feeling that Tsurumaru-senpai only wants an excuse to also hang out with me…but I can feel that his worry is genuine.

"Tsurumaru-senpai, you've been doing this for the past few days - observing ikiryou - that you even skip school?"
"Yes and no. You see, there's another problem I have to take care of. One of the reason I showed you that I'm a xian."

"What - "

Suddenly, he pushes me and Kogitsunemaru away with an inhuman strength. At the place I was once before, a knife with a talisman appears. Tsurumaru-senpai flies away, screaming, "Kogi, go home with Manba-chan! The party is over! They're here!"

"Who?!"

"Those who hunt humans who went off of the path of humans or something close, I bet."

Kogitsunemaru hisses, grabbing my waist and flies to the opposite direction as senpai. "I understand. Take care, Tsurumaru!"

I can see Tsurumaru-senpai salutes us from far away. "They're after me, so they won't run after you guys…I hope! Anyway, just get out of here. See you!"

That uncertainty is kind of worrying!

Before I can say anything else Kogitsunemaru flies faster. "Hold on, Yamanbagiri!"

"Y-Yeah…!"

The wind is getting more and more violent, my bangs covering my eyes, so I close them as I clutch Kogi's shoulders. My ears are ringing; my heart is pounding fast from the adrenaline of possible injuries. I pray that Tsurumaru-senpai gets away safely.

After a while we slow down, and I finally can open my eyes. I look around, finding that we're now quite far away, and the steel tower can't be seen anymore.

"I'm going to take a detour just to be careful," Kogitsunemaru says.

"Okay."

"We'll answer your questions later. I'm not even sure they're hunters, though."

I nod.

The best course of action is to run away for now. I entrust myself to Kogi as we fly across the sky.

I'll have to contact senpai tomorrow morning just to check his condition.

I'm worried, but I have to sleep when I get home.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Ikiryou or shouryou, seirei, ikisudama, refers to a spirit that leaves the body of a living person and subsequently haunts other people or places, sometimes across great distances. The terms are used in contrast to shiryou, which refers to the spirit of those who are already deceased. It is believed that if a sufficient grudge is held, all or part of the perpetrator's soul leaves the body, appearing in front of the victim to harm or curse
them. However, according to mythology, the ikiryou does not necessarily act out of spite or vengefulness, and stories are told of the ikiryou who bears no grudge, or poses no real threat.

[2] Xian...is everything explained in the story. No, seriously. Putting it here just because.
"I'm going to school today. Thanks for worrying about me, Manba-chan!"

"Is that so… I'm glad if you're okay. See you later then."

"See you soon. I will explain everything to you today."

"Okay."

I end the call and sigh in relief. Thank god he's fine. I don't sense anything wrong on his voice, either.

"Calling him right after breakfast, I'm jealous," Mikazuki mumbles with a bored expression. "I want you to worry about me, too~"

"I'm always worried about you, really." I respond.

Tsurumaru-senpai is right. Mikazuki is the one who easily gets jealous.

Hearing this, Kogitsunemaru shoots him a smug, proud smile. I pat Kogi's head, ruffling his hair. "Good boy, good boy." He seems to like it.

"I heard that! And I see that!" Mikazuki sulks even more, looking away from me with crossed arms.

"What are you, a kid?" Kogitsunemaru snorts.

"Said the one who cried a few times b~"

"Shh! Don't say that!!"

I just laugh seeing their interaction and take my bag, "Brother, I'm going now."

"Take care!" Brother Horikawa says, smiling as he waves his hand.

Brother Yamabushi is already out before dawn, so he isn't here. Of course, I haven't told him about Tsurumaru-senpai… I don't know what action should I take. For now, I'll just see senpai and and hear his explanation, and then accompanying Ichigo-senpai whenever I can…

This day is going to be rough. I can feel it.

Unexpectedly, Tsurumaru-senpai visits me before homeroom. Early morning.

Showing up at the door, he waves his hand, "Yo, Manba-chan!" with a smile he normally wears. Not a trace of exhaustion is on his face. Maybe it's an effect of him being a xian? He's basically a celestial being that's supposed to be in heaven, after all. "Oh, Hasebe-chan is here as well."
"Don't call me that," Hasebe grumbles, pulling his hand away from mine. I think he was about to hold my hand…ahahaha…awkward.

"Mind if I kidnap Manba-chan for a while?"

"I mind if you take him away without his consent."

Why does Tsurumaru-senpai like to use that wording… "It's fine. I'll go with him." I reassure him.

"Yaay! Don't worry, I won't do anything weird to him," Tsurumaru-senpai says, "Or Hasebe-chan wants me to do something to him?"

What does he mean…?

Hasebe groans, and with a clearly displeased face, nods. "Whatever."

"I'll see you soon then, Hasebe." I stand up and walk to the door, exiting my classroom with Tsurumaru-senpai.

"Let's go to somewhere quiet," he says, holding a key in his hand. "This is the key to the rooftop."

Rooftop…it's usually off-limits, especially during mornings like this. It's only open after school and during break time, but even that's not absolute.

"Senpai, you stole that key?" I felt sure that I already knew the answer to my question.

He grins. "I borrowed it."

"Illegally."

"Yep! More like, abusing my power as a part of student council."

"At least you're honest."

We walk to the stairs in silence. Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki are trailing behind, Mikazuki seems ready to jump and attack if something happens…it's obvious on his face, so the aura from him isn't very comfortable. Tsurumaru-senpai ignores it as we reach the door to the rooftop. He takes out the key once again and unlocks the entrance, the wind greeting us as soon as he opens it.

Even though it's morning, the skies are not looking friendly, clouds hovering in gray. I heard on TV earlier that it'll rain, so I guess it's true.

My heart feels heavy.

"Tsurumaru-senpai, do you like high places?" I ask to break the silence, asking an unimportant question.

"Yep. I do," he replies with his back to me, the wind messing up both of our hair. "Maybe it's a natural part for xian. I don't particularly hate heights when I was a human, though."

…When I was a human.

He has transcended beyond humanity.

Even so, his appearance and emotions remain the same. I feel this firsthand with Mikazuki. So…I can't see him as an oddity, especially after almost 2 years knowing him as a human. I wonder what
he may want me to see him as...oh, I'm thinking of useless things again. Must be the dark sky's fault.

Tsurumaru-senpai walks up to the railings.

"Man, going to school is actually so much safer than roaming around outside, having to rest in one place and run away again and again, but I don't really want to take chances. They might play dirty and take my friends hostage, you know?" He speaks almost to himself.

I can't see his face, but I bet he's making a sad smile right now.

"Senpai...do you want me to help you?" I ask.

He finally turns around, a seemingly fake smile glued on his face. "Do you want to, Manba-chan? You have your plate full already, don't you? I know you still have to observe Kashuu, having three lovers, and now you have Ichigo as an addition. What are you, a masochist?"

I just realized that Tsurumaru-senpai switches calling people with suffix and without. I feel like he's not using suffix -chan when he's serious about the matter. Hmm. Though he keeps calling me Manba-chan...

"...Masochist, huh. I feel insulted here. I'm just very responsible and hard-working." I answer.

"Insult Yamanbagiri one more time and I'll - hmmph!!"

Mikazuki says that, but Kogitsunemaru shoves a bread (he brought since he's always hungry) to his mouth before he can finish his sentence.

"Don't worry. Please continue," I say.

He shoots him a murderous glare, but Kogitsunemaru just shrugs, as though he's unaffected. What a way to break the tense air...

"Ahahha. The two of you are so lively. I'm sure Manba-chan isn't lonely," Tsurumaru-senpai says, softly chuckling.

"There's no time to be lonely with them around, yeah."

"Sorry, I'll talk a lot to your Manba-chan from now on."

"I kind of feel unneeded and left out," Kogitsunemaru says, "It hurts, but it can't be helped. We can't just leave him alone, so there's nothing we can do but stick with him anywhere."

Mikazuki looks like he wants to say something, but he has no choice other than eating the bread slowly since Kogitsunemaru keeps shoving it in his mouth. For some reason, he doesn't push his hand away. Maybe the bread tastes good and he can lash out by eating it...ahahaha. This is a great scene. I wish I could take a photo.

"Your job is to protect me, anyway." I remind him.

"Being a bodyguard is rough," he chuckles dryly.

"I'm glad you're so loved, Manba-chan. You seem happy," Tsurumaru-senpai says, saying it with a striking familiarity, but I don't feel particularly disturbed.

Touching the wristband covering my left wrist, I look down. "I guess so..."
"So…going back to the main topic. Do you want to help me, Manba-chan?" He repeats the question. I nod immediately. "I do."

"Even if there's nothing you can do? You can't fight these people. You're just a normal human capable of seeing oddities, nothing more."

*That stings.* "That might be true, but…maybe I can give you a shelter? Give you mental support? Or lend you Kogitsunemaru or Mikazuki?"

I see the two mentioned twitch. Tsurumaru-senpai laughs. "That's too kind of you. I did nothing when you ran around to help Ichigo last year, you know?"

"The past is the past. That one was resolved." I wave my hand to push the past away.

"…Geez. Manba-chan is so stubborn, I'm troubled."

"You're also stubborn here, senpai."

He nods and looks sideways, "I'm happy to hear that you want to help me, Manba-chan. But…I'm not the one you should focus here. I can take care of this by myself, at least for now. It's not like I can die so easily, anyway."

"Are you referring to Ichigo-senpai?"

"Yes."

"Why do you keep bringing his case up?"

"Because it's urgent, duh. He's a ticking time bomb. I'm worried about him, but I'm even more worried if he manages to hurt you. I can't let that happen, now that you're in my reach."

"Hurt…me?" I blink a few times. "Why would he hurt me?"

Sure, he almost killed me…in a way…last year, but it's not like I'm his target. He just had no control that time. But Tsurumaru-senpai's wording is worrisome. It's as if he's certain, for sure, that Ichigo-senpai *is going* to attack me when he lost control.

"Because he wants you," he replies with a nod.

"How can you know that? I don't understand." And *want* as in…what? Why would he hurt something he wants? I have a bad feeling about this.

Tsurumaru-senpai ruffles his hair, shifting his gaze uncomfortably. "It's…complicated, Manba-chan. Even if I explain it to you, I doubt you'd understand. As for how I can know…well, sometimes people hurt the one they're fond of, you know? It's basically that."

He refuses to answer me, I see. I don't think I can press further about this.

Assuming what he said is correct, then I'm in danger if this goes on. That much is clear.

"You're the one in danger the most, even if you have these two by your side," he continues grimly. "Especially with your personality."
Personality, huh…sadly, I can see what he means.

But, I'm not giving up.

"Before that, senpai…I've heard a little from Kogi and Mikazuki, but…what exactly are the people who attacked you?"

"Actually, I don't really know myself." Tsurumaru-senpai shrugs.

"…Huh?"

"They just attacked out of nowhere a few weeks ago. Not even saying a thing. Even when we talked for a bit, they won't answer that one question. So, I don't know, and their attacks just became some kind of sparring for me. Well, I'm a bit rusty, so I appreciate the training."

"Do you have any idea who are they?"

"Either they're those who hunt transcended humans just because, or…they need me, an immortal, for something else. Like a ritual. But man, if they do, they're insanely persistent. Must be some kind of cult or a bunch of lunatics."

"Ritual?"

"I can't think of any rituals that need someone like me, but that's just one possibility I can't shake off." He scratches the back of his head. "That's why I don't want to involve you in something like that."

"Hearing the possibility just makes me want to help you even more, senpai."

"Ahaha. Figures… Aren't the two of you going to stop him, though?" He turns to Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru.

Mikazuki, having eaten the bread, looks more annoyed than ever as he crosses his arms. "When Yamanbagiri is determined to, there's almost no way to stop him except by force."

"But we can't stop him by force, so…" Kogitsunemaru shrugs. "We respect his wishes as long as it seems possible and we're certain we can help him along."

"What do you think about my case?"

Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru look at each other before shooting me some hard looks. Like glares. What for?!

"We don't know the full scope, so we can't say. We certainly can't afford to let Yamanbagiri get involved," Mikazuki replies, "In the fight at least."

"I don't see a problem if he helps you with, say, a shelter or food," Kogitsunemaru adds.

"You guys are so soft to him," Tsurumaru-senpai says with an exasperated sigh. "Being pressured isn't very nice."

"But you kind of pressured me to help Ichigo-senpai," I say, "Though it's certain I'll help him as soon as I know something is happening."

"Then that's not a pressure at all for you."
"I feel the pressure to do it from myself…err, okay, enough of this. Let's get to the point. Do you still refuse me, Tsurumaru-senpai?"

"I…don't want to refuse your kindness, but…"

"Senpai."

I stare at him. He stares back at me. The cold breeze passes us.

Staareee.

Staaareee.

…

After what it seems to be a long time, Tsurumaru-senpai nods. "I can't say no if you show me that kind of expression, Manba-chan. How unfair…yeah, I'll let you help me. Just for a bit! As for what you can do, hm…I already have a place to stay, so maybe you can ask a specialist you know about a cult or suspicious people running around? But keep my existence a secret, please. For now."

Seems like he doesn't know that my elder brother is a specialist. Hm, I hope he is home tonight.

"Sounds good to me." I nod.

"And in return, I'll help you about Ichigo's case." He returned my nod of affirmation.

"You're the one who gave me the task, so…all I can do for now is hang out with him and see what happens, right?"

"Yeah. He told me the two of you are going home together today. Is that true?"

"Yes, somehow. The plan was made before I saw you yesterday."

"Well, I don't want to meddle in that case. I think it's still safe."

Why don't you come too? The words are on the tip of my tongue, but for some reason, I can't say it. I don't see a problem if he comes with us, and yet I feel something unsettling if he does come…I don't think Tsurumaru-senpai is something that can cause problem, but since he doesn't want to step forward himself, instead asking me for help, there must be a reason I don't know. Then again, I don't know Ichigo-senpai very well. He might be hiding something that Tsurumaru-senpai knows.

Hmm…

Tsurumaru-senpai claps his hands. "I think that's all for now. Deal?"

"Deal."

"I'd like you to hang out with him during break too, but I guess that's not possible." He shoots me a smirk. "You must be going to flirt around with your boyfriend. I won't stop you but remember restraint at school. Don't do anything weird."

W-Wha-

I feel my face going hot.

"W-We're not going to do anything weird! Whatever you're thinking…"
"Ahahaha. Sure, sure. You're cute when blushing, it just makes me want to tease you even more~"

"Senpai!!"

He runs off to the door before I can hit him. "Come on, Manba-chan, or the bell will ring. It'd be bad for us if someone sees us here," he says, stretching out his hand.

I look at my two lovers, asking for confirmation. Is that all? Should I ask for more? Stop him? No? They nod (Mikazuki, grumpily) before vanishing into thin air, going back to my shadow.

I run off to Tsurumaru-senpai, of course not taking his hand.

"Aww, Manba-chan, let me feel your hand~" He pouts.

"No." I answer sternly.

I shudder feeling his lips touching my cheek as his fingers reach for mine, holding me tightly. My other hand pet his head, brushing his hair, before he slightly moves to kiss my lips. My hand falls down to his back, clutching his vest as he parts my lips with his tongue, sliding in to trace the inside of my mouth, his left hand gripping my shoulder as he leans closer. I can feel his warm body pressing against mine, making my heart go unsteady, and my mind almost blank with the kiss.

It feels so good. I have to curse how good he is at this now.

Almost forgetting how to breathe through my nose, I feel our tongues touching each other, the certain stickiness ingrained on my mind. Having his tongue tracing mine floods me with joy and embarrassment. It feels good and simply amazing - I can't even describe it in words - but knowing that the one I'm kissing with is Yoshiyuki, *I feel like dying.*

I-I mean, I'd be lusting after my own childhood friend. Granted, we're lovers now, b-but…

Aaaaah. Looks like I still need time to adapt to our kissing routine. This kind of kissing, anyway.

He doesn't let me take a break. Sure, I can breathe just fine, but there's a more pressing matter. So, I have to be the one to pull away.

Not feeling him makes me a bit sad, to be honest.

"Y-Yoshiyuki…"

I gasp for air, inhaling and exhaling to calm my heart down. Yoshiyuki has a disappointed expression on his face. So unfair, it pains me to see it. This is the so-called puppy eyes attack, combined with his ears and tail that always appear whenever he's way too excited about me. 1000 damage taken.

"What? I still want to do it," he says, sulking. I can feel his legs around my waist are even tighter now. "I want to kiss ya, Yamanbagiri."

"Even so, we should stop and finally eat lunch. There's not much time left. You know that it takes time for your ears and tail to vanish. They'll just stay if you keep kissing me and there might not be enough time for cooldown." I chide him.
He's still unable to control them whenever we kiss like this, even after weeks.

"Buuuuut…." And he continues to beg.

"Besides, your weight is killing my legs."

"E-EH?! Really?!"

"Yeah, my legs - I mean, my thighs feel like being crushed. I doubt I can move them for a while."

"That's bad! S-Sorry!!"

Yoshiyuki finally gets off from my lap. The pressure is gone and I feel so relieved.

Why did we even start with that position? Thinking about it, I'd be the one to have Yoshiyuki's position most of the time with Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki… I never knew it'd be that heavy. Or maybe because it's Yoshiyuki, and he weighs more than me.

"You're finally done. I was about to slap you out of it," Kogitsunemaru calls out, sitting a bit further away from us. "Enjoyed it?"

"D-Don't ask me that…" I blush a bit.

He crawls to me and hugs me, pecking my lips. "I also want you."

"But I want food."

"Let me feed you, then."

"I'm afraid you'd just steal it."

"I won't."

"Feels good being able to flirt?" Mikazuki asks with a terrifyingly bored expression. He's in a bad mood since this morning, and it just gets worse, but the expression he makes is just so cute and funny. He's sitting even further away. "I'm tired maintaining the barrier here. I can't even move."

"Sorry. It's okay to let it go now." I say apologetically.

He nods and the shimmering faint sphere covering us vanishes. It's a barrier of illusion to make sure that nobody finds us here and doing stuff. However, because Mikazuki's power doesn't amount to much, it requires him sitting in seiza and not moving at all except for his eyes and mouth. It drains his energy, apparently, so he needs food to recharge.

I walk up to him, knowing that his legs must be dead by now. I sit next to him, once again feeling the grass below me.

"Thank you, Mikazuki. Here, want some food?"

"I'd gladly accept it."

Yoshiyuki and Kogitsunemaru also end up moving to our place. Opening up our lunchboxes, we clap our hands and finally eat in peace. Well, not completely in peace for me as I have to feed Mikazuki food from his own lunchbox. Yes, we knew this would happen, so I prepared another lunchbox for him. As for Kogitsunemaru… he just eats from everyone's lunchboxes.
"I wonder what others think now that we've done this a few times," Yoshiyuki mumbles, his face slightly worried, "Our excuse is pretty straightforward."

"Having lunch somewhere since you want to vent to me...it sounds like you, and we've done it a few times even before they came - so we know of this place, but this time it's different, so yeah...I don't think they'll think of anything weird, though." I mean, they're straight, right? "They might think you need a time alone with me to talk about stuffs, or vice versa."

"I guess there's no point in thinking about it."

"Yup. There's no point. But I think we're better safe than sorry, so we should keep this routine low for a while."

"Aww~ Too bad."

"We can kiss a lot after school - not today, though. And maybe during weekends."

Yoshiyuki smiles and shoves an octopus-shaped sausage into my mouth. He's been cooking his own lunch for a while, showing off his cooking skills, but he doesn't have a really good composition in colors yet. It's just totally like him. At least they're delicious and safe to be eaten.

"How is it?" He asks after letting me swallow the octopus.

"It's delicious. I think you're getting better." I look down at his box. "The shape is almost perfect too, now." I remember it looked like an abomination, a mix of hammer and octopus before, but now you can tell that it's an octopus.

"Eheheh, I'm honored to hear that! How about me making ya lunch next week?"

"I don't mind if that doesn't bother you."

"Not at all! It feels like something a couple would do, so..." He says with a bashful smile. "It'd be a good practice, too."

Although that'd be for girl-boy couple, with the girl cooking, usually. I'm not a good cook like Yoshiyuki, so I don't have the confidence to do it. Being on the receiver's end feels nice, though.

If you're wondering, we're at the back of the school near the gym, hidden by the bushes and some trees, with gray clouds hovering above us. People rarely pass by or come here unless they have some intentions like ours. The barrier was there just to be safe. It's actually a nice place, the breeze is comforting and it's quiet. A good change of pace from the crowded and noisy cafeteria, though I feel a little bad for the other three.

Maybe we can show them this place and eat here instead. Someday.

Before long, we finish our lunch. There's still time, but we hurry to clean up our boxes and walk back to the class. I tell Yoshiyuki what happened with Tsurumaru-senpai (we just kissed me immediately earlier, okay, there was no time).

"I see...that sounds dangerous," he says after listening, "But if all ya do is just help relay information, I don't see a problem. The thing with Ichigo-senpai, though..."

"We'll be with him. Nothing should go wrong," Mikazuki says. "Assuming Tsurumaru is right, then it'd be more dangerous to let him roam around freely without any countermeasure."
"It'd be bad to let a bomb keep ticking," Kogitsunemaru adds.

Yoshiyuki nods. "I believe in ya two to protect Yamanbagiri. Just tell me if ya need anything from me. Remember, don't push yourself too hard."

"Yeah. Thanks, Yoshiyuki."

I idly look at the windows as I walk down the hallway. It's raining outside.

"Oh, Yamanbagiri-san."

I stop my feet. Geh. This voice is…

"Sadamune-senpai."

Kikkou-senpai smiles to me and waves a hand, exiting the classroom. "What a coincidence. It must be fate."

"No. it's break time, I'm passing your classroom, and you happened to see me."

"Ahahaha, that's true. What are you doing at this floor? It's rare to see someone like you here at break time."

"I'm thinking to see Ichigo-senpai, but…what was his class again?" I know he's at the same class as Mitsutada-senpai, but…I forgot.

"Ichigo Hitofuri? He's in the same class as me."

"Oh? I never knew." Then he's in the same class as Mitsutada-senpai too.

"You know now." He shoots me a wink for some reason and I feel like walking away from him for my safety and sanity. "Why do you want to see him?"

"What does that have to do with you?"

"That hurts!" He clutches his chest in an exaggerated gesture. "Well, I don't want to meddle, don't worry. He isn't at the classroom, though. He ran out as soon as the bell rang."

"Do you know where is he?"

"Probably student council room. See, sports festival soon. They must be busy."

"I see…okay. Thanks, senpai."

"You're welcome. Are you going now?"

"Yeah. No point if he isn't here." Actually, I don't have a concrete reason on seeing him. I just want to check on him and maybe have a chat since I have the time, but… "Excuse me, then - "

"Manba-chan!"

Whoa?!
I turn around, and suddenly, my face meets something soft, buried as hands wrapped around my waist. I try to pull away and look up. "T-Tsurumaru-senpai."

Tsurumaru-senpai releases his hug and grins. "Are you surprised?"

"Yes, totally."

"Hey, Tsurumaru," Kikkou-senpai greets him, "Where are you going?"

"I'm about to go downstairs to the student council room. We're quite busy thanks to the upcoming sports festival."

Kikkou-senpai shoots me a smile that says 'See, I'm right.' I just nod. It seems I can't bother Ichigo-senpai right now. Not even Tsurumaru-senpai, even though I want to talk for a bit too.

"What is this? The two of you know each other?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks before I can leave.

"Who takes away his books every time he brings them to school? Me, because everyone else is tired already." I point at myself.

"Ahaaha. Yeah, Yamanbagiri-san is my caretaker!"

"That's completely wrong." I retort.

Tsurumaru-senpai chuckles. "You don't change at all, do you, Kikkou? Always so shameless."

"Ufufufu. Being shameless is my charm point," Kikkou-senpai replies with a wink.

"No. it isn't at all."

"Uwaah…e-even such harsh words are good for me!"

"Disgusting."

Kikkou-senpai makes weird sounds in the hallway, but there aren't many people around to begin with, so thankfully my reputation is fine. Not that it'd change, though, considering it's the infamous Kikkou Sadamune.

"Ahaaha. Manba-chan is so brutally honest," Tsurumaru-senpai comments, "So, what are you doing here? Searching for Ichigo?"

"Yeah. But it seems he's busy, and you're busy too, so I'll take my leave for now."

Yes, finally, I take a step -

"It's fine if you come along, you know? I don't think it's a problem. You can help us too."

"…The last part is your real intention, isn't it, Tsurumaru-senpai?"

He smiles meaningfully.

Well, I guess it's not a problem. If I get a chance to talk to Ichigo-senpai for a bit and show him that I care…these are my genuine feelings, of course. It's been some time since the last time I talked to Uguisumaru-senpai too.

"Okay then, I'll come along with you."
"Wait, Yamanbagiri-san," Kikkou-senpai calls out before I can take another step, "Why don't you call me with my given name too? I'm jealous you call other seniors so intimately, you know~"

"I refuse."

"Why?"

Kikkou sounds so goddamn close to *kinky* and I hate it, because the said person is such a pervert.

…That only works in English, though.

"Well, maybe if you put less burden on me and stop bringing your books, I'll consider it, Sadamune-senpai."

I can see him frowning. "That's unfair, Yamanbagiri-san. Even though I want to draw a book for you…"

"I'd rather be burned than see your book, thank you, unless you draw something safe."

"Hmm…something safe…ideas…safe…"

"Ah, he's in that mode now," Tsurumaru-senpai says, staring at Kikkou-senpai who is mumbling something unclear under his breath. "Well, we should leave now, Manba-chan, or break time's going to be over soon."

"Yeah."

We go downstairs, leaving the *in the zone* Kikkou-senpai to the second floor, to where the student council room is at. Pretty close to my classroom, actually.

"You're so hardworking, Manba-chan, going to get close to him so soon," Tsurumaru-senpai says.

"I just want to make sure of something, and being face-to-face is better." I say to clear up any odd thoughts in his head.

"I see."

The conversation ceases as we walk down the corridor, and before long, we reach the student council room. He slides open the door with "Yo!" and enters the room. I follow behind him.

"You're late, Tsurumaru - oh, Yamanbagiri?" Uguisumaru-senpai says, smiling, "Good afternoon."

"Hello, senpai." I bow down and observe the room packed with papers and folders. What kind of hell is this?

"Yamanbagiri-san!" Ichigo-senpai calls out. I can almost see his eyes sparkling. "Why are you here?"

"Do you need anything from us?" Kousetsu-senpai asks this time, his face shows just how troubled he is.

"No, I just want to talk a bit to Ichigo-senpai, but you all seem so busy, so I'd feel bad to intrude."

"Oh no, no, that's fine, Yamanbagiri-san! You can sit on my lap as I - " Ichigo-senpai starts.

"Why would he sit on your lap? That's unnecessary and will just cause trouble," Uguisumaru-senpai
jabs in, still smiling, actually jabbing Ichigo-senpai's stomach with his elbow. That must be painful. He turns to me and I can't help but to get startled. "If you want to talk, how about helping us?"

"That's why I brought him." Tsurumaru-senpai pats my back.

"I don't mind helping, but what should I do?"

"Alright, then sit on my lap for now -"

"You're just the same!" Ichigo-senpai jabs him this time as a revenge.

What's with them and laps? I'm quite heavy, you know. Even Mikazuki's old lap can't really hold me -

"I heard that!!" Mikazuki cries out from inside me. I shrug him off.

"What's with all of you today?" Tsurumaru-senpai laughs. "You can just sit next to Kousetsu for now, Manba-chan."

"Okay."

I sit next to Kousetsu-senpai as asked. He sits across the sofa Ichigo-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai are sitting at.

"Is there anything I can help with, senpai?"

"Ah, uhh…" Kousetsu-senpai takes some papers and gives them to me. "Put them in order and put them in the folder, please. The folder should have the same name as the cover."

I nod and begin to sort the papers. There are plenty… I don't know what kind of paperwork is this and whether it's important or not, but doing so much work must be very tiring. Student council's job is mostly dealing with paperwork, after all, no matter how cool the position is.

Tsurumaru-senpai sits next to Uguisumaru-senpai and begins to do his job.

For some time, the room has no sounds but the flipping papers.

…Why did I come here again?

"So, Yamanbagiri-san, what do you want to talk about?" Ichigo-senpai breaks the silence, his hands are still moving the papers.

Oh, right.

"Uh, I just want to talk about later, after school…"

"About going home together?"

I nod.

"Oh? The two of you are going home together?" Uguisumaru-senpai asks, seemingly getting interested.

"That's the plan, yeah."

"Ehehehehe," Ichigo-senpai lets out some creepiest laugh I've ever heard from him.
"Are you going anywhere after that?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks.

"There's no plan to so far. If we do, where do you want to go, Ichigo-senpai?"

"Hmm…I have no idea. Walking next to Yamanbagiri-san is more than enough to make me happy, so…"

Happy? Why is he happy with me?

…If he considers me a friend, I guess I'm happy too…

"It'd be boring if you guys just go straight home, no?" Uguisumaru-senpai says with a smile. How is that boring? That's what I've been doing with Yoshiyuki… most of the time, anyway. "I know of a good ramen place. Why don't we go there?"

"Wait, we?" I notice the somewhat alarming wording.

"I'm coming too, if you don't mind. I'd like Tsurumaru and Kousetsu go too."

"Eh?" Kousetsu-senpai gasps hearing him.

"Sounds good to me." Tsurumaru-senpai nods.

I shoot Ichigo-senpai a troubled look. He nods to me, looking displeased. "Don't just go and change our plans like that. I want to be with Yamanbagiri-san."

"I'm generous today, so I'll pay yours. How about it? It's one of the best ramen shop in Suzuran."

"Okay, deal."

"So fast!!"

Note to self: Ichigo-senpai can get bribed by free food, unexpectedly.

"Well, I've been craving for ramen for quite some time," Ichigo-senpai says with an embarrassed chuckle, "I think it's nice to have since it's getting cold."

"I guess so…" I sigh. "I'll go too, then."

"If there's no problem…then I'll go as well," Kousetsu-senpai says.

Uguisumaru-senpai The Mastermind claps his hands. "Since we all agreed, let's meet at the gate after school."

"I have a club first, though," I say.

"That's fine. We have some things to take care of as well."

And just like that, the plan was changed so easily.

I wonder if this is good for Ichigo-senpai, even if he's okay with it…hmm. They're his friends, though, so he shouldn't mind so much, right?

Chapter End Notes
April 25th 2018 marks the 2nd anniversary of this fanfic! 2 years old now, and still going - at an even better pace since I write quicker now. Nothing can express how grateful I am to the readers who have followed this story from the beginning until this point, and my beta-readers, Cyanblue475 and WastefulPhoenix for taking over! I sincerely thank everyone for their support. Without all of you, I won't have the spirit to continue this wild project of mine. Thank you for keeping up with my mistakes and the fanfic's monstrous length. I hope you enjoy the rest of this fanfic.

I really want to do something for this 2nd anniversary, but I have no idea what to do, not even a special chapter. Perhaps you can ask me to do something, I'll do it to the best of my ability. I'll hopefully draw something later, though. I don't have the time and energy to draw nowadays. Once again, thank you for reading and supporting me!

I decided to delete character tags and leave only Yamanbagiri to avoid bloating the tag list. I will add ship tags, but that's all. The ship tags are enough to explode the list.
After messaging Brother Horikawa to say that I'm going to eat dinner outside, I walk to the gate to meet up with the four student council members. The IT club ends early and Akashi-senpai lets me free because I was being a good member today. Apparently, Ookurikara caught a cold, so he wasn't there, and Mitsutada-senpai didn't go to the gate with me.

I shrug off my thoughts about the club. Now, onto the next plan.

I wonder if I should just invite Yoshiyuki. I mean, it's about food…but I guess it's too late now. He should be at home, preparing dinner. Ah, he promised to make me lunch for Monday, didn't he? I can't wait.

"I want to eat ramen too," Kogitsunemaru whispers, almost wailing next to me.

"I'll order a take out for you and Mikazuki." I say.

"Yay! I love you, Yamanbagiri~"

"I wonder what ramen I should get." Even Mikazuki has his mood restored greatly by the promise of good food. The power of food is indeed scary.

"Anything that fits my pocket money, okay?"

"It's okay, I can create money out of nothing."

"That's illegal! I'd get caught by the police," I hiss.

"We won't, so don't worry."

"Hearing that from you makes me more worried."

Before long, I reach the gate, finding that there are four people standing in front of the gate, bathed in the hue of sunset, and I fall speechless for a moment. Meanwhile, Kogi and Mikazuki are already inside my shadow, hiding.

"Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai notices my appearance first and greets me with a smile.

I run to them. "Sorry for being late."

"It's not late at all," Tsurumaru-senpai says, patting my head.

"Let's go then before the shop gets too crowded," Uguisumaru-senpai says, taking the lead.

I walk the furthest behind, staring at their backs as they talk with each other.

Huh…

This is…

A realization strikes me.
I'm…

…In a group of four handsome and charismatic guys. They're sparkling so brightly together that I want to close my eyes. I fall speechless. How can I have just realized this? There's another reason they're greatly popular. Looking from afar, they're such a perfect group of perfect young men idolized by many people…

I feel so left out. I'm not suited to be with them at all.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

"Kunihiro-san," Kousetsu-senpai's gentle call wakes me up from my trance. He slows down to stand next to me. "I can tell that you're nervous."

"N-Nervous…I guess you can say so." And embarrassed, of course. Existential crisis hits me. Why am I here?

"It can't be helped when you're with them. I feel you," he smiles wryly.

"But you're a part of them, senpai."

"I didn't feel like it at the beginning…but they're nice people. I feel accepted."

I can see how much he is fond of his friends from that smile and voice.

As people who can see oddities, being able to lead life like normal people is almost so unreal that it might as well be a fantasy. We're essentially different from others and thus feel shunned. However, we're still humans, so we crave a place that accepts us. Even if we hide something, as long as we feel at peace and safe, that's the best place we can ask for.

I imagine Kousetsu-senpai had a harder time to fit in with the three as they're naturally charismatic. If I were him, I'd be no doubt swallowed in the vortex of an inferiority complex. Meanwhile, he managed to push away the thoughts and become happy with them.

"You're amazing, Kousetsu-senpai." I praise him.

His face turns slightly red. "W-What's that for?"

"Well, you can be a member of student council while being a specialist," I say in a whisper. I can't tell him the other one, can I? "I sure can't lead a seemingly double life like that."

"I have minor roles in both, really…but thank you. I-I can't take compliments very well, sorry."

"I can see that."

Out of the four, Kousetsu-senpai is the one I'm close to the most. We've known each other before I went into this high school, and you can say we share the same part-time job. Since we know each other very well now, interacting with him makes me feel warm.

"Oh my, Manba-chan is flirting with Kousetsu."

And then that voice comes.

Tsurumaru-senpai is snickering at us, while Ichigo-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai are staring at us with weird looks. Umm…
"The two of you are really close," Uguisumaru-senpai says with a chuckle.

"Intending to catch the one with the softest heart, aren't you a bold and quick one, Manba-chan?"

"What the hell do you mean, Tsurumaru-senpai…” I massage my forehead because it hurts. "We're just talking for a bit."

"Hmm, is that so~?"

His face is so annoying. Can I punch him?

"Stealing Yamanbagiri-san is forbidden, Kousetsu," Uguisumaru-senpai joins in, "Before he agrees to, anyway."

"S-S-Stealing…I'm doing nothing of sort!" Kousetsu-senpai's face flares up even more. "There's no way I can do that…"

Seriously, what's with this talk every time I'm with all with them…I don't understand at all.

"Our beloved dense Yamanbagiri is back." I can hear Mikazuki chuckling.

Dense…is this about that…? N-No, I don't want to think about it.

"They're as aggressive as always. Or even more?" Kogitsunemaru mumbles. "Just go on and walk if you want to break from this situation, Yamanbagiri. Poor Kousetsu looks like he's being beaten to death."

I look at the one next to him. Indeed, he looks like he is about to cry and Uguisumaru-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai throw questions and statements to him. I wonder why, despite his appearance, Uguisumaru-senpai also likes to tease people so cruelly, being Tsurumaru-senpai's partner in crime. Sighing, I walk forward, passing them.

"Drop the joke off and let's go the shop already. Before it gets crowded, right, Uguisumaru-senpai?"


"I won't cry…” Kousetsu-senpai retorts weakly.

For some reason, Ichigo-senpai is completely silent during the whole thing. Since I walked forward, I stand next to him as he idles there, looking at his three friends behinds before turning his head to me. I take a peek at his face. He doesn't seem to look at anything in particular.

"…Ichigo-senpai?"

"Hmm?" He responds on time, like he's on focus, but I know his mind is somewhere else. This might be an automatic reply. With a smile, he asks, "What's wrong, Yamanbagiri-san? Is there something on my face?"

"No, there's nothing."

"Manba-chan is going for Ichigo now! How bold!"

"Shut it, Tsurumaru-senpai."

Uguisumaru-senpai passes me and takes the lead again as we keep bantering like that.
"Finally…arrived…"

It feels like forever.

I thought the banter would be short and harmless, but Tsurumaru-senpai keeps hitting me with weird statements with such a grin on his face that I have to refute in frustration. And then Uguisumaru-senpai likes to join in. Even though Kousetsu-senpai is on my side, he also gets shot. The two of us are dead tired by the time we arrive at the ramen shop.

"They're…so unbelievably lively," I say, gasping.

"That's youth for you," Mikazuki snickers.

At least give me comfort…

"You can have me as your blanket tonight," Kogitsunemaru says.

That sounds good. Deal.

"Sorry for that, Kunihiro-san," Kousetsu-senpai says with an apologetic face, "They just get so worked up when it's about you, for some reason…"

"I wonder why. I wish I knew."

"Can you not talk about us when we're right in front of you?" Tsurumaru-senpai says, slightly pouting, before he looks around. "Looks like only the counter seats are free."

"Let's take it," Uguisumaru-senpai says, sitting on one of the chair.

We follow suit, with me somehow trapped between Tsurumaru-senpai and Ichigo-senpai, and make our orders in the busy shop. It's small and doesn't look very special, but it's packed and busy, so it must be popular. The smell of broth and noodles fill the entire building, making me hungry even more. But I'm a bit worried if it'll take a bit too long for our orders to come with this level of rush hour.

While waiting, I play a mobile game, and the others converse with each other.

Yeah, I don't feel too good trapped and separating them into 2 groups like this…

"Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai calls all of sudden. "Don't you feel hot with your hood on?"

"Ahh…now that you said it." The shop is small and yet crowded with people, and the ventilation isn't enough. Even with AC, it's quite hot. "It's a bit hot."

"Why don't you take it off, then?"

"…You're quite obsessed about my hood, aren't you, senpai?"

He chuckles. "Perhaps I am."

I don't want him to bother me too much, so I resigned and pull down my hood. Suddenly, I feel a cold hand touching my nape, surprising me, and my smartphone falls to the desk.
"Ohoo, that's a cute reaction," Tsurumaru-senpai says.

"Tsurumaru-senpai…!" I groan in displeasure and a bit of anger, so I pinch his cheek. I'm tired enough, don't make me feel even worse.

"Sorry, sorry, I can't help it. It's rare to see your nape, you know?"

"Don't do that again."

"Yes, I promise, Manba-chan."

I sigh and go back to my smartphone. My head is aching. Just when I'm about to click continue, I realize Ichigo-senpai's stare. I thought he was staring at Tsurumaru-senpai, but it's clear that it's directed at me now. It's like he's digging me, searching for something…it's uncomfortable.

"Ichigo-senpai? Is there something on my face?"

"Ah, excuse me for staring," Ichigo-senpai replies, blinking a few times, and puts a bashful smile. "It's really rare to see you without your hood on, so it's refreshing. I can't help but to stare."

But he saw me at home without hood before…

Hmm. Remembering what Tsurumaru-senpai said…I feel there's something off with him today. It's like he's here but not at the same time. And then there's his attention to me. It's a bit normal, I guess, but I feel unsettled. Maybe because I believe in Tsurumaru-senpai's words and get wary.

Suddenly, the chef puts bowls of ramen in front of us and a glass of tea, filling my view and nostrils with delicious food. Oh no, this smell is way too great.

It's faster than I thought, so I'm happy.

Well, it's time to eat, putting aside my thoughts. I take chopsticks and start digging in.

"I-It's hot…" I spit out something obvious as the noodle burn my tongue.

"Be careful, Yamanbagiri-san." Ichigo-senpai smiles, blowing on the noodles wrapped around his chopsticks.

"Yeah…"

I blow on my noodles before putting it in my mouth. Mmm…the texture and taste are great. It's even better since it's still hot. The broth is good as well…

"How is it?" Uguisumaru-senpai says, leaning forward so that Tsurumaru-senpai won't block him.

"It's delicious."

"I'm glad you're a man of culture, Yamanbagiri. It's something to die for."

"That's a bit too far…" Kousetsu-senpai mumbles.

"Come to think of it," Ichigo-senpai says, looking around our bowls. "We all ordered different types of ramen."

I look around, and indeed, each of our bowls have different toppings. Tsurumaru-senpai's broth looks so red - must be a spicy one, but other than that, it looks similar to my ramen. "You're right."
"Do you want to try, Manba-chan?" Tsurumaru-senpai says, pushing his bowl on me. "I can assure you, you'll go to heaven after eating this."

"Death in the truest sense, you mean…"

I'm a bit disheartened looking at how red the broth is.

"Come on, try it, Manba-chan." This time, he lifts my bowl and shoves his bowl. Oi, that's unfair. "Manba-chaaan. You won't lose anything."

I fear that I'd lose my tongue.

"Ngh…"

Why must I go through this? Looking at his face, it's obvious that he won't budge until I eat it. I sigh again, for god knows which time today, having no other choice. Tsurumaru-senpai took the bowl away with the chopsticks, so I have to use his…geez. I pick up his chopsticks from the bowl and start to slowly eat the noodles.

I-It's as hot and spicy as expected!

But of course, being spicy, it's just so good that it makes you want to eat more and more, not stopping even after you're crying and your ears feel like burning. I know self-control, so I stop eating after taking one bite.

"How is it?" He asks excitedly.

"It's good…too spicy for my tastes, though."

"Manba-chan is weak to this level of spiciness, huh? Note taken."

"Don't take a note!"

I shove the bowl back to him and he puts my bowl in front of me - or that's what was supposed to happen. Uguisumaru-senpai's hand stops him from doing so.

"Now that it comes to this…try my ramen too, Yamanbagiri," he says, with his ever-gentle-devilish-smile.

"WHY?!" I protest.

"Try it."

Saying that with such a commanding voice…ugh, Tsurumaru-senpai goes along and puts Uguisumaru-senpai's bowl in front of me. Why am I doing this, seriously…please help, I'm getting bullied, this is my punishment for bullying others…no help will come, though. I can even hear my two lovers laughing inside me. Damn it. I once again pick up the chopsticks and eat the noodles.

Hmm…this is good. Shoyu ramen, I believe? It's the preference of an old man, honestly. Even Mikazuki likes this one. It's not bad, though.

"Your face tells me it's good," Uguisumaru-senpai says. "Well, I doubt this place has anything bad."

"Yamanbagiri-san, try mine too," Ichigo-senpai says quickly after, smiling as he shoves me his bowl.

"I guess I'll just try everyone's…Kousetsu-senpai's too."
"GH?!"

A weird sound is coming from Kousetsu-senpai. He chokes on his ramen, it seems, so he takes the glass of tea and drinks it erratically. After he calms down, he turns his head to look at me in surprise. "Eh? What do you mean…?"

"I mean like this." I take Ichigo-senpai’s chopsticks and eat some, slurping it. Oh? I-It's so salty… uehh…it's not really my kind of thing, but it's good. A bit too salty for me. I believe this is called shio ramen. "It's good."

"Ehehhe." Ichigo-senpai smiles, far brighter and happily than I ever seen, as he takes away his bowl and forcefully takes Kousetsu-senpai's bowl. "Kousetsu-san, it's okay, let Yamanbagiri-san do it."

His mood gets so bright suddenly that it's almost creepy. Kousetsu-senpai might've thought the same as his face is pale, but he has no power to oppose.

And so, I eat Kousetsu-senpai’s ramen. As expected, it's also good, even though I'm unfamiliar with the taste. If I remember correctly, he ordered Tonkotsu ramen. It came from Hakata, and it's rare to be seen here, so this is my first time tasting it.

Hmm. This shop is great. I should come again and order many different things.

"So, Manba-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai calls me after I give the bowl back to Kousetsu-senpai. "Whose ramen is the tastiest?"

"What, that was the point of that? Why should I answer?"

I say that, but when I look around, the four of them have eyes full of expectation. Waiting for me to answer. Pressing me to answer. Yes, even Kousetsu-senpai.

Seriously, what's with them?

Their gazes are so uncomfortable that I just get back to swallowing on my own ramen before deciding. "Mine's the best, after all."

"That's a no-no reply," Uguisumaru-senpai says with a very disappointed face.

"Nobody told me I can't choose my own ramen."

He jabs Tsurumaru-senpai's stomach for his mistake. The said crane lets out a painful cry as he clutches his stomach.

"Quit messing around and eat before it gets cold, senpai," I warn them.

"You're right," Kousetsu-senpai says, continuing to eat, but somewhat slowly. He looks flustered as he glances at me for some reason.

"Yamanbagiri, you don't realize at all?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

Realize what?

"...You dense demon."

That's rude.

"Indirect kiss," Mikazuki says, "You ate with their chopsticks, remember?"
You're right...I did that...so we did...!! N-Now that I'm conscious of it, I can't eat calmly...and uh...staring at their lips...waah, wahh, aaaaah!!

"I have a feeling it'd be a mistake to tell him," Kogitsunemaru chuckles. Wait, why are you chuckling?!

"Even though you did it all the time with Yoshiyuki," Mikazuki says.

Yoshiyuki and these four are different...! We're not really close, and knowing we did indirect kiss like that makes my heart want to explode right now! A-And they're quite special...student council members...popular students...sparkling and handsome...

"Ah, Yamanbagiri's innocent gay fanboy self is out. You really admire these four, don't you?"

S- Shut it, Kogi!

Just then, my takeaway order (for Mikazuki and Kogi) arrives, averting my mind for a bit, and I calm down slightly. The plastic bowls are in a plastic bag, stacked together. We'll have to heat them in the oven when we get home. Ah, please, don't ask me about the price...although it's normally cheap, buying three bowls made it quite expensive. Rest in pieces my pocket money.

Surprisingly, the rest of the dinner goes smoothly and peacefully. No more crazy antics, so I can sigh in relief, but thinking about that indirect kiss make me want to slam my head to the desk.

"Look at the time," Uguisumaru-senpai says, taking our attention after a while of nothing important to do. "We should go home soon. Unless Yamanbagiri-san wants to spend the night with one of us."

There is it again. The mastermind is him, after all. "No thanks, senpai. I want a good sleep."

"Oh, too bad."

We pay for our own orders, except for Ichigo-senpai since Uguisumaru-senpai pays for him. Gah, I wish I get that offer too. I regret buying the takeaway now. Look at my thin pocket. Maybe I should suck up to Uguisumaru-senpai to get money...

"No, don't," Mikazuki hisses.

Ahaaha. I'm half-joking, don't worry.

"That's still worrying."

"Are you sure you can go home alone, Yamanbagiri-san?" Ichigo-senpai asks when we're about to part ways in front of the shop. I haven't even said anything, but he knows that there's nobody else going to the same direction as I do - not that I know for sure, except for Kousetsu-senpai, but I assumed it from his words. Since the shop is in the shopping district, I know the way home. "It's already so dark. Want me to accompany you?"
"I'm fine, senpai…and I'm not alone, remember? I appreciate the thought, though."

"Hmm…"

"Our houses are in the opposite direction, senpai."

"Ah…that's…true." He nods and sighs, seemingly giving up.

"Manba-chan, what way is your house?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks. I point at the direction in front of me. "Oh. We're in the same way. Let's go home together, then?"

"Sure."

"…kh."

…? What is that sound? I feel like it's coming from Ichigo-senpai as he glares at Tsurumaru-senpai with a face twisting in an unpleasant emotion I don't really know…uh, maybe it's a bad idea, after all? Before I can comprehend what his expression means, Ichigo-senpai turns around and walks up to the other two.

"We should part ways here, then," Uguisumaru-senpai says. "See you next week. Thanks for today."

Kousetsu-senpai bows down and Ichigo-senpai waves his hand with a smile. He doesn't look any different from normal, but…

"Mm. See you next week. Thanks." I return the farewell.

I decide to not say anything for now and turn to go with Tsurumaru-senpai.

And when I do -

There, in the middle of dimly lit street, with not many people around, stands someone I know very well. Someone who was once my only ally. My childhood friend. Someone who pushed me away with hate nobody else ever gave me. Seeing him makes all of the memories come crashing at me within seconds, my body frozen as I stare at him. With his long hair swaying, its light color shining in contrast with the dim background, he is far more mature than the last time I saw him. This is the first time in years I’ve seen him up-close though, and I'm stunned.

"Hachi…suka…"

I can't help but to mutter that name. It's been ages since the last time I said it…it brings me nausea and pain, so much that I regret ever saying it again.

As expected, he looks at me with condescending eyes that never fail to pierce my body, as if he's looking at garbage he needs to trample on. My body shudders in fear and pain, sweat falls down even though it's a pretty cold day in June.

"…So you're still alive," he says after we stand still like that for minutes. "What an unpleasant coincidence."

I don't even have the courage to reply and can only tremble, hugging my own arms as I look down on the ground, not wanting to see his face again. I hear his footsteps coming closer, and slowly but surely, he walks next to me without another word. I don't see his face, and yet I can sense hostility and spite from him.

…I don't change…and neither does he.
Still hating me with the same vigor as before. Or even worse, I don't know.

It still pains me to the core, reminding me of my worst sin.

His footsteps stop just when he's behind me. With a low voice that probably only I can hear, he says -

"Hanging out with others oh-so-happily when you're just a harbinger of misfortune, destined to bring everyone down with you? When will you learn your lesson and lock yourself up? Or maybe you like to drag people down to their graves with you?"

…When, indeed…

And no, I…I don't…

"You're disgusting. You don't deserve to be happy."

I squeeze my bag tightly as he walks away for real.

He's right.

Rattle. Rattle. Rattle.

I should just lock myself up so nobody will get hurt ever again. Isn't that what I wanted? He's right. He's right. My existence is nothing but a bother. I shouldn't exist. Because, because, because, I just bring misfortune to everyone. It can't be helped that he hates me. It's a given that he hates me. In fact, everyone should hate me. I am nothing but a parasite. My existence is but a disaster.


"Yamanbagiri!"

"Manba-chan!"

My mind stops running.

I snap back to reality.

Tsurumaru-senpai is gripping my shoulder, his face clearly worried. I just stare at him as I try to comprehend what's happening.

Although Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru didn't appear, I can feel them hugging my heart. Spreading
warmth inside me. Activating the link to their minds, their overflowing emotions for me flow like a waterfall, assaulting me with surprise and joy. They remind me how much they love me just by a snap of fingers. That's right. Calm down. They're right. There are people who are glad by my existence, and they're no exception. That's right. I decided to live for their sake. At least try to. Don't hear Hachisuka. Don't hear him. Don't get drowned in that mud again. Okay. Huft...calm down, calm down...

I inhale and exhale deep breaths a few times to calm my mind.

"Manba-chan? Are you okay?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks, patting my back.

"Uh...yeah...I'm okay now. A bit. Sorry."

I heave a sigh. Haaah.

...And then I finally realize the stares stabbing my back. That's right, the other three haven't walked away...! Oh god, I'm too embarrassed to look behind me...they must be wondering what happened, and who the heck is the person who passed us...but they said nothing. They simply stare. I look down at the ground again, contemplating on my reaction. I should've control myself better.

"...We'll get going now," Tsurumaru-senpai says. I can't see his face, but he's probably looking at the three behind him. "See you next week. Don't worry, I won't do anything weird."

With that, he pushes my back to walk forward. My body feels heavy, but with his arm pushing me gently, I walk slowly but surely, clutching my chest. I'm so embarrassed and I regret it, but this warm feeling is still spreading...it feels so weird.

We walk in silence, passing the bright shops, turning left and pass flickering street lights, to the residential area. Kogitsunemaru appears just then, immediately hugging my side that I almost tumble due to the shock. Tsurumaru-senpai pulls his hand away and looks at the two of us - actually three since Mikazuki is also out and hugs me from the other side.

"I won't ask what happened," Tsurumaru-senpai says with a grim expression. "But, uh...I might be in the way, so do you want me to just...fly and go somewhere else, leaving you?"

"Um, it's fine. I don't mind." In fact, I think I'd feel better with more people around me. "I've calmed down enough...though I don't think I'll be able to move with these weights. Kogi, you're choking me."

"B-But..." Kogitsunemaru yelps, tightening his arms around me.

"I appreciate your worry and I'm happy, but you have to move if we want to go home. Mikazuki too. We can cuddle all we want later."

"I refuse to move. I still want to hug you," Mikazuki replies. "It's comfortable."

"...You..."

"Ahaahaha," Tsurumaru-senpai snorts, "Manba-chan, want my hug too?"

"No thanks, I'd die if you do."

"You won't~"

"I don't believe it."
"Geez, don't be cruel on me." He stretches out his arms upwards before he looks up at the dark sky. "How about going up there, Manba-chan?"

"Up there?"

"Yesterday's tower. It always calms me down to see the sight from above. At least you can just not think about anything as you enjoy the view and wind. I can assure you, it's great."

The view is beautiful, so maybe… "As long as we don't float again, sure."

"I'll fly him this time," Mikazuki says, glaring at Tsurumaru-senpai. "I'd rather have him go home, but he is tempted to see the view again, so I'll allow it this time."

You don't have to say it…

Tsurumaru-senpai shrugs and nods. "Okay, okay."

Mikazuki carries me in bridal style before taking off, with Tsurumaru-senpai flying as the lead. Kogitsunemaru follows not far behind us, looking around for anything suspicious. We arrive shortly at the same steel tower, looking tall and rusty as always. I sit just a bit far from the edge, hugging my body, while Mikazuki sits next to me.

"…It's cold."

"At least it didn't rain tonight," Tsurumaru-senpai says, sitting next to me and crossing his legs.

"…Mm."

Kogitsunemaru pats my shoulder from behind. I look at him, and although he doesn't say anything, I get what he wants. It'd be great for me as well. I stand up, letting him sit on my spot before I sit on his lap. He wraps his arms around me, and I can feel his body heat warming me up. Mikazuki reaches for my hand and holds it tightly.

Tsurumaru-senpai looks at us weirdly, but he doesn't say anything.

Oh, that's right. I wonder what he thinks about our relationship. Usually, I'd not do this in front of others except for Yoshiyuki, but I don't care this time. I love this hug and I need it, so I'm thankful.

Silence falls as we gaze at the dark town, with clouds and stars covering the sky above, and glittering lights below. The cold breeze brushes my cheeks, thankfully not violent and instead comforting. I want to close my eyes and resign myself to the wind, but my eyes are glued open to the view.

Tsurumaru-senpai is right. I understand now.

It's comforting…in a lonely way. You watch the town gradually sleeps, the lights are the only sign that people are inside and alive. The clouds drifting above indicate that time is moving, and yet seeing the town, you might not feel like that at all. Looking up, I can see the milky way, coloring the sky with purple and blue, gradually moving, sucking me in to keep watching. I'm really glad I live in this town to see such view, which usually would be impossible to see in big cities.

There are two seas above and below me. I'd like to jump in either, but I guess that's impossible. It won't be the beautiful sea of lights when I land down, and I can't go to space. Such idle thoughts fill my mind, much to my relief. It's so much better than thinking about painful things.

I don't know how much time passes as I keep on staring, but I don't mind. I might as well watch this
scenery forever, in this silence and melancholy.

…Forever, huh.

I glance at Tsurumaru-senpai. He's also looking up at the sky.

I wonder what he thinks whenever he sees this kind of scenery for years. Although the buildings change, the night sky might not change at all for hundreds of years. It keeps on watching everyday happenings in this town, a silent witness. And…he doesn't change like that sky. I think. As far as I understand how xian works.

Humans are obsessed with the idea of immortality because they fear death. There's a reason scientists search for ways to change humans' DNA to extend their lives. There's also the idea of preserving brain and your body after death in case you can get revived…that's what I read on internet, anyway. It's mesmerizing. Little they know about Taoism and its way to attain immortality. The real example is Tsurumaru-senpai, but I read that it's hard to do so because you had to become a hermit, fasting for months and the likes.

I can't help but to wonder - why did Tsurumaru-senpai choose to attain immortality?

Isn't it lonely, watching people all around you age and die when you're alive and unaging?

Didn't he get bored at all, living in solitude and watch time passes as it doesn't affect him?

It's pure curiosity…because I'll die someday, leaving Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki - as long as nothing actively tried to kill them. It's a sad thought. Sometimes the future looks grim because of it, but death isn't something I can avoid. Nobody has the power to overturn death unless you're an immortal. Even oddities aren't safe from death.

Am I jealous? Do I want to gain immortality too? I don't know, but because I think it's a lonely thing, I don't want to feel it. If anything, I'd like a power to redo time instead…but that kind of power is merely just a fantasy. It doesn't exist. It can't exist.

…My thoughts are kind of messed up, huh? I'm sorry about that.

More importantly, the words are on the tip of my tongue…to ask Tsurumaru-senpai about it. About his past and about why he's living like this now.

But I don't think it's the right time. He didn't ask me about what happened, so I don't want to ask him personal questions. For now, I close my eyes, feeling the wind caressing me and stay silent, feeling safe in my lover's embrace.

"Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru calls out, but inside his mind, since the link is still active. "I'd appreciate it if you don't think about another man while enjoying being in the presence of another man."

"I agree," Mikazuki says, "It feels like openly cheating in front of us. How shameless."

"I guess that's Yamanbagiri for you. He's the only one able to do it."

………………

I'M SORRY!!! I didn't mean it!! I'm just wondering and curious, you know?!

"Manba-chan."
"Y-Yes?"

Hearing my name suddenly called when I'm busy waving my lovers off, I yelp. Tsurumaru-senpai snorts seeing my expression.

"Are you talking with the other two? Sorry to cut off."

Oh, he knows about our connection… "I-It's fine." In fact, thank you, I don't want to continue that topic.

"By the way, I can feel your gaze for quite some time. Why are you staring? Are you thinking about me?" He asks teasingly.

"That's…" Yeah, I am thinking about him, but it's too embarrassing to admit. "…None of your business, senpai."

"What a cold answer." He smiles and looks up at the sky once again, his expression solemn.
"Manba-chan. I don't know what happened, and I won't ask. As long as you don't want me to know, then I won't, but…"

"But?"

"…Know that you're precious for other people…and that includes me."

…He…

…Might've heard what Hachisuka said and comprehended what he meant, or he's just way too good at understanding other people's feelings just by looking at their expressions.

"I'm sure your lovers have told you that, so my addition might mean nothing, but I still want to say it."

"Ah, uh…" How should I react? I regard him as a friend, so knowing that he regards me the same brings me happiness. The fact that he understands without forcing me to open up may also mean he looks at me…it's quite…a joyful occasion. "T-Thank you, senpai…these words are comforting to hear, really."

"Well, I'm glad if I helped even a bit." Tsurumaru-senpai strokes my head gently, even though my hood is still covering it. "I'm sure you want to know about my past."

That's too sudden, but that's right, so I nod awkwardly.

"I'd be happy to tell you, but it's not the time right now. I promise I'll tell you later."

"You don't have to promise me."

"I want to make a promise," he says with a wink for some reason, "I want to share another secret with you, Manba-chan. Okay, I know that your lovers know, but this and that are different!"

"Okay…if that's what you want, then sure."

Tsurumaru-senpai is weird, and even though he teases me a lot, he's considerate at the right times.

"Then…we need something to seal the promise."

"…What?"
Before I know it, his face gets so close that our noses will touch each other if we move slightly—what is this? I feel my face getting hot, but before I can react, his hand parts my bangs and...

...His warm lips press against my forehead.

It's...a kiss.

"Ehehhe." He pulls away and puts on a grin. A very...annoying grin. "Are you surprised?"

"GAAH!"

Mikazuki screams, shaking violently as he stands up. I stare dumbfoundedly at Tsurumaru-senpai - and I'm sure Kogitsunemaru does the same. I touch my forehead, feeling the trace of his lips and squeak. "Um, senpai, what was that for...?"

"I wonder for what."

"Tsurumaru!! I knew I shouldn't have let you get close to Yamanbagiri..." Mikazuki shouts, walking up to him with such a pressure. His expression is full of rage. "What do you think you just did?!"

Tsurumaru-senpai stands up and flies before Mikazuki can grab him. "What? I'm comforting my cute junior."

"But that's unnecessary!"

"Why are you so worked up? Geez, I just pecked him on the forehead! That's totally normal. What, are you jealous? Ahahah! I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

"You - !!"

Mikazuki gives in to his provocation and jumps, flying to get the crane.

"...I'm surprised by his action, but it feels like he's intentionally asking for a fight." Kogitsunemaru says after a while watching the two people flying like a cat and mouse on the sky.

"Kogi, are you angry?"

"A bit, I guess..." He looks embarrassed admitting it. "But that's just a kiss on forehead, not something to get so worked up on. Also, these words are what you need the most, to be honest, so I'm glad he said it. Besides...you like it, don't you?"

"...I certainly don't hate it." My heart throbs when I said it. It feels...warm.

"You're so soft, easily touched."

"I am."

"It's not a bad thing, though."

He squeezes my waist tighter. I put my hand atop his, the tension from my body is gone almost completely. We watch as Mikazuki finally grabs Tsurumaru-senpai by the collar and proceeds to swings him around. Just then senpai looks genuinely panicked. He reaped what he sowed.
6-Listening to the Sound of Rain-6

Chapter Notes

Edit: I'm supposed to update next week and I just realized a few minutes after I updated it. Well, it's finals week for me, but today is holiday. There's a chance I won't remember to update next week during finals, so take this as a gift for my beloved readers. Early update is nice, isn't it?

=6-06=

It's Saturday.

Thankfully, yesterday ended peacefully. I got a good sleep, and so, I'm full of spirit today.

"You're looking forward to this so much, Yamanbagiri…" Mikazuki says with a sigh as he floats next to me, crossing his arms. "I don't need this. It's really just a bother."

"Too late for that. I decide you guys' clothes from now on."

Kogitsunemaru frowns. "I don't want to wear hoods all the time."

He's saying that clothes with hoods are my style, and indeed it is. "I won't choose that! It's a shame to hide your ears. Ehem. That's why I called for help, you know? Even I want the best outfit for you."

"Sorry, did you wait a long time, Yamanbagiri?"

Speaking of the devil.

I turn from my smartphone to the person I've been waiting for, my back is still leaning on the wall because it's comfortable. "Not for too long. It's fine. Thanks for coming on your free day, Souza."

He waves to me. "I was surprised when you messaged me a few days ago. I didn't think you'd want my help."

"Well…Yoshiyuki and I are hopeless when it comes to fashion, so… and you're the only one I can depend on about this. I think."

"Oh. The two of you are dating now, aren't you? It is late, but congratulations."

He must've heard it from Kousetsu-senpai. Geez…I'm embarrassed now. "T-Thank you."

"Though this is for your another lovers."

I can see Kogitsunemaru putting an awkward smile. I avert my gaze, having no idea how to react. "Sorry, um, I know I'm weird, but…"

"That's fine. I don't see a problem. In fact, I support you, Yamanbagiri."

"Eh?" I look at him, finding his ever-meaningful smile. It's…a bit unexpected, but I guess I shouldn't
be surprised since he wasn't even shocked the slightest when I told him that I'm dating Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. "T-Thanks."

He pats my shoulder. "Let's go before it gets too crowded - "

"Wait!!"

Another familiar voice suddenly appears along with a slam to the wall. Oi, this is in front of the shopping district, there are many people…! Though it's not too loud to attract attention. To my surprise, the person who just slammed the wall and called out to us is…

"Hasebe," Souza mutters, his expression doesn't really change as he watches the said brown-haired man panting and catching his breath. "I'm surprised. You really came. Almost on time too."

"There's no way I won't after you told me!"

"Uh…what happened? Why are you here, Hasebe?" I ask in confusion.

Hasebe wipes the sweat away on his forehead before crossing his arms. "I'm going with you. I heard it from Souza. You want to buy some clothes for your brother, don't you? As thanks or something."

I glance at Souza. He just gives me a nod. So that's the story he gave…why did he tell Hasebe in the first place?

Hasebe approaches me and points at me. "Why don't you ask for my help instead of asking him, Yamanbagiri? I'd gladly help you."

"I don't think you have a really good fashion sense, Hasebe. Besides, you've only met my brothers once."

"Ugh." My words seem to cause him some pain. "W-Why not Kashuu, then?"

Eeeeh. "I…I have no guts to ask him. It's not like we're really close. Once again, he has never met my brothers, so he has no way of knowing for sure what's good for them, even if I told him their personalities and how they look."

The first part is true. My other reason is…I can't just tell him that I want to buy clothes for Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. I think it'd be weird for me to pick their clothes if we're only bound in a contract and nothing more, so I can't ask him. I can't make up other stories either, not even Souza's scenario. It'd be hard to play along for me.

Hasebe seems displeased hearing my answer. "A-Anyway, I'm going with the two of you."

"I'm sorry, Yamanbagiri. I just messaged him a few hours ago just to tease him about this, but he unexpectedly wants to go as well," Souza says with an apologetic face. "You can just kick him out if you want to."

"Oi."

"I don't see a problem, so I guess it's fine," I say with a nod. It'd be hard for me to play along, but I think he can fool Hasebe better than me and manage it, so…

At that moment, I can see Hasebe's face lightens up. He takes my hand and pulls me slightly. "Let's go, then. Where do you want to go first?"

"Uh, uh…" Your hand, dude, your hand. I know he likes to do it at school, when it's so early
nobody else is there, b-but this is…!!

Souza's hands grip my shoulder, pulling me back. "Don't be rash. Yamanbagiri doesn't like it, see? He's the one who asked me, so I'm in the lead. I know fashion better than you, Hasebe. Well, I won't disturb you holding his hand if you want, but don't go off by yourself."

Frowning, but he eventually says, "…Okay."

I'm pretty sure they're friends, and yet the tension between them is thick with animosity…mostly coming from Hasebe. Uuuuh…

"This is quite the unexpected turn," Mikazuki mumbles, whispering right next to me. "I have a feeling it'll be a wild ride."

Yeah…I feel the same.

Souza steps forward and says, "Let's go."

"Before that." Hasebe turns to me and pulls down my hood.

"What's that for?!"

"I just want to see it. It has been a while since the last time I saw you on weekends like this. You wear it all the time again."

After I grumpily pull up the hood, he takes my hand again and pulls me to walk.

Hasebe…is weird.

"No, this one is better," Souza states as he crosses his arms.

"What are you saying? This one would be better! It's cheaper, too," Hasebe replies with a vigor that doesn’t lose to Souza’s.

"Do you have eyes? Look at the pattern. You think he'd like it?"

"I think it's good. Why won't he like it?"

"There's something wrong with your mind."

"You - !"

I massage my forehead once again, having lost count on how many times I’d done it today as I stand between the two of them. "Okay, stop right there. Calm down and don't shout, we're in a store. And more importantly…why are you fighting over some clothes for me?!!"

"We've finished shopping for your brothers," Souza replies.

"Yes, with a lot of hurdles, and 2.5 hours have passed."

*We've been in the same store for 2.5 hours. Oh my god.*

"This section's clothes caught my eyes. I thought they'd suit you," Hasebe says, "You need more
clothes, Yamanbagiri. Varied ones, even if they have a hood."

"I agree with you this time." Souza nods.

"I never asked for it, and my money might not be enough."

"What if I said I'll pay for it?" Hasebe stares at me, taking out his wallet from his bag.

"I'd feel guilty." No kidding. "I don't need it. I still have spare clothes. I don't care about fashion either way. Whatever I like and is cheap, I'll buy it."

"I wonder what I can do to change your mind..." Souza mumbles, his expression showing that he's seriously considering it.

"It might take 100 years."

"There's still chance, then."

….How is that a chance when I'm referring that it's impossible in a human's' lifespan?

Still, they frown seeing how stubborn I am about this. Just at this moment they can get along quite well, huh? They've argued so much that it took a long time for us to choose and buy clothes, and now this...my head kinda aches now. Not to mention that Hasebe insisted on holding my hand when we walk in the crowd, and I can't bring myself to sternly reject him....

I heave a sigh. Despite everything, I still hate myself. How can I bother to care about my appearance? I know I shouldn't say this to them, though. Yes, I know you two hear me, but you're already used to my self-depreciation. "Can we drop the issue for now? I'm tired."

Hasebe straightens up all of sudden. "Alright, if that's what you want."

"We should go rest somewhere. I know a good cafe around here," Souza says, "Then we can decide to shop more or go home."

"I'd rather go home, but a rest at cafe sounds nice."

We walk out from the store after apologizing for the ruckus.

"I'll carry these for you," Hasebe says, taking plastic bags filled with clothes.

"Oh. Thanks."

He looks at me. "...Can I hold your hand?"

_You're asking me shyly now, after forcing for so long?_ I'm not really angry to the point of wrath, though. That's just how he is sometimes, and it's my fault for not rejecting him clearly.

"I think it'll just disturb you, so no."

"...Okay."

He looks dissappointed. I have no idea why he's so fixated on holding hands with me, honestly. It's embarrassing in public, but he doesn't seem to mind. Suzuran is no big city, but it'd be bad if someone from school sees us holding hands like that. I don't want to have rumors going around us.

Though I guess he's been careful, only doing it whenever there is a big crowd around us, so much
that the term 'sea of humans' is correct. I don't think people can notice us holding hands in that situation.


…Don't say that all of sudden!

"I also want to hold your hand…"

“Later, okay? We can flirt all we want at home.”

"Ehehe. Promise us, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says with a wide smile.

"Yamanbagiri? What are you doing?" Souza says, turning his head to us. There's quite the distance between us and him. "Let's go."

"O-Okay. Sorry."

And so, we end up at a sidewalk cafe, still in the shopping district. It's a newly-opened cafe, and yet it's packed with youngsters already. It seems to be highly popular, quickly booming after it opened. Thankfully, we managed to get a seat at the outer part of the cafe.

"Should I eat brunch or dessert? Hmm," I mumble as I look at the menu. Of course, I had lunch before coming to meet with Souza, so I'm not really hungry. However, the photos of food are so tempting my stomach is growling, but I'm not sure if I can finish a heavy brunch. It happens sometimes. "I guess I'll settle with chocolate pancakes."

What do you two want?

"I'm still full," Kogitsunemaru replies.

"Me too."

Okay, then. I can save money.

They're inside me now, by the way, if that's not obvious enough.

"I'll have this parfait, please," Souza says, pointing at the menu, "Also…ice lemon tea, please."

"I'll have lasagna, then" Hasebe says, "And a cup of hot tea."

Ah. Drinks. Right, I forgot. "For drink, uhh…I'll just have mineral water." I don't have much money left in me right now.

The waiter jolts down our orders. I ask for the wi-fi, and after getting it, he walks away with a bow.

"I guess we end with dessert," I say.

"Desserts are the main attraction of this place, after all," Souza says. "And I don't have a stomach that can eat another heavy lunch."

I'm sure Yoshiyuki has it. "Same."
"This place is quite nice, despite being crowded like this," Hasebe says as he looks around. "There are many seats, but not too close to each other to become uncomfortable."

"I feel like we stand out, though…" Looking around, there are mostly girls, or a group of boys with girls. Meanwhile, there are only three boys here.

"This place is mostly popular with girls. It can't be helped," Souza replies. Even I can see some decorations are quite… girly and cute.

"At least the prices are not very expensive for a cafe. Hmm, the wi-fi is good as well." I take out my smartphone and start to play a game. As usual.

Silence falls as I tap my smartphone screen. I knew it'd be awkwardly silent like this… neither of us is talkative. I don't know how to start a conversation. We don't really share interests too… you can say it's quite the miracle that we can stay as friends this long without the same interests. I can talk about oddities to Souza, but certainly not to Hasebe. There's a reason we rarely hang out on weekends.

So… silence as we do our own stuff on our phones it is.

This generation is said to be smartphone-using zombies, after all. That's not wrong, but I don't think it's all bad, either - as long as you don't hit stuffs when walking or danger yourself to take a selfies and stuff. It's better than gossiping and badmouthing people behind their backs.

Our drinks come shortly after. I can't really enjoy it since it's just a normal mineral water, but it feels good to drink something since I'm tired. My throat feels like it's parched…

Returning to my game, I can't really focus, and instead look at the two people around me. How are they friends since middle school when they're like this, busy with themselves? Uh, they are, right? I remember Hasebe telling me that before. Or is it because I'm here? If that's true, then…

"Yamanbagiri. Remember, no self-deprecation," Kogitsunemaru warns me.

U-Uh… sorry…

Suddenly, Hasebe stands up. "I'm going to the restroom," he says and walks away.

Seeing his back vanishing as he turns at the corner, I finally let out a sigh.

"What's wrong?" Souza asks, staring at me. "Did we put too much pressure on you?"

"T-That's not it…"

"The silence is heavy?"

"… A bit, yeah."

He smiles wider for some reason. "Sorry, it's always like that when we're together. At least when neither of us has a problem we want to vent about. I'm sure he wants to talk to you, but he just has no idea what to say other than pushing himself onto you. I have no idea what to say, either."

"Nah, it's fine. I'm just a bit shocked. I'm not talkative, either, so I'm not helping."

"You have games to play."

"There's that, too, and the wi-fi is too tempting…" Now that we're actually having a conversation, I
have to ask. "Do you know why he came? I'm just wondering."

He looks around a bit, pausing before replying, "...I told him we're going to have a date and the location of our meeting point. I know it isn't a date, but I just want to tease him. And he ended up coming. I never expected that, too. I underestimated his feelings."

That's...doesn't really answer my question. "...Why did he come?"

"He wants to hang out with you, of course."

"I-I see..."

"He's a bit too much today, though. Too happy, I guess. You should just slap him if he bothers you too much."

"I can't do that...but I understand."

Why is he *that* happy hanging out with me, though? I guess I can't ask that. I'm happy if he considers me as a precious friend, too, so there's no problem.

"I actually want to talk about oddity-related things, but I can't say so when he's there. So, on this short time he's away..." Souza says, putting a hand on his chin. "Yamanbagiri, why don't you become Nii-san's assistant?"

"A-Assistant?" That's the first time I heard of...a specialist's assistant...

"Well, he's going to be an independent specialist soon. I just thought you can help him when the time comes. I'm afraid to let him roam alone, but I can't help him, either. It'd be more trouble if I go. Sayo seems to be interested in oddities as well, so I have to keep a lookout for him."

"Ahh...then, I don't mind if he doesn't mind. I haven't decided for sure if I will become a specialist or not, but I'm leaning much closer to becoming one, so I have to train as well."

"I'm sure he doesn't mind. You're pretty close to him now, aren't you? I'm honestly a bit jealous."

W-Why does he feel jealous? It's a rude thing to ask, though.

"Then again, we're on different classes and focus on different things. We rarely meet. That's why I was happy when you asked me to help you. I certainly don't want to widen our gap. I consider this hanging out with you."

That...how am I supposed to react to that?

Since two years ago, we became closer and regularly messaged each other, sometimes meeting up and talk about unimportant things, but...yeah, I don't want to be far apart again. During that time, he actually helped me to recover as well.

"...Yamanbagiri, Why are you blushing?"

"I-I'm not."

"You are, though. Want to look at a mirror?"

"Yamanbagiri just has the heart of a maiden," Mikazuki says, suddenly appearing...*from below the table*. Oi, that's creepy! He's actually floating, but it seems like he's lying down on the floor instead.

"By the way, thank you for picking clothes for us, Souza. I don't want Yamanbagiri to pick
everything for us, to be honest."

Hey!

"You're welcome. I can't wait to see them on you. I'm sure it'll be good."

"And kill Yamanbagiri, yes. I'm looking forward to it."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you wear it wrongly." My foot is hovering above him, ready to step on him when needed. "Shut up and go away already."

"Yes, yes."

He finally vanishes from under the table. How did he end up there and why? Geez, I'm surrounded by weird people. During all of that, thankfully, nobody looks our way, so nothing should seem out of the ordinary.

"Sorry about that. I don't understand why he has to be so weird sometimes."

Souza chuckles. "It's fine. Oddities are weird in the first place."

Silence falls upon us. Again. What should I talk about? How to form the words? Aaaah…at times like this I'm sad with my low level of social skills.

"Yamanbagiri," he speaks up, "This might be rude of me, but…you look happy now, unlike before."

"Huh?"

"When I first met you, you didn't seem like you enjoyed life at all. But you've changed."

"…Is that so?"

He nods. "It's a good thing, of course. I'm also happy seeing it, and it's easier to approach you like this. Oh, you're blushing again. You're awfully expressive today. That's also one thing that changed."

I slap my cheeks before pulling my hood to hide my face more, feeling my heart fluttering for some reason I don't know. "Uuuh, I'm not blushing." I can't get this easily flustered. Not with him…right?

"You are. Don't be embarrassed."

"Sounds like you had a good chat," Hasebe says, walking up to us and sitting on his seat. "What did you talk about?"

"It's a secret," Souza says. "Our secret. Right, Yamanbagiri?"

I just nod. Hasebe shoots us a displeased gaze, but he sighs and proceeds to sip on his tea. At that moment, our food finally arrives. The waiter puts down the plates in front of us.

"That pancake looks good," Souza says, referring to my pancake.

"Yeah. I forgot it has ice cream too." Fortunately, I think I can eat this much. It's not too much. "That parfait sure is…flashy." I look at the parfait in front of him. It looks like a parfait out of some anime, honestly, with waffles, ice cream and…is that pocky sticking out? And other stuffs.

"It's this cafe's speciality."
"I see…"

I never knew he liked that kind of thing. It looks delicious, but the appearance is a hot mess. You learn new things everyday. Meanwhile, Hasebe's lasagna looks normal, but oh god, the smell is so tempting. It's still steaming hot too…mmm.

"What? Do you want this, Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe asks, noticing my gaze.

"W-Well…"

"Just a bite. Here, go ahead."

He digs some of the lasagna with a spoon before shoving it to me. I stare at the steaming, delicious-looking meat and cheese in front of me.

"…What is this?" I ask the obvious question. But, I mean, *this* again? I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

"Open your mouth."

"You're embarrassing," Souza comments.

"Shut up." He stares at me. "Do you want to eat it or not?"

"I-I want it. Okay…" I look around, nervous if someone watches us closely. I'm sure there are, but… ugh, no time to think about it. Before Hasebe changes my mind, I eat the lasagna he feeds to me and munch it down. Ahhh…it's as good and hot as I expected it to be. "Delicious."

Hasebe nods and wordlessly starts to eat.

After I drink some mineral water, I proceed to eat my own pancake before the ice cream melts. I use a fork and a knife to slice the two-layered pancakes, carefully trying to not move the chocolate ice cream from the center. The pancakes are covered in chocolate sauce, and there are chocolate chips scattered too. This is a full-blown chocolate party.

After slicing one bite-sized piece, I eat it with some part of the ice cream. It's good! The pancake is a little hot, and the ice cream is…obviously cold, so together, they create a nice taste and feeling. Being a chocolate pancake, of course, the flavor of sweet chocolate is so rich here. I'm afraid of diabetes, but this is way too good.

Before long, we finish our food like that in silence.

"You guys sure can stand the cold, huh?" Hasebe says after taking a sip of his hot tea. "The wind is not very friendly, and it seems it's going to rain soon."

I look above, finding that the gray clouds are darkening. "You're right." As for the wind…when he said that, I can feel it piercing me. Huh.

Souza stands up. "We should go now, then. Unless you want to get drenched. I didn't bring an umbrella."

"Me too."

"Me neither."

Three people without umbrellas…
We pay for our orders and go out immediately.

"The nearest place is Yamanbagiri's house, isn't it?" Souza says.

"Hm?" I look at him, confused why he brings that up. "Do you want to visit my house?"

"Well, I'm just thinking it'd be bad for us if it rains when we go home separately, since our houses are quite far from this district," he says, looking at Hasebe. "I want to save money instead of buying a plastic umbrella. If you don't mind, though…"

"I don't mind. It's been a long time since the two of you visited my house. Maybe I can give a treat or two as thanks for helping me. There's nobdoy home, so you can enjoy yourselves."

"You visited his house before?" Hasebe asks to Souza.

"Yes. What about it?"

"…I see."

That's a quite a glare he sent…oh, he's walking up to me.

"I'll carry your bags."

"But -"

"Let me carry it."

W-What a pressure…this is unusual. He is really weird today, but I like how he's being nice to me, I guess. Just put aside his glares and it's good. I give him the plastic bags and we begin to walk to my house, somewhat running since we don't know when it'll rain.

When we enter residential area, he takes my hand once again, after holding all of plastic bags on his other hand. "Can I?"

"You already did it…well, you can."

"You shouldn't spoil him too much, Yamanbagiri," Souza says with a shake of a head, "He'll just cling on you more and bother you."

"I think he already did. Too late, then."

"C-Cling…" Hasebe looks a bit hurt hearing it.

"Because you don't refuse or hate it, he'll just keep doing it," he continues.

"That's true, but I don't mind. It's not a big deal. You can hold my hand too if you want."

He looks at me with an extremely preplexed face. "…You're fine with anyone, aren't you?"

"Huh?" What does he mean?

"Nothing. Thank you for the offer, but someday, perhaps."

"Then, I'll hold your hand," Mikazuki says, appearing and immediately taking my hand. I quietly nod, hoping that my other side doesn't look weird to Hasebe.

"I'm jealous," Kogitsunemaru says, his voice shows disappointment. "My turn at home, okay?"
Yeah, of course. If it rains, I'd like to sleep with your hair as the blanket.

The residential area is quite desolate today, so I don't think anyone is around to see us holding hands.

Oh, never mind, there are oddities roaming around as usual, but other than that, humans are almost unseen. It's always like this in late afternoon, especially if it's going to rain like this. Sometimes I wonder if Suzuran is going through decline in population...then again, Japan is suffering from it overall. No wonder a small town like this is desolate.

That doesn't hide the possibility that people from inside their houses can see us, of course, but let's not think about it. Let's not.

After a while, the sound of lightning and the surprising flashes start to appear. I think it's a good decision for them to come to my house, after all...the rain is going to fall real soon.

"It's close now," I say, actually running ahead after letting go of Hasebe's and Mikazuki's hands. "Let's hurry."

When I turn around the corner, I'll see my house close by, and this whole ordeal will be over.

...Or so I thought.

My legs stop when I can see a figure in the distance, standing in front of my house. Just a bit more, the goal is right in front of me, and yet my legs refuse to take me further.

"Yamanbagiri?"

I can't even tell who called me. My eyes are fixed to the familiar figure. My mind stops functioning.

He turns to face me when he notices my presence, spite and hatred clear on his expression. Perhaps you can say that he has an expression of the one who is going to commit murder. I can't help but to let out a yelp out of my mouth, my legs moving to take a step back. What kind of expression am I wearing right now? Surely, it's nothing but fear.

"You," Hachisuka says as he approaches me, and with each step he takes, I take a step backward. "We've accidentally met yesterday, and you just went ahead to spread your goddamn curse to me again? You want me to die that bad?"

W-What does he mean...?

"Who are you?" Hasebe says, taking a step forward, his arm is spread as if to protect me. "Whatever you are, you've made him scared, so I won't let you take a step forward."

"Another one of your friends? I'm amazed you managed to go along with so many people. You live a happy life, huh?"

Hasebe hisses, probably shooting his best glare ever. "Answer me."

But Hachisuka remains unfazed as he flips his long hair to the back. "None of your business. You don't know about Kunihiro's curse, do you? Poor soul. You'll be eaten before you know it. He's just that kind of person."

"I-I'm not...!" I stammer.

"Shut up!" Hachikusa retorts.
"Hk…!"

Just when I answered, he shouted, pushing me to actually shut my mouth from the pressure. I can feel that my body is shaking. My legs are giving out. My vision seems to blur into a spiral. This is bad. Even though I can feel Mikazuki's hand gripping my arm to keep me standing up, I just -

"What? You aren't that kind of person? You don't have a curse? Bullshit!"

Hachisuka's voice gets louder, echoing in my ears. Feeling that my breath is ragged, my heart is about to explode, nausea rising up to my stomach, I covers my ears with my hands, hoping it'll calm me down - but, unfortunately, his voice still shakes my entire body.

"Then what about the sacrifices you've made? Just to keep you alive…no, it's because you exist. You're standing atop a pile of corpses, and yet you live your life in ignorance? Don't make me laugh!!"

I don't want to hear…I don't want to!

Just then, rain starts to fall down. Even so, we all keep frozen in the same place, with me closing my eyes and ears. His strangled voice seemingly gets louder instead, drowning the sound of rain. I feel my entire body has frozen.

"Give him back…give me back my brother! Aren't you satisfied, having killed him along with everyone else, and even your own brother?! So, stop it! You've almost killed me so many times! I've had enough!"

I-I-I'm not…!!

"And yet, you - you!! You're but a harbinger of misfortune! You should just di-"

SLAP!

That loud sound of flesh hitting flesh stops his words.

For a moment, there's only the sound of rain as it gets heavier, and the sound of my hiccups. I'm crying…but since when? I open my eyes, feeling my cheeks wet with tears and rain, and then the blurry sight of Hasebe's back enters my vision. In front of him stands Hachisuka with a shocked expression, holding his red cheek.

"I don't know what happened," Hasebe starts, breaking the silence. "I don't even know who you are, but…I can tell that you're hurting my friend, and I won't let you go away so easily."

"Y-You don't know - "

"I don't care! He's my precious friend no matter what." He turns his head, looking at us behind him. "Run away with him, Souza! Now!"

R-Run?

At that call, I feel Souza's hand pulling me to the opposite direction of my house, our shoes splashing with puddle of water. The road is slippery. I feel like I can trip any moment and it scares me, as if the ground is but a soft sand that crumbles easily when I step on it. My legs wobbled, my mind is in heat even though my body is wet with rain.

I can't think straight. It hurts to think, so my mind shuts down completely.
Just like a doll, I'm just being dragged around, having neither power nor capacity to resist. Even so, I can feel my strength weakening, as if my soul is slipping away from my body, and I can collapse at any moment. My vision blurs, my headache worsening.

It seems like the world is warping into a spiral. Everything around me is slowly being compressed, and when it gets way too small, I can see it exploding. The raindrops falling to earth sound like knocking sounds on the door, hurting my eardrums. I wish to shut my ears, but even that can't be achieved. I feel my body being pierced from all angles, it might as well bleed now.

It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It's cold. I can't take this. I can't do this. I give up.

Ahh, my left hand is itchy. It's so itchy. I want to scratch it. I want to make it bleed. It hurts, it hurts, let me feel it…

My hand slowly slips away from his slippery hand, my legs refusing to move as my body leans forward. I look at the ground. I'll meet it in seconds, melting and being compressed, and then I believe I can find peace. I let my weak body fall. What I see is not the asphalt ground, but instead my own reflection on the puddle.

Oh, I'm still crying. I can tell even with the rain assaulting my head. My face will be even wetter now.

Splash.

It doesn't happen.

I fail to meet the ground.

A strong hand is holding my stomach, preventing me to fall. I realize it's Mikazuki. Wordlessly, he lifts me and carries me in his arms, something called bridal style. I let my limp body be embraced. It actually feels nice, being enveloped by warmth like this.

It feels good to not think about anything.

"Is there any place we can use as a shelter?" Souza asks, letting me settle with Mikazuki.

"There's a park nearby," Mikazuki replies, "I'll lead the way."

I can't tell if he walks, runs or floats, but before I know it, we arrive at the said park. It feels like we teleported in an instant. We walk up to an old-looking, wooden gazebo at the center. Kogitsunemaru appears and sits on one of the bench, and Mikazuki lies me down next to him, letting my head rest on his lap. He rummages something from his sleeves and takes out a long, white cloth, throwing it to Souza. To warm himself up, I guess…how did he hide it there all this time? Hngh…

…Ah. Right. It's raining. The plastic bags are still with Hasebe. I wonder if it gets wet…and what happened to him?

Ack. My head still hurts.

"Don't think too hard, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says, his finger sweeping the tears wetting my cheeks before he strokes my hair. "Just rest well for now. You can go to sleep."

"But I might catch a cold if I do…"

"I'll warm you up. Don't worry. Mikazuki has a magic to warm you up too. Right?"
"I can try stuff," Mikazuki replies, sitting next to me on another bench. Despite running around in the rain, he didn't look very weird. That's some oddity's resistance…Kogitsunemaru is not wet at all since he didn't get drenched. Before long, his hand glows in orange, and the temperature seems to go up.

Ooh, magic…

…Haaah. I heave a sigh.

My left hand is still so itchy. But I can't reach it. I must not reach it.

I look around and roll slightly to see Souza sitting across me. He's brushing his hair and face with the cloth. When I look at it closely, it looks like a towel…Mikazuki is so ready, or he might just happen to have it. What a mystery.

"…Um, Souza." I start sheepishly.

"Yes?"

"…I'm sorry."

His expression doesn't really change. "There's nothing to apologize for."

"But - "

"There's nothing," he repeats, "It was unprecedented. Nobody would have expected it. I won't ask you about what happened, as it seemed to shake you greatly. I don't need to know, either. However, if there's something I can help you with, I'd be glad to help. I hate to see you like this. I'm angry towards that man, too."

"T-That's…"

"The only thing I want you to do is rest for now. Okay?"

"…Okay."

Having no idea what to do or talk about, I look up at the gazebo's ceiling. The lamp is flickering, reminding me of thunder.

I close my eyes and listen to the sound of raindrops hitting the earth.

People say listening to the sound of rain is calming.

I guess they're right.

I shut down my mind peacefully this time.
"Ichigo… I mean, his other self attacked that guy. The one we met in front of the ramen shop."

"… Really?"

"Yeah." There's no hesitation in his voice or expression. "Ichigo already strangled him and he almost collapsed, but I repelled him when I realized what was happening. Unfortunately, though, he was conscious, so he saw us… though it seemed he already knew the existence of oddities."

"And then what happened?" Mikazuki asks.

"Rather than being glad, he looked angry instead. He shouted weird stuff to me about you, Manba-chan, and then pushed me to the balcony, kicking me out. So ungrateful." Tsurumaru-senpai ends his story with a sigh, sitting on my bed.

… That'd explain why Hachisuka wanted to meet me earlier today, and what he said makes more sense now. Even he won't bring it up if nothing happens.

"I don't know Ichigo - uh, I mean, his spirit -"

"Let's call him Shadow Ichigo or something," I say. "Ichigo-senpai's spirit is too lame as a name."

"Sounds good. I know that's from a game, though," he smiles as he scratches the back of his head, "I don't know how Shadow Ichigo found where your ungrateful friend lives at - most likely through stalking and dedication, but I understand his reason."

"Reason?"

I look at him, my hair is fluttering thanks to the wind from the hairdryer. With a cold stare, he replies, "Reason for attacking him. He might've realized that your relationship with him isn't good, and that he hurt you. I'm sure someone like that is unforgivable in his eyes and must be punished. That's why his shadow acted."

It takes a few moments for me to process what he means. "… That's extreme."

"He wouldn't be an ikiryou if he doesn't have extreme and intense feelings in the first place."

"I guess so… but even so, I still don't understand why he'd act just for that reason."

"When someone hurt your friend, will you just stay quiet and watch as your friend cries?"

"… No."

He nods and smiles. "It's the same for him. And for me, too."

I turn away, looking at my smartphone screen. So… Hachisuka is right. It's all because of me, after all. It's my fault that he got in danger so many times. Because I exist. Because I made some decisions. He has the right to be angry, and I have to accept it.
"You're not at fault here, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says, tilting the hairdryer so I can hear him well even though the sound of machine is noisy. "You did nothing wrong. Ichigo acted all by himself, and it's obviously not what you desire. It's his responsibility, not yours."

"…Mm." I'm not convinced. Not at all. Even though I've calmed down after taking a nap, my mind is still a bit cloudy, most likely because my body is still somewhat cold, even after taking a warm bath. That's why Kogi is drying my hair right now. It'd be bad if I caught a cold.

"…Something bad happened, didn't it?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks after a pause. "Well, I won't ask what, but I think I came at the wrong time."

That's right. He came shortly after the rain let up. He didn't see that scene. He has no way of knowing.

"It's fine, senpai. I'm alright now, so hearing that news isn't all bad for me."

"Whatever you say, then." I hear the bed creaking. "I'll watch that guy's house again for some nights in case Shadow Ichigo attacks again. I'll keep you updated about his movements, too. After the attack, he didn't show up again, and nothing out of ordinary happened to the real him earlier."

"I see. You can have dinner here tonight as thanks."

"Oh? I won't reject that offer. Thank you~"

The door creaks open shortly after, revealing Souza as he steps in, a towel is around his neck. My shirt on him looks so baggy and too big…ooops.

"Thank you for the bath and clothes, Yamanbagiri." He says.

"No problem. How's Hasebe?"

"He's still taking a bath."

That's…certainly a long bath. If you don't know, there are two bathrooms in my house, one on this floor and one below. I'm grateful I have two bathrooms at times like this.

I stroke my hair, feeling that it's dry enough now. Noticing this, Kogitsunemaru turns off the hairdryer. I stand up, holding my smartphone. "Go ahead and use it, Souza."

"Oh. Thank you."

I move to my bed, feeling slightly refreshed. It's time for me to play some games and forget about things. I honestly still want to sleep some more, but I'd have a hard time sleeping at night if I do.

"I'm off to dry clothes, then," Kogitsunemaru says, stepping out of the room, "Too bad we can't wear these new clothes just yet."

"I'm disappointed too."

"I hope the weather is good tomorrow. I'm not fond using a dryer, but better than having laundry drenched…oh, I have to wash some clothes too…" He mumbles as he steps out of the room. The only sound filling the room is the roar of Souza's using the hairdryer.

"Kogi's the wife, I see," Tsurumaru-senpai says as the door closes, "With two irresponsible husbands."
"I'm responsible. Mikazuki isn't."

"How rude. I help too, you know?" Mikazuki says, making faked sobbing sounds.

"Yes, you help destroy everything."

"Yamanbagiri is so cruel to me! Please don't spread weird rumors!"

"They aren't rumors, they are facts."

"There are no facts, only interpretations! [1]"

"Don't use the subtitle of the novel I love like that!"

Mikazuki sulks as he hits my back a few times with his fist. He puts no strength on it, so it doesn't feel like anything. Tsurumaru-senpai chuckles as he stands up and stretches out his arms.

"Well then, what story do you have to say to Hasebe-chan about me, Manba-chan?"

"I haven't thought of anything."

"I think telling him that you came to surprise him is fine," Souza says, holding his hair and hairdryer. He seems skilled at that. "He won't delve further, especially if Yamanbagiri backs it up. He'll just hate you."

"I know he already hates me, ahaah. I guess I'll let him hate me further."

"You just like to pick a fight with anyone who is fun to get teased," Mikazuki says calmly.

"Ahaahaha. You're right."

Hasebe hates Tsurumaru-senpai? But why? …It's better to not ask, isn't it?

…Hm, wait.

Kogi is drying clothes right now, and it's in the second floor. What if Hasebe hears the sound and gets curious? He can't see Kogi, so it'd seem like…uwaaah. I just realized this. Oh no. I hope he doesn't realize or get curious. I pray for it.

Tsurumaru-senpai looks around my room. "Hmm, looks normal."

"What do you expect, senpai?"

"Anime posters, I guess? There's nothing under your bed, too…"

You checked under my bed? When?! "I hardly buy posters. It's embarrassing."

"Hmm~"

"Don't look around so much, please, there's nothing interesting."

"There is."

His voice suddenly gets lower. I look up at him, auto-piloting my game. With a serious expression, he approaches my wardrobe.

Opening it, he says -
"This!!"

"You want to look at his underwear, don't you?" Mikazuki says grimly, pointing a gun at the back of his head. "Don't you dare."

"A-A gun?" Tsurumaru-senpai yelps, his hands on the air.

"It's a toy gun, but getting hit by the bullet would hurt," I say. "Shoot him, Mikazuki."

"Understood."

"W-Why, though - waaah!!"

I should've had popcorn or something. Tsurumaru-senpai is genuinely panicking, it's a refreshing scene. I'm sure he can attack back shortly, though. I hope they won't mess up my room in the process. Auto-piloting the game, I waste the stamina. The fight is still fun to see. Noticing the time… it's almost time to make dinner. Brother Horikawa should be home soon.

I already told him that Tsurumaru-senpai is going to have dinner here, but…

"Hey, Souza," I call him. He's still not done drying his hair. Having long hair, even if it doesn't reach Kogitsunemaru's level, seems like a pain.

"Yes?"

"Do you want to have dinner here? As thanks from me."

He looks at the ceiling, thinking. "I'll accept your offer, then."

"It is sure noisy here." The door creaks open and Hasebe steps into the room. His eyes immediately set on Tsurumaru-senpai who is holding a gun (after taking it from Mikazuki) in a crouching position. Narrowing his eyes, he asks, "What are you doing?"

Riiight. He can't see Mikazuki who is trying to punch him.

"Doing some poses, of course!" Tsurumaru-senpai replies. His sudden acting is pretty good. He straightens his back and waves the toy gun around with a smile. "Manba-chan has this cool looking toy gun, you see."

"Ha….wait, why are you here?" Hasebe asks.

"You just realized it was me? Aahhha. I wanted to surprise Manba-chan by visiting him."

"It's not even funny, Tsurumaru-senpai," I say with a sigh, turning off my phone and plugging it into the charger.

"Is that so?" Hasebe doesn't really look convinced, but he shrugs and looks around the room with slightly glinting eyes. I can tell because Yoshiyuki's eyes are usually like that. This is unusual of him, though. "Are you okay now, Yamanbagiri?"

"I'm fine, thanks…um, do you want to have dinner here? As thanks from me?"

Is it just me, or his eyes suddenly look bigger and brighter now? "Are you sure?"

I nod.
"Then…okay. I'll be happy to." He accepts.

"Then I'll need to buy groceries, huh…I don't think we have enough." I stand up and stretch out my arms. My shoulders feel heavy for some reason.

"I don't think you should move around too much now, Yamanbagiri," Hasebe says, "I'll buy them for you."

"I don't know what to buy, though, honestly. I guess we should wait for brother to come home, which should be very soon - "

A distant voice coming from the first floor echoes. "I'm home!"

"Speak of the devil."

I run out of my room, and go downstairs, straight to the front door.

"Huh? There are a lot of shoes lying around…" Brother Horikawa says as he looks around in confusion. "Oh. I'm home, Brother."

"Welcome home."

"These shoes are…?"

"My friends!"

"Hello~ I'm Manba-chan's senpai, Tsurumaru Kuninaga, the one he messaged about," Tsurumaru-senpai says as he descends the stairway, waving a hand. "Nice to meet you."

Brother Horikawa looks at him with wide eyes for some reason.

"Excuse us for intruding," Hasebe says, also descending a few steps away from senpai. "There's Souza in Yamanbagiri's room, drying his hair. We got in the rain, so we dropped by here. Yamanbagiri gave us some of his clothes and let us take a bath."

"I see, I see." Brother Horikawa smiles - so wide that he can be mistaken as that slit-mouthed woman oddity. "I assume Hasebe-san and Samonji-san are going to have dinner here too?"

I nod. "Well, I asked them, they said yes…"

"Is there a problem?" Hasebe asks.

"Oh, no! There's no problem at all! You're welcomed here!" He claps his hands bubbly. "I'll check if the ingredients are enough." He goes to the living room, takes off his coat and puts his bag on the sofa before going to the kitchen. The sound of the fridge opening can be heard. After a while, he comes back with a sullen face. "We'll need more."

"I'll buy them. Yamanbagiri is a little sick, I'm worried," Hasebe says, "What do we need?"

"I'll message you the things we need. Do you have my contact information?"

He checks his smartphone. "I have."

"Then you can go now. I'll type it soon. Ah, the money - "

"Let me buy it with my own money. As thanks for the dinner." Hasebe says.
"Mmm…if you say so, then."

"I'll go with you, Hasebe-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai says. "I'd feel bad to make my junior do it all by himself."

Hasebe snorts hearing him. "I'm fine without you, thank you."

"Don't be so cold~!!"

"It might be heavy, so two people is better," Brother Horikawa says with a smile.

"…Okay, then."

Tsurumaru-senpai giggles now that he won. The fight with Mikazuki is unfortunately postponed, though.

"We're going then," he says as they slip on their shoes at the front door.

"Take care on the way," I say. I honestly want to go and help, but I feel like I'd be a burden if I go. There's something to be talked about with Brother, too…it can't be helped. I wave them off as they go out and lock the door.

The house is suddenly quiet again.

It feels weird, even though it's usually like this.

"Yamanbagiri~!"

When I turn around, Mikazuki jumps from the stairs, landing straight into my embrace. I anticipated this, so there's no falling, but man, if he doesn't float, he's sure heavy as heck. He floats here, though, so it feels nice hugging him. I also still feel cold, so this is warm.

"Brother, you got wet too, right?" Brother Horikawa asks, "You're prone to cold. You should rest more."

"Yeah…" I respond sheepishly.

"Don't worry, I'll keep him warm," Mikazuki says, rubbing our cheeks together. Brother giggles seeing us.

"By the way, these two don't know about oddities, right?" He asks after a pause.

"Yeah. They can't see." Tsurumaru-senpai can and he's an oddity, though. I still want to keep it a secret. It'd be more complicated if I tell him the truth.

"I see…what to do with Kogitsunemaru's and Mikazuki's dinner, then?"

Good question. "Let them eat in my room, or after we have dinner."

"Eeeh..." Mikazuki immediately lets out a protesting sound. "I want you to feed me, Yamanbagiri."

"What are you, a baby?" I ask.

"Well, a dinner that isn't together doesn't feel right," Brother Horikawa says with an apologetic smile, "But there's nothing else we can do."
Mikazuki puts on a troubled expression, but he sighs and resigns anyway. "I'll eat later, then and Yamanbagiri has to feed me."

"Sure."

"What about Kogitsunemaru?"

"He's still drying our clothes - and maybe doing laundry too, but he should be finished soon. Then I can ask him."

"Okay then." Brother nods and goes to the kitchen. "I'll prepare the first dishes now."

I go to the living room and pull out a light novel from the shelves. I sit on the sofa and Mikazuki sits next to me, his arm holding mine tightly, resting his head on my shoulder. Looks like he's sleepy. Well, I won't bother him. I open the novel, flipping the pages to find the bookmark. How many days has it been since I continued this light novel? Hmm.

It's an old light novel titled Zaregoto. I'm pretty sure you know who the author is.

"Thanks for the hairdryer, Yamanbagiri."

I turn away from the book and look up, finding Souza smiling as he approaches me.

"No problem."

"Where are the others?" He asks, looking around, probably noticing the missing shoes.

"They're out to buy groceries."

"I see." He sits next to me and looks at his smartphone.

There are clinging sounds behind me. Brother Horikawa has begun cooking. Time to say it in a whisper. "So, uh…please keep Tsurumaru-senpai a secret. You know what I mean."

He raises an eyebrow. "I don't know the details, but I won't ask. Okay, I'll keep it a secret. I have no reason to not to."

"Thanks. I don't exactly know why he wants to keep it a secret, either."

For Souza to find out that Tsurumaru-senpai can see oddities was inevitable. After all, senpai went to my room through the windows, just before we took a bath, and immediately picked a fight with Mikazuki. Fortunately, Hasebe was out when that happened, but Souza was with me, so I had to explain quickly about the truth, hiding some things. I said that he has an oddity-related problem he wanted to sort out with me first before going to the specialist.

"I'm surprised, though. I never expected it," he says as he stands up, brushing his hair with his fingers.

"He likes to surprise people, after all. I think he wants to keep it a secret just to surprise people."

"I can imagine that."

The conversation ceases, and so, I turn back to my novel.

"Can I turn on the TV?" He asks.
"Sure."

He takes the remote control and turns the TV on. The screen lights up, immediately showing breaking news about a forest fire. I look at the screen after hearing that it's on the city next ours, and the forest connects to us….wew. It had been put out, thankfully, but it's scary to think if it reached Suzuran.

For a while, there's only the sound of TV and flipping pages, with occasional clinking sounds from Brother Horikawa. Mikazuki snores softly next to me. I read the book intently.

"Ngh, finally done…oh, where's the others?" Kogitsunemaru says, stepping into the living room as he massages his shoulder.

"Welcome back. They're buying groceries," I reply.

"But Horikawa is cooking right now?"

"Cooking for the first dishes or something."

"I see…"

He walks up to the kitchen and says in such a loud voice even I can hear, "Horikawa, do you need help?"

"Oh, Kogi! Nice timing. If you're fine with it, then…" Brother replies.

Looks like he's helping Brother, right after he finished a job. What a hard-working, good wife. I'm very lucky to have him. Yeah, sorry for being an irresponsible husband, but I have to take care of our kid - namely, Mikazuki and Yoshiyuki. I'm kidding.

I go back to my book, but Souza heaves a sigh as he changes the channel and lowers the volume. "Say, Yamanbagiri…"

"Hrm?"

"Don't you mind it when someone who isn't your lover holds your hand?"

Was he referring to Hasebe? "I'd mind if the person isn't my friend."

"As long as they're your friend, it's fine?"

"Yeah." Why is he asking this?

"Even me?"

"Yes. I offered you, didn't I?"

"…Right. Sorry for asking a weird question."

I look at him, but he simply stares at the TV, as if avoiding my gaze. A part of me says that he wants to hold my hand…but that's impossible, isn't it? He's just asking out of curiosity, right? I mean, it's weird for boys to hold each other's hand, so…b-but then again, he knows that I'm gay, and that I have three lovers…uh…?! I feel like my brain is about to explode!

Before I can overheat, I turn back to my book.
Let's forget it. It's none of my business if he doesn't want to talk about it.

The dinner is such a fest. Kogitsunemaru and Brother Horikawa went all out in their cooking, making various dishes - from shrimp *tempura*, *oden*, some *sushi* rolls, *tonkatsu*, *gyoza*, and the usual radishes. All in small portions so we can taste all of them without getting too full. Brother Yamabushi isn't home yet, he just texted us that he'd come home late. Normal.

Even so, the table is rowdy tonight.

"This is so good!" Tsurumaru-senpai exclaims with a pleased expression after he munches down a *tempura*. He sips the *oden* soup before taking rice inside his mouth.

"Brother is always a great cook," I say proudly.

"No wonder Yamanbagiri's lunches are always good," Hasebe comments before he eats some *gyoza*.

"I tend to have simplistic meals at home, so this is nice," Souza says.

"It's not everyday Brother goes all-out like this. Just because there are guests." I say.

Brother Horikawa smiles widely as he claps his hands. "You're all Brother Yamanbagiri's friends, after all! I have to make the best meal. Thank you for always taking care of him."

"I'm the one taking care of you guys, though," I retort.

"Only sometimes," Hasebe replies.

"Manba-chan, you can depend on me more, you know," Tsurumaru-senpai says, pointing his chopsticks at me as I'm sitting across him. "Don't be embarrassed."

"I wonder. Tsurumaru-senpai isn't very reliable, after all."

"Eeeh, that's a cruel thing to say!"

"He's just telling the truth," Souza adds.

"Even you?! What's with this grudge against me?!"

"Perhaps you should look at the mirror and reflect on your behavior, senpai," Hasebe says, taking a bowl of *oden* and sipping it.

"Oi, oi, you guys are teasing me now? So this is how we do things?"

"It's your fault, after all," I say, and the other two nod.

"You reap what you sow," Hasebe says.

Tsurumaru-senpai puts on an exaggerated pained expression. "I'm surprised I'd get this treatment. It hurts."

"Now, now. Eat up before it gets cold," Brother Horikawa interrupts us with a giggle.

After a seemingly long time to finish dinner, I help Brother wash the dishes, shooing away the other
three and let them do whatever they want. I have to secretly put out dinner for Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, after all. It's a pain, honestly. With Souza's and Tsurumaru-senpai's help, they distract Hasebe in the living room as I slip away to my room, holding a tray full of dishes.

"Ah, finally. I thought I'd die of starvation here," Kogitsunemaru says, slowly getting up from bed. He looks like he's dying, alright.

"Sorry for the wait, it was a messy dinner. Here, eat up." I put the tray on my bed.

Mikazuki approaches. "You're going to feed me, aren't you?"

W-What a commanding tone… "It'd be weird if I'm gone for too long, but…there's no problem if I do it for a short time."

His face lights up and bursts into a smile. Instead of sitting on bed and taking the food, he leans closer and kisses my lips, his hands reaching for my waist and back. It's not even a peck, he slips his tongue inside my mouth, and the usual thing happens. I let him do what he wants until he pulls back.

I flick his forehead. "That's not in the contract."

"Eheheh." He laughs.

He sure wants to be spoiled a lot today.

…I know. He might just want to divert my attention from this afternoon's incident, and one of the ways is to act like this. There are better ways, but…this is very like him, and I don't mind. I'm fond of this side of him, after all.

"Yamanbagiri, mind coming here and kissing me too?" Kogitsunemaru asks, pointing at himself.

"I don't mind, of course."

I sit on my bed and lean to him, kissing him like Mikazuki did to me while I stroke his head. His ears wobble happily, and when I open my eyes, I can see his tail waving around too. Too cute. He likes to be stroked on his chin, too. What a big cat.

Mikazuki sits on the bed, waiting patiently. I try to not get too immersed in fluff and start to feed him.

"Wait, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki stops me from taking the chopsticks and speaks with a serious expression.

"Hm?" I have a feeling he is going to say something stupid.

"I want mouth-to-mouth feeding."

*Tempura* game…no. "What a pain. I'm out of here, then."

"I'm joking!! I'm just joking, don't go!!"

After getting out of the mess in my room and letting the two eat dinner by themselves, and getting the somewhat dried clothes from Kogi, I go to the living room. Tsurumaru-senpai is watching TV as he eats some chips and Souza is next to him, busy with his smartphone. Hasebe is looking at my
bookshelves curiously, like he's searching for something.

"Oh, Yamanbagiri," he calls me as soon as he sees me. "You have quite the collection."

"It's mixed with my brothers', but yeah. Find anything that interests you?"

"Plenty. Can I borrow this?" He takes out a novel from the shelf.

"Sure. As long as you keep it safe and give it back."

"That goes without saying."

He turns to look at me, gazing from my feet to head. "...What?"

"No, uh..." Is that color of red on his cheeks? "Do you...always not wear your hood at home?"

"Unless it's very cold and there are strangers, yeah. What about it?"

He stares at me again, but it's not a glare. It's something much tamer, but I don't know what. "I know I wanted to see you without your hood, but...seeing it for a long time is..."

"Hm???"

"N-Nothing. Sorry." He walks up to his bag and shoves the book into it. Weird. "A-Anyway, it's getting late. We should go home soon."

Tsurumaru-senpai looks at the clock. "Ah, you're right. I wish I could stay the night with Manba-chan..."

"That's not possible, sorry..." Huh?

Is it just me, or both Hasebe and Souza are glaring at him as if seeing something that needs to be killed with dark aura emanating from them? S-Scary...

"Ah, is it time?" Brother Horikawa pops out from the kitchen. He was busy preparing a dinner special for Brother Yamabushi and had to cover them with plastic or something.

"Thank you for the dinner. It was delicious," Souza says, standing up before he bows down.

"No problem. Thanks for taking care of Brother. Please get along well with him too from now on."

"B-Brother, the way you said it is so embarrassing..." I stammer.

"Ufufu."

We walk to the entrance, seeing them off, except Brother Horikawa, probably to give me some private time.

"Thanks for today, Hasebe, Souza," I say, slightly bowing, "And sorry for the trouble." I give them their dried clothes.

"You're welcome. I'll give you this back on Monday," Hasebe replies.

"Just take your time."

"H-How is that nice?"

His smile scares me. At least answer me, please.

"I'll contact you later, then. See you and good night," he adds.

"See you."

I wave them goodbye as they walk away. Both Hasebe and Souza are going in the same direction because it's a given, but…Tsurumaru-senpai also goes with them. I wonder where he's staying at now? Or maybe he's staying at his house?

I should ask that later.

I turn around, but at that moment, I feel something strange. There's a sharp feeling behind me, piercing my skin. This is a feeling whenever someone, something is watching me. I look around, even behind me, but of course, I can't see anything. Not even a shadow.

Perhaps it's just a passing, curious oddity. Yeah. I shouldn't think too hard about it.

And so, I go back to my house. I go upstairs to my room.

"Kogi, Mikazuki, give me the tray - huh? What's wrong?"

Upon opening the door, I see them standing with anxious faces, with Kogitsunemaru looking over the windows covered in curtains. Mikazuki immediately pulls me closer.

"He was there, outside," he whispers.

"He? " I ask.

"Ichigo. His spirit, or whatever you call his shadow."

"What…? Why is he here?"

"Naturally, we don't know why he's here, and that's why we should be careful. He's been watching for about 15 minutes now. No important movements."

I nod anxiously.

"Oh," Kogitsunemaru yelps, peeking through the curtains. "He's walking away. And… he disappears."

"That was fast," Mikazuki says.

"I guess he's just walking around, taking a breather or something."

"I'm glad nothing dangerous happened…" I sigh in relief. "Can I get the tray now? I want to go sleep soon."

"I'll bring it downstairs. You can just rest," Mikazuki says.

"Oh, thanks."

Mikazuki takes the tray and exits the room. At least he can do that, even if he's useless at housework. I lie down on my bed, looking at the ceiling.
I slept this afternoon, and yet my body is still so tired. It's good that I didn't catch a cold, at least. Not yet.

"Don't jinx yourself." Kogitsunemaru sighs before he slowly crawls on bed, looming over me. I can feel his hair touching my cheek and neck, tickling. "Do you want to go sleep as soon as possible, or do you want another thing?"

"What thing?" I ask.

"You know what it is. Say it." He traces my lips with his fingers.

Yes, of course I know. I'm just feigning ignorance.

My chest still hurts, even though I try not to think about it, this afternoon's incident keeps crossing my mind. If I didn't have anyone to rely on, I'd no doubt fall down once more. But...I'm not alone here. Not anymore. I can be selfish, right? I might always be selfish, but just for now...to open up to the people I love...

I reach out to him, stroking his cheek and pull his head closer.

"...Remind me that you love me." I whisper.

"Mm. I love you, Yamanbagiri."

"Kiss me and hold me."

"Are you sure? Not going to wait for Mikazuki?"

"You asked that as your hand is reaching for my shirt...geeze. He can join later. There's no problem."

He grins and nods. "If you say that, then I'll do whatever you want now."

I have to get my mind off of unpleasant things. That's for the best. I'll let my mind go completely blank just for tonight. "I love you, Kogi..."

The night ends peacefully and happily. I can't say in detail what we were doing, but you get the gist, don't you?

Chapter End Notes

[1] The English subtitle for Eiji Mikage's (actually not light) novel, "We Don't Open Anywhere -there are no facts, only interpretations-". I highly recommend it and his other works as well, although I don't think this one is suitable for newcomer to his work, since it's pretty extreme. He's my source of inspiration for many things, and you can see that in many places. Yes, even the insane ones, so you can tell what kind of stories he wrote. (Shameless promotion)
When Monday comes, my hips are still aching. It's a lot better than yesterday, plus Mikazuki healed me slightly, but still, walking a fair distance is still a pain...

"We're sorry, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru apologizes for the probably 100th time since yesterday. "We really should not have done that."

Yeah, yeah, it's fine, I was the one asking for it. I kinda regret it now.

"Want me to heal you more?" Mikazuki asks.

If you do it now, you'd get extremely hungry. That's even more bothersome. During lunch, maybe. Also, refrain from jumping on me for now, okay?

"Understood."

Even he is apologetic. Heh, nice. A good way to make him not disturb me.

After a long and painful journey, I go upstairs and walk to my classroom. As usual, Hasebe is already there. There are actually other students on morning duty today and they're tidying up the chalk board.

"Good morning, Yamanbagiri," Hasebe greets me.

"Morning." I sit on my chair.

After clapping his hands a few times to get rid of the dust, he walks up to his seat and takes out a plastic bag before approaching me. "Here. Thanks for another day. We actually could have just wear our dried clothes, but they weren't completely dry yet, so it'd be uncomfortable."

"I should be the one saying that, really. Yeah, I understand. No problem."

I put the plastic bag in my bag and he sits in front of me as usual.

The two students on morning duty soon leave, probably to get fresh air or something, leaving the two of us alone as we sit face-to-face.

"What's wrong? You've been staring at me." I ask.

"Ah. I'm sorry."

"You're off since days ago. What happened? If you don't mind telling me."

"N-Nothing." He averts his gaze and looks down at the desk. "Uh...I'm sorry."

How unusual. "What for?"

"I was thinking about it...and I realized how pushy I was 2 days ago. So, I'm sorry."

"I don't think you're being pushy, but...if you say so, then apology accepted."
He looks up at me, his eyes are slightly wider than usual. "D-Didn't I bother you, though? I wanted to hold your hand so badly. I pushed myself on you."

"I don't know why you want it so badly, but it's not a problem for me. At least you know the place and time to do it."

He gasps and his cheeks turn faintly red. Huh? What's with this reaction? Huh? "Yamanbagiri...you're just too defenseless."

"D-Defenseless?"

"This is why I just..." He trails off, as if remembering something.

"Just?"

He sighs. "Forget it. I'm sorry for being weird lately. I blame the weather."

"Okay?"

"I...I don't want to bother you any further, so let's drop this topic."

"Mm..."

I wonder what's up with him...there's clearly something troubling him, but he doesn't want to say it to me. He's very secretive and hard to open up to others, including me. I thought he'd open up more, but then again, I also hide stuff from him. It's a given that each of us hide something from others.

He doesn't hold my hand throughout that whole morning.

By the way, Souza visited and gave me my clothes he borrowed.

"Let's have lunch together!" Yoshiyuki exclaims with a wide smile.

"Huh?" Yamato looks at him with a shocked face. "I thought for sure you were going to kidnap Yamanbagiri and run away again and have some quality time alone."

"K-Kidnap?"

"I assume the problem is solved, then?" Kashuu says, crossing his arms with a smile. "That's good. Lunch feels different without you guys."

"The difference is - well, I made my own lunch again! And this time, I made one for Yamanbagiri," Yoshiyuki adds as he shoves me a lunch box.

"Oooh, a handmade lunch from Yoshiyuki..." Yamato looks at the box, "You sure it's not hazardous?"

"What kind of cook do you think I am?" Yoshiyuki looks dejected and pained.

"Ahaha. I'm joking. I know you can cook well."

"Let's go before we miss our chance to buy things from the limited menu," Hasebe says with fire in
his eyes. We follow him with a relaxed pace, but Yamato and Kashuu are clearly fired up as well.
The cafeteria is as crowded as always. Yoshiyuki and I run and look around for empty seats.

"There!"
I strike when I find one, almost throwing my lunchbox to the table. I win.

"Huh?"

"Oh?"
There's another person putting their lunchbox on the table. I look at that person.

"Yamanbagiri-san!"

"Geh."

"What does that reaction mean?" His joyful expression turns sour, Kikkou-senpai sulks. "It's rare for us to meet here."

I feel like I've been running into him a lot lately. What luck. "Yeah, it's rare...um, do you want to sit here? I'll move somewhere else, then - "

"Oh, it's fine! This table has chairs for eight people at maximum. There's room for you to sit if you want to."

Ahh, right, this table is the long one. "There are other 4 people with me, though."

"That's fine, I'm only here with one other person."

I bet it's the president. "Then I guess it's fine. Let's share the table."

Yoshiyuki walks up to us as I take a seat. "Ooh, Sadamune-senpai?"

"Hello." Kikkou-senpai waves a hand with a smile. "Yoshiyuki-san, isn't it?"

"How did you know?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"You're Yamanbagiri-san's friend, after all. Of course I know."

That's a bit creepy. Yoshiyuki chuckles awkwardly, taking a seat next to me and falling silent. He knows what kind of person Kikkou-senpai is, after all. He has no idea how to act around someone like him.

"Who are you with, Sadamune-senpai?" I ask.

"Ichigo-san. He's still buying food now," he replies happily. "We rarely hang out, but just for today."

...I've been running into Ichigo-senpai a lot as well. Oh man, it'd be awkward since I said nothing when we parted ways after eating ramen... "Not with the president? I'm surprised."

"Pres - ? Oh, Akashi-san. He's too lazy to go here, saying that he wants to sleep during break."

I can imagine...oh well. Time to eat. I open up my lunch, the one Yoshiyuki cooked for me. The inside is...relatively normal, though you can argue it's a bit too cute or girly. There are rolled eggs, vegetables, sausages, nuggets, and more importantly, rice. Half of the rice looks like a panda.
"The panda is cute," I say. "It looks good, Yoshiyuki. Thanks."

"Ehehe, thanks. I don't know what you prefer, so I made both for rice."

"I don't care either way."

"Oh? A handmade lunch from Yoshiyuki-san?" Kikkou-senpai looks interested as he opens up his lunchbox. "The two of you are so close."

"I just wanted to practice cooking more, that's all," Yoshiyuki replies bashfully. "Did ya make your own lunch, senpai?"

"Yup! I live alone, after all. I should be able to do this much. Though sometimes I'm too lazy to cook something great, so I usually end up with rice balls." He lifts his box and shows the content to us. Indeed, there are rice balls and some small sushi. The shapes are perfect, though and the sushi's insides have such striking colors that they look pretty. My jaw drops seeing his skills. Even I can tell how high he is.

Yoshiyuki stares intently at the food. "I have to get better....!"

"You can do it, Yoshiyuki."

But Kikkou-senpai looks confused instead.

"We're already hungry, so we're going to eat now, senpai," I say after a pause.

"That's fine. I'm not going to wait as well. My stomach can't."

We're the same, then.

And so, we start to eat our own lunches. Apparently, Yoshiyuki has no idea how to make our lunches look different, so they look the same with the same dishes. I first eat a nugget. It's good and crunchy. He really is getting better at cooking...this panda is well-made, too.

Before long, as we enjoy our food, a voice calls out, "Kikkou-san, where - uahh?!"

"Hello, Ichigo-senpai."

Ichigo-senpai looks terribly surprised seeing the two of us sharing the table with Kikkou-senpai. The plates and bowls on his tray almost fall, I swear.

"Y-Yamanbagiri-san, Yoshiyuki-san..." He approaches us timidly and sits across from me. "I'm surprised you're here with Kikkou-san. Then again, the other seats are filled."

"I'm more surprised you even hang out with Sadamune-senpai." I retort.

"I feel like you're insulting me, Yamanbagiri-san. We're friends, you know? It looks unlikely, but we are!" Kikkou-senpai crosses his arms as he puffs out his cheeks.

"Aahahah. Kikkou-san can be weird, but he's a good friend," Ichigo-senpai replies. "I just hope he doesn't do anything weird to you and Yoshiyuki-san."

"I won't, really, trust me."

"We'll be careful around him," Yoshiyuki replies.
"E-Even the *genki* Yoshiyuki-san said so?!

"Putting Kikkou-senpai aside -"

"Hey!"

"It's rare for you to be here, Ichigo-senpai," I continue, ignoring Kikkou-senpai. "I thought you always make your own lunch?"

He shakes his head. "Not always. Sometimes I'm in the mood to buy something from cafeteria, especially the limited menus."

"Aah...understandable."

"It's rare to see ya without other student council members, though," Yoshiyuki adds after munching down a sausage. I feel like I should add *especially Kikkou-senpai*, but that'd be too much teasing from a junior in a day for him...although I can imagine him liking it instead.

"We're in different classes. It's not like we hang out together all the time," Ichigo-senpai replies without any hesitation. "It's not really a bad thing, though. We attract attention. It's even worse when we're together, so this kind of peace is nice."

I can see. Even people around us are looking at us right now...some girls shoot us jealous eyes. I'm sorry, it was not my intention to share a table with him! I doubt they want to sit with Kikkou-senpai, even though he's handsome, his personality is something else.

"So that's why Kikkou-senpai is here. He drives people away." Oh whoops. That's another tease.

"Y-Yamanbagiri-san is truly...an S..." Kikkou-senpai whimpers, slowly hugging his own body. "Looking down on me like that so easily...huaa..." "...As expected, he looks like he's enjoying it...creepy. Even Ichigo-senpai looks at him like, *'ah, this guy is hopeless'*."

"Um, I'm just teasing you a bit, senpai. I'm sorry."

"Please, don't be sorry at all! Although you being nice is fine too..."

He's blushing and wriggling weirdly right now. Everything feels like it backfires when it comes to him, for better or worse...yes, it's for the worse, alright. We awkwardly ignore him and continue to eat.

"Oh? I just noticed that your lunches are the same," Ichigo-senpai says, pointing at my lunchbox.

"Yeah, I cooked it!" Yoshiyuki says proudly.

"I see. The two of you are so close."

"Sometimes I'm scared he'll put something weird in it, though," I comment. He lightly jabs my side as a rejection.

"Yamanbagiri-san, can you cook?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

"I can, a bit. I'm not confident, though so I prefer if someone is with me and helps me."

He nods a few times in understanding. "I'd like to taste your cooking if possible."

COUGH. I almost choked on rice there. Dangerous. The way he said it is so hopeful and a bit
commanding. E-Even his expression is...he really wants it, I can tell. "S-Someday, maybe."

"I can help ya train." Yoshiyuki gives me a thumbs up, probably not realizing the pressure from Ichigo-senpai.

"Someday."

"Yamanbagiri, Yoshi - whoa."

It's Kashuu's voice, getting closer as he approaches, but he stops halfway.

"Ooh, sharing a table with upperclassmen," Yamato says.

"Excuse us," Hasebe says with a slight bow before he sits down. Kashuu and Yamato reluctantly follow and sit, with Yamato sitting next to me, putting the trays of food on the table.

"Sharing a table is good," Kikkou-senpai says with a wave of a hand. "Food tastes better when there are many people together."

Hoh, he said something good and normal for once.

"The other seats are taken, anyway," Ichigo-senpai adds. "I know Hasebe-san, so...the two of you are Yasusada-san and Kiyomitsu-san, correct?"

"Y-Yes." I hear the two being called reply in unison, awkward and stiff. Probably surprised someone like Ichigo-senpai knows them. You guys are pretty popular too, you know...

"I see." He silently continues to eat.

"Yamanbagiri, you know them?" Yamato asks in a whisper.

"Yeah, I do."

"You sure know popular guys..."

Once again, you're also popular, boy. "It's all because of work, really...and knowing Kikkou-senpai isn't exactly a good thing."

"I heard that, Yamanbagiri-san!" Kikkou-senpai says, pointing at me like he's a detective that just found the culprit.

"Geh."

"T-That reaction again..."

Didn't you say you're happy with me acting like that, though...? That sad face just pains me, oi. This man sure knows how to play with my emotions in a very bad way.

"I would have never thought that Hitofuri-senpai would hang out with Sadamune-senpai," Hasebe says before he takes his chopsticks and starts to eat his rice bowl.

"Everyone said so, aahha." Ichigo-senpai chuckles. "Despite everything else, he is a good friend." He repeats what he said before.

"Thanks~"
"Just a bit dangerous sometimes, so be careful when interacting with him. I'll keep you all safe, at the very least."

"Am I some kind of wild animal?!"

Hasebe snorts, "I'd be more surprised if you weren't."

"Eeeh?!"

It became a Kikkou-senpai bully fest or something. Even Ichigo-senpai approved it. Though, of course, Kashuu and Yamato don't say anything, and I feel a bit bad about it. Of course it's awkward with someone you don't know very well, especially if it's someone older than you.

Before long, the topic ceases, and we only occasionally talk as we eat.

"Hee, so your lunch is identical with Yoshiyuki's," Yamato says, looking at my half-eaten lunch.

"Yeah. It doesn't look like it now, but...there's panda rice."

"I took photo of it this morning," Yoshiyuki says, shoving us his smartphone. On the screen is a selfie photo of him and the two identical lunches. Also, he's wearing an apron there.

"Looks good! And cute!" Yamato comments.

"It is quite good," I say. Yoshiyuki grins happily.

"How nice~ I can hardly cook," Kashuu says before he takes a sip of water. "The food here is good, but having to buy every day is a pain."

"There's always convenience store boxed lunch as an option," Hasebe says.

"Ehh, I'd feel like some kind of NEET if I did that."

"Try cooking, then?"

"That's a pain. I'll just let Yasu cook for me sometimes."

"I don't agree to it," Yamato says, crossing his arms, "Even cooking every morning for my own lunch is a pain for me."

"I'd like to taste your cooking, Yamato," I say, intrigued by the idea.

"I'll consider it if you say so."

"Weaaak," Kashuu mumbles, but it seems only Yamato understands as he glares at him.

"Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai suddenly calls me. I see that he has finished eating. "Are you free after school?"

"I think I'm going to IT club, but...what about it?"

"Well, I'd like to go home with you again if possible."

I look at Yoshiyuki. He nods slightly, though a bit bitter. "Then...sure, there's no problem. You'd have to wait for me, though."

"That's fine. I usually go home around that time because work is piling up."
"I also want to go home with Yamanbagiri-san," Kikkou-senpai says with a frown. "You promised me."

"I never promised you anything."

"Then, Hasebe-san - "


"I...I only want to get closer to my underclassmen, uuuu..." Ah, he's sulking now.

"The forecast said it'll rain this afternoon," Yamato says, now he can fully ignore Kikkou-senpai, such adaptability, "Did you bring an umbrella?"

"I did this time."

"Me too," Yoshiyuki replies. "Praise me! I saw the forecast today!"

"There, there, good kid." I pat his head a few times.

"You mean good puppy," Kashuu says with a chuckle. "A big puppy."

"Then give me food and spoil me," Yoshiyuki says with a wink, getting a bit too deep in his character.

"I'll spoil you a lot~" Kikkou-senpai says, his arm reaching for Yoshiyuki across him - but Yoshiyuki slowly bends backwards.

"U-mmm...I'm satisfied with Yamanbagiri as my master now, so..." He says, glancing at me awkwardly.

"What kind of good puppy are you?!"

"Perhaps you have to be more patient, Kikkou-san," Ichigo-senpai says with a smile, "Perhaps you're a bit too intimidating."

"A-Am I? Hmm..."

As Kikkou-senpai falls to a deep thought, Ichigo-senpai looks at his smartphone. "It's almost time. We should go now."

"The third years' classrooms are on the third floor, right? It must be a pain," Yamato says.

"It is a pain, really."

"Ichigo-san has always sprinted downstairs when the bell for lunch rings. It's an amazing sight. Akashi-san is a lot faster as he runs away from teachers, though," Kikkou-senpai says, cleaning up his lunchbox and stands up. "See you later, then!"

President runs away from teachers...blackmail note taken.

"I'd like not to see you again," Hasebe says coldly.

He freezes with a pale face. Ichigo-senpai chuckles, stands up, patting his shoulder. "Now, now, it's alright. By the way, Yamanbagiri-san, you're free to come again if you want to help us the next break."
"Mm. See you." I reply.

They walk away and blend into the crowd. With that, the sharp glares from people around us also slowly vanish.

Kashuu stretches out his arms. "We should go soon, too. Yasu, finish up your lunch already."

"Sorry." Yamato immediately digs in again after stopping for a few minutes. "But man...I was frozen there. It's hard to eat with the two of them around."

"Really?" Hasebe, Yoshiyuki, and I ask at the same time in unison. That's the first.

Kashuu looks at us like we're some kind of monsters. "You three are too used to them. Who wouldn't be stiff and conscious of their actions when a very popular, almost godlike person sits in front of you?! I don't want to make embarrassing mistakes in front of them, so I have to be careful."

"Well, I understand the sentiment, but..." I cross my arms after I close the lid of the lunchbox. "Yeah, we're too used to them."

"Sadamune-senpai is another thing," he continues, "Rumors about him are pretty wild, so I was so cautious."

"He seems like a good guy, though," Yamato says with a smile.

"Fortunately, yeah."

"Don't let that fool you," Hasebe says with a wave of a hand, having an unpleasant expression. "Remember Hitofuri-senpai's warning. He's a good person, but another side of him is like a wild beast."

"Isn't everyone like that, though?" Kashuu replies, his finger twirling around his hair. "True, being so open like he does is not something people would do. He's a bit abnormal. But, people have dark sides of their own. I bet the angelic puppy Yosshi has it too." He ends his sentence with a smirk.

"Y-Yosshi?" Yoshiyuki yelps. I'm a bit surprised someone other than Mikazuki and Kogi would use that nickname.

"Indeed." I nod. "Yoshiyuki is a beast in games. He hates losing, after all."

"Said the one who mercilessly killed me many times after saying you'd let me win once!"

"I did let you win...once."

"That's different!!"

"Even Yamanbagiri is a devil," Hasebe comments with a shake of a head.

"And you're a robot. I wonder which one would win in a battle," I say. We proceed to have a staring match. I'm glad he's acting normal now...at least in my eyes.

Kashuu suddenly claps his hands. "Okay, now that slowpoke Yasu has finished eating, we also should run back to class. Next period is Japanese, remember?"

Oh no. The teacher is the actual devil who doesn't tolerate even the slightest mistake. Of course, that includes being late to class.
Remembering that, we all seriously run back to classroom with what little time we have.

It's second break time.

I planned to go help student council, but Yoshiyuki tugged my shirt with the Puppy Eyes attack that immediately killed me. There's no way anyone can withstand such an expression. He dragged me to the back of the building and pinned me down to the ground before I could even say anything. And here we are, kissing like we did a few days ago, just without lunch to be eaten.

Perhaps that's why Yoshiyuki is...quite wild today. This kiss is a hot mess. It's almost like he's hungry, greedily devouring my lips and tongue, not taking a break even the slightest. His hands grip my wrists tightly, it's so unlike him...but really, I don't mind it if he gets a bit rougher like this.

In fact, this kind of thing is more Yoshiyuki-like, isn't it?

Though I can feel my poor hips aching again as he presses me down to the ground. Oh, I can feel a familiar warmth spreading...it must be Mikazuki's magic. Thanks, but can you pull Yoshiyuki away? I think it's time for us to stop.

"What, I thought you wanted it as well," Kogitsunemaru's voice echoes inside my head.

I want it, I like it, but this is a bit too much...this position is uncomfortable, and I think...I'm nearing my limit, you know? This kind of kiss is dangerous.

"Alright."

Kogitsunemaru appears and pulls Yoshiyuki's collar. The said boy with dog ears and tail yelps as he is being pulled away from me. "K-Kogi, what -"

"Yamanbagiri told me to stop you," he replies.

"Sorry." I slowly get up, cracking my wrists. Wew, his grip left some marks on my skin. That's how strong he is. "I think that's enough for kissing. It's a bit too much."

Yoshiyuki doesn't even try to hide his disdain as his ears fold down, but he resigns with a nod. "Okay."

"It's rare for you to act like that. What's wrong?"

"Uh..." He takes my hand and plays around with my fingers, looking down. "It's just that...we didn't meet on weekends, we didn't kiss at all on first break, and ya gonna go home with Ichigo-senpai later, not me, so...I-I just can't let you spend time with him now. S-Sorry."

"...Are you jealous? Or you just want to make up for the time we lost?"

He looks greatly embarrassed, but he answers. "B-Both."

Being honest like that just makes him more irresistible. "I see. That's fine. I never thought you would feel that way. It's cute."

"I'm a human too, ya know. If I can, I want to stay with ya all the time."
"Yes, yes." I pat his head. "I'm happy you feel that way."

His frown changes into a smile before he embraces me, his tail waving around. Haah...this is way too nice. I can't possibly leave him now. Besides, Ichigo-senpai just told me to go if I can, so it's not obligatory. My lover is still my top priority.

"I love ya a lot."

"Me too."

"Sorry I couldn't be there with ya days ago..."

Ah. I told him about what happened with Hachisuka in the span of two days over the phone on Sunday. I couldn't hide it from him, so I told him, and I think it's for the best. I was worried if he'd act violent, but thankfully, he knows that's not what I want. He still said he wanted to punch Hachisuka at least once, though, and Kogitsunemaru shares the same sentiment.

I stroke his head, pressing his ears a bit. "It's fine. I'm happy that you told me you love me, so that's enough."

"Yamanbagiri wanted us to remind him that we love him before. He wanted to be spoiled," Mikazuki says, appearing to hug me from behind. "That's why he didn't resist you, Yoshiyuki."

"Ya still want me to shower ya with love?"

Damn, why are his eyes sparkling? He looks so hopeful. "T-That's enough for now, thanks."

"Okay..." He pouts.

"I'll stay with you, so don't sulk...though you're cute, I don't mind."

Just like that, we keep on hugging each other. The shadows from the incident are creeping at the edge of my mind, threatening to push me down, but this warmth healed me almost immediately.

"Where am I supposed to go..." Kogitsunemaru looks dejected, his ears are down. That's adorable, too. "Yamanbagiri, don't say that you'd let me suffer here just because my suffering face looks cute..."

"Ahahaha. Why don't you transform, then? If you're small, you can fit on my lap, or I can pat you too."

"Ooh. Good idea."

With a snap of a finger, his body vanishes into thin air - or so it seems, since his figure becomes much smaller in an instant. He isn't humanoid now, however. He looks like an actual, white fox, as big as a cat. When I rode him, he was bigger than that, like an actual beast. This isn't really new. I know he can transform. That's a fox for you, but...

"How is this?" Kogitsunemaru asks, his voice is far more childish than he actually is. He can change that according his size, too? Whoa...

"You're so cute, I want to kidnap you and eat you. Maybe fried Kogi tastes nice."

"N-No eating, please!" He yelps before he rests his head and hands...or legs...paws...on my thigh. Aaah, so soft.
"I'm joking."

"Hmph. I'm the one eating you, anyway."

"Yes, you already did."

We spend the second break just like that. Being trapped in warm hugs feels great.

Well, that is, until...

"Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki calls solemnly, "I'm hungry."

...Let's go to cafeteria as soon as possible.
"It's pouring really hard…" I mumble, looking at the windows.

"The forecast is right!" Yoshiyuki says, also looking in the same direction in awe. "Thank god I brought umbrella an today."

"I hope it'll clear up when I go home."

"You have IT club now, right, Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe asks.

"Yeah."

"Yamanbagiri is the only one who's in a club among us, huh," Kashuu mutters.

"We're in the going home club," Yamato exclaims.

Kashuu ignores him as he brushes his hair with his fingers. "Well, I'm going home now."

"Me, too." He eagerly nods. "Umm, Yamanbagiri…I want to go home with you someday."

Hm? He says that as if he's afraid to be scolded or something. "If the time allows me to, maybe tomorrow." I reply.

"I'm looking forward to it, then!"

"I'm going home, too. See you tomorrow," Hasebe says, taking out an umbrella from his bag.

Yoshiyuki waves me goodbye as he walks with the other three to the entrance. I wave them off before walking to the IT room, sliding open the door when I arrive. The inside is the same as always, cold with the AC blasting, and is packed with students already. Mitsutada-senpai, noticing me, stands up and approaches me with a smile.

"Good afternoon, Yamanbagiri-chan." He greets me.

"Afternoon, Mitsutada-senpai." I look at the person next to him. "I see you look fine now, Ookurikara. I thought of visiting you, to be honest."

Ookurikara nods. "It was just a normal cold."

"Glad to hear that.

"The weather is really unfriendly, so you have to be careful too…oh. Yamanbagiri-chan, how about sitting next to us today? It's still empty."

"Sure. It's been quite some time."

The seat arrangements don't matter, but I usually prefer quiet, shadowy spots in the corner. Though I can't just refuse him for that reason.

I follow them to their seats, at the usual spot at the back of the room. I put my bag on the chair next to Mitsutada-senpai and turn on the PC before I sit. Haah…my body feels weak. I'm not in the mood
to write codes today, to be honest. I'm tired and coding is tiring.

"That's quite a long sigh," Mitsutada-senpai says, shooting me a worried look. "Is the training really hard?"

By training, he means training for the programming competition or whatever. Even though I don't want it, I'm forced to participate anyway. There was no choice since the start but to follow the president's wishes. He's a strict teacher, I tell you. I can hardly pick up the pace of a genius like him.

"Well, you know the president...he's so ruthless. My body is just aching today, so it's even worse."

"Hang in there, Yamanbagiri-chan!" He clenches his fists in an encouraging gesture.

"Yeah...thanks."

"...Why is your body aching?" Ookurikara curiously asks from next to senpai. He peers into my face.

That question catches me off-guard. How should I reply? Uh, a normal answer...yes, that... "I slept wrongly for the past few days and forced myself to type a lot, so my shoulders hurt. P.E is a bit harder nowadays, too..."

"Hm. I see." He suddenly stands up and walks up to me. "Do you mind? I can massage your shoulders at least."

H-Huh? I look at him, full of questions. Why is he offering me that? It's...so unlike him. I mean, it's kind, but it's just weird.

He frowns upon seeing my silence. "It'd be a problem if you hurt your shoulders more."

"A-Ah, yeah, you're right...then, go ahead."

Saying that so bluntly, I sense nothing but genuine worry from him, so I end up accepting his offer. There should be no problem. My shoulders kind of ache in reality, so this is nice. He, however, pulls off my hood right after I say that...and I feel nothing but wrath. I glare at him, but he simply says, "Your hood is a bother."

"It isn't." I glare.

"It is."

Now there's a spark between the two of us. Nobody can forbid me from wearing my hood... over my dead body!

"That's a bit too much," Mikazuki says with a chuckle. Grr, this is a serious matter for me.

"Rock-paper-scissors, you two," Mitsutada-senpai suggests calmly, perhaps finding our fight amusing. Seems like there's no other choice but to take down the other.

We nod and get ready, preparing our hands. "Rock, paper, scissors - !"

The result is - me with rock, and Ookurikara with paper. Oh shit.

Ookurikara lets out a rare, triumphant smile. I'd like to admire that but right now I want to slap his face instead. This is an exaggeration, don't worry. Now that I lost, I can only resign myself to him as I sigh and his hands start to touch my shoulders. I feel my body stiffening, because I'm not used by
his touch. In fact, this might be the first time he has ever touched me like this…

W-What is this, my face feels hot.

"Oh my, how lewd."

Please don't butt in with such comments, Mikazuki!

"You're thinking of stuff too, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru mumbles. "Sure, it's nothing dangerous for now, but...when it's starting to feel good..."

Y-You guys are the ones giving me these suggestions! Don't laugh!

O-Oooh...Ookurikara starts slow, but now he's steadily going faster and pressing harder...t-this is actually quite good? It's been quite some time since I got a good massage, I think...since Mikazuki can solve things with healing. No, wait, it's not quite, it's really good. My body is starting to get relaxed now.

"How is it?" He asks soon after.

"Mmm...y-you're surprisingly good at this, Ookurikara."

"Thanks."

"Kuri-chan is good with his fingers," Mitsutada-senpai adds.

At that moment, I feel like Ookurikara's hand slips for a moment before he regains composure and continues normally. Hmm...? I can feel his uneasiness as his fingers clench on my shoulders, but I don't know what he's uneasy with, so I stay quiet and enjoy the massage.

"Your face is quite lewd, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says with a playful tone, almost snickering.

I-I'm not...not that I can tell, as the PC screen doesn't reflect my face right now.

"Looks like Kogitsunemaru lost to this."

"Hmph." Kogitsunemaru lets out a disdainful groan. "I'm still greater at other things."

O-Oh? Now he's moving to my upper arms...aah, that hits the spot.

"...What are you, an old man in a hot springs?"

But it feels like thaaat...

"It'd be better if you take off your jacket," Ookurikara suddenly speaks up. "But do you mind doing it?"

"I mind." I reply instantly.

He snorts. "Figures."

"This is okay, too. I can feel it. It's good."

"It feels...good?"

I nod. "Mm."
I hear Mitsutada-senpai chuckling softly. He's staring at me this whole time…I hardly notice it. "Kuri-chan. Don't think of anything weird. Your face gives it away."

"I-I'm not!"

Eek, he pressed on the most painful spot so hard when he said that. Ow, ow. Beside that, what kind of weird? Is it the same as the one I think about? If so, then…no, don't think about it. Shake it off. There's no way he'd think of that with me…it's just senpai's teasing, that's all!

"Oh? Yamanbagiri-chan, your face is red right now."

"E-Eh?" No way. Noooo.

"Is it that good? Man, I wish I could do it to you."

Isn't his face…a bit too close right now? His smile is as sweet as ever, and yet danger bells are ringing in my head. I can't really slide away from him, though, so I freeze in place as he peers at my face, his one bright eye observing me. This is uncomfortable. His gaze might as well stab me. I can feel my body stiffening, even with the massage.

"What is it, senpai?" I ask.

"It's rare to see you without your hood…"

And so he can't help but stare.

I understand that, but…t-this is way too close. Come on, Ookurikara, say something too…unfortunately, I can't see his face or ask for help, so I avert my gaze to my lap, away from Mitsutada-senpai's face. I can feel his breath and smell his scent from this distance. This is…quite the experience.

Is that the sound of my beating heart? What's happening here?

"Oi, what are you doing," Ookurikara says after a few moments of silence. "You're bothering him."

As if he just realizes that, Mitsutada-senpai backs away and laughs dryly. "Ahaaha, sorry…"

"You were too focused."

"It can't be helped, Yamanbagiri-chan is too dazzling! I don't mind staring at him all the time."

"That's creepy," I reply as the tension leaves my body. Huft. He's just frozen earlier, right? Thank god it's nothing weird.

"You're so pretty, Yamanbagiri-chan…"

"Don't call me that."

"Pretty," even Ookurikara joins in this time, and even saying it in English.

"What am I, Pretty Cure? [2]"

"That's fine too." Mitsutada-senpai says, somewhat more excited than before. Eeeh, I know he's interested in magical girls shows, but really?! "You'd look good in the costumes."

"Don't make this into cosplay and crossdressing at the same time."
"...White and black suit you. Or maybe blue...uh, that girl, Cure what?"

"Which one?"

"Ookurikara..." I let out a disappointed sigh. I guess it's a given that Ookurikara is infected in some way with Mitsutada-senpai's interest since they're always together. Damn senpai, the closeted otaku, secretly spreading viruses to sane people, and then shamelessly revealing his true colors when everyone else is busy here. "I'm not here to hear your talk about the franchise."

"Yamanbagiri-chan has to watch it too! At least the new season."

Now he's trying to pull me into the same hell with the sparkling eyes that remind me of a certain Nogi from a certain story [3]. He has a predator-like expression that is ready to grasp its prey and never let go. He's leaning closer now, even creepier than before. Mitsutada-senpai is sooo scary...!

"If you read Mahoiku [4], then I'll consider it."

"I'm on it, but it's painful to see their suffering..."

"Weak."

He sulks hearing my reply, for once showing a childish expression.

"What is this? You're all bonding over a magical girl show? Let me join, then."

The star has arrived. President is somehow already standing next to us, his hands slipping into his pockets. Unusually, he has headphones around his neck. They're black and red colored, they're pretty big and look soft - perfect and expensive gamer headphones. He looks far hotter with this nerdy, yet messy look for some reason...

"Admiring me, Manba-chan?" He grins when he notices my gaze.

"I'm not, and stop calling me that."

"Ookurikara, why are you massaging him? You want to touch him that badly?"

"Hk - It's not that!" Ookurikara groans when hearing Pres's playful words for some reason. "I'm just helping."

"Even though you like to say 'I have no intention of getting along'?"

"You -"

Time to stop him before President gets punched with an even colder attitude. "We already get along, so it can't be helped. Thanks, Ookurikara. It's okay to stop now. I'm feeling better." I say.

He releases his hands from my shoulders. Although I feel a bit sad about that feeling being gone, this is for the best. Okay, I feel fired up enough to do the task now.

"What are we going to do today?" I ask him.

"Hmm..." He puts a hand on his chin, thinking. "I'll give you some an task later. For now, just do whatever you want, as I need to talk to everyone else."

"Okay."

"Mitsutada, come here for a bit."
Mitsutada-senpai stands up and walks to him. They walk to the other group at the front, all third year students. Not minding their business, I decide to surf the internet - or not.

"Yamanbagiri, how about a round of PvP in Closers?" Ookurikara suggests before he takes a seat.

"Sure."

You aren’t surprised that the school’s PCs have MMORPGs installed, right?

Nothing interesting happened earlier, other than Ookurikara winning PvP against me. My controls are a bit wacky today. It's been some time since the last time I play Closers, too. Meanwhile Ookurikara seems to play it every day, so it can't be helped…wait, don't tell me he caught a cold because he played it until late at night? Seems plausible.

President gave me some tasks per usual, correcting me if I'm wrong. Normal.

The abnormal thing is, rain is still falling hard even when the school is about to close.

I walk up to the student council room after getting a message from Ichigo-senpai to wait for him there. I knock on the door a few times.

The door slides open, and unexpectedly, it's Tsurumaru-senpai. "Oh, Manba-chan. Waiting for Ichigo?"

"Yeah."

"Just go in, then. I think he and Uguisumaru are running some errands right now, talking with teachers and stuff."

"I see."

I let myself in, stepping inside the now familiar room and sit on the sofa.

"What are you doing, senpai?"

"I've just finished my task," he replies, one of his hands is massaging his shoulder a bit, "I'm about to go home, but I can't just leave you alone."

"I'm not alone, though."

"I know, but, you know…” He chuckles before he sits next to me. "Do you mind?"

I shake my head. Mikazuki might mind, though but he's dozing off right now. I can tell, of course, and I don't want to disturb him. We stay like that for a few minutes in a rather awkward silence. What should I say? Uuuh…the thing I'm curious about…

"Senpai. Did they ever attack again after that?"

"They?"

"The people that hunt you."
He shakes his head. "No, fortunately. Doesn't mean I can let my guard down, though. Are you worried about me? Manba-chan sure likes me, huh? I'm glad."

"Yeah, I do."

"Huh?"

"I'm worried about you. You look like the type to get into messes happily and unable to get out, you know. Then again, I guess I'm the same, that's why I feel that way."

As if what I said is insane, he looks at me with uncharacteristically wide eyes, before his face slowly twists to that of…what? I can't really tell. It's like it's mixed, but I can feel embarrassment from him. If my eyes are right, his cheeks are turning red, too. This is not something I expect to see from him, so I'm surprised, and I probably have a shocked expression right now as we stare at each other.

Congrats, you've surprised me, senpai.

Though he doesn't seem too happy as he's still silent, his eyes are staring at me like he's searching for something.

"…Senpai? Did I just say something wrong?"

After a few blinks, he seemingly snaps out of it. "N-No, I'm just surprised, sorry."

"Why?"

"B-Because…" For a second, he averts his eyes from me, looking uncomfortable. "I didn't expect it, that's all! Ahahaha!" Even to me, his laugh sounds forced. He even scratches his cheek.

I glare at him, asking for the truth. This makes me uneasy. I feel like I have to know no matter what.

"It's nothing, really!"

"Hmmm, sure."

"You don't believe me, don't you?" He heaves a sigh before he fixes his sitting position, looking at the wall this time. His eyes seem to look at a far away scenery, however. "Well… a long time ago, someone I know said the very same thing to me."

"Is that so…I won't pry further, then." His reason is normal. I'm a bit disappointed, honestly.

"Oh? You don't want to know more?"

"I see no point in knowing more, but I'll listen if you want to tell me."

"Hmm…” He sounds like he's reconsidering it. "I don't mind telling you who said it and our story."

"Then, go ahead."

Tsurumaru-senpai's past…I can't say I'm not curious.

"I once had a lover."

"Huh?"

What a way to start the story. I look at him in disbelief, and his lips form a grin, amused at my
reaction. "Surprised? What do you think, even I can capture someone's heart! Ahahah. The story is short, really. About 200 years ago, at a certain village, I met a certain someone. That village is a part of Suzuran now."

…Why am I not surprised at '200 years ago' part?

I listen closely to what he says.

"That person is a human, but also not a human. He's half oddity, very rare among the population."

Wait. "…He?"

"I'm the same as you, Manba-chan. I'm only attracted to guys. In my era, it wasn't even such a taboo," he replies straightforwardly, no hesitation at all. "Though three-way is rare. Oh wait, isn't it four-way for you now? Are you going to create a modern-day harem? Harems existed before, but they were just for high-ranked people…so Manba-chan is an elite."

"I…I see." I shouldn't be surprised…he looks totally fine with me flirting with Kogi and Mikazuki. "Uh, go ahead and continue." I completely ignore his last remarks.

"Well… at that time, oddities and humans still live side-by-side. Our existences weren't secrets. However, humans with mixed blood like his were being discriminated. Humans who strayed from the path - like me - were being feared as well, so the two of us mostly lived in solitude," he said with a melancholic expression.

I sit there and listen silently. Tsurumaru-senpai looks like he's recalling precious memories, yet pained at the same time…

"We accidentally met when we were in the forest in the mountains, just hiding from other humans in the day. I could blend into society, sure, but it was tiring, so I took breaks. At first, I thought he was just a normal, passing human, but he noticed my abnormality right away. Normal humans wouldn't be able to tell that I'm an immortal, and yet he did - and then he confessed that he wasn't a normal human. I had just moved there, by the way, so of course I had no idea who he was even though he was pretty popular. One way or another, we got close since then, regularly meeting each other even if just to greet. Weirdos stick with other weirdos."

His voice gets warmer, as though he's talking about someone he holds dear. Even though it has been such a long time, his feelings must be still strong…I can tell that, somehow.

"Before long, as if it was natural, we found ourselves dating each other. There's no dramatic confession or anything, really, it's all far too normal for two lone wolves. We started to live together since then. Despite having a meek look, he had an adventurous heart, so I was dragged around mountains and many places. It was our little adventure. In these places, we met various things, from mild to dangerous…mm. These days were fun."

There's a long pause after that, so I ask, "…I assume he told you the same thing I said that time?"

"Yeah. Many times. He's very kind and caring, but he also liked to surprise me."

"Just like how you surprised him."

"Indeed. It's revenge."

Another mysterious pause, and I can't help but to ask this question. "…May I ask where is he now?"
"He died, of course. He's half oddity, and though he retained his youth, his lifespan is only 100 years… and I'm an immortal. I can't die."

_Only_… and that last part.

He snorts when he says that, showing an even sadder expression. "Don't look at me like that, Manba-chan. I know very well the consequences. We talked a lot about it when we started going out, and although it was saddening for the both of us, we decided to go with it. Those 100 years were full of happiness, and it was worth the pain. I'm glad I met him and spent time with him. I really am. It'll stay as a precious memory, no matter how much time passes."

"…Mm."

"M-Manba-chan?"

I grit my teeth hard when he calls me, but that's when I feel my cheeks are getting wet. H-Huh…? I touch my cheeks, feeling that certain liquid on my fingers, and my heart feels like it's sinking. I'm crying…? Even though I don't know the reason, teardrops keep on falling, and before I know it, I'm sobbing.

Tsurumaru-senpai looks at me in amazement, looking like he's lost on what to do, before he strokes my head gently and wipes away my tears with his fingers.

"Why are you tearing up now? Geez, I feel bad. Sorry."

"No, I…" I shake my head, but unable to let go of the words. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for. There, there."

"In fact, you're the one that should apologize to Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says, suddenly appearing behind the sofa with a displeased face. "For making him cry."

"But I did."

"Kneel down before him or I'll slash you."

"Do you hate me that much?" Tsurumaru-senpai visibly sweats, his face turns pale.

"I'm half joking. No, maybe 40% joking."

"That doesn't calm me down at all!"

He sighs, still keeping his palm on my cheek, his fingers wet with my tears, but he doesn't seem to care. The warmth of his hand soothes me, and that exchange is quite funny, so I slowly catch my breath and calm down. It's weird. I suddenly cried, and I don't exactly understand why. If I have to place a reason… you can say I'm in the same boat as him, but as the one leaving, so I feel the sadness. It's a topic that pops up from time to time. That shows just how weak I am to this.

It's something personal for me as well.

"Oh. I just remembered we just bought tissues here. Wait." Senpai says.

Tsurumaru-senpai stands up and walks to the desk in the center of the room - Uguisumaru-senpai's desk. Behind the pile of books, he takes a box of tissues and brings it to me. I take one and blow my nose before wiping away my tears. "Thank you, senpai."
"No problem. Have you calmed down?"

"Mm. Pretty much. Sorry…" I snuffle.

"Once again, it's nothing to be sorry about." He smiles and strokes my head again, ever-so-gently, and my heart feels like it's about to burst for some reason. "Your crying face looks adorable, I'm honestly glad to be able to see it, so it's not a problem - w-wait, don't point your sword at me, Mikazuki-sama! If it hurt him, I don't want to see it either!"

Mikazuki is really pointing his sword (covered in its sheath) at him with a sharp glare. I chuckle seeing him not moving an inch even after senpai's words. "Stop that, Mikazuki. Leave senpai unscathed just for today."

"Just for today?! Even if I'm immortal, injuries still hurt a lot!"

"If Yamanbagiri said so." His sword vanishes from our view, much to Tsurumaru-senpai's relief.

"Well then, enough of that. My story ended there. More importantly, your eyes are a little red, Manba-chan. You should wash your face or Ichigo might punch me, thinking I made you cry… though I did." Senpai suggests.

"I'd rather have him punch you."

"Ssshhh."

I smile seeing their exchange and stand up. "I'll wash my face, it's embarrassing. Tell Ichigo-senpai to wait when he arrives, okay?"

"Okay."

Mikazuki follows me when I step out of the room. Thankfully, the restroom isn't very far from the student council room, so I swiftly walk there and wash my face. The cold water seems like it's waking me up from whatever hazy daydream I had. I look at myself reflected in the mirror, my bangs are a bit wet from the water, and my eyes still look red.

Haaah…

"Yamanbagiri…"

I look up. He wraps his arms around me from the side, embracing me. I hug him back, feeling his comforting body heat seeping into me. "I'm okay now."

"Still…because of us, you…"

I shake my head. "The one hurting the most would be you, not me…so I apologize in advance."

He looks at me with a frown, but he softly nods. "…Don't worry about it. We decided it, after all. There won't be any regrets. If even that crane can do it, we also can." He says with a rare fist pump to the air.

I pat his head and smile. "That's some kind of motivation."

"Can I also hug you?" Kogitsunemaru says, suddenly appearing next to me with a smile.

"Ahaha, sure."
We have a sudden hugging session for a while. It's so warm, but awkward in a restroom.

With my heart feeling lighter, after I encourage myself, I go back the student council room. I still don't understand exactly why I cried, but that's not important right now. I slide open the door, only to find one thing has changed. Tsurumaru-senpai is still sitting on sofa, but -

"Uguisumaru-senpai?"

The green-haired student is already in the room, packing his stuff into his bag. "Oh, Yamanbagiri. Hello. What are you doing here?"

Tsurumaru-senpai looks at him. "He's waiting for Ichigo. Isn't he with you?"

At that moment, his face shows surprise. This is perhaps the first time I see it. "He should have came here before me. He was saying that he doesn't want to make you wait any longer, took his bag from his class and ran away. I thought he already left with you."

"…What?"

I look at Tsurumaru-senpai. He looks at me back. Our expressions must be the same right now - that of surprise and terrified of the worst case possibility. The worst case for me would be that something happened to him, making him unable to move and such…w-what a scary thought.

I take out my phone, and when I'm about to call him, a LINE message arrives with a vibration from the phone.

"It's Ichigo-senpai."

I quickly tap on the message and carefully read it.

"I'm sorry, Yamanbagiri-saan. I just remembered I had to run an urgent errand for my family, so I'm going first. I'm really sorry! I hope to walk home with you again someday."

…For my family.

If he's getting along with his family, then that's good.

"He said he had something urgent to do, so he went home first."

Tsurumaru-senpai shoots me a doubtful look. "Really?" I show him the message, and though he still looks unconvinced, he nods. "Okay then…"

"I guess I'll be going home now, then." I take my bag from the table.

"Oh wait, Manba-chan! Let me go home with you, then. Can I?"

"Sure."

"Let's walk to the entrance together, then," Uguisumaru-senpai says.

We walk out from the student council room. I take out my umbrella before I forget, seeing from beyond the windows that the rain is still not letting up. "Tsurumaru-senpai, did you bring an umbrella?"

"Nope. If it's not yours, I'd ask for Uguisumaru’s." He responds.
"I'll let you get drenched, you know," Uguisumaru-senpai says with a chuckle.

"Don't be cruel to me, Uguuui~"

"I'll consider it after we graduate."

"That's a bit too long!"

I follow behind them, feeling amused by their chat. I guess Uguisumaru-senpai leans heavily as boke instead tsukkomi, despite his appearance, and Tsurumaru takes over as tsukkomi. Quite surprising, but now I understand how fun it is to become boke with him.

I kind of wish Ichigo-senpai was here. I wonder what the urgent thing was that he talked about.

"What if it's a lie?" Mikazuki asks.

A lie? Why would he lie about it?

"Perhaps he wants to run away from you."

B-But why? He's the one asking to go home together.

"What if he saw you with Tsurumaru and misunderstood?"

Misunderstood? What? Why?

"It's hard to explain. Let's just see what's going to happen," Kogitsunemaru says, "We better not get ahead of ourselves."

"...You're right."

They fall silent, but my heart feels heavy. I'm suddenly uneasy now that they said that. There's a sense of foreboding... indeed, something is going to happen, but I don't know what. If it does happen, I don't think it'll be something mild...unfortunately, my gut tells me so.

I hope it's nothing bad, and the feeling is just my imagination.

Before long, we reach the door. I open my umbrella. Tsurumaru-senpai hops in next to me and we walk away, waving our hands to Uguisumaru-senpai. The entrance of the school is empty. Most students have gone home since it's raining so hard.

The raindrops hit us immediately when we walk away from the building. The ground, now somewhat soft, is full of puddles. The sound of rain fills our eardrums. It's almost like there's no other sound other than rain, and even Tsurumaru-senpai's words almost can't be heard.

"The rain is falling harder, isn't it?" Tsurumaru-senpai says in a louder voice than usual so I can hear him. "This is dangerous if the umbrella can't hold...and since it's small, we're getting wet anyway."

"Yeah..."

"Wanna take shelter somewhere?"

"Sure, but where?"

"I'll think about it as we walk."
I wordlessly nod and continue to walk. After a while, my hand starts to ache holding the umbrella, since senpai is a bit taller than me. I should've made him hold it…

"You look troubled. I'll hold the umbrella, Manba-chan."

Just in time! I give him the umbrella and rest my hand.

"Aahhha, you look so happy. Just tell me that before if it's hurting you."

"Yeah, I'll do that next time."

"You want to share an umbrella with me again?"

"Sure, why not?"

Tsurumaru-senpai hums happily. "I see. If you insist, then we can do it again."

"Just need a bigger umbrella. By the way, have you thought of where we're going if we take shelter?" I ask.

"Mm…nope!"

I look at him with a disappointed face. I guess I shouldn't have hoped.

"I'll just go straight home then. It's already late for me, anyway. You can take my umbrella with you."

"Okay. I don't really want to spend money in a cafe, so…aahhha. Unless we can find some awning or something close."

"I don't want to, either. I feel like I've been spending too much money lately."

"Too bad my date with Manba-chan has to be postponed."

I never want a date with you - I'm thinking of that, but decide to not say it. "Come to think of it, is your place close by, senpai?"

"Actually, no. But I'm staying at a different place, and it's near your house. I can't say, sorry. I don't want to get attacked there."

"I understand."

"I live in an apartment unit. I'll take you there when things calm down. Maybe I can cook a few things for you. Oh, for Kogi and Mikazuki too, if they want it."

"I'm looking forward to that, then. Kogitsunemaru would never reject food, by the way."

Somehow, a promise has been made so easily. A promise is supposed to be heavy, a must to fulfilled - I learned that from Yoshiyuki and my two lovers. However, just for this, between two friends, chatting lightly…it's a normal thing that’s bound to happen. It's not something so heavy and has to be stressed about.

…Right?

My heart sinks once again as the cold air pierces my neck, even though it's covered by my hood.
That bad feeling again. I shake my head, trying to shake it off, but as if a *something* is stuck on my body, it keeps on spreading all over me instead. It's disgusting and creepy, but there's nothing else I can do other than swallow the feeling and walk normally.

Suddenly, the rain hits part of my head. Just then I realize Tsurumaru-senpai has abruptly stopped walking.

"Senpai?"

I call him, but there's no meaningful reaction. He just gazes at the street in front of us, his eyes glimmering in a light I've never seen before from him. He shoves me the umbrella before saying, "I guess it can't be helped. Manba-chan, I'm sorry in advance. No hard feelings, okay?"

"Wha - ?"

He suddenly pushes me with an inhuman strength, sending me flying backwards in the middle of the residential area. The umbrella slips from my hand, so the rain pours down on me relentlessly as my back hits the ground - or not, because I can feel strong arms holding me. My eyes are blinded for a moment, and when I get used from the water, and my blurry sight turns clear -

In the spot I was before, a knife falls down with a *clink*.

Tsurumaru-senpai is holding someone's hand. A hand of the one who swung that knife, most likely to hurt me. I look up at the person. To my surprise, it's none other than the one who said he went home first.

…No. That isn't Ichigo-senpai.

It's *ikiryou*. After all, Ichigo-senpai's eyes aren't red…he never looks at me like that, disdainful and pained at the same time, as if I've hurt him deeply. He shoots Tsurumaru-senpai the same hateful gaze.

Tsurumaru-senpai swings his arm and holds it tightly, clenching in a way to crush his bones. Even so, the red-eyed Ichigo-senpai doesn't budge. The pain doesn't show in his face. He tries to free his hand and punches Tsurumaru-senpai's face. I never knew how strong Ichigo-senpai was, but that punch causes a loud echo.

I can't see the damage from this angle. I'm frozen in place, stunned.

Ah. Tsurumaru-senpai turns his head slightly, looking at me, his cheek is red, and there's blood slipping out from the edge of his lips. I don't know what he is trying to say, but it's most likely, *run* - I feel the hands on my body - Kogitsunemaru's - tighten as he prepares to take me to the sky.

"You're first."

"Wha - ?!"

Taken off-guard, he can't dodge the swing of another knife - a hidden knife from his pocket.

*Slash!*

I see it.

I see the moment the sharp knife slashes his neck so easily in a speed my eyes can't follow.

At this point, Shadow Ichigo-senpai is an oddity. It's no wonder he has inhuman speed - that's what I
think at first, before reality hits me. In a dramatic slow motion, Tsurumaru-senpai is - he is - falling, down, on the ground, b-bleeding, and then Ichigo-senpai...stabs him again. On his stomach. The sound of flesh being ripped away. The sound of gushing blood.

The rain can't devour all of the sounds coming out.

At that moment, I feel like the rain might as well pour something red from the sky.

Blood drains from my face.

My vision is turning red.

In the midst of rain, I can hear voices. My own voice, echoing in my head, cracking my head -

{ Tsurumaru-senpai is an immortal, but,

He can't bear the guilt of seeing my condition like this. His psyche is that of a normal human's. Yes, he is just a normal human at the end...he has feelings and troubles. When he is pushed to the edge, it's no wonder even he'll snap.

And so, this happened.

This happened again.

Because of me.

This is my fault. My sin.

I have to die.

"Manba-chan, I love you..."

I love you too, senpai. I really, really, love you. But this can't go on any longer.

And so, I -

"...You understand, don't you?" }

I can feel the cold gazes of two non-existent blue eyes, identical to mine.
"Can we be together again, now that we're different?"

After hundreds of years in solitude, he once again met someone who took his heart at the first sight - someone who reminds him of his past lover, and not only because of his personality, but appearance as well. As much as he doesn't want to believe it, he seeks that strange possibility.

To once again find love. To once again feel that warmth, spreading inside his chest. The long-forgotten feeling of what makes him human even now.

His resolution to be a hermit, never to get too close to people easily falters.

Perhaps he is using him as a substitute for his past lover, not seeing him as his own. And so, he is hesitant to take a step forward, afraid making a mistake. He has infinite time, but the other person doesn't.

"I swear to protect you. I won't let that happen ever again."

In the midst of rain, the memories of that fateful day arises in his mind, hiding his tears.

"That's why, please…smile for me. One last time."

A shiver runs down my spine. That voice is directed at me.

But it's my own voice.

As if I can see my own self in front of me, I clutch my aching head, and just then my eyes find black hands crawling - creeping on the ground like a shadow, moving. Their destination seems to be me. What's happening? What are these? My mind can't process all the information.

I know I'm safe, though. It's impossible for them to reach me as Kogitsunemaru takes off.

...That's what I thought. When the black hands appear from the ground, sticking out to reach me no matter what - ah, I'm totally in trouble. However, Mikazuki appears and cut them into pieces before they can hold me. He doesn't fly with us, instead landing on the ground.

"Don't worry about me. Just go. There's someone else other than Ichigo," he says, his gaze is sharp as he looks at the road. "My senses are tingling. I have to fight it."

"Are you sure you can fight it?" Kogitsunemaru asks, stopping mid-air and fixes my position on his embrace.

"To be honest, I'm not confident." He heaves a long sigh, moving his sword slightly. "However, I think it's better for me to fight it. I won't be affected by any dark magic. When things get dire, I'll back down, don't worry. I'll just buy you time."
"Understood."

I look at Mikazuki. He gives me a nod. I trust him to get out alive, so we'll have to stay alive as well. I hold on to Kogitsunemaru as he flies off.

Now that the adrenaline rush has passed, I just realize the rain splashing on my skin and clothes. It's uncomfortable, but it can't be helped.

"Where are we going?"

"I'd like to go home, but...I don't think it's very safe. These hands were definitely reaching for you, though I don't know what they are. Let's go to somewhere with a natural barrier."

"A shrine, then?"

He nods. "I'm thinking of the temple Kousetsu manages."

"I guess that's the safest place..." I don't really want to bother him or other people, but I don't want to put myself in danger, either. "I wonder if Tsurumaru-senpai is alright..."

"He's an immortal, remember? He just didn't move because of shock, like how you forgot that he is immortal for a moment. I'm sure he is alright and will get up to help Mikazuki."

"Y-Yeah...I hope so."

Even knowing that he is an immortal doesn't ease my worry.

"Why did Shadow Ichigo-senpai attack him? No, I think he went in for me first...?"

My body shudders thinking about what happened. If Tsurumaru-senpai didn't push me out of the way, I would be bleeding right now. That knife is sharp, and for some reason, Shadow Ichigo-senpai looked comfortable with using knives, like he was a professional. Intense emotions gave birth to such a thing... What does the real Ichigo-senpai feel?

"Does he hate me now...? Wanting to stab me like that..."

Kogitsunemaru shakes his head. "No, I'm sure he doesn't hate you. It's the opposite. He likes you, that's why he wanted to do it."

I frown. "...I don't understand."

"I don't exactly understand, either. I'm not an expert on other people's feelings, but I can feel it vaguely. Remember what Tsurumaru said?"

"That sometimes, people hurt the one they're fond of?"

"And that it's complicated to explain. Yes. I wish I can explain it to you, but I only understand vaguely, so..."

"It's okay. Curiosity can kill the cat...I'll find out when the time comes."

Still, I can't help but to indulge in negative feelings, even with his comfort. What should I do if he hates me? I'm hurt thinking about it. I know I shouldn't, but...

"Yamanbagiri. What comes later comes later, okay?"
"O-Okay..."

"Good. I'll give you a kiss for forgetting that."

"I'm not a kid that'll get easily swayed by such things, but sure. I need to get warmed up, though....this rain is killing me." It's so cold and wet, I don't like it.

"I'll warm you up, too. Look forward to that."

I smile and hug him tightly, feeling the tension and worry slowly leaving my body.

After some time flying in the midst of rain and passing some thunders on the way, we finally reach the temple grounds. It's a Buddhist temple the Samonji family and some others manage. Their houses are near the temple, protected by the barrier the temple has, but the living quarters aren't exactly monasteries. There's no tight rules or studies and such. In fact, some rooms are rented for students and people for a good price.

Kogitsunemaru lands on the ground and gently puts me down. As expected, the concrete is slippery, but we run to the houses next to the main temple anyway. W-Which one is the Samonji's house again?

To my luck, I can see someone on the window of one of the houses. That pink hair...yeah, it's obvious who is it. Before long, he seems to notice me and runs to the front door as we rush to that house.

The door opens, and Souza greets us with a confused and worried look. "Just go in. Don't worry about getting the floor wet."

We enter the warm house, getting out of the rain. "Thanks, you saved us. I forgot which one is your house," I say.

"No problem. I'll go get you towels. Wait here." He walks away deeper into the house.

I don't want to make the floor completely wet, so we just stand there and wait for him to come back. He comes back with two towels and gives us each. I take off my jacket, heavy with water, and wipe myself.

Souza blinks and looks at me from top to bottom. "...Can you wear your jacket again?"

"Why? It's cold and wet."

"It's dangerous."

Dangerous? What does he mean? But before I can ask, Kogitsunemaru asks him another thing. "Can you give us new clothes, then? Just for now and wait for our clothes to dry."

"Of course. There's only yukata and such for Kogitsunemaru's size, though. Is that fine?"

"That's fine."

"As for Yamanbagiri...what do you want to wear?"

"Anything warm is accepted, Actually, a yukata is okay, too." I reply as I put the towel on my head.

"Alright. You can go to the living room and turn on the heater. I'll get the clothes first."
I nod and bow. "Thanks. Sorry for bothering you."

He smiles before he walks away again. Kogitsunemaru and I wordlessly go to the living room after we make sure our feet and hair are dry enough. The living room is Japanese-styled, with a square table with a blanket in the middle of the room, pillows around it, and a TV at front. There are cupboards with photo frames and a flower vase. On the back, there's a big family altar.

"The heater is... kotatsu?" I ask, looking around and only find the table as a heater.

"Seems so."

Having no other options, we sit on the pillows across each other and turn on the heater. Before long, the heat spreads through the entire blanket.

"Haa...this is so good," I say, feeling myself succumbing to the warmth of the kotatsu. I don't want to go out now.

"This is a very dangerous thing..." Kogitsunemaru adds, also succumbing to the greatness of the kotatsu. "Hey, why don't we have this back home? I've been wondering for years."

"Our old kotatsu broke and we're just too lazy to buy another one. There's no place for it now, anyway, and the heater is working good during winter."

"I want a kotatsu..."

Geh, he is already so deep in mere minutes? I look at him, finding him having a pleased expression on his face as he stares at me. Just then, I can feel his soles hitting mine below the table. Wanting to play, I see...it's tickling, but he won't stop with a grin, so I have to attack him too.

And the battle begins.

There's not many movements as we're restricted, but Kogi is sure putting a lot of effort into this. He has an advantage since his legs are longer and his soles are bigger than mine, but I keep a good fight going as well. Actually, there's not much fighting happening. It's more like we're just playing each other's toes out of boredom.

"Your toes are cold," I say, frowning when the coldness spreads to me.

"You're the same, you know," he hisses.

"Didn't you say you'll give me a kiss and warm me up? Where is it?"

"Later. I think hugging each other now will just be a suicide. It'd be way warmer if we hug each other with warm clothes, right?"

"I guess you're right."

"Seems like you're comfortable," Souza says, stepping into the living room. "On a second thought, the two of you can just go take a bath. I've put your new clothes in the cupboard in front of the bathroom."

"Really? Can we?" I ask, turning my head to him.

"Of course. You let me take a bath before. It's just natural you can now."

It saddens me to leave the kotatsu, but I must, or else I'll get a cold. "Thanks. Come on, Kogi. Let's
take a bath."

"What, we're going to take a bath together?"

"Hm? Of course." That's what we always do.

"Just don't do anything weird," the owner of the house says with a smile.

"Understood." Kogitsunemaru reluctantly stands up, getting out of the comfortable kotatsu. "Where's the bathroom again?"

"At the end of the corridor."

The two of us walk to the bathroom, walking through the creaking wooden floor. This house is really old-styled, or even might be actually old. I've been in Kousetsu-senpai's room, though, and it's more modern than other parts of the house.

The bathroom was renovated to suit modern needs as well, so it looks white and brand new.

"Come to think of it...don't we have too many bathing scenes together, Kogi? Poor Mikazuki is left out again," I say as I take off my wet clothes when we're in the bathroom.

"I guess you're right," he hums happily, "That just means I'm far better to warm you up."

"Your hair is needed, yeah."

Nothing important happened in bath, so I won't say it. I feel like there's enough bath scenes for you to know what we were doing, even if we're taking a bath in another person's house.

"I feel like this yukata is a bit too big for me," I say after I put on the pure white yukata Souza has prepared. It must be something for the monks, maybe even himself or Kousetsu-senpai. "This is too loose."

Kogitsunemaru pats my yukata a few times and fixes some parts. "Yeah, it's a bit too big, but it can't be helped. You look cuter that way," he replies with a wink.

"And you can see my thighs anytime you want now."

"Yes. A blessing in disguise."

I jab his stomach lightly. "Pervert."

But he just waves me off with a smile.

We go back to the living room with our wet clothes. To my surprise, Sayo is in the living room along with Souza. His small eyes look up at me when he notices my appearance. Well, this is his house, it'd be weirder if he isn't here.

"Yamanbagiri-nii-san."

"Hello. Excuse us."
He stands up and walks to me. I pat his head and smile. He looks like he is enjoying the touch. It's been some time since I saw him, and I can see him getting taller. Kids do grow up so fast.

"No greeting for me?" Kogitsunemaru says, smiling as he crouches on Sayo's level.

He walks up to him and lightly tugs on his hair. "Kogi-nii-san."

Kogitsunemaru lets out what seems to be a squeal because how adorable Sayo's face is before he ruffles his blue hair.

"Sayo is happy to see the both of you," Souza says, smiling.

"Where is Mikazuki-nii-san?" The child asks with his innocent eyes.

"He has something to do. He'll hopefully come later."

He nods before pulling me and Kogitsunemaru to the kotatsu, as if telling us to sit there. His eager expression is way too cute, so we can only obey and slide in the warm blanket. For some reason, Sayo sits on my lap, so I pat his head again as he settles down.

There's no drying machine here, so we just put up our wet clothes and wait for the rain to let up.

"I've called nii-san. He'll come back soon," Souza says, "He actually just went out."

He knows it's oddity-related problem without even being told, huh. As expected, he has great instincts. "Thank you. I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"No problem. I did nothing of importance, really. Besides, I feel like I've been paid already by the sight, so don't worry about me."

Paid by sight? What does he mean? It seems he has no intention on clarifying it, though.

"Nii-san has trouble?" Sayo asks with a worried voice, looking at me. Even him realizes this? Man, this family sure has some thick sharp instincts running down their veins.

"Mm...you can say so."

He pats my head, forcing me to lean forward. "There, there, trouble, go away. I wish I could help you..."

Uaaah, uwaaah, what's with this living angel?! I can't help but to ruffle his head as I blush. I feel like my heart is being gripped so tightly by this mysterious warm power...!

I hold Sayo's shoulders and seriously say, "Can I kidnap him?"

Souza is still smiling. "You think I'll say yes?"

I sulk hearing his reply.

"Well, I guess there's a way for you to legally kidnap him," he continues with an amused tone, placing a hand on his chin and stare at me. We're sitting across each other, after all.

"W-What is that?" Is there even such a way?

"Marry into this family."
The room is completely silent.

_Eh? What did he just say? Marry Into Samonji? Me?_ Wait, what?! Sure, that'd make me Sayo's brother-in-law, b-but...!!

I look at Kogitsunemaru, and it seems I heard it right.

"A-Are you planning to steal Yamanbagiri right in front of me?" Kogitsunemaru says after a pause, his jaw drops from the shock. "That was basically a proposal right off the bat."

"Haha, no. I'm kidding. Same-sex relationships can't get married here, anyway."

O-Of course we know that, but that still caught us off-guard...!! When he jokes around, it still looks like he is serious, and the air was suddenly so tense, so...haaaah.

"Don't surprise us like that, please..." I say, sighing in relief. I have no idea what to do if he's seriously proposing that...if he's serious, it either means he ships me with Kousetsu-senpai, or that...he loves me, which is just impossible, ahaaha...ha...

Sayo turns to look at me with seemingly sparkling eyes. "I don't mind if Yamanbagiri-nii-san became our family."

E-Eehhhh...saying that with such a cute and innocent face, I can't just refuse him straightforwardly! I can't break his heart!

"Sayo, between your two older brothers, who do you want to see marrying with Yamanbagiri? If they can get married."

What kind of question is that, Souza?! Why are you asking that to your own younger brother?! I glare at him, but he just smiles as if he has done nothing wrong.

The child blinks a few times. "Kousetsu-nii-san or Souza-nii-san..." He mumbles before looking down, thinking deeply. "I-I can't choose...both look perfect with nii-san. Why can't it be both?"

Waaaaaaahhh?!

"That kind of answer is the kind of answer Yamanbagiri would give, honestly," Kogitsunemaru mumbles awkwardly. Of course, nobody told Sayo that I'm dating two...no, three people at once, so that kind of thing is possible, but...d-dating two brothers? That's kinda...

"Yamanbagiri-nii-san, if you have to choose, who will you choose?"

If I was drinking water, I would be choking and spitting out that water out right now. S-Sayo, why do you say that? At least he is sure it is just a hypothetical question with _if_, but - "Eeh. That question is...too hard...love doesn't just choose so easily, you know."

"How do you know? Do you have someone you love right now?"

This kid is way too sharp, even though he is raised with love...! I look at Kogitsunemaru and Souza, asking for help.

"I'm actually interested. Just think of it like choosing a bread, Yamanbagiri. Just choose who you like
better at that moment," Kogitsunemaru says with a serious expression, much to my appointment. I should've known this outcome. He and Mikazuki, despite everything, ship me with everyone I come across, after all.

The only one who can save me is Souza right now, but he just stares, having no intention to help. Of course, he's the one at fault with this thing happening in the first place. Sayo stares at me in expectation as well.

Now that their gazes are piercing me, I have no way to escape.

So I have to answer.

I have to choose.

S-Seriously...why do I have to choose and answer this? Sayo is right. Why can't it be both...or none at all? For me, these two options always exist. Although it's so much more awkward if I indeed date two brothers at once, and I don't want to imagine.

Hmm...

Kousetsu-senpai or Souza...their figures appear in my mind, but it's even clearer for Souza since he's right in front of me. W-why...why is my heart pounding so fast and loud? This is bad...I'm starting to imagine how we'd be if was dating either of them, and it's...it's too much! This is too much! Impossible!!

My head is about to overheat and stop working...!

"...He thinks why not both, at the end," Kogitsunemaru says, breaking the silence.

"Oh my. Quite greedy, aren't you?" Souza comments.

"I didn't - no, I thought of that, but it's not like that!! I haven't chosen anything...!" I stammer.

Damn it, Kogi! Don't break my image like that.

"Ahaha. Calm down. Your face is completely red, you know."

Oh no. Sure enough, my cheeks feel hot, b-but...gaaah, how embarrassing...

"Your yukata is sliding off, Yamanbagiri. Be careful," Souza says.

There's that thing too...hahaah. I'm such a mess. I fix my yukata and just hide my face with my hands. I feel Sayo's hand patting my head and hear Kogitsunemaru chuckle. If only I had my hood right now...I don't like this...

"You're so cute, Yamanbagiri." The one who says that is Souza, and that's why the attack strikes me so badly.

"I'm not happy..."

Sayo is still patting my head. "It's okay, Yamanbagiri-nii-san. I'm sorry if my question was weird..."

"It's not your fault, Sayo, it's totally okay..." Actually not okay, but I can't blame him. I'd place the blame on his older brother - because it is his fault.

I should devise a plan to take revenge.
While the room is pleasantly silent, suddenly, the front door slams open, and the sounds of rushing foosteps echo in the house. Kousetsu-senpai steps into the living room, and when he sees me, he sighs...in relief? He seems to have hurried here. Some parts of his monk clothes are wet from the rain.

"Welcome home, nii-san."

"Mm. I'm home."

"Nii-san." Sayo gets up from my lap and walks to Kousetsu-senpai, who proceeds to pat his head with a smile.

"Have you been a good boy?"

"I have. I think."

There's only four pillows, so Kogitsunemaru stands up and sits behind me, while Kousetsu-senpai takes his place with Sayo on his lap. What a cute sight.

"Excuse me for the disturbance, senpai," I say with a slight bow.

"No problem. Can you tell me what happened? I see Munechika-san isn't around."

I look at Kogitsunemaru behind me. He nods, and decides to be the one to speak up, telling the whole story except the existence of Tsurumaru-senpai, so the story is slightly altered on Ichigo-senpai's part. By the way, yes, his two brothers are there listening, but it's not really a problem.

"I see..." Kousetsu-senpai nods in understanding, looking pained to know that his friend went berserk again. "Have you told your brothers about it?"

"I haven't called home...yeah, I should."

He gently puts Sayo on the pillow before he stands up. "I'll call the other specialists. I remember there was a talk about a dangerous person around in the past few weeks. It might be the one that attacked you."

"O-Okay. I'll call my brothers too. Do you think I can go home?"

"I don't know yet, I'm sorry."

"I understand."

I stand up and walk away and rummage through my wet bag. My smartphone is safe and dry. I take it and go out from the living room into the hallway, while I see Koutsesu-senpai does the same, but to the kitchen instead of the hallway. I call the house first. After a few seconds, the phone picks up.

"Hello, Kunihiro household - "

"Brother Horikawa, it's me."

"Brother Yamanbagiri...? Where have you been? It's already pretty late."

"Um, actually...I'm in Kousetsu-senpai's house right now. I think I'm...being chased around by some oddity, so I take shelter for now. I'm unharmed, don't worry, but I don't know if I can go home today. I'll message you the decision. Is Brother Yamabushi home?"
"...I see. Yeah, he is. Wait, I'll call him here."

There's a sound of the receiver being put on the table as Brother Horikawa walks away, faintly calling Brother Yamabushi. Before long, Brother Yamabushi picks up the phone.

"Brother. What happened?"

Straight to the point, I see. I tell him the same thing Kogitsunemaru told Kousetsu-senpai. I also told him about Kogitsunemaru being with me and Mikazuki is out to fight whatever is there.

"I see. That sounds dangerous. I'm glad you escaped safely, Brother."

"Mm...what should I do? Kousetsu-senpai is calling other specialists right now, but..."

"Wait there. I'll come to you, so don't go anywhere. Be safe, Brother."

"Okay. Thanks, Brother."

I end the call and go back to the living room. It seems Kousetsu-senpai is in the kitchen, calling someone, but his voice isn't very clear as the rain falls harder.

"Yamanbagiri, sit here," Kogitsunemaru says, patting his lap. He's ready as he is already sitting on my pillow.

"That's embarrassing."

"Isn't it too late for that?" Souza says. "I've seen plenty."

I frown. "Excuse me, then..." And reluctantly sit on Kogitsunemaru's lap. He wraps his arms around my body.

"I fulfilled the promise."

You haven't kissed me, though, but there's no way we can kiss here, so I quietly enjoy his embrace. Sayo crawls to me and shyly asks, "Can I sit on your lap again?"

"Of course."

And so he does, sitting on my lap once again. I ruffle his hair. This kid is way too cute, my instincts to protect him switched on whenever I see him. However, even if we're close now, this kind of thing is still rare - for Sayo to be so willing on being spoiled, I mean. I can understand if he's doing it to his brothers, but me? It's rare.

I guess it's because we rarely meet.

"Yamanbagiri-nii-san, do you think you'll have dinner here?" He asks after a pause. "I'd be happy if you did."

"If your brothers allow me to, then sure..." And if I must not get out from the holy barrier, and I'm kind of sure I must not. For now. So I'll bother this family even more...

"If that's what Sayo wants, then there's no way we'll refuse," Souza replies, "Will you spend the night here as well?"

"I don't know yet. That'll depend on what my brother and other specialists said...oh right, Brother
Yamabushi said he is going to come here."

"I understand. I'll have to prepare more food for you, then. We'll see where you'll sleep tonight if you spend the night here," he says after a nod. He stands up and walks to the kitchen, pushing Kousetsu-senpai out. I'm not surprised to know that he is the one who cooks, really. I've found it out long ago.

Kousetsu-senpai is still on the phone with a panicked face, so he walks to the hallway, mumbling something I can barely hear.

"Sayo, can I turn on the TV?" I ask after some time. The silence is not very good for me, although I'm enjoying Kogitsunemaru's body heat and patting Sayo's head.

Sayo nods, so I take the remote control and turn on the TV. The kotatsu is as good as before, by the way.

The first thing that comes up on the screen is the weather forecast. It said Suzuran will be raining a lot this week. I hope it won't become a storm. I change the channel and stumble upon another news channel. It said that an old, thin tree just fell down due to heavy rain near my house.

Welp, okay, one victim down. Glad there's no casualties other than the tree and the road.

....I hope Mikazuki and Tsurumaru-senpai are okay. What if normal people see the puddle of blood, though? Even if the owner is okay because he is an immortal...

What about Ichigo-senpai? What is he doing now? And what about his shadow?

I'm worried about them.

Just then, Yoshiyuki pops up in my mind. That's right. I promised to not keep secrets. I have to message him...so I take my smartphone and begin typing a LINE message to him. It seems he isn't on, so there's no read mark. I turn it off and place it on the table again.

"Yamanbagiri-nii-san."

Sayo suddenly calls me.

"I just remembered I have to do math homework. Can you help me?"

Ooooh. I didn't expect that from him, but I'd be happy if I can help. "Sure."

"I'll get the books first." He stands up before rushing out to his room. He's quite fast and agile. Before long, he comes back with a thick book, a notebook, and a pencil. He sits on my lap again and opens the books.

"What can I help with?" I ask.

"Mm. I don't understand these questions," he points at some questions...or actually, almost all questions.

"Okay then, let's see..."

Elementary school math is still basic, so even I still remember a few things - enough to help him. He jolts down the answer and nods when he finally understands. It's so cute.

"Kogi, do you understand these questions?" I ask to the one hugging me from behind, staying silent this whole time. I wonder if he is bored.
"Of course I do," Kogitsunemaru replies, slightly frowning. "Are you doubting me?"

"Not really. You can't be a housewife if you can't do basic math."

"I'm a housewife, huh...wait, what do the two have in common?"

"Stuff." I shrug.

"I'm not bored, by the way," he adds, and I can feel his arms around me tighten. "I'm in bliss being so close with you like this. You smell so nice."

"You smell the same, though." We used the Samonjis' soap, after all.

"I'm still in bliss."

"Also..." For some reason, he adds in his mind, letting me hear it clearly. "Seeing you and Sayo like that, I almost feel like we have a child. I'm a bit embarrassed, imagining it, but I also feel pleasant."

...I understand that Sayo is cute, but we can't have a child.

"I know. I'm just saying...you'd be a good caretaker. Or a mother. Whatever you want."

I kind of hate dealing with kids, you know, but Sayo is an exception because he's such a good boy. Oh, you're still my wife, even if I become the mother.

"Sure, my irresponsible husband."

I can't help but to chuckle hearing his reply. This kind of normalcy is fine, too...perhaps it's what I need, instead of drowning in worries and thoughts about the future.

A few minutes pass, and Kousetsu-senpai finally comes back to the living room. He sits across me and heaves a sigh, looking tired. However, he doesn't beat around the bush, and instead speaks up first.

"Kunihiro-san. You'll have to stay here for now and spend the night. The other specialists you know will come here to check on you. Other than that, I don't even know most of the details, so I can't say."

So it'll be a gathering of specialists again...I nod in understanding, but still wonder why the call took so long. "I see. Thanks, senpai. I'm sorry for all the trouble I always seem to cause you."

"I-It's not a trouble at all," he waves his hands around in a somewhat embarrassed manner, "I can't help much, to be honest. This is all I can do."

"You help me a lot."

"I'm just worried about you...it's a natural thing to help each other," he says with a smile.

I have such a good senior and friend, I'm moved and a bit teary. "Mm. By the way, my brother - Brother Yamabushi - is going to come here too."

"Oh. That's even better, then." There's a pause before he continues, staring at me with a serious expression. "Kunihiro-san, you're sure you did nothing, right? No, I'm not doubting you. I trust you, but I need clarification."

W-What kind of question is that? I nod. "Yeah. It just came out of nowhere..."
"You're quite special, so perhaps that person noticed it."

"Special?"

He looks at me suspiciously. "Did your brother never tell you?"

I shake my head.

"Kogitsunemaru-san, did you never notice it?"

"Notice what?" Kogitsunemaru asks back, clearly confused. "I guess I never did, then."

"If even Munechika-san never said it...hmm. Simply put, Kunihiro-san, you're completely a human, and yet you have...a different feel...or perhaps you call it as aura, than other people. It's hard to describe, as this is just how I perceive you, and I might be wrong, but...it's as if you have something sacred around you at all times, even before you meet Munechika-san. Like a divine protection."

"Even though I'm usually unlucky?"

He nods. "I can't quite grasp it, but that's how I feel. It might not affect your every day life, but instead act when you're in danger."

"I can say I've been lucky in life-threatening situations..." Yeaah, that would make sense. I'm amazed I'm still alive right now, to be honest.

"I never noticed it," Kogitsunemaru mutters with a shocked voice, "Not even after you say it."

"It's quite subtle right now. Perhaps you've never noticed because you're always with him, and thus have been affected greatly."

"That's a possibility..."

"What does this have to do with that attack, though?" I ask.

"My gut tells me they're connected. Because you're special, you can be...used...in various ways. At least that's what I've heard before."

"U-Used?" Now that's worrying.

"I don't exactly know the details myself, but I heard my senior saying it before. I apologize."

"That's fine. I'm scared to know, anyway."

"I said that you're special, but truth to be told, Taroutachi-san has the same aura, and a lot thicker than yours. I only know the two of you that have it, so it is still special."

"Taroutachi-san too? Well...he is quite otherwordly, to be honest...it's not surprising." I imagine his appearance. He is always calm and composed, and has that monstrous electric pole height, so he always has this out from this world aura. It's a compliment, really. Oh, his hair is long and well-maintained too, if that's something.

Kousetsu-senpai nods, and I take it that he agrees about my opinion on Taroutachi-san. If I can be honest, senpai actually had this icy loner aura too...before I knew him, at least. Just first impression. He is actually very kind and gentle, and surprisingly, quite expressive. That's introverts for you.

"I don't think I'm suited for having it, really...it's better on you, Kousetsu-senpai. But even without
that, I like being around you. I feel calm, somehow."

"Mm...eh?"

He looks at me with wide eyes. An expression I rarely see from him. And just like that, he stops moving and talking.

"Senpai?"

What have I done this time? His glasses start to tilt in a comical fashion, but he doesn't even bother to fix it.

"Did I say something weird?"

Sayo looks at me in confusion. He doesn't know what is happening, either.

"Senpai?"

Finally, when I call him again, he responds with a little jolt of his shoulders.

"A-Ah, sorry."

"What's wrong?"

He slightly hides his face with his hand, averting his gaze from me. Even with his hand blocking the view, I can see tints of red coloring his cheeks. "It's nothing. I'm just surprised by your words...but I'm happy, thank you."

Happy? Hmm... "Okay, then."


Hnggh, this good kid~!! I ruffle his hair again and again. Too cute, too cute. "Me too, Sayo."

"Kogi-nii-san hair is nice," he suddenly continues. "Can I play with it again?"

"Of course. When you finish your homework," Kogitsunemaru replies like a good brother. Or mother. And so, the said child diligently continues on his math homework.

"Nii-san, can you help me for a bit?" Souza's voice comes from the kitchen.

Kousetsu-senpai stands up and goes to the kitchen with hurried steps. Looks like he is still embarrassed. I understand that, but were my words worth that reaction? Hmm...I don't really get it, but if he is happy like he said, then I guess it's fine.

Soon after, the two come back with trays of dishes - bowls of steaming rice and other side dishes, such as dried fish and radishes. It's the kind of menu you'd expect from a temple, but it looks so good, and as I've tasted it before, I know it tastes delicious.

We clap our hands and start to eat.
After dinner, my brother and the other specialists came. Just in time.

Sayo already went to his room to sleep, and Souza is washing the dishes, so there are only those who are far too deep in the oddity world in the living room. I sit awkwardly as I'm being surrounded by these adults, waiting for someone to break the uncomfortable silence. I feel like their gazes are judging me, it's so scary...Kousetsu-senpai can only support me from the corner.

But I guess I can't blame them. I always get mixed up in these kind of problems. They have every right to be angry and lecture me, especially my brother.

"It seems like there's nothing wrong in your body as I see it, but..." Ishikirimaru-san speaks up. "I have a bad feeling."

"Brother, are you sure the hands and that ikiryou didn't touch you?"

I nod. "I'm not very certain about these hands, but Mikazuki sliced them off, so..."

When the one cutting impurity is a god, the said impurity should have been purified. Should.

"Did you notice anything weird on your body? Or did Kogitsunemaru-san notice something?" Taroutachi-san asks calmly.

I shake my head. So does Kogitsunemaru next to me. When we took a bath together, there was nothing out of place in our bodies. If there was, we would have noticed it already.

"Can you check your feet just to make sure?"

I shift my position, hugging my knees to see. The yukata isn't very long, so it doesn't cover my legs so much. There should be nothing unusual about my feet. They should just be plain looking skin, and yet -

"W-What is this?"

Thump. My heart is beating fast. My breathing is suddenly ragged as I try to swallow my sight.

There's black marks on the wrist of my feet, forming the shape of fingers, as if they're holding me. The marks look painful, as if they're scorched into my skin - with tints of red and black mixed in, but I don't feel any pain. Trembling, I move my legs so that the one next to me - Taroutachi-san - can see them.

My face must be pale right now.

"T-These weren't here before. I'm sure of it."

Kogitsunemaru nods, his expression is as intense as mine. "These should be noticeable right away, but I don't notice a thing."
"I didn't feel anything before noticing it..." What I feel right now is fear and dread. "It's as if they appeared all of sudden."

"Don't touch the marks. We don't know what might happen," Ishikirimaru-san says. That was close, I almost touched it. "This is certainly not something _ikiryou_ can do, so it must be those black hands."

Taroutachi-san observes my feet, his face twisting in a rare sight of disgust, "There's malice coming from them. It seems to be a curse. Should we try to purify it?"

"But it can be dangerous for brother if it's been ingrained deeply inside him," Brother Yamabushi says with a huff. That's true. I can get purified in the process too...

"Excuse me." Taroutachi-san's hand moves to touch my feet, touching the marks. "Do you feel anything?"

"It stings...a bit..."

"That's not a good sign. It'd hurt a lot if we try to purify it now without knowing the root of it."

"The safest way is to destroy the source of the curse," Brother says, "So we have to search for it."

"Do you think this is connected to _that_ person?" Ishikirimaru-san raises question.

"There's a high chance." Taroutachi-san nods.

"Who is _that_ person?" Kogitsunemaru asks, intrigued.

"When we were investigating the _jiangshi_ case, we met with the indication that someone summoned _gashadokuro_ and moved _jubokko_ to this place. It's far more possible for that to happen than for the two oddities to appear out of nowhere."

"We still don't know their intention, but both oddities are connected to blood, since both manifest in places with bloody history. The _Jiangshi_ virus had been planted into the said _jubokko_, so it could spread the virus without the existence of _jiangshi_. Based on this, they might be doing an experiment," Ishikirimaru-san continues.

"That's..." I trail off.

I'm speechless.

It's very unsettling...why would someone do that? Because of them, Kashuu had to suffer. Everyone else involved had to suffer. What if there are other casualties? Don't they think of such consequences?

Or, maybe they're like a mad scientist.

Thinking about it makes me sick.

These kind of people, just like the one _hunting_ Tsurumaru-senpai...

...No, wait. What if...what if the one chasing him is the same person? That'd make sense. Perhaps they need an immortal's blood, body, power, or whatever, for their experiment. Perhaps he is in the way for his experiment, too, like some kind of hindrance. My body shudders imagining it.

I think...I think we should tell them about Tsurumaru-senpai.
I look at Kogitsunemaru. He looks hesitant, but he nods anyway. I clench his hand, but I'm unable to speak up, so he is the one taking that role.

"There's something we're hiding."

Starting with that, he piqued everyone else's interest.

"Tsurumaru Kuninaga is also involved. He was walking home with Yamanbagiri earlier. He got slashed first, but we assume he didn't die - because he is an immortal. A xian."

"Senpai wanted to keep his identity a secret, so..." I trail off.

I look down, afraid to see their initial reactions. Kogitsunemaru continues with the full story - from when Tsurumaru-senpai confessed to me, to when Ichigo-senpai attacked. Everything, except some personal details such as his past.

"...That's all we know." He says.

"We're sorry for hiding it." I add.

"We understand. You just did it for him as he asked, and that's certainly not wrong." Ishikirimaru-san smiles. "Thank you for telling us now."

We silently nod. From the corner of my eyes, I can see Kousetsu-senpai's shocked expression as he is frozen in place, as though he just sees an impossible feat in front of his eyes.

Taroutachi-san turns to him and asks, "Kousetsu-san, did you never know this?"

"I...I never knew, yes," he replies with a gasp, as if it's still hard for him to grasp the fact. Well, of course, it's hard to think when someone you're very close to has such a secret. I felt it toward Yoshiyuki once. "I never feel anything weird from him, and he never said anything..."

"That just shows how good he is at keeping secrets."

"The one who told me about Ichigo-senpai this time was Tsurumaru-senpai," I say weakly, "I don't know why he confessed about his true identity to me, but he seemed to be stubborn on keeping it a secret. I think telling me was hard enough for him. He's actually like the type to do everything all by himself."

Noticing my trembling shoulders, Kogitsunemaru gently puts a hand on my shoulder and pulls me closer to him, just enough to make our shoulders hit each other.

Now that we're talking about him...what happened to senpai and Mikazuki? I feel like my anxiety and worry are about to burst forth. Perhaps this can be seen from my face as well, as Brother Yamabushi heaves a deep sigh.

"Brother is worried about them, I see. Then my main priority is to find them and get them to a safe place. Can you contact Mikazuki or detect where he is, somehow?" He asks. "It's safe to assume that he is with Kuninaga."

I shake my head. "I can only contact him through telepathy, which only works if he is close enough. The same goes with detection." We should've made a way to send distress signal since long ago, honestly, but it's a hard thing to create, even for a shinrei like Mikazuki. Kogitsunemaru has no idea how to do it.
"Got it." Brother stands up and smiles, "I'll look for them. The rain is about to disperse, it's a good time. Don't worry, I'll bring them safely, Brother."

Brother...I'm touched. I might cry anytime now. "If this can help, Tsurumaru-senpai said his shelter is near our house."

"That's good information. Okay." He starts to stretch his arms and legs. "I'm leaving brother to your care. Sorry for the trouble."

The two specialists nod. "No problem. Be careful."

He waves us with a hand before walking away.

"Well, taking care of the curse isn't Yamabushi-san's specialty at the first place. He is better at finding people and other labor work," Ishikirimaru-san says, "So don't worry about him, Yamanbagiri-san."

"Ah. Um. Thank you." He is trying to calm me down, huh...I'm embarrassed.

Taroutachi-san looks at the clock, "It's quite late and you're tired. Why don't you sleep now? Depending on the circumstances, you might have to skip school tomorrow."

I don't even have the books, but yeah... "Yeah, I should..."

"I'll leave him in your room, Kousetsu-san. Is that alright with you?"

"E-Eh?" Kousetsu-senpai almost jumps when he is suddenly being called. "I-In my room?"

"Yes. You would sleep with him and Kogitsunemaru-san, of course, just to be safe...is there a problem?"

"N-No, it's fine. I'll do it."

"We'll sleep here, so don't worry about us," Ishikirimaru-san says with a clap of a hand. "Yamanbagiri-san, if anything happens, don't be afraid to tell us."

I nod.

"If you happen to dream, make sure you don't touch anything and speak to anything in that place."

"In that place?"

"It's hard to explain, but just remember my warning."

I have a bad feeling about this. "I-I understand."

Just like that, the urgent gathering ends. Since the rain has let up, Kogi and I hang our clothes first. Then, we take out futons for Taroutachi-san and Ishikirimaru-san as they pray something all around the corners of the house. After that, Kousetsu-senpai leads me and Kogi to his room.

"I'm sorry it's small and a mess," he says before turning on the lights.

We bring in the two futons and lay them out on the tatami floor. There's really nothing scattered around, so we can do it quickly.

As expected, Kousetsu-senpai's room is neat and simplistic. I'm not very surprised. It's just like my image of him. It's really Japanese-styled, so there's only futon for him, a round and low desk to study,
and cupboards for books and clothes. There's a poster and some sticky notes on the wall about Buddhism, though. That's also not surprising, and the amount is normal. He must be studying hard to become a proper specialist, outside his tasks at school. He also has to be a good brother.

I think it's very admirable and amazing for him to pull such a feat. It's an impossible thing for me.

"Kunihiro-san."

He suddenly calls me when I'm looking at him. T-This is embarrassing, but I have to act ignorant.

"Yes?"

He rummages his desk before crawling to me and holds my hand. "Open your hand."

I open it. He puts something on it.

"This is..."

"*Omamori [1]*. I made it just yesterday. I don't know how much it'll be effective, but..." He gently closes my fingers, his warm hand pressing me. "I hope it helps you, even for a bit."

"Thank you, senpai."

I hold it tightly and closely. It might be just my imagination, but I can feel a power from it. Kousetsu-senpai's feelings. He made it to protect someone, and gave it to me. It's something precious...mm. I should put it under my pillow. Maybe it can give me a good dream. And so, I slip it under my pillow.

Kousetsu-senpai is doing his nightly routine, namely a meditation or some kind. Brother Yamabushi also does it. As I wait, I take out my smartphone.

Oh, Yoshiyuki just replied.

'Uuugh. Ya magnet of trouble, worrying me 24/7. I wish I could help ;w; I wish ya luck and safety! Just tell me if there's something I can do. Remember that I love ya no matter how far apart we are.'

....Yoshiyuki. He is such a good friend...no, um, boyfriend.

'Thanks, Yoshiyuki. I'm going to sleep in Kousetsu-senpai's room right now. With Kogi too. I might not go to school tomorrow, unfortunately, but I assure you I'll be okay. There are professionals with me. Hmm...send me a good night kiss, please. I might sleep peacefully with it.`

W-What am I saying? But before I can regret my words, he replies with kiss and love stickers.

'Good night and rest well, Yamanbagiri.'

'You too. Don't play games late at night.'

'Eheheh, I will only do that if you give me a good night kiss.'

I can't help but to smile as I send him the same stickers he sent.

'When this is over, let's have a sleepover.'

'Ya can sleep at mine! I wanna cook lots for ya.'

'I'm looking forward to it. Good night.'
I turn off my smartphone and put it in my bag before crawling to the futon. I'm trapped between senpai and Kogitsunemaru, but of course, as we're too used on being together, I already end up holding Kogitsunemaru's hand as we lie down. Just then, Kousetsu-senpai has finished his routine, so he turns around before saying, "Do you want to sleep now?"

I nod weakly.

"Then, I'll turn off the lights. Good night."

"Good night."

The room darkens in that instant.

It's almost frightening, as I'm not used to this, even when my eyes start to be able to see in the dark. However, Kogitsunemaru's warm hand assures me that nothing bad is happening - because he is there with me. Everything is fine.

And so, I close my eyes.

.. [Blackout] ...

.. [Drifting away] ...

I open my heavy eyelids. Darkness greets me, prompting my eyes to adjust first. When they do, I can finally see what's around me in the dimness of the night - a square room, with a bed I'm sitting on, a desk, a chair, cupboards and a window. It looks like a normal room, but it's a room I've never seen before.

This is...what is this? Where am I? My mind is hazy. I can't tell.

"Hk...hk...."

Just then, I notice sobbing sounds from the corner of the room. There's someone sitting there, their back facing me. My legs naturally take me to that person. I can't just let a crying person alone, no matter what the circumstances.

When I get close, I realize it's Ichigo-senpai.

"Senpai...?"
I pat his back softly.

"Yamanbagiri-san..."

He turns his head to look at me. Indeed, he is crying. The tears are still falling from his eyes, wetting his cheeks. Although I've seen him crying before, his expression looks far weaker than before. As if he is so fragile and would break if he keeps on crying.

"What's wrong, senpai? You can tell me," I say, patting his back a few times.

Ichigo-senpai wipes away his tears with his fingers. "I'm happy you're here...I'm so happy, so I'm fine..." He says before looking at me. "Can I hug you?"

"Sure."

He leans forward and wraps his arms around me, pressing his body against me.

His body is oddly cold, as cold as a steel, but I hug him back anyway.

"Haa...haa..."

Huh? S-Senpai? He is suddenly panting. "What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

"You smell so nice...haa..."

"Senpai...?"

What's wrong with my smell that he is acting like that? I slightly pull away from him, seeing his expression...twists in a way that should be called as ecstatic, even as tears keep streaming down from his sparkling eyes that glow in the dark. Although he is still crying, his cheeks are red. His mouth is gaping open in a way that makes his overall expression send chills down my spine. Simply put, it's creepy.

That is not the expression he should be able to make - is my opinion, at least. It's so odd and unnatural, that I feel terribly uneasy seeing him.

"I-Ichigo-senpai, what happened? You're acting weird."

"Eheheh...eheheh..."

Now he starts to laugh creepily, reminding me of witches in horror movies.

"I can't...with you here, I can't..."

"Can't what - ?!"

He grabs my shoulders and pushes me down to the ground. My back doesn't hit the concrete floor, however - instead, I feel a certain softness of a mattress. Suddenly, I'm lying on a bed, with Ichigo-senpai looming over me, with the same ecstatic expression as before, and he is still panting, even as he leans closer to my face. His eyes seem disordered as he looks at me.

I'm scared, but my instinct is telling me to run, and yet I can't even do that. I'm frozen. Perhaps this is another reaction of being scared.

"Yamanbagiri-san...ehehhe...finally, finally...we can be one...hehehe..."
W-What...?

He grasps my hands before leaning even closer, pressing our lips together. I can feel his cold lips on mine. T-This is...a kiss. Undoubtedly. But why? No, that's not important right now. I have to get away.

I struggle to push him away, but he holds me so tightly, my struggle is but in vain. I should be able to kick him, and yet my body refuses to do it. At the very least, I can move my head to disturb him, but he is still stuck on me, kissing me deeply. He sucks on my lips, and then, and then...

N-No...!! I don't want this! I can imagine what will happen if he continue. W-We're just friends...nothing more, so why...why does this have to happen?

Even if he likes me, our first kiss shouldn't be like this...!

This shouldn't have happened...!

"Yamanbagiri-san...you're so cute...hehehe...he..."

He pulls away and creepily chuckles like that, looking at me with an even more disturbing expression, as if he is a beast enjoying his prey. My whole body feels cold. My heart is beating so fast. My head feels dizzy. Looking at him pains me, and yet my eyes are glued open to see him.

"I want you, I want you, so be mine...please?"

While erratically panting, he moves to blow my ear. Even his breath is cold, sending shivers all over my body.

I need to run. I need to escape. I want to, but I can't move an inch, even as his hands leave my mine to stroke my head and my cheek. I'm just there, lying on bed, frozen. The only parts I can move are my lips and eyes. Everything else slowly turns numb, until I can't feel them anymore. Maybe I've lost them. I don't know. Ichigo-senpai is attacking me, seemingly about to violate me in the worst way possible, and yet all I can do is watching him stroking my body. His fingers start to unbutton the buttons of my shirt as he nibbles on my ear hungrily.

All I feel is dread and disgust. I don't want this. The only one who can do this to me are my lovers. If he confesses his love for me, I'd gladly accept him, but this is...if he does this to me right now, before all of that, I'd be completely cheating...no, no, no, no, I don't want that! This is just a forceful, sinful thing, there's no love in it at all...! And it's the worst!

Someone, save me - !

Just then, the door swings open. I look at the opened door in glittering hope.

Splat. Splat. Clack.

Emerging from the darkness -

Is not my savior.

In fact, it's the opposite. Far from it. I can feel everything is going down to the worst case scenario the moment it enters my view.

"S-Senpai...that...what is that?"

Ichigo-senpai doesn't seem to hear me as he is kissing my neck. It tickles, but I have no time to focus
on the feeling. My sight is locked to the thing that just entered the room.

My primal instinct is screaming even more.

This thing is dangerous, whatever it is. The name that pops up in my mind is - monster.

As before, however, I can't move an inch, hopelessly trembling as the monster drags itself to approach the bed. The dimness of the room hides the details, but as it gets closer, I can see its big shape, color, and some parts that twist my stomach. It doesn't have a concrete shape, instead looks like a lump of meat pushed together. It has the color like human's skin, and the texture seems to be similar. However, it's certainly not humanoid. It doesn't have a head, but it has two arms with big three claws.

*Splat. Clack. Splat.*

It keeps making these dripping sounds as it drags closer. Upon closer look, I can see liquid dripping from its skin, but instead of sweat, it reminds me of vomit. Something inside pushed the lump of meat to become bigger and smaller in a rythm, as if it's breathing and alive. There's a faint breathing sound coming from a part I don't know.

I shudder in fear. What is that thing? What is that monster? I've never seen an oddity like that. It certainly looks dangerous, on top of being disgusting.

"Senpai, w-we have to move," I say, but there's still no reaction, and my body is still numb. I can't move.

"Haaa...Yamanbagiri-san...haa..."

Suddenly, Ichigo-senpai grabs my left hand and bites it, just near my wristband. It's so sudden and painful that I let out a yelp, but he seems satisfied by my reaction. I can see a bite mark is left there. He licks my fingers one by one, tickling me even further. N-No...please...

"So adorable, I just want to eat you...hahaha...haa..."

Letting go of my hand, he leans closer once again, completely ignorant to the monster next to him, running his hand across my chest. His lips twist into a smile, his eyes wide open, staring at me. His amber eyes remind me of a cat's, almost making me forget about what he is about to do.

"Senpai, stop, please -"

"Yamanbagiri-san, right now, right now, we can - "

...[ ]...[ ]

He stops talking.

In exchange, there are other sounds filling my eardrums.

ÇÆÞŴuĦĦĦă§ÑÒÓ¡!!

Sounds I refuse to hear and understand as the color red fills my sight. I can barely see what's happening as the warmth of the liquid splatters on my skin.

"Se....senpai...?"

My body can move now, for some reason...so I put my hand on his back.
He has stopped moving, and as if energy is drained from his body, he falls on me, splattering even more red liquid as something falls next to me with a thud.

Red...liquid?

I look at his body.

When there’s supposed to be a head, there’s only a part of a neck and shoulders, gaping open, showing white bone and red meat. Meanwhile, everything else below is complete. Huh?

Where is his head?

Eh, wait, what?

Why am I bathed in red again?

Then, I look at my left. The thing that fell down...was none other than Ichigo-senpai's head, with a stream of blood gushing out from the wound. Even in that kind of state, he stares at me in the same glint as before, his amber eyes are still glittering. As if nothing happened. I look at his body once again.

"A...Ah..."

Oh...I see. Just now.

It takes me a few minutes to comprehend what happened in front of me. What people would call gore.

That creature...that monster...whatever oddity it is, had just sliced him. Right in front of me. And this red liquid is blood. I'm bathed in blood. Warm blood, even though his body is cold. That's how much blood is shed from...

...His head...

...As it was sliced off from his body. That much is obvious just now. And that head is staring at me, frozen in time. The bones and meat are sticking out eerily from the two parts surrounding me.

When I realize that, my stomach twists violently, as the claws of the monster creep closer to me.

I have no time to react as I scream, feeling the still warm blood dripping to my hand, dirtying my clothes and skin.

Aaah, Ichigo-senpai is...

...Dead. Dead. He is dead. Dead. DEAD.

DEAD AND HEADLESS.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA/

Stop, stop stop stop stop, I don't want to see, no, no, STOP -

Even as I close my eyes, I can see him and that monster haunting me. They're all around me.

NO NO NO NO NO -
"Yamanbagiri!!"

"AAAGHHHH AAAAHHH AAAAHHH-"

"Calm down!"

"B-BUT-T-TH-THAT-AHHH AHHHHHH-"

"What's wrong? What happened?!"

"HIS HEAD IS- THERE- DEAD- AAHHHH-"

"Yamanbagiri! Calm down!! There's no such thing here!!"

"B-BUT - !"

I can feel someone's warm body hugging me. Warm...and familiar, so I stop screaming when I feel it.

When I open my eyes, I'm greeted by the blurry sight of a lamp and a flowing hair I know very well. His scent wafts to my nose, somewhat calming me down as I look around and try to think where the heck I am. This is an unfamiliar room.

I can see Kousetsu-senpai standing just a few meters away from us, wearing a worried expression.

"This is...

Ah...oh...this is senpai's room, and the one hugging me is none other than Kogitsunemaru.

So, this is...I...

"That was just...a dream..."

Tension seems to leave my body as I let Kogitsunemaru hold me before he gently lies me down on futon. I feel so weak and embarrassed. The room is silent for some minutes as I keep sobbing, with him stroking my head.

"Have you calmed down yet?" He asks, wiping away my tears with his fingers.

"A bit...thanks..."

He moves his hand to touch my forehead. "If you don't mind, can you tell me what happened?"

"Mm...I had a dream. A clear and terrifying dream...but I'm okay now. Sorry." I weakly lift my left hand to put it atop his, but then something catches my attention. "Eh...?"

No way. This shouldn't be possible.

"Kogi, you didn't bite me when I was asleep, did you?"

"What? E-Even I would never do that."

If it's not Kogi, then...there can't be anyone else. My face goes pale. Trembling, I show him my left hand, pointing at a spot just below the wristband on my arm.
"In my dream...I saw Ichigo-senpai. And he bit me...right...here."

There's a seemingly fresh teeth mark on the spot I'm pointing at. And it is still slightly aching.

Exactly in the same spot as the one Ichigo-senpai gave me in my dream, and if my memory is correct - completely identical.

Chapter End Notes

This might sound impossible, but...the dream affects reality. It affects me, at the very least.

The charm Kousetsu-senpai gave me actually worked. It took me out of my dream before the monster could kill me. When I took it from under my pillow, it was sliced in two. It saved me at the cost of being unusable now.

If...if I didn't wake up at that time, perhaps I'd be dead right now.

Ugh, I don't want to imagine.

I woke up from my nightmare in the morning, just in time for me to go to school if possible. But now, with that dream, there's yet another emergency meeting after breakfast, so it is impossible for me to go today. As expected, I guess - in the worst way possible.

Who would have thought this kind of thing would happen? I guess Ishikirimaru-san has some ideas as he said stuff yesterday, but even he looked surprised to know what happened.

After the Samonjis go to school, the four of us are left in the living room.

Brother Yamabushi hasn't come back yet, but it seems he found Mikazuki and Tsurumaru - as he told Ishikirimaru-san, so he stayed with them last night. That was pretty quick. My brother is so dependable at this.

I tell the other three the full story, but I can't go into the details about Ichigo-senpai's state.

"Can I see your wound?" Taroutachi-san asks after my story ends. I show him my arm. The mark is too noticeable if you're close. He lightly touches it with his fingertips and narrows his eyes. "This is yet another form of curse, but it's far weaker."

"The marks from your legs were gone, weren't they?" Ishikirimaru-san asks.

I nod, looking at my legs. They're now clean with no marks, as if yesterday's surprise is just a bad dream. But then, a new mark appeared on my hand, coming from my dream. It's even more absurd.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't feel any different." Just a bit unsettled thanks to that nightmare.

"Hmm...ikiryou aren't supposed to have the power to infiltrate dreams...and there's no way he can come here in the first place," Taroutachi-san mumbles, looking down at the table. "Perhaps it's not ikiryou, and instead something else entirely, but taking his form based on your memories."

"The hands marks disappearing is also odd...there's a chance this is also connected to that person, then." (Same person talking from last paragraph?)

I shudder hearing that possibility. Just what did I do to deserve this from them?

They fall silent, looking like they're thinking hard. What to do now, I have zero idea...but...

"Umm, if this dream affects reality...I'm worried about Ichigo-senpai." The worst possible case
would be...his death. I don't want that. I desperately wish for his safety, but I can't be at ease thinking about his condition as long as I haven't seen him myself.

"We can have Kousetsu-san checking on him," Taroutachi-san replies.

"I know that, but...I want to see him myself. And...I can possibly calm him down from whatever is bothering him...I hope."

Tsurumaru-senpai said Ichigo-senpai needs me, for whatever reason. If even his friends can't help him mentally, and if I'm the only one who can do it...I have to do it. I can't let this pass and let him go down even worse.

"Alright. We understand. You're quite stubborn in this, after all," Ishikirimaru-san says as he takes something from his bag. "When you're with him, his **ikiryou** won't disturb you, so that'd be safer. For now...take out your left hand. Can you take off your wristband?"

I do as he asked. There's no need to hide the scars on my wrist as he already knew, but it's still a bit embarrassing. He takes out a bandage and wraps it around my wrist, covering the scars and the bite mark. It is, however, a bit different than your every day bandage. There's a divine power imbued within it - and that's why I feel my skin is mildly being burned when it touches the bite mark. This is the reaction when an impurity meets the pure.

The bite mark is a curse, after all...how is that possible? The world of oddities is far too wide for me to comprehend.

"There. This hopefully should help." He pats my wrist a few times.

I nod. "Thank you."

The bandage burns a bit, but I can withstand it as it gets weaker by time.

"You'll go to school for now, then?" Kogitsunemaru asks, finally speaking up.

"Yeah."

"Even though you'll be late?"

"Yeah. That's fine."

"I'll get our dry clothes first," he says, standing up and walks outside to get our clothes.

The clothes dried overnight, so after waking up, he ironed them. They're still lying on the table near Souza's room. He comes back soon after and pulls me to the bathroom to change our clothes. We already took a bath before breakfast, by the way.

"Are you sure you want to go?" Kogitsunemaru asks as he brushes my hair with a comb, with my back facing him and I looking into the mirror. "You aren't feeling well. You need rest."

"But I can't just stand still here. I'd get worse."

I hear him sighing. "Well, I can imagine. As long as you don't push yourself too far, I'll allow it. I'll drag you back home when I think you really need to take a rest."

"Mm..." I look at myself in the mirror and frown, "I want to see Mikazuki..."

"Let's call your brother and ask Mikazuki to come to school if he is alright."
I nod. Although Brother Yamabushi has found them, he didn't tell us about their condition. That's also worrying.

"Okay, done." He pats my back a few times and smiles as I see him in the mirror. "We'd still need to get your books from home, so let's quickly go."

"Yeah."

We go back to Kousetsu-senpai's room to get my bag before taking off. It seems both Ishikirimaru-san and Taroutachi-san have something to do, so they take their leave as well, leaving me alone with Kogitsunemaru. To save time, I hold onto Kogitsunemaru and fly to my house.

Nothing happens on the way, and we safely land in front of the house.

I take out the key I have and unlock the door. "I'm home."

There is no reply as nobody is home.

Seeing the empty house at this hour makes me feel lonely and sad, for some reason.

I go upstairs to my room. The inside of my room looks the same as ever. Nothing out of ordinary, so I calmly put my books into my bag after taking out other books. Hmm, I'd miss homework and maybe first period...but I take the first period's book just in case.

"Yamanbagiri, I'll go make a quick lunchbox for you," Kogitsunemaru says after we go downstairs.

"Eh, that's unnecessary - "

He places his finger on my lips. "I want to make you one. Okay?"

Pressured, I can only nod and let him go to kitchen and start to prepare my lunch. I sit on the sofa and take out my smartphone. Although I haven't fully charged it, the battery lasts long enough. I call Brother Yamabushi, anxiously waiting for him to pick up.

"Hello, Brother?" After a few seconds, he finally picks up. "Good morning."

"Brother. Good morning."

"What's wrong?"

"I just want to ask...uh..."

"Mikazuki and your senior. Right?"

"Geez, so you already know...don't tease me like that, Brother."

"Kakaka! Don't worry, they're here...that's what I want to say, but Kuninaga already went to school. Mikazuki is here, though. Do you want to talk to him?"

Tsurumaru-senpai went to school? This immortal really has...nerves of steel...that means he is fine, which is good. "I want to talk to Mikazuki."

There's the sound of the cellphone being passed over to someone else. "Yamanbagiri. It's you, isn't it? Aaah, I miss you so much."

My heart leaps when I hear his voice. "Mikazuki...mm. I miss you too. How are you?"
"I'm fine, just had scratches on some places, and I've healed them. The only bad thing is that I couldn't sleep well without you. How about you? Did you get involved in a dangerous thing? I have this sense of foreboding since this morning..."

"Ahahaha...your instincts are so good. I'm fine for now, but...well, I'll tell you in full if you come to me. Can you come home right now?"

"The place we are at is quite far away from your house, unfortunately, but I'll manage if you want."

"I see...what about school?"

There's a mysterious pause. "...What? You're going to school?"

"Yeah. There's something I want to check with my own eyes."

"What's with you people and your strong desire to go to school when something bad is happening?"
He lets out a rare show of exasperation. "Alright. I understand. Let's meet at school."

"Kogi is quickly making my lunch right now, so we'll go in about 10 or 20 minutes."

"Very calm when you're already so late, eh? What an example of disciplinary committee vice-president."

He is sure energetic. "Just this once. I can say that I had a bad stomachache before but then I decided to come to school when it healed. I'm a good kid, so they'd accept me."

"Yes, yes, whatever you say."

"I'll see you at school."

"Yes. See you. Be careful."

I end the call. Haaah...I'm so relieved knowing Mikazuki is alright! If he gets injured badly, I won't know what to do...I'd have a breakdown without a doubt. That'd be painful to imagine.

"So there's nothing to worry about. I'm glad," Kogitsunemaru says, coming out from the kitchen with a lunchbox.

"That was fast."

"Horikawa had prepared leftovers specifically for you, so all I need to do is heat them up and stuff them into this box. His instinct is as good as always."

"I see..." I should thank him later. I feel bad for always worrying him like that, and yet he doesn't get angry at all. "Should we go now?"

He sits on my left and looks at the clock. "If we go now, you will still attend homeroom, won't you? I think it's better to wait a while so you'd arrive at the first period, unless you want to attend homeroom."

"Hmm...I guess you're right."

I'm already late, so I might as well choose when to go. I take the lunchbox from him and put it inside my bag. I decide to charge my phone for a bit, so I plug the charger into the socket next to the TV before going back to the sofa, holding Kogitsunemaru's hand.
He turns on the TV, arriving at a news channel. He changes the channel a few times, but it seems he can't find whatever he is interested in, so he leaves it at a channel showing a documentary show about a polar bear.

"Yamanbagiri."

"Hm?"

Kogitsunemaru lifts my left hand he is holding, staring at the bandage closely. After some time, however, he shakes his head, and puts it down. "...Never mind. I don't want to make you remember a painful thing."

I look at his clouded expression. Even if I'm an oblivious person, when it comes to someone I've been living with for 2 years... "...You're thinking about the bite mark, aren't you?"

A nod is the answer. Well, of course.

"It was surprising and painful. But more than anything...I'm scared. I feel like..." I pause, hesitating whether to say it or not - but I guess there's no point as he can read my mind anyway. I'd feel better if I say it...perhaps. "...I feel like I was dirtied. I'm not pure in the first place, sure, but...I hate it. I hate such a violent thing. It was unpleasant, as fear spread all over my body from the possibility of his action and...the fact that he seemed so inhuman."

I don't hate Ichigo-senpai. I'm sure the one in my dream wasn't him. Even if it is him or his ikiryou, I'm sure he was controlled by that monster. I refuse to call it simply an oddity. I've never seen a creature as disgusting as it was.

"I'm...I'm scared...thinking of the possibility of you and Mikazuki hating me if I let him do that. Even though I was powerless and unable to move, I feel bad, as though I'm betraying you. Ah, and Yoshiyuki, too...the idea of doing that outside love disgusts me, to be frank. I hate it."

"...I understand." He clenches my hand tightly. "Even if that happened, I won't hate or blame you. Mikazuki and Yoshiyuki won't, either...but I'm glad that didn't happen. That'd be a bad experience for you."

"Mm..." I nod. "...I'm also glad that didn't happen."

"You know..." He once again lifts my left hand, but this time, he places it on his warm cheek. "The first thing in my mind when I heard it was... I was upset. At Ichigo. The thought of someone else outside the people you accept doing that to you upsets me - even if it's just a bite and some kisses. In a dream, no less. I gotta say, it was childish and possessive of me. I should be thinking about how you feel instead. I know you, and yet I want to restrain you, ignoring your feelings...hngh. Sorry."

He ends his sentence with a groan.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for. It's perfectly normal and fine to get upset over that." In fact, that was what I expected - jealousy.

"It doesn't change the fact that I'm selfish, letting my desire to monopolize you taking me over in moments like that when you need help...I'm ashamed of myself."

"Kogi..."

"Just for this moment, however...I want to be selfish. I can't stop this feeling." He moves my hand slightly to kiss the part the bandage is covering - the spot where the bite mark is supposed to be. It's still there, because when he presses it, I can feel a slight pain. "Once again, I'm sorry."
I stroke his head. "It's fine to show it from time to time, outside jokes like this. As long as you don't disturb anyone else. Besides, this is just one small thing. I will never mind a kiss from you."

"You're saying that I look cute when I'm jealous like this, aren't you?"

I smile. "Of course."

Kogitsunemaru's ears fall down as he looks at me with a frown, clearly sulking, which is even cuter. Say, why don't you puff out your cheeks next?

"I'm not a kid! Geez, I love you so much, I can't even get angry at this point."

"Ehehe. I love you too, Kogi."

Pulling the collar of his clothes, I take him into a quick morning kiss we didn't get to have earlier.

Still, walking to school after skipping homeroom feels so weird and a bit disturbing for someone like me. I'm kind of a model student, after all - I've never been late even once since I enrolled here.

Despite everything, this school lacks discipline, especially on being late. I can get away by messaging my homeroom teacher with a lie. The gate is opened for me, because I have permission. Even if I don't, I think I could manage somehow, but I want to keep up my appearance in front of the teachers' eyes.

Walking on the school grounds at this hour feels so surreal. It's even more so when I enter the building and swap my shoes with indoor shoes, since I'm the only one outside class right now. The atmosphere is also different from my usual routine. At early morning, of course it's quiet - there's nobody around. However, now, with the classes packed with students, and as the first years are quiet rowdy, there are noises filling the hallway coming from other classes. They aren't really bad for the ears, though. It's just normal for school.

I go upstairs, feeling a bit nervous. People would look at me as I'm very late, and me being me, it's far from normal. People would wonder, and some might even ask...hhhaaaa. So bothersome.

But it's not like I have any other choice, as I'm the one who wants to come.

I take a deep breath as I stand in front of the door. Okay, here we go...

Just slightly after homeroom ends, I slide open the back door of the classroom. The loud sound prompts some students' attention, b-but let's not notice them. I look the ground as I walk to my seat and sit there. It's okay, it's okay...calm down. Pretend everything is normal.

When taking out books from my bag, I notice a certain gaze. When I look, I find that it's Yoshiyuki. He smiles and waves slightly to me, which I respond by a nod. I'm happy to see him, too.

Since the first period immediately begins, my friends can't talk to me. Not yet.

The ones asking me questions are people in front and next to me, which is far more annoying...I lie to them about my hand, that I accidentally splashed some hot oil on it. It's not really bad, but it hurts, and as my brother is a worry-wart, he told me to wear this bandage for now.

Yeah, that's a perfect lie. It can also connect to the fact that I'm late - to take care of the wound.
Aaaah, that was so nerve-wrecking.

The tension just leaves me when I leave the classroom, though I know it'll start again when I come back. I was practically being interrogated by my classmates earlier, even though class was in session.

Okay, no time to stand around here.

I go to boys' restroom and enter one of the stalls. No, I'm not here to take care of my humanly needs - not yet. If I do, I won't even narrate it.

"Mikazuki, come out."

There's no better place to speak to an invisible being openly other than restroom at school... actually, the rooftop is also good, but it's always off-limits. An hour after the first period began, I noticed Mikazuki's presence. For some reason, though, he refuses to show himself, instead hovering around as a ball of light. Almost invisible even to my eyes. I can talk to him through our minds if I want to, but...

I want to see him.

I want to see Mikazuki.

So, I chose this option. Of course, he follows me all the way here, knowing my intention.

"My, my, what a place you chose, Yamanbagiri." He muses.

"Sorry, I can't think of anything else...I don't want to get caught at all."

Oh, wait, I should just talk in my mind now, for further secrecy.

"That's fine. I'd gladly go to the end of the world as long as we're together."

Mikazuki's human form slowly appears in front of me along with his voice. Even though I'm sure he had quite the battle, his clothes are completely clean - I'm sure he cleaned the dirt off with a snap of a finger before. There's no sign of wounds on his body, either. He retains his beauty in all aspects - except for his tired eyes.

I put my hand on his cheek, feeling his body heat and the texture as I look into his eyes. The strands of his longer side hair falls on me as well. This sensation... hmm, hmm. You really didn't get enough sleep.

"I said it, of course it's true," he replies with a smile, placing his hand atop mine. "I miss you, Yamanbagiri."

"I miss you too..."

I ended up saying it out loud, but oh well. I lean closer to him, pressing our foreheads together, just enjoying each other's warmth before Mikazuki pulls me into a kiss. His hands go down to my waist and I lean closer, not wanting to pull away from him, my hands on his back. The kiss naturally goes more aggressive, but it's not really full of lust or something...I think.

We stay like that for minutes before Mikazuki pulls away.
But even after that, he pulls me into his embrace. He doesn't say anything, but I can feel his worry about me, and how tired he is. I just hug him back. This is quite unusual of him. I'm sure something bad happened, but as long as he is okay...I'll know what happened later, anyway.

"What happened to your hand?" He asks afterwards, holding my left hand lightly traces the bandage with his fingers.

"It's..." I don't want to say it, so I just remember what happened and the conversation afterwards with the specialists. They should be enough for Mikazuki to understand as we're already connected now.

"...So that's what happened." Soon, after, he nods, visibly biting his lower lip. "I'm glad you're okay."

"For now, yeah."

"I wish I could purify it now, but..."

"Don't force yourself. I know you're tired. Just sleep, okay? I'm sure I'll be fine with you."

"I'll do that..."

He pecks my cheek before he vanishes, going inside me. It seems he immediately falls asleep.

"I can't say anything," Kogitsunemaru says, filling in the silence, "Not even a welcome back."

Ahaahha. Sorry about that. You can tell him when he is awake.

"Which is, like, 8 hours from now on, you know?"

Be patient and let him get his beauty sleep.

.

.

Break time has arrived! Haaah...I'm so drained, for some reason.

But wait, I can't relax now. Break time is an even better time for more interrogation...!

Fortunately, the one walking up to me first is Hasebe. I mean, he is my friend, not that fortunate that he is here to drive people away. Although it is a blessing.

"Hey," Hasebe says, patting my back. "What happened with your hand? Are you okay?"

As expected, that is the first question he asks. "I'm okay. I'll explain in the cafeteria since it'd be easier."

"Let's go to the cafeteria, then," Yoshiyuki says as he walks up to us, his hand holding a lunch box, "I'm already so hungry!"

With Yamato and Kashuu joining, the group is here. We go to the cafeteria, and as usual, Yoshiyuki and I search for empty seats, taking them immediately when we see them. To be honest, I want to look for Ichigo-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai right away, but I can't just refuse them, and I have to explain what happened to me.

"I didn't expect ya to come, so I made nothing for ya, sorry," Yoshiyuki says after he sits next to me.
"That's okay. I didn't expect myself to come, either."

"So...mind to tell me what actually happened?" His expression turns serious.

I nod, and after taking a deep breath, I tell him what happened. About that dream, as before cutting some disturbing details. I try to make it shorter as we don't know when the others will come back.

"I see..." He mumbles after my story ends, his face clouded. Taking my hand and grasping it tightly, he says, "...I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For being unable to help ya. I mean, I know I won't be able to help in your dream, but, after ya wake up..."

Yoshiyuki...this guy is just so angelic.

"For that to happen...I don't know what to say."

"It's okay to not say anything. Just having you here is enough. I'm happy and I feel so much better. If you're sad, I'll also get sad, so...I'd like to see your smile."

"Okay...."

He releases my hand soon after. We don't want anyone to realize the truth between us, after all.

"So...ya here to look for Ichigo-senpai?" He asks.

I nod. "Yeah. Even if someone else tells me he is fine, I want to see it by my own eyes. I also want to talk to him, confirming stuff and...maybe make him feel better about whatever is bothering him."

"I see. I wanna help, but...I doubt there's anything I can do. Especially if he trusts ya alone."

"Well, you can always support my back and comfort me. I take kisses and food."

Yoshiyuki chuckles, taking an egg roll with his chopsticks and shoving it in front of me. "That goes without saying! I'll give ya this. Open yer mouth~"

I do as he said, letting the egg roll enter my mouth. I bite it and swallow it. "Great as always...hmm, it's a little bit spicy."

"I'm experimenting."

"It's good, though. I don't mind spicy food."

"Ehehhe~ Glad ya like it!"

Soon after, Hasebe, Yamato, and Kashuu come with their lunches, putting the trays on the table.

"So, what happened to your hand, Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe immediately asks after he sits down. Not beating around the bush, or he is just curious as heck.

So, I tell them the same story I told others before.

"Uwaaah, that sounds painful," Yoshiyuki's face twists in pain - this guy is too good at acting. "I got
the same before. It sucks, leaving me with some burns for weeks."

"Yeaah...this isn't really bad, but you know. Better be safe than sorry."

"You should be more careful," Yamato says, "It's sad to see your hand covered like that."

"It can't be helped for now. I'll be more careful next time."

"...Is that all?" Kashuu looks at me with narrowed eyes and asks that question.

I flinch. Is his instinct always this good? "Yeah, that's all. What's wrong?"

"Nothing...I just feel something is off, I guess..." He turns to look at the bowl of rice and plates of chicken on the table, but instead of eating, he just moves his chopsticks to play with rice grains. It seems he doesn't feel like eating...

"Your complexion is rather pale today, Kashuu," Hasebe says, looking at him with a worried expression. "How are you feeling?"

"Not well. I don't exactly know, but I feel dazed."

"How about taking a rest in the infirmary?" Yamato suggests. "Maybe you caught a cold."

"Maybe..."

"Eat a bit even if you have no appetite to. Then you can go to infirmary and drink medicine," I say. Kashuu weakly nods, looking even more lifeless than before. I think he looked okay this morning...what happened to him? Then again, cold can attack out of blue. I'm worried....aaah, yes, yet another addition to 'things I'm worried about today list'.

Since he is sitting in front of me, I can see what he is doing as I eat. He takes out his smartphone, types something, and then shoves it back to his pocket. At that moment, my smartphone vibrates. I almost choke due to shock. I take it out, seeing a LINE message...from Kashuu. Well...I should keep this a secret, then. Because of my settings, I can see the message even without unlocking my phone. It says:

'Can you go with me to infirmary later? I have a problem.'

A problem? Seems like it's urgent since he doesn't want others to know. There's no way I can refuse him, so I type a quick 'OK' and lock my smartphone, putting it back to my pocket.

After we take our sweet time to have lunch, when the bell is about to ring, we go back to the classroom.

"I'll go to infirmary, after all," Kashuu says halfway the journey, putting his hand on his forehead. "Sorry."

"Can you walk? I'll go with you just in case," I say as I step closer to him, jumping to the chance. I'm pretty sure this is what he wants me to do.

"Thanks."

"Please tell the teacher if I'm not back in time."

I see Hasebe nodding and walk off with Kashuu, my hands on his shoulders as I push him to walk.
He walks slowly and steadily, looking down on the ground. The infirmary is on the first floor, so it's pretty close from where we are. I slide open the door when we arrive, finding that there's no nurse to be seen. Perhaps she's still taking a break.

We walk to one of the beds. Kashuu sits on one of them. "Can you close the curtain?"

"Sure."

I close the white curtain surrounding us.

"What's wrong, Kashuu? Did you catch a cold?"

"Well...Yamanbagiri, try touching me. My forehead or hand."

"Hm?"

I put my hand on his forehead as if I'm checking his temperature and flinch when I feel his skin. "W-Whoa, so cold. Wait, the problem is...?"

He nods with a sigh. "I feel weak. The virus is taking over me again. Well, it won't be able to do take me over completely, but my instinct as a jiangshi grows stronger. It sucks."

Ahh...so that's how is it.

"This just suddenly happened all of sudden earlier. I was feeling fine, and yet...I remember the feeling, so I know for sure I'm lusting for blood. What should I do? I'm lost..." He frowns, looking down at his pale hands. "I hate this...it makes me remember that I'm a half now. Not a full human."

"Kashuu..."

...It's my fault for being late to save him. As the result, he has to bear the desire as a jiangshi while still embracing his humanity...it must be hard...and painful to accept. But I shouldn't immerse myself in regrets now. There's something I need to do right now.

"I'm sure the specialists are busy, so...this is just for emergency. How about drinking my blood, even a bit, like that time?"

Kashuu's red eyes snap wide open. "B-But that's dangerous and I don't want to bother you more than this!"

"What's bothering me is my inability to help you."

He falls silent, although he looks like he still wants to say something.

"This is just a possibility, but...you might go on a rampage if you let yourself get too thirsty for blood."

He frowns and looks at me in terror. "...That's even worse."

"Right?" I softly pat his head. "Just drink my blood. It's much safer. Send a message to Ishikirimaru-san about this later, though. Or I can do that if you want me to."

"I guess I have no other choice..."

So...how did I cut my finger again before? Oh, right, a pin. I take it out from my jacket's pockets - I always keep it there because I forget. I stab my index finger until blood slightly drips. Being careful
to not let the blood fall to the floor or bed, I bring myself closer to Kashuu.

He looks at my finger in clear dissatisfaction, but he reluctantly drinks my blood anyway, catching the blood with his tongue. Having my finger being sucked like this feels so weird and ticklish, also a bit painful because wound... I can hold it, though. It's nothing very bad. As someone who had been slashed in the stomach, I know worse.

A few minutes later, Kashuu stops sucking on my finger, gulping down the last drop before he heaves a sigh and ruffles his hair. "...Thanks, Yamanbagiri."

"No problem. If you're still feeling unwell, you can just sleep here."

"Yeah, I'll do that. I'm actually lacking sleep today." He proceeds to take off his shoes and lies down on bed, covering himself in the blanket. "Don't forget to clean the wound."

"Thanks for reminding me. See you later."

Because he turns his body, I can only see his back, but I hear him mumbling, "Mm."

I close the curtain after stepping out and walk to the sink, washing the wound with water. It has stopped bleeding... hmm, that was quick. I take out a band aid from the cabinet and wrap it around my finger. That feels better.

"Are you okay? Do you feel anything weird?" Kogitsunemaru asks worriedly.

I'm fine, thanks. Nothing is weird. It's fortunate that I don't feel dizzy at all. Maybe because I've just eaten lunch.

Well, it's time to go to class now. I should look for Ichigo-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai during the second break for real.
Chapter Notes

*Short chapter but 9/5 and 9/6 are Manba-chan's day! Happy Manba-chan day! I never said it before in notes before, huh.

=7-04=

It's second break time. I immediately walk out of the classroom when the bell rings, before anyone can ask me anything.

Now then, where should I go? I think he is either in his own classroom or the student council room. Considering the sports festival is just 2 days from now, he must be busy...so student council room it is. I don't want to bother him if that's the case, but I should see if he is there or not at least. I can't be at peace unless I do.

I walk to the student council room, just a few doors away from my classroom. Now then, what should I do? Being direct and just open the door? Take a peek from the door?

...There's no other ideas, so straightforward is better. No need to beat around the bush.

I knock on the door a few times before sliding it open.

"...Huh?"

Only to find the room is devoid of people. Ahhh, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. The bell just rang, and the student council members are on the third floor, so it'll take time before they get here...

But, there's always the possibility of Ichigo-senpai not coming here...uuugh.

"You can just message Ichigo, can't you?" Kogitsunemaru asks. I can hear him heaving a sigh. "You're so roundabout sometimes, I don't really understand."

T-There's no point if he knows I'm searching for him before we meet...I think...besides, he can lie and direct me to somewhere else. I don't want that. Not that I'm doubting him, but...just to be safe, so he can't escape from me.

"Sure, then. What are you going to do now?"

I can either wait here or go to the third floor. Maybe I can meet him on the way for the second option. Ugh, I can't just stay still, so I'll go to the third floor. I close the door and walk away, passing other students as I make my way to the stairway.

When I see Kousetsu-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai, I greet them and quickly walk away. I can see Kousetsu-senpai is surprised to see me, but he says nothing more and waves me off. I can't see Ichigo-senpai as I climb the stairs. The students on the stairway...none of them are Ichigo-senpai, either. I can feel my anxiety rising.

Arriving at the third floor, I look around. Once again, there's no sign of him. Okay, time to go to his
class. Uuh, his classroom should be...this one. I take a peek from the windows. Nngh, there are still too many people inside, my view is kind of blocked...I should look at different angle.

Suddenly, I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"Yamanbagiri-san~"

"...Sadamune-senpai."

Kikkou-senpai is looking at me with a smile. "What are you doing? Staring intently into the classroom like that."

"Ah, um, I'm searching for - "

"Sadamune-san, don't just run like that. Just because you haven't handed in the form...it's not like the teacher will punish you. Or perhaps punishment is better for you?"

Ahh. This voice is...

"Ehehe, sorry. It's just instinct. I can tell he was going to bring the topic of my books, so I have to escape before that happens."

"That's just a given..."

Ichigo-senpai emerges from the crowd, sighing at Kikkou-senpai. His eyes light up when he notices me, and he walks towards us.

"Hello, Yamanbagiri-san. What are you doing here?" He asks.

His smile doesn't look any different from before. This is the Ichigo-senpai I know, the one I'm searching for...and yet, I can feel my heart thumping quicker, my body sweating and shuddering when I see him. Dread and fear are creeping in my nerves, spreading without mercy, numbing me, as the image of him attacking me and then getting beheaded in front of me rise in my mind.

My stomach feels sick.

B-But this isn't the time for that.

"I'm searching for you, Ichigo-senpai. Um...can we have some time alone together? Just for a bit."

I hear Kikkou-senpai whistling to tease us and I feel the desire to jab his stomach.

Ichigo-senpai blinks a few times before pointing at himself with a dumbfounded face. "Me?"

I nod.

"A-Alright...sure."

Ichigo-senpai is secured. I'm so relieved to see him looking fine, but I have to confirm something. Now then...where should we go and have a private conversation? Cafeteria would attract attention...my bad for not planning this thoroughly. The spot where I spent time with Yoshiyuki...is on the first floor, outside even. Too far.

Okay then...

I end up taking him to the stairway leading to the rooftop. It's usually empty, it should be, because
the rooftop is off-limits.

"I guess this is a good place."

It is fortunately empty. I sit on the highest step, just in front of the door. Ichigo-senpai sits next to me.

"So...what do you want to talk about, Yamanbagiri-san? You look troubled."

Is it showing on my face? I'm so easy to read when it comes to this kind of thing, huh...it can't be helped.

"Senpai - " I start, only to be interrupted.

"Wait, what happened to your hand?"

"Eh? Uh - "

Cutting me off for the second time, he suddenly grabs my left hand, staring intently at the bandage wrapping my wrist. His grip doesn't hurt, but it surprises me. His eyebrows wrinkled, he asks again, "What happened? " in a commanding tone.

Shiver runs down my spine for some reason. My hand automatically pulls away from his hand.

No. No. This Ichigo-senpai is normal. He is different. It's okay. I'm safe...it's safe here, with him...yeah, yeah. Huft.

"A-Actually...senpai, did you have a dream last night?"

"A dream?" He repeats my question before shifting his sitting position, tilting his head in wonder. "I don't think so. I don't remember having one. What about it?"

I put my hands on his cheeks. He lets out a surprised yelp, but he lets me rubs his cheeks. Hmm, they're normal...

"Do you feel anything is weird with your body today?"

He shakes his head. "I feel completely normal."

"I see..."

So, the dream only affects me. I'm glad...although, if it happens again, I don't know for sure if he won't get affected this time. It'd be better if I can find the cause of this dream before it comes for the second time.

"Yamanbagiri-san...did you hurt your wrist...in a dream? And I happened to be there as well, got hurt, and so you're worried about me?"

All on the marks. "...You're way too sharp, senpai. But I guess it's quite obvious from the flow of conversation."

Ichigo-senpai smiles. "Thank you. So, mind telling me what exactly happened?"

Oh no. There's no way I can tell him the details...especially not the grotesque details. W-What should I do? How should I reply to this? "Ah, uh..." Please work, my mind. Just cut off some details... "S-So, last night, I had a dream...it's a bit vague now, but what I remember is...I saw you get stabbed in the chest, senpai. By a creature that should be called a monster. I got bitten, and then I woke up,
finding there's a bite mark here. Ah, it's not deep, don't worry. And well, you know the rest. I'm worried if you got affected as well."

His face visibly goes pale. "Are you serious, Yamanbagiri-san?"

"I'm not joking around."

"I can see that, but..." He touches his chest. "I feel nothing wrong, but imagining that actually happened to me..."

"Don't imagine it, please. I'd like to forget that scene." I shudder. The reality is way harsher, so much my stomach seems like it's twisting again. "I'm glad you're fine, senpai. But if that happens again...the result might not be pretty. The other specialists are searching for the cause."

"I see..." He looks at my hand and strokes the bandage, "I wish I could help."

"You can help to ease my worry. Tell me if you feel anything is weird about your body, okay?"

"I'll do that," he replies with a nod. "Um, does it still hurt? Your hand, I mean."

I shake my head. "It's doesn't, don't worry. It didn't even bleed. By the way, do you have an amulet? Just in case."

"I have. It's the one you gave me before, though. I'm still keeping it. Wait..." He rummages his pocket and takes out something from it. Of course, he takes out the amulet, colored in blue. It's a normal *omamori* I got from Taroutachi-san. Right, I remember. I decided to give him one because I already have one.

"That can work. Keep it with you at all times. Put it under your pillow."

"I actually do that, so you don't have to worry."

"You're responsible and reliable, so yeah. I can rest easy and trust you."

He shoves the amulet back into his pocket. "That dream sounds bad, but I hope it won't get worse. I pray these specialists can find the cause soon...and for you to be safe, uninjured, Yamanbagiri-san."

"I agree..." Honestly, I think it's quite the miracle I'm alive right now. I barely escaped death...

"Putting that aside, I'm happy you're worried about me and trust me. Thank you."

I'm suddenly getting embarrassed. "Why are you thanking me?"

Ichigo-senpai shoots me a bashful smile brighter than before. "I'm simply happy to know how you feel towards me. I can't really describe it in words, but...I'm really, really happy, to know that you care about me. To be honest, my mood hasn't been the best lately...but this alone is enough to make my mood better, so thank you."

So he mentioned his mood himself...I'm glad he trusts me enough to say it. Huh, I guess I feel the same as he does. "I-If I help even a bit...then no problem. If there's anything else I can help, don't be afraid to just say it to me."

"Then..." He glances at me, peeking as though he is afraid to get lectured. "If I may be selfish...can I rest my head on your shoulder?"

"Sure."
"Can I hold your hand? W-Wait, I guess that's weird of me, I apologize, please forget it..."

Getting embarrassed, I see, though he scoots away and hides his face with his hands, so I can't see his expression. "I don't mind, really, so you can, but...aren't you supposed to help with the preparation of sports festival, Ichigo-senpai?"

He snaps back to normal and puts a teasing smile before he gets closer to me again. There's no trace of his embarrassment now, it may as well be an illusion. "There's no way I can turn down the offer to spend time with you, Yamanbagiri-san. I can work extra hard after school to make up for it."

"I'd feel bad, though...uhh, can I help you after school, then?"

"Feel free to, if that doesn't bother you."

"I skip club from time to time, it's fine."

I shove away the image of the angry president. *Who cares about him.*

"Ehehehe." Ichigo-senpai chuckles as he takes my hand into his, intertwining our fingers. The warmth of his skin seeps into my hand. I can feel the somewhat rough texture of his palm and fingers. "This is...our first time holding hands. I'm the one who accepted it, and yet my heart is beating so fast right now... "I'm so happy to spend time with you, I might as well die."

"That's not very much like you to say..." Dying out of happiness, eh? What a concept. "Um, if I may ask, what exactly happened yesterday? I'm a bit dejected we couldn't go home together."

His shoulders visibly jolt before he turns to look at me. "You're...dejected?"

"A-A bit. I'd like more explanation if possible, but if you don't want to say it, that's fine too..."

"I'm sorry! All I really needed to do was run some errands like getting groceries, but the discounts are limited, so I had to rush...I also had to put down laundry." He bows deeply, but still holding my hand. Uwaah.

"T-That's fine. It's understandable." Brother Horikawa becomes a demon every time there's discounts at markets, pressing how important they are to our lives, although I'm barely affected by his words. "Then...we can go home together today. Or someday."

"Today is fine." He lifts his head and smiles. "I won't let anything get in our way today."

"O-Okay..."

I can feel that his words are genuine. His happiness and eagerness are real, and yet...

Somewhere deep down, I feel unsettled hearing his last words as he clenches on my hand. I know he doesn't mean anything weird, but that doesn't ease the growing worry inside me.

"May I ask...about why your mood is down?" I gently question him.

His smile turns bitter. "...I'm stressed about a few things, that's all. Completely normal. It's nothing I can't handle, really. I'm sorry I can't be open yet about it."

"Eh...?"

He can't be open...d-does that mean...
"Ah, it's not that I don't trust you! I trust you a lot!" Realizing what he said might be misleading (and yes, that was what thought), he waves a hand around with a panicked face. "I'm just embarrassed to show you the other part of myself. I want to look the best when I'm around you, ahaaha."

That's embarrassing to admit, isn't it? Ichigo-senpai can be weird sometimes.

"But someday...when I'm ready, I'll tell you about it."

The way he said it is kind of worrying...I sure can't keep myself from worrying about him right now, huh? I wonder if it's for the best. "If that's what you want...okay. I'll wait."

"Thank you."

He finally rests his head on my shoulder. Silence falls upon us. His hair is tickling me a bit. Our bodies are so close and touching each other right now, but it's not bad...there's no way I can refuse him when he is this fragile. I gently stroke his hair with my right hand. From the first time I met him, I always thought he is the kind that puts a strong facade, only to be frail inside...there are so many people like this, in reality and fiction. Brother Horikawa included.

Pretending to be alright and support everyone else while he is all alone, crying...it's sad. Everyone needs something to hold onto, including him. If I can be that pillar of support, I'd be more than glad to be there for him. And for everyone else if they need me.

Of course, there's always pride and embarrassment as hurdles...

...Huh, wait...he said he is embarrassed to show other part of himself, but...isn't this another part of him as well? The one he is embarrassed to show me? I mean, there's no way the normal Ichigo Hitofuri would want me to do this. I mean, asking someone to lend his shoulder...it's a show of weakness, isn't it? Keyword is lend, a support.

I guess it's the first step for him to open up and ask me for help when he needs it.

Hmm...I wonder if he never shares his troubles with the other student council members. If he never did...that'd be quite disturbing. Trust issues, perhaps? Geh, I'm getting more and more worried as I think about him...I need to try hard to make him trust me more, then. I can't let him push himself alone like that.

"You talk as if you're not like that, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru whispers.

...I can't deny the fact that I was like that before. But it's different now. I have you, Mikazuki, and Yoshiyuki...I'm trying to become better in that department, okay. I'll lean on you more and bother you more.

"You're already a bother, in a good way."

Is that so?

"I can't stop worrying about you."

Ahaha...there's that...always. It's unavoidable.

"Moreover, I'm concerned about other people making moves on you while you have no idea..."

Making moves? What do you mean?

"Well, this is one of the real example. Oblivious as always...or should I say, ignorant?"
Oi, don't just insult me like that when you haven't explained a thing.

He chuckles, echoing in mind. "No, I'd rather see your adorable confused face, just like how you like to see me getting troubled."

...We're on par, then. You got your sweet revenge, Kogi.

"I'll make sure to strike more later. More importantly, you should focus on comforting your beloved senpai first."

B-Beloved senpai...I-Ichigo-senpai is still silent, and I think he prefers it...look, I'm still patting his head. I wonder if he likes it, though...well, if he isn't rejecting it, then it should be fine. I'll stay like this as long as he wants, even until the bell rings. I wish I could do more for him, but I don't know what to do as he doesn't want to tell me yet.

This silence is quite something for me, though. Uugh. Talk to me, Kogi.

"Even if you tell me that, I don't know what to say - oh, wait...come to think of it...don't you want to find Tsurumaru as well?"

...Oh god, you're right. I completely forgot about him because he is number 2 priority. I was too relieved to find Ichigo-senpai. But now, I can't just leave with him clinging onto me like this.

"Yeah...I have a bad feeling if you call Tsurumaru to meet you right now, to be honest, so this is fine. I'm sure you'll see him after school. You can talk to him at that time."

I'll do that, thanks.

"By the way, I demand you to dry my hair and brush it today, okay? I'm looking forward to it!"

Why all of sudden? I do that regularly to you, so it won't make such a difference.

"I also want ear-cleaning -"

"Kogitsunemaru, you're noisy. Can you lower your voice a bit?" Mikazuki's voice suddenly echoes. He still sounds half-asleep, but that's exactly why his words sound so deadly and chilling.

"Haah...I'm going back to sleep."

"...Sorry."

Even Kogitsunemaru cowers in fear hearing him. You can't disturb a sleeping tiger, after all...or should I say, a sleeping dragon? ...A sleeping god?

"I can't stay quiet for more than 2 hours, though. Mikazuki, you've been sleeping for almost 4 hours now. If you nap too much, you won't be able to sleep at night."

"Do not worry. That won't be a problem," Mikazuki is unexpectedly still awake, "Just smelling Yamanbagiri's scent and see him sleeping are enough to lull me to sleep."

I...I don't know how should I feel about that...it's embarrassing.

"Ahahaha," he lets out his ever-annoying laugh, "Well then, good night."

"It's afternoon."

"The details don't matter as long as I sleep."
He falls into a deep slumber almost immediately before Kogitsunemaru can retort.

"Yamanbagiri-san..."

Ichigo-senpai calls me right after. I almost shriek in surprise hearing his voice.

"Yes, senpai?"

There's a sound of his breath, before he shakes his head lightly. "Nothing...I'm sorry. I just want to call you. Um, I'll be waiting for you at the student council room after school, okay?"

"Okay."

"And then...we can go home together. I hope it's not going to rain."

"Yeah."

His hand tightens around me.

Is it just my imagination, or he seems frustrated...? I can't see his face right now, and yet I can feel that emotion for certain. I wonder what he is thinking...and what is bothering him. I wish I knew. Feeling powerless and unable to help people I care for are the last thing I want in my life.

Although it unfortunately still happens from time to time...

That's just life for you.
After school, after some time has passed…

Because the sports festival is in just two days, plenty of people from outside the student council help - much to my surprise, such as putting chairs and tables for the announcers, checking the sound systems, checking rations for students and teachers, checking the time schedule, and many more important tasks. Meanwhile, student council members mainly do the paperwork.

Is that Yoshiyuki I see? Right, that's Yoshiyuki, waving his hand at me as soon as he notices me. I wave back to him. He's quite active at activities like this, so it isn't surprising. Or wait, I think it's an obligation for him to help as a class rep, ahaha. Too bad I can't go to him.

"With this many people… I'm at loss on what to do," I say, scratching the back of my head, watching many people walk around with boxes and papers, talking to each other in the field.

"You can help me check and bring equipment into the gym storage, then," Ichigo-senpai says, "If you want to."

"Sure. I can't just stand around and do nothing."

"Ooi, Ichigo. What are you doing?"

He turns to see the one calling him - unexpectedly, Tsurumaru-senpai. Glad to see that crane looks completely fine and unharmed. He acts as if nothing bad happened yesterday.

"You didn't come at break time. It's good that we aren't completely behind schedule so you can rest easy from Uguisumaru's anger, but… it's so unlike you."

"I'm sorry about that. I had some things to do."

"And what is that? Flirting with Manba-chan?"

F-F-Flirting - ?! "What are you saying? We didn't - "

But Ichigo-senpai smiles as he holds my shoulders. "Ufufu, I wonder. It's our secret. Right, Yamanbagiri-san?"

A-At least deny that we're flirting, please… but his smile seems like it's commanding me, so I can only awkwardly nod. "It's a secret…"

"Come on, we have to go to the storage room."

"Don't do anything weird in there, you hear me?" Tsurumaru-senpai says with a laugh. "If you need anything, I'm always here. Hopefully."

I think his last words are directed to me… he knows I want to talk to him, but Ichigo-senpai is pushing me right now, so I can't. He seems eager to be with me - not forceful, but a bit pressing, so I'm hesitant to even leave him… I have a bad premonition if I leave him even for a bit, for some reason. I should do what he wants me to do right now, and then I can talk to Tsurumaru-senpai when it's all done. There should be no problem.
The two of us walk to the gym storage room, passing some sports club members in the gym. Ichigo-
senpai slides the door open. It's unlocked, huh. I enter the room with him. Although it's being used
regularly, the room has a thick, suffocating smell of an old and abandoned place. Maybe there's thick
dust somewhere, and the wooden floor is so old…how uncomfortable.

"What do we need, senpai?"

"Hmm…" He takes out his smartphone, most likely searching for his notes. "Let's get the easy ones
first. We need batons. Just take every baton you see. I think they would be scattered in the shelves."

"Okay."

Batons for the relay race, huh. The usual stuffs.

I walk to one of the shelves as Ichigo-senpai closes the door.

"Senpai, isn't it better to leave the door open? It's quite dark here…"

"No problem, we can use a flashlight. See?" He turns on flashlight on his smartphone, the back
shining with light.

"If you say so…"

"What is this, a plot of some censored book?"

What are you saying, Kogi?

"Don't mind me."

…Okay.

It's not much of a problem. I turn on the flashlight on my smartphone as well. Actually, this would
make the search easier and more detailed. Senpai must've thought of it. We start to search for batons
in the shelves. I'm going to the right side and he is going to the left side. This room isn't big, but there
are plenty of shelves to be looked at. There's some dust here and there. Oh, is that spider web I see?

"Senpai, I think this place needs to be cleaned."

"I think the same. I thought our suggestion to clean this place was accepted, but I guess they didn't
do it regularly."

What kind of school is this, honestly…

Before long, I see something catch my eyes at the lower shelf. It's kind of buried under useless stuffs,
but…batons? The light from my smartphone shines upon it. Yep, it's a baton…and there are other
batons. They're unorganized. "Found them."

"Me too. How many did you get?"

"Mm…" I start to take out the batons from the shelf one by one and count the numbers. "Only five."

"I got three here. They should be enough. Put them in this plastic bag, please."

"Okay then." I walk up to him, holding the batons and shove them down the plastic bag. "What
else?"
"Cones. I think they're being used right now, but...we should look for them at least."

I nod in understanding and begin to search once again, rummaging through the messy shelves. Not here, not there, and not here...I can feel my body getting tired. Searching for stuff is really bothersome.

"Yamanbagiri-san, may I ask something?" Ichigo-senpai suddenly speaks up, breaking the silence. I turn to see him, but I can only see his back as he keeps on moving and searching.

"Sure. What is it?"

"Are you participating in the sports festival?"

"Yeah, I am. In the relay competition. I don't have any choice. What about you, senpai?"

"Student council relay."

Ooh, right, that exists here. Sometimes I forgot it does, since not every school has it. My middle school didn't, either........ugh, let's not think about that cursed school. My hands keep on moving and searching.

"The Sports festival is a pain, to be honest. Can I skip it?"

I hear his giggles from across the room. "If you ask me that, of course I won't let you. Besides, aren't you the disciplinary committee vice-president? Skipping is forbidden. What kind of example are you if you skip?"

"Just saying."

"Oh, I also will participate in the treasure hunt. If I get hood or emo, I'll definitely get you, so get ready."

"Who are you calling an emo?! Huh...for some reason, I have a feeling you'd easily rig it just to get that paper."

"What are you saying? Of course I won't. I'm a good student."

I doubt it...Although he doesn't really look like it, I've seen him taking various shortcuts to get what he wants...for a good cause in a good way, of course. If it's thoroughly illegal or bad, I would've stopped him already. The things he had done are understandable. Though I don't understand why he likes to focus so much on me. I can tell that his words when it's about me are completely serious...

"Uhh, senpai, I can't find the cones at all." I call.

"Oh? I got only two. Perhaps the rest really are being used by the track team."

"I bet they're practicing for the club relay race...I don't think anyone else can win. This is what I'd call rigged."

"Ehem!" Ichigo-senpai suddenly coughs a few times. Turning my body, I see him facing me with a serious expression. "Just watch, Yamanbagiri-san. We will win this time."

"Who are we?"

"The student council."
"Eeh…"

"Your doubtful face is too painful…"

Ouch, he looks like he took so much damage, I feel bad. I know it's just acting, but still… "S-Sorry. So, are we done here?"

Recovering from the attack, he nods. "Yep. Now we need to put all of these in the field and help the others put up the flags and other decorations."

"Alright."

"After that, we can go home together," he adds with a smile. "If you like, how about dropping by my house? I can cook you dinner as apology for yesterday."

"E-Eh?" An invitation? Am I hearing that right? Ichigo-senpai's handmade cooking, huh…oh no. As much as I want to, there are things I have to discuss with the specialists. I'm also not sure about my safety if I go with him today. "I-I'd like to, but I have plans today. Maybe tomorrow, or after sports festival?"

At first, he looks dejected, but his face immediately lights up. "Hmm…after sports festival sounds good. Let's do that. It's a promise, okay?"

"Okay. I'll message you if something happens and I can't go."

A plan was made so easily…

I'm not doubting him, but honestly, I don't want to risk my safety. Even if the chance for his other soul to attack me when we're together is slim, nobody knows what caused that dream, so I have to be extra careful.

"Say, Yamanbagiri-san?" He calls me out again as he stops in front of the door. "If we…the student council wins the relay…will you give me a reward?"

Hm? "A reward? What kind of reward?"

There's a long pause before he snaps, as if realizing something. "A-Ahh, never mind. How stupid of me. I apologize. Please forget it."

"Senpai -"

"Come on, let's go out of here. We can't waste anymore time."

"Y-Yeah."

I follow him, only able to see his seemingly distant and cold back.

I wonder what he wanted from me…and why he doesn't want to say it. He is being weird today.

While I was sitting under a tree with my eyes closed, something cold touches my cheek. Startled, I snap my eyes open and look at the person who did it.
"Good work, Manba-chan!"

"Oh. Tsurumaru-senpai."

"What, you sound like you don't want me to be here."

"It's not like that…"

He chuckles before throwing the can of cola to me. "For you."

"Ah, thanks."

I left my bag at the student council room, so my bottle is there too. I couldn't drink despite being tired - the distance between the field to the room is too much, but now I can. Haaah, lifesaver. I open the can and immediately drink it, the cold soda flowing into my throat. It's so good.

Tsurumaru-senpai sits next to me and watches the people walking around on the field. "How is it, helping to prepare for the sports festival?"

"It's like preparing for a festival…then again, it is a festival. I never thought we'd need this much preparation, though. I'm tired. Please spare me from more labor work."

"That's impossible. Most work now is just labor work."

"Euuuh…"

A comforting breeze passes us before he speaks up. "…Manba-chan. Ichigo asked you to help, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he did."

"And he didn't go to student council room at break time because he was with you."

"…How did you know that?"

He shoots me a grin. "Instinct. So it's true, huh. I guess there's no other reason for him to skip work other than you."

"Why me?" And he looks so certain when saying it.

"I wonder."

I'm sure he knows, but he doesn't want to say it. Maybe it's a stupid question, one I'll never know the answer for if people never say it to me. Is the answer so obvious?

…No, I shouldn't be thinking about that right now.

"Senpai, tell me what happened after I left."

"Mikazuki didn't tell you?"

"He fell asleep the moment we met, so he didn't. He's still asleep right now. I'm glad to see the both you are fine, but I need to know what happened."

"Oh. I should have expected that…" He mulls over his reply before he turns to look at me. "It's quite the long story. I doubt I can tell you everything right now."
"Tell me the important points, then."

"How about you telling me what happened to you first? For example, that bandage."

I glare at him, but he just smiles. How annoying. After sighing, I tell him everything that happened. I went to Samonji's house, took shelter there, and had a dream. I end it with, "Ichigo-senpai is unharmed. It's likely that it only affects me, but who knows."

"Hmm..." After some time thinking, he says, "What if he is unharmed because you didn't inflict a wound on him? I mean, that bite mark came from him, not the monster."

Oh, god. "You're right. I didn't think of that..." I was too shocked to even consider that. "But then, doesn't it make less sense? Why would the wound we inflict to each other get transferred to real world? It's as if the monster doesn't exist. Why was it there and why did it kill him, then?"

"Unfortunately, I can't answer that question. I don't understand, either - this is the first time I heard of such thing. Maybe because the two of you exist in reality, while the monster doesn't. But one thing for certain...there's no logic in the world of oddities. Anything can happen."

Anything...

This is just what I think and feel, but...if what Tsurumaru-senpai said is true, then it's as if...as if... we - Ichigo-senpai and I - have to face each other. Facing each other in what? In something life-threatening. This is just what pops up in my mind, of course. I shudder thinking about it.

That possibility is too much.

"Who did this and why...?"

Tsurumaru-senpai quietly pats my head. "I'll try to search for the answer as well."

"Now...tell me what happened with you."

He looks around before replying, "Break time is almost over. I'll give you the summary for now. You can ask me or Mikazuki later for details. I mean, you can call me. So, in a nutshell...the pain shocked me to the point I fell, but after you left, I got up and kicked him. My body was regenerating quickly, no problem. Mikazuki helped to knock him off, but then black hands appeared again. Pretty sure the source was his shadow. A fight ensued, but in the middle of that, some knives and stuff were thrown out of nowhere. It felt like this person wanted to catch me."

"Is it the same as the one who hunted you down?"

"I think so. The knives are the same, as far as I remember. Anyway, because it was getting too tiring - especially since we don't want to hurt him and destroy our surroundings - we ran away when we could. But, the other thing was so persistent, so we had to hide away from it. Like some horror game. We took a shelter until your brother found us. End of story." He stands up after patting my head again. "I'll have to go now. You have too, to not look suspicious."

"Yeah. I understand. Thanks."

He waves a hand before walking away. From his words, it actually sounds easy...then why did Mikazuki look so dead tired?

"There's always a chance Tsurumaru annoyed him," Kogitsunemaru says with a giggle, finally speaking up after a while.
I guess you're right. That might've happened. Mikazuki seems like he dislikes him in the first place.

"To be honest, I smell something fishy. He must be hiding something. That super condescending summary isn't enough."

Mikazuki is our last hope if that's the case.

Well, I should get going and continue to work, too.

"Wait, Yamanbagiri."

Hmm? You suddenly sound grim…

"When you meet the specialists later…tell them about Ichigo's invitation."

O-Okay…but why? I accepted it already.

"You said it yourself. Your safety is at risk. We don't know what will happen."

Ah, yeah…I understand. What do you think about his offer?

"To be honest, I want you to refuse him - even spending time alone with him - until things calm down, but it's better to ask for their opinion. I'll protect you if anything happens, but if it's in dream world, I can do nothing, so…I'm worried."

I see…aaah, this is hard for me. Refusing him would mean hurting him, but there's no guarantee I'll be fine if I accept, either…I should've asked Tsurumaru-senpai's opinion on it. If I have to reject him, then I'll have to tell a lie, postponing it to whenever seems good. That's also hard.

"We should get new information from the specialists later. Oh, don't forget to tell them about Kashuu just in case."

I'll do that. Remind me later, please. Also remind me to walk home with Ichigo-senpai, get my books from home, and flee to Kousetsu-senpai's house once more, and maybe call Tsurumaru-senpai. This will be a busy night…

"Ya-man-ba-ri!"

"Wah!"

Too deep in my thought, I didn't realize Yoshiyuki appeared, crouching down and getting so close in front of me.

"Surprised?" He asks with a sweet smile.

"I am clearly surprised…what, you want to become Tsurumaru-senpai the Second?"

"Nope." He chuckles before his expression turns bashful, and he continues with a whisper. "We haven't been together at all today, ya know…even the second break."

"O-Oh…" So, he wants to spend time with me? Going home together, perhaps? "Sorry, I'll go home with Ichigo-senpai today…I promised him."

"I-Is that so?" Although his expression turns sour, he is still smiling. "There's no helping it, then. Ya have things to do and they are important."
"I'm really sorry…um, how about going to my house this weekend? Or maybe a day after sports festival? I want to spend time together with you as well." Huh, I think this sounds…lewd. Even though I know we'll do nothing but cuddling and playing games. That thing won't change, even after we started dating.

Just like a dog that just found its owner, his smile turns to a very wide and happy smile, bright and blinding. "Okay! I can't wait for it!"

I pat his head, thinking that if his tail and ears are out right now, I'll see his tail waving around. Too cute!

"Yamanbagiri-san? Are you done resting? Can you help me?"

After some time, Ichigo-senpai approaches me and says that with a smile.

I nod and follow him to set up some decorations, leaving Yoshiyuki with a wave of a hand. All I'm doing is whatever Ichigo-senpai asks. We're doing it together, but it's still tiring, even with other people's help.

"Haa…I'm tired…"

The sun has set completely by this point. My whole body aches and screams in pain when we're finished. Even walking is painful.

Ichigo-senpai chuckles. "Yamanbagiri-san is unexpectedly weak at this. Do you need a massage? I can give you one if you give me the time. I'm pretty confident in my skills."

"Hey, I'm just not used to it. It's been a long time since I did labor work like that. Ah, can you do it while we're walking?"

"That'd be hard, unfortunately."

"I'll have to rely on magic to heal this, then…" Which means, as usual. Mikazuki should wake up soon, so I can ask him to do it. My old body can't take this. Why must Mikazuki be a sleeping beauty at the wrong time, honestly…

"Magic…" He looks startled at first before understanding my words. He must have not heard of it for quite some time. "Magic, as in, Munechika-san's power?"

"Yeah. Calling it magic is simpler."

"Healing power sounds nice. I'm jealous."

"Ahaha. Overusing it is bad to the user, but it's nice for those who get it. Although I heard it can be quite bad if you even over-use it on yourself."

"Is that so? Too bad. No self-healing for me, then."

"All over things are dangerous, after all."

"Hmm…I wonder if magic can stop rain." Senpai looks up at the darkening sky. The hue of orange is fading into dark blue, the clouds drifting and hiding sunlight, indicating that night is slowly falling
upon us. "I'm glad it didn't rain today, but it'd be bad if it rains during sports festival."

Ooh. He was thinking about the event this whole time, huh.

"Ahh…I remember. It was raining hard for hours last year, so the events switched to indoors."

"Yup. I heard it was such a pain. The previous student council had to make plans from zero in mere minutes as they didn't want to keep the students waiting and apologize for the ruined event."

"And then they managed to create unique competitions indoors, huh…I remember almost everyone fired up despite the rain." Well, not me. I'm never fond of sports.

"Yes. That's why they're amazing to pull such a feat. But I must say, I'd rather avoid that at all costs. Sports is far better being done outside."

"I agree. The sun is annoying, but the air is nice."

"To be honest, if that happens now, I don't think we'd be able to take care of it."

"Huh? Really? I think Uguisumaru-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai would have tons of ideas."

Ichigo-senpai chuckles. "Indeed, they'd most likely have unique ideas, but I'm not really capable of taking care of it, and Kousetsu-san would most likely panic and resort to a trance-like state. That would mean we'd put more burden on the other two."

Trance-like state… god, I can totally imagine that. I think he’s calmed down more nowadays, but there was a time where he…became like that. Just mumbling prayers under his breath, completely cut off from his surroundings. I think it was last year.

"I think you can do it, senpai. You're amazing, after all." I encourage.

"You flatter me. I'm not that kind of person." He shoots me a bitter smile. "I'm just a normal person like any other."

"I've seen some weird parts of you, senpai, but you're still amazing in my eyes."

Ichigo-senpai's feet stop abruptly. He turns to look at me with wide eyes. "Really?"

He doubts me that much? "Really. I'm serious. Especially since…you know…I know some of your problems. But of course, everyone has them. It's just a matter on how they take care of these problems and continue with their lives. I think you've done well in that area."

"T-That's…" He bites his lip, refraining from whatever he was about to say. "Thanks, Yamanbagiri-san, but you put me too highly."

Still thinking like that…then again, I guess I'm the same. It's pretty normal to look down on yourself, and others' compliments are hard to accept, however… "...It's rare for you to say that kind of stuff."

"Hmm…I hardly say it when I'm with you, perhaps, but this is quite normal. I'm grateful for compliments people give me, but they feel completely empty when they only see my facade. When I reply like this, I'm sure most think I'm just being selfless and kind."

That's true. It's the image of him most people have. "I saw you crying once, you know."

I see his cheeks turn faintly red. "Please, don't remember that. It's embarrassing, but…you're a special case. I won't talk about this with others, but I can with you…and so, I feel at ease, taking off my
mask like this, it feels as though my burden has been lifted. You can say that I lean on you for support. I apologize for that."

"I'm glad if that's the case, so no need for apology."

It feels nice knowing he trusts me like this.

"I wish you'd lean on me more as well, Yamanbagiri-san…but I guess that would be hard. You have so many people with you."

"Eh, but you also have - "

"You're the only one for me."

The volume and coldness in his voice surprise me. I have to stop walking and actually look at him, but I find nothing other than his smile. Always gentle, and yet, I'm shivering…in fear. Just at that one moment. I might've mistook his voice, but thinking about that doesn't ease the fear creeping inside me.

Shake it off. I have to shake it off.

This is the normal Ichigo-senpai. There's nothing wrong…yes, there's nothing, so calm down.

I guess that dream was far more traumatic than I initially thought. Well, who wouldn't be traumatized knowing you were about to get violated? Not to mention the oddity at that place…thinking about it makes me want to vomit. Geh. What a bad memory. I wish I could erase it, because the memories bring forth the pain too.

"Don't look at me like that," Ichigo-senpai says after a rather long silence. "I'm fine as long as you're with me."

Just what kind of face I'm making as I thought about that cursed dream? Judging from his reaction, it must be pity. I hide my disgust quite well, I see. Not to say I'm not feeling pity towards him, but… pity would be the wrong word, I think.

"You look at me highly too, senpai. I'm not like that."

"I know your bad sides too, but I still look at you highly. Hmm, then again, you're the same towards me. We're even, then."

"Eat your own words, huh. Maybe we're more similar than we thought."

"Perhaps."

He smiles before patting my head. "Since it's not raining, why don't you pull down your hood?"

Geh. So that's why. He wants me to take it off again. I thought he wouldn't bother me again on that topic, but I was wrong. Knowing my annoyance, he just smiles as if he has done nothing wrong. "No. It's getting cold for my neck."

"Oh. I know!" As if he gets a good idea, he claps his hands once. "Remember what I said? If the student council wins the relay race in sports festival, I want you to give me a reward."

I have a bad feeling…"What is it?"

"Of course, that reward is having you without your hood for 2 days!"
"That's a punishment!!"

"Just for you. It's a reward for others. Or are you scared…?" He smirks.

Whoa, he's provoking me…and I'm buying it. A man wouldn't take a challenge like this lying down, no? "Okay then, I accept that."

"Good. I'll tell the others. I'm sure they'll get fired up."

He suddenly looks so cheery right now, it's terrifying…but if he's happy, then it's all good.

"That's called digging your own grave."

Oh, Mikazuki. You're awake. Good evening.

"Good evening. I woke up just now. I feel a disturbance in the air."

…What? A disturbance?

"Never mind that. Now that you accepted his offer, there's no way he and the other three will lose."

Why do you sound so convinced? Track team obviously can't join for a good reason, but the club relay race has other sports club, you know, like football and basketball. Those two have been the top winning ones for years.

"It's a simple premonition. Well, then, let's see how it goes. It'd be interesting."

Y-You sound so creepy…you want me to get punished?!

"Well, why not? It's not like you'll die without your hood."

This guy, acting like this when he just woke up - ! Or maybe it's because he just woke up? Half-asleep?

"I've completely woken up…"

You don't have to hide it, I can sense your sleepiness from miles away. Don't sleep again, though, tell us what happened later.

"Understood."

"I just hope nothing bad will happen," Kogitsunemaru says with a sigh.

I hope the same…
"Brother, can't you stay for a dinner here?" Brother Horikawa asks when I get home to take my books after parting ways with Ichigo-senpai. He looks at me with a frown, immediately asking that question after greeting me. "I understand you have to stay with them for a while, but…"

"If it's right now, maybe…well, I'll ask the others first."

"Brother Yamabushi is also here, so it should be fine."

"Oh? He is?"

"He's still meditating right now, though."

"I see."

That's good. I can ask him to fill in some details. I go upstairs to my room, switching the books for tomorrow, before calling Kousetsu-senpai. W-Wait, I think I should call for either Ishikirimaru-san or Taroutachi-san…oh, too late, he picked up.

"Hello?"

"Senpai."

"Yes, Kunihiro-san? Where are you? I just got home from preparation. I know you were there and went home with Hitofuri-san. Did something happen?"

"Ah, no, it's not that."

"Ah, no, it's not that." Already getting worried there, I see. "I'm at my house right now. Brother Horikawa wants me to have dinner here, so can I…? Just dinner, of course. Brother Yamabushi is also here."

"O-Oh…then, I suppose it'll be alright, as long as your brother accompanies you to get here."

"Thanks. Is Ishikirimaru-san or Taroutachi-san there?"

"They are here."

"Then, please tell them about Kashuu, in case they don't know yet. He became weak and craved for blood earlier today - it's apparently pretty bad, so I gave him some of my blood. Just ask him the details."

"I see. I'll tell them. Be careful, Kunihiro-san."

"Mm. See you later."
I end the call there before lying down on my bed, feeling the coldness and softness of the sheets on my skin.

"...I miss this bed already."

My bed is the best. So comfy.

"By the way, is there enough futon in Kousetsu's house?" Mikazuki says, appearing right next to me. "I'll sleep there tonight, after all."

"Mm...I don't know. But maybe. If there isn't, Kogi can turn into a small fox and lend you his place."

"I haven't agreed to it, but if I can sleep in the same futon as Yamanbagiri, then I'll happily do it," Kogitsunemaru says, also appearing next to me.

Mikazuki visibly frowns. "How sly."

"That's a fox for you," he grins. "Oh, right, we should take other clothes."

"You're right. That's the important thing." I just remembered... "Let's get to it, then."

"Wait." Mikazuki holds my arm, refraining me from getting up. "Since there are other people later, we can only flirt all we want right now."

"Uhh, so you want a kiss before we go?"

He smiles. "Yes, exactly."

There's no helping it. "As long as it doesn't take too long."

"It'll be quick, really."

I have a bad feeling...his smile is ominous.

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After that messy kissing session (Kogi obviously joined in) and grabbing clothes, I go downstairs. Brother must be waiting for me. I feel bad for making him wait. In the dining room, I can see Brother Yamabushi is already sitting, and Brother Horikawa is putting plates and bowls on the table.

"You took too long," Brother Horikawa says with a frown. "The food is almost cold now."

"Ahaha...sorry about that." Awkward.

"Let's eat now, kakaka!" Brother Yamabushi says with his unique laugh, taking chopsticks.

"Don't worry, I made enough for Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki," Brother Horikawa says with a smile before he takes a seat.

Very prepared, I see. What if we aren't allowed to? Wait, he can just pack them up for us. There are many ways.

We take a seat and clap our hands together before digging in. It's not like Souza's cooking is bad. In
fact, it's very good, but...he has a long way to go compared to Brother Horikawa's cooking skills. And perhaps Misutada's skills as well. I miss this cooking already...the lunch was good, but it was cold. Warm food is always the best...although tonight's menu is vegetarian because Brother Yamabushi is here. I'm craving for chiken katsu, honestly, but it oh well.

"Brother, do you want me to pack you another lunch?" Brother Horikawa asks. "Just leftovers from this, though."

"Sure. I'll warm it up tomorrow morning."

Dinner finishes peacefully. He walks up to the kitchen with leftovers as I drink water.

"How are you feeling, Brother?" Brother Yamabushi asks. "I've heard what happened."

My hand, huh... "I'm feeling fine right now, but if something like that happens again..."

"There's no guarantee you'll make it out alive."

What a grim fact.

"Is there a charm to keep someone safe when sleeping?" Mikazuki asks. "I don't know how to interfere with dreams, unfortunately, and it can be dangerous if I try carelessly, but I can't just stay still."

"A dreamcatcher should have the same effect," Brother replies, "The effect can be stronger if you put your power into it. I don't have one, but I heard Ishikirimaru does."

"Really?" Nice. I have to go to Kousetsu-senpai's house quickly.

He nods. "Believe you'll be alright, brother."

"Y-Yeah...what are you going to do now, Brother?"

"We'll see how the talk with the others go. I haven't heard all of the information they got." He looks at the clock on the wall. "Let's get going, kakaka! It'll be more dangerous as the night is getting late."

"Okay. I have some questions for you, Brother, but we can talk as we walk."

"I'll tell you what happened first," Mikazuki says, "I heard what Tsurumaru said. He cut off some details, but the summary is right."

I nod before walking to the kitchen. "Brother, we're going now."

"Okay." Brother Horikawa approaches me with the lunch box. "Here."

"Thanks."

"Take care, Brother," he says with a smile.

"I will."

Brother Yamabushi and I walk away from the house. The night has completely fallen, so the entire sky is almost black, with glittering stars here and there at times. The only source of light is the street lights as the moon is hidden behind the clouds. I think the forecast said it might rain tonight.

The cold atmosphere is perfect for oddities to come out and attack.
"So, let me speak of what happened that night after you went away," Mikazuki begins. "Although remembering it and sharing the memories with Yamanbagiri is far more effective, I think Yamabushi-san wants to hear it as well. The first part Tsurumaru said is right. I don't think I have to further elaborate on it. The black hands indeed came out again, but this time from Ichigo's shadow. Over time, there were knives thrown from somewhere we don't know."

Shadow Ichigo's shadow…ok, that's way too weird. Ichigo-senpai's ikiryou… how is that even possible? But I'm sure nobody here knows, so I stay quiet.

"We didn't want to wreck the street, so after we took quite some distance away from him, we ran away."

It's the same so far.

"However, changing direction didn't help. When we turned around the corner, he suddenly appeared right in front of us. Like instant teleportation. Well, if it's teleportation, I won't be surprised, but the problem is…after some time the same thing happened, we realized we didn't go at all - we stayed at the same area. We somehow kept going the same way as we tried to escape. It's as if…every time we tried to escape through the road, we went back to where we started."

It takes a few moments for me to swallow his words. "…Wait, what?"

"It's quite confusing, indeed, but if I have to say it simply…for example, you're going into a tunnel. When you come out, you see the road…and another tunnel. When you go out, you're immediately transported to the entrance of the tunnel. Over and over again, as though there's no escape."

That's…like something fresh out of horror stories and games. Inescapable place. "Is that even possible?"

"It's possible," Brother Yamabushi is the one who replies, "It's a form of black magic - or a forbidden spell, you can say - to trap someone. It's a difficult magic to be done, and it drains much energy. Not everyone can do it."

Mikazuki nods before he stops floating and looks at the road behind. That thing happened just a few meters away from my house, some meters behind us. He might be thinking about it.

"But Yamanbagiri and I escaped," Kogitsunemaru says, appearing next to me with a curious expression, "Did the spell appear after that?"

"Maybe yes, maybe not. We broke free from it by escaping through the skies," Mikazuki replies.

"So it might only affect roads…"

"Correct. We have no way of knowing now."

It'd be more noticeable if the spell covers the sky, too…it'd be bad if that happens. I'm glad it didn't yesterday. For Tsurumaru-senpai to cut off this important detail, though, I'm disappointed. "Then, what else happened?"

"Ichigo couldn't fly, so he didn't run after us, but, the knives and black hands chased after us. It's weird. He didn't seem to control it, though. We suspect someone else did."

"Considering there's no way Ichigo-senpai knows how to cast that spell…that certain someone was the one who cast it."
"Yes. That's what we think. They're pretty persistent, chasing us all the way outside Suzuran without ever revealing themselves - well, we went back after a few minutes. Making more damage is forbidden. I can feel it, though - they're a human. Not an oddity. For what purpose do they seek us - or Tsurumaru in particular, perhaps - I do not know."

That's another new detail. They went outside Suzuran…

"We were basically playing cat and mouse with them. Fighting seems pointless, so we just kept on running. They didn't seem to care about our surroundings, although we flew above the mountains, not stepping into them. The damage shouldn't be too bad, at least. I recovered some parts of the road, walls, and trees around this area last night, after things calmed down. Of course, there's always a chance someone passed by the road before that, but well…” He shrugs. "I did what I can. At least they might think it's just their imagination in the morning."

No wonder he looks tired. It must've consumed a lot of his already limited power. And indeed, on the road to home, I can't see a trace of any battle ever happening. As if everything is just a daydream. Not that the scale of destruction was high yesterday, but hey, they existed. Especially Tsurumaru-senpai's blood…uh, I hope nobody saw it and thought of a murder or something.

Just for your information, normal oddities are just like this. They can affect the reality of everyone without exception. Gashadokuro can only affect those who can see oddities because of its massive size that already took so much power. It required a few things to be able to, but Suzuran doesn't meet the requirement, fortunately.

"And then? Before that? I heard you two went into hiding," Kogitsunemaru asks.

He nods. "That's right. After some time, we were just too tired to keep running. We might spread the damage as well, so we searched for somewhere to hide as we ran. We found an abandoned factory in the outskirts of the city and went there after a few tricks to divert their attention, set up a barrier to forbid anyone from entering, and took a rest. Unexpectedly, there were no further disturbances until your brother found us."

I look at Brother Yamabushi who suddenly looks so proud. How did he find them when they set up a barrier? What a special skill…

"That's all I can say." Mikazuki ends the story. "I was just tired from staying in such a horrible place and fixing some things."

"I see…"

"Letting me sleep on the floor…how cruel this world is to me!" Putting his sleeve in front of his mouth elegantly, he sobs in dramatization.

"Hey, I bought you a futon, " brother retorts with a chuckle.

"That's not enough. I need Yamanbagiri as my pillow."

"I'd rather skip sleeping in an abandoned place, thanks.

"You don't want to accompany me?"

"Yeaah, nope."

"So cruel!"
"If anything, you can always turn into a ball of light and sleep inside me like always."

Sulking, he replies as he pounds my back softly, "But I want to hug you. I'll make sure to do it tonight."

"Sure, sure."

"And my time to monopolize Yamanbagiri all by myself is over, huh..." Kogitsunemaru says with a sad sigh.

Mikazuki glares sharply at him and takes my arm, wrapping his arm around mine. "It's my turn now. You've had enough."

"Eeeh...there's not enough to spend time with him."

"At least don't disturb me, then."

"But I don't."

"Your very existence does."

"What - ?!"

Mikazuki sure likes to provoke when he's in a bad mood, huh. And Kogi just buys it very easily. Don't act like children when my brother is around, please, it's embarrassing...well, it's a bit too late for that, I guess. I know you're joking, no worries.

...If you're wondering, yeah, we've been talking openly with air in normal people's eyes, but it's fine because the road is empty. The only people passing by are us.

With faster pace, we arrive at the shrine, and we don't take time to go to Kousetsu-senpai's house. The clouds are starting to form above - it's about to rain. As expected from rainy season, there's no way a day can pass without any rain. Kousetsu-senpai opens the door after Brother Yamabushi knocks a few times, letting us in.

Everyone is already gathered in the living room with serious expression on their faces, save for Souza and Sayo who already went somewhere. I feel nervous all of sudden. We sit on the cushions, circling around the table. Both Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru just sit behind me, though.

We stay still just like that.

It's so quiet.

"Err...before we start," Ishikimaru-san breaks the suffocating silence, rummaging through his bag placed on the tatami floor. He takes out a dreamcatcher. It looks normal like any other dreamcatcher you can buy anywhere, and yet it looks somewhat glowing in my eyes, other than the fact some talismans are wrapped it. "This is a dreamcatcher for Yamanbagiri. It should be enough protection for now, but just to be safe, Munechika-san can put some power into it. We don't know what might happen."

Mikazuki nods in understanding. I take the dreamcatcher before noticing something below the table, some parts of it sticking out near Taroutachi-san - is that a tail? He notices my gaze and gently takes
the thing on the table. I'm shocked. That thing is a cute living creature with quite the small stature, as big as a medium-sized doll. If only its elephant nose didn't move, I might've mistake it as a doll.

"This is a baku. The child, but it is willing to help with consent from its parents," Taroutachi-san says. "It can't talk yet, but it understands us."

"A child baku… h-how did you find it and ask it for help?" I ask in surprise. Baku is an oddity that eats dreams. True, it might help me when I get dangerous dreams, but the species is known to be shy and is very good at hiding. For one to appear out of its own volition is a first, even for me.

He smiles meaningfully. "I have connections."

A real specialist is really in a whole different world…

"It's here as insurance, just in case the dreamcatcher can't contain everything properly."

The small baku walks to me in careful steps. It really is shy, but it gently pokes my hand resting on the table. Its expression doesn't change, but it looks so cute…! My heart is taken almost immediately. I pat it gently and it doesn't seem to mind.

"Nice to meet you."

It nods a few times. Uwaah…I want to take it home and make it my pet. I really do.

"Can I kidnap it?" I ask a pointless question anyway.

"Of course not. Look, you're scaring it."

"Oh. Sorry, I'm kidding." I look at the baku. It's kinda shuddering right now, but once again, its expression doesn't really change. This baku looks far milder than the older bakus, as its chimera-like appearance - a mix of animals, such as ox and tiger with the head of an elephant - haven't really developed further. It looks like a harmless doll from someone's creation.

"A baku is a good idea. We should've taken it sooner…" Kogitsunemaru mumbles. "Though I barely see any baku talismans around here."

Yeah, nowadays, baku talismans are hard to find. Its chimera appearance scare many people who don't understand that it's our guardian. Actually, the norm is having baku eat the nightmare as soon as we wake up, but it's not like bakus are easy to find. I heard that their numbers have gone down lately. They are capable of running at mach speed, looking like they teleport instantly and all, but even there's a limit on what they can do. The talismans can teleport them instantly to the person's place, but with the unpopularity of baku talismans…I remember Brother said that they do patrols in certain areas at certain days in shifts, so not everyone's nightmares in Suzuran can be consumed. Nobody was patrolling here yesterday when I got the dream.

"It took a considerable amount of time to convince this baku. I'm glad its parents agreed to," Taroutachi-san says.

"Why not just give me baku talisman?"

"This is quicker and safer in case of emergency."

"Okay…so, I will just sleep with this guy?"

"Yes. Place it next to you after you hang the dreamcatcher."
I look at Kousetsu-senpai sitting nervously next to me. He looks so uneasy for some reason. About the small room that will be filled by Mikazuki, maybe? "Senpai, where can we hang the dreamcatcher?"

"Um…there's no place near you to hang it…does putting it next to you work?"

I look at Ishikirimaru-san, who soon nods, "That works as well, although then its usage as a decoration falters."

There's no helping it. I think it'd be more dangerous to be too far away from it, anyway. I just hope neither Kogi or Mikazuki wreck it when we sleep together. It's a very possible thing to happen. Hmm, I wonder if I can hug the baku instead, since it's a bit awkward to have it next to my pillow or behind it…geh, my mind is already thinking about sleep. Yeah, I'm tired, I want to sleep and I need it.

"A dreamcatcher and a baku… seems like a mix of culture," Mikazuki says after a few moments, "I pray for the best for tonight. Let me purify the dreamcatcher further, Yamanbagiri."

Taking the dreamcatcher I give into his hands, he closes his eyes and focuses on it, trying to imbue his holy power within it. It's a process I've seen a few times before, so I turn my attention away from him and let him focus. "So, other things to be discussed…"

"We haven't find out who the mysterious person is," Ishikirimaru-san replies, "But we found some traces and are still looking into it."

"Oh, right. Mikazuki said the person is a human. He could feel it. If that helps."

"That can narrow it down, thank you. As for Kiyomitsu-san's trouble, we'll be the ones talking to him, so you don't have to worry. We have a few plans."

"Okay." I trust them and it's a burden lifted from my shoulders. Maybe that's their intention too. I'm still facing this dream problem, after all. And there's still Ichigo-senpai…

"Here. I'm done," Mikazuki says, giving me the dreamcatcher. I take it. Huh, it's somewhat heavier than before. The weight of his power, I guess. But it doesn't seem he is finished. With a serious expression, he takes a deep breath. "Yamanbagiri, I didn't tell you this before, but, it's because I want to inform all of you right now."

"Hm?" I have a bad feeling…

"Actually, I had a dream last night. You can say it's a nightmare."

What?!

"I do not know if that dream can affect reality or not, but I saw the same creature as in Yamanbagiri's dream. Exactly the same." When I told him about it, the image flashed in my mind, and he saw it, of course. "Unlike him, though, I could move freely. It's less of a nightmare for me. Everything felt real as I walked across the corridor of what seemed to be an apartment building. It was dark at night, with only a moon hanging in the sky. Not knowing what to do or where exactly I was, I just walked around, searching for anything interesting. Everything was normal until at the end of the corridor…" He stops at that cliffhanger, his eyes narrowing. This seems very…horror-storytelling-like.

"…At the end of the corridor, as you expected, there's that creature, coming out from one of the rooms. It exploded right in front of me before I could think of anything…and at that moment, I woke
I'm not hurt, however, the sight was disturbing."

It must be, like…a lump of meat exploding from inside…blood and stuffs splatter everywhere…
gaaah, don't imagine it, me! That's way too disturbing…my stomach feels sick again. Ow. Don't think about it, me. Forget it.

"Hmm…there's a high chance the same curse was placed upon you. It'd be weirder if there wasn't," Ishikirimaru-san replies after a silence, "Perhaps you were at the same place as Yamanbagiri was at."

Mikazuki nods. "I think so as well. I wish I could check where the room is."

"Did you experience anything else?"

He shakes his head. "Just that dream. It made me uneasy for many reasons. I woke up before dawn, so I couldn't sleep again."

Severely lacking sleep, isn't it…but wait, I woke up after dawn. Our time doesn't match. Maybe he was pulled out before that creature came to me? Maybe there's more than one creature in that world? Maybe our dreams are separate, not in the same world at the same time - he had the dream first, and then me?

There's a lot to dig, I see. I think everyone is thinking the same.

"As for Hitofuri-san…did you notice anything strange with him today?" Taroutachi-san asks, putting the dream aside.

To be honest, he is acting far too open with me. I think that's a good thing, though, but I'll just say it. "He is being open and more honest with me for some reason, but he still didn't want to tell me what bothered him. He said he'll tell me when he is ready."

"Do you think he is getting attached to you?"

"Attached…?" The word sounds so strong. I believe everyone needs something they're attached to, but I'm sure he means in a bad way, like very attached and dependant. "I don't think so. Besides, it just been a day. He didn't act drastically different from before, so even if he does, I can't really tell for now."

"I see. Thank you. Did your senior say anything?"

Senior - must be Tsurumaru-senpai. "Nothing about that. Ah, should I ask him if he sees another Ichigo-senpai today?"

"You should. Any information is good."

I take out my smartphone and immediately message Tsurumaru-senpai through LINE. Unexpectedly, he seems to be on and reads it immediately as the sign says so. The answer comes soon, 'I didn't see him at all today. Did you send him to the seventh heaven?'

Uhh…What does he mean? I'm staring at the message for a while now, but I still have no idea. Happiness, maybe? "He said he didn't see him at all today…and asked me if I made him happy or something."

"I see…well, there's no doubt that the existence of ikiryou corresponds his current mental state. If he is happy, then it's unlikely it'll appear. It's good. It'd be dangerous if he is happy and the ikiryou is still roaming around." Ishikirimaru-san nods a few times. "We'd like you and your senior to monitor
him for a while and help him when necessary. Keep his mental state stable."

"Of course. That's what we're doing…well, trying."

"I'm sure Hitofuri-san doesn't know the one who helped his *ikiryū*, but just to be safe, can you ask him if he knows of someone who perhaps can do such a thing?"

"Okay. I'll ask him."

"Alright. That's all for now." Taroutachi-san claps his hands. "We need to see what happens next to decide on other things."

This kind of thing is always such a slow process. There's nothing to be done about that since we severely lack information and have to seek our own path. It's full of uncertainties and confusion. There's the dream that affects reality, which somehow linked to Ichigo-senpai's *ikiryū*, and the mysterious person that may caused all of this. Who, how and why - just like a mystery story, we need to solve these questions by gathering clues, and then confront the culprit.

There's also still the previous case with *gashadokuro* and *jubokko*. The culprit might be the same.

Heh, it sounds so cool, but I'm not particularly excited. Problems after problems keep on piling up, and they aren't exactly safe for me. They aren't easy to solve, either. It sucks. Life connected with oddities suck in general, be it for me or those specialists, or even normal people like Ichigo-senpai. The only unlucky one isn’t me, for better or worse.

At one side, I feel glad because I'm not alone, but at another side, I feel bad because they don't deserve this. The specialists are one thing because they knew the risks when they entered this world, but the innocent people…like Kashuu…they're just victims.

Sometimes I wonder why I'm still here, in this world, even knowing all the troubles it brings. Although...if I'm not here, I won't be able to meet with everyone, and I might not help anyone. Being useless, unable to do anything as I watch people around me suffer…is the last thing I want to do.

To be honest, I already feel like a burden right now. After all, because of me, they have extra work to do…because of that dream…that's why, I have to do my best on what I can do.

I clench my fist, feeling renewed resolve burning inside me.

For now, I'll have to sleep, and then I can -

"*Yamanbagiri, aren't you forgetting something?*" Kogitsunemaru suddenly asks - in my mind, for some reason.

Forgetting what?

"*What Tsurumaru said. His theory about that dream, so to speak.*"

Hmm, which one…oh, that one - that Ichigo-senpai is unharmed because I didn't hurt him physically?

"*Yes, that one. I think it's worth mentioning. Another possibility on the list.*"

I completely forgot about that, thanks. Fortunately, everyone is still sitting in silence even though the discussion has supposedly been finished for today, so I can say it safely.
"Um, I just remembered something. This is what Tsurumaru-senpai thinks about the dream."

Having everyone's attention snap back to me feels so uncomfortable, but I continue and explain what Tsurumaru-senpai said. I try my best to explain it, at least, but by the end, it seems they understand, so it's good.

"That's an interesting theory," Brother Yamabushi finally speaks up, "It's worth looking for."

"I agree." The other two specialists nod, but Kousetsu-senpai's face just seems even paler. I can't blame him, everything about this is sickening and worrying. Ishikirimaru-san stands up and says, "It's getting late, why don't we rest for tonight?"

Ending the gathering with that note, he and Taroutachi-san walk away from the living room, probably to talk for a bit on what they're going to do tomorrow. The others stay with thoughtful expressions on their face. The air feels kind of heavy, for some reason…gaah, I forgot to ask when can I go back to sleep at my home. I feel like I'm greatly bothering Kousetsu-senpai and his brothers, staying like this and doing nothing of importance…then again, with this kind of uncertain situation, I don't think I can go back soon.

"Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki tugs on my sleeves and says gently, "Let's go sleep now. You must be tired."

"Ah, yeah…"

"Can you even sleep again?" Kogitsunemaru looks at him in doubt.

"Well, I'll try."

Not very convincing…I look at Kousetsu-senpai, who is still looking down on his lap. "Senpai."

"Y-Yes?" He perks up in surprise. Being worried is alright, but I feel like he is acting a bit strange. A bit unlike him.

"Do you have extra an futon for Mikazuki?"

"I have." He stands up. "I'll get it now."

"Let me help you," Kogitsunemaru says, also standing up and stretching out his arms, "We can't let the owner of the house do all of the work."

Senpai looks like he wants to refuse but he nods anyway. The two of them disappear around the corner. I look at Brother Yamabushi, whose posture is as stiff as before, with his hands crossed.

"Brother, what will you do now?"

He opens his eyes. "I'll go home."

"I mean, yeah, of course, but…"

"Kakaka! I know what you mean, Brother. I'll look around for clues tomorrow, but it is time to rest tonight. You shouldn't think too hard about it now. Instead, think when your head is clear after a good sleep."

I nod as he stands up and pats my back. "Okay. Good night. Be careful, Brother."

He smiles. "Good night. Tell the others I'm leaving now." He waves me off as he walks away, opening the front door and slams it close.
There's only me and Mikazuki in the living room now. Okay, well, there's the *baku*, but it's looking around the room in curiosity right now. Hnngh… it's suddenly so quiet. I lean to Mikazuki behind me. He catches me and wraps his arms around my waist. I feel my body relaxing feeling his touch as I take a few deep breaths.

"Should we go help those two, or do you want to stay like this?" He asks in a whisper.

"Staying like this for a while is fine. You were missing for a pretty long time, after all."

"Just a few hours, really. Do you miss me?"

"You know I do. Very much."

He giggles softly, his fingers reaching for my bangs to play with them. "Before *that* dream, did you dream of me?"

"Nope."

"Ouch. How sad. I dreamed of you."

I glance at him. It seems he isn't joking as his expression is quite gentle. "Really?"

With a nod, he pecks my cheek. "Yes. I don't remember the details, however, but I remember you were there, looking no different than right now."

"Do you remember what is it about?"

"I only remember bits of it. You were standing in the middle of a field full of colorful flowers. It's a beautiful sight."

"That's quite the elegant dream you have."

"Your face looked sad, though. I don't feel exactly happy about it. I was like a floating camera - I could move, but I couldn't touch or talk to you. It was a strange dream. I've never dreamed of you or something like that before. I only watched as you walked to the cliff."

"To the… cliff?" That sounds dangerous all of sudden.

"You just sat on the edge and it ended. Or there might be something else, but my memory is vague."

"I see." It's just a normal dream, after all. "People said that if you dream of someone, you miss them."

"I did miss you at that time. I'm angry at anyone who planted a curse on us for cutting that dream," he says with a sulk, his hands wrapping even tighter. "I wish I could dream of you again."

"Why should you when the real one is here?"

"Hmm, good point, but I'm still interested to see you in my dream."

"Try lucid dreaming, then, I'm sure you'll like it." At that moment, a thought comes to my mind abruptly. It's a weird question, but I find it intriguing. "Mikazuki, I'm sure you know what I'm about to ask you right now but… did you realize you were in a dream when you had the dream with that monster?"

Mikazuki shakes his head. "No. I don't know where I was, and yet I never consider that it was a dream until I woke up."
"It's the same for me. When you saw me in the previous dream…did you realize you were dreaming?"

"…Thinking about it now, I do. I remember seeing you and think *ah, this is just a dream, isn't it.* I can neither control or actively get out of it since I was only a camera, though, and for some reason, my memory is foggy about it. What about it? Your mind is jumbled right now, but you look like you found something."

"No, uhh…I'm not sure, but I have a hunch…think hard. Was there anything out of the ordinary on my body in that dream? Or maybe how I acted?"

He falls into thought as he tries to remember the dream, and soon after, he audibly gasps. That's rare of him. "I remember now. You were holding a flower. I'm not an expert at flowers, so I can't tell what flower it is. It's small. You sat on the cliff and started to pluck out the petals."

"….That's not something I'd normally do, but it's otherwise…normal?"

"No. Listen," he looks at me with serious eyes, "It'd be fine if you just plucked out the petals, but you were mumbling words I couldn't hear. At that moment, it seemed as though the ground shook, and if my memory is correct, your wristband turned red. That's the end of the dream, happening in seconds. I'm not certain about some parts, but I'm fairly sure that's the gist of it."

"My wristband…that's the area where I got bitten…..I still don't know if my hunch is right, but that doesn't seem like a very normal dream, no? There's also that - you knew you were in a dream - lucid dreaming, and yet you couldn't even get out."

"You might be right. I don't know many things about dreams, so I'm not sure…"

"If, and only what if, your lucid dream has something to do with me - namely the curse?" But what kind of connection? The red line connecting them is slowly forming in my mind, however still blurry, I can barely make it out. I know I'm close to finding it, to grab that piece of puzzle, but I can't grasp it. My mind fails to connect the pieces. This is so frustrating…"Ugh, I don't know if that's even possible, but I'll take every theory that exists. Every possibility. No matter how crazy it sounds."

"Everything is possible before proven otherwise." Mikazuki eventually nods. "It's worth looking into. If I have a dream again, I'll tell you. Remember, though, making theories is fine, but you can't be biased towards one. Always look objectively according to the facts and clues."

"I understand."

Is this an improvement or another problem? For now, I can't tell, but if Mikazuki's dream can, one way or another, help me if I get trapped inside the same dream again, or predict what will happen in my dream, I might be able to counter this curse. This is hope. I want to believe that.

"We should tell Kogitsunemaru and Kousetsu-senpai later," I say, looking at him.

"I agree. Talking helps to form concrete opinions. Although, to be honest, I prefer you to sleep before discussing it. I'm sure it'd be a long night if you don't."

"Aah, you're right. My brain is also tired now."

We look at each other and lean closer into a kiss for no reason at all. Good night kiss? Perhaps.
=7-07=

The four of us - me, Kousestu-senpai, Kogitsunemaru, and Mikazuki - almost slept too late last night because of that new theory. In fact, we barely got the healthy amount of sleep. Even though I said to discuss it this morning with the two specialists, we ended up talking about it anyway, because it was interesting. It was actually fun, but when we realized the time…

By the way, there was enough futon for Mikazuki, so Kogitsunemaru didn't turn into a small fox, for better or worse. I also didn't have any dreams, much to my relief - perhaps thanks to the baku and dreamcatcher. Mikazuki didn't dream, either.

We're having breakfast right now while telling that theory to Ishikirimaru-san and Taroutachi-san.

"So…what do you think?" I ask nervously after swallowing food.

The two of them look like they're in deep thought as they eat. Honestly, this isn't something I want Souza and Sayo to hear, but they already know that I have a dream problem anyway. No need to hide something so urgent now.

After a moment and after taking a rolled egg, Ishikirimaru-san replies, "I think it's very possible, considering the two of you have a connection in mind."

Connection in mind…he means reading each other's mind and even sharing senses, such as pain. Still, having a connection in dreams? It's an outrageous idea. Dreams are supposedly manifestation of the subconscious. If Mikazuki had a dream to warn him about my safety, doesn't that mean his subconsciousness knows beforehand that something will happen to me? Some kind of premonition or prediction…but how?

Maybe my perplexed look screams my thoughts as Taroutachi-san adds, "There's no way of knowing how it happens just yet. We have to look deeper into your connection. Perhaps it's Mikazuki-san's power as a shinrei."

"I don't remember having it. A new power is possible, however…" Mikazuki says, looking unsure.

There really is no logic or reason in mystical powers sometimes. The oddities' world is truly a world beyond comprehension. My head might as well have exploded from all the possibilities and people around me. Ugh. A headache so early in the morning just spells bad luck for the rest of the day…wait, did I just jinx myself?

After looking at Taroutachi-san and seemingly talking with their eyes, Ishikirimaru-san says, "If possible, I want you to search for the cause in your own self before seeking the external cause."

I think he is referring to both me and Mikazuki. Nodding, I say, "We'll do that." Not that I know exactly how, but we'll find the way. I hope.

"It can be a powerful weapon to counter the dream if it happens again," he adds.

"I'm thinking the same thing." It'll really help me to brace for the dream and maybe fight it…if Mikazuki can wake me up and tell me about what he saw before I dream, that is. I'm not exactly a heavy sleeper, but I have times where waking me up can only be done by throwing cold water on my face. Only when my internal clock is messed up, at least.
Finishing breakfast, Taroutachi-san claps his hands. "We also will try to find the cause alongside the curse. We'll inform you when we find something."

"Thank you so much." I awkwardly bow. Gosh, I'm putting more burden on their shoulders. More tasks on their agenda.

"Kousetsu-san, can you look after them?" He turns to ask Kousetsu-senpai, who has been listening closely.

Kousetsu-senpai nods. "Of course. I'll try to help as much as I can."

Ah, that reminds me. Today is the last day of preparation for the sports festival, since the festival is tomorrow. We're going to get busy after school today. I kind of hope we can use the lessons at the end to prepare instead, but this school doesn't work like that.

Never mind after school. So early this morning, and I already get… a thing. I don't know what to call it. It's not really a problem, but it's really mysterious to the point it's disturbing.

I look at the one in front of me, staring at me so intently he might stab me with his gaze.

"Umm…Hasebe? What's wrong?"

There's no reply.

W-What is even happening right now?

Uuuh…okay, so…after I parted ways with Kousetsu-senpai, I get to my classroom. Just as early as I've always been. As usual, Hasebe was already here. We greeted each other. It went normally. So how did things end up like this? Why am I being pinned to the wall, out of blue, when I haven't even put my bag on my desk?

"H-Hasebe, you're close…"

"Does that bother you?"

"I-It does." Of course it is! There's no way it doesn't. Being this close with someone physically…is not normal in any way. My heart can't take this.

"Hmm. I see."

Despite hearing my reply, Hasebe only mumbles, keeping his right arm on the wall to block my way…and gets a bit closer. Actually, I might as well just go through the gap on the other side, but my feet are glued to the ground, refusing my command to move. Why, my legs?! Huh, wait…isn't this a popular trend? Kabedon, isn't it? A romantic…pinning to the wall. Romantic.

No way, no way, no way. No Way.

It's also a thing thugs do to stop someone from moving, so…shake off that romance part, me. I'm not a lovestruck maiden. Keep your eyes open to reality, not fiction.

"You're blushing," Hasebe suddenly says, a smirk forming on his lips, "Not everyday I can see it. Cute."
"W-Why are you teasing me…? If that's all you want to do, let me go."

"Why the hurry?"

And now he's asking me back, grr… "I-If someone sees us like this - "

"It's still early. You know it. Nobody is going to come for at least 20 minutes. That's plenty of time."

Plenty of time to do what?! My mind is running wild right now, it's dangerous! H-Help me, Kogi, Mikazuki!

"We'll stop him if he attacks you, but this is otherwise harmless," Kogitsunemaru says nonchalantly. "You just have a wild imagination."

Anything can happen right now and this is bad for my heart! Harmless my ass!

"Where are you looking?" Whoa, whoa - Hasebe suddenly forcefully pulls my chin with his left hand and says, "Look at me."

I can only stare at his piercing gaze and shudder. Even blinking is hard, as if my body is at his command. This is so uncomfortable. "You're being weird…"

"Will you hate me for this?"

"N-No. Why should I?"

"Then that's good. Just for today, let me be weird."

You were acting weird a few days ago too, though…but I can't say it. My gut tells me that I would not get away unharmed if I said it.

Suddenly, I feel a tickling sensation on my skin. His thumb runs across my chin, just below my lips, lifting my head slightly. "Answer me honestly, Yamanbagiri."

What is this, an interrogation? Seems like it. I have no other choice but to gulp and wait for his question.

"I saw you with Hitofuri-senpai yesterday. After school, preparing for the sports festival."

"O-Oh…were you there? I didn't see you."

"No. I was going home, just passing by."

Figures. He was never the type to be active in that kind of activity unless necessary, to be honest.

"So, what about it?" I ask, getting impatient. Ask me whatever you want already.

For some reason, Hasebe cleans closer. I can feel his chest touching mine slightly. M-My cheeks feel so hot. "You were gone during the 2nd break yesterday, running away right after the bell rang. Were you with him as well?"

Ichigo-senpai? I don't know how he came to that conclusion, but it's right, so…I don't see why I should lie. I nod. "I was."

"What were you doing?"
W-Why does he want to know, and why does he look even more intense than before…? I'm honestly getting scared. "W-We were just talking…and he pushed me to help him after school to prepare for sports festival."

"Did you two go home together?"

I nod again, still having no idea where this would go.

"What did the two of you do?"

"Nothing in particular…just talking. What about it?" I really want to say it's none of his business, I feel like his mood will be worse if I say that, so I refrain myself and go along. There's no harm, anyway. Just then, a possibility for his action dawns upon me. "Wait, there's no disciplinary committee work that I missed, right?"

He shakes his head. "There's none."

Then why all of this…I can only frown as a response, but this reaction seems to please him instead.

"Heh, you have a nice expression right now."

He's provoking me again and I'm buying it. "Is that all that you want to ask? Then I'm going." I'm already moving, slapping his hand away from my chin, when he blocks my way with his arm.

"Not yet," he says. I stare at him - almost glaring, seeing his eyes somewhat wavering, before he weakly says, "Can I…hug you?"

…What? Did I hear that right? Uh-oh, he looks away slightly with red cheeks. Getting embarrassed now? Hasebe is really a strange man. The strangest I've ever met, to be honest…but I can never get angry.

"If that's what you wanted all along, then just say it from the start. Sheesh. You can, go ahead."

I embrace him first, before his hands reluctantly hug me back. This isn't the first time we hugged, but it's sure more awkward.

"I don't know what happened, but there, there," I say, patting his back.

He stays mostly quiet before mumbling, "…Spoiling me like this, this is why you…"

"Hmm?"

"…Nothing." With a sigh, he releases his arms from me and looks down on the ground. "…Sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for. You can vent to me when you're ready."

He weakly nods, turning his head away - to my left hand. "How is your hand?"

"Ah, it's getting better, but, just for a while, I'll keep the bandage."

I walk away to my seat now that it's over. It's… *weird* beyond words. Never in my life have I experienced something like that before this, even with my life accompanied with oddities. I'm still shocked about it, but my body moves as if to escape and save myself from further awkwardness.

Hasebe sits on the empty seat in front of mine - just like any other day, but with awkwardness still hanging in the air. At least my heartbeat is calm now.
It's normal...yeah. Everyone needs a break from their persona sometimes. I'm no exception, so it's fine. Besides, Hasebe has a hard time expressing himself honestly, so this kind of thing is not new, now that I think about it. It's the same as before - he has no idea how to ask for it nicely, being too embarrassed about, so he pushes himself on me.

At least it's nothing bad. It sure surprised the heck out of me, though.

I take out my smartphone and play a mobile game while he looks at me with bored eyes.

After a few moments of silence, he speaks up with a low, trembling voice, "Um, Yamanbagiri..."

"Mm? No need to be embarrassed after all of that, you know."

"S-Shut up." He groans before continuing, "I...I want to spend the second break time with you."

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"Anywhere you want."

"Hmm...I guess the cafeteria or the back of the building would be good. Let's just see later." We talked a few times at the back of building before - the same place as when I spend time with Yoshiyuki. No problem at all. It really is a perfect secret spot.

"Are you going to spend time with Hitofuri-senpai again today?"

"I don't know."

"...I can't leave the two of you alone. If you're going to meet him, I'll come too no matter what."

What a mysterious pause. "Huh? Why?"

"I just can't. I'm worried about you."

Why are you worried about me being with Ichigo-senpai? It's an important question, but I shut my mouth before focusing on my game. Things can go down if I say something wrong, even unknowingly, so I won't say anything for now. "I see."

"Are you going to help prepare for the sports festival again today?" He asks after a pause.

"Yeah."

"I saw Yoshiyuki helping too yesterday."

"He is the class representative, after all. I'm pretty sure it's obligatory for him."

"I guess so. I'll also help. Just this one time."

"Oh, nice." It's very rare of him to help on his own initiative, because he's usually not interested in that kind of thing, and thus doesn't want to help. I think there were enough helpers yesterday, and we almost finished preparing everything, but knowing there's someone else I know in the field soothes me.

"And then there's relay race tomorrow. I'm after you."

"Right. I honestly want to skip. if only I didn't have to participate in a competition...a relay race on top of that." I heave a sigh.
"Bad kid. Everyone in class has to participate."

"It's not a very strict rule, and there are people who don't get anything sometimes."

Hasebe frowns but he eventually nods. 

"…You're right."

"The one who chose who is participating is Yoshiyuki with the help of some others, anyway. He must be teasing us by putting us in the relay race with him. Abusing his authority as a class rep."

"True. Well, let's do our best tomorrow. I hate to lose."

I can see fire burning in his eyes and unspoken words - *we have to win.* "You're always competitive."

"I still can't beat you in grades, though. I was so close."

"T-That's…"

"I don't mind if it's you, so it's fine. I'm just a bit bitter sometimes."

….At least I'm saved from being on the receiving end of his competitive spirit. I never liked competitions in general, and Hasebe is terrifying when he puts all of his power into something. I certainly don't want to feel that stabbing my back. I'm glad I have his good side.

He puts a hand on his chin, staring at me and says, "I'm too soft on you, honestly."

"Is that so? I find it good…you're being awfully honest today, though. It's unusual."

"I'm always honest. With you."

"Oooh, really?"

"Really." Looking down on my phone, he suddenly taps the screen with his index finger.

"Aaah! What are you doing?! Thank god you didn't press anything."

Smirking, he taps on my finger this time. "Too bad for me."

"Oi…"

"By the way, this just crossed my mind. Are you going to wear your hood during relay race?"

Geh, here comes the topic I wanted to avoid at all costs. My beloved hood. "I did it last year, so of course it's the same this year. Yes."

"It's going to fall anyway, why wear it?"

"I do whatever I want - ouch!"

Hasebe suddenly flicks my forehead with his fingers before I finish my sentence. I pause the game and

"What?!

"I do whatever I want."

This guy…first, pinning me to the wall out of blue, and now teasing me like this…sometimes I
wonder why I'm still friends with him and can keep up with his randomness. It's not a moodswing or something similar, it's more like he is hiding whatever bothering me and try to act like normal, ended up getting even more worked up to shove away the bad thoughts. I understand.

"You're also random, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki chirps in. "That's why you understand."

Geez, shut up.

Classes and first lunch break went peacefully.

It's second break time. I already told Yoshiyuki about my plan today - spending time with Hasebe, maybe with Ichigo-senpai if he asked. Yoshiyuki looked sad hearing it, he obviously wants to spend time with me (me too), but as usual, there's no other choice. We already have a promise to spend time together in the weekend anyway, some time apart from each other now is okay. Man, he is such a caring and kind boyfriend, I'm starting to question whether I deserve him or not.

Now that I already got consent from him, I can go with Hasebe.

"Wait, we haven't agreed yet," Kogitsunemaru cuts my thoughts with a firm voice, "In fact, we haven't talked about it at all."

What? I thought the two of you automatically give me consent at this kind of situation…

"I appreciate how you ask for your lovers' permission now, Yamanbagiri, but no, there's no auto-agreement. There never is, and there'll never be," Mikazuki says.

E-Ehh? That's the first time I've heard of this.

"That said, it's not like we can just refuse when you want it so much…right?" Kogitsunemaru says, asking for validation.

"That's right."

"Besides, I personally don't consider this an urgent situation where we have no other choice but to agree," he adds. I can imagine him lifting his index finger. "Your life isn't at stake at this moment…or wait, is it?"

"…It actually can be, in another sense. I don't want to risk it." Mikazuki lets out a long 'hmmm', seemingly thinking hard.

Come on, there's no harm if I go, right? Besides, you should've talked to me earlier. It'd be hard to turn Hasebe down now…

"Yes, we're too soft on you. You may go," Mikazuki says, as if shooing me off.

Okay then, good. I wasted some thinking spacing out in others' eyes because of this, sheesh. Thank god Hasebe seems busy jolting down notes. He might have not wrote down everything on the board yet. I stay still on my seat, waiting, when Yamato approaches me.

"Are you okay, Yamanbagiri?" He asks, "You seem spaced out for a while."

So he noticed. "I'm okay, really. Daydreaming is normal."
"Hmm…what are you going to do now?"

"Ah…" I glance at Hasebe. He closes his notebook before tidying up his stationary. "I'm going with Hasebe. He…wants to talk about something. I don't exactly know."

"I see." Yamato nods in understanding. He leans closer to me and whispers, "I heard about Kashuu. I heard he was given a solution already, but he seems uneasy about it, I'm worried. He doesn't want to tell me anything…"

He wants me to dig for information, huh. "I'll ask him or the specialists later."

"Thanks."

Right at that moment, Hasebe walks up to me and says, "Let's go."

I nod, waving Yamato off. It's clear since the start that we tend to split up in the 2nd break time. Since weeks ago, yes. It actually makes me kind of sad, but I have things I must do, so it's good since there'd be no hard feelings.

"Where do you want to go, Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe asks after we enter the hallway.

"Back of the building seems nice."

"Ah, that secret spot." He nods in agreement.

"Yamanbagiri-san - Oh."

I turn around after hearing that familiar voice, finding Ichigo-senpai standing behind us with a troubled expression - somewhere between happy and bitter.

"Ichigo-senpai, What's wrong?" I ask him.

Instead of answering my question, though, he asks, "Am I interrupting the two of you?"

I look at Hasebe. He isn't interrupting us in my view, but what about him…? There were sparks between them plenty of times, something like animosity, so I'm afraid of them fighting if I decide all by myself. Hasebe stares back at me, his expression unreadable, flat and emotionless.

"….No, you are not," he replies after a moment, much to my relief. That moment of silence is frightening. It feels like forever.

"What do you want from me, Ichigo-senpai?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm thinking to spend some time with you, if you don't mind. There's no need to do work right now, since everything will be done after school, but if Hasebe-san doesn't allow it…"

A hand pushes my back. It's Hasebe. "It's fine if Yamanbagiri wants it. I can go somewhere else."

O-Oi. That's not what we agreed on. Although we stay silent most of the time when being together, it's a peaceful time and I know he likes it as well, so why… "T-The three of us can hang out together. I can't just ditch you, Hasebe. If that's okay."

"Choosing the third option, as expected from our harem leader," Kogitsunemaru says with a laugh. W-Who are you referring to as harem leader?! No, I know it's me, but still, ugh. You really broke the mood. It's just the best choice for me, okay?
Uh-oh. Both senpai and Hasebe are silent, looking at me, as if trying to dig whatever lies inside me. "I'm fine with it," Ichigo-senpai eventually replies with a smile.

Hasebe ruffles his hair before sighing. "Okay. Whatever you want."

It almost seems like I'm forcing them to go with me instead. I feel somewhat bad, but it's even more uncomfortable with this heavy air between the two of them. I feel so nervous and awkward that the time seems to pass by slowly before we get to the back of the building.

"Oooh, this place," Ichigo-senpai mumbles when he sees the ground surrounded by thick green bushes. No flowers are in bloom here. "This is quite...the spot."

"I have a feeling you wanted to say naughty," Hasebe says, narrowing his eyes.

Ichigo-senpai chuckles, not giving a rejection at all. "I've been in this kind of spot before. That's my impression every time, even though the surroundings are quite different."

"So you went here for naughty stuff?"

"Of course not. I have no one for that."

Smooth rejection there. I can't imagine someone as (seemingly) innocent and gentlemanly as Ichigo-senpai do that kind of thing, honestly. It's almost like a fantasy, out of this world, even though he is not as pure as I thought he was. Not even Yoshiyuki is safe from that kind of thing...wait, isn't it my fault in Yoshiyuki's case?

"What about Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe suddenly asks me when I sit.

"How about me...what?"

"Do you know this spot because you do stuff here?"

...W-What kind of topic is this?! "Hasebe, we went here a few times before too, you remember? It's nothing lewd."

It's Ichigo-senpai's time to shoot a suspicious glare at Hasebe, who just replies, "That still doesn't answer my question."

Does it even matter?! But that'd give away the truth, so I have to lie. Sure, it's nothing very lewd with Yoshiyuki or Mikazuki or Kogi, but still, I admit, it's not something I should do at school. "I-I don't, of course. I just like to be alone once in a while, so I searched for quiet spots."

"I see. I'll accept that reason for now," Hasebe says with a faint smile before sitting down next to me. So he doesn't completely believe me...I'm hurt.

"It's okay, I believe in you, Yamanbagiri-san." Ichigo-senpai pats my shoulder after he sits - also next to me, so now I'm sitting between the two of them. I just nod awkwardly.

H-Huh...is it just me, or did the tension just level up? I suddenly realize how close they are with me. Our shoulders almost touch each other. W-What to do now...? For now, I just lean my back to the wall and take out my smartphone, intending to finish a certain web novel.

"Yamanbagiri, I'm borrowing your lap."
"Huh - ?"

Just like that, Hasebe rests his head on my lap. Forcefully. That warning is too short! HOI!! My lap feels ticklish right now, it's weird…I'm not used having someone else other than my three lovers resting on my lap like this…it feels different, for a reason I don't understand.

"You don't mind, do you?" He asks.

"Too late for that…" I heave a sigh. "Do whatever you like."

"Thanks."

At least he's polite enough to say thanks. He closes his eyes and seemingly drifts off to somewhere else. Hasebe napping, huh…I seriously want to know what happened to him lately. Did his family burn (in another sense) or something? As far as I remember, last year, when this kind of thing happened, his older brother brought too much alcohol to the point they almost got into financial crisis. Even almost was enough to stress him out. Then there's also when his younger brother got into an accident and got hospitalized. Thank god he had minor injuries and was thus saved.

His life seems quite wild. Interesting.

"Is he sleeping?" Ichigo-senpai whispers after a moment of silence, leaning even closer.

I touch Hasebe's forehead. No response. "I think so."

"So even Hasebe-san can sleep…"

"Come on, he isn't a robot. Even robots need sleep, though."

"Ahaha, you're right." After nodding, he looks at my smartphone screen. "What are you reading, Yamanbagiri-san?"

"A web novel."

"I thought you'd play games."

"I'm a bit lazy right now and the wi-fi is bad here."

"You're really a nerd, aren't you? Ah, it's not a bad thing, of course! Tsurumaru-san and Mitsutada-sen are the same."

"It's okay…” It stings just a bit. Tsurumaru-senpai and Mitsutada-senpai, huh…Tsurumaru-senpai watches seasonal animes and plays games as far as I know (the modern grandpa, I see). Mitsutada-senpai is a magical girl big fan. Even his room said so (from what I saw in photos, at least). It's not a secret, and yet they are somehow still popular. Charm is weird.

Ah, come to think of it, I skipped club yesterday, but president didn't message anything. My head might be saved. I think they're going to help with the preparation for sports festival after school today anyway.

"You can listen to me as you read," Ichigo-senpai says, turning his head to the front, looking at nothing in particular. "I had a dream last night."

If I was drinking, I must have choked right now.

"W-What kind of dream?" Don't panic without further information.
"I don't exactly know, either. My memory is a bit hazy. The point is, well, I'm unharmed, so it might be a normal dream. I remember seeing you, though, and that's rare."

Rare…does that mean he has seen me in his dreams before? Welp, that doesn't matter now.

"Tell me what you remember."

"Hmm…” He falls silent, trying to remember what he had seen. "You were…standing in the middle of a room. My room, to be exact. It seemed like I was only a camera, floating and unable to talk to you. And then you suddenly turned around with a rather furious expression and walked away outside, going down the hallway and vanishing into the shadows. It was late at night. Then there were weird sounds…I don't know how to describe it. Banging sounds coming from all over my surroundings. It was terrifying, to be honest, but then I woke up."

I swallow his words real hard. I somehow feel a striking similarity between his dream and Mikazuki's - a mix of both dreams, minus the monster. "Senpai, do you live in an apartment?"

"Yes, I do. I thought I told you before."

"I see…"

The two dreams are connected. My gut tells me so. The place Mikazuki and senpai were in must be senpai's apartment. Then, I might have been in senpai's room before. I'm fairly sure, but I shouldn't rule out other possibilities.

"It seems like a normal dream and not normal at the same time," I say. "I'm glad you're safe, at least."

"Yes…” He sighs and leans his back to the wall. "What do you think, other than that it's somewhere between normal and not?"

"Nothing else…uh, do you remember seeing anything weird on my body?"

He looks up at the sky and recalls it. "At first glance, no, but…mmm, I don't think I saw anything weird. You were wearing our school uniform. Your left hand was bandaged too, so it seems normal. If anything, the place is strange. It's my apartment, and yet it isn't at the same time. The sky was so dark."

"I see…"

My gut feeling might be wrong, then. This is really hard…what do you think, Mikazuki, Kogi?

"We think the same as you," Mikazuki says. "There's also possibility that he might forget details, since he said his memory is hazy."

That's how it normally is with dreams, yeah. What about the apartment part?

"You should see his apartment to confirm."

H-How do I do that?

"Go to his apartment, of course. What else?" Kogitsunemaru replies. "You can always ask for photos if you want, but I prefer if you go. I think it'd make him happy."

Asking for photos is weird…but going to confirm is also weird. Both options are the same! I think it's always like that when it's related to oddities…sighs…
“Think about this. You can go with him to his apartment today. It'd be much quicker than asking for photos if you're in a hurry, unless he has photos, though I doubt he has.”

"I'm a bit worried about your safety,” Mikazuki jabs in, "But we're here with you. We'll protect you no matter what.”

O-Okay…that makes sense. I hope senpai understands because it's related to oddities, but I don't think I can say it so openly right now, so I'll just type it in my smartphone's notes and show it to him. Who knows if Hasebe is just half-asleep and hears me?

"That's good,” Mikazuki says. I can imagine him nodding. "It might turn bad for everyone if he hears.”

Yeah, I don't want him to know about oddities and all. I also won't be able to answer him if he asks me why I want to go to Ichigo-senpai's apartment. I'm bad at making excuses.

"There's that and another thing…well, you don't have to know.”

I'm intrigued to ask, but I shall refrain for now, and type down 'I want to check your apartment to confirm something, senpai. If possible, today. Can I?' in my notes before giving it to Ichigo-senpai. He seems taken aback by the message, taking time before he types his answer and gives it back to me. He typed ‘Sure, you can, but it'd be empty today. Nobody but me.’

I just stare at him and nod, wordlessly saying, 'It's fine.' He shoots me a smile, understanding my meaning.

Since I'd be going after helping to prepare for the sports festival, I might have to eat dinner there with him, so I ask him again, which he quickly accepts. Good.

"Don't forget to ask Tsurumaru if he sees Shadow Ichigo again,” Kogitsunemaru reminds me. I'll do that, remind me again later.

At the end, the second break time ends just like that, with Hasebe napping all the time, and I only have a light conversation with Ichigo-senpai. It's nothing special. I sure wish I could find out what's bothering Hasebe…hopefully I'll have another chance later.
The preparation for the sports festival is going very smoothly. Even more people helped today, including Hasebe, just like he promised.

"This really is a bother," Hasebe says the moment he approaches me, heavily sighing.

"That should be my line," I say. That phrase isn't something that often comes out of his mouth.

"What are we going to do now?"

"Well, I would just wait for a commands to do something…"

He looks around. "Yoshiyuki is already doing things."

"He's used to it. We aren't."

"Fair enough."

"Oh? Hasebe-chan is here too - ueeegh!!"

Tsurumaru-senpai lets out a disgusting shriek when Hasebe steps on his foot the moment he appears. No mercy at all.

"What's that for?!" He asks painfully.

"I wonder." Hasebe feigns ignorance. "I shouldn't be surprised you're here."

"Everyone from the student council is here as we're the ones responsible for the event," Tsurumaru-senpai states the obvious thing. "It's a surprise to see you here, though. Or should I say not surprising since you're with Manba-chan?"

"I'm not forcing him or anything," I reply.

"I know. Well…I'm pretty sure he feels forced in some way."

I turn to Hasebe and ask. "Do you?"

"That doesn't matter now," Hasebe replies. "Let's do this already."

Hmmm…I keep on staring, but he shows no sign of surrendering.

"Oh, your commander is here, so see you." Tsurumaru-senpai says, waving us off and walking away. So random. Who is this commander, anyway? There isn't anyone like that.

"Yamanbagiri-san~ Oh, Hasebe-san tagged along too? I'm glad to have more helpers."

Oh, Ichigo-senpai is finally here.

…Ichigo-senpai, huh…that's right, I'm only here because I follow his instructions. That's all I do. You can say he is my commander.

"Let's go. We can't waste time here," senpai says, dragging us to work. Hasebe heaves a sigh before
following him.

Unexpectedly, or as expected, even with Hasebe disliking Ichigo-senpai to some degree, he can work with him pretty well when needed, so there's no obstacles in doing work. Everyone can finish the preparation in time and cheer when the work is done. There won't be any classes tomorrow, so everyone is happy.

"Good work, the both of you," Ichigo-senpai says, patting my and Hasebe's backs. "Now you can rest easy."

"I never thought it'd be that heavy," Hasebe says with a somewhat depressed look on his face.

"It's mostly labor work for the last day, after all," senpai replies with a wry smile.

"We can go home now, right?" I ask.

He nods. "Where are your bags?"

"In the classroom."

"Get it first, then. I'll also come, since I put my bag in the student council room."

The three of us make our way to the classroom. I see Yoshiyuki is too busy talking to others to come with us. I'm a bit disappointed, to be honest. When nobody was looking earlier, I messaged Brother Yamabushi, Yoshiyuki, and Kousetsu-senpai about going to Ichigo-senpai's apartment. I had decided it all by myself, but all of them accepted. Bitterly, in Yoshiyuki's case. He told me many times to be careful and don't cheat without his permission. I won't cheat, of course. I don't feel that way to Ichigo-senpai.

"I doubt it," Kogitsunemaru says, responding to my thoughts.

W-Why?

"Just because."

Not going to tell me, I see…I can't even hit you since you're not outside.

"Ehehehe."

Don't sound so happy from it! Sheesh…

After taking our bags, we part ways with each other - well, I'm staying with Ichigo-senpai. Hasebe doesn't ask anything and walks away with a wave of a hand, leaving the two of us alone. I follow senpai to his apartment. The sun is setting, so the sky is getting dark. Just like yesterday, there are only lights from the street lamps to guide us, and occasional houses and shops with their lights on. Our journey is enveloped by silence.

I'm tired, and senpai might be too tired to talk as well. I don't mind.

"Is it far from school, senpai?" I ask, realizing how much time has passed. I don't really know where we're going.
"Not really. Just a bit more."

For some reason, he reaches for my hand, gripping it tight. Holding hands…his hand is warm. I can't help but to get embarrassed as he pulls me along with a smile.

"You said you won't cheat~" Mikazuki says pleasantly with a teasing tone.

T-This isn't cheating!

"As your lover, I count this as cheating."

"That would mean Yamanbagiri has cheated right in front of us many times, though," Kogitsunemaru chimes in, "Hugging, letting someone rest on his lap…"

"...You're right. What a grim, saddening fact…" Mikazuki sobs in an exaggerated manner.

I choose to ignore them and focus on the road. After turning to a corner, I can see a white, quite tall building that stands out from the rest of the houses. It's a five-story building. I can tell that it's the apartment. Suzuran, as a small city, doesn't have super tall buildings, especially in a neighborhood area like this, so even the apartment is small, but it looks well-maintained.

Ichigo-senpai silently walks to the building, still holding my hand. We climb the stairs to the third floor, and after walking, we stop at one of the doors - at the end of the corridor. He takes out a key and unlocks the door.

"This is the same room and area as what I saw in my dream," Mikazuki says, appearing right next to me, but speaking to my mind. "Except that the building is far bigger and wider than this, the details are the same."

I see. Moment of truth when we see his room.

"Come in, Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai says.

"Excuse me…"

I step into his apartment unit and take off my shoes in the entrance before I walk to the living room. The inside looks…quite spacious, despite how small it looks outside. It's almost magical.

"Sorry, I haven't cleaned many things because I didn't know you were coming," senpai says with a bashful smile. Huh, even though it looks clean and neat…just what is clean in his dictionary? "Go ahead and sit on sofa. I'll prepare some tea and snacks for you. Make yourself at home."

I nod and sit on the sofa, sitting right in front of the TV. I'd rather go see his room immediately, but it seems impolite of me to ask. I don't know why, but sitting here makes me anxious already. Turning my head, I see Ichigo-senpai entering one of the rooms at the back - most likely his own room, before coming out and walking to the kitchen behind me. I stop staring at that moment.

Kogitsunemaru appears out of nowhere and rests his head on my shoulder, somewhat playfully. His expression tells me that he wants to be spoiled like a cat. I just rub his chin and he looks pleased. A big cat, indeed. I can almost see hearts coming out of his head, honestly. Mikazuki pouts, sitting next to me and holds my hand. I have a feeling he wants to kiss me, but flirting that far in someone's house is just…not something I want to do - although Ichigo-senpai can't see them right now.

Soon after, Ichigo-senpai comes with a tray of three cups and a plate of cookies. Three cups…he considers Kogi and Mikazuki, despite not knowing for sure they are here. He puts the tray on the
"Thank you." I take one of the cups, steaming hot, and blow it. I glance at senpai, who is still sitting with a smile, as if wanting to know my reaction. Awkwardly, I sip the tea, trying to not burn my tongue. It's normal tea you can find anywhere, the warmth spreading through my body. I take one of the cookies and eat it as well. "It's good."

"I'm glad. I had no experience baking cookies prior to this. Oh, I baked them just yesterday for my snack, but there are leftovers."

So this is handmade cookies? I can't believe it's his first time. Yoshiyuki has already lost on this front.

"Um, Yamanbagiri..." Kogitsunemaru mumbles. I look at him. "I know he prepared these for us, as well, but...it's a bit weird knowing he can't see us." Ah, no wonder he hasn't touched the cookies. As someone who tends to jump the moment food is in sight, it's unusual. "Hey, I'm not like that! Just...sometimes..."

"Why don't you let him see us again, just for today? Talking will be harder without it," Mikazuki suggests.

Okay. "Ichigo-senpai. If you allow me to, I want to lend you my power so you can see oddities again. Just for this moment. We want to talk about something important."

"Sure."

He knows the procedures, so we proceed easily. I do it the same way when I lent Yamato my power - I hold his hands, close our eyes, and we count to three before opening our eyes again. When Ichigo-senpai opens his eyes, there's not much change on his expression, not even the slightest surprise seeing two people appear next to me.

At that moment, Kogitsunemaru claps his hands and says, "Thank you for the food!" before taking some cookies and eating them in a very bad manner.

"Are you that hungry?" I ask.

"I'm always hungry," he replies. Uhh-huh. I should know better. Ichigo-senpai looks amused, so I guess it's fine.

Mikazuki takes one of the cups, taking it to his lips elegantly before he sips it, seemingly enjoying it. "Hmm, it's great. It's perfect from all sides."

Senpai bows as a response. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

I slap Kogitsunemaru's hand from taking another cookie because there are only about five left, what the hell. "I'd like to see your room first, senpai."

"My room? Ah, sure. It's a bit embarrassing, though."

He doesn't ask about why... not yet, but I'm sure he has some ideas about it - none other than about a dream. He stands up and the three of us follow him to the room he went in before.

He opens the door and says, "Go ahead and look around."

So I do, entering the room and looking around. It's a neat, square room, a bit smaller than my room. I can somehow see that this is Ichigo-senpai's room from how neat everything is. The details in my
dream were obscured because of the darkness, but I still remember big things, such as the placement of the bed, chair, desk, cupboards, and windows. In my dream, I only saw one window, but there are two here. Other than that, the position and color of the rest of the things I remember are the same. The size of the room itself matches the one in my dream.

"...Okay. Thank you, senpai. That's enough."

I walk out of the room before senpai closes the door. We go back to the living room.

"Judging from your reaction...my room is the same as the one you saw in your dream, right?" Ichigo-senpai asks. As sharp as always. I didn't even tell him the details of my dream, such as in a room, and yet he deduced it... Terrifying.

I nod. "That's right. The only difference is the windows and perhaps some things I don't remember well, but the big things are the same."

"I see..." He slumps. "What do you think it means?"

"Pretty obviously, my dream is connected to you, for some reason or another. It's the only explanation, though nobody knows yet why and how. " Actually, it might've had something to do with Shadow Ichigo - his ikiryou, but I can't say it. I don't want to make him remember all the pain last year, although he might get an idea about it.

"Do you think I'll... get a dream that can affect reality?"

"There's a high chance, yes."

"Your dream you told Yamanbagiri about earlier..." Mikazuki finally speaks up after some time thinking, "It was similar to my dream. On the same day as he did, I also got a weird dream, and after that, I was thrown here - in your apartment's hallways."

Seeing Ichigo-senpai's surprised expression, he begins to explain his two dreams, exactly like what he told me.

"What linked my dream and yours are Yamanbagiri's existence. What linked my dream with Yamanbagiri are the monster and this place. What linked your dream and his is your room." He ends the story there before he sips on tea. "I didn't see Yamanbagiri in the second dream, in this place, at least, but the similarity is striking, don't you think? On top of that, all dreams have night setting."

"A-Are you hurt too, Mikazuki-san?" Senpai asks, sweating.

He shakes his head. "Not at all. And so did you. The only one hurt is Yamanbagiri."

I hold the bandage covering my left hand. When I looked at it this morning, the mark was still there, just fading slightly. I hope it goes away completely tomorrow. I can't say this is an injury, however, the mark is very unsettling to look at and think about.

"Do you remember anything else from your dream?" He proceeds to ask. "For me, I remembered the ground shook and Yamanbagiri's wristband turned red."

"Wristband..."

I nod. "The area where I got hurt. We think it can be some sort of prediction."

"There's a possibility your dream is the same as mine," Mikazuki continues. "Rather than searching
for the reason, we should focus on avoiding injury in the dream based on the predictions, if we ever get it again."

"….I-I understand," Ichigo-senpai stutters, anxiety is clear on his face. "I'll try to remember… anything…mmm…"

He sounds like he is thinking really hard, so we don't want to bother him and instead enjoy the tea and cookies. Thank god Kogi hasn't eaten all of them.

"Ah!!"

Suddenly, senpai lets out that yelp, making me almost choke on tea.

"I remember now!" He exclaims, his expression is the joy from enlightenment mixed with fear. "Everything is dim in that room, but when you turned around, Yamanbagiri-san, I remember…well, I'm hopefully remembering this right…just for a split second, I saw your neck have a striking red collar."

"A collar?" I gasp.

"Stylish collars, perhaps. I couldn't make out the details in the darkness."

"I don't have anything like that and I've never worn one…"

Kogitsunemaru looks disturbed and speaks up for the first time. "Mikazuki saw your wristband turning red, right? It might be the same hint…that your neck will meet something next."

"Geh, I wonder what that something is…my hand injury is nothing bad, but neck is worrying… maybe not having a dream last night was the right choice. Thanks to baku and dreamcatcher." I shudder to think what would happen if I have a dream…there's a high chance my neck would be… and then, maybe -

- The image of Ichigo-senpai's head, lying in front of me, flashes in my mind.

I would, undoubtedly, die if that happens.

The air suddenly feels heavy now. Of course, it's just a possibility, but thinking about it would make anyone depressed. Even if these dreams are predictions, how can I counter it in a dream if I can't even move? Will I remember the information from real world when I'm in a dream? After all, I didn't question the missing Kogi and Mikazuki before.

"We still lack information, so we can only see what happens before we make conclusions," Kogitsunemaru says with a low, grim voice, before looking at the clock. "Ah, isn't it time to have dinner?"

I stare at him breaking the tense mood so easily. "You're still hungry?"

"No, I mean, aren't you hungry? It's already time."

"I doubt it. I'm sure you say that because you're hungry."

He bashfully smiles. So I'm right.

"You're right. I'm getting hungry myself. I'll quickly make something for all of us," Ichigo-senpai says as he stands up.
"Oh, please let me help you. We can't just let the owner of the house work alone, after all," Kogitsunemaru says, standing up as well. As expected from a housewife. Ah, he shoots me a glare after I said this. Cute.

"Thank you," senpai says with a bow. The two of them proceed to go to the kitchen.

I take the remote control and turn on the TV. The channel is a documentary channel, so I let it be. It's quite an interesting documentary film. I've watched it before. There are a few photo frames next to the TV - photos of people I don't know, but I assume they're Ichigo-senpai's brothers. I wonder how they are doing.

"What do you think?" Mikazuki asks me telepathically.

About what? Connection between our dreams?

"Yes."

…I already thought of it. For Ichigo-senpai, at least, it's connected to his ikiryou - Shadow Ichigo-senpai. It's still a part of himself. Keep in mind that this is just a speculation. Shadow Ichigo-senpai somehow got a way to enter dreams with the help of a third party, which should be the same person as the one hunting Tsurumaru-senpai. I don't know the reason, but Ichigo-senpai seems to be targeting me. I might be his number one priority. It makes more sense for senpai to get the dreams that seem to predict where I'll be hurt next, because he is…basically…the culprit. Of course he has a plan on what to do next.

Mikazuki nods. "I think the same as well."

It pains me to think of him as the culprit. I wish to separate the two, but…

"Shadow Ichigo is still Ichigo. A part of him. He unconsciously knows what his shadow is doing."

Yeah…that's why….no. I really can't blame him for this.

"Just remember, for him to split himself into ikiryou, he leaves most part of himself sane. It's a self-defense mechanism, as he throws the intense emotions to ikiryou. I don't think his emotions are that intense, but it's amplified by the ikiryou because it lacks the conscience he has."

There's that, at least. Yeah, I think so too.

As for your dreams, Mikazuki…do you think it's possible the sane part of Ichigo-senpai sent it to you? Like, he feels bad, but he can't control himself, so he wants someone else to do it.

"That…makes sense, but why not Kogitsunemaru?"

Maybe because he isn't cursed. When you fought Shadow Ichigo-senpai days ago, I'm sure you touched some parts of him. The black hands reached me a bit, and it's enough to trigger the dream - well, this is just a speculation on my part, of course. I didn't feel the hands touching me, but that's the only explanation.

"I see…indeed, that sounds plausible."

Tsurumaru-senpai isn't cursed, though…is it because he is a xian? Even though you're a shinrei, Mikazuki.

"It's weird, hmm. Either he is hiding the truth from you or Shadow Ichigo didn't curse him. Ah,
speaking of that crane, have you messaged him about seeing Shadow Ichigo?"

Aaah, I haven't. Thanks for reminding me. I take out my smartphone and type a LINE message. No read mark nor reply, so he might be off this time. Well, there's no need to rush.

I guess all we can do is rest and tell our findings to others later.

"Yes. Let's do that."

I hold his hand and rest my head on his shoulder since there's a chance.

I close my eyes, feeling tired from everything that happened today…

[Blackout]

"Ah - !"

The moment I get up from the sofa, I'm greeted by the darkness where I almost can't see my hand, I feel my forehead throbbing. Ouch, it hurts. It's as if I had taken a blunt damage on my head. It's aching greatly right now. "What happened…?" I ask to no one in particular.

I can't feel Mikazuki's or Kogitsunemaru's presence. It's really weird and frightening…knowing I'm completely alone makes me anxious, even though it was the natural way - I was like this before, too. In that dream, I didn't have them with me as well, and yet I didn't mind it. Missing the two of them at once in this kind of strange situation makes me realize how precious they are to my well-being.

I look around, trying to search whatever that might explain this.

"This is…"

Now that my mind is clear enough, I can tell that this dimly-lit room is Ichigo-senpai's apartment - living room, to be exact. Why am I still here? Did I fall asleep? I mean, I remember I dozed off, but everything was bright. Meanwhile, the lights are out right now.

"I-Ichigo-senpai? Mikazuki? Kogi?"

I call out their names, but there's no answer. The room is awfully quiet. My body shudders from the coldness. The silence is sickening. I can't stand this, so I'm about to get up, when -

"Yamanbagiri-san. So you're awake."

Ichigo-senpai's voice rings out as his figure comes out from the darkness. He smiles gently, something I'm very familiar with, and despite the situation, I feel myself sighing in relief.

"Senpai, what happened?" I ask immediately.

He sits next to me on the sofa. "You dozed off and slept. You must be so tired."

"I see…" Even so, I feel something very unsettling creeping on my back. "Um, why is the house so dark?"

"There's blackout right now. The rain was pretty heavy."

Rain…? I don't remember rain falling, so maybe after that.

"Where is Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru?"
A shadow is cast on his face. "They don't matter now."

"Eh…?"

"Coming to my place like this, it's almost like you want to get caught…"

Shiver goes down my spine. I try to stand up, but he immediately grabs my hand…tightly.

"Sen - ?!"

He pushes me down on the sofa, my back hitting it roughly. Looming over me, he is still smiling widely, and yet all I can feel is dread.

"What you want doesn't matter now. This is my realm. I do what I want."

His hands reach for my neck.

"A-Aaagh!"

I scream, feeling my neck getting strangled, blocking the air to my lungs.


My struggle is pointless. I'm losing more and more air. I think struggling makes it worse as his grip tightens.

It hurts. It really hurts. And yet he doesn't stop. He doesn't seem willing to stop. Why? Why? Why is he doing this to me?

"G-gggh…"

It hurts. It's too painful. I'm suffocating for real, very badly. I want to breathe. I need to. It feels like my neck is about to get crumpled like a paper. Or crumble like dust. It's too scary. The fear makes my hands shake. I can't hold anything. I can't attack him.

Senpai, why? It hurts. It hurts. Hurts. Hurts. Too much. Please stop, please, please, please - I can't even say that, powerless against the force, letting his hands keep on strangling me. My sight is blurry now, looking at nothing, tears streaming down my eyes.

But even so, I can see his face. His eyes are shining red.

Is that…an ecstatic expression he has? I can't tell. My neck hurts so much, I can only close my eyes, trying to escape it, but of course, nothing helps me. My mouth is wide open, trying to take oxygen, but it means nothing as it can't reach my lungs. My whole body starts to hurt from the lack of oxygen. My head is aching. Strength gradually leaves my entire body.

Is this how it feels to dying? After initial panic, I'm strangely calm right now…is it because I'm nearing my limit? It hurts so much…but I'm powerless…I can do nothing, not even so much as to gasp now.

Will everything…end here?

But…maybe it's better…set me free from this pain…
Before long, my body seems to go numb. I can't tell anything anymore, as if my body is not mine now, going limp and weak on the sofa. If I'm still on sofa, that is. It feels like I'm floating. Within my closed eyes, in the darkness, I can hear nothing. There's only darkness all around me.

Suddenly, I feel something grasping my hand.

It's warm, unlike Ichigo-senpai's cold hands. The warmth seems to spread from my fingertips to my entire body, slowly but surely filling my empty body. And then, that something touches my lips. No…I'm sure this is a kiss. Or not a kiss…as I feel oxygen filling my lungs soon after. CPR?

Then, that something is a person. Who is this…?

I open my heavy eyelids…and I'm greeted by white hair strands.

It's none other than…

[Fade from black]

"Uwaah!"

I gasp, waking up from my slumber.

I feel like I had a dream…but what was it? I don't remember. It's unlike the dream before, so maybe a normal dream…?

"Oh, good morning, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says, already standing up and combing his hair. "You startled me for a bit."

"Ah, morning. Sorry about that."

Yeah, it must be a normal, good old weird dream. After all, Kogi doesn't say anything, so there's nothing wrong with my body. There shouldn't be. I pull away the blanket and yawn, realizing Mikazuki is still sleeping soundly next to me. As expected, this heavy sleeper…

My hand reaches for my neck, feeling slight pain coming from it. I must have slept in an awkward position. This happens sometimes…

…

…Eh?

I feel like…there's something wrong. As if I'm missing something.

I look at the clock. Indeed, the time is my usual waking up time. There's nothing strange about that. And yet, there's this striking feeling of unease, creeping all over my body. I think hard, searching in my memories. I think the wrong thing is there…

"H-Huh…?"

I find it.

Since when did we get home - I mean, Kousetsu-senpai's house, again?

Kogitsunemaru, hearing my thoughts, turns around and looks at me worriedly. "What's wrong, Yamanbagiri? You look pale and your mind is in disarray…did you forget?"
Forget…but…

"After we had dinner at Ichigo's place, we went back here - cheating a bit because we flew. Everything went smoothly."

…Dinner…fly…smoothly…

…

…Ah. That's right. How could I forget? Ichigo-senpai's food is tasty, his apartment unit is quite cozy that we almost stayed there all night…

"I heard you had a dream. Is that why you forgot?" He asks, approaching me and crouching down next to me. It's clear that he is worried about me. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Yeah, I had a dream, that's why I screamed, but…I don't remember at all. I don't remember a thing from that dream, so it might be a normal dream…I hope. There's nothing wrong with my body right? I mean, my neck is kind of in pain, but that's just because sleeping position."

He nods. "So far, at least. We should check when we take a bath." He glances at my futon. "The baku looks fine as well."

I gaze at the same direction. There's the child baku, sleeping soundly, just next to Mikazuki. I can tell by its rhythmic breathing that yes, it's just sleeping. There's nothing unusual about it.

"Mm…sorry. I must've become paranoid because of what's been happening lately," I say.

Kogitsunemaru pats my head. "It's okay. Just relax, today is just the sports festival, right?"

I nod, getting up and stretching my arms while Kogi tries to wake Mikazuki up. My heart is filled with warmth when I see the two of them, the one I love so much, and yet…

…The lingering sense of incongruity is still there, creeping on the back of my head.

I have a hunch that I must not ignore it.
Chapter Notes

**Two chapters update.** This is the first one.

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**Email**  
(Sent June 23th 09:00 AM CET)

From: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: *Re: Dream and Ichigo-senpai trouble*

I'm sorry to hear what you went through. I'm just glad you're alright...although everything hasn't settled yet, and I'd be lying if I said I'm not worried about it. I wish I could help you, but I have no knowledge about it, and the distance between us makes it harder. I really, really wish I could be there with you...there's no other choice for me but to give my wish to your lovers.

I'm sure they're there with you no matter what happens. I'm the same, despite the distance between us, so please remember that.

What I think is the same as what you thought. There's not much I can say in that regard. I can only pray for the best.

Ah, thank you for the photo. Child baku sure look so cute, I'm a bit envious you can meet it and sleep with it. I wonder if there's any merchandise of it anywhere? If there is, I should definitely buy one.

You want to know how my days went? That's quite embarrassing, that's why I rarely talk about it, even after years...alright, if you insist. This is for you. There's nothing out of ordinary in my everyday life. I'm practicing saxophone nowadays. It's the hardest instrument I've ever tried so far. If you ask me why I practice it, well...it's hard for me to explain. I want to try every musical instrument to the best of my abilities.

I've become acquainted with two cats that keep strolling around my house. They are very cute and fluffy, I can't stop feeding them. Perhaps that's why they keep coming back as well, but I'm happy. I'm considering actually adopting them. Stray cats aren't safe...another stray cat just got hit by a car 2 days ago. I'm sad.

Oh gosh, I ended up blabbering, I apologize.

By the way, this is special for you, but I covered your favorite anime's opening theme song with piano and violin. I hope it sounds good and it cheers you up, even for a bit.

1 attachment: special_1_5.mp4

>>Reply
8-Falling Down Into the Abyss-2

Chapter Notes

**Two chapters update.** This is the second one.

---

Putting aside my hunch…it's time to relax. Somewhat.

I've taken off the bandage from my hand, as the mark has gone away completely.

Today is the day of the long-awaited sports festival. The students have been very energetic since the start, screaming and cheering on, ready to go to battlefield, contrast with how the school usually is - almost lifeless in the mornings. Unfortunately, my brothers can't come today, so there'll be only me and my circle of friends. And Kogi and Mikazuki, of course. At least Brother Horikawa packed me a very, very good and luxurious-looking lunch. I can imagine Yoshiyuki's jealous face when he looks at it.

"It's finaaaally the day!" Yoshiyuki shouts, stretching his arms. "Let's have fun and do our best, everyone!" He raises his fist to the sky, looking at the other students in the field.

"YEAH!!"

While Hasebe and I just answer weakly, everyone else is fired up thanks to his words. Just at times like this, Yoshiyuki acts like actual class representative. It's quite the sight.

I'm really happy to have no classes today, but, sports is a pain. I'd rather play on the computer all day.

After the student body gathers in the field and listens to the principal's speech in opening ceremony, the event starts. I go to the main canopy where they announce stuffs - you can say it's the committee headquarters. There are a few people I know there, mainly the student council members, so I come to greet them and just look how everything is going.

"Good morning, senpai," I greet them.

Although they look like they're busy, they return my greeting. I look at the schedule on the pillar, finding that the class relay race is about 3 hours from now on. I can just relax and watch the other competitions for now. Nice.

"Yamanbagiri-san, don't forget to watch us in the relay race later, okay?" Ichigo-senpai says with a smile.

I nod. "Of course."

"Everyone, if we win, Yamanbagiri-san will do something for us," he adds, prompting attention from others.

"Oh? What is it?" Tsurumaru-senpai lets out a playful grin.
"It's a secret...or not, really," I say with a sigh. Will I really have to do it...? Really...? More than that, I find it weird that Ichigo-senpai hasn't said anything about it prior to this. I'm sure he'll explain it right now, though. "Just ask Ichigo-senpai. Well, I'm going now. Good luck."

"Good luck to you too," Uguisumaru-senpai says, waving a hand before he goes back to work.

I take off and look around the resting venue - the cloths spread on the ground. The one with canopies are packed already, there's not much space left, so I walk to the open space one. I want a place where I can play games peacefully.

"Yamanbagiri! Here!"

I hear someone's voice and immediately see him. It's Kashuu, waving his hand at me. I approach him, finding that there's Hasebe and Yamato already. Ah, right, we parted ways after the opening ceremony...so this is where they went.

"This is a pretty good place," I say, seeing the tree branches casting a shadow over us. It makes the place breezy.

"I know, right?" Kashuu says proudly. He seems to be the one that found it. He doesn't look pale, and I haven't heard anything from him, so there shouldn't be any problem with his vampire self - which means everything is okay. I've asked about the solution for his problem to Taroutachi-san last night, and he replied "Drink blood regularly. Once per two weeks for now." I wanted to ask him the details, like whose blood and from where, but he didn't reply, instead telling me to sleep. Aah, I should tell Yamato about this. I forgot to message him.

"By the way, have you looked at the schedule?" Yamato asks. "There's nothing in group."

I sit between the two of them, just a bit behind. "Aaah, right. I forgot to take a photo, but...mm, Kashuu and Yamato are in three-legged race, right? It should be before class relay race, so about 3 hours."

"Ah, 3 hours of freedom. What should we do to fill in the time..." He grumbles.

"Well, just be lazy here," Hasebe says, leaning his back against the trunk. He is holding a pretty thick novel on his hands. If I remember correctly, it's a murder mystery novel. He likes this kind of thing? Well, I know that he likes to read books at least, and his image suits mystery novels. He's very prepared to kill time, huh...

"Sleeping sounds nice," Yamato hums.

"I'll play games. By the way, where's Yoshiyuki?" I ask.

"He said he wanted to go to restroom," Kashuu replies. "He should be back soon."

"Ooh, I see..."

I want to talk to him about the dreams, although it's not exactly a topic I can let the others hear. By the way, Tsurumaru-senpai answered my message last night. He said he didn't see Shadow Ichigo-senpai for a while, and even he is confused. I hope it's a good sign. I really hope. I also have to show Yoshiyuki a photo of a sleeping baku, just because.

I crawl next to Hasebe and take out my smartphone, having no other idea to strike a conversation.

"Aaah, I wish I was in the relay race too," Yamato says with a sigh after he stretches out his arms.
His voice is actually low, but I can hear him just fine.

"Too late to complain, isn't it? You should've complained waaaay back," Kashuu replies, "Why do you want to be in it, anyway? Ooh, wait, I know…geez, this maiden in love."

"I-I'm not like that!" Yamato raises his voice in embarrassment, looking at Kashuu. From here, I can see his flushed cheeks. Huuuh…? Now I'm interested.

While playing my game, I lean forward and join them, "What is this? Does Yamato have someone he likes?" Our relay team is all boys, though. We can mix it with girls, but the girls in our class don't want to participate for some reason, so there shouldn't be anyone in the team. Maybe someone from another class? Like, he wants to run with her?

"T-That's, no…" Yamato visibly stutters, his face reddens even more.

Kashuu grins and chuckles. "Oh, he does, really! He's such a lovestruck maiden that I can feel myself getting diabetes from how he acts."

As expected from the gossiper and Yamato's best friend. "Ooh, tell me more about it," I say.

"I never knew you were into this kind of topic."

"I'd like to know my friends better."

Yamato is still silent, glaring at Kashuu as if saying, "Don't say it!". Alas, Kashuu's smile gets wider. "Well, I'd like to keep the name a secret, but basically, Yasusada's type is someone who is kind, sweet, and never gives up in hard times."

"Hee…" Sounds general to me.

Yamato finally speaks up with a flustered face. "K-Kashuu - !"

"Yasu can know this because…you guessed it, he has been watching them since middle school! It's a miracle they can be in the same high school," Kashuu ignores him and continues, even more fired up than ever. "This one person is very beautiful, on top of class, and is admired by many people. They have this certain charm that attracts someone even when they don't realize it. I can see why he fell in love, honestly. I have to admit, though, Yasu sometimes looks like a creepy stalker, since he keeps observing them - "

"Kashuu, you idiot!!"

Before I can even respond, he hits Kashuu's side with his fist, stands up, and walks away, seemingly about to cry.

"Ah…" Kashuu is too shocked, his body stiff. "I…might've gone too far."

"…I can't tell," I say, as surprised as he is.

Hasebe snorts from behind us, having been watching and listening to everything. "Seems like Yasusada is the type to get easily embarrassed about his crush."

So it seems…

"Well," Kashuu shrugs and nonchalantly says, "He'll come back soon after calming himself down. It's normal."
"Is it?" I ask, a bit worried. "If you, the one who knows him the most, says that, then…"

"Oii, what happened?" Yoshiyuki's voice rings out as the figure gets closer. Oh man, his appearance makes my heart skip a beat…I never knew he'd look this hot…no, my perception of him just changed, so…even though all he did was just roll the clothes' arms like some bad boy. "I saw Yasu run like crazy."

"It's nothing serious," Kashuu replies, "Just something about a crush."

"Ohoo? I see, I see." Yoshiyuki's eyes seem to sparkle as he sits next to me. "I wanna hear what this is about!"

"Yoshiyuki is interested in this topic?" The one saying that is Hasebe, knitting his eyebrows together. "Who would've thought."

"Well, I never thought you were into murder-mystery stories, Hasebe…" I say. And of course, nobody here would have thought I'm dating Yoshiyuki.

"I'm just a curious kid curious about his friends, ya know," Yoshiyuki says with pride.

"What a girlish topic," Kashuu says with a laugh, "Well, I don't hate it. I can tell you all the gossip around this school that I know!" Now he seems to boast his knowledge on rumors and gossip.

"Spare us the bad ones, please," Hasebe replies, but his eyes are still fixed on the book.

"Hasebe is suuure into this too," Kashuu says gleefully. Ah, that's true. He has been listening quite closely.

"I can't help but to listen. It's an interesting topic for me."

"Rather than other people we don't know personally, though…I'd like to know about all of us," Yoshiyuki mumbles, "Ah, I mean, I'm just curious about ya guys."

"Curious, in…?" I tilt my head in confusion.

"Since the topic is crush, then…" Hasebe hangs these words on purpose, but now I get it.

He wants to know about our romantic lives or who we like, if we have any. I sure have, but hey, I can't possibly answer it honestly. Help, what should I do if they ask me about it? Damn it, Yoshiyuki, I'm your boyfriend, you know, but it's not like we can be very open about our relationship. Not to mention I'm also with two otherwordly creatures…! Three lovers and all males…I already know this, but man, I'm really a weird person.

"Just calm down for now, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says, chuckling. "Let's hear what Yoshiyuki said first and you can follow him."

Okay…make sure to help me out, though. Too bad I can't talk telepathically with Yoshiyuki. I sure wish I could right now and scream at him for asking something like that.

"Well, it can be anything other than that topic," Yoshiyuki says with a smile. Aah, this angelic smile, I'm sure he means no harm, and now I can't be angry at him…gosh, I'm so weak.

"T-That's embarrassing…" Kashuu mutters, scratching his slightly red cheeks. "I'm, uh, not liking anyone at the moment…"

"Your reaction says otherwise," Hasebe says with a smirk. "You're unexpectedly bad at acting on
this topic, aren't you, Kashuu?"

He sure is evil today. Kashuu looks annoyed. "I'm just not prepared for this. What about you, then, Hasebe? Do you have someone you like?"

"I do."

There's no hesitation or even a pause at his answer at all. He even keeps his face flat. I already know this, but Hasebe is sure something. He's quite amazing.

"What kind of person is it?" Yoshiyuki asks excitedly. He's getting into this, I see.

"Cute beyond relief." His expression softens when he replies. Is it just me, or did he just glance at my direction?

"Now I'm curious... who is good enough to make someone like Hasebe fall for?!" Kashuu says in exaggeration. I think the same, really. Is this person the one that keeps troubling Hasebe's mind?

"What do you mean, someone like me? I'm an ordinary person."

I believe you're a bit more extraordinary...

"I answered mine, so tell us yours, Kashuu," Hasebe adds. Now he's barely reading the novel and looks at Kashuu with one of the most evil expressions I've seen in the two years we've been friends.

"U-Ugh..." Kashuu grimaces.

The three of us stare at him with hopeful eyes.

Staaare.

Staaaaaareee.

"Okay, okay, I'll admit it! I also have someone I like. There, satisfied?" He finally gives in after a seemingly long time.

"What is your type?" I ask.

"I... don't know, really," he replies as he starts to twirl his hair with his fingers. "It's pretty random, in terms of personality. Well, all of the people I like so far are all pretty and kind, I guess? They're amazing in their own stuff, so I admire them."

"That's broad..."

"I don't know why and how my heart chose them, okay. Before I knew it, I already fell for them."

"That's how love is," Hasebe nods, understanding it.

Huh... I see... I don't really get it, though. I was the one being chased around, so I think my heart naturally got pulled from their affectionate actions towards me. But maybe it's similar? I never think too hard about it.

"Soo... what about Yamanbagiri and Yoshiyuki?" Kashuu looks at me and Yoshiyuki, his face twisting to a grin again. He's very happy when it isn't about him, huh.

"I, uh..." I awkwardly turn to Yoshiyuki. I hope he understands that I want him to answer first.
"I have someone I like," Yoshiyuki replies nonchalantly and calmly with a bashful smile. "In fact, we're dating right now." When saying that, he glances slightly at me,

_Gyyyyaaaaah._ Oh god, he said it. _He said it. He said it!!_ Aaaaahhhhhhh. Let me scream like a girl for today, please. I'm dying here. My heart and head are about to explode!

This causes a stir for both Kashuu and Hasebe. Especially Kashuu, who immediately jumps with wide eyes, looking like some paparazzi catching a big scope. "What? What? This is new. Who is it? Since when?!!"

"I can't tell who is it yet…um, we started dating around three or four weeks ago," He replies, visibly blushing, but the smile on his face tells that it's the truth. "I want you guys to know, too, but it isn't the right time…so maybe someday. Soon, hopefully."

"Do you know who is it, Yamanbagiri?" Hasebe asks me.

My body stiffens almost immediately. "Y-Yeah, I know…I can't tell you who is it, though." _Because it's me._

"This is hot news! It has been going some time, too, uuuugh…I didn't realize at all," Kashuu grumbles like he's in pain. "What kind of person is it?"

"Kind, caring, cute, and wild!" Yoshiyuki replies happily.

Who are you calling wild?! It's you, not me! I really have to talk to him later…to sort this out…

"Sounds like a match for you." Kashuu nods as if he is taking mental notes before he turns to me, "What about you, Yamanbagiri?"

"M-Me…?"

W-What should I do? Should I really follow what Yoshiyuki said? I mean, it's not like I date one person, so I'd have to actually lie…ugh, uggh, why is Hasebe glaring at me like that?! It's scary!! Kashuu too, please stop looking at me with these eyes…gyaaah…

"I-I…"

Kogi, Mikazuki! I call you!

"What are we, _pokemon_?" Mikazuki chimes in. "_Just be honest. Tell them you have a lover._"

"Is it the right choice, though?" Kogitsunemaru asks with a worried tone. "_I mean, they - _"

"I'm sure it won't be a problem. Do you think they will give up so easily?"

"I guess you're right, but…"

They…? Give up? What do you mean?

"Time is up, Yamanbagiri. Go answer them honestly," Mikazuki says with a commanding tone.

I-I have no other choice, don't I…? They've confessed about themselves, so I have to…"I have. Someone I like…and we're…dating…" _Yes, I have. I have three people I love and we're all dating. Kill me as you please._

Both Hasebe and Kashuu are frozen at that moment, keeping surprised expressions on their face.
Yes, even Hasebe. I'm a bit amazed. They're stiff like stones for a while, completely not moving, not even blinking.

"I-I see..." Hasebe is the one who recovers first, though, as he coughs, "I...never expected that at all. At the very least, I thought you would lie if you have."

"I-I feel pressured, okay..." I say, sweating.

"Ahh, same. I wonder who is it," Kashuu says, glancing at Yoshiyuki. "Do you know who?"

Yoshiyuki nods. "I know, but not telling." *Since it also includes him.*

"What kind of person is it?" Kashuu asks me. "What's your type?"

"Uhh, I don't think I have a type either," I reply. There's not much similarities between Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, and Yoshiyuki, other than they're handsome. And, uhh, as for their general charm... "As for them...they're good-looking, caring, adorable, and responsible." Except Mikazuki in housework.

*I doubt he's responsible in other things,* Kogitsunemaru says.

*I'm responsible enough to marry Yamanbagiri, alright,* Mikazuki grumbles.

"I see..." Kashuu nods a few times, taking mental notes. "Since when did you date?"

Ahh...I don't want them to suspect I'm dating Yoshiyuki yet, so I'll use the other two instead. "Last year."

"Ooh, that's a pretty long time."

"Really?"

"Most teenage relationships don't last for even a year. I guess the both of you are serious. That's good."

W-We're engaged (in oddities' sense), after all...and they aren't teens at all.

Meanwhile, Hasebe doesn't say a word. He's looking down on his novel now, but his eyes don't seem to read anything. Now I'm scared. What is he thinking? Is it about me?

"Anyway, congrats, you two," Kashuu says, clapping his hands together, "Only the both of you are in a relationship from our group. I wish I could be in one, too..."

"I-It's nothing, really," Yoshiyuki replies, chuckling awkwardly. The two of us are in a relationship with each other. Yes. "Why don't ya confess, then, Kashuu?"

"T-That's out of the question..." His cheeks turn red and he fidgets. "They already have a lover..."

"Ouch. Still, I think it's better for ya to confess. Who knows, ya might change their mind." Yeah, because you confessed to me, Yoshiyuki.

"D-Do you think so...?" Kashuu becomes so meek when it comes to himself. It's cute.

Yoshiyuki nods furiously. "Never give up and seize that chance! The result doesn't matter. What matters is your genuine feelings to them."
"Such wise words," I comment, "But I agree with him. You should confess, because why not. You won't lose anything."

"I'm afraid I'll certainly lose something, but..." Kashuu sighs. "I don't have the courage to confess. And gosh, this talk is very girlish. I never thought I'd have this kind of talk with you guys. You know, I only get such things with girls."

"It's helpful, though," Hasebe finally speaks up. "I... want to confess, even if they reject me."

"That's good. You can do it!" Yoshiyuki pumps a fist.

"Courage comes from within yourself, Kashuu. Just take your time," I say, patting his shoulder. He nods bashfully.

I feel like Yamato needs to hear this topic as well, but he hasn't come back. Where did he go, anyway?

At the end, all of us happily kill time before it's our turn to compete.

I could withstand it and passed the baton to Hasebe, the last runner, for him to run for our victory, but...

"I think I sprained my ankle... ouch..."

My left foot is aching. I don't exactly remember how, but of course, it must be when I was running. The pain is getting worse as I haven't done anything to it. Before long, I might not be able to walk at all.

"I saw you stumbling... you're really clumsy, aren't you?" Hasebe says with an exasperated sigh. "After your hand, it's your ankle this time."

He's right, so I can't retort... unfortunately.

"Way too clumsy for your own good," Kogitsunemaru says, stabbing the sword even deeper inside me. Ugh.

"Are ya okay? Can ya walk? Let's go to the inf-" Yoshiyuki's words are cut off by the sound of an announcement, the start of cavalry battle. "Ah, it's my turn."

"I'll take him to the infirmary. Don't worry about him," Hasebe says.

"Okay." He nods. "I'll be off, then!"

"Good luck, Yoshiyuki..." I say weakly, seeing him off. He waves a hand before walking away. After his competition, there will be the lunch break, but it seems I'll spend it in infirmary.

"Can you walk? How painful is it?" Hasebe asks, turning to me.

"If you support me, I think I can walk a bit more."

He nods, putting his arm around my shoulder and carefully take a step forward. I follow him, trying to not put pressure on my ankle. It's harder than I thought, especially with my unstable footing.
keep on wobbling around. It'll take some time until we get to infirmary like this, despite the infirmary being on the first floor.

"I'll carry you. Hold on tight."

After some time, when we're a bit far from the noisy field, devoid of people as far as I can see, Hasebe says that, and before I know it, my body is being lifted to air. This is the second time he has carried me like this. Although, this time, I feel happy and relieved because walking hurts -

"Y-You don't need to…"

It really is embarrassing, and most of all, I don't want to bother him more than this.

"It's fine. I want to do it. I can't stand your pained expression."

His gentle voice surprises me. It feels genuine, so I can't say anything back, letting him carry my body all the way to infirmary. There are no people on the way, fortunately. He puts me down to slide open the door. Unexpectedly, there's someone we know very well in the infirmary.

"Uguisumaru-senpai…" I call him without thinking.

Uguisumaru-senpai turns around. "Hello. It's surprising to see the both of you here. What happened?"

"Yamanbagiri sprained his ankle," Hasebe answers for me.

Senpai's face contorts to a pained smile. "I see. Accidents like that tend to happen, but yours is the first one today."

I don't know how to feel about that…my status as an unlucky student is coming back to bite me. Instead of carrying me again, Hasebe just supports me to sit on one of the beds, two beds away from Uguisumaru-senpai's place. Senpai is just standing in front of the window. It doesn't look like he is hurt.

"Do you know how to treat it?" Senpai asks, approaching us.

"I…" Hasebe looks at him, and then at me, and then at the floor, somewhat shyly. "…I don't know."

"I'll help you. First of all, can get packs of ice from kitchen's fridge? Wrap it in something, like plastic bag."

"Alright. Wait here, Yamanbagiri." Hasebe stands up and walks away - just before he leaves the room, though, he glares at Uguisumaru-senpai. "Don't do anything weird to him."

Senpai just smiles and waves him off. What does he mean by weird…?

After he is out of sight, senpai says, "He really likes you, doesn't he?"

"W-What - " I'm completely taken aback by his sudden words. "What do you mean?"

In a very Uguisumaru-manner, he doesn't reply. "Well, I can see why." He stands up and walks to the cupboard, taking out what seems to be, uhh...a roll of something brown. I don't know its name, but I'm pretty sure it's what going to hold my sprained ankle. Err, elastic bandage?

"Senpai, why are you here? You don't look like you're hurt…"
"It's my duty to wait here and take care of people if they're hurt."

"Even though you're the president?"

He chuckles before walking to me again. "Nobody else is as good as I am in things like this."

"…Where's the nurse, anyway?"

"She's busy taking care of the severe cases on field. I'm surprised you didn't go to her first, but it's actually better, because there's nothing that can help your ankle there."

Ahh…that's right. I forgot there's a nurse on the field, and I'm sure Hasebe forgot, too…actually no, when I think about it, before racing, I glanced at the area, but it was full of people. I might've unconsciously wanted to avoid it.

"Don't worry, I'm a professional."

I just chuckle awkwardly. "I trust you, at least."

"Okay, then…excuse me. I'll check for now." He kneels down. "Will you take your shoes off yourself, or will you let me do it?"

"I-I'll do it myself, of course." That's not even an option. I hurriedly take off my left shoe, but when I move my leg, it throbs, even far more painful than before. Surprised, I let out a yelp, but I manage to pull it out completely. I also roll up my pants and take off my socks before senpai can do anything about it.

"Hmm…" Uguisumaru-senpai stares at my ankle. His gaze is so intense I feel so embarrassed, on the same level when Hasebe carried me. I must be blushing right now. "It already looks pretty bad. It's okay, I won't touch it. I'm sure it hurts. However, do brace yourself when Hasebe comes back. You'll press the ice on your ankle, after all. It'll be painful, but it'll be worth it. I'll also massage your leg."

"A-Alright…" That sounds horribly painful, indeed…

"Is this your first time spraining your ankle?" He asks with a smile after standing up and sits next to me on bed.

"Yeah, so I'm lost at what to do."

"Rest assured with me here."

"You can be questionable sometimes, but as I said before, I trust you, senpai. I'm glad it's not anyone else treating me."

"Your words make me happy."

Though he says that, his smile is the same as always. I hardly see other expression than this and his neutral one. It's hard to know what he is thinking, so he can be a bit scary at times, but we've spent enough time together for me to understand parts of him. Despite his appearance and demeanor, he really likes to tease people. I'm pretty sure Ichigo-senpai complained once that , which he didn't deny at all. I've experienced some of it, as well.

"Why are you staring at me?" His gentle voice snaps me back to reality. "Are you thinking about me?"
There is it. His teasing. He even puts his hand on my cheek. It's very intentional! Just at times like this, I understand why Mikazuki is wary of him.

"No touching," Mikazuki says without a pause, slapping Uguisumaru-senpai's hand away from my cheek. "I can just heal Yamanbagiri's ankle myself, but for the sake of normalcy, I shall let you treat him. Take it as a blessing, so anything more than that is forbidden."

"Ohho." Uguisumaru-senpai seems unfazed. "How kind of you. Indeed, I'll take that as a blessing. Anyway, you should like down, Yamanbagiri, Rest your ankle."

…How am I supposed to do that when you're sitting next to me, though? I'm pretty sure he knows this.

"I'll help you," Mikazuki says, still glaring at senpai, eyes full of distrust.

He pulls me to the center of the bed, then helps me to lift my leg - it's throbbing in pain when I do it, so his help is great as I don't have to move it myself. Then, I drag myself to the pillow after Uguisumaru-senpai slightly shifts his sitting position to make more space in bed. I don't want to lie my head down as I think I'll have to get up soon anyway…

…Or so I think, when both Mikazuki and Uguisumaru-senpai just push my shoulders so I fall magnificently to the bed.

"We're quite similar, don't you think?" Senpai says with a smile.

Mikazuki's face contorts to an utterly disgusted one, but only for a split second as he grumbles. "That would be the last thing I wish for. I'm afraid "

"Aah, how cruel."

I shoot them a questioning look, but nobody wants to answer. Oh well, it doesn't matter now. I'll just enjoy the bed. Uguisumaru-senpai huffs, standing up to take…two pillows and a folded blanket. He gently lifts my left leg and puts those things under before resting it once again. It feels weird to have it higher than me now. I don't know if this is needed, but seriously, I think he should've done it minutes ago. He sits next to me again, quietly staring at me. Mikazuki does the same on the opposite side.

This level of awkwardness is otherworldly, even for me.

Uguisumaru-senpai pats my head. I don't hate it and I don't want it to stop, so Mikazuki can only sulk, holding his itching hand while trembling. The expression on his face is funny beyond words.

"Say, Yamanbagiri…" Senpai's face gets closer. I suddenly feel nervous, as his eyes look like they're seeing through me. "You - "

"I'm back."

At that moment, Hasebe slides open the door, holding a pack of ice. He looks stunned the moment he sees us. *How great, misunderstanding on the way.*

He narrows his eyes, glaring so hard at Uguisumaru-senpai. It's a terrifying expression. "What are you doing?"

"I'm simply comforting him," senpai replies with a chuckle.
"Comforting in what?!" Mikazuki yelps, but of course, Hasebe can't hear him.

"Whatever, get away from him or I'll throw this ice on you," Haebe threatens, getting into a stance to throw the pack of ice.

"How scary. Alright, alright." Uguisumaru-senpai gets up from bed. "Good timing. I'm about to massage him. His leg, of course."

"Is that even okay?" I ask worriedly as Hasebe walks to us.

"Don't worry. I'm a professional, remember?"

His smile doesn't assure me at all. I have a very bad premonition about this…!!

I have to cut it there because the continuation is so dangerous for my dignity…sure, I feel so much better after senpai massaged my leg, but the process was so embarrassing, to the point Hasebe had to hold my hand, with Mikazuki sulking even further since he couldn't, and then there's Kogitsunemaru appearing at some point, laughing at my reaction. The torture ended when the massage ended, but he still needed to wrap the bandage around my ankle, so it's still embarrassing.

"Keep everything that happened back there as a secret, okay, Hasebe?" I whisper when we're on the way to resting venue to have lunch.

"Okay. You're so cute, by the way," Hasebe replies as he supports me to walk.

"Shut up…"

"Yamanbagiri-san!"

I see another upperclassmen - Ichigo-senpai, running to us with a worried face.

"I heard you sprained your ankle," he says, looking at my feet. I'm wearing a pair of sandals given by Uguisumaru-senpai now. "Are you alright now?"

"I'm alright. Uguisumaru-senpai sure knew how to treat it."

"Thank god…I was so worried." He sighs in relief.

I can tell by his expression. I'm happy he's that worried about me.

"Please rest and don't forget to watch us in relay race after this, okay?" Ichigo-senpai says with a smile. I nod. "By the way, if it isn't too much…can I have lunch with you?"

I have no problems with it, of course, but what about the others? I look at Hasebe, who replies, "Considering we've had lunch together already, I think there shouldn't be any problem."

"Thank you!"

I'm not sure how will Kashuu and Yamato react to him, but at least Kikkou-senpai isn't here.

After going back to the venue, lunch proceeds smoothly. We talk about small things after they worry over my ankle. It seems our class won the cavalry battle thanks to the wild Yoshiyuki, so I pat his
head a few times and feed him an rolled egg, while he feeds me a karaage he cooked himself. We end up trying out each other's lunch. Yes, with everyone there. Ichigo-senpai blended in well, although I could feel people's gazes all over us. Scary.

This peaceful, every day activity made me forget about my supernatural problem for a moment. Just for a moment, but I feel refreshed - as though the burden has been lifted slightly from my shoulders. I'm glad to be able to spend time like this with them.

"I also want to eat..." Kogitsunemaru cries inside me. I can even imagine hearing his stomach grumbling.

…Well, there's him and Mikazuki unable to eat with us, and I'd be lying if I said I'm not sad about that. Being an oddity is sure hard. Don't worry, I'll try my best to slip you guys food later.

The bell rings, signaling the end of lunch break. Ichigo-senpai hurriedly cleans up his lunch and stands up. "It's club relay race time. Please cheer for us," he says, waving a hand.

"Good luck!" Yoshiyuki says, pumping a fist to the sky.

Senpai smiles before looking at me. I think he…is signaling me about the promise. I nod, and then he walks away. Sometimes I wonder why the student council is included in the club relay race, but well, no use thinking about it. I can't wait to see how they act, especially Kousetsu-senpai. He might look weak and meek, but as a specialist-in-training, I know better that he has a good stamina, but what about speed? I'm interested to find out. He seemed reluctant to do it earlier this morning, but there's no other choice for him. Ah, I really should cheer for them, then…

…That promise, though. I'm basically forced to do it. I don't really want to, but there's no harm, and if they're happy, I guess it's fine.

While waiting, I have Yoshiyuki, Yamato, and Kashuu help me to shift Hasebe's attention away from me as I give Kogitsunemaru and Mikazuki their lunchboxes. When they hold physical stuffs, they will turn invisible in normal people's eyes.

After a few minutes of preparation, all teams line up on the field. I look at the student council - Tsurumaru-senpai is first, and then Kousetsu-senpai (who has his long hair tied up), Ichigo-senpai, and ends with Uguisumaru-senpai. I thought Tsurumaru-senpai would be the first, but yeah, getting ahead since the start is good.

With a bang of the toy gun, the race begins. I watch closely.

As expected, the football team runs faster than anyone else, but Tsurumaru-senpai isn't losing, either. The basketball team is just slightly behind him. This is a tight battle. He somehow manages to keep second position and passes the baton to Kousetsu-senpai.

Kousetsu-senpai's hair flows to the back as he runs. He starts slow, but he is getting faster with each passing moment. I'm pretty sure that thick, long hair is actually holding him back somehow. The basketball team catches up, so he's the third, but their distance is not wide enough to make panic. While Tsurumaru-senpai had a smug expression earlier, Kousetsu-senpai's face is tense, but he manages to pass the baton to Ichigo-senpai.

There's a loud scream from all over the field when Ichigo-senpai runs. At first, he smiles to the audience (no wonder many people - mostly girls - scream even harder), but then his expression turns serious. He passes the basketball team, keeping second place just right behind the football team. For some reason, the basketball team slows down, so the gap widens between third and second places.
Way to go, Ichigo-senpai. Even I'm excited now, caught by the intensity of the race.

Keeping his second place, senpai passes the baton to Uguisumaru-senpai. While still smiling, he closes the distance with the football team in mere seconds, as though it's easy. You can tell the guy in the first place is panicking. He speeds up, but Uguisumaru-senpai is even faster. He is still getting faster, to the point he passes the other guy, making him the first place, just moments away from the finish line.

Not keeping his guard down, senpai passes the finish line with the same speed.

And so, quite obviously, the student council got first place. They really did it, somehow. Keeping on second place, and then becoming first place…I'm speechless. It's beyond amazing, considering how fast they were. Many people are screaming all around me, some close friends gather to student council members, but all I can do is just stand still here.

"I heard Uguisumaru-senpai holds the first place for running speed in his grade," Kashuu says, eyes glued to the scene. "I guess it's true."

"He even keeps on smiling while running. It's so cool!" Yamato exclaims excitedly.

"I never knew…" Yoshiyuki mutters. "Man, that's so awesome! I wanna congratulate them, but look at the crowd gathering already."

Other than close friends, it seems their classmates and fans are all gathered around them. I can't see the four people anymore, hidden by the crowd. It's safe to call it a pool of people, honestly. It's impossible for us to break through.

But more importantly, now that they have won, I'll have to fulfill my (forced) promise. I'll just message Ichigo-senpai about it for now.

"Oh, they all got shooed away by the teachers," Hasebe says with an amused voice. "It's time for the teachers' relay race, after all. Can't waste time, we're already behind schedule."

"This school sure loves relay races," I comment. "Well, this should be interesting to see."

The teachers, especially non-athletic ones, are fun to watch at events like this.

Today is a good day so far. I hope it stays that way…

"*Remember your ankle, though,*" Kogitsunemaru jabs in.

…Yeah, that's that, but it's all okay now. I can move it just fine with the bandages, so don't go and ruin my moment.

It's finally the last event for the day. I'm chilling around beneath the shades of the tree, feeling bored as I read a novel on my smartphone.

Everyone around me is getting tired and want to go home already, so they're mostly quiet and doing their own things. Hasebe and Yoshiyuki are sleeping peacefully, having ended up leaning onto each other. I took a photo already to blackmail Hasebe later. Yamato is also sleeping, leaning to Kashuu's shoulder. Kashuu is meanwhile busy searching for make up items in his smartphone in front of me. I
I don't understand anything that pops up on the screen.

I turn off my smartphone and look above to the fluttering leaves. The sunlight is slipping between the gaps. I feel sleepy. Maybe I should sleep, too…

"E-Err…Kunihiro-senpai?"

An unfamiliar voice calls me all of sudden.

I look up, finding someone I don't know standing in front of our group. A pretty tall boy with long, silky black hair stands there.

"Did you call me?" I ask carefully.

"Y-Yeah." He nods and shows a piece of paper in his hand, with 'blond hair' written on it. "I-I don't know anyone else with blond hair, so if you're willing to come with me…o-of course, it's fine if you refuse! I don't mind!"

Aah, the last event, Scavenger Hunt…basically, you have to get whatever written on the paper you got. But wait, have we met before…? He must be an underclassmen for calling me senpai, but I don't remember ever talking to underclassmen enough for them to know my name…hmm…the more I stare at him, the more I feel like I know him. I've seen him somewhere before, but where and when?

I stand up despite having no answer on who is he yet. "Sure, I'll come with you."

His face brightens up when he hears that. "Follow me."

I wave my hand to Kashuu and he waves back before I follow him. "Um, excuse me, but you are…?"

"So you don't remember me?" He sounds dejected, though I can't see his face. Well, yeah, even Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are dead…I mean, quiet about you, so it's a mystery. He turns his head slightly at me, showing a smile. "I'm Izuminokami Kanesada."

A familiar and yet not familiar name.

Perhaps because I don't give any response, he turns around with a sulkling face. He sure is expressive. "The one late the other day. Well, I'd rather have you forget that…gah! My mistake on saying it!" Now he suddenly looks embarrassed all by himself.

What a weird man.

I look at him closely again. When I think about it - that's right, I've met him before. He was indeed late once, so I had to deal with him. His image is different now, though.

"Okay, now I remember you, Kanesada-san. I won't speak of your bad record. Nice to meet you."

I don't know why I said that even though we most likely will never talk again after this.

"O-Oh?" He seemed to be taken aback by my words, his cheeks turning red before he nods. "N-Nice to meet you, too…just call me Izumi."

"Izumi, then. I don't mind if you call me Yamanbagiri-senpai."

"Okay, Yamanbagiri-senpai."
He seems like an easy going and friendly person. Totally my opposite, but I don't mind being called by my first name like this with my consent as long as he is still polite enough. So far, he seems quite polite despite being open. That's good, not too distant, but not too close, either.

"Wait, are you sure we can walk slowly like this?" I ask after some time, realizing that this is a race, and yet our pace is just… slow, even slower than walking.

"That's fine. I have no intention on winning or anything. Besides… you injured your leg, didn't you?" He glances at my feet. "I don't want to push you."

Ah, he's right. I almost forgot that I sprained my ankle. The pain is lessening, after all.

"This really is a bother, but I can't refuse my classmates," he continues, scratching the back of his head. "You can go back soon after we get to the finish line."

"You'll still get scolded by your classmates, though."

"Yeaah, definitely, but that's fine. I can explain."

He is a pretty chill guy despite his serious appearance, much to my surprise. Friendly and pleasant to talk to, I think he must be quite popular in his grade. That thought is confirmed when we cross the finish line, with many girls and boys yelling happily and approach him. He is already caught in a conversation, so I walk away without a word.

We most likely won't talk to each other after this, after all.
One way or another, we - Yoshiyuki, the R4, and I - end up going to a *ramen* shop Uguisumaru-senpai likes based on his suggestion. Just like before, he casually broke my promise with Ichigo-senpai - well, it wasn't his fault, he just has such a timing.

Before long, we arrive at the store and take our seats in the place Uguisumaru-senpai has booked. The shop is really packed, I doubt there's any space left for us, so it was a good thing he booked it. After reading the menu, we order our food and drinks. The *ramen* we ordered happen to be different from each other again. Perhaps this is a good thing as we can try each other's *ramen*.

"Yoshiyuki, are you serious? *Double ramen right off the bat?*" Tsurumaru-senpai says in clear bewilderment, checking his wallet and sighing. Somehow, Yoshiyuki managed to get him to treat him after begging. "Ugh, a man can't take back his words…"

"Ehehhee." Yoshiyuki looks as cheerful as ever, as though he doesn't feel the slightest pity to the one who is treating him. He can be evil at times like this. Double *ramen* is basically two *ramen*, so it's more expensive than other *ramen*. "I'm so hungry, I can't help it."

"You just have the stomach of a black hole…” He looks like he’s about to cry.

"It's good to eat well," Kousetsu-senpai says, seemingly approving Yoshiyuki's action. Revenge against Tsurumaru-senpai, somehow?

"Yeah, and two bowls of *ramen* is the weakest thing Yoshiyuki can do,” I say. Yoshiyuki, sitting next to me, puffs out his chest, smiling widely to confirm my words.

"I'm scared to ask what he can do on top of that…!" Tsurumaru-senpai wails.

After having that kind of idle chatter, our drinks and bowls of *ramen* arrive. Unlike that one time, the R4 didn't force me to eat their *ramen*, but instead having Yoshiyuki trying out their *ramen*. I'm relieved. I'd hesitant to go if that happened again. It was really a weird experience.

"Yamanbagiri, let me try yours," Yoshiyuki says.

"Here." I pull out some noodles with my chopsticks and feed them to him. He looks taken aback by my hand, but he immediately eats the noodles. "In turn, let me taste yours, too."

"Mm. It's good. Okay. Be careful, it's spicy." He takes some noodles this time, feeding me. I blow on them before carefully eating it. It really is spicy, but not enough to make me cry and scream for water.

I turn to my own *ramen*, realizing the gazes piercing me…hmm? All four of them are staring at me for some reason. Asking what's wrong feels out of question…the pressure was *that* hard. They say nothing, so I'm not going to say anything, either. If they want something from me, they should know better to just ask.

After we clear our bowls, Uguisumaru speaks after drinking a cup of green tea, "So, Ichigo. Tell us about it."

"About what?" Ichigo-senpai asks. "Oh, that reward?"
Uguisumaru-senpai nods.

"Well…" For some reason, he leaves it hanging, as if telling me to take over.

"Ichigo-senpai just forced it on me," I say, trying to act like I'm sulking. "Not that I mind. But wait, I thought you already explained it to them?"

"I did."

Really…?

Yoshiyuki is still eating, so after gulping down some noodles, he asks, "What is this about?" I wonder if he is…feeling something about me right now?

"I told Yamanbagiri-san that, if we win the relay race, he'll give a reward," Ichigo-senpai replies. "Or well, something to do, to be exact. Don't worry, though, it's nothing weird."

"Aaand the thing is for Manba-chan to not wear his hood for two days," Tsurumaru-senpai adds, "But you haven't said the details. Is that what Uguisumaru asking for?"

Uguisumaru-senpai smiles and nods. "Indeed, that's what I'm asking."

Then say that since the start, please… I feel like he is letting Yoshiyuki to swallow the information first, or just messing around with all of us. Both are very plausible.

"Hoooh." Yoshiyuki lets out a sound. "Wait, isn't that a punishment for Yamanbagiri?"

"It is," I hiss. "I wish I could take my words back."

"…Ya dug it yourself."

"So I did." I can just refuse, but at the time, I somehow couldn't and decided to accept right away. Is it pity for Ichigo-senpai? Not wanting to see him sad and dejected? I believe that's mostly why I accepted. Yoshiyuki stares at me with disappointed eyes, like I'm a hopeless human being. Ow, that hurts.

"The details, huh…" Ichigo-senpai mumbles. "To be honest, I haven't thought of anything yet. What do you think?"

"Well, other than two days…" Kousetsu-senpai looks at me. "…Are you okay, Kunihiro-san?"

"It's okay…it's a befitting punishment for me…" I say grimly, still hurting from Yoshiyuki's gaze. "Aahahaha…"

"Oh. Depressed Manba-chan. How rare," Tsurumaru-senpai says with a grin. What is that grin for?! "Details, huh…does Manba-chan have to take off his hood with us only for 2 days, or all day long for two days?"

"That's a good question," Uguisumaru-senpai says. The shadow on his face makes him look evil - and yes he is an evil.

"No bully Yamanbagiri!" Yoshiyuki exclaims after drinking the broth of his ramen completely, his face is red from the spice. He pulls me closer by holding my shoulder, making us somewhat hugging. He even pats my head. It's a pose similar to what I see in fiction, somewhat possessive…and it makes my heart beat faster. "Especially not in front of me. I don't care who ya are, but if ya mess with Yamanbagiri, ya have to fight me first."
His lines seem *chuunibyou*-like instead as it was hyperbole, for some reason, which kind of destroyed the feelings budding inside me, but I'm still moved, so I guess it's fine. I know he's serious about it despite how the situation doesn't really fit those words.

Perhaps it was the words he has wanted to say all these years.

"Ohoo…"

Tsurumaru-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai let that out from their lips at the same time. What the heck does that mean? Teasing? I'm sure it is. Meanwhile, Kousetsu-senpai looks in our direction with red cheeks, looking completely shy before he turns his head away as though staring is forbidden. N-Now what… I mean, sure, he knows our relationship, but that reaction is kinda… Ichigo-senpai just smiles normally at us, so at least there's one normal reaction.

"Well, I can't bring myself to torture Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai says, "So the first option is better."

"Soft-hearted," Tsurumaru-senpai says before making *boo* sounds like a child. To think he's as old as Mikazuki is… wait, maybe that's why? It's the cycle of life, they said - from a baby, a child, a teenager, an adult, an elderly… in elderly stage, you resort to childish behavior. Or so they said.

"Did you just - ?" Mikazuki mutters inside me. Mm, never mind. I say nothing. Really, it's nothing.

"I-I think first option is better as well," Kousetsu-senpai says, "It'd be better if we don't push Kunihiro-san too much."

Aaaah, thank you, my angelic seniors! I feel so moved that I might as well cry right now.

"If that's what both of you say, then, it's fine with me," Uguisumaru-senpai says, shrugging. "Indeed, making Yamanbagiri cry would be the last thing I want to do."

"No, um, I won't cry because of that…" I jab in weakly.

"Then, we have to be with Yamanbagiri when we can, don't you think?" He continues, ignoring me. "On weekdays, there are break times and after school."

"During weekend sounds nice too," Tsurumaru-senpai says with a proud look on his face, "Especially since it's perfect - two days."

I look at Yoshiyuki who has released his grip. We already made a promise to spend time together during weekend. If I have to spend time with R4 during break time, then we have less time together at school. Moreover, I don't think it's good for my health to be around R4 for so long. They're way too otherworldly. I can manage one or two, but all four at once? Do you want me to die?

"You're exaggerating," Kogitsunemaru comments. "You love them that much, huh…"

W-What do you mean, love?!

"Mmmmmm. I wonder."

Oi! You can't leave me hanging after that comment!

Ugh, let's ignore him for now. Yoshiyuki is also staring at me. I can tell that he is thinking about the same thing as I am. Both weekend and weekdays, they have pros and cons… this is a tough decision. Oh, right, I need to consider Hasebe, Kashuu, and Yamato, if we can't have lunch together… I've
been neglecting them nowadays, honestly. I feel bad.

I guess there's only the weekend, then.

"What do you think, Yamanbagiri-san?" Ichigo-senpai asks me all of a sudden. My heart leaps for a second there.

"Uh…" I look at Yoshiyuki who hasn't said anything. Please say something… I don't know what to say. Uuugh. "Actually, I have a plan with Yoshiyuki on weekends." I just realized we haven't specified which day.

"So… weekdays?"

"But that's also…" I fidget.

"Yoshiyuki can go with us. How about it?" Uguisumaru-senpai suggests.

"Ah, that's fine!" Yoshiyuki says with a smile. He seems relieved. "I just want to hang out at Yamanbagiri's place."

"Manba-chan's house, huh…" Tsurumaru-senpai mumbles.

"Waaait, if they go to your house, we'll have less time together…!" Kogitsunemaru exclaims in terror. "A-And then… food…"

 RIP you and Mikazuki. That stays true for even if we go somewhere else, though. "Hmm, there's a chance my brother wouldn't allow these guys at my home since it's way too noisy and all. Besides, what are you going to do at my house?"

"Good question." Tsurumaru-senpai nods and crosses his arms. "Then, normal hanging out, walking around, shopping and stuff?"

"That might be better," Uguisumaru-senpai replies.

"I'll still come, okay?" Yoshiyuki says, raising a hand. "I'm afraid for Yamanbagiri's life as he'll be naked in crowd - "

"I won't be naked." I jab his stomach with my elbow, but I really feel glad if he's coming as well.

Kousetsu-senpai nods in agreement - no, not to Yoshiyuki or me, but to Tsurumaru-senpai's suggestion, obviously. "I'm fine with that."

"Then, let's plan what we're going to do…" Uguisumaru-senpai says, putting his chin on his hands like some kind of mastermind in anime and comics. Or, to be precise, a villain. Yeah, it suits him to a T.

After a pretty long time - the customers around us have mostly vanished when we're finished - everything is set, and I can only bury my head on the table. My free time during weekends… goodbye. Life is saddening. At the very least, Yoshiyuki and I can have time together after we hang out with R4.

I'm an indoor person, so I like to spend weekends at home, but well, just for this one time. I consider them my friends, so it's fine. On top of that, I can observe Ichigo-senpai better with this.

After we pay for our orders, we walk outside and prepare to go back home. I'm surprised we didn't get kicked out considering the time. This time, of course, I stay with Kousetsu-senpai.
"Huh? I thought your way home is the same as Tsurumaru-san's?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

"Ah, yeah. I have something to do at Kousetsu-senpai's house," I say, "Stuff for my brother."

"I see. Be careful on your way home."

It's a blatant lie. We're living together for now. I hope I don't let that truth out with my expression. Kousetsu-senpai and I walk away after we part ways with the others. Senpai isn't talkative and neither I am, so the journey is mostly filled with silence. Surprisingly, even Kogi and Mikazuki are quiet. They must be hungry.

"Kunihiro-san, did you accept...that reward thing...for Ichigo-san?" Kousetsu-senpai asks all of sudden. It almost makes me jump. His voice is so low, close to a whisper. I thought it was an oddity's whisper at first, sorry, senpai.

"Mm...maybe. What about it?"

"No, um...I think he's desperate to be with you because you're really important for him. A factor for his happiness. A factor to keep him stable, or something..."

"...Really? I know he's acting weird, but..."

He nods. "He has never acted like this for the 3 years I’ve known him. He naturally attracts people, good-natured, and kind. He has never actively pursued someone before. It's almost like...he's a maiden in love."

A maiden...in love...these words are pretty strong for some reason.

After a few seconds, he just realizes something and waves his hands with red cheeks. "U-Umm, please don't mind the last part."

"O-Okay."

"A-Anyway, although it's abnormal, I don't find it bad for him to do so. It's good to find a pillar for mental support. However, he might get too dependent on you...comfort is both sugar and poison. That's dangerous. Ikiryō is born from any form of intense emotions, including love."

His words robs me of air for a moment. He has an uncharacteristic grim expression on his face right now, and his voice is nothing but cold. I feel a shiver down my spine. This is a real warning from senpai. This is not a joke.

"Even if the problems that stressed him vanished, that's no guarantee for Ikiryō to vanish. It might be replaced by another strong emotion he can't contain...and, this is just a speculation on my part, but, if that emotion is replaced by love, or if it might be love all along...you're in great danger, Kunihiro-san. You're one of the objects of his affection." He takes a few deep breaths before continuing. "I'm not a professional and this is just what I think...the closer you are to the one you love, the more obsessive you become. For example, getting easily jealous, wanting to have the one you love alone...well, this is something I've seen from cases and books. There were cases involving lovestruck Ikiryō in the past."

What does he mean by love in this case? But this isn't the time to ask about such a trivial thing. I'm shocked about the Ikiryō cases, though. That's new information. "I'm honestly happy if I'm Ichigo-senpai's support, but that's...uh, do you think he is someone like that?"

"He is quite the uptight person...even more than me. He is good at hiding his true emotions, putting
on a mask and behaves like everyone expects him to...it's normal for someone like him to create
*ikiryou*. I can't answer for certain about being lovestruck, however. It's always possible, if you look
at it objectively."

Objectively... "...You're right. It's hard to imagine him being like that, to be honest, but it's possible.
Tsurumaru-senpai said something similar before, that Ichigo-senpai might attack me because he likes
me...I still don't get it, to be honest."

"There are many ways to be with someone, even twisted ones. I don't understand why anyone would
torture someone they love like that, though...so, um...actually, my point is...don't force yourself for
him and others, Kunihiro-san. Please prioritize yourself first and be careful. I'm not telling you to go
further from Ichigo-san, but please keep in mind, too kind sends more danger."

I stare at his bashful expression. Aah, so that long explanation is just for that? "...Thanks, Kousetsu-
senpai. Thanks for letting me stay at your house for so long, too."

"N-No problem...I'm happy to see you ev- uh, yeah..."

"When will you call me by my first name, by the way?"

"W-When I'm ready..."

Why would he need to be ready? Oh well. Take it easy.

"Umm, where's Kogitsunemaru-san and Munechika-san...?" Kousetsu-senpai asks after some
silence.

"I'm here and dying," Kogitsunemaru says weakly, appearing right behind me. His face is full of
pain. "I'm so hungry..."

"Where's Mikazuki?" I ask.

"He died."

...Collapsed out of hunger? I thought Kogi will be the one to meet such fate.

"We should quickly return home, then," Kousetsu-senpai says with a wry smile.

"Yeah, we should."

"Yamanbagiri, I know it's getting late, but are you free?" Souza asks the moment he steps into the
dining room.

"I am. What's wrong?"

Thank god I'm not doing anything weird with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, since they're happily
eating *ramen* right now.

"I...need some help with homework. Can you help me?" He looks embarrassed when he says that.

"Sure, of course. I'll help as long as I can."
He proceeds to take a seat next to me, in front of Kogitsunemaru. Remember, this is a square table. Souza opens the notebook he is holding after placing it on the table. It seems to be math homework. Aahhh, I see. It's kind of unexpected for him to have a trouble with math, honestly, but then again, I don't know him very well.

"Which one are you confused about?" I ask.

"This, this, and this…" he points at number 6, 11, and 12. "Has your class covered this yet?"

I lean closer to look at the notebook. Realizing my difficulty to read it, he slightly shifts the notebook. "Ah, I remember, we just did yesterday. Let's see…"

I explain the numbers, and he easily understands them. This is the kind of student teachers want to have, to be honest. A very good student who listens carefully to your explanation.

"Why did you ask me and not Kousetsu-senpai?" I ask after we're finished. That didn't even take 30 minutes.

He shoots me a mysterious smile. "I want you to teach me."

…What?

I try to comprehend his words. Huh-uh-huhh. I'm pretty sure I heard it right…

W-What? B-But why? Why does he -

"I'm half-joking. Nii-san is in the middle of meditation right now, so I don't want to disturb him."

…Yeah, I knew it. Of course I knew it.

…Half is true, though. Should I keep this in mind?

"Maybe you should," Kogitsunemaru says. Despite being outside, he sends it right through my mind. "I feel like, he really is…"

He what? Souza what?

"…Nothing. I'm not sure. I can't say yet until I'm certain. He's way too mysterious for me to make a conclusion."

Leaving me hanging again, you guys sure like it.

"Said the one who is as dense as a black hole."

Where the heck did you get these words? How rude. Maybe I should've never taught you the internet…

While thinking about that, a notebook suddenly, gently, hits my head. It's none other than Souza, standing up. "It's getting late, you should sleep. I'm sure Nii-san should finish meditating soon. Thanks for your help."

"No problem."

"Good night. Sleep well."

"Good night."
He walks away to his room with his swaying, striking pink hair. Sometimes I wonder how he manages to not stand out with that kind of natural hair color. One of the reasons I keep wearing hood at all times is because of my hair color, which is unusual in Japan...but then again, I guess many people around me have colorful hair. Life is strange.

I stretch my arms and ask, "Have you finished eating? Ah, wait, I guess I don't need to ask."

Kogitsunemaru's bowl has been empty since minutes ago, and yet Mikazuki's bowl is still full...no, half empty. Or half full? As expected. Old man is really slow at eating. I guess I will wait...that's when he suddenly pushes his bowl to me.

"Please feed me."

I stare dumbfoundedly at his serious expression before caving in easily. There's no need to ask why he wants it. At the very least, I can force him to eat faster. I take some noodles and says, "Okay, open your mouth."

Instead of doing as I said, though, he leans closer to my face, until our lips meet in a kiss.

I'm not that surprised, honestly. We haven't kissed for some time today. Looks like he is pretty hungry about it to lick my lips as his hands grabs my cheeks to pull me even closer. Mm...he tastes like ramen. Obviously. Now I have to have a drink after this to erase the smell from my mouth.

...Aaah, isn't this getting a bit too dangerous?


"You just want your turn," Mikazuki sulks.

"But of course."

Kogitsunemaru pats my head before kissing me. I'll just accept this as good night kiss and relax...
The cursed day arrived so quickly. For once, I don't want weekends to come before I can somehow break that promise, but alas, the world is spinning regardless of my wish.

"Going outside without my hood…I am empty…" I mutter weakly as I look at myself in the mirror, preparing to go soon. Kousetsu-senpai has finished his preparation before me and is now helping Souza with washing dishes.

"You're exaggerating," Kogitsunemaru says with a chuckle and pats my head. "Well, good luck out there, Yamanbagiri. Make sure to scream if something happens."

"Why aren't you coming, anyway?"

"I'm tired. As much as I want to accompany you anywhere, there are a few problems, such as food…" His ears flop down. "I also want to help with housework. We're freeloading here, after all. We need to do something for them."

"You're right." As expected from my future wife, so thoughtful.

"Aah, poor me," Mikazuki mumbles from the corner of the room with a very sad expression on his face, full of dramatization, "Now I am all alone in this fight…"

…What fight?

"Accompanying Yamanbagiri is also important," Kogitsunemaru shoots him a glare, "Tsurumaru said there's no movement from ikiryou for two days now, but we still have to be careful. Well, if you don't want to, I can always have Yamanbagiri all to myself."

"No, no, I don't mind that part, really, I'll happily flirt with Yamanbagiri, but…I'm sure it'll be boring without you."

They look at each other in silence. "…Heheh, so you can say something normal for once, huh. I thought you're used to boredom."

"Unfortunately, not anymore. Ever since I've come to live together with the both of you, every day is rarely the same."

I just listened quietly to their conversation before I took my bag off the floor. Sigh.. I sure make a lot of trouble for them…

"If you want to get self-deprecating, Yamanbagiri, you better take me to bed first," Mikazuki stands up and says with a smile. A really, really, creepy smile.

"W-Who has the time to do that now?!" I squeak.

"I'd be lying if I say I'm not bitter at all, but I'll happily do anything for you, so I don't mind. Don't be sad, okay?"
"...Okay. I'm so-

"Don't apologize either."

I shut my mouth and nod. Although I'm still feeling guilty, I feel better than before.

"Kunihiro-san, are you ready?" Kousetsu-senpai opens the door at the right time. He looks surprised when he sees Mikazuki - which is to be expected, as he's not wearing yukata now. Instead, he's wearing the casual, modern clothes we bought before, consisting of a leather jacket, a shirt and a pants. He looks 100 x times younger now. *This is a miracle.*

Honestly, there's no reason for him to wear these, but I just want to see him in modern clothes..and everything suits him perfectly. No regrets.

"I'm ready."

Mikazuki nods in agreement.

"Alright then. Let's go."

I forgot to say this, but, since Tsurumaru-senpai was the one that picked the movie, it's a horror one. Nobody refused this decision, and I don't really find horror films scary since I've seen the real thing anyway. I was pretty sure the others think the same as me, but...after the movie...

Yoshiyuki's soul seems to have flew away somewhere, Kousetsu-senpai looks like he needs a blood transfusion, and Ichigo-senpai looks like he has been drained of energy and is now very thin and weak like someone who hasn't eaten for days. We're now sitting at one of the benches scattered all around the mall.

"I admit that the movie was good. It was scary, but... seriously, Yoshiyuki, Kousetsu-senpai?" I say, having unspoken words - especially Kousetsu-senpai. I mean, he deals with oddities most of the time as a part-time job.

"I'm bad with jump scares, okay! Don't judge me!" Yoshiyuki shouts, but weaker than how he usually does it. "That was... something... I don't even want to remember it."

"I'm...bad with jumpscares as well..." Kousetsu-senpai whispers meekly. "Actually, all of the gore and violence...too...urk." He looks nauseous when he says that, his face becoming as white as Tsurumaru-senpai's hair. This guy is really pure, please don't taint him any further...

Ichigo-senpai seems too shocked to even say anything. I remember earlier, he was sitting next to me, and as the scary parts passed by, he held my arm shakily. It's quite the intimate gesture. I was surprised at first, but realizing how scared he was, I couldn't shake him off. M-Maybe I didn't find the movie very scary because I was distracted by his touch...there's also Yoshiyuki on my other side, so we naturally hold hands - somewhat secretly. I don't really care if the others saw it.

"Geez, you guys are so weak!" Tsurumaru-senpai, the culprit behind three people's suffering, says. "It's not real, calm down."

"You said that, but you sure screamed pretty loudly next to me," Uguisumaru-senpai says with a smile.
"W-What are you talking about, I wonder…"

"I sure heard your scream, Tsurumaru-senpai," I say. "Quite the sweet one. How about I make you scream more and record it?"

Tsurumaru-senpai stares at me with super wide eyes and open mouth, looking terrified and disturbed at the same time. "Manba-chan, is that…?"

"What? I mean horror films marathon." What did he think about? I get feeling that it isn't something I'd like.

"Thank god you noticed that," Mikazuki breathes in, trying to hold back his laughter.

"O-Oh…you sadist!" He quickly recovers and retorts. "Why are you bullying only me?!!"

"Hmm…because it's you and it's fun?"

He makes a very disturbing, incomprehensible sound out of his mouth, when I feel a tug at my sleeves. It's Ichigo-senpai. For some reason, I feel a thump on my heart before I turn around, ignore that stupid crane, checking on senpai.

"What's wrong, Ichigo-senpai?"

He pulls me closer and whispers, "I…I want to go restroom."

I get what he means without more words. He's still scared, so he wants me to go with him. Heh, that's pretty cute of him. I'd never expect this kind of side. I'm glad I got to see it by my own eyes - it's a sight you won't see a lot. Maybe once in a blue moon or even less. SSR or even UR.

"Sure." I take his hand and help him to stand up. "I'm going to the restroom with Ichigo-senpai, so wait here."

Tsurumaru-senpai and Uguisumaru-senpai look like they want to say something, most likely some teasing, but they say nothing and wave us off. The restroom is pretty close to where we were sitting, so we arrive quickly. Thankfully, it isn't crowded - in fact, there are only the two of us there.

"Go ahead, senpai, I'll just wait h-"

Before I can finish my words, I feel Ichigo-senpai's body pressing against mine. No, well, he wraps his hands around me, hugging me close out of blue, I'm shorter than him by some centimeters, so it feels like I'm the one burying my head on his chest, smelling his comforting scent, but waaaait, that's not the problem here!

"S-Senpai…?" I whisper. Does he really need this to calm down? But more than that, the scene from that dream flashes on my mind, twisting my stomach. I hold it in and pat senpai's back, more about calming myself down. This is the real Ichigo Hitofuri, my kind senior. He is not the one in that dream. "Senpai, are you okay?"

"Mmm…you smell so nice…it's so comforting."

Shivers run down my spine again when he says that, reminding me of that dream again. Damn it, mind and my beating heart, calm down a bit, please. My heart is beating so damn fast because he's hugging me and I can feel the warmth of his body, unlike in that cursed dream.

"…Sorry," he says as he pulls himself away. "I'm fine now, thank you." He puts on a smile,
somewhat forced as he scratches his cheek awkwardly. "To be honest, I just wanted to hug you. I'm not that scared anymore, but...please forgive my selfishness. Being with you is comforting."

My face feels hot. I'm getting embarrassed now. I'm really weak towards him... "I-I'm fine with it. You can tell me anytime you want a hug."

Ichigo-senpai shoots me his usual gentle smile, as though whatever burden he feels is no longer on his back. "Thank you. Please wait here for a bit." He goes to one of the cubicles and shuts the door close.

"You cheater..." Mikazuki says as he pops up right next to me, staring at me with a grim face, full of disbelief. "That's a proposal right there!"

How is that a proposal?! Besides, it's not like Ichigo-senpai and I are lovers, you know...

"Not yet, you mean." He puffs out his cheeks and suddenly sulks, crossing his arms. It's just an exaggerated gesture, trying to be cute. "Yamanbagiri, you're such a player..."

I don't know if I am, really, but well, you still love me, don't you?

Mikazuki frowns, his cheeks are red. He is both embarrassed and happy at the same time - I can feel his feelings overflowing. Ehehehe. What a great view. I'm enjoying this. Hearing my mind, he pouts even harder. "I wonder why I love you."

I wonder the same towards you. It's mysterious.

We smile to each other amusingly, though the place is very inappropriate for this...wait, this isn't the first time we've done this in a public restroom. We have quite the hobbies...

"I'll pretend I never heard the last sentence. Anyway, that hug was out of place as well, you know. It just seems lewd if done here," Mikazuki says in amusement, but then his expression and tone change. "In all seriousness, though, Ichigo is back on being strange. Please be careful. Do you remember what Kousetsu said? It's exactly that."

That sometimes, kindness just brings danger?

Yeah, I got it, no problem.

He doesn't look too convinced by my answer, though.

After I while, Ichigo-senpai comes out, washes his hands, and off we go. When we come back to where the others are, Tsurumaru-senpai immediately whispers to me.

"How inappropriate of you, Manba-chan. Doing something like that."

"What the heck do you mean. We didn't do anything." We hugged, yeah, but that's all.

He puts on a wide smile on his face. "Well, going there together is just weird, you know? There's no way you didn't do anything."

"We are not girls, true, but it was right after a horror movie. Understandable." Even I had a period where I couldn't go alone to the bathroom at night after encountering terrifying oddities. Well, okay, that's actually not normal considering I saw the real thing, but they're similar, okay.

"Hmm~" His face is still smug for some reason. What does he want, seriously?! "Something must have happened. After all, it's him and you we're talking about."
What? Why? I have so many questions piling up, but more than that, I want to punch his annoying face or at least spit out some retort, but before I can, Ichigo-senpai pulls on his collar and glares - he must've heard us, or feel that he is being talked about.

"Tsurumaru-san, what did you speak about to Yamanbagiri-san?" He says with a smile on his face, but his eyes are clearly shooting death arrows. Or laser.

"N-No, um...nothing..." Tsurumaru-senpai looks visibly pale.

"Teasing like that is bad, you know," I say with a sigh. For a second, I see Tsurumaru-senpai's face flashes some kind of seriousness, but it soon snaps back to his usual expression, smiling awkwardly. "Come on, I'm just curious...and joking around, okay? Don't stare at me like that! I'm sorry!" He pleads as he claps his hands.

Ichigo huffs and lets him go, before he walks over to me and...g-grabs my shoulder?

"Well, whatever happened there, it is our little secret. Right?" He winks to me.

I shudder in shock and I'm sure Tsurumaru-senpai feels the same. What happened to his mind?! Did I wreck it somehow?!

We recover by having brunch at a sushi restaurant. It's not the extravagant one, just a normal, small restaurant, so it's not very expensive. To be honest, I don't consider eating sushi as lunch, as I always still feel a bit hungry afterwards. It's just not enough. I know Yoshiyuki thinks the same as he has this melancholic expression on his face, while he usually looks happy when eating.

The sushi on the plates look delicious, and they indeed are, but it is certainly not enough.

"Yoshiyuki, what's wrong? Did the ghost eat you?" Uguisumaru-senpai asks, his tone is one of worry, and yet his words are clearly teasing.

"No ghosts have eaten me!" Yoshiyuki yelps without thinking (or so it seems). "Nah, it's just...this isn't enough for my stomach."

"Try to eat a desk, perhaps? Your stomach is a black hole, after all."

"That's rude! And I can't desks..." He grumbles before he takes a sushi and swallows it down in one big gulp. "Yamanbagiri! We're going to hunt for more food after this!"

"Understood," I reply immediately. It's almost like we're servant and master, but as you already know, I completely agree with him. I'm going to cry if I have to walk around some more with just some sushi filling my stomach. At least I should have sweets, like chocolate, to fire myself up.

"If it's eating delicious food, I'm in!" Tsurumaru-senpai raises his hands. "More food is good. Not like I'll get fat anyway."

Yoshiyuki shoots him a jealous look. He doesn't look like it - well, not from my eyes at least - but he is pretty heavy, and he isn't so happy with that. His metabolism isn't good. And yet, he loves food so much that he can't stop eating. At least he can balance it out with some exercise and sports. And gaming.
"You're not full from this?" Kousetsu-senpai asks, somewhat in bewilderment.

"Y-You're full from this?" Yoshiyuki strikes back with an equally shocked expression and voice.

"P-Pretty much?"

"It depends on the power of the mind, my dear underclassmen," Uguisumaru-senpai speaks up, eats a sushi, then dramatically puts his chin on the back of his hands. "If you think you'll be full and are full after eating it, then you'll be. If you aren't, you'll be a chicken like Tsurumaru."

"But chicken is good," Ichigo-senpai says, somewhat non-sequitur (which is a bit unexpected from him), "Especially when fried."

"That's not the point, and wait, why am I the chicken?! And it should be a cow!" Tsurumaru-senpai jabs in, complete with a hand gesture.

"Huh…can a dog be very fat?" I say while thinking. "Well, I guess it can."

"I might be a dog, but I'm not fat!" Yoshiyuki says before stuffing in more sushi into his mouth in a comical fashion. "Ayaglabase, I'm - "

"Please don't eat when your mouth is full…" I sweat, not understanding what he is trying to say and tiredly eat more sushi. A salmon one, a bit spicy, even after I dip it into the sauce. It really is delicious and heavenly.

Kousetsu-senpai eats more sushi with a somewhat sad expression. If he had animal ears like Yoshiyuki, they might be weakly slumping down now. "Sushi is so good, and yet…” He mumbles. I can't hear the continuation as he is sitting across from me, and Ichigo-senpai next to me is being a bit noisy with Yoshiyuki.

Huh? I look at the plates and think hard, searching through my memories. Come to think of it… "Kousetsu-senpai, you sure have eaten a lot…"

He gasps as though he was caught in the act. "R-Really?"

"Hmm…” Ichigo-senpai hears me, so he averts his attention and looks at the plates too. "Right, I don't think I've eaten many."

"More like, nobody eats so many, save for Kousetsu and Yoshiyuki," Tsurumaru-senpai says. "…Wait, isn't that unfair?!"

"That's my point." I nod. "No wonder I'm still hungry and yet the sushi are all almost gone now."

"Then, you should quickly eat more, Kunihiro-san. Before someone else steals it," Kousetsu-senpai replies.

"You're in the quickest is the winner team now?" I chuckle dryly. "We should've counted and split them up first. But oh well."

Suddenly, he shoves his chopsticks with a sushi between them towards me. "Here."

My whole body freezes. He's clearly asking me to eat it, but… really? He's going to feed me? However, the innocent look on his face tells me that he doesn't realize how embarrassing this is, even though he should be the one who gets easily embarrassed. He's dense in some aspects, I guess. Having no guts to reject him, I lean closer and take the sushi into my mouth. Still good as always, b-
but...the taste of embarrassment...especially now that I'm not wearing my hood...they're slowly overwhelming me. Uuugh.

"Kunihiro-san."

With such a gentle and affectionate voice, Kousetsu-senpai hands me another sushi. I don't know if the others are staring at us right now, I'm too scared to find out as I focus on the sushi on the chopsticks. His face twists to a dejected one when I haven't taken it for a while, sending a wave of guilt that shakes my entire body.

Oh my god. This guy is so illegal.

I eat the sushi again, hesitantly. His face lights up and he hands me...yet another sushi. O-Oi? I'm going to finish all of them if you keep giving them to me, you know? Even if I want to say that, his expression doesn't let me to even speak up. This is so terrifying...I can't refuse him at all. My body just moves to lean and eats it, even when I haven't completely swallowed the previous sushi. I try to meet his expectations every time, until...

...Until my mouth is so full...I can't eat all of them anymore. I feel sick. H-hey, isn't this bullying? What's with that angelic expression, senpai?!

"Alright, time out." Uguisumaru-senpai, surprisingly, comes to the rescue, stopping senpai's hand. "Kousetsu, please kindly stop. Yamanbagiri is suffering now."

Kousetsu-senpai stops, blinks a few times, then stares at me. Meanwhile, I try to slowly gulp down the sushi inside my mouth. It's really hard, I feel like choking. Why must I suffer like this? What have I done to deserve this?

"O-Oh...I'm really sorry!" Seemingly snapping out of it, he stands up and bows deeply, his long hair covering his face like a ghost. I just weakly nod and still try to swallow everything down while Ichigo-senpai next to me encourages me.

"Why did you do that, anyway?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks.

Kousetsu-senpai fidgets, the color of red is painted across his cheeks. "W-Well...Kunihiro-san just looks cute when he is eating, so..." Why is he being so honest now?

"Oooh, you have a point." He nods a few times. I don't take that as a compliment at all, damn it! This is true suffering!

"In the end, Yamanbagiri finished all the sushi, huh?" Yoshiyuki says, looking at the now empty plates. "Even though it was by force."

He is right. All of sudden, the plates are empty now, and I don't feel too hungry anymore. I stole everyone else's portion...not like I'm the true culprit, but I still feel somewhat bad - as bad as my mouth is right now. After some time, I finally swallow everything down when everyone is busy teasing Kousetsu-senpai (who went back being his usual self, but totally embarrassed) and gulp down a glass of water in frustration. The water clears my throat, but the feeling still lingers. Ugh...

"Kunihiro-san, are you okay?" Kousetsu-senpai asks when he notices me, as if trying to escape the bombs the others throw at him. I didn't really listen to the conversation, so I don't know what he is escaping from exactly.

"I'm fine now."
"Once again, I'm sorry about that…" He bows his head again with a very melancholic expression.

"It's okay now…I'm just surprised you can be like that." It's almost out of character, though he is doing it without realizing my suffering or intending it to happen. He has quite the personality, the gap between his serious look and how he is actually clumsy is adorable. I can't get angry at all.

He, however, just hides his face between his two hands, mumbling something I don't comprehend. Still embarrassed, I guess. That's a given.

"Okay! Shall we go hunt for more food?" Tsurumaru-senpai claps his two hands and declares.

"Yeaah!" Yoshiyuki raises a fist, far more pumped up than everyone else. Everyone else supports their decision, even Kousetsu-senpai, who admits that he is still hungry. Ugh, I'm sorry about the sushi, everyone.

By the way, Mikazuki, why aren't you saying anything? Don't you want food?"

"...Sorry, I'm drowning in salt right now."

...What?

There's a sobbing sound echoing in my mind. "I also want to eat sushi and feed you…I'm so jealous..."

…I see. Well, I'm not really surprised you feel that way.

"Honestly, your face when eating is really adorable. It reminds me of a hamster. I completely understand Kousetsu earlier. Sometimes you just lose it."

Ugh…I guess I'll take that as a compliment, coming from you. Seriously, though, I don't want anyone to do that ever again.

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The said food-hunting happens in the shopping district. We walk around and seek whatever that might interest us…well, everyone except me. Sure, I bought some food for Mikazuki, but that's all. I honestly want to buy some drinks, but my money is running out. Eating out again and again is dangerous for my wallet.

Meanwhile, Yoshiyuki basically buys anything he comes across, be it sweets, salty snacks, and even something you'd consider heavy. His stomach is really a black hole. I wonder how much money he has, though…I'm a bit jealous. Of course, being his boyfriend, I can always ask him to treat me, but that's the last resort.

While I'm watching from afar (and secretly gives Mikazuki food - unfortunately only some onigiri for now), everyone else is surrounding a takoyaki and taiyaki stall. Ichigo-senpai approaches me after a while, but instead of takoyaki, he brings two taiyaki. It's still steaming hot. He smiles as he hands me a dorayaki. "I know you must be full, but just take it as a dessert."

"Everything?"

"Well, depends on how much you eat. I'll gladly finish it if you don't."

"...Okay, thank you." I feel bad for refusing him, and I still have some space for sweets (salty foods
are out of question), so I take the **taiyaki**, blowing on it, hoping to reduce the hotness. It's really hot, fresh from oven; even with my fingers touching only the wrapper and not directly the **taiyaki**. I'm a bit scared to even let my lips near it. "By the way, what filling does this one have?"

"Just a normal chocolate. Mine too," Ichigo-senpai replies. He is already eating his **taiyaki**, so I can see the chocolate sauce from the bite. The fish is no longer a complete fish. "Do you like chocolate, Yamanbagiri-san?"

"Mmm, pretty much, if it's not too much to the point of making me sick."

"Same here."

After blowing it for a few more times, I finally bite the **taiyaki** (the head, to be exact). It's still hot as expected, but I try my best to gulp it down. I haven't reached the part with chocolate yet, so it tastes like nothing. I can feel senpai's gaze towards me as I eat, making me conscious and hesitant. I can't just show him how messy I can be when I'm eating, it's way too embarrassing. There's no other choice but to act like I don't notice his gaze. He will stop soon, anyway, and the others will have finished buying snacks.

True to my thoughts, he shifts his gaze away from me soon after and looks at the crowd, walking around the packed streets. "Yamanbagiri-san," he calls with a somewhat low voice.

"Hm?"

"Is your ankle fine?"

Ah, I've been using it a lot today, but... "It's fine, surprisingly."

"That's good, I'm glad... are you having fun today?"

The tone of his voice reflects joy and sadness at the same time. I can't comprehend his true intentions. "I'm having fun. Things have been hectic lately, after all, so I needed some refreshment... what about you, senpai?"

A cold breeze passes us. Ichigo-senpai replies after a pause, "...To be honest, I'd be happier if it was just the two of us, but being with everyone else is also fun in another way."

H-He'd be happier if it was just the two of us? **Alone**? But why? And why do I feel something welling up inside me? My heart is beating quickly all of sudden. "I-I see."

"I want to get closer to you, and one of the best way is hanging out like this."

...This is bad. I think my heart is about to explode. My face must be red right now. My mind can't think straight and I mumble, "W-Why?"

"Why... that's a hard question." I hear him softly chuckling. "You can say that I like you. Isn't it normal if you want to get closer to someone you like?"

"I-I guess... yeah, that's normal."

"You must be thinking I'm weird." He lets out a self-deprecating laugh out of his mouth. "I know I've been acting weirdly lately, especially towards you."

His words pain my heart, not because he is attacking me, but because he is attacking himself. "No... if you're weird, then I must be weirder than you."
"Why is that?"

"Because…” There are many reasons, but all of them are stuck on my throat. For instance, I can see oddities and interact with them more than I interact with humans (most of the time, at least). I'm also gay and currently have 3 boyfriends, 2 of them being oddities. Heck, one is a fox, even. Wait, does Yoshiyuki count as oddity? Okay, let's say he is odd. Then there's also the fact that I cut my wrist before - which is nothing but a dark past, and the cuts are still there. It's depressing to think about. At the end, I can only mutter, "…Many reasons."

Ichigo-senpai blinks a few times, clearly confused.

"Well, that doesn't matter now. I like you the way you are, senpai. If there's something bothering you, I'd be more than glad to help." I remember our conversation before - that he wasn't ready to tell me. To show more of his weakness to me. "When you're ready, I'm here to listen and help in any way I can."

He nods and shoots me a smile. A genuine one. "Okay. Thank you, Yamanbagiri-san."

"I've done nothing, really." I certainly don't deserve his thanks or even his interest, but if I say that, it'd be just rude more than anything, so I refrain on saying that. "By the way, I can say that we're pretty close already. I consider you as a friend and someone I can trust, Ichigo-senpai. If not, I wouldn't be so open with you like this. And like the other times before."

He once again blinks a few times as though he is too surprised to even react, staring at me. I stare back at him, waiting for whatever he wants to say. Instead of words, though, I see his cheeks going red instead. Okay, this isn't like it's the first time I saw him blushing, but it's still rare, especially with that kind of dumbfounded face.

"Uh, senpai?" I wave my hand (with the ignored taiyaki ) around and trying to wake him up somehow.

"Ah, um." Ichigo-senpai finally snaps out of it. "I-I'm sorry. I feel so happy, I just short-circuited for a moment."

"What are you a robot? But well, I understand." I'd have the same reaction as he did if anyone said the same thing, or even more. I decide to continue eating the taiyaki , which is now not very hot anymore. Now that I can eat it without fearing the heat, it's really delicious.

"You're really kind, Yamanbagiri-san. Thank you."

Why is he thanking me now? "What I said is just what I feel, really, so it's nothing."

"Your words mean a lot for me."

"S-Senpai, stop, you're making me embarrassed." I don't think I'm that much of an importance, but of course I can't just say it. Like I said before, it's rude, and he might keep on retorting, which seems bad for my heart.

He chuckles. "That's fine once in a while, isn't it?"

Yeah, but unfortunately, I tend to get embarrassed lately. Not to mention that the wind is brushing against my neck now. I feel so naked without my hood, even with the people I'm comfortable with. In my mind, it seems that many people are staring at me, their gazes piercing every part of my body, even though they may not be. It makes me uneasy. I just want to hide away somewhere, even behind Ichigo-senpai's back.
"You look cute when you're embarrassed," he adds soon after, interrupting my thoughts, "Especially without your hood like this. Your bangs may cover some parts of your face, but it's far more clear this way."

Do I not look cute normally? But wait, that's not the point here. I heave a sigh. "You like to tease me, don't you, senpai?"

He lets out another short giggle with a smile, "I mean, who doesn't?"

"...Good question." Maybe Kousetsu-senpai, but considering what happened earlier...well, I guess Mitsutada-senpai never teased me so hard before as he is a caring mom. So that's one at least. While thinking that, I nibble on the taiyaki, which now only has its tail.

"Teasing is a form of affection, so it's completely fine. As long as it's within bounds."

"I know...that's why I can't get 100% angry here, even if I want to."

The tone of his voice drops. "I'd be troubled if you got angry at me."

"I'll just direct it to Tsurumaru-senpai or Yoshiyuki, then."

Is it just my imagination, or is that his shoulder flinching for a second? His smile doesn't leave his face, though. "By the way, I just remembered that I got this from buying this taiyaki..." He says as he the wrapper and takes out something sparkling.

It's a taiyaki keychain. Even the color is identical to its real counterpart. I look at the stall, finding a big pamphlet about 'win the chance to get keychain for each purchase'. Ichigo-senpai must've won the RNG.

"I'm giving it to you, Yamanbagiri-san," he continues. "I already sent a similar keychain to my brothers, so I don't think they would want this...but it's a waste to throw it away."

"I see. I'll humbly accept it, then." I take the keychain from his hand then put it in my pocket. There's no harm in accepting this, and I like keychains in the first place. I don't actively collect them, but I keep those I get. I might use them for many things. "Thank you."

"No problem." He looks happy to see me accepting it. I feel happy to see that - I haven't been much help to him, so I want to at least make him forget about his troubles for a while when we're together. Considering how relaxed he is now, I guess I did it. That's a relief.

"Ya-man-ba-gi-ri!"

"Whoa."

Yoshiyuki suddenly appears - no, he runs at high speed and arrives at my place with outstretched hands, his arms around my shoulders. With a stupid grin on his face, he asks, "What are ya eating? Let me have it too."

"I'm sure you've eaten many before this."

"My stomach still has enough space."

"As expected. Just one bite, okay?" I give up and extend my hand holding the taiyaki, letting him take a bite, somewhat worried that he'll finish it instead. He leans closer, taking a bite from behind me with a joyful expression.
"Aah, it's so good~!"

When he is about to take another bite, I pull my hand away just in time. "No! Only one bite."

He puts on an extremely dejected expression to the point I can see his dog ears flopping down as his arms around me tighten. His eyes look teary, it's making me waver... damn it, why do you have such a good acting skills to persuade someone, Yoshiyuki?! Or am I just weak to him? That might be it.

"Come on... pleaseee?"

Now he puts on a cute face. Why insist on eating mine when you can buy it at the stall in front of you?! Ugh, I hate this. Ichigo-senpai gave me this, so I can't just give it up to someone else. I have to be strong -

"J-Just one more bite..." I give up, feeding him the taiyaki again. He nibbles it with delight.

"Thanks," he says afterwards, nudging my cheek with his own. *Soft.*

W-What is this? He's acting like a cat instead of a dog. I return to eat the *taiyaki*, but he's still clinging to me. Seriously, what's happening? I don't mind hugging with him, but... in public like this is... to be fair, nobody seems to be watching us, except for Ichigo-senpai, but...

"The two of you are so close," he says with a smile before he continues to finish his *taiyaki*. For some reason, I feel chill runs down my spine when I see him.

"Senpai, can I have a bite?" Yoshiyuki asks.

"Ahaha. Unfortunately, no."

"You deserve it," I say to Yoshiyuki with a chuckle. Let's bully him.

"I'll bite ya, then!"

"Anything but that!"

Soon after, we meet with others, finish our food shopping and go home. Everyone is already tired. I end up going home with Ichigo-senpai, one way or another. We walk side-by-side down the road.

"Yamanbagiri-san," Ichigo-senpai calls, "Do you want to go somewhere first? It's rare for the two of us to be alone like this."

"Sure. Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"Hmm, I think so. Just follow me." He shoots me a smile. His usual gentle smile, soothing my soul. Yes, this feeling... this is how he is supposed to be. The senpai I know is like this. "When you asked me to go home with you, I was so happy. I want to go home with you as well, but I didn't get the chance to ask."

"Huh? Why?"

Now he looks embarrassed, scratching his cheek awkwardly. "Yoshiyuki-san looked like he'd glare at anyone that got close to you..."

"Aah, right, he is a dog, after all. Sometimes he wants to be spoiled no matter what."

Yoshiyuki ends up hugging me until the end. Even Tsurumaru-senpai had to pull him away as
though he's glued to me. Before we went home, he told me that he did it because he was jealous and wanted to spend more time with me. Understandable. I haven't spent much time with him as lovers nowadays - but yes, as expected from me, I'd never know he's jealous if he never says it. He doesn't look like the type to be seriously jealous. I was so surprised. But he knew I had to focus on Ichigo- senpai, so he let me go. I hope I can go to his house to play later and make it up for him somehow.

Having three lovers to be cared for and this case drains my energy, but I love all of them, so I'll still do it to the very end.

"Are you sure, though? Yoshiyuki-san looked like he wanted to go home with you," Senpai continues, his face is clearly that of worry.

To think he realized that when I didn't at all… "It's okay. I already told him and he gave me the OK."

"I see." Even though I said that, he doesn't look very convinced. Light doesn't return to his eyes and he shuts his lips tight. I feel the air around us gets heavier. Huh…? I don't know why he's acting like that, but that's bad. Now he is being gloomy - that much I can tell. I feel like I've seen this before… it's making me uneasy.

People sure switch sides easily in this case. Of course I'm no exception. I personally experienced the same.

I know what he might be feeling right now, so I’d better say it. "Senpai, please don't feel bad. Right now, I want to be with you more than Yoshiyuki. That guy can stand by himself, so I don't have to worry."

"Dear god, this playboy…"

…Mikazuki, you completely ruined the mood here.

Well, only my mood, as Ichigo-senpai can't hear him. He's just staring at me with wide eyes - something like amazement and surprise, I think. Ahh, right, being told like that so straightforwardly must be embarrassing and shocking, although being the one who said it feels nice and normal for me. By the way, I understand his surprise, but why was that your reaction, Mikazuki?

"You're such a thickhead. I won't tell you now."

Cheapskate god…

"I-I know that you're worried about me, but…" Ichigo-senpai finally recovers from his shock, his hand hiding his mouth. He's completely embarrassed as I can see tints of pink on his cheeks. I've been seeing this side of him so much lately that I can only grin in my heart. "….I, uh, don't know what to say, other than I'm happy…to be chosen by you like this."

Chosen, huh? Hmm. I just decided that first priority is senpai. As long as he's happy, I guess that's fine.

"I thought having you care about me was enough for me, but to be together like this….brings joy that no words can explain."

Now, he has a gentle expression, his lips curled into a smile - reminding me of a maiden in love in shows. I feel my heart skipping a beat, caught off-guard by that reaction. I mean, it's kind of as expected at this point. as he said it so many times that I'm important to him, b-but…that expression is just…
I feel like I've just caught a glimpse of his true self. Sometimes actions speak louder than words, after all. Even though he said so many things to me, the weight of reality isn't as heavy as this. It just sinks in.

"That's good. Being happy is what humans are all about - as long as it's within bounds." I manage to let that out without stuttering.

"Hm…” Ichigo-senpai looks at the sky overhead. His eyes look distant once again, as though he is digging through something. "If that so, then…what do you think I should do? When I…”

"…What?” I don't understand his question.

He gasps, as though realizing what he just asked. He smiles and says, "Let's sit on the riverbank first.”

Right…we're passing by the river. The usual river, but not the usual riverbank. We take a seat on the riverbank. I wait for him to continue, but he just keeps on staring at the darkening sky. God knows how long this will stretch for, but I have to be patient. He just has to take his time. This is the moment. This is the moment I've been waiting for, right? My gut tells me so.

With a sigh, he finally speaks up. "Yamanbagiri-san…the truth is, I…”

I stare at him when he leaves his words hanging, his face becoming even redder. This is the first time I've seen his face become that red. As vivid as a tomato, you can say. What he's going to tell me must be very important…

"T-This is weird, and I know I shouldn't say it first, but, I can't stop it…I have to. I…Yamanbagiri-san, I - "

A harsh wind splits the air.

And at that moment, I see it.

A shadowy figure appears right behind him, with eyes blazing in scarlet.

My eyes snap wide open, my hands automatically reaching for Ichigo-senpai. and Mikazuki leaps out from inside me while screaming -

"Get down!!"

And so, I push myself and the unknowing Ichigo-senpai down to the river, having nowhere else to escape.

The two of us enter the cold river with a big splash.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wish Yoshiyuki was following me as well -

[Blackout]

"…giri. Yamanbagiri…Yamanbagiri! Wake up!"

I wake up with a jolt. When I come to, I'm sitting next to Yoshiyuki with my head on his shoulder.
Looking around, it's obvious that we're inside a bus, which is slowly coming to a stop. The bus is pretty crowded.

"Sorry to disturb your sleep, but we've arrived," Yoshiyuki says with a smile, patting my back. "It's rare for ya to doze off, though. What's wrong?"

"Ugh…" I hang my head, feeling a distinct pain racing through my head when I look at him. "I feel a bit dizzy."

What...am I doing here again? What day is it? Geh, another pain...why all of sudden?

"Are you okay?" Ichigo-senpai, sitting next to me, asks worriedly.

"Just a bit...and I'll be okay, I think."

I massage my forehead with a sigh. Ahh, right, I remember now. Today is Sunday. We're going to a local aquarium per Uguisumaru-senpai's suggestion (or command, actually). Yesterday ended fairly well, I went home with Ichigo-senpai and then...and then...

...hmm...?

Seems like my mind is still wacky from being woken up all of sudden. I don't remember clearly what happened afterwards. Yeah, this unusual headache too...I'm sure it'll go away soon.

"Did you dream of something?" Kogitsunemaru asks. This time, he's going with me and Mikazuki because he wanted to go to the aquarium. Mikazuki should've stayed, but he also wanted to go to aquarium. "You're sweating."

Huh...you're right. I have a feeling that I dreamed of something I'd rather not remember about, but I don't remember the contents. I guess that's for the better.

"Anyway, let's go," Uguisumaru-senpai says, standing up from his seat.

"Can ya walk?" Yoshiyuki asks as he helps me stand up. I take his helping hand.

The six of us leave the bus and are immediately greeted by a big and modern building, seemingly out of place with the green scenery - but the blue color matches green. The logo at the top of the 2-story building shows 'Suzuran Aquarium'. It's the first and only aquarium in this small town. I went here before with my brothers when Brother Nagayoshi was still alive, so it was a long time ago. I've never been here ever since then because whenever I and Yoshiyuki hang out, we mostly play games.

That said, the aquarium is at the outskirts of the city due to its massive size. We have to take a bus, whether we like it or not. I don't really like using public transportation, especially a very small but shared space like a bus, so I'd rather not go.

Alas, everyone else favored this activity. Oh well, I'll try to enjoy myself.

Unsurprisingly, there are many other people going in and out of the aquarium, especially families and couples, despite being Sunday.

"I'm so excited," Kogitsunemaru says, popping out next to him with a wide smile. He looks like a kid with that expression.

"This is my first time going somewhere like this...I wonder how it is...?" Mikazuki mumbles, also appearing. Rather than excited, he looks nervous instead. Well, he was a shut-in for so many years,
so of course he never went to an aquarium, let alone knowing what it was. It seems my brief explanation earlier didn't help to ease his worry. The sight is funny for me so I wish I can laugh at him, but then I'd be a weirdo in everyone else's eyes.

"Okay, who will buy the tickets?" Ichigo-senpai asks, pointing at the row of people - lining up to buy the tickets. Looks like torture.

"Decide it with rock-paper-scissors!" Tsurumaru-senpai says excitedly. Having no other ideas, we play the game.

He loses miserably and has to line up as a sacrifice. Nice.

We wait in front of the gate. I lean my back against the wall, still feeling slight pain in my head. I try to hold it down. I don't want to destroy this supposedly fun day, even though I'm not wearing my hood (unfortunately).

"Are you okay? You look pale," Ichigo-senpai asks once again, still as worried as before. When I look at him, as if fuel is added to the fire, my head aches even more, to the point I groan in pain.

"I…" I massage my forehead and sigh. "I'll be okay soon. I hope." I have to make best of the placebo effect now. I don't want to make others worry about me because of this sudden headache. Wait…sudden headache…am I carsick or something? I never knew I had it. Ugh, thinking about it won't do me any better.

This is just a normal day and I'm feeling under weather all of sudden…illness appears suddenly sometimes. Yeah, that's it.

Right, this is also a normal occurrence for people, though a bit rare for me…so why do I feel so uneasy? I feel like I forgot something very important, and that I shouldn't take this lightly…this makes me uneasy. Is it related to that dream I can't remember at all? Also, my gut tells me that this isn't the first time this kind of thing has happened.

As though I've jumped between scenes and places. As though I went from the past to the future, or vice versa…what I feel is so vague, I can't put them into words. I can't even grasp the full picture.

When I think about it, my head throbs again and again, as if it's forbidden for me to even think about it. A thick fog acts as a wall, blocking my grasp and sight of the thing. With this, I may never know the truth.

What…is happening…?

This sense of foreboding…something is certainly going to happen today.

…Ahh, now I also feel deja vu. I'm getting scared of the future, if it's inevitable.

Also…when I'm in this state, why doesn't Kogi or Mikazuki say something? They must be reading my mind right now, so why…or did I accidentally cut off our connection? Or did they do it? More questions are piling up, stressing out my mind even more. My head feels like it's about to burst for real.

I stumble, but thankfully, Ichigo-senpai immediately holds my shoulders, stopping me from falling completely.

"You are not alright at all…!" He says, his voice cracking up, a bit unlike him, as though his composure is about to break. "You should just rest."
"Uhh…I just need to sit…when we go in, I'll sit first before looking around."

I keep on making excuses. I don't want anyone to worry about me.

Yoshiyuki goes over to my side as well, patting my head wordlessly. Placebo effect takes place, his touch somewhat heals my headache, and I feel slightly better. Sighing, just then I belatedly realize the others' stare at me. Uguisumaru-senpai and Kousetsu-senpai, and other passerbys. Not only that, Ichigo-senpai's hand is still cradling my shoulder.

"I'm okay now, so please stop staring at me like that…" I mumble weakly. I really need my hood to cover my face right now.

"Hearing that makes me don't wanna!" Yoshiyuki replies with a wide smile as his hand widly ruffles my hair.

"Eh - stop! I don't want my hair to be as wild as yours -"

At the end, I can't stop him. My other upperclassmen are too busy chuckling, and my fiancees are too busy looking around…uhh, they got into the aquarium first! These illegal trespassers! Just because they don't have to pay tickets…at times like this, I envy their invisibility.

Regardless of what happened before, now I feel much better, both my head and heart. I feel at ease.

I shouldn't think too hard, and instead focus on having fun with everyone. I'm sure it's the best action I can take right now.

Chapter End Notes

*Happy new year 2019 in advance, everyone! I update this today, on the last day of 2018, just for that.
As always, thank you for reading Miniature Garden up until this point! Wow, time passed by so slowly and quickly at the same time. This is the third time I said it. Miniature Garden's 3rd anniversary is coming. Without your support, Miniature Garden won't last this long. I hope to meet you again next year, continuing Miniature Garden and making it even better.
"Yamanbagiri, are you okay?" Mikazuki asks, approaching me. He's still floating around, so I look at the ceiling.

Worrying about me just now, eh, Mikazuki? You left me when I need it.

The shinrei puts on a sullen expression. "You didn't look that bad, and there's Yoshiyuki with you, so…I-I also thought you want to spend more time with him than us."

Childish curiosity won you over, eh? I understand. It's okay, I'm not angry or anything. Even Kogitsunemaru is looking around happily right now. By the way, you heard my thoughts earlier, didn't you? Considering we can still talk telepathically like this, I'm sure I didn't cut off our connection.

"Hm? If you mean hissing at the headache, then yes. What about it?"

Then why didn't you say anything about -

A pain suddenly races through my head. Just when I thought it has completely vanished, it comes back so easily…!

"Ah, did the headache come back?" He asks.

I sigh. Yeah. Can you do something about it?

"I've been healing it, actually, but it seems to be not very effective, even when we're this close. I wonder why."

He comes even closer and puts his hand on my forehead. I can feel warmth emanating from his palm. With that touch, I slowly feel calmer and the headache seems to be going away slowly. It works after all. Seems like you need to directly touch me for it to work.

"Seems like it. It's weird, but oh well, as long as it works. By the way, did you say something to me earlier? I think I missed it," he adds. "I didn't hear your voice, but I feel like you said something before the headache came back."

…N-Nothing. Don't mind me, just calling out to you.

"Is that so."

I better not think too hard right now, yeah…

"Yamanbagiri, are ya okay now?" Yoshiyuki asks, approaching me with two cups on his hands. We're now in the resting area inside the aquarium, just near the entrance. Everyone else is walking around separately, but we can still see them from here. It must be intentional on their part. "Here, hot tea."

"Thank you. Thanks to Mikazuki and sitting like this, I feel much better now."

Yoshiyuki sits next to me as I take a sip of tea. It's an ordinary tea you can find anywhere. Nothing special.
"That's good, then," he says before drinking his own drink. I don't think it's tea like mine, though. "Let's walk around and follow everyone else soon. It's rare for us to go to the aquarium, after all. Gotta enjoy it to the fullest."

"Yeah, that's true." I also want to catch Kogitsunemaru and pull his hair so we can go together already…

"Don't force yourself, though, okay?"

I nod. After I drink half of the tea, we stand up and start to walk around, seeing the exhibitions. The aquarium isn't very crowded, but there are still a large number of people nonetheless. I almost lost sight of my upperclassmen. They're now grouping up in front of a certain tank for some reason.

"Senpai, what are ya looking at?" Yoshiyuki asks as we approach.

"Oh. Yamanbagiri-san, how are you feeling now?" Ichigo-senpai, upon noticing me, immediately asks. T-That's the first thing he has to say, huh…I feel both happy and embarrassed.

"I'm fine now, please don't worry. More importantly…"

I turn around and look at the tank they’re looking at. I'm not an expert at fish, and this is my second time going to an aquarium, so I don't know what kind of fish they are. All I know is the sight is amazing. All sorts of fish are moving around, the clear blue water flowing, the water plants on the ground, the light - everything is stunning.

Even though they're trapped inside a glass, it's as if we can enter the sea the moment I touch the glass. When I think about it, the entire surrounding area is bathed in blue light from various tanks. No wonder.

"Apparently, this tank is called The World, biggest tank in this aquarium, spanning 2 floors," Uguisumaru-senpai says, looking at a pamphlet he's holding, "There are various sea creatures from various countries."

"That's amazing." Yoshiyuki lets out a sound of amazement.

"There are panels about the species," Kousetsu-senpai says, pointing at a panel tucked to the tank in front of him. "There are mostly Japanese sea creatures, though, it seems."

"Ahh…Suzuran doesn't have any fish, right? Too bad," Tsurumaru-senpai says.

Well, this city is not located near the sea in the first place, so duh. I'm even more surprised there's even a tank full of creatures from other countries here, but I guess this place has large selections because Suzuran doesn't have anything to show off.

"How about going up?" Ichigo-senpai suggests, pointing at a big stairway near the edge, where people are walking up and down. "We can see more parts of this tank up there and see more exhibitions."

"I think we should walk around this floor first, then go upstairs," Uguisumaru-senpai says, staring intently at the map in the pamphlet. He looks completely serious on enjoying this aquarium. "There's a tube tunnel tank here, and we can also touch starfish and seashells somewhere."

"Wow, sounds good!" Yoshiyuki looks fired up. Hearing tunnel tank, I'm also getting excited.

I notice Kogitsunemaru suddenly appears right next to me, staring at the tank with eyes of admiration...
I've rarely seen coming from him. The only time he shows me that expression is when he is playing games and reading amazing books.

Kogi, do you like it?

"Eh? Yeah, I like it." He nods.

That's good. Your first time has to be memorable. But anyway, don't just go off on your own again, it'd be bad if we get too far away from each other. I pull his hair as I think that.

"O-Ouch! I know, I know, sorry."

Good, now follow me.

Soon after, we walk around the first floor. It's really spacious and full of marine life. After touching starfish and seashells, we enter the tube tunnel tank.

It's as magnificent as I thought, or even more amazing, making me completely speechless. Blue colors fill my sight, and everywhere I look, I can only see sea creatures swimming around, even on the ceiling, as the right and left are connected with an arc like any other tunnel. Overhead, I can see the stomach of some kind of whale and a rayfish, being so close to me that I freeze for a second out of surprise. It feels like the glass can break at any moment.

It's on a different scale than the The World tank. This tunnel tank stretches for so long, and seems to directly take us into the sea where these creatures live, as though we're there with them in the ocean. The colors, the lights and the view are more vivid than ever. The pamphlet says that on the second floor, we can walk directly atop this tank, the glass making us able to see the sight below. Though, because this tank includes sharks and orcas, we can't feed any of them. Instead, we can only feed small fish at another tank.

We walk along the tunnel, watching the fish swim about in 3D, sometimes stopping to watch the creatures closely. I see Kogitsunemaru floating and touching the glass next to me. I have a feeling that he wants to enter the tank…not like he can, though. He is not invisible to physical things. It'd be amazing if he could.

"Yamanbagiri!"

Yoshiyuki calls as he gets closer with a stupid-looking grin on his face.

"This place is so amazing," he says as he looks around.

"Yeah, it is."

He suddenly pulls my arm, making me closer to him. He whispers right beside my ear, "It'd be a perfect dating spot."

The blow to my ear actually makes me feel weird, but I try to act normal. "Hoh, so you realized that. What a surprise."

"Hey, even I'm not that dense!" He puffs out his cheeks in annoyance. It's adorable. "I like being together with senpai like this. This group is fun, but I also want to be just with ya…it's a complicated feeling."

"Mm. I understand."
We see a shark swim right in front of us as silence falls. He's still holding my arm, I'm getting embarrassed now. His hand slides down and grasps for my hand. Whoa, since when can he act so assertive in public like this? Is my face red now?

"After this, let's go on a date. Just the two of us," he continues.

"S-Sure."

His gaze falls on me soon after. I stare back, not knowing what to say, I feel like there's a certain tension in the air as we stare at each other like this...

"Aaagh!" He suddenly lets out a frustrated sound, his face troubled, "Seriously, I want to ki-"

"Yamanbagiri-san."

At that moment, Yoshiyuki hurriedly lets go of my hand.

Ichigo-senpai approaches me. He looks a bit surprised to see me and Yoshiyuki together. "Ah, sorry, did I disturb you?"

"N-Nope," Yoshiyuki says, stuttering with a forced smile. He's being obvious at this kind of time, huh. He pushes my back lightly and says, "Well, I'm going now. Ya two can take your time."

"Okay…?" Ichigo-senpai looks a bit confused by his demeanor as Yoshiyuki hurriedly walks away. I am confused as well, but maybe he's just nervous. Ichigo-senpai puts that aside as he puts a hand on my shoulder with a smile. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" He says.

"Yeah, it is…"

"It makes me want to swim."

"True. Swimming is a nice idea now." Even though I hate to do outdoor activities…well, you can swim indoors, too.

"When I went here a long ago, I think I felt the same kind of admiration. This tank is still amazing. It's my favorite."

"You've been here before? Me too, though I don't remember much because it was when I was so small. What about you? When did you come here?"

"Hmm…” He looks at the ceiling, seemingly thinking, "When I was 10 or so, I believe. With my brothers." His expression turns melancholic the moment the words are out of his lips.

Even now, the mere mention of his brothers still burden him…unfortunately, I know there's nothing I can do about this part. In fact, I still don't know the details behind his family's fallout and how he had to split up with his brothers, and that might be for the best. It's a sensitive personal matter, hard to bring up even to people you trust. I understand that.

"Oh, look, senpai." I try to divert his attention and point at the tank when I find something interesting. "That ray looks like it has a human face."

Ichigo-senpai leans closer and narrows his eyes, trying to find what I'm talking about. "Wah, you're right. It does have a human face. Come to think of it, I heard a rumor about it before…so it's real."

"There are rumors, huh?" I guess that's a given - and it's not surprising that I never heard of it.
"Most rumors about this place fall into horror category - urban legends, you can say. I'm sure most of them are fake or just exaggeration of the real one, but they're still interesting."

I nod. As someone who can see the real thing, horror stories don't scare me as much anymore. It'd be interesting if the rumors are true to the horror degree, though, but so far, I haven't seen anything out of the ordinary. There are a few oddities flying around, sure, but they're all harmless. It's normal for a public place like this to have a number of stray oddities. I'm sure there are oddities who are actually visiting, though, like Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru.

"They are interesting, but I don't really want horror stories to break the fun mood." I end up saying that, imagining how Yoshiyuki might react if he heard of the rumors.

"You're right." He nods. His entire body is bathed in blue colors from the surroundings, giving off a somewhat peaceful vibe. "I want to take a photo with you, Yamanbagiri-san."

"E-Eh? What's all of sudden…?"

"Oh, I mean taking a photo of you with the fish. It'd look great."

"Eeeh…I don't think so." More importantly, I'm too embarrassed to take photos and such. It is allowed here, but…just me alone? I won't know how to pose and what to do.

"Your eyes have similar color to the sea. It's refreshing to look at," he says with a bashful smile. "Come on, Yamanbagiri-san. After we graduate, we might not visit while you’re available next time."

"T-That's true, but…"

"What is this? Ya wanna take photos?" Yoshiyuki chimes in from behind. God knows when he got closer. "Let me be in!"

Ichigo-senpai nods, as if expecting that this would happen. "Sure. What about the rest?"

"I'm in," Uguisumaru-senpai says, approaching us.

"A selfie would be better, don't you think?" Tsurumaru-senpai says, taking out something from his bag. "I have the stick."

"You like to take selfies?" I knit my eyebrows in surprise. Sure, he is an active guy, friendly, and pretty stylish for his actual age, but…to have a selfie stick…pretty much a narcissist, eh? I never heard of R4 actively taking selfies or something before, so…

"No, I just bring it around because it can be a good weapon."

"What kind of weapon is that?!"

"It hurts if it hits your head," he says proudly, "Like getting hit by a bat. You'll bleed."

Sounds extremely painful and hilarious at the same time. I have mixed feelings. "Have you tried it?"

This time, he doesn't reply, his lips curling into a wry smile. Looks like he tried it on himself, or maybe just accidentally. I'm pretty sure he's strong as a xian, though, so I'm surprised he needs a weapon. Well, it's obvious that having more weapons and skills are better than having none or less.

"Let's do it, then. My phone has a pretty good camera," Uguisumaru-senpai says, taking out his smartphone and putting it on the selfie stick.
After searching for a good spot, we take photos together. A group of high school boys taking selfies at this kind of place, I wonder if it's normal at all… I'm embarrassed, of course, but it's actually pretty fun.

After one photo, Mkauzuki tugs at my sleeves with a sullen expression, but he says nothing. What is it?

"Isn't it obvious…? I'm jealous…I want to take a photo with you."

Whoa, so honest. Is the world going to end? Anyway, you can always appear in the empty spot, but not like you'll appear in the photo, you know.

"I-I know…"

Kogitsunemaru approaches us with a frown and tugs at my other sleeves. "I also want to take a photo with you. This place is too amazing to not have a photo."

Why are you guys being so easily jealous today? Sheesh. It's as if I'm looking after two big babies.

"Yamanbagiri!" Yoshiyuki calls me, motioning with his hand for me to come closer. Looks like they're going to take another photo.

Hmm. I think we can take individual photos after that, and you two can appear with me.

I go over to Yoshiyuki and we take more photos at other spots. However, as expected from a selfie with such numbers of people, we can't actually show off the fish in the tanks, so we also end up taking individual photos - exactly as I hope for, but I don't even have to say it as Tsurumaru-senpai naturally came to the same conclusion. Thank you, senpai!

That being said, I don't like taking photos in the first place, so I just pop up with others. Mkauzuki and Kogitsunemaru take my advice to heart and look like they're goofing around, appearing all of sudden at the photos like ghosts. If only Ichigo-senpai could see them…the rest of us who can are trying to hold back our laughter.

The amazing tunnel tank has come to an end, however. It's actually pretty short for me.

The moment we get out of the tunnel, we are greeted by jellyfish tanks. The tanks are in the shape of tubes, lining up with lights. The lights are all in different colors from each other, illuminating the transparent jellyfish. They look stunning and beautiful… if only the panels didn't tell us that most of them are poisonous.

From there, we go back to the beginning and walk upstairs as we intently stare at The World tank that stretches all the way to the ceiling. There are platforms at the end where you can walk around to survey more parts of the tank from various angles. We once again take photos there.

Walking further down the platforms takes us to the tunnel tank - or its roof, to be exact. People are walking around on the somewhat thick, but still clear glass separating them from the sea and its creatures below.

When my feet touch the glass and I look down, it feels like I'm walking above the ocean instead, like magic. It's an amazing feeling, even more so than flying around. The ultramarine color of the water is beautiful, and seeing the fish swimming around right below me gives me some kind of satisfaction and joy.

We take some photos there, but only Tsurumaru-senpai and Yoshiyuki are brave enough to lie down
on the glass for some photos. Honestly, because how much we can see the insides of the tank, it also gives me anxiety that the glass might break. If it does, then everyone here will be in danger...what a terrifying thought.

"We've visited all exhibitions," Uguisumaru-senpai says at the end, after we go downstairs, as he folds the pamphlet and puts it in his bag. "So that concludes our visit. Unfortunately, there is no show on stage like dolphins today. It has been canceled for some reason."

"Eeeh, it feels so short," Yoshiyuki says with a pout. "I still want to walk around for a bit more."

Uguisumaru-senpai checks the time on his watch. "Hmm. That's fine, we have a lot of time. You're free to walk around on your own. Just meet me at the resting area when you're finished."

"Yay!"

"Ah, I'm going to the restroom first," I say, "You guys can go without me."

"I'm going with you," Tsurumaru-senpai says. "I've been wanting to go, actually."

"Let's go together, then. It's a bit far from here, huh..." I say as I look at the pamphlet and sigh. Despite its amazing exhibitions, the placement of the restroom is quite disappointing. To go there, you have to enter the staff's passageway, which is located somewhere near tunnel tank. Quite a letdown.

"I'm going too," Ichigo-senpai says, somewhat bashful. Looks like he has to take care of his needs right now, too.

"We'll be going, then," Kousetsu-senpai says, waving us off.

The three of us - Tsurumaru-senpai, Ichigo-senpai, and me - walk off to another direction than they do. I take the lead as I have the map in the pamphlet. We make our way, cutting through the crowd, until we arrive at the jellyfish tanks once again. When I look around, there's actually a door somewhat hidden in the corner of the room, with the usual restroom labels, lit up in red and blue. The signs are pretty noticeable, but I didn't notice it before...

Opening the door, we're greeted by a dimly lit hall. There are a few boxes scattered on the floor. With just a few steps, we arrive at the restroom. At least the room has a decent size and is clean. Maybe because the aquarium is targeted at children too, the restroom is decorated with childish fish decorations. Even the wall has a blue wave wallpaper.

Avoiding possible awkward situation with the other two, I enter the empty cubicle and do what I need to do.

Ugh, this room is so cold. It's a bit uncomfortable. I'm glad Kogi and Mikazuki don't disturb me during this time, but...at times like this, company would be nice.

A chill runs down my spine. Suddenly having a bad feeling, I quickly get out of the cubicle.

"Huh...?"

Only to find that I'm all alone in the restroom. I look around in confusion, but there is nobody but me without a doubt. When did the other two leave and why? I understand if they wanted to prank me in this kind of atmosphere, but...my neck brushes against the cold wind once again, sending shivers all over my body.
For some reason, I am reminded of yesterday's horror movie. In the movie, the protagonist encountered this kind of thing too...when he came out of the bathroom in his house, there was nobody, not even his dog...and the true horror started there.

I shake my head to brush off these pointless thoughts. I can see oddities and I've been living with them since as far as I remember, so ghosts and the likes don't bother me. In fact, I'd feel better if an oddity was here with me, but there's not even one...which is weird. I'm sure I saw one on the ceiling mere minutes ago, and it's odd for public restrooms to not have any oddities at all. This situation is out of the ordinary for me. I gulp as I wash my hands, trying my best to not look at the mirror.

This aura...is certainly not good. It's vague, but my instincts are screaming out danger. What is going on? That headache, and now this...

I turn the handle of the sink to stop the water from flowing without looking. However, when I turn it around, the sound of water is still echoing in the small room. Huh? Is it broken? I look at the sink, and of course, the water is still flowing, just in small volume. I turn the handle again, making it flow harder, then slowly turn it off. The water really stops flowing, so I guess it was jammed earlier. I breathe a sigh of relief.

It is a moment of weakness as I look at the mirror.

"Ah..."

My whole body freezes. Cold sweat falls down from my forehead.

Even though there was nobody but me...there in the mirror, what reflected behind me, standing in front of the cubicle I got out of...is a figure. A figure of...something I can't quite tell. It is covered with long black hair, even its face, so it looks like a human, but it doesn't have legs. It has tentacles instead, like what octopus have. There's a puddle on the floor all of sudden, where the thing stands. Other than that, I don't see anything else.

I'm too scared to look back. W-Why does it have tentacles...? Don't tell me...it wants to catch me? This might just be my paranoia, of course. It might be just harmless and stay there for no reason at all.

I observe it worriedly for a bit through the mirror, but it doesn't move. Slowly but surely, I get closer to the door. It still doesn't move. After taking a deep breath, I run towards the door. Better safe than sorry!

"Aah?!!"

However...I never reach the door. My hand almost grasps the handle when I start to float. As though there's wind below me, or as though I'm underwater, I start to float in the air. Gasping, I frantically move my legs and try to push myself to the door, but my struggle is completely pointless as my body keeps being pulled upwards by an invisible force.

My mind is suddenly thrown to disarray, however I remember just one thing. "Kogi, Mikazuki...!! Where are you?!!" I scream that out with all of my might, but no answer ever comes. I can't feel our connection, either. As if it has been cut off...what is happening?!

As I panic, I have no power to stop myself from floating. Before long, I hit the ceiling - or so it seems, but the ceiling is nowhere to be found. As if it stretches on forever. The shadows of the restroom - the sinks, the cubicle, the mirror, and even the oddity I don't know - slowly fade into a color of blue, no longer to be seen.
When I gasp for air, all I take into my lungs is water. Bubbles rise up from my mouth as a cold sensation touches my skin. I shut my lips tight, realizing that I'm somehow underwater right now, drowning. I have to get out of here before I run out of air.

But where should I go? And how? All I see around me is the color of blue. As if I'm completely stuck under the sea, there's no way to see the ground and the surface. Does this space even end? Worry wells up inside me, but I have to be calm. I relax my body, letting it float as I try my best to hold my breath.

I start to move my legs and swim. I might not be able to see it, but the surface might be close. After all, the closer I get, the brighter the light up ahead shines. Weirdly, there's no creature other than me as I swim. Sometimes I look back, only seeing the abyss deep below. It sends shivers down my spine, so I focus on swimming upwards.

I have no idea how much time has passed, but it shouldn't be long.

As much as I don't want it…my chest starts to hurt. The lack of oxygen is getting worse on my body as it weakens. Even my vision starts to get hazy. Meanwhile, the distance between me and the surface doesn't seem to really change…is it an empty hope, after all?

When I feel a bit disheartened, all of sudden, I see a human figure floating lifelessly. Without thinking, I swim to that figure, worry swirling inside me. The figure gets clearer as I get closer, and I hold him closely, feeling like I'm about to cry. It's none other than Ichigo-senpai. He is unconscious. He must have been underwater for too long…at the very least, his heart is still beating.

I have to get him out of here quickly.

But soon after -

"Ghh…!!"

Unable to hold it any longer, my mouth snaps open, and the water immediately rushes inside my body. The water tastes like nothing, but it's filling my body more than it should. It hurts, it hurts…!! I need air, but there's no way to get it here! I panic for a bit, but I soon calm down and try my best to stay conscious, shutting my mouth to stop more water from coming in. Still, the damage has been done, and I feel incredibly sick…b-but this is still bearable. Just a bit more…

I can't lose hope just yet, as long as I'm conscious. Especially now that I have the unconscious Ichigo-senpai with me.

At that moment, I feel something slippery wrapping around my legs. Don't tell me it's the oddity from before?! I look down, but what I see is just complete nightmare fuel. It's even worse than tentacles.

There are hands. Countless hands. They're all coming out from the darkness below - stretching from the abyss just to reach me, grabbing me…I've never seen something like this in my life before. I try to shake them off, but the numbers are too great. I lose soon after, and the hands grab my legs, and then -

"!!!"

N-No way…!!

They're pulling me down with such inhuman strength that I feel my bones are being crushed.

This scene is completely out of a horror movie, but it's unfortunately happening to me right now.
I let out a silent scream as water flows into my body once again, filling in my lungs. Bubbles rise up from my mouth and my eyes shut down on their own. My whole body jolts in pain. I can no longer consciously control my body as it seeks out oxygen.

It hurts, it hurts, it's too painful…!!

"Ah…!"

Without thinking, I let my grasp slip from Ichigo-senpai's arms. I'm about to take them back when I realize…this might for the best. At the very least, his body will float, and he can be saved. A bit of relief washes over my heart.

And it's broken immediately with another set of long hands taking Ichigo-senpai's body captive.

My stomach twists violently. Rage and hatred wells up inside me as I see the hands covering his body, taking him down at an ever faster rate than me. I can only stare, unable to do anything as he is taken away so easily. My heart feels like it's being crushed.

I can no longer resist as I drown deeper and deeper into the abyss, my consciousness going hazy.

"…an. …me? Ah…"

There are soft voices out of nowhere I can't comprehend in the still darkness. I still can feel the hands crawling all over my body. At the end, is this real or is this a dream…? I wish it was just a dream. I don't want to die yet…no, I can't die just yet…if only I had the power to resist and break through…

If only…

Why does this have to happen…?

[B l a c k o u t ]

[ F a d e i n ]

The moment I open my eyes, I find myself sitting on a chair in the familiar-looking aquarium dream world, I immediately realize that this is the dream world. As always, the memories of the boy living here comes back, and I understand immediately. In front of me is a table full of plates of food and cups of tea, with the boy sitting across me with an annoying smile. Of course, the chair and my feet are still chained, and there's a blue whale swimming next to me.

However, unlike the phenomenon in real world, here, I can breathe normally. In fact, it doesn't seem there's even water at all - the whale and other fish are swimming in the air. That's how I see it. The aquarium has blue walls that create the illusion of the sea.

"Long time no see, Yamanbagiri," the boy greets me. "How are you?"

"I'm feeling sick. Trapped inside this aquarium after that …is not very good for my heart." I sigh heavily.
"That was an amazing experience, wasn't it?" The boy says calmly, sipping on a tea. "It's a very rare phenomenon."

"I'm not happy to experience it, honestly... so, why am I here? It's been a while, sure, but I believe I wasn't summoned here just for idle talk about a terrifying experience."

"You're mistaken... hm, I should've cleared up this misunderstanding long ago." He puts the cup on its plate and sets it on the table elegantly, the movement reminds me of the fact that he is a 700 year old oddity. "Whenever we meet, it's not that I summoned you. It's the opposite. You summoned me. This is a space inside your mind, after all. If you don't need me, I won't be able to come out."

"I... I summoned you?" I repeat his words in doubt. "Why do I need you?"

"Why don't you ask yourself about it?" He smiles innocently. "I know why you need me. However, it's pointless if you don't realize that on your own."

"Ugh... you're annoying as always." Keeping secrets even when he knows is his usual modus operandi. I'm grateful for the help he gave many times, though. "I think I know about what I need, but... speaking of which, I find it weird that you didn't show up at all when I got that dream... the dream where the injury from the dream was sent over to reality."

"Ah, that..." He taps his knuckles on the table with a troubled expression. "I wanted to come, and you called me as well, but something from outside your body came in and prevented our meeting - prevented the creation of this lucid dream."

"Do you know what that something is?"

"I have some ideas about what it is, though I haven't confirmed anything yet. I can only slowly weaken it over time with my powers. It's at the weakest right now, so I can slip into your dream. I apologize for being unable to help at that time."

"No, that's fine... you're not my guardian. You've done plenty for me." He's connected to my dream, and the... curse or something put a dream inside me, so it makes sense that he's blocked in some way. "Alright, then onto the main problem. What the heck happened earlier?"

"As much as I want to help you, you'll know the answer to that soon, so replying now would be pointless."

I just stare at him with a displeased expression on my face. How did he know I'll know about it soon in real world? But there's no point in arguing with him. "Then, there's no reason for me to come here at all..." I sigh, hanging my head.

"Not really," he points at the cup in front of me. "Have your tea. I prepared it for you."

I grumble, but I take the cup and drink. It's the usual jasmine tea, somewhat calming me down. Delicious, even inside a dream. I ponder on what to ask as I enjoy it. A lot of questions come to mind, but... "Do you think the real me is safe? I drowned."

"You'll know about that after you wake up... but if you want a spoiler, then sure. You're safe... for now." His tone at the end is eerie more than anything, even his gaze is sharper than before - but as though they're all illusion, his expression turns sweet. "Don't worry. You're not allowed to die yet."

"Not allowed, huh..." The wording worries me, but that's not the problem here. "To suddenly float underwater and then drown like that, it's beyond my imagination."
"Even for you and your friends, there are many things you haven't seen yet in this vast world."

Saying that, he gives off the vibe of an old man.

Well, that's true. There's no way I've seen everything in this world. Still, the experience shakes me greatly. It's even worse when I don't know the reason for it happening to me, and I have no knowledge on what I'm facing. I have to survive this blindly…

"Are you scared?" He asks after some silence. "To get injured. To face the unknown. To die."

"A bit…no, a lot. That's normal."

"I see." He takes a sip and finishes the tea. "I can't help much, and others will help you, but…at the very least, I can say that…you're so oblivious, it's disheartening to watch. You have such good lovers and the people who are crushing on you are way too patient."

If I'm drinking tea, I must be choking after letting out the liquid right now. "W-What does that have to do with this?!"

"It does. Jealousy is amazing, you know. It drives people to do many things unimaginable," he says with a smile.

"This thing has something to do with someone's jealousy…?"

"One of the dangerous factor, yes, though it has nothing to do with the aquarium itself. I'm kind today, so I'll tell you…ah, you'll wake up soon."

Sure enough, my eyes suddenly feel heavy.

"Remember this well, Yamanbagiri. Be careful around Ichigo Hitofuri. If you meet him after waking up, there's a chance that…"

"What…?"

"He is…"

His words are getting further and further away as my vision turns black, my ears turn deaf. I feel like falling through a tall building, something is pulling my soul to the other side.

What he said at the end is -

Ichigo-senpai is…

[ Fadeout ]
In my hazy consciousness, I hear a voice.

"Manba-chan!"

The familiar voice is calling me...so desperately.

"Manba-chan! Hang in there!!"

My body is numb...but slowly but surely, I regain the feel of my body. I can feel something is pressing against my chest...and then something pressing on my lips. Something soft. Whatever they are...my mind can't think.

I try my best to open my heavy eyelids, answering the call.

When I open my eyes, I can see a blurry but familiar-looking white-haired man. Seeing him soothes my heart. Noticing my awakening, he holds my body closely and gets me up to sit on the ground.

"Ah...gh!" Soon after, I cough violently a few times, vomiting water on the ground. Seems like there's still more water inside me. It feels incredibly unpleasant.

"Manba-chan!" Tsurumaru-senpai pats my back a few times. After I stop coughing, and after my vision clears up, he asks me with a worried expression. "Are you okay now?"

"Y-Yeah...thanks, senpai..."

"Thank god..."

"Ah - "

I can't resist when he suddenly hugs me, wrapping his arms around my body. Feeling his warmth soothes my heart, but at the same time, it's about to burst. The action is very unexpected, so I'm at loss on what to do. He must be very worried about me, which I'm happy about, but this hug is...
"S-Sorry." As if realizing something, senpai pulls away. "I'm just glad you're alive and well."

"M-Me too...I'm happy to see you here, senpai."

I calm down my pounding heart as strength comes back to my body. I move my numb fingers and neck, looking around - immediately spotting the one I'm worrying the most about. Ichigo-senpai is lying next to me, looking as lifeless and pale as before.

"Ichigo-senpai..." I look at that pale face with worry. "How is he?"

"His condition has stabilized, but he's still unconscious, that's all," Tsurumaru-senpai replies. "I'm sure he'll wake up soon."

"I see..." I sigh in relief before looking around more closely. "This is...where are we?" The surroundings are so dark, I can't tell exactly what this place is.

"We're still at the staff passageway."

After a bit, my eyes slowly get used to the dimness, and sure enough, I can see the familiar boxes and a row of rooms from the passageway. I can tell the shape of the passage as well, though the dark corners are nothing but eerie to me now.

"What happened...earlier...?" I mutter weakly, remembering the nightmare. Then, I look at my hand, touching my clothes. "I'm not wet..." Despite drowning and coughing up water earlier, there's no trace of water on my body. It's abnormal.

"Shortly after you entered the cubicle, I started to float and drowned," Tsurumaru-senpai says matter-of-factly, "But being a xian, I can hold my breath for more than 2 hours, and even then I won't really die - I'll just lose consciousness for a moment before coming back healthy. When I realized, Ichigo was already gone, so I just swam without destination as the pressure took me upwards. After a while, I found you and Ichigo about to be taken to the deepest part of the sea."

"And so...you fought with the hands and took us away...?"

"Hands?" He looks at me in confusion. "What wrapped around you were tentacles...well, I guess it doesn't matter. Yes, I cut them all off and somehow managed to swim to the surface while keeping the two of you alive."

T-Tentacles...? Maybe the hands morphed into actual tentacles after I fainted, or my vision might've been wrong since the start. Either way... "You saved us. Thank you so much, senpai."

"You're welcome. Of course I'll save my friends when they're in danger," he shoots me a tired smile, "Seriously, though, I think I died once thanks to a heart attack when I saw you guys...thank god you were still alive at that time."

"Yeah...anyway, do you know what exactly happened, how and why?"

The air turns even colder as the serious talk starts. Tsurumaru-senpai's face turns grim. "I have some ideas, but I'm not 100% sure about them. Even this situation is a first for me."

"Let me hear them."

"Alright. First of all, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru aren't with you now, right?"
I nod. "Our connection seems to be cut off forcibly. Now I can't tell whether they're here or not…I don't even know how it can happen. I didn't cut it, after all, and they have no reason to cut it."

"Okay…have you heard of special dimensions? The one that was created from negative energy in a place. There are many names for it. Warped dimensions, parallel dimensions, and even cool terms like labyrinths, but they're all basically the same."

"Yeah, I've heard of it before. When negative energy stays in a place, as long as it's not taken care of, the energy will pile up and become stronger as it attracts more negative feelings from oddities and people - hence creating a separate dimension from reality that is filled with malice."

Tsurumaru-senpai nods. "It's actually rare for it to be born, because it takes a very long time for one to be created. Since it's a separate space, people can hardly enter, either."

"Then, how did we get here?" Never mind the fact that it means this aquarium has a massive pile of negative energy, which I don't feel at all.

"I have no idea about that…for now." Tsurumaru-senpai stands up and touches the wall. "Manba-chan, do you feel anything here? I don't. There's nothing negative here. It just feels eerie because what happened."

"That's what I just thought. I feel nothing, either, which is just weird."

"Considering this place's history…there's no way this can happen, unless there's some sort of murder I don't know. This is way too unnatural. As if…someone took us to this dimension they created."

It reminds me of gashadokuro's appearance. For something that shouldn't have existed to exist here… "Is that even possible?"

"It's very possible for high-ranked specialists and oddities. In fact, if I want to, I can create a dimension like this, although it'd take 3/4ths of my power," he says, his face wrinkled in thought. "And it's even easier to take people in."

"I-I see…" I shudder thinking about his words. Just who in their right mind would create something like this and take us in? It's clear that we're the targets, but why? We may never know if we don't catch the culprit. "Do you think…the same person is the culprit?"

"If you mean the one who summoned gashadokuro, then it's very likely."

He knows about that gashadokuro, huh. Well, I shouldn't be surprised. It's a big deal, even for other oddities.

"What should we do now, senpai?" I ask, my mind is completely blank.

"Well...for now, let's wait until Ichigo wakes up." He sits next to me again. "Then, we can begin to look around to search for clues. It's too dangerous to walk around alone. I suspect that...Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are here, so we should search for them too. There's no way they weren't dragged as well, but because of their position, they might be locked somewhere else."

"They're...here?" His words light up a hope inside my heart, and I feel slightly more fired up even in this abnormal situation. "Alright. It's reassuring to have you here, senpai."

"And I feel happy with you here, Manba-chan," he hums with a smile.

"Uh...ugh..."
I suddenly hear Ichigo-senpai's groaning. I look at him immediately, finding his eyelashes and lips twitching and his head shaking slightly. He's waking up soon - and sure enough, his eyes slowly open.

"Senpai…!" My body moves on its own, placing a hand on his forehead and brushing his bangs. Hm, his body temperature is normal, and just like me, he isn't wet either.

"…Yamanbagiri…san…?"

He blinks a few times after calling me, still in a daze. I help him sit on the ground as he tries to come back to reality.

After regaining his strength and soul, he asks, "Where are we? What happened?" He hangs his head, as though trying to remember. "The last thing I remember…I was…drowning…?"

I look at Tsurumaru-senpai and he nods. I pat Ichigo-senpai's back, "Calm down, senpai. First of all, all we know is…"

I explain what happened to me and Tsurumaru-senpai, adding the theory about special dimension as I watch his reaction. Maybe because drowning out of nowhere was already weird, he doesn't seem too surprised about my words. Then again, he knows about oddities, so this kind of thing isn't unthinkable.

Because of the nature on how Tsurumaru-senpai saved us, I had to tell Ichigo-senpai about his real identity. Well, the one who explained that was Tsurumaru-senpai himself.

"I see…" Ichigo-senpai heaves a sigh. "To hide such a thing from us, you're horrible, Tsurumaru-san."

"Sorry about that. I only bring trouble, so keeping it a secret is the best…or so I thought until this happened," Tsurumaru-senpai replies with a forced smile, scratching the back of his head. I'm sure he has more reasons for keeping it a secret, but I can't really ask.

"Yamanbagiri-san, did you know about that before this?"

I nod awkwardly, shifting my gaze away from him. "Though I just found out about a week ago, so you can say I was deceived as well."

Ichigo-senpai crosses his arms and shakes his head a few times. "So horrible. Well, putting that aside, thank you for saving us." His tone changes to that of a normal one, but his expression is still scary. "What are we going to do now? Surely we can't just stay here."

Tsurumaru-senpai stands up. "Let's explore this place. Though I don't think going back to the restroom is a wise idea," he says as he points at the door with glowing signs. Yeaaah, I'd rather not.

Standing up, I look around and ask, "Do we need a light?"

"In a normal situation, I would want to say yes, but here, we have no way of knowing what the light may attract. Sometimes not seeing whatever is in the corner is for the best."

"P-Please don't scare us like that," Ichigo-senpai hisses as he stands up. He's probably remembering the horror movie from yesterday…yeah, I remember there was a scene similar to this. How disturbing.

The said crane just chuckles as though he's completely innocent. "Don't worry, I can see well in the
darkness. Manba-chan is sensitive to weird things, too, so the radar is good."

"I hope I can detect it…" I say with a sigh. Considering I didn't feel anything before I started to float and before the hands caught me. Then again, the hands came out when I was lacking oxygen, which means I wasn't in my full strength. As for now…I'm a bit thirsty and scared, but my condition is far better than lacking oxygen.

"Alright. The two of you, stay behind me. It's better to not get separated. Let's go," Tsurumaru-senpai says.

In uncertainty, we start to walk in the dimness of the passageway. I didn't realize it before because I was consciously trying to not look around too much and instead diverted my attention with talking to Tsurumaru-senpai, but this place sure has a lot boxes, scattered all around the passageway. At least the path is enough for me and Ichigo-senpai to stand side-by-side. Perhaps because he is scared, he holds my hand, and I don't resist. His hand is unusually cold for some reason, but knowing he is with me comforts my heart. Even more so with Tsurumaru-senpai who looks dependable for once.

Fortunately, the passageway is harmless, and we come out of the door safely without anything happening. Ichigo-senpai and I sigh in relief. From the tanks around us, we're now near The World tank, near the entrance. Unlike the passageway, this room is bright with blue lights, and the fish are swimming normally…nothing is out of ordinary.

"Oh my." Tsurumaru-senpai gasps, looking at me - no, at my hand. "You guys are sooo... close. Sorry to disturb your fun time."

I look at my hand, realizing that I'm still holding hands with Ichigo-senpai. My face burns. It's embarrassing when someone points this out. "S-Shut up, Tsurumaru-senpai. Please don't joke around at this kind of -" 

Suddenly, a hand reaches for my arm, wrapping around it, then pulls me closer. It's none other than Ichigo-senpai, holding my arm so intimately that I fall speechless. My mind is blank, the contents are all burned in an instant. W-What is happening? Sure, this is similar to what happened yesterday, but…there's something different here.

"Are you jealous?" He asks with a smile. He shows a smile he always has, and yet a shadow is cast on his face. This is completely unlike the Ichigo-senpai I know! What happened?!

…Or wait. I think it's possible for him to be like this…

"No, not really," Tsurumaru-senpai says with a grin before he turns around. "Let's look around the other areas to search for clues now."

"We're not going outside? The entrance is there."

"Nope. My experience tells that me getting out now is dangerous…or we can't get out at all. Don't try…not to mention that we have to look for Manba-chan's guardians before we can get out."

"Munechika-san and Kogitsunemaru-san?"

"Correct. They should be here somewhere, trapped just like us."

"I see."

For an instant, I see his expression turning somewhat sour. Huh? What's wrong? I want to ask that, but we start to walk once again and Ichigo-senpai pulls me along. I decide to shut my mouth as
awkwardness hangs in the air. I feel like whatever I say right now will just make everything worse.

We pass by The World tank. "It looks normal," I say, looking at the tank. There are fish and other sea creatures swimming around inside the tank. The blue water looks completely normal as well. I'm happy to see something normal, but at the same time, it gives me doubt and fear…what if this normalcy is fake to lure us?

"Looks like we don't have to investigate this - huh?"

Tsurumaru-senpai stops walking and talking, looking up at the tank. With his eyes narrowing, he suddenly jumps and floats in the air, seemingly climbing the tank as though he is searching for something. Like a hunter searching for his prey - that's how intense he looks.

"Tsurumaru-san?!" Ichigo-senpai calls out in surprise, his grip on my arm tightening. This is the first time he's seen his friend flying, so he must be surprised. "What are you doing?"

"I think I spotted something out of place."

"What is it?" I ask. "I didn't see - "

At that moment, something with fur comes out of a pile of rocks. I strain my eyes, focusing on that spot. The creature with fur is small, and it's far in the upper part of the tank. Unfortunately, my eyes can't see clearly that far, so I can only see a shadow with fur striking out. It looks like a ball with spikes more than anything as it swims. Behind it is another shadow, bigger than it.

"Manba-chan, Kogi can change shape, right? He can look like a small cat, right?"

"Yeah. What about it…wait, don't tell me…"

I let go of Ichigo-senpai's hands and run upstairs to the platform as Tsurumaru-senpai flies, observing the tank. I press my face against the glass, and sure enough, I see something I'm familiar with. Kogitsunemaru is swimming with his fox form - something akin to a domestic cat - with a troubled expression. No, he's actually crying. "That's him!! Kogitsunemaru!!" I slam the glass of the tank with all of my might, but of course, the action only hurts my hands, and it doesn't seem anything notices it from inside the tank. "How did he get in there?!"

Now that I'm close enough, I can clearly see the shadow behind Kogitsunemaru - a shark. I thought this tank didn't have sharks…?! Then again, this is an alternate dimension. Things might be far different here, hence the shark.

"Uwaah, he's being chased by a shark," Tsurumaru-senpai comments nonchalantly with a comical terrified expression. "What should we do?"

"Sure, it's funny how a shark is chasing after a white fox inside an aquarium, and Kogi's crying face is laughable, but please help him! The shark might catch up soon." And if it does…I shudder thinking about it. I trust that Kogitsunemaru will be able to get away, but it's better to help him soon. The sooner, the better.

"I know, I know."

"Be careful."

He flies higher to the top of the tank. It's out of the platform's reach, but I can see that the top is not closed with glass, so he can dive in immediately. And he does just so, jumping into the water, shaking the water and shocking the other creatures inside. He doesn't pay them any mind as he
swims towards where the shark and the fox are. Kogitsunemaru, noticing his arrival when he gets closer, swims even faster towards him. If he could talk, he must be screaming right now.

Tsurumaru-senpai lands on a rock, waiting for their arrival. When Kogitsunemaru passes him, without any hesitation, he jumps and kicks the shark's head with a high speed kick, as if the obstruction from water doesn't affect him at all. The shark is sent flying to the ground and crashes with a loud BAM, shaking the tank. The sight makes my jaw drop. Never once in my life have I imagined a shark kicked by a human with such a force - well, granted, since Tsurumaru-senpai is an immortal, he isn't scared, and he as a xian, he has more strength than normal people. Not wasting any time, he grabs Kogitsunemaru and swims upwards before the shark can get up and swim after him. In fact, it seems the shark passes out...it doesn't move at all on the ground. I offer it a silent prayer.

They get out of the tank soon after and Tsurumaru-senpai lands on the platform I'm at. I run at them, screaming, "Kogi!!"

Kogitsunemaru sees me and his eyes light up. "Yamanbagiri~!!" He jumps from Tsurumaru-senpai's hands to my embrace. I hug him, ignoring how wet his fur is. Relief and joy crashes over me. I'm happy beyond words, but more importantly...

"What happened? How did you get in there? And this form...you've lost most of your energy, haven't you?" I ask.

His cat-like ears flop down. "When I came to, I was standing in front of the tank. When I touched the glass, my hand got sucked in, and I entered the aquarium. For some reason, the surface was nowhere to be found, no matter how much I swam upwards...so I was trapped inside the sea. I used all of my power to breathe underwater, so I got into this form when that shark popped out of nowhere and chased after me."

"I see. That must've been hard. There, there. It's okay now." I brush his wet fur with my fingers. The sensation is uncomfortable, so unlike his usually soft fur, but I hold him close nonetheless, and his head snuggles to my cheek.

"I want to get dry," he says with a sad voice.

"I don't think there's a hairdryer here...maybe a towel?"

"Let's look for one. There should be a towel somewhere, maybe in the staff's room. I'm drenched too," Tsurumaru-senpai says. Ah, I just realized the state he's in - wet from top to bottom. It's weird, considering we weren't drenched even when we drowned in the restroom. Perhaps the nature of the seas are different. "I didn't expect this. I should've taken off my shirt."

"Too late for that now." I descend the stairs, still hugging Kogitsunemaru on my arms, and Tsurumaru-senpai floats next to me, descending easily. Well, it'd be dangerous if he used the stairs when his shoes are wet.

When we get back to the first floor, Ichigo-senpai is staring at us. His expression is a mixture of confusion, surprise, worry, and something else I can't exactly read. "Is that Kogitsunemaru-san?" He asks, pointing at the fox on my embrace. "I can see him...huh..."

"This is a world of oddities. It's natural that you're able to see oddities now. Here, everything exists in the same plane," Tsurumaru-senpai explains as he presses the hem of his soaked shirt to get the water out, dripping to the ground.
When I look at him, I notice that the white shirt is actually sticking to his skin, and some colors of his skin are showing. Whoa. On top of that, he brushes his bangs away with his hand, making him look different than usual. How glossy his lips and skin are...making me feel weird. U-Uwaah...I turn my gaze away immediately before anyone notices. My face feels hot now.

"Is that so...how convenient. Anyway, that was such a show there, Tsurumaru-san. The poor shark isn't getting up," Ichigo-senpai continues, turning his head to look at the tank. The shark is still lying lifelessly on the ground. "Well, I'm glad the two of you are fine. Just drenched."

"I really thought I wouldn't get wet, but alas, this is the result. We should look for a staff room and steal some clothes and towels...this is really uncomfortable and cold, even for me."

Feeling Kogitsunemaru shiver in my arms, I use my jacket to wipe some of the water away. After I zip my jacket halfway, I tuck him inside to keep him warm, not minding the fact that my own shirt is also getting soaked. Keeping him warm is my priority.

"Manba-chan, you look like a kangaroo," Tsurumaru-senpai chuckles.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Let's go already. I think we should go to the staff passageway again."

"Sounds good," Ichigo-senpai nods, and off we go. As we walk, he asks a question, "By the way, why is Kogitsunemaru-san in that form?"

I explain to him that this is what happens when he loses too much of his power or if he shifts shape to a small fox for convenience or to save power. In this case, he’s lost too much of his powers, so he can't immediately change form. It takes time for his powers to come back - like a phone that is charging.

He nods in understanding...or what seems to be half-understanding, his face brimming with interest. "I see." But that's all he says. Oddities must be a wonder for him.

The four of us walk to the direction we came from, tracing the steps as we make our way to the staff passageway without any hurdles. After passing various rooms, including the traumatic restroom, Tsurumaru-senpai opens a door labeled 'Staff Only Room' on the door. The light is on, so we're immediately greeted by sharp light in contrast with the dark passage, the furniture inside the room can clearly be seen. There doesn't seem to be anything weird, so we step inside.

It looks like an ordinary staff room, with a table, some chairs, and lockers lining up.

"Nice, there are some clothes here," Tsurumaru-senpai says as he rummages through a locker and throws a towel to me. "There, for Kogi."

"Thanks."

I sit down on a chair and put down the small Kogitsunemaru on the table, then start to dry his fur with the towel. He looks delighted to be enveloped in the blanket. Ichigo-senpai sits next to me and stares in interest. "I feel kind of bad...isn't this basically stealing?" He says. Still such a good citizen even in this kind of situation.

"It is," Tsurumaru-senpai says as he unbuttons his shirt. I hurriedly turn my gaze away from him and try to focus on drying Kogitsunemaru, ignoring the rustles of his clothes. "But don't worry. This is another dimension, separate from reality. What we do here won't come to reality, so in truth, we did nothing. Though things from reality can get transferred here."

"Hmm..." Ichigo-senpai looks like he's still unconvinced, but he says nothing more. Once again, his
gaze falls on me - or to be exact, Kogitsunemaru.

"Do you want to touch Kogi, Ichigo-senpai?" I ask. He looks surprised by my question, his cheeks flushed red soon after. Looks like I got it right.

"You can touch me," Kogitsunemaru says, still hugging the towel, almost looking like a pupa. "My wet fur doesn't feel good on skin, though."

"We need a hair dryer, but it doesn't seem this place has one." I also have to wipe my jacket that got wet thanks to him. It feels uncomfortable, although of course it's better than how drenched Tsurumaru-senpai is.

Wordlessly, Ichigo-senpai hesitantly pokes Kogitsunemaru's cheeks. He looks happy to touch him and keeps on poking. He looks like he's having fun, much to my relief. At this point, unfortunately, I'm already used to being in weird situations - although getting thrown into another dimension entirely is a new experience. However, unlike me, Ichigo-senpai is a normal person in many aspects. He just found out about the existence of the unseen last year. To suddenly find himself in this kind of horror story situation must be taking a toll on him, even if he doesn't show it. No…knowing him, there's no way he'd show it on the surface. He isn't willing to show such a weakness.

So, I'm glad if he can relax even for a bit. Being too tense for a long period is bad.

As my hands keep on pressing the towel around Kogitsunemaru's body, my eyes drift to look at the room. Tsurumaru-senpai is behind me, probably still changing, so I can safely avoid the scene. Other than the chairs, table, and lockers, the room is devoid of any decorations. I'm surprised the lockers have anything inside. There's no dust to be seen. Not even a speck of it. This dimension is really odd.

With a click of the locker door closing, Tsurumaru-senpai says, "Okay, I'm done."

I turn around, seeing him with a towel around his neck, in a plain shirt and jeans, perfectly fitting his size. It's not the aquarium's uniform. Seems like he stole personal clothes instead, whoops, but I'd feel weird to see him in an uniform, so this is fine. He plops down on the chair across me, his hair is still wet, the water dripping to the floor.

"What's our plan now?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

With a troubled expression, the xian sighs. "I honestly want to get out of here immediately, but we haven't found Mikazuki. We have to walk around the entire aquarium and search for him. Or…" He looks at me and Ichigo-senpai. "Manba-chan and Ichigo can just get out first. Kogi will stay with me to help. That's the safest way."

"B-But - " I speak up immediately, my hands slamming on the table.

"I know what you want to say, Manba-chan…it goes without saying that it's safer for you to get out first, and Mikazuki will surely kill us if you're injured, so yeah, that's the best way. However, there's no guarantee Mikazuki can be found without you, the one closest to him. It'd be best if you stay here, because in some ways, you're more sensitive than us. And there's the fact you want to search for him and will kill me if I push you to the exit, so you'll stay."

I sigh in relief. I won't kill him, though. There's no point trying, since he's immortal. I'll just hate him for the rest of my life. Probably.

"So, this leaves only you, Ichigo. I'd appreciate it if you just escape right now, but…" Tsurumaru-senpai stares at Ichigo-senpai, his expression completely serious. "…You won't go down now, will you?"
Heavy air fills the room as everyone sets their gazes to Ichigo-senpai.

"...That's right." Ichigo-senpai nods after a pause. "It'd be a lie if I said I'm not scared. However, I will hate myself if I leave all of you right now. I might be useless, but I'll try to not get in the way."

Scratching the back of his wet head, Tsurumaru-senpai heaves a big sigh. "I feel like I'd get killed by you and Manba-chan if I turn you down, so you'll stay as well."

"I'm not that violent, you know," I say. "To be honest, I'd rather have Ichigo-senpai out of this place, but..." My mind rushes back to Yoshiyuki. Isn't this the same? Caring about one another, worrying about one another...a conflict where both wish for the other to get out of danger and willing to jump into danger. A contradiction. If I one-sidedly push him away like I did with Yoshiyuki, the two of us will just feel pain. It'll repeat again. There's no merit in doing so...self-sacrifice won't create happiness. I learned that. "I appreciate your feelings, senpai. Let's do our best to get out together."

Ichigo-senpai nods with a smile.

"Alright, now that matter is settled..." Tsurumaru-senpai claps his hands to gain attention. "It'd be quicker to split up, but it's obviously dangerous, so we should walk around together, visiting all exhibitions in the aquarium. If there's drinks or foods in the resting place, we should get some."

"Can't fight with an empty stomach," Kogitsunemaru chirps.

"Another thievery..." Ichigo-senpai sighs. "But I guess we have no other choice."

"My throat is dry, so I want a drink myself," I say.

The four of us - with Kogitsunemaru settling on my jacket once again, this time wrapped in a towel - exit the staff room. As we walk in the darkness of the passageway, I wonder about the people we left behind...geh, I said it as if we're dead or something. I mean the people who went with us...Yoshiyuki, Uguisumaru-senpai, and Kousetsu-senpai. I'm sure they're worried that we don't come back after a long time...especially Yoshiyuki. Oh man, if I knew this would happen, I'd have dragged him with me to the restroom. I'm sure he'll scream at me for getting caught up in danger without him after we get out. T-This is out of expectations, okay...I'm sure he understands, but I feel bad, since I promised him. He must be worried sick.

Kousetsu-senpai too...although I'm glad he doesn't have to face this kind of thing, I caused so many problems for him, and now I make him worry about me. I can imagine him panicking and even contacting the specialists...sighs. Perhaps it'd be better if he were here to help. More hands are welcomed. I wonder if the specialists outside can do something about this, though. It'd be nice if they can.

Getting out of the staff passageway, we enter The World tank once more. It doesn't look any different than before, but we hurry to the resting area. Sure enough, there are drinks and food being sold in the counter and fridge. There's no staff, though, so we just take what we want like thieves. I drink mineral water, refreshing my throat, then immediately eat a chocolate bar. Did you know that chocolate bar is a good ration? It's delicious, sweet, gives us the energy we need, and we can eat it quickly.

I see the others drinking and eating as well. I feed Kogitsunemaru some of the chocolate bar. "Your fur is dry enough now," I say as I touch his fur.

"Mm, you're right. I still want this towel, though."

"Warm blanket, huh...by the way, this place is getting colder." I shiver. "I wonder why...I have a
"D-Don't jinx it, Manba-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai says, almost choking on his drink. With that towel hanging around his neck, he looks like a construction worker somehow. "But yeah, it's getting colder for some reason. Is the AC broken or something?"

"I hope not," Ichigo-senpai says before he takes a sip of his drink - a bottle of tea. "We might get frozen if it is."

"I'll try my best to unfreeze you guys when that time comes."

Being immortal sure has its merits.

After we finish eating and drinking, we set off once again. We look around the first exhibitions - The World tank and the small tanks around it. Seeing nothing strange, we go to the tunnel tank, bathed in blue light. It makes me forget about our situation at first.

"Even in another dimension, it's still beautiful," Ichigo-senpai mumbles, looking around in admiration.

"Don't let your guard down," Tsurumaru-senpai says. "In my experience, sometimes the beautiful things are the deadliest. We don't know what might happen."

"There are flowers like that, so that's true," I say, restraining myself from touching the glass. If I do, I might get sucked into the aquarium like Kogitsunemaru did. I just get close enough to see details in the tank, seeing a rayfish passing by. Overhead, in the arc, I can see a small whale swimming. Seeing them brings comfort to my heart somehow. "Anyway, I don't feel anything so far."

"I wonder if he's close," Kogitsunemaru says, wiggling his tail. I can feel it from my shirt, wew, so soft.

"I hope so. If he isn't anywhere in this aquarium, well…"

"We'll think about that when that time comes," Tsurumaru-senpai says, ending the conversation.

Just like before, the tunnel tank seems like it stretches on forever. But of course, we'll get out of it soon and enter the jellyfish tanks.

"Huh?"

Or so it should be. I'm confident in my memory, so we should've gotten out at this point, and yet… everywhere I see, there is only the tunnel tank, stretching as far as I can see, as though it's a long corridor without end. My heart thumps violently, screaming out danger.

"Is it just me, or is the tunnel is a bit too long?" Ichigo-senpai asks at the moment everyone stops moving.

"Not only you…this is too long. It's unnatural." I say. "What do you think, Tsu-"

When I turn around, my whole body stops, as if paralyzed. Where Tsurumaru-senpai is supposed to be…is something else entirely. I suddenly lose the ability to speak as my eyes snap to the thing. So does Kogitsunemaru. Ichigo-senpai looks at the same direction as I do, his face twisting in surprise.

"W-What is that…?" He stutters.

"It's clearly an orca…but..." My gaze follows the orca's movements as I step forward, hiding Ichigo-
senpai behind me. "Step back, senpai."

"Coming out of the tank…is that possible…?"

"This is a different dimension, so looks like it," Kogitsunemaru says, somewhat calmer than the two of us.

Sure enough, the orca in front of us is trying to break free from the glass of the tank, a large part of its head already sticking out, almost entirely covering the way with its head only. Its eye is staring at us - a hunter seeing its prey as its body wriggles, slowly but surely getting out of the tank. The glass doesn't break - there doesn't seem to be any damage at all, as if it's some kind of portal.

Considering we drowned out of nowhere, and that Kogitsunemaru touched the glass and got sucked in, this kind of thing should be possible. Of course.

"More importantly, we have to get away, and…where's Tsurumaru-senpai?" I say. "He was right behind us earlier, right?" He was behind us to watch over us easily. That much I understand.

"Did that orca eat him somehow?"

"D-Don't joke, Kogi…but I don't have to worry if that's the case." The merit of being an immortal keeps on popping up here. I hold the still-shocked Ichigo-senpai's hand. "Let's run while it's still struggling!" My legs take off soon after, effectively dragging senpai along.

"I feel like we should go slowly," Kogitsunemaru says, jumping out of my jacket and runs next to us. "But I guess we have no other choice."

We run as fast as we can. As the tunnel tank is straight without any other paths, we can only run ahead. However, the tunnel tank never ends. Now that I look around, I notice the plants I've seen, concluding that that we've been running in circles somehow - that's why the tunnel tank seems like it stretches on forever. It has no end. This phenomenon is familiar.

So, the method to get out would be either destroy the ceiling or the ground.

If we destroy the ceiling, there's no telling what'll happen to the water and the creatures inside. I don't want to risk it, so that leaves only the ground. But is there a path of us underground? I doubt it…

From the corner of my eyes, I notice the orca is catching up, its black color and sheer size intimidate everything around it. I curse under my breath. "If only Tsurumaru-senpai was here, he might have a plan…" Or anyone that could help, really. The three of us are powerless against this thing, especially with Kogitsunemaru still weak. I feel so powerless for being unable to make a concrete plan.

"Sorry about my condition - "

"Why…"

Kogitsunemaru's retort is cut off by a hand slipping from my hand. No, it's not as gentle as slipping. To be exact, Ichigo-senpai shakes my hand away. Roughly. Full of emotions. I'm too shocked to completely comprehend what's happening.

"S-Senpai…?" I turn around, finding him standing still. "Hurry up, the orca will - "

"Why is it always him ?!"

With the shout of his voice, the entire space shakes, followed by the shatter of glass all around us. I
instinctively cover my ears, but the sounds still pierce through my eardrums. Somehow, though, the pieces of glass don't touch me at all. They scatter all around me, showing a scene of destruction.

It seems like the water from the tanks is pouring out, flooding us, but all it does is create a shade of blue on my vision. The colorful fish freely swim in front of me, but I don't care about them.

"Ichigo-senpai…?"

He is still standing still, frozen on the spot. I can't see his expression as he hangs it low. I feel the air getting thicker and heavier. I can't tell whether it's caused by the water or Ichigo-senpai, but I feel shivers down my spine. My instincts are screaming out danger higher than the orca.

"What do you think of me, Yamanbagiri-san…?"

"Huh?"

What is this all of sudden? I look at Kogitsunemaru, asking for help, but he is nowhere to be seen. Just like Tsurumaru-senpai, he vanished out of blue before I realized. What is happening?!

"Why, why, why…why don't you look at me?!"

The shockwave of the shout creates ripples through the water I can clearly see. The fish that just a second ago were happily swimming fell down to the ground fall at once, losing their lives. Even the orca behind him suddenly falls limp to the ground. I fall speechless at the unbelievable sight.

What am I supposed to do at the display of such a terrifying power?

I can only feel despair and primal fear running throughout my veins as I stare at Ichigo-senpai…who flashes red from his eyes. As though he is a hunter staring at his prey.
Ichigo-senpai…"

I mutter weakly as my knees give out, falling to the ground riddled with corpses and sharp pieces of glass. My mind is completely blank. The one in front of me is no doubt Ichigo Hitofuri, but with blazing red eyes…no way, no way. Only his shadow has red eyes. Was this his shadow all along? I don't know. I want to believe it is, because…

If he merged with his *ikiryou* and let it go out of control just now, then…it'd be close to impossible to save him. To tear him apart from the negativity of himself. *Ikiryou* is actually a convenient thing for the person because they put their feelings aside subconsciously, lessening the burden on their minds. But with this, Ichigo-senpai might've become a true oddity.

After a long time of silence, he finally steps forward, the pieces of glass cracking with a loud sound under his soles. I know I should move, but my body can't move an inch. I'm completely paralyzed in fear and confusion. I can do nothing but stare at his hollow gaze.

"Yamanbagiri-san…"

The way he calls me doesn't change, but it sends shiver down my spine. He crouches down in front of me and extends his hands, placing them on my cheeks. His hands are unbearably cold. This coldness is unnatural. I want to look away, but my eyes are glued to him.

"Tell me. What do you think about me?"

He mutters with a sad expression. It pains my heart so much that I can't reply. My lips refuse to open, my throat dry, unable to make a sound.

"I care about you a lot. So, why don't you look at me? It's always, *always* him you look at and care about. You even cried on him, while you never did so with me…I've had enough."

His face darkens in a shadow. What is he talking about? I don't understand.

"Even though I'm the one who likes you this much, to the point it hurts…!!"

His grip on my cheeks tighten. It hurts. My whole body trembles in fear when I see the insanity on his face. He's smiling, and yet his red eyes are unfocused.

"But it's okay now. There are only the two of us left. Nobody can get in the way anymore. Not even him. You'll finally look at me and realize my feelings. I have no need of others as long as you're with me…and you don't need anyone else but me. Finally, we'll be happy together…ahahaha…!! AHAHHAAAH!!"

"Ah…ugh…"

I can only squirm and let out those sounds, unable to even call his name, completely powerless. My whole body feels weak and limp, as if my energy has been drained beforehand. It's no longer about being frozen in terror. I have no will to even move. Ichigo-senpai's laughter echoes throughout the tunnel tank that stretches on forever, piercing my eardrums like the sound of raindrops.
It hurts.

My heart is in pain.

Pained from being unable to help him, pained for being so powerless... is there something someone like me can do? Aaah... at the end, it's always like this. I'm useless when I'm all alone. What's the point of helping people when I can't do it myself?

Just as anger towards myself welled up, I suddenly notice a change in Ichigo-senpai's body. It's very small at first, but as seconds pass, I realize what's happening and shriek in surprise. "S-Senpai...!"

My voice comes back along with the strength to shake the still-laughing senpai's shoulders.

His whole body is melting. There's no other word to describe it. His skin, his hair, his fingers, and even his clothes are pouring down thickly like a candle slowly dying. I notice the white substance on the palm of my hand wriggles and turns into a fish. It falls down with a splash towards the ground. Just then I realize he is actually melting into a countless number of white small fish, as though the fishes made up his body.

As the fish rain down upon my hands, I hold in a scream to not come out of my mouth. I drag myself backwards. Somehow, the fish, emerging from Ichigo-senpai - whose form is vanishing bit by bit - are alive. Just then, I choke on the water and see the bubbles floating out of my mouth.

Now that I'm completely underwater, my body starts to float. I hold my breath as the white fish swim towards me. They merge into a comically white shark, but completely real. Its jaw, with sharp teeth lined up, is open, trying to eat me - no words are needed to understand that. I swim as far and as quick as I can, but of course it catches up. The adrenaline and the sense of impending doom can't help the inevitable.

I close my eyes as the shark gets closer, about to bite my legs.

"GET AWAY FROM YAMANBAGIRI-SAN!!"

With that scream and a loud thunk of something, I open my eyes. I'm greeted by a weird sight of a white shark, its side being hit by a fire extinguisher. Then, a hand roughly pulls my arm, pulling me away from the confused shark. I turn to see my savior.

"What - "

Somehow, I can talk underwater, but more importantly -

"I-Ichigo-senpai?!"

Ichigo-senpai looks at me for a second, flashing a smile before he returns his gaze to the ceiling, swimming upwards. Is the surface close? I have no idea, but I know we should get out of here soon. We pass by other fish and other creatures as we swim, higher and higher, to touch that shining light peeking in from outside.

Finally, we get out of the water before we run out of breath. Ichigo-senpai pulls me to the side - what seems to be a platform, out of the water. I cough a few times and inhale air in relief, lying with my back down. The water is unreal as we are not drenched at all, but the adrenaline rush and dread are still running through my body.

"Are you okay?" Ichigo-senpai asks with a worried expression, sitting next to me.

I slowly get up. "I'm okay. More importantly..." I look at him, staring from his bangs, his eyes, his
gentle expression, to his disheveled shirt. The aura around him is far different than before…no, than his shadow. This is, without a doubt, the real Ichigo. "I'm...I'm so glad you're okay, senpai..."

He blinks a few times, eyes wide. "W-Why are you crying?"

"H-Huh?" In confusion, I touch my cheeks with my hand. It's wet. My eyes feel hot, burning. When I realize that I'm indeed crying, I can't stop the tears and overwhelming feelings from flooding out. "T-This is...um..."

"D-Did I do something...?" The look of panic on his face makes me chuckle. He hurriedly brushes away the tears on my cheeks with gentle movements. I lean closer to him. Feeling the heat radiating from his body is comforting.

Without thinking, I hold him close, practically resting my face on his chest. I can hear his heartbeat, going faster…but it's so calming. To know that he's here. He exists. Living. As a human.

"Y-Yamanbagiri-san...?"

I'm in dilemma.

Should I tell him about the existence of his ikiryou, whom we thought had perished last year, or not? If he knew, he might blame himself for it - for having overwhelming emotions and subconsciously casting them away to keep himself sane, so that he could keep functioning as a human in society. It's a self-defense mechanism going off the tracks.

I bit my lip, realizing that my tears are directed at him - the joy that he's still the one I know, and I can still prevent the ikiryou from taking over him…and prevent the ikiryou to harm me and other people.

"...Sorry. Things happened, that's all. I'll tell you later. There are more important matters to discuss for now." I wipe away the tears that are left and calm myself down, pulling myself away from Ichigo-senpai. "What the heck happened earlier?"

"Good question..." He pats my head a few times before crossing his arms. "When we were walking in the tunnel, I was spacing out. When I realized it, everyone was gone. I walked further, then I find you inside the tank...floating with closed eyes. You looked like you'd...died. Your body was pale and there were fish swimming around you."

"H-Huh?"

Well, that's a drastic turn of events.

He smiles bitterly. "I was panicking, of course, knocking on the tank many times, but it wouldn't budge. Then, I suddenly noticed there was an out of place fire extinguisher. It was so convenient to have it there. I took it and bashed the tank with it, scattering pieces of glass. The water flooded me from the cracks, but for some reason, I could breathe after a while, so I swam and swam. The water looked far darker, and I had a hard time finding my ways because of spatial disorientation. Before long, though, I found you with a white shark, then you know the rest. I did that without thinking..."

"I'm really grateful you did. I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come...but why did you choose to swim upwards?"

"Hm...my gut told me that the surface was near, so...it was a gamble."

Thank god he won his gamble. But then again, if I were him, I'd most likely swim upwards too. The tunnel tank ground was already covered in water and corpses, so the only way was probably going
"This aquarium is getting bad for my heart," I say with a sigh. "Not only that, we lost our protectors."

"Tsurumaru-san and Kogitsunemaru-san, huh…" Ichigo-senpai sighs too. It's contagious. "We have to search for them as we defend ourselves."

"I sure hope that thing won't happen again." I stare at him, looking at him more closely. "Senpai, it's okay to cry, you know."

"H-Huh?" He stutters out, clearly taken aback.

Ah, that came out wrong and too sudden. Damn it, me. This clearly shows how bad my social skills are.

"Err, I mean…I'm happy you took care of me just now, but you can let me take care of you too…or something. It's okay to act out of your persona - the honor student everyone respects for once. I'll spoil you if you want to, like yesterday, no need to hold back. I'll accept all of you. I think we both need it. Because there's no way you're fine right now, especially in this dire situation where we know nothing. Even I'm overwhelmed. It's okay to take a rest from the main business."

Did that come out right? After all, Ichigo-senpai looks extremely confused right now, his eyes blank, not blinking at all. I'm sweating in nervousness. I turn my gaze away, feeling embarrassed. After a while, two hands suddenly reach for my body, hugging me tightly. It's none other than Ichigo-senpai. I can't see what kind of expression he is making right now, as he buries his face on the crook of my neck.

"You're so kind, and gentle, and….it's troubling me…" He says, his voice cracking in a low volume.

Oh shit, I'm a trouble for him?

"You're so bright, it's blinding me, yet attracting me at the same time…I feel happy, yet…I realize that, I'm just taking advantage of your kindness, even though I'm not supposed to do that…I can't help it."

"Huh…?"

I don't really understand his words. All I know is how sad his voice is, as though he's about to break. His body trembles, so I pat his back. My heart feels heavy all of sudden as I listen to him - the things he kept hidden. They come without a warning - that's how much he suppressed these feelings.

I don't know if he's completely ready to tell me or not, or if it is just in the heat of the moment, but I'll still listen regardless.

"I feel bad. I feel like I'm using you for my own self-satisfaction, without regarding your own wishes…and yet I can't stop. It hurts. But I also feel overjoyed. I don't know what to do anymore. Everything I do seems wrong. What's the right answer? What can I do for these overwhelming feelings inside me…?"

Like a lost child, Ichigo-senpai sobs before he pulls himself away. He hangs his head low, so I can't see his eyes, but I can see his knuckles wiping the tears staining his cheeks. I've never seen him like this before, it's shaking my heart. Sure, I saw him crying before, but this looks different.

"Thank you and I'm sorry, Yamanbagiri-san…I don't deserve your kindness, after all. You don't
have to care for someone as rotten as me…I realize it, you know? That my ikiryou spawned again. And that it was born out of jealousy. And out of my own desires."

"What…?" How could he know that? Someone with an ikiryou wouldn't know about its existence unless someone else told them. So what happened here…?

After making sure the tears are gone from his face, he looks up at me and puts on a smile. An incredibly heart-breaking smile. "Do you know, Yamanbagiri-san? I love you. I really, really, love you. A lot. Not as a friend, but…I want you as a lover."

A lightning struck me in place, short-circuiting my brain for a moment.

Ichigo-senpai…loves me romantically?

When I look back at the past…I see. That makes sense. The things he had done, the expressions he showed me, everything -

"But this feeling isn't pure…I yearn for you, I long for you, I want you to be mine, so much that I take advantage of your kindness and clueless self. I'm using you for my own desires. It's extreme. It's abnormal. I didn't fully realize it at first…but then, I had dreams after dreams. About the times my ikiryou stalked you. Observing you from afar, and attacked a certain person…" He clutches his chest with a pained expression. "Isn't that scary? Disgusting? I even had a dream that I attacked you a few times. And I know they aren't simply dreams. Even though I love you and want to protect you, I harm you myself instead. It's just...weird, and painful! What kind of person would hurt the one they love? A garbage one, for sure."

"Senpai -"

"Judging from your reaction earlier, after we were separated, you met my ikiryou, didn't you? So, that white shark...was somehow based from my ikiryou? To think that I attacked you, even here… jealousy is a terrifying thing. Possessiveness is a terrifying thing. It scares me to think that they're part of me...even if I pushed them away...you are not even people's possession, and yet I..."

"No!" I shake his shoulders roughly, realizing how dark his face is becoming. "I don't care about that! It's human to feel that! Besides, at the end, you saved me! I'm here thanks to you!"

"That doesn't change how bad I am as a person. I'm a failure. I'm a failure as a brother, as a son, and then as a friend -"

Unable to hold back anymore, I put my two hands on his cheeks, somewhat slapping them. I lean closer to him, forcing him to look into my eyes. Ichigo-senpai stares at me, mouth agape. "Senpai, you're contradicting yourself right now."

"What…?"

"Do you remember what you said to me? That everyone deserves the same thing. You deserve people's kindness. You deserve love. The fact that you realize your mistakes mean that you aren't a bad person, senpai. You can learn from these mistakes and become better."

"But I can't forgive myself for doing these things…! My jealousy is so deep, rooted inside me, it's impossible to change. These feelings of mine are too much to bear...sooner or later, I'll lose control, and I will harm you even more...I don't want that. I'd rather die than harming you even further."

"It's possible! Don't say that it's impossible when you haven't tried it…!" I clench my hands around his soft cheeks stained with tears. The tears have stopped flowing, but it seems like he's about to
burst and he just stops himself from crying more. I grit my teeth. "I felt the same as you before. Even I made mistakes, senpai. I was the lowest of the low, and maybe I'm still the same trash. However, I changed for the better. If I can do it, then you can do it, too."

I pull my hand away and roll up my long sleeves, then take off the wristband that always cover the wrist of my left hand, showing him the ugly part of myself. The wrist ridden with old scars. His eyes snap even wider, his hand reaching for his mouth in shock. I smile bitterly.

"You know, Kogitsunemaru slapped the heck out of me before about my selfless acts that were just suicidal. You know about that side of me, don't you? It was painful to hear his brutally honest words, but I accepted it and continue to try to change myself to not act all alone...because I'm not alone. There's no need to put on a burden all alone out of guilt like that - it's just the same as suicide. All I can do is move on to become better, to rely on others when I need it, and not pushing myself alone. For myself and the people who support me. Suicidal acts don't bring happiness. I'm still learning, but I think I'm getting better at it."

To think that I'm saying the words that hurt my heart deeply like this, times sure have changed.

"You saw right through me even without knowing about my past. You told me the truth about myself. You can tell the existence of your ikiryou just by how I behave. You're amazingly perceptive, senpai. That's why, I'm sure you can change yourself. You can control your feelings and emotions. And..." I take hold of his hands. "You're not alone. I'll accompany you in your journey and help you in any way you can. You have friends you can lean on, as well. I'm sure they will accept the entirety of you, too. So, don't worry and just keep looking forward. We're with you, sharing your burden, supporting you. In fact, you already take a step forward by telling me. You don't want to hurt me, so you want to push me away. Thank you. That means you care about me, and you have the means to change yourself."

"Y...Yamanbagiri...san..."

His voice is extremely weak as tears run down from his eyes once more. He can no longer stop them from flowing out of the cracked dam. I can see his cheeks are flushed red from both the tears and embarrassment. Seems like the entirety of his mask has fallen off now, letting himself bare in front of me.

"It's okay to cry. Just let it out," I say as I wipe away the tears from the edge of his eyes with my finger.

"Uh...aaaah..."

Ichigo-senpai chokes and sobs like a child. His mouth only lets out sobs, unable to let out anything else in the form of words. He can no longer stop them from flowing out of the cracked dam. I can see his cheeks are flushed red from both the tears and embarrassment. Seems like the entirety of his mask has fallen off now, letting himself bare in front of me.

His sudden confession rings in my mind, making me tremble for a second. Why am I getting conscious about it now?! I brush his hair with my fingers, trying to distract myself from the thought, but knowing it's a physical contact makes my heart leap. Anything I do here is wrong for myself, but I still have to comfort him.

Confession, huh...this is a good time to think about my answer.
How do I feel about him, exactly? I'd be lying if I said I'm not attracted to him even the slightest, but...do I love him that way as well? Of course, I think the best option is to accept him, but he'd notice if I didn't actually love him. And more importantly, he needs to know that I'm three-timing legally right now. It's hard to say it, though...

After what seems to be a long time, Ichigo-senpai pulls himself away, wiping away the tears that are left on his face with his knuckles. His eyes are red and swollen, as expected, but the smile he flashes towards me is genuine. "Thank you, Yamanbagiri-san. I'm feeling better now."

I smile back. "No problem. I'm glad I can help."

His smile twists to a regretful one before he bows deeply. "I apologize. I showed you such an unsightly side of myself...no, I'm still showing it. I'm also sorry about...these things. I told you all of that in the heat of the moment. I wasn't really ready myself, but I couldn't stop myself from pouring that out."

"That's fine. It's understandable. See, you must've piled so much stress from being in this place to that point. And besides, I'm happy you told me all of that. Also...no need to apologize about showing that side of you. It's human."

"You're such an angel."

I'm wasn't prepared for that reply at all! "I-I'm not! What are you saying..."

"Ehehe." He smiles teasingly before his finger reaches for his eyes, sweeping away the little trickle of tear. "My face must be a mess, huh? How embarrassing."

"Oh wait. I just remember I have a handkerchief..." I rummage the pockets on my jacket, and sure enough, I pull out a handkerchief. I'm so forgetful. "Here. Sorry about that, I forgot about its existence."

He takes it and wipes his face with it. "That's my line. You've done so much for me, and even just now...I don't know to repay you."

"You don't need to, but if you insist...be better for me. That's all."

With a bashful smile, he nods. Hm, I wonder if this is a good time...after some time waiting in silence, I straighten my back as I try to let out the words out of my mouth. "So, um, about your confession..."

"Ah!" His face reddens even further as he avoids eye contact with me. It looks like he just realized that he confessed. "Y-You can answer me later...s-sorry, that was really thoughtless of me to say it out of blue."

"N-No problem. I-I'm happy you li-like me. I appreciate your fe-feelings." Why am I stuttering and avoiding his gaze? "P-Please wait for my answer."

"A-Alright. Of course, I'll wait."

The air around us is now awkward for a whole different reason. Is this what people call unresolved sexual tension? My heart is beating so fast. No matter how many times I've heard it, I still can't get used to confessions. Though I guess it'd be bad if I got used to it.

"Even so...for now, will you hold my hand? And support me...?" Ichigo-senpai whispers meekly, his fingertips brushing mine. I clasp his hand at that moment. There's no need to hesitate.
I nod. "I already told you that I'll support you no matter what."

"Do you think my *ikiryou* has calmed down, now that I've opened up to you?"

"It should calm down somewhat, but I'm not sure that it'll stop attacking us. As long as it hasn't come back to be a part of your soul, it'll still be able to attack, unable to control its emotions."

"I see." His face darkens as he clenches his fingers on my hand. "It seems I have to smack it down myself. So this is the so-called fighting yourself...that your greatest enemy is yourself."

"It's true sometimes." Even more so here. This is not my intention, but I called his *ikiryou* Shadow Ichigo-senpai before. It's based on a game, which incidentally, is about something similar. Although it never said *ikiryou*, it must be based on it, and the characters must accept their other self - their ugly desires - in order to gain new power...in order to step forward. And that acceptance isn't self-loathing, like Ichigo-senpai did. It's just a simple matter of embracing that part of you and trying to be better. I think it's a wonderful thing. "To be honest, I don't want you to endanger yourself, but the best way to fight it...only you can do it. I believe in you."

"Thank you. I'll do my best," he says resolutely. I can still sense how nervous he is, but at least he doesn't seem to be scared anymore. He doesn't reject himself anymore. I sure hope his newfound feelings will reach his *ikiryou*. "I feel like I can do anything with you by my side."

"That's the spirit."

"What should we do now?"

I look around, realizing that we're on the second floor, above the tunnel tank. There's a hole where we got out on the tank. "We should search for Tsurumaru-senpai and Kogitsunemaru. And Mikazuki."

Ichigo-senpai flinches. "Yamanbagiri-san...can I be honest?"

"What is it?"

Once again, his cheeks turn red as he stares into my eyes. "I'm easily jealous whenever it comes to you, like a dog clinging to its owner, barking to anyone that approaches. That much is obvious. However, the one I'm most jealous towards...is none other than Tsurumaru-san. You're so close with him, lately, even sharing that one secret about his true identity, I can barely stand it. He's my friend, but that's exactly why I don't want to give you up to him."

"H-Huh?" I shriek in surprise. My heart almost jumped out of my body. It's true that I've been spending more and more time with Tsurumaru-senpai, but... "H-He doesn't think of me as anything other than a junior, you know..."

"You're too oblivious."

"That hurts." Straight into my heart is the bad way.

"Don't worry, I like that part about you as well. If he hasn't said it to you, then I'll say nothing further. You can take it as a speculation, based on my observation. I watch over you, so I naturally notice others around you. You just have to remember it as a warning."

"So, uh, you think Tsurumaru-senpai looks at me as something more...?"

He nods in certainty. "And it's not only him. There are a lot of other people I consider my rivals..."
around you, long before this *ikiryou* problem appeared. You're adored by many people."

T-That long?! I don't think I can dismiss it as paranoia thanks to his jealousy, and I want to believe him, but...r-really? What kind of person loves me? Okay, sure, there are a total of 4 people now and it's not like I'm insulting them, but... *really? How?* I'm kind of curious to hear about Ichigo-senpai’s story on how he fell in love with me, but I shake it off. There's more important things.

"A-Anyway, we went off track here. Putting that aside...we should go and search for that crane and Kogi now." I say as I stand up, helping Ichigo-senpai to his feet as well.

He nods. "You're right. That topic is saved for later. We should be careful now. To be able to split us without anyone realizing like that...this dimension is dangerous."

"Indeed."

"As much as I hate to admit it, having Tsurumaru-san with us would be better. I'd hate to see you get in danger, Yamanbagiri-san."

"That feeling is mutual. It's convenient to have an immortal that has vast knowledge. Also as a sacrifice just in case we have to try a trap. He won't die, after all."

Ichigo-senpai bursts out laughing, but he still doesn't ruin his elegant image. "I like that."

I smile. He's getting more relaxed now. Good. "I think they're in the tunnel tank, but it's dangerous, so we should just check the outer part first. After we group up with Kogitsunemaru and Tsurumaru-senpai, we search for Mikazuki, then look for your *ikir-"*

My words are cut off by the massive sound of glass cracking. Before I can comprehend what's happening, the ground shakes, and in the distance, the cracks meet and the glass falls, creating a large hole on the tank. As if being pushed by a sheer force of something, the water inside the tank bursts outside all at once, though the volume is not enough to reach me. A shadow - no, two shadows emerge from the tank.

"Thank god we didn't get wet again. I hate to get wet like that."

"If we get wet again, I'll kill you."

"This isn't the time for that! And why me?!"

"You're the one who thought this up, you shitty crane!"

"What did you say, dirty fox?!"

"Well, looks like we don't have to worry," I say, sighing in relief the moment I see them and hear their voices.

"Tsurumaru-san! Kogitsunemaru-san!" Ichigo-senpai waves his hand after letting go of mine.

The two figures finally notice us on the platform. For some reason, Tsurumaru-senpai is riding on Kogitsunemaru, who has a fox form, bigger than before. He is as big as a tiger now, leaping out easily from the hole and runs at full speed towards me.

"Whoa, slow down, Kogi -"

"Yamanbagiri~!!!
Ignoring Tsurumaru-senpai, Kogitsunemaru doesn't slow down as his body changes slowly but surely, getting smaller and smaller. Before long, Tsurumaru-senpai is thrown off, rolling on the tank, while Kogitsunemaru, as small as a domestic cat, leaps into my arms. I hug him close, feeling the warmth and softness of his fur.

"Warn me first, you shitty fox!" Tsurumaru-senpai shouts, patting his head that fell first to the ground. "That hurts!"

"Meh." Kogitsunemaru's only reply.

"Y-You little…"

"Now, now. We're glad to see the both of you. We were thinking to search for you, but now we have no need to," Ichigo-senpai says, calmly putting aside their little bickering. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"Well…" Tsurumaru-senpai stands up and pats his pants from any dust during the improper landing. "I assumed all of us are separated, either to different dimensions altogether or different locations within the endless tunnel tank. When I came to, there was nobody else but me. The disappearance was so sudden, I didn't notice anything."

"Same here," Kogitsunemaru says, acting innocent as he rubs his cheek against mine. This softness is heavenly. "I remember being with Yamanbagiri and Ichigo, then an orca appeared and we all ran. Even though I made sure to run next to Yamanbagiri, somehow I lost sight of him soon after, then found myself completely alone. Even the orca vanished."

"Then we met up and decided to break our way out," Tsurumaru-senpai concludes the story. That's way too short, but okay, I don't need to hear the details. "I assume the two of you are the same?"

"Basically, yeah." I nod, pointing at the hole on the tank just in front of us. "We got out from here."

"Meanwhile, the both of you are so flashy," Ichigo-senpai adds.

"Well, stuff happened." Kogitsunemaru sighs.

"Anyway," Tsurumaru-senpai claps his hands to get our attention, "Now that we're all here, we should move and search for Mikazuki, then get out of here quickly. This dimension is more dangerous than I thought, to fool my senses like that. I think we were all in the same tunnel tank, but just teleported to another identical location, giving the illusion that everyone vanished. In fact, that's why all of us can gather like this now."


"Let me say it myself." Ichigo-senpai steps forward. "The truth is…"

He tells Kogitsunemaru and Tsurumaru-senpai about what we were talking about - about his ikiryou and such, leaving out his confession. He also doesn't give the details about his outburst to me, which is completely fine. It's personal, after all.

"…So, I'd appreciate your help…no, I want all of you to help me. Defeat myself. It's now or never."

He ends his sentence with a bow. I can feel his determination and I feel so proud of him.
8-Falling Down Into the Abyss-8

Chapter Notes

I forgot to update yesterday. This kind of forgetful event is actually quite common, but I don't think I ever said it here before (except the time I messed up real bad)...I apologize for my bad memory!

=8-08=

"Ichigo confessed to you, didn't he?"

I almost choke the moment I hear his question. "I guess I can't hide it from you, senpai."

Tsurumaru-senpai smiles. "I can tell. I mean, there's no way he got that determination without pouring out his heart to you. After all, his very problem was caused by his strong feelings towards you."

I'm not so sure about that, but I say nothing. "So, you knew about his feelings towards me all along, senpai? Oh wait, that's a stupid question. Looking back at your words and what you did, it's obvious."

"Yeah, of course."

"You're just too dense as always," Kogitsunemaru says. He is still in his small fox form, standing comfortably on my shoulder like a bird. "So? What will you do about it?"

"I'm still considering it…" I say, fidgeting. Ichigo-senpai can come out any moment from the restroom now, so I'd rather end this topic right now and here, but I'm sure the other two still have things. Either out of curiosity or just to tease me. Yeah, while Ichigo-senpai is washing his face and maybe calming himself down inside the restroom, the rest of us are outside, waiting silently…until Tsurumaru-senpai asked that question.

"You're pretty much gay for everyone, so I'm sure there's nothing to be worried about," Kogitsunemaru says.

"What does that mean?"

He just shoots me a smile, but being in his fox form, it just feels creepy.

"Well, I don't see why and how you'll reject him," Tsurumaru-senpai says, crossing his arms. "So just go ahead and accept him. I support you guys."

I stare at him, remembering Ichigo-senpai's words. My curiosity overthrows my embarrassment, I let out the words, "Senpai…what do you think of me?"

"W-What?"

That question throws him off guard, but I just stare silently. I can't say that Ichigo-senpai told me that. His eyes are wavering. He looks troubled my question, but he soon tries his best to cover it up.
As expected from someone so old and wise, I won't be able to tell he was troubled before if I didn't see it.

"What are you talking about? I see you as my junior, that's all. And a subject of pranks."

"Hm."

"You don't believe me?"

"Who knows."

Soon after, the door slams open, and Ichigo-senpai steps out of restroom, wiping his hands with the handkerchief. He approaches us and gives me the handkerchief, "Thank you, Yamanbagiri-san."

"No problem." I take it, fold it and put it in my pocket again. "So, where are we going now?"

Ichigo-senpai's heartfelt plea won over Kogitsunemaru's and Tsurumaru-senpai's hearts, so despite the danger, they agreed to help him. Seems like Tsurumaru-senpai believes that it is the best way to eliminate his ikiryou. So, all of us are in a quest to find Mikazuki and Shadow Ichigo-senpai. I like these terms.

"I'd rather avoid the tunnel tank for now, but we have to check the jellyfish booth. Thankfully, we can enter that area without passing the tunnel tank - just going out of this passageway, so we're fine," Tsurumaru-senpai replies. He really acts as the commander here. "Let's go. It's better if we stick as close as we can to each other. Maybe, we can get separated like that again outside the tunnel tank."

All of us nod. Kogitsunemaru is still perked on my shoulder (thankfully he isn't heavy), while Ichigo-senpai…

"Can I hold your hand?" He asks in a whisper.

My face feels hot as I nod. He reaches for my hand and holds it tightly. I know this is just to make sure we're together and to comfort him, and we did it right after that too, but…I can't help to think back to his confession, now that the situation is calmer. He loves me, so this kind of skinship must be…overwhelming to him, in many ways. That thought makes my heart beat so fast. This is dangerous…!

"Why is your heart the one beating so fast? It should be Ichigo's instead." Kogitsunemaru asks directly to my mind.

Shut up, you know why. This is a natural human reaction.

Leaving the staff passageway, we exit from the door we only got into once - the door that changed our lives today. Kind of. We enter the jellyfish tanks. However, unlike from my memory, the jellyfish tanks aren't in colorful lights. Instead, only a bright color of red flashes. The color of blood. Even the water is red, like blood. This is clearly dangerous, amplified by the aura surrounding this area. It's making me sick.

Tsurumaru-senpai’s back straightens. "Stay back. Kogi, don't leave them." We all nod, holding our breath as we watch Tsurumaru-senpai approaching the nearest tank. I can't see anything from inside the red water, but his face twists in discomfort. He must have seen something out of place. After checking the second tank, he turns away and asks, "Manba-chan, do you feel anything?"

"Other than creepiness and the thick aura of oddities…no. Mikazuki isn't here. Or his presence might have gotten blocked by the negativity around here, I don't know."
"I see... searching the tanks one by one seem like a bad idea, so..."

"A bad idea? Why?" Kogitsunemaru asks.

"W-Well... there's no jellyfish here. It's better if you don't see the contents. I suspect the other tanks have the same things as well. Remember, curiosity kills the cat."

With that warning, we go back into the passageway with silent agreement, too afraid to enter the tunnel tank or even pass the other jellyfish tanks. I think it's for the best we avoid these two areas for now. Exiting from the other end of the passageway, we enter the entrance area once more. The World Tank stretches tall, and seems the same as before.

"But this place is actually small, and we've passed this place thrice already now, so where is Mikazuki?" I say, tired. "Is he really in this dimension?"

"There's no reason for him to not get sucked in like Kogitsunemaru, but there's no reason for him to get sucked, either... this is hard," Tsurumaru-senpai mumbles under his breath, with a serious expression. "Come to think of it, if a god like him appeared here, this place should've turned into ashes already, as it is just a mass of negativity."

"A-Ashes? He isn't that strong."

"Well, that's true, but he can still purify this place all alone if he puts the effort to."

As if he is willing to. At least not without any reason that is good enough to make him use so much of his precious powers. Recharging powers like that isn't simple, especially since as a shinrei, he needs people's faith. He has been getting steadily stronger with more people that know him (even if they don't worship him at all, and I don't worship him either), but he is still far from how he is supposed to be, unlike the old days - or so he said.

"I think we should go around one more time. We might've missed him or something, or he might be moving like us," Ichigo-senpai suggests.

"I agree," Kogitsunemaru nods, waving his tail around to smack my face. It's so soft and I like it, but...

"Alright then. We haven't actually gone into the shop, right? We should go there first, then go to all the exhibitions again, including the stage. We haven't gone there as well. But, we're going to avoid the tunnel tank," Tsurumaru-senpai concludes.

The shop he's talking about is the merchandise shop, not the one for food and drinks in the resting area, although they're side-by-side. Behind the food and drinks counters, there's a glass closing off the merchandise shop, with the door nearby. I can see the shadows of the racks and dolls inside the dimly lit shop. We enter the shop with Tsurumaru-senpai at the lead. The shop is darker than I thought, as dim as the staff passageway.

We let our eyes adjust to the darkness first before proceeding further. The shop is pretty small, so it's really packed with racks full of dolls and merchandise. I can see a few keychain gacha set up next to the counter and feel the urge to try it. Of course, this isn't the time to even try my luck, so I skip it and look over the counter. It's empty, without staff, so I get over it while the others examine the other parts of the shop. Hmm... it's really empty. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong here. I kind of hoped to find someone hiding here...

"Oh, there's a door," I mumble, just noticing it behind the counter. I grip the doorknob. "It's not locked."
"It's probably a storage room," Tsurumaru-senpai says. "Wait, I'm going with you. It might be dangerous."

"T-Then, I'm coming too," Ichigo-senpai says, putting a doll of a penguin back in its place. "I don't want to be alone here."

Tsurumaru-senpai takes the lead, slamming the door open. The room is as big as the shop, or just a little smaller, but far darker. I can only see the silhouettes of things, some are covered in cloth, and a few boxes. This really is a storage room…that isn't dusty. We march forward, searching every nook and cranny in our limited vision.

"Wah!"

I stumble, losing my balance, but before I can fall, I already recovered. T-That was dangerous…just for my heart.

"You're really clumsy," Kogitsunemaru chuckles.

"Don't laugh at me, ugh."

I can't believe my unluckiness comes back at times like this. I look at the thing below that made me trip in annoyance. It's a very big doll of a blue whale, almost as big as a *dakimakura*. In the darkness, I can tell the shape of something next to it, so I narrow my eyes to get a better view. I find something extremely familiar instead.

"…Mikazuki?"

I crouch down, take out my smartphone and use the flashlight application. Yeah, this is definitely Mikazuki, sleeping so peacefully he's drooling as he hugs the doll of the whale. I notice Tsurumaru-senpai and Ichigo-senpai approaching us, so I slap Mikazuki's cheeks to wake him up.

"Just….100 more years…." Mikazuki mumbles.

"That's too long!" Kogitsunemaru screams as he proceeds to scratch his face. "Wake up, grandpa!"

"If he's a grandpa then what I am…?" Tsurumaru-senpai mutters weakly.

"I can't believe he was here the whole time, sleeping…" Ichigo-senpai says in shock as he stares at the still-sleeping Mikazuki.

"He's usually picky at where he sleeps, so I'm honestly surprised he can sleep here like this…or he might have just fell asleep." I say with a sigh. I slap his cheeks again, harder this time. His eyebrows twitch. "Oi, wake up already."

"Only if you…kiss me…"

This man is so annoying even in his sleep. No, actually, he might already be awake but he decided to troll me. There's no other choice, then.

"Okay, everyone, let's just leave him to rot here - "

"I'm awake, so don't leave me!"

Mikazuki grabs my hands in panic. I smile, knowing I won. "That was quick. When did you wake up?"
"When Kogitsunemaru scratched my face," he replies with a sigh, healing the scratches on his face. "I still want to sleep more, though."

"Too bad then, resting time is over," Tsurumaru-senpai says, snickering. "Just what did you dream of to sleep until you drool, grandpa?"

"None of your business." Mikazuki looks embarrassed as he wipes his mouth with his hand. Thanks, Tsurumaru-senpai.

"I'm amazed you can sleep in this kind of situation…in this room, on top of that. Is it comfortable?" Kogitsunemaru says.

"Well, this doll reminds me of Yamanbagiri, so it's comfortable," he replies as he holds the doll close. It really is a hugging pillow for him.

"How does that remind you of me…?"

"Many ways. Can I take it?"

"I'll buy it after we go back to reality, so just let that one go."

Mikazuki puffs out his cheek, sulking, but he lets go of the doll and stands up, patting his clothes. "So, were all of you are searching for me?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you're okay." I'm still pissed at how he could calmly sleep, though. What if this place wasn't safe and he was attacked in his sleep? But, he is strong, so I guess he'd be fine, but I can't help but to worry.

"Better stick together and get out together," Tsurumaru-senpai adds. "Although we are not finished yet with this dimension."

Mikazuki stares in confusion. Ichigo-senpai looks down on the ground, looking visibly nervous. After all, our real mission has just began - and it is the most dangerous of all. If any of us get hurt. he might feel responsible as he's the one who wants to fight his *ikiryou*.

After briefly explaining what happened that lead to Ichigo-senpai's wish to fight his *ikiryou*, we all go to the resting area and discuss our plans (we actually have no plan, just talking about possibilities) while resting before fighting the last boss. I sit next to Ichigo-senpai, who is drinking a small carton of strawberry milk. I can see his hand trembling. What should I say at times like this?

"…Yamanbagiri-san."

"Y-Yes?"

Unexpectedly, he's the one who calls me out first. His expression softens when he looks at me. "Do you mind going somewhere more private? I have something I want to talk about."

I look at Tsurumaru-senpai and my two lovers. They nod, so I nod to Ichigo-senpai. "Sure. The shop can do."

"Yes, I don't want to be too far away from others."

We enter the shop once again, with my smartphone as a flashlight. We let the door open as we sit next to the counter. Ichigo-senpai stares into the distance, perhaps digging through his memories as he finishes the milk.
"There's...something I haven't talked to you about."

"What is it?"

"Last year, when my i kiryou first awakened...I didn't tell you the exact reason, did I? And you...and Kousetsu-san...and everyone else...didn't push me for the answer, so I shut my mouth."

"Wasn't that because your stress was piling up, so your i kiryou attacked others to relax? It's quite different case than usual i kiryou."

"That's the aftermath. There's a main cause I never talked about." He shifts his gaze uncomfortably, his hand poking the now empty carton milk on the ground. "I already told you that my parents divorced, forcing us - my brothers and I - to split up, right?"

I nod.

"In truth, divorced is too soft. They abandoned us soon after divorcing. It doesn't help that our economy was suffering." His voice trembles as I stare, mouth agape. I'm too shocked to hear this new information. His situation was way worse than I thought. He closes his eyes, drowning even deeper in the old memories stained in sepia. "However...nobody told us that they abandoned us...at first."

I listen to his story in silence.

"For as long as I remember, my parents couldn't be called as parents. There was no intimacy between us, unlike normal parents and their children. I've always seen them as nobody. Their faces never register in my memories, censored with a swirl of black crayon. They always left us alone to work, even mother, so I had to take care of my many small brothers even when I was so young. It wasn't all unhappy memories, of course. At the very least, our parents never abused us, and my cute brothers made me smile.

They occasionally had a fight at night, shouting at each other, but I thought it was natural. I've seen in news and heard neighbors talking about such things. However, it went from bad to worse after...something happened, but I can't remember it. Anyway, their fights escalated and became more and more frequent, until one day, father ran off. Mother fell depressed. She started smoking and started to shout at us, rarely slapping us and such. Before long, she too vanished from our house, leaving with the usual words that she left to work.

That's why, at first, I didn't realize she abandoned us. A day passed, she didn't come home. Two days, three days...until it became a week. Food quickly ran out, and I had no money to feed my brothers with. I had no idea what to do.

Social workers came into our house and helped us after that. We were saved when we were in the brink of death. I was truly grateful. They told us that our mother got into an accident, which we believed easily. However, for some reason or another, we must split up. At first, we lived together in some kind of social center for kids like us, waiting for foster parents or orphanages to take us in. All of my brothers got taken away by foster parents. I was the same. The Hitofuri family took me in soon after all of my brothers were taken away.

Ah, even though we were still children at the time, I got their contact info, so we still contact each other even now, as you already know. I just think I have to mention it.

My foster parents are nice. They give me the care and affection I didn't get from my biological parents. I want to make them happy, repaying everything they've done for me. That feeling still
persists even now. However, as we are not related by blood, I still feel a certain distance with them. They, too, put a thin wall between us...and their expectations of me, their only son, are so high it's suffocating, but I worked so hard to meet these expectations...out of fear they'll leave me if I don't.

I don't want anyone to leave me ever again...including you, Yamanbagiri-san.

One way or another, I became the person I am now, something like an honor student everyone should strives for. My persona was born. My parents are happy. It was hard to keep up for me, because people outside my parents start to expect things from me. I'm sure you know this much, but I suppressed my inner feelings for that persona - to meet people's expectations. That's why ikiryou can appear.

Before that, though, something else happened.

As the oldest, I was the one to go around to visit my brothers. We're all scattered in different cities, so it was quite the journey. Whenever I had a long break, I'd visit all of them or at least one. I was able to see how much they've grown up and how happy they are with their current families. To be frank, I was jealous. I couldn't break the thin wall between me and my parents, and it frustrated me. Though of course, my brothers had their own problems, which I tried to help with. Most are caused by the fact that we're all adopted. Understandable.

When I think about it, I've always been easily jealous. Jealous of people with good biological parents, jealous of people who don't have to keep up appearances, jealous of people who don't have to meet others' expectations, jealous of people with freedom, and the list goes on...I'm jealous because they have something I don't have, something I wish I had.

One day, my foster parents sat to talk with me. They told me the truth - that mother abandoned me and my brothers. She already went through police and such, and she was already released, so they figured they should tell me since I'm old enough. They said mother just got married for the 2nd time, and asked me if I wanted to see her.

The thought that mother abandoned us already crossed my mind before, but I kept pushing it down. Now, the truth came into view, unavoidable, so I calmed myself down and took it. I thought I was prepared, so I went to see her on the next city over. I was mostly curious. I felt some kind of anger, sure, but I thought I could push it down. I might change my mind when I see her, after all.

My foster parents set up the meeting. My mother agreed - apparently she's the one who wanted to contact me in the first place. We met in a local and quiet cafe. Mother brought her new husband along. She...looked so beautiful. She was shining so brightly when we talked. She bowed, apologizing for abandoning us while her husband encouraged her.

I was just dumbfounded, but accepted her. Then, she went on to talk about her new life. I'll omit the details.

I couldn't believe it.

While my brothers and I suffered with worries and such, she was being so happy, with a clean record in a new city. As though she was reborn, leaving her past. I was enraged. How could she so easily forget us like that, after doing such a thing? How could she be so happy without any worries about us? She just wanted to apologize to me, to relay it to my brothers, then cut off our connection forever.

Hatred and jealousy burned so hard inside me. It was the first time in my life I felt such an intense emotion. I shouldn't have forgiven her. But it was too late. I couldn't take back my words, so I
pushed the feelings aside and acted like a normal person. That feeling never dispersed.

A few days later, I heard mother got caught in a bizarre accident. She was alive, fortunately.

After you saved me, Yamanbagiri-san… I thought it might be my ikiryou’s doing. My first act of revenge. I confirmed this after messaging her about it. As much as I hate her for abandoning us, to hurt her until she had to be hospitalized for months… I couldn't believe myself. I was disappointed in myself. I was angry at myself. Hurting my own mother like that, I'm on the same level as her.

It was painful. I just wanted to disappear.

But you’re there, Yamanbagiri-san. There's no doubt that I wanted to cling to you, as my pillar of support… but I also want to genuinely help you after you helped me. I fell in love in the process. I never felt such an emotion before… it was a really intense feeling. I was happy, but my jealousy naturally turned to you and the people around you… and became worse. Y-You know what I mean. Even though you're not mine, I… aah, it's so embarrassing.

Even though I was supposed to be happy with just having you by my side, just by seeing you happy… I yearn for more. I want to make you happy, I want to stand by your side, and maybe make you mine at all costs… love is weird, isn't it? Loving yet hurting at the same time…"

Realizing how red his cheeks are, Ichigo-senpai scratches the back of his head and awkwardly smiles. "Anyway, that's all I want to tell you. S-Sorry. I had no intention to make you flustered at the end…"

So he realized how embarrassing his words are to me.

"I-It's okay." My heart is beating so fast, uwaah… "Thanks for telling me, senpai. I'm glad."

He nods. "I thought I should get that off my chest before we go. So that I don't have to worry anymore. It is the origin of this problem, after all… to fix the problem, I have to know what caused it first." He puts his hand on mine. It's warm. "Thank you for listening, Yamanbagiri-san. I feel like I can do it now. I can fight myself… I can move forward. I have to. It's for my own sake, and for you, the one I love."

My face feels so hot, so I shift my gaze away from him. I realize it is his sincere feelings, but I still get flustered nonetheless… especially when he flashes that kind of smile. It's so unfair. "Y-You can do it, senpai."

"Yeah." He slowly stands up and extends his hand to me. "Let's go now."

I take his hand and stand up with his help. I can feel his strong grip, now not trembling anymore. If I'm his only pillar of support right now, then I have to be strong, too. This is important for our lives. When we're about to exit the shop, I hear something falling to the ground. I look behind, finding that a penguin doll fell from the rack.

At that moment, I feel cold air caressing my skin. Shivers run down my spine. My instinct is telling me about a danger appearing behind me. Without looking back, I pull Ichigo-senpai to go out of the shop, greeted by the sea of lights in contrast with the dim shop. I shut the door close with a slam.

"It's here," I say.

Ichigo-senpai visibly stiffens. "H-How?" It goes without saying that there's only one door in the shop, for entering and exiting. They were near the door, so how did it get in? The answer is simple.
"An oddity knows no rules."

And considering how his shadow broke glass pieces and killed the poor fish when we were in the tunnel tank, it's safe to assume that he somehow has capabilities to control things in this aquarium. In fact, he might have melted somewhat into this dimension. There's not much time to get it back into Ichigo-senpai, then.

"We have to act fast…" I mutter in frustration. The time limit is drawing near.
"Whoa!"

Before we - or to be exact, me can get away from the door, a hand pierces through the door with a loud sound, grabbing my arm so hard there's a mark on my skin. It hurts...! T-This inhuman strength is...there's no doubt about who is it, as the nails dig in my skin. I grit my teeth in pain.

"Y-Yamanbagiri-san!" Ichigo-senpai screams in panic.

From the edge of my vision, I can see Mikazuki throwing away his drink and leaping to me, his hand grabbing the other's hand. His face twists as he pours his power to his hand. The holy power seems to be effective as Shadow Ichigo-senpai retreats his hand back into the room.

Taking this chance, Tsurumaru-senpai shouts, "Let's go!"

Mikazuki grabs my hand and we take off. My other hand pulls Ichigo-senpai so that he isn't left behind. Soon after, I hear the sound of the door falling down violently, followed by the sound of footsteps coming out of the shop. I try my best to not look behind me, feeling darkness creeping behind, spreading to my surroundings.

"We can't run away forever! Do as planned!" Tsurumaru-senpai shouts once again.

It isn't much of a plan, and it might not work, but we bet our hopes on it. Fighting it head-on would be dangerous for Ichigo-senpai - there's a high chance the pain and injuries his ikiryou suffers will be transferred to the real him, and so on. The reasons pile up. In any case, it's clear that the one most targeted is his own self and me, so to confuse Shadow Ichigo-senpai, we split up. Tsurumaru-senpai with Ichigo-senpai, while I'm with Kogi and Mikazuki.

I'm honestly a bit worried about this grouping as Shadow Ichigo-senpai wants to kill Tsurumaru-senpai too, out of jealousy...but at least he's immortal - nothing can kill him and he is reliable. I have to believe in him in case anything happens.

Before we can split up, I quickly give Ichigo-senpai an omamori I have. He nods resolutely.

While my two upperclassmen go towards the tunnel tank, the three of us go straight to the door - to the staff passageway again. With this, we can meet up as long as they can get to the other door at the jellyfish booth. Honestly, as how Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are right now, Tsurumaru-senpai is obviously far stronger, so having him go through the more dangerous path is the better choice.

What will Shadow Ichigo-senpai do, now that his targets have split up? Who is his priority?

I see him stop in his tracks as I open the door and slam it close. Kogitsunemaru turns into his normal humanoid form and holds the door along with Mikazuki, both visibly sweating. I catch my breath and sharpen my ears, trying to make out the sounds outside. The footsteps are going away from us.

Kogitsunemaru slumps down on the floor, sighing. "Looks like he went for Ichigo. Or Tsurumaru. Whatever."

"We should continue as planned now," I say.
He nods and turns into a small fox again, jumping to my shoulder. He still hasn't fully recovered, after all…unfortunately, I can't help him when he's like this, other than letting him rest. "It's okay, I feel better with you here, Yamanbagiri," he says, reading my mind.

"I knew you would say that…"

We continue down the long passageway as I pray for the two's safety.

...\n
"H-He is chasing us!" I say the moment I see my own self running towards us. I can feel adrenaline rushing through my body. In all honesty, I'm surprised my ikiryou ran after me instead of Yamanbagiri-san. What is he thinking right now? Who is his target?

I wish I knew the way to ease this anxiety welling up inside me.

"Keep running! Don't look back!" Tsurumaru-san says.

I try my best to keep up with his speed. He's so fast, I can barely follow him - but I'm sure he is already being considerate of my speed and stamina. A xian is on a whole different level, after all…I wish he'd slow down for a bit, but considering the ikiryou's speed, perhaps this is for the best -

"Ah!"

Before I know what's happening, my body is already falling, meeting the cold ground with a bam. Ouch. It hurts a bit, but the surprise overwhelms me more than the pain. I look at my legs, annoyed. Just what did I clumsily trip on, at this situation where I must not make any mistake?

…Only to find nothing but a black hand wrapped around my ankle, grasping it tightly.

I choke, dread and fear creeping all over my body. My mind has gone blank in an instant. The hand, coming out of the ground even though there's no hole there - drags my body backwards, towards another me with red eyes, who is now standing calmly and proudly in the shadows.

"Waa…aaahh!!"

I scream and struggle, my nails digging into the ground to no avail. My body keeps being dragged by overwhelming strength, getting closer to that darkness I'm terrified of. Tsurumaru-san clicks his tongue as he jumps over to behind me and tries to knock away the black hand…without any concrete result. The hand is still firm on my ankle, dragging me away. Despair is swelling up inside my heart.

…No, I must not think of giving up. I have to keep on struggling until the very end. Besides, I'm sure Tsurumaru-san still has a few things up his sleeves.

I'm right. After cursing, he starts to chant something incomprehensible under his breath, and the black hand suddenly pulls away from my ankle. From the corner of my eyes, I can see my ikiryou wriggling in pain. Is that hand his hand, after all, somehow…?

"Get up!" Tsurumaru-san's voice snaps me back to the most important matter at hand.

That's right. I must not lose sight of the most important thing. This is the chance to get away to somewhere with better advantages and attack first - don't let the enemy strike first. I quickly stand up, and the two of us proceed to run.
My ankle throbs slightly as I run, but I just grit my teeth. This is nothing compared to what Yamanbagiri-san went through. We enter the tunnel tank, our surroundings change considerably into the view full of blue. However, the moment we enter, there's something incredibly different than the supposedly full of life and beautiful tunnel tank.

"Where are the fish…?" Even Tsurumaru-san mutters that out in amazement and confusion.

The tunnel tank, stretching as far as eyes can see, is devoid of life. We don't waste time to stop, but we still look around in confusion as we run. Even the plants and rocks have vanished, leaving behind only the glass and the water. Just what happened here…?

One way or another, we outrun my ikiryou, so we stop when there's a somewhat sharp turn, enough for us to hide and launch a surprise attack. I don't remember the tunnel tank having a turn, complete with a well-positioned box of fire extinguisher and a small shelf full of pamphlets, but this is good. I said surprise attack, but I don't know what we'll have to do. Tsurumaru-san didn't tell me the details.

"Okay…" He takes out a selfie stick from his bag and stretches it out. "You hold this and slap the ikiryou’s face when I give the signal. Or you can hit his crotch too, anything is fine as long as you hit him. Even if the pain is transferred to you, I'm sure you can endure it."

I take the stick and look at him dubiously. "A selfie stick? Really?" This feels like a joke, but I've known him for 3 years, and his face tells me that he's completely serious.

"It's been strengthened with my power, so it should be as hard as a sword."

A sword? I don't know how hard it is as it is used to cut, but this selfie stick certainly can't cut…uh, r-right? Before I can say anything, Tsurumaru-san's form turns into particles of light and he vanishes into thin air, nowhere to be found. I look around in confusion as I step closer to the box of fire extinguisher, hiding my body. Where did he go? What kind of signal will he give? I wish he gave me more details.

I grip the stick tightly when I hear footsteps not belonging to me come from the direction we came from. My hand trembles, sweat falls down from my forehead. At the end, I can't completely erase this primal fear. This instinct crying out, wanting to take my feet away right at that moment. Even breathing is hard as the tunnel tank is completely silent - even if I move slightly, it can be heard so clearly. My heart pounds. The person approaching really gives off a bad vibe. However, I can't waver. I must not.

Time seems to slow down as I wait, only chilling footsteps enter my ears.

How long have I waited in this tense atmosphere, to the point my palms are sweaty? I cannot tell. However, out of the blue, a light flickers in front of me, and a few white feathers fall down from the ceiling. My body moves faster than my mind. With all of my might, I swing the selfie stick, as though holding a bat, trying to hit an incoming ball.

At that moment, a burning pain surges through my face. I hit my ikiryou’s face, distorting his shocked expression. The pain we feel might be equal as we both fall down to the floor, wriggling in pain. It hurts more than I thought, especially my nose. It feels like some bones are broken, but thankfully not - just my imagination, and my nose doesn't bleed at all.

The other me glares, resentment clear on his red eyes. Before he can move, Tsurumaru-san falls down out of nowhere, hitting his back, and I can feel my own back creaking. I question what he
wants to do, as I see on his hands there's a white rope or some kind, seemingly glowing. Without much hassle, he ties up my *ikiryou*’s wrists and legs, keeping him in place. Fortunately, my hands and legs are free, unaffected by his state.

"This is pointless," he says with my own voice, thick with fury and spite I've never heard from my own self. "I can break free if I want to."

"Then do it." Tsurumaru-san taunts with a huff. "This is a specially made rope, just so you know. Yeah, this is a temporary measure, just so it's easier to deal with you. Okay, Ichigo, be quick."

He suddenly pushes the responsibility to me. It *is* my responsibility, however… "W-What should I do, exactly?"

"About that…"

"There's nothing to do. I am you. No matter what you do, I'll always come back."

I flinch. Looks like the attack is starting. "That's just if I keep harboring and suppressing these feelings."

The other me snorts. "You know humans will never change, no matter how much they try to, no matter how long time passes…especially someone like you. Or should I say, someone like me, the lowest of the lowest, scum on earth. A psychopath pretending to be a saint, how laughable." His voice is thick with disgust and condescending, shaking my fragile heart. "I will appear again without fail, as all you can do is suppress me with nothing but delusions, empty hopes, which one day will bite you back just like this moment. You’ll just take me back to existence after pushing me away for your own convenience, creating other reasons for me to come back. The same thing is happening right now. Don't you understand?"

"N…No…!"

Without so much as thinking, I blurt out my pointless denial. I regret it the moment I say it. What he said is true...he knows everything about me as he's a part of me, born out of my darkest part, fulfilling what I can't, for me. However...the most disgusting part of me, the disgusting desires deep within me…I can hardly accept it, even though I know I shouldn't reject it.

"A-Ah…I mean…"

I step backwards.

I've always known that I'm garbage, the lowest of the low. To be unable to even accept my own creation and the facts slapped right in my face, wanting to avert my eyes from reality …the truth is always hard to confront. I thought I was prepared for this, because Yamanbagiri-san retorted me, but hearing it now…I'm just overwhelmed with agony, realizing even more on how weak and disgusting I am, as I seek for Yamanbagiri-san…wishing for him to be here and comfort me.

My hand grips the stick tightly, but I feel empty. I…I need him. I want to hold his hand, basking in his warmth. Then, I can calm myself down…but he is not here.

"That's right." he sneers at me reading my mind. "You're just selfish garbage. You don't genuinely love him…you want to monopolize him just for your own sake, taking advantage of his kindness. You just want someone to be your pillar of support. You're clinging to him like a parasite."

"I…I love Yamanbagiri-san. I don't know whether it's genuine or not, but…for the rest, I know that." I said the same thing to him. I try my best to keep my legs standing. My body is trembling, my heart
is torn, but I still cling to what Yamanbagiri-san said. I can't…and must not give up. "I might be a parasite right now, but I can get better, and I will, for him as well."

He - no, I click my tongue, annoyed. "Didn't I say it already? You know humans can never change! You experienced it firsthand! Whatever you do, it's pointless. You want to get rid of me, a part of you, yet you denied me at first - you denied the truth, like that woman did. See? You can never change, too! It runs in your blood!

"H-Humans can change! Sure, I was surprised, so I denied on instinct, but…I believe in what Yamanbagiri-san said. I haven't tried it, so I don't know whether or not I'll be able to yet - it's still possible. More the reason I should try to change myself. I can't harm the one I love any longer."

It hurts me to harm him, but I can't drown in those mistakes and forget the future.

"Y-You…no, I tried to kill him! You ordered me to! That's how low and twisted you are, to get the one you love all by yourself, even as a corpse! How can someone like you change?! You're always easily jealous since the start, so this will always happen! Always! " I scream, seeming desperate as I wriggle. Tsurumaru-san glares as he holds me in place. He is silent throughout this whole scene. Does he believe in me - that I'll be able to solve this myself?

I exhale and inhale air, calming down my tense body. It's embarrassing to have someone other than Yamanbagiri-san hearing all of this, but this is fine. He's my friend, despite our rivalry. He has the right to know.

"That is certainly unforgiveable of me. It's very twisted and bad. I deserve punishment, that is this guilt riddled my body. However, Yamanbagiri-san forgave me, and supported me to change. He believes in me, putting his hope in me…I can't let him down by not trying. It's a way to redeem for what I've done to him…I have to make him happy."

Every time I think of Yamanbagiri-san, I feel a tinge of pain. At the same time, warmth fills my heart, and I feel more confident in myself. I might be using him as a reason, but this is a step forward so I can stand all by myself. In my mind, I can feel his hand gently pushing my back, prompting me to move forward.

With him watching over me, supporting me, I feel like I can do anything.

My heart does not waver any longer. That's right. As painful as my words are, I can't lose sight of what's important.

I have a terrifyingly agonized expression, colored in disbelief and rage, but at loss for words. I grit my teeth until blood flows out, and I can taste iron in my mouth. It doesn't taste good. I glare at myself. There is no time and place to waver, to doubt, to be afraid. All I can do is march forward, so I take a step, approaching myself, still glaring at me with those red eyes.

Seeing my own self with demonic red eyes, face distorted in fury, feels surreal; out of this world. Do I hate myself this much? Most likely. Blood keeps on flowing in my mouth, but even the pain slowly fades from my mind.

"…I'm sorry. I caused you a lot of trouble. I dumped my ugly emotions to you to retain my own sanity, while you…drowned in those emotions, unable to control yourself, wandering to fulfill what I can't, stressed while I feel better. There's no need for that now. I'll bear my own emotions and I'll clear them away myself."

I kneel down, looking at my own expression, still filled in anger. Why do I hate myself this much…?
The silence persists until I let out a snort. "You are an idiot. I know that deep down, you're a kind and hopeless idiot, but..." Instead of softening, my expression get more intense. "To think you are this stupid. You shouldn't accept darkness. You shouldn't let yourself get close to the darkness... or you will be consumed, you know?"

"Wha - ?"

"Shit!" Tsurumaru-san hisses and pulls the rope, but it's too late.

I lean to myself and feel my lips, then something surges into my body, rushing into my blood, my organs, my nerves, to my brain, shaking my entire body. I can see the color of black, like a mist, spreads in front of my eyes.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

Pain suddenly takes over me. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts - what, what, what is this?! I can't, can't, breathe. It's as if. All of my organs, bones, with creaking sounds - crushing, crushing, crushed, gone.

"AAGH, AAH, AAAHHH - "


Stop this, stop, stop -

Rattle, rattle, rattle.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!"

No more, no more, no more, no more, no more, no more, no more - !!!!!

Stop, stop entering me, stop crushing me, hurts, hurts hurts, stop, please stop, go away, go - !!! Aahh, no, no, no, NO, NOOOO!!

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA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I can hear a gentle voice beckoning me in my hazy unconsciousness.

"…Ichigo-senpai. Wake up."

With these words, I open my heavy eyelids…and immediately I'm assaulted by a light. The light shi
shines so brightly on top of me, seemingly close and far away at the same time. My body is floating in a blue space, as though I have no weight to speak of, like a feather. My whole body…feels numb, as though nothing is attached to me at all. I can't feel my fingers, nor can I move them.

My mind is still devoid of contents, refusing to think of anything yet as I drift away with the waves, helplessly looking up at the light i can never reach. The world is completely silent, leaving me all alone in this space - so familiar and unknown at the same time.

Is that voice just my imagination? After all, as far as I can see, there's nobody but me here. I feel a tinge of pain and loneliness when I realize the fact.

Huh? Wait…

…Who is the Ichigo that person was talking about…? I feel like I know, but…ahh, my pain throbs when I try to remember. Come to think of it…I don't remember anything. Not where I am, what happened, and…who I am.

Isn't this bad? Am I just going to drift here for eternity, not knowing and not doing anything - ? When I think of this, a sharp pain pierces my head. It hurts so much I can't bear it and scream. I choke, letting out bubbles - instead of a voice. Am I underwater? If that is so, then…

My body slowly sinks further down, as though an invisible force is pulling me, or pushing me down. I can't resist as I can't move my body other than my eyes and mouth.

I…will I meet my end here? Just like this…?

No, I don't want it…! I don't want this!

"That's the spirit. I'm here, so you have nothing to worry about now, senpai."

Perhaps in a daze, I see a figure, extending his hand towards me. Like a mirage, his features are blocked the intensified light, and I don't know who he is, but as my heart feels warm, I can tell…this is the person I love. Hope fills my entire body, as though regaining its strength, and I extend my hand towards him.

The moment I touch his hand, a white light bursts from our fingertips.

"G-Go… GO AWAAAY !!"

I scream on top of my lungs, letting out what last strength I have. My scream seems to take a physical effect as the black mist disperses from around me. Before I know it, my hand is holding the *omamori* Yamanbagiri-san gave me. The *omamori* is shining, like a lamp, illuminating the dim place.

I look at it as I pant, taking deep breaths to calm my body down. At the end, Yamanbagiri-san protected me. I can feel his warmth and feelings inside this small bag of a charm…did he make this himself? I hold it close to me, feeling warm tears staining my cheeks. I can tell he really wants to help me, to protect me…

Not minding the fact that I cries a lot today, my heart is terribly moved…aah, I *really* love Yamanbagiri-san. This intense feeling can't be a lie.
I glare at my other self, who was just thrown out of my body with great force, looking shocked by this turn of events. "You…you…!!" I - he screams in anger. "How dare you…! At the end, you rejected me!"

"You want to take over my body and mind completely!" I shout back, gripping the omamori. "You are a part of me, but…you shouldn't be the one to control me! If you do that, I'll be nothing but a monster with intense jealousy, losing my conscience…" Nobody told me this, but I can tell. I almost lost myself back there…it was so terrifying, I'm still trembling.

"Good job getting back." Tsurumaru-san says before the other me can speak, heaving a sigh of relief. He is already standing next to me, holding the rope bathed in light. "To think that this ikiryou evolved so much as an individual to the point he can do that…Ichigo, it seems it'll be hard to let him go back into you. Looks like we can only do it by force now."

I gulp. "…Yeah. Even then, it'll be dangerous for me." When we combine, he might try to take over me again. I have to be strong and prepared for that, before he gets too strong.

"I believe you can defeat him…so, don't think about that right now."

I smile hearing his words. It's nice to have someone believe in me like this. The two of us stare at myself - no, him, my ikiryou. He glares back at us with an expression more tense than before. He clicks his tongue. "I thought you wanted to lose your mind, lose yourself…so that you won't be able to feel any pain and won't be able to harm others."

"…I did think of that, but at the end, it's not possible." I shake my head.

"Why?"

"You already know the answer…doing that will hurt my friends, my brothers, and the one I love. It is a selfish act that can't be forgiven."

This seems to snap him completely as he roars as the answer - a very inhuman roar, like a lion's, shaking the entire tunnel tank. I almost lose balance, but manage to keep standing.

In a blink of an eye, the tunnel tank gets even more dim, close to utter darkness. The other me is wrapped in darkness, creating a silhouette that gives me a bad feeling. The shadow slowly twists and turns, morphing into something else - something inhuman. The transformation is followed by the sound of… splat. Splat. Sounds like meat gushing. It's disgusting.

What…is happening? My legs are frozen as I watch in horror. The figure becomes taller and taller, reaching the ceiling, the appearance no longer humanoid. Before long, after towering so high, he steps forward, moving with that splat sounds, as though dragging something heavy…and slowly emerges from the darkness. I shriek, sweating so hard, feeling dread and fear creeping inside me.

"Oh my god." Even Tsurumaru-san is breathless.

"What…is that…?" I mutter weakly. Now, I can barely accept it as another me…a part of me. With that kind of monstrous appearance…yes, monster or oddity is a better term.

It stands tall and mighty to the ceiling, looming upon us. Its body looks like mash up of lumps of fat, glued together when they're still fresh; colored in the tone of a human's skin. Transparent liquid flows from the pores. Despite the non-humanoid appearance and missing a head, it has two fat, big hands and three claws on each.

Splat. Clack. Splat.
It makes these sounds as it drags its body closer. As it emerges from the shadows, I can see the meat moving in a rhythm, as if breathing. J-Just what is this abomination? Is it really a part of me? I created such a monster…?

"Is this the monster Manba-chan saw on his dream?" Tsurumaru-san gasps. "A-Anyway, we should step back, Ichigo. I am surprised he can take that form, but that shows just how much he has been affected by the negativity in this aquarium."

I weakly step back, my legs shaking, practically hiding behind his back. My teeth clatter, my whole body shivers, my heart threatens to rip apart my chest. "W-What should we do?"

He can't hide that he is as lost as I am. "Let's watch it first. Don't provoke it."

We watch with halted breath as the monster stops a few meters away from us. From this distance, I can faintly smell the scent of rusted iron wafting through the air from it…blood? N-No, it's better to not think about that…

It just looms over us and looks at us with its invisible eyes, as though gouging something. Tsurumaru-san takes out a sword out of thin air and holds it, taking a defensive stance.

After what seems to be eternity, a voice echoes in the dim hallway. I look around, searching for the source as the voice gets louder and louder, vibrating in the air until I need to close my ears with my hands. It's hurting my ears…what is this?! My head…ugh..

In the midst of throbbing pain, I find the source. It's right in front of me, after all.

The voice sounds like a howl, a cry, one would expect coming from a wolf - except it comes from the abomination with no mouth. The monster. Its body vibrates. There's no doubt that it produces the sound…but how? Why? What is this?!

"Ugh…"

It hurts to think. I want this to stop. The sound gets louder and louder, less of a howl and more like static of electronic, about to break my eardrums. It hurts so much, my body refuses to move.

"Wagh!"

Until suddenly, something hits my gut, sending me backwards. What - ? Before I can swallow this, my body hits the floor, the pain corroding my senses and mind. I belatedly realize Tsurumaru-san punched me when I look at his direction.

But why…?! He didn't give me any warning at a-

Slash.

A sharp wind brushes against my cheek, making a line of red on my cheek. Suddenly, the ground cracks, shaking the entire place along with horrendous sounds as though there's an earthquake. I close my eyes, struggling to keep my balance. Just what is happening here?!

The tremor stops soon after. The world falls into silence in the darkness. I am afraid, but not knowing frightens me even more. I slowly, reluctantly, open my eyes that got heavier.

What greets me is a bit surprising. I expected destruction, but the only destruction to be seen is the cracked floor. The walls, the aquarium tanks, everything else stands firmly. On the floor I stood before, a crater is gaping open. Just how it appeared, I have no idea.
But I know one thing.

Ah…so it's targeting me.

That's why Tsurumaru-san pushed me away…wait, where is he? I look around, immediately spotting him leaning against the tank. His clothes are ripped there and there, but I don't see any external injuries. He holds his sword and stands up wobbly.

"Tsurumaru-san -"

"Stay still! It's coming!"

My instinct tells me to duck, so I do. Right after that, something slams against the wall where my head was. Tsurumaru-san leaps, closing the distance in an instant and slashes it - a hand of the monster. The wet lump of meat falls to the floor. No, calling it a tentacle is better. It stretches out from the monster's body. There are more tentacles growing.

Just what kind of monster is this?! There's nothing like this in youkai encyclopedia…!

I run away as far as I can while Tsurumaru-san blocks attacks from the tentacles. I have no other choice but to rely on him as I can't fight at all. There's no way the selfie stick can do something about it.

"Ah!"

"Ichigo -!"

A tentacle slips from Tsumaru-san, coming towards me with a speed I can't follow.

Oh no, it's coming - !! I don't have time to dodge!

With my mind blurry from fear, blood boiling from adrenaline, I raise the selfie stick and swing it to protect myself. As if this would work - is what I think, but then the stick cuts the tentacle in two. Aah…he did tell me that it has been strengthened, but…to think it's as sharp as a sword. This is surreal.

My hands, gripping the stick, are shaking as I watch the tentacle wriggling around before falling into ashes. The monster seems shaken up by this outcome as it ceases attacks for a moment.

I…

I might be able to do this.

No. I believe I can do it.

Tsurumaru-san seems to pick up my will as he smiles, moving to intercept incoming attacks with his sword, swinging it so easily. It almost looks like he is dancing. I hate to admit it, but he is certainly a pro at this.

A tentacle rushes to meet me, slipping past him, and I slash it before it can do anything. The slashed tentacle turns into ashes.

Yes…I can do this.

I can fight and protect myself.
One way or another, our backs meet as we take a slight break, staring at the tentacles ready to assault us.

"Listen. I'll do most of the job. You should just focus on surviving," Tsurumaru-san says.

"I understand. I'll sacrifice you without any hesitation when push comes to shove."

"I try my best to not say it like that, but you just break it so easily!" He sounds pained but laughs anyway. "I know...you hate me, don't you?" He asks with a low volume, in contrast with his previous laugh. "Even before Manba-chan came along."

He realizes it, I see...I'm not surprised. He's sharper than he looks, after all. "...I do. I only disliked you, a bit, but now I really hate you. Don't steal Yamanbagiri-san's attention away from me."

"Whoa, so brutally honest."

"But I also know you love Yamanbagiri-san."

He falls silent. The air feels heavy. I close my eyes and exhale air, then inhale more. A part of me is undoubtedly pained by this, but I have to say it...

"I hate some parts of you, but you've been a good friend, so...go and confess to him already, you coward."

As if prompted by my words, an ear-splitting roar echoes in the air once more. We prepare ourselves for the incoming attack. I hold the selfie stick tightly. I might not look like it, but I practiced several martial arts before, including karate and judo, and my body still remembers as I take a stance. My instincts and reflexes are quite good. I'm glad I practiced martial arts before despite not liking it.

I calm down my breathing and attack a tentacle that almost grabs my hand. Another one rushes in right after with speed I'm unable to follow. My heart pounds quickly as I move, dodging only with instinct. I get lucky and manage to slash it, thankfully.

"You're good!" Tsurumaru-san says, looking over me as he blocks a bigger tentacle's assault with a sword and proceeds to effortlessly slice it into two. I nod, focusing on incoming attacks.


The actions repeat in no order, my body is getting used to the rythm of the so-called surreal battle. However, no matter how many we slash, the tentacles keep on growing, and the monster doesn't seem pained as though the tentacles are not part of its body. Fatigue is catching up with me.

I am but a normal human, after all.

My movements are becoming duller, my reactions getting slower. Just how long will this have to stretch out? As if this is a hopeless, never-ending battle...

In that moment of weakness, I make a mistake.

"Wha - "

I gasp when I realize I've slipped on a crack on the floor and am in the process of falling down. At
that moment, I see a tentacle aiming towards me, and I can't avoid it.

"Oh shit - "

Tsurumaru-san wants to help me, but a tentacle grabs his hand and drags him away. Aahh, he won't be able to help me on time now.

The tentacle wraps around my body before I can fall to the ground, taking me to the monster.

I can't move…!

Fear of death rushes through my body as the countdown begins. I can clearly see the eyes of the monster staring deep into me. A hole slits open on its side, seemingly acting as a mouth. Is it planning to swallow me? No, no. I'm scared…I can't…I don't want to die here! I shut my eyes, unable to look at my soon to be killer, hoping it'll be a quick, painless end -

"Senpai!"

A voice that doesn't belong to me or Tsurumaru-san echoes…from above. Along with the sound of something falling onto the tentacle. I feel the tentacle holding me stop moving. When I open my eyes, I find -

"Y-Yamanbagiri-san…?!

Yamanbagiri-san is holding and biting the tentacle with all of his might. Red liquid spurts out from the tentacle, its grip on me growing weaker. As though annoyed, the monster swings another tentacle, but he manages to hold on, his nails digging on the meat.

I don't know why or how he is here, but - "Yamanbagiri-san! Just get away, please - "

"No!" He says in a muffled voice, his face filled with determination.

Before long, his effort bears fruit as the tentacle lets go of me, and I fall to the ground. It's a bit painful, but I have no time to waste. I grab the selfie stick and swing it, trying to kill it off before it can do anything. However, the monster is smart. It expected this as it swings higher out of my reach, then wraps around Yamanbagiri-san's body.

"Guh - ?!" As if enraged, the tentacle holds him tighter and tighter, trying to crush him. Pain flashes on his face. I can hear his bones creaking. My body feels weak.

This can't be happening…no…

This is worse than me dying. I can't…if he gets injured because of me or more, I…

"Aaaaagh!!"

The worst comes in a matter of seconds as he coughs up blood. Just how much pressure is that tentacle releasing…? I feel hopeless and pathetic for being unable to do anything. Am I going to just watch the one I love die in front of me, because of me?

I hear a roar coming from behind as despair swallows me.
9-The Love Between You, Me, and Him-2

Chapter Notes

I forgot to announce it on the previous part, but I created manbaharem discord server! Feel free to join if you like manbaharem, want to share manbaharem works, and perhaps interact with others! This is the permanent invite link: https://discord.gg/rMAynHE

=9-02=

How can this happen again on my watch?

Just how many times have I watched the same scene playing, with me unable to do anything?

"Aaaaagh!!" Manba-chan groans in pain, coughing up more blood. The color of red dripping from his mouth drains strength from my body.

I scream in a frenzy as I slash the tentacles blocking my way to Manba-chan. How dare you - ! It sure knows strategy. When I kill one, another one appears right away. Not even my regeneration is that fast!

Damn it, damn it! There's no time for this!

I fly, but they still intercept me in the air. These persistent bastards. At the very least, I'm getting closer. I have no long-range attacks, unfortunately.

Just then, Manba-chan stops screaming and wriggling, his head falling down weakly. My entire body trembles. My heart seems like it stops beating, the oxygen doesn't reach my lungs and choke me. It's hard to breathe. The taste of bitter helplessness fills my mouth.

At the same time, rage burns my whole body.

"AAAAAAAAHHHH!!"

I cut my way through the tentacles, letting them smash me as long as I can get to Manba-chan. I push myself to my maximum speed, closing the distance in a few seconds. This resulted in my clothes being ripped apart by the wind, some wounds from the tentacles throb, but I don't care.

I slice off the tentacle holding Manba-chan and catch his limp body. I feel relieved to hear his ragged breathing. There are no external injuries, but he might be bleeding internally.

I set him down in front of Ichigo and immediately set up an invisible barrier around us.

"Yamanbagiri-san!" Ichigo squeaks.

I put my ear on Manba-chan's chest, listening to his heartbeat. I check his pulse and breathing. Hmm, it doesn't seem there are internal injuries other than a lightly bruised lung that caused him to cough blood. Soon after, I feel my body relax. "He is fine. No external injuries, and his internal injuries are little. He has difficulty breathing, but it isn't bad either. He'll be fine with some rest. I hope Mikazuki comes soon to treat him before he gets worse."
"Oooh…thank god." He sighs in relief.

"We should loosen his clothing first to help him."

Ichigo nods, gently taking off Manba-chan's jacket while I unbutton his shirt, just a bit, enough for him to not feel strangled.

"Se…senpai…" Manba-chan gasps, his chest heaving up and down erratically. So he is still conscious, huh. He really is tough.

"Don't talk, idiot. Just try to breathe. Calmly." I pat his head. Seeing his eyes get watery, a familiar image flashes in my mind. The image overlaps with the weak Manba-chan and I feel my blood rising up. Something is welling up inside me, burning hot; rampaging.

That's right…didn't you say you'll be careful, Manba-chan? To not push yourself? So why…why did this happen again?

My chest hurts.

I have so many things I want to tell him, such as "Are you an idiot?! What do you think you've done?! Don't you realize how reckless you are?!". I'm angry towards his stupid actions. I really am. I want to lecture him about it. I also have to ask how and why he came here. I don't have any idea what happened, but for him to land here and protect Ichigo…it's quite a blessing.

However, for now, I have to let him rest.

"Ichigo. Monitor his breathing and pulse. Help him to breathe, and…just stay here."

I stand up with these words.

I couldn't save him the first time. So this time…I can't make the same mistake. I swore to myself…but Manba-chan has always been Manba-chan. It's not easy for him to change his ways. If he brings it upon himself, whatever I do is pointless.

Alright. Time to get serious.

"You've done it, you piece of shit. You made me angry."

I glare at the monster looming over us.

Right now, the only one who can protect them is me. I should've put the barrier before before, now that I think about it, but doing it drains my power, so I'd rather not. However, this situation calls for it and should be worth it. This way, I can focus on the enemies, knowing they are safe. They can't go out of the barrier and nothing outside can reach them.

I take a few deep breaths before stepping forward. I have to preserve my energy. Just killing off the tentacles are not good, of course - it seems they can endlessly grow. I move and swing the sword that has always been with me for hundreds of years, making a path for myself. The source should be Shadow Ichigo, transformed into that weird creature, who had become an individual and merged with this dimension. He really is dangerous…does Ichigo still have some doubts, thus keeping the ikiryou? That's very possible.

It's hard to change humans' hearts and minds. I know that very well.

To be frank, I still have no idea what to do about his ikiryou. Although it gained individuality and
that form, it is still connected to the real Ichigo. They still share sense of pain. Killing it is not an
option. However, even Ichigo's words don't reach him...aaagh, this is a really dire situation. I hate it.
The only way to kill it without killing the real one is exorcism. Or purification, you can say. We need
Mikazuki to do this. Where is he? When will he come?

While I'm thinking all of that, my body automatically moves to slash anything in my way, like I'm on
auto-pilot. It's been a long time since the last time I had a battle like this, but fortunately, my body still
remembers. Even I feel some sort of excitement from this.

I no longer hesitate to pass the tentacles to go to the source straight away. There is no need to waste
my energy by defeating them anymore. The monster roars when it picks up my intention. A gaping
hole slits open from its body again. Now it has two scary-looking mouths leading to abyss. And I still
have no idea what the right course of action is. Great!

For now, I have to stall the monster until Mikazuki comes, or until I get a better idea. Manba-chan's
lovers should be aware that he is injured and rushing here now. I am a Taoist and I still practice it, so
I can do exorcisms, but the preparation takes time, and it's dangerous to do so. There are too many
cases of things going wrong during exorcism, especially when it comes to *ikiryou*. At worst, the
person dies. That's why the specialists do nothing about it - they want the *ikiryou* to vanish naturally
just like last year. It's better for Mikazuki, a *shinrei*, to do the exorcism, as he is holy and pure. Even
his mere presence is unsettling for evil spirits. That's how powerful he is.

I move left and right, forward and backward, dodging the monster's attacks, occasionally cutting off
annoying tentacles here and there. I still keep a distance from it, just enough for me to dodge and
keep its attention to me. This is a good distance.

At times, I glance back to the other two behind. I can faintly see the sphere shape of light as some
tentacles hit it repeatedly. Whatever they do, it's useless. There's no way the barrier can be broken as
long as I have enough power to keep its existence.

But, if this drags on, the barrier can be breached. I grit my teeth, hoping nobody realizes about my
limit.

After a while, the monster wails. It seems frustrated about the barrier and me. I'm getting frustrated
too - where the heck is Mikazuki?! Why is he so late?! I want this to end quickly so I can rush to
Manba-chan's side...the last part is an appropriate wish of mine. I just want to make sure he is fine. I
just want to ensure his safety and protect him from any harm.

I want to be by his side.

It's a simple wish. Why is it so hard to come true?

Am I not allowed to see the one I love safe and sound?

Or were our souls born under a cursed star, so no matter how many times we meet, we can only face
destruction at the end? Heh...how laughable. I do not believe in such things. Thinking about fate and
destiny, already decided upon birth, and we mere earthlings can only follow that path...don't joke
around with me! I decide my own path! Nobody can control me! I will overturn the bullshit called
fate with my own hands!

A newfound strength empowers my spirit as I keep dodging attacks, however my body is getting
weaker. Damn it, I need to exorcise the *ikiryou* by myself, after all...but there's no time for
preparations. The thing I'm envious of about Shintoism and Buddhism is how far easier their
exorcism rites are.
I have to borrow their ways. Fortunately, I always have amulets and such with me, and I've trained for this kind of emergency. This is the last resort. I don't really want to, but -

*Crack!*

Suddenly, a crack echoes. What? Dread fills me as I turn away. Sure enough, the barrier is cracking. Bit by bit. Slowly. Like a glass cracked by a ball and is about to shatter completely. The tentacles' relentless attacks now bear fruit.

Why? How?! I still have enough power to maintain it! So why -

An idea flashes my mind. No way…I didn't think of it before. Despite its appearance, that monster is still a part of Ichigo, and of course, Ichigo is also a part of it…maybe, just maybe, Ichigo inside the barrier weakens the barrier or strengthens his *ikiryou*. I have no basis of this, but it seems to be the only plausible reason.

My feet take me away from the monster back to the barrier before I know it. I cut down the tentacles on my way. I don't have any plan. I don't know what to do. My mind scrambles for a plan. Is there nothing good? Nothing at all?

I step inside the barrier with ragged breath. I'm the one who made it, so of course I can. Ichigo stares at me, his face a mix of confusion and fear. I silently look at Manba-chan. He is also looking at me as he lies down on the floor. His complexion is getting better, but…

"Senpai...this is a dire situation, isn't it?" He says weakly. I guess my expression is way too obvious.

"Yeah, it is. Do you know where Mikazuki is?"

"I...I don't feel his presence. Kogi too..."

Damn it. They might be blocked by other oddities or thrown to another part, after all. I didn't think of that possibility. My mistake. I really hate this place and our luck.

"W-What should we do?" Ichigo asks with chattering teeth. His face is pale.

My mind races, but I find no other answer. "...You guys have to get away. Escape from this place. I'll try to hold that *ikiryou* back and exorcise it. Send Mikazuki my way if you meet him."

"E-Exorcism?"

"That's the normal way...to defeat *ikiryou* ..." Manba-chan heaves a sigh. "I guess Ichigo-senpai's voice...can't reach it anymore."

I nod. "It gained individuality and blended into this dimension. I'm sure that before long, it will be completely separated from Ichigo, but that's dangerous because you'll lose a part of yourself. It's better to purify it and send it back."

Ichigo falls silent. It's not hard to know what's on his mind right now.

"You...don't have much power left, right, Tsurumaru-senpai? Can you do it...?"

Manba-chan is really is sensitive on this...just on this thing. I can also sense people's spiritual power, so this is not a surprise. To put it so bluntly like that, though, I'm a bit hurt. "That's right. Well, I'm immortal, so I can try and try again without dying, I can do it." I think.

He looks like he wants to say something as his mouth gapes open, only swallowing air in silence. He
settles with, "Hold my hand, Tsurumaru-senpai."

"What?"

"Hold my hand," he repeats. What is he thinking? At a time like this? His eyes tell me that he has a plan. I'll go through it for now. I take his hand, which is quite cold compared to mine. That's why it's noticeable when warmth slowly rises from his hand. I can almost see a faint light shines at the same time I feel spiritual power flowing into me, recharging me. This is -

"Manba-chan, you -"

"I...might be useless, but...at the very least, this is what I can do." He clenches my hand. "You are not alone, Tsurumaru-senpai. I am here...Ichigo-senpai is here, too..."

Transferring his power to another person so easily like this, and in no small amount... Manba-chan, who exactly are you? I shake the question off my mind as his voice echoes in my mind.

"You are not alone."

Being immortal, I see the people I hold dear grow old and die one by one, leaving me all alone in my youth. It undoubtedly pains my heart, no matter how many times I went through it. The pain keeps appearing, I can never be numb even if I want to. I'd appreciate it if I could be heartless.

This is the downside of being an immortal. Something I didn't think clearly about when I was a mortal. Who would've thought having a long, endless journey alone was this painful?

To keep myself away from pain, I consciously put a certain distance between me and other people. Even if we're friends, I never try to cross a certain line. I try to do important things alone, because I know nothing will last forever but my own solitude. I have no need for fleeting things that will only bring me pain...yes, just let them be artificial, fake. That is fine with me.

"You are not alone."

These words are so simple, yet touched my heart so much. If it were anyone else, if the situation wasn't this dire, I'd have dismissed it as always... and yet... I feel my heart is shaken up right now. Is it because the power flowing into me is so warm? Is it because the one saying it is the one I love? Is it because these words are the ones I want to hear all this time, coming from his mouth?

Being alone is painful, but being left alone is more painful.

I...what should I do? I don't know.

Manba-chan seems to realize my complicated feelings. "Senpai..."

"T-That's right. I don't know what I can do yet, but I'll help too." Ichigo says with a determined nod, his face no longer looks dark. "You can depend on us."

It's not like I never depend on anyone. I trusted Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru to protect Manba-chan when they're together. I depended on Mikazuki to come just now. I depended on Ichigo to at least protect himself earlier, and depended on him to take care of Manba-chan. However, when it comes to more dangerous things, I don't want anyone to get hurt. It's fine if I get hurt. I'm an immortal, after all.

It's easier for me to fight alone.
That's what I genuinely think.

I don't think it's wrong of me. I keep people safe that way, keep my sanity intact, and avoid my heartache. Isn't it good?

Manba-chan slowly gets up with Ichigo's support, still clenching my hand as hard as he can, even though he is no longer transferring his power to me. "There are things you can't do alone, senpai. There are things you better do with others' help, even a little."

"But…"

"I won't accept any buts. I helped you just now, didn't I? Thank me instead."

I can't cry here. Even so, my voice cracks up. "…You're so unfair. How can you read my heart so easily when you're oblivious to people's love towards you? Manba-chan is really unfair…and weird."

"Thank you," he says with a prideful huff. Looking at him like this, it doesn't seem he is injured at all. He really is tough.

"That is not a compliment."

"I take it as one."

I sigh. My mind is still all jumbled up; I still have no idea how exactly I feel about this as both positive and negative feelings are bursting out. A part of me still wants to refuse. Another part of me wants to accept. I hate it and long for it at the same time. Humans are complicated and I'm no exception. Turning immortal doesn't change that contradictory nature.

However, I already lost. Manba-chan won me over already. The moment he touched my hand, I already lost. No…perhaps I lost the moment I told him my secret. I can no longer resist.

I take a few deep breaths and let go of his hand. "Thank you, Manba-chan."

Manba-chan shoots me a soft smile. Ichigo looks relieved.

I slap my cheeks lightly as my mind clears up and races to think about what to do right now. The barrier can fall at any moment. We have to move fast.

Ichigo raises his hand. "Before you exorcise it, can I try something?"

"What is it?"

"I think I can reach its heart. I can feel its bitterness and it's getting stronger…it's my own feelings, after all." He clenches his shirt. "I think I can weaken it, even for a bit. I want it to come back to me. If I fail, then you can exorcise it."

I mull over his words. It seems he has a strong conviction…at normal situation, at this point, he should be able to get his ikiryou back. "Alright. I don't want to exorcise it so forcefully, either. Manba-chan can be with you to shake it even further, while I try to push it physically. If it gets too dangerous, though, you two will stop and run away away immediately. Understand?"

They nod firmly. Doubt and worry are swirling around my heart, but I have to shake these feelings off and trust the two of them…and trust myself to do this as well. I can't mess up.

"Alright, let's go."
Instead of letting the barrier break, I disperse the barrier on my own. The tentacles take no time to be happy and attack, but I cut them off as Ichigo, supporting Manba-chan, run to the monster. I follow them to cut anything on their way. I feel like the monster's attacks are becoming more aggressive now, but I can withstand it until the other two arrive in front of the monster safely. There's a distance between them. I put barrier around them before any tentacles can slip past me.

I watch as I pray that this will work.

I glare at the monster - *me* - standing tall, looming high above me. The size is truly intimidating. I feel like I could be swallowed without a moment's notice. My body is trembling. I'm scared. I'm really scared - I've never been this scared before. My heart is beating wildly. I can't calm down. Why did I ask for this in the first place? I have no absolute plan. If it doesn't work, I might die. That fear of death and of this creature shake my core.

Yamanbagiri-san holds my hand. I'm surprised, but the warmth of his hand calms me down. "You'll be fine, senpai," he says.

"Yes. Thank you."

It's embarrassing, but I depend on him a lot. I have to slowly change that part as well. I can't depend on him forever. I take a few deep breaths.

Believe. I can do it. Believe in myself. I can accept the other, disgusting part of me.

"Just what are you doing, idiot? Transforming to that form, attacking us..." I glance at Yamanbagiri-san and the scene of him almost crushed flashes in my mind. I grit my teeth, a fire lit inside me. "You even hurt Yamanbagiri-san...no, you were planning to kill him and swallow me. You want to kill all of us and take control of my body, like a parasite you are."

The monster does not say anything. It only responds with its eyes scattered all around its body blinking a few times. I feel slight annoyance coming from it. I guess it is more effective for me to insult than saying kind, gentle words to reach it now.

"Getting jealous over something others have, being possessive of something you don't have...isn't that stupid? How long will you turn a blind eye to reality and be selfish? How long will you lock yourself in your own little box? You know that you will only get temporary relief and regret everything at the end!"

Although I'm actually screaming to myself, insulting myself, weirdly, I don't feel too bad about it. I'm simply speaking of the truth from my heart, with the intention of taking the bad down.

"If you can't get it, then use any force necessary? It's okay to harm Yamanbagiri-san as long as he can be mine? That's stupid. Everything about you is stupid. You're like a jellyfish with no brain, only driven by pure instincts alone. No, you're even worse than animals. You're just a microorganism, a parasite residing in this world. A nuisance that can only make everyone unhappy, including yourself."

The monster roars, clearly agitated. The entire world shakes as it moves its body around, as if stomping its non-existent legs. A gust of wind brushes me as the result, but I keep standing, holding Yamanbagiri-san's hand tight.

"You created me!" It says, its voice cracking, like it's coming from an old tape. "You pushed me to be
like this, and yet you dare to insult me - ?! Oh, I see...you said you accepted me, but that's a lie! You're rejecting me, after all! You are no different from other humans!"

"I never wanted any of this! You took my feelings too far - you twisted it! I just love Yamanbagiri-san and want to make him happy - that's all, nothing more! Sure, I get jealous, but it's normal for humans. It's only a natural, negative feeling that can be brushed off. And yet you turned it into a deadly weapon. An irrational, mad weapon. Matters of possession and being lovers can go to hell! Just let me see Yamanbagiri-san be happy - is it so hard to be granted?!"

I pant as I screamed as hard as I could. My throat is a bit painful now - I'm getting too emotional. I glance at Yamanbagiri-san, who looks slightly embarrassed. Seeing that fills me with power somehow.

He is really the best when he is cute and happy. I love that Yamanbagiri-san the most.

"You are a part of me. I acknowledge that and accept you. I admit that I pushed my negative feelings on you and I feel bad. Of course, I never had any intentions to create you, even in the past. However, this and letting you swallow me are different things. You should come to me, not the other way around."

My body and soul are the original, with personality, memory, and conscience intact. The other me, meanwhile...is a little part of my soul, separating itself from me and harboring all of my negative emotions. He is not as complete as I am. I still feel negativity, it just transferred to him. He is like an animal, the only thing driving him is pure emotions with no regard to consequences and morals...he is simply a vessel, a container of negativity. Or you can say...pure madness.

Looking at him, I can't help but to wonder. Is this how people deemed as lunatics are?

He was but a little part, but as Tsurumaru-san said, he gained individuality to derive from my desires. He gained understanding on what he wants, even if it isn't morally right. He wants to swallow me to be complete - but in the process, I will be no longer. Everything about me will get rewritten, consumed by darkness...we're two different containers now, after all. We might even be on equal terms as living beings now, but...I want to believe that I'm still stronger.

Especially with Yamanbagiri-san by my side.

"You...you don't understand. There's no other way but to do this!" It screams. I can feel its frustration flowing into me. It gives off the impression of a child unable to accept his mistakes. "This is selfish, but that's what humans are all about! They only care about themselves!"

"That might be true to some people, but you and I know of one person who isn't like that! Someone we can trust and depend on...don't dismiss him like that." I clench my hand on Yamanbagiri-san's hand and glance at him. He is looking at me with a faint smile. I wonder if he realizes that I'm talking about him. I take a few deep breaths, feeling the warmth of his hand before I reluctantly let it go. I step forward to face my own self. "I am selfish, but I'll try to lessen it. I'll stop taking advantage of his kindness. I'll control my emotions. I'll stop clinging to him. Codependency is unhealthy. I'll try to give Yamanbagiri-san what I take from him. That's how a relationship should be."

"I don't need - " As expected, Yamanbagiri-san mutters, but I cut him off.

"Shhh. I want to do it. I believe give and take is important."

He looks a bit perplexed, but he nods. "Okay. I'll gladly accept it. I'm open to free food as well."

I smile to him before looking back at my other self. I can sense that it's faltering as it stands still in
silence. I extend my hand towards it. "Remember what I said? People can change, even if it's slow and hard. Why don't you believe and try to change with me? We are not alone. We have people to help us when we fall. We can always get up and try again. Trial and error is a part of what makes us humans. We learn from experiences. Don't say that it's impossible to change when we haven't tried it. Giving up before we even start is stupid. You realize all of this - how long do you intend to run away? Running away and locking yourself up won't do anything good."

It starts to waver. My words finally reach it. "B-But…I…"

"But what? If it's about harming Yamanbagiri-san, he has forgiven us. We can redeem our sins by making him happy."

"B-But…no…I can't…! I can't do it, after all! You know it! I am weak! You are weak, so why -!

I sigh, tired. Just how hard-headed my ikiryou is? "Don't make me repeat everything I've said again and again. Come, there's nothing to be scared of."

It seems shocked by my words as its body shakes slightly. It speaks with a coarse voice, "…Scared? Me?"

"I can feel it, because these feelings are inside me as well. We're scared of moving forward; of changing, of being rejected. What if I turn for the worse? What if I fail and disappoint people? What if I repeat the same mistakes? On top of everything, you're scared that…if you fuse with me, you'll disappear. Even though it was short, I experienced how it feels to almost lose yourself…it wasn't pleasant. I understand."

"Don't worry. You won't disappear. You'll just come back to where you were born - to where you belong, to where you started, like a piece of puzzle," Yamanbagiri-san speaks up, standing next to me. I wanted to say those words, but I didn't know whether it was true or not - well, I'm glad it seems to be true. "The two of you make a complete Ichigo Hitofuri when combined. I believe it won't hurt or anything."

"…Is that…so…?" I can hear a tiny bit of relief from its voice. However, it seems to have lingering doubts. It shakes as the countless eyes stare at Yamanbagiri-san. "Yamanbagiri-san…do you…really forgive me?"

"I do."

"Even though I tried to kill you?"

Yamanbagiri-san snorts. "I've been at death's doors many times. This is nothing. The result is what matters…I'm alive now. You are alive. You just…like me so much. I understand. This way is bad, but I really appreciate your feelings. Together, we can change that part."

"…Really?"

"Believe me."

"But I…"

"I don't accept buts. If you want to run away, I'll catch you no matter what."

"Why? Why are you willing to go that far for someone like me? Garbage, a parasite, the lowest of low-"
Yamanbagiri-san suddenly slaps my cheeks before facing the monster again. "You are not a parasite or garbage! I don't know if you heard what I said to Ichigo-senpai before...well, I'll say it as many times as you want. As cheesy as it sounds, I believe I speak the truth."

"W-Why my cheeks?" I ask, rubbing my throbbing cheeks.

"Sorry, I have no other way to do it. The two of you share pain anyway."

Hm, it's true that it doesn't make a difference at the end.

"As for your question...you are my friend. Uh, please don't take it as a friendzone. You're a precious person to me, ikiryou or not, bad or good. I'll always stay by your side, even if you change. Ichigo-senpai will always be Ichigo-senpai for me. I will always be there to help you, kick you to get up, and lend shoulder to cry on."

I know it's directed towards my ikiryou, but...I'm touched. Warmth floods my heart. Regardless of my love towards him, I want to be his friend and stay by his side first and foremost. As long as he allows that, I will be the happiest person in the world.

The monster feels the same. Its heart is wavering even further. It is opening its heart more, so I can feel its feelings more than before. Our feelings combined are overwhelming. I'm about to cry here...

The monster's big body slowly melts from the top - or, to be precise, it dissolves into petals of red as its body shrinks. In the midst of petals, a human body emerges. It's none other than my own body with red eyes. Seeing my own face, looking on the verge of tears feels weird. The other me, undoubtedly became his own creature while inheriting my feelings. A complicated being...to think I created him...I really feel bad. Things shouldn't had come down to this.

"I give up. Ichigo is right. I'm scared. I'm scared of so many things. I'm weak, stupid, a coward...I have so many objections I want to say, but now, I feel it's pointless to argue. I'm tired...so let us end this with my loss. I will come back to you and end this."

I can imagine. It'll just be an endless argument with no result. In fact, we've been circling around for quite some time, repeating the same things as before, with just small additions and changes. The points stay the same. However, the moment Yamanbagiri-san speaks up, he gives up so easily. Aaaah, I should've known. This is me, after all. Who else can melt me but him?

"You're weak to Yamanbagiri-san," I say with a sigh. "Really, really weak."

He snorts. "I am you. We're the same."

"For better or worse, yes. I should've let him talk since the start." Regrets came too late. It was my fault, as I wanted to speak to my other self alone...

"Too late for that now," he shoots me a wry smile. "You know, I...I just want to be accepted. But when you accepted me, I couldn't believe it, so I pushed you away. I am really a coward, afraid of even trusting my own self."

"Being self-contradictory is normal for humans."

"A human, huh..." He looks at the ground with a melancholic expression. "A part of me wants to be an individual - a true Ichigo Hitofuri. But it's impossible at the end, after all. I'm not a fake, I'm not a copy, and yet I'm not a true being either...just what am I? Can I be considered a human? Are the feelings inside me real?"
"You are a part of Ichigo Hitofuri, of course. We're both real. The true one, just split into two for a moment."

"...You're right. Then, this is fine..." He pauses. "...Say, do you regret this? Telling Yamanbagiri-san how you feel, showing him your disgusting side?"

"I don't. I was scared of being rejected, but at the end, he accepted me, so I have no regrets. I'm glad I confessed everything to him." It felt like burden was lifted from my shoulders when I told him. I felt much better.

This is certainly the right answer.

"I see." He smiles, lifts his face and stares at Yamanbagiri-san. "Before I go, Yamanbagiri-san...can I ask for one last thing, while I'm still an individual?"

Yamanbagiri-san nods. "Sure, what is it?"

My other self's voice cracks up as tears well up and fall down from his eyes. "...Hug me."

Yamanbagiri-san approaches him, and without a word, wraps his arms around his body. I'm not being hugged directly, yet I can feel his body heat. The other me hugs him back, his head on his shoulder.

"I love you."

Even though he has all my negative emotions, his confession of love is genuine. Is love a negative emotion, so he feels it too? For some people, it might be a negative emotion, as it can give birth to negative emotions and actions. Or, is it because my feelings are shared with him as well? It's very possible, as he needs to be madly in love to act.

Yamanbagiri-san nods. "Mm."

"I'm sorry."

"I accept your apology."

"Thank you."

With that, as though he was a ghost whose lingering regrets have resolved, his body dissolves into thin air. I can feel something surging into me. It's warm, but my heart also feels heavy. All the negative emotions I've repressed for so long are rushing back into me, surfacing in my mind. So these are...the things he had to burden...!

So many things, so many disgusting things, so many painful things -

My legs give up and I collapse to the ground, but I don't have the time to care about that now. I have to control myself. I've decided to bear these feelings myself, like any other human being. I can't lose now!

When I come to, Yamanbagiri-san is hugging me tightly. With my jumbled up head, I can't think of anything else but the warmth of his body, pressing against me. I hug him back, clutching his jacket. My heart is beating so quickly now. Why is he hugging me? I'm confused, but I appreciate it as I can feel myself calming down.

"Are you okay?" He asks, releasing his hug.
"I'm okay now. Thank you."

He extends his hand and I accept it, standing up with his aid.

"At the end, you saved me, Yamanbagiri-san. It's embarrassing. I still can't do anything alone."

"It's fine. One step at a time...no, even 1/4 step is fine, as long as you move forward...and you did it," he says with a smile. I wonder why he smiles a lot lately. I'm happy to see it, of course.

"Is it over now?" I ask, looking around the place. The monster is no more, but the aquarium stays the same, even the cracks on the floor. It's still so dim that something might appear in the corner.

"It should be over. Good job, I didn't have anything to do," Tsurumaru-san says, approaching the two of us. His face is more relaxed than before. "We should fetch Mikazuki and Kogi and get out of here before anything else can happen. This dimension is still dangerous, with or without ikiryou."

Yamanbagiri-san frowns. "What happened to those two, anyway? I'm worried."

BAM!

A part of the ceiling collapses without warning. We're alerted, but it doesn't take too long for us to know what's happening. The dust from the rubble clears up to show the men we were just talking about.

"Ow...what an improper landing..." Mikazuki-san groans. The poor Kogitsunemaru-san is below him, like a cushion, his face on the cracked floor. Is he alive?

Right at that moment, Kogitsunemaru-san groans pitifully. "So...heavy..." Ah, he is alive!

"Kogi! Mikazuki!" Yamanbagiri-san shouts as he approaches them. His face lights up the moment he sees them alive and well. I feel as my jealousy perks up.

Yes, I already know.

I already know he is dating the two of them. I'm not so stupid to not notice their true relationship, despite their attempt to hide it. How Yamanbagiri-san's face lights up whenever he talks to them is as clear as day. I can tell how much he loves these two and that love is reciprocated. I'm sure he is with Yoshiyuki-san as well.

...Ahh. I wish I could be a special person for him, too.

"Yamanbagiri. So this is where you were." Mikazuki-san shoots him a smile. "I'm glad to see you're alive."

"Me too, but Kogi seems to be dying."

"Ye-yes, I am dying..." Kogitsunemaru says, lifting his seemingly weak hand. "Mikazuki, get up from me already...you're heavy."

"What? If you can't withstand my weight, you won't be able to withstand the weight of three Yamanbagiris," Mikazuki-san says coldly. It seems he keeps on pressing on the poor fox's back instead.

Three Yamanbagiris...? I can't help but to feel intrigued.

"You're still going with that joke?! My back, my back, stop- !!"
"Lively for someone who is dying, aren't you."

"What joke?" Yamanbagiri-san asks as he tilts his head. "Never mind, that can come later. Stop playing around so we can get out of here immediately."

Mikazuki-san (elegantly) stands up, patting his clothes from any dust. "I assume everything is over now?"

I nod. "My *ikiryou* has vanished. It came back to me...just a few moments earlier."

"We rushed the moment Yamanbagiri fell down a hole, but were late thanks to fish blocking our way. Sorry about that." Kogitsunemaru says as he stands up, cracking his pained back. "At any rate, I'm glad everything was resolved safely."

"Sorry, you guys had no part in the main act!" Tsurumaru-san says with a grin, pointing at the two oddities. He looks like he is proud for taking part in the main act, but...

"You didn't do much at the end, either," I say the truth.

Yamanbagiri-san nods in agreement. "The credit is all Ichigo-senpai's."

"Seems like you didn't have too many parts, either," Mikazuki-san comments, covering his mouth with his hand. I'm sure he is smirking and looking down on Tsurumaru-san right now.

"Y-You two were more useless!" Tsurumaru-san retorts. "A-Anyway, we have to get going now!"

This fun, relaxing atmosphere makes me think that the previous tension-filled scene, complete with the fear of death wasn't real. However, it is clearly reality, as the aquarium shows no hint of changing. I can feel traces of the *ikiryou* lurking inside me too.

Tsurumaru-san takes the lead, with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru guarding behind me and Yamanbagiri-san. We move cautiously as I glance behind me. I still can picture that monster, with its nausea-inducing appearance, standing tall in the middle of the room. Why did it take that form? Is it a representation of how disgusting my negative emotions are? Or is it because of something else? I might never know. In fact, there are many questions on my mind, such as...how did it get here? How and why did it gain the power to enter Yamanbagiri-san's dream?

I'm undoubtedly happy by the relatively peaceful outcome. Yamanbagiri-san seems fine now as well, no traces of pain on his face. However, my steps feel heavy as doubts linger in the air.

There must be something more behind this incident. Something much more sinister...
We pass through the entrance with no trouble and soon after, we find ourselves in a bathroom, coming out of nowhere. It's the aquarium's restroom. It's a fairly normal and clean restroom, but after that unpleasant experience, this place is just…cursed, to put it simply.

"Are we back?" Ichigo-senpai asks anxiously.

Tsurumaru-senpai opens the door slightly. "Yup, we are back."

All of us sigh in relief. "I wonder how much time passed? We spent quite a while there. I'm sure the others are worried," I say. I'm scared to think how furious Yoshiyuki will be when he finds out about this.

We quickly exit the cursed restroom. The passageway is full of people - mostly staff and visitors searching for restroom. Unsurprisingly, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru cling to me. Seriously, I'm still so tired right now, and yet they look so energetic…actually, they look like they want to flirt with me. Realizing this, I look at Ichigo-senpai. He doesn't look at us, only looking forward. Is he just ignoring me or does he not notice anything? Probably the former…

After his confession, I feel conscious about him. It's his own job to not get jealous, but I shouldn't make a situation where it's possible for it to get triggered, either. Am I being too considerate? Maybe. I only think that's a proper way to deal with him as I think about my answer. I can't rile him up too much.

"You already riled him up with holding his hand," Mikazuki says through my mind. I-I just did that to calm him down, nothing else.

"Yeah, but he might think of something else. Even if he doesn't, it will still make him sad, since he isn't a special person to you."

…I admit you are right. What else can I do, though? I can't just do nothing when he is struggling in front of me. You know it pains me.

"Accept his confession, of course. I know you're unaware of it, but you do love him," Kogitsunemaru is the one who replies. "If you date him, then doing such things won't be a problem."

Do I really see him that way…?

"You thought the same about Yoshiyuki, and now look at yourself now."

Ugh. I really hate how right you guys are. For now, I'll just think hard about it. If I do love him, then I'm not ready for it right now. Rushing things is bad. I know it's an excuse, okay, but I have to realize myself, no?

"I don't know if you've grown up ever since Yoshiyuki's confession or not…" Kogitsunemaru sighs.

I consider it an improvement.

"You have to grow up and get used to love confessions."
Eh, why?

"Forget it, Kogitsunemaru. His head is way too thick for that right now," Mikazuki says with a giggle. W-What is that supposed to mean?!

Right after the conversation ends, we get out of the staff passageway into the World Tank booth, swarmed with people. It's so noisy, which I usually hate, but now I'm kind of glad to hear it. We're really back into our dimension now...no more stifling silence in darkness.

We make our way to the resting area where Uguisumaru-senpai should be waiting, if he had enough patience. The place is crowded as expected, but we can spot his green hair immediately.

"Uguisumaru!" Tsurumaru-senpai says as he waves his hand, walking towards Uguisumaru-senpai, who is sitting on the bench with a bottle of tea in his hands. Since when did he get that?

"Hm? What's wrong? Yoshiyuki and Kousetsu are on their own already, if you want to follow them," Uguisumaru-senpai says. He is right, the other two are not with him. But wait, something feels off here...

"Uh, how long have we gone for?" Ichigo-senpai asks, also realizing this.

Uguisumaru-senpai checks his watch. "Around 6 minutes or so, I believe."


All three of us - Tsurumaru-senpai, Ichigo-senpai, and me - are too stunned to speak, only our jaws hanging open. Tsurumaru-senpai breaks the tense silence as he takes out his smartphone. "Not even an hour has passed!"

"Well, yes, I only said 6 minutes. Quicker than I expected, considering how packed this place is."

Uguisumaru-senpai looks at us with a questioning look. "What happened? Your faces are pale."

"I'm going to call Kousetsu now. Manba-chan, can you call Yoshiyuki? Tell him to go back immediately," Tsurumaru-senpai says, "Then we will go somewhere and explain everything."

I nod as I scramble to get my smartphone. Does this require immediate response? It's not an emergency, just an unexpected situation, but the sooner we explain, the better...maybe.

There can only be one answer to what happened here.

...

"...we left through the entrance and found ourselves in the restroom. We went to Uguisumaru and here we are," Tsurumaru-senpai ends his recollection. Silence falls upon the room. The air feels somewhat heavy.

We ended up at Uguisumaru-senpai's house, sitting around the table. After explaining about Tsurumaru-senpai's true nature as a xian (nobody was surprised), the three of us - me, Tsurumaru-senpai, and Ichigo-senpai - explained about what happened to us in turns. Everyone can see Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru now, so there's no need for them to hide or for us to act like they don't exist, but those two decided to just rest inside me, staying out of the emergency meeting.

"In conclusion, time flows differently there and here, for some reason," Ichigo-senpai says. "Good
for us, though, as we didn't have to make anyone worry."

"It's mindblowing!" Yoshiyuki says with sparkles in his eyes. Wait, sparkles? "To think that there's such a dimension like that…!" Seems like his adventurous self won over. Huft. Now I don't have to get lec- "Still, for all of that to happen without my notice…" He glances at me, his eyes sharp. *Uwah, there's no escape.* "…I feel bad. I didn't realize anything."

"I didn't sense anything weird when we were there…" Kousetsu-senpai mumbles with a frown.

"I sensed nothing too," I say. Uguisumaru-senpai nods as he sips his tea.

"Seems like this is a case for the specialists. You can't leave that dimension alone, or it will take another victim," he says. "For now, Yamanbagiri and Ichigo should rest. Kousetsu, please contact the specialists you know. Tsurumaru, please tell me for more details."

"No rest for me?" Tsurumaru-senpai points at himself.

"You are immortal, so you'll be a good slave." Uguisumaru-senpai's smile is terrifying.

"I never signed up for this!"

"I'll rest too, then!" Yoshiyuki cheerfully says, raising his hand like a kid. He seems happy to not get any roles at all.

"Yes, you will rest until I want snacks."

"I'm a private chef now?!"

Uguisumaru-senpai ignores him as he turns around to look at me and Ichigo-senpai. "You can use the room just 2 doors away from here. It's unlocked."

"I don't know what you're planning, but I can help, too - " Ichigo-senpai says.

"No, you *are* going to rest. It's obvious you're tired. Don't push yourself."

Even the stubborn Ichigo-senpai immediately shuts his mouth and nods weakly after getting such a command. I'm not so tired that I need a nap, but taking a break isn't bad. "Let's go, senpai," I say. He nods. The two of us, along with Yoshiyuki, go to the room mentioned.

Sliding open the door, we find rolls of *futon* on the floor. They look clean. The room is quite small and is missing even a speck of dust, but there is only *futons* here, nothing else. It's devoid of anything else. Just what is this room used for?

"Do you want to take a nap, Yamanbagiri-san?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

"Not really."

"Mm. You want to talk to Mutsunokami-san, right? Go ahead while I set up the *futon* for myself."

H-How does he know? My face seems to give it away as he smiles. "O-Okay…thanks, senpai." I push Yoshiyuki out of the room and close the door. Before he can ask anything, I drag him away from the door, walking all the way to the garden.

"If you want to get angry, do it now," I say. "I'm sorry for leaving you out."

Yoshiyuki blinks a few times as if surprised. That expression turns into a smile. "Don't apologize. I
am annoyed, but ya couldn't do anything about the situation. Ya had no way to contact me and it happened all of sudden, so I won't get angry."

"Oh…” I sigh in relief before he suddenly hugs me. My heart pounds.

"I'm just glad ya are fine…” His voice cracks up as he arms tighten around my body. "I'm sorry for not being there with ya. I feel so useless."

Í hug him back. His body is warm, and his back feels dependable. "There's no helping it. It's like what you said. It's not your fault, so don't apologize…don't beat yourself up about it, either. I'm fine, others are fine, and that's what matters."

He releases his hug with a smile. "Yeah. Can I kiss ya now?"

"T-There's no need to ask that." And why a kiss? It feels out of place, but I don't mind. I close my eyes as our fingers twine with each other. Our lips meet just like that, pressing against each other until we're satisfied. He looks both happy and embarrassed after our kiss. I'm getting embarrassed, too…he just looks so pure and innocent. A real puppy I want to pat a lot.

Before we go back, I decide to speak up about another thing.

"By the way, Yoshiyuki…Ichigo-senpai confessed to me. And if he is right, Tsurumaru-senpai likes me too…"

A few seconds of silence as Yoshiyuki processes what I just said. "…Oh…I never realized they like ya. I see, I see..." He nods a few times. "That actually makes sense."

"The two of you are so dense, it's amazing," Mikazuki suddenly speaks up, appearing right behind me like a ghost.

"Don't just appear to say that!" I retort. He snickers before he vanishes from view, as quick as he appeared. I sigh as Yoshiyuki laughs, but soon his face turns serious.

"What are ya going to do? If you love them, I'm fine with them joining your harem."

"You are too kind…wait, did you just say harem?"

"Yeah?" He tilts his head innocently. "That's what this kind of thing is called, right? Like in fiction. Comics, animes, games…ah, isn't the visual novel ya recommended me before is basically a harem?"

I mull over his words. I've forgotten what visual novel he was talking about, but that is unimportant. Me? Harem? Someone like me? What a joke. I want to refute it with all of my might, but thinking about everything that happened…and the criteria of harem in fiction…hmm…………….damn, he is right. I hate it. My face feels hot. I hate to admit that I do have a harem now! An unwanted one, on top of that! Unwanted harem is probably the most used trope in harem genre. Protagonist suddenly finds themselves surrounded by people who, for some reason, attracted to them romantically.

Yeah, that's me. I never wished for any of this - I just want to live in peace. I'm glad I met Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, as they pretty much changed my world, but…including Ichigo-senpai, there are 4 people crushing on me now. Five if I include Tsurumaru-senpai, but I'm still doubtful about him. It's a small number than most harem fictions now, but it's still considered as harem, from what I know.

What am I supposed to do with this discovery?
Yoshiyuki might've realized my uneasiness as he pats my shoulder, "It's your choice. Take it easy. I already gave my consent." He smiles.

I nod. "Thanks, Yoshiyuki."

"By the way, does Ichigo-senpai know about our relationship?"

"I haven't said it, but I think he knows." I wonder if we're too obvious…? We have to be more careful.

"I see."

With that, we go back to the unused room. Ichigo-senpai has finished laying down the futon, patting the sheets right now. Before I can do anything, Yoshiyuki pushes my back. Wait, what? Why…? Unable to understand, I stumble to the floor, right onto Ichigo-senpai. He catches me before we can fall to the futon. I'm thankful at his good reflexes.

"What are you doing?!" I shout to Yoshiyuki. The shock is still shaking my body.

"My hand slipped!" Yoshiyuki replies with a smile. What a blatant lie, it was obviously intentional. "Anyway, I'm going to Uguisumaru-senpai, so ya just take yer time!" He waves his hand before closing the door quickly before I can ask. Didn't he say he wanted to rest? Just what is his problem…?

"Sorry about that, senpai. He's acting weird," I try to get up, but his hands lock me in place. "S-Senpai…?"

Just then, I realize the position we're in. You can say I'm sitting on his lap, my hands on his shoulders, while his hands are on my arm and waist. T-This position is…it's like…it's like we're a couple…aggh! This is so embarrassing! Especially when you consider his feelings for me, this is just - !

I look at his frozen state. I can see color of red on his face. H-He is blushing…I'm sure I look the same. My heart is pounding like crazy right now.

"S-Senpai."

"A-Ah," He finally snaps out of it, his face becoming redder. "Sorry."

He lets me go and I get up, sitting next to him. Heavy silence falls upon us. T-This is really awkward…I can feel the tension on the air…Yoshiyuki, you idiot! You created this situation by doing something useless!

"S-Sorry, Yamanbagiri-san. It's just awkward now, isn't it…?" Ichigo-senpai mutters weakly.

"I-It's fine. It's Yoshiyuki's fault, not yours. I don't know what is he thinking…" D-Don't tell me he wants me to get closer to Ichigo-senpai…? But why? To make me realize I love him? Anyone would be embarrassed in this situation.

"I'm pleasantly surprised you can tell that." Mikazuki chimes in.

Y-Yeah, yeah. What should I do now?

"Accept him."

I regret asking you.
The silence stretches for so long it's stifling and uncomfortable. I can't stand it anymore. I have to say something. Anything. That's right, I have to ask him -

"Ichigo-senpai." "Yamanbagiri-san."

We end up talking at the same time. Our faces turn red in an instant. "You can go first," Ichigo-senpai says with a forced smile. This is a comical situation, isn't it? I can't waste time by rejecting his offer.

"O-Okay…um…" I turn away from his gaze. "I…I'm dating 3 people at once."

"I know."

"O-Oh…I see…" I expected that. I glance at him and he shows me his usual, calming smile. My heart is about to explode. "Am I so obvious?"

"I am simply able to tell because I like you. I've been watching you, after all," he replies, shifting his body slightly, a smile is still glued on his face - but I can tell his smile is genuine. "Don't worry. I already know, but my feelings toward you don't change. Besides, you are not cheating. You just have an unusual relationship. If…just if, by any chance, you accept me…I'm willing to share you with others. I don't know if I can do it well or not, but I'll try my best. I won't disappoint and hurt you anymore."

"Senpai…"

He is really serious about this. I can't answer half-heartedly.

But right at this moment, I can say I am touched. In fact, I might be falling in love right now. He knows how easily jealous he is and how painful it is - it's better to put some distance so he doesn't feel hurt anymore. That's how most people would think, but he is willing to go through it for me, trying to be a better person. He needs to do it for himself, not for me, it's a good first step nonetheless.

Senpai is trying his best. He must be tired, confronting himself like that, and yet he stays so strong.

I…how do I exactly feel about him?

"Senpai, when did you fall in love with me…? And what part of me do you love? I-If you're willing to answer…" These questions slipped, but I can't take it back now.

Ichigo-senpai looks startled for a moment, a smile appears on his face soon after. "I fell for you last year, when you helped me for the first time in ikiryou case. For me, it felt like an angel descended from heaven," he replies bashfully. "As for what I love about you…there are many things to list. I love your voice. I love your beautiful eyes. I love your down to earth, but kind and caring personality. I love it when you smile. I love everything about you."

My heart skips a beat. My face is burning.

"I-It's amazing how you can say that…so straightforwardly…"

He smiles, seemingly amused. "You asked me, so I have to be honest. This part of you is cute, I like it."
"D-Don't call me cute."

"This is cute, too." He chuckles.

"Ugh…"

This is really bad for my heart. A-Anyway, putting aside my annoyances and embarrassment…

What does it mean to love someone? Even after all this time, I still don't understand it completely. It's still a mystery to me. I dated Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru just because I gave in to their advances, and ended up liking them more than I thought as we lived together. I dated Yoshiyuki because he has always been a precious person to me - I just didn't want to accept his affection because I thought I didn't deserve him, and being with me is dangerous.

What about Ichigo-senpai? He is a precious person too, but…it is a bit different than how I feel about Yoshiyuki. We haven't known each other for so long, and we don't live together. I…I just can't leave him alone. I want to keep supporting him and never let him feel depressed again. It doesn't necessarily have to be me, but he wants me. He needs me. I'm happy, so I want to answer his call…a-as long as it doesn't get to co-dependency, of course.

Ughh. my head hurts…this is such a hard question. I hate it.

"It's simple, Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says. "Imagine if he does things we do to you. Do you like it? If you do, then you love him. It doesn't have to be sexual acts. A simple kissing and confession everyday are enough."

If…Ichigo-senpai does that to me…

My cheeks feel hot. I know I'm embarrassed, but I don't know whether I like it or not. It's complicated. I wish I could tell how I feel more clearly. Geez, why am I like this? Why is it so hard for me to realize my feelings…? I'm getting frustrated, but I don't want to take any rash decisions, either…that'd be the worst outcome.

I let out a heavy sigh. My mind is going in circles. Harem or whatnot, I never wanted any of this. I just want to see the people I care about happy. So, for now…

"A-Aren't you going to take a nap, senpai? Go ahead." I stand up on the realization.

"Are you sure you don't want to rest?"

"I'm fine…besides, there's only one futon here." I'll have to go somewhere when he is sleeping.

"Yamanbagiri-san…if you don't mind…" Ichigo-senpai looks at me bashfully, his face is red and meek. I've never seen this expression on his face before. I'm too surprised that all I can say is a gasp. "…W-We can sleep together. I-I won't do anything, of course! I'd just feel bad if I rest alone…if you don't want to, that's fine too…"

The idea of sleeping together with him in one futon makes my heart pounds crazily. I felt the same when I had to sleep together with Kogi and Mikazuki for the first time (at least my bed is quite big) …but once again, it's just normal. Who won't be embarrassed?

But…if I sleep with him, I wonder if I can realize something.

"…Okay. Let's sleep, senpai."
I wonder what kind of expression I have on my face right now.

Ichigo-senpai seems surprised, but he quietly lies down on the futon, pulling the blanket. I follow next to him. The futon is quite small, so our bodies touch each other accidentally. I try my best to ignore the heat spreading inside my body. I sure hope he can't hear my noisy heartbeat…

While I lie on my back, Ichigo-senpai is sideways, facing me. I think his face is getting redder. I'm amused to see a new expression on him. It's adorable for sure. Ichigo-senpai, admired by many, loved by many as a charming prince, showing a side only I see… I feel a bit special, so I'm happy. Is this good? Or is it bad? I don't know.

"Can I hold your hand, Yamanbagiri-san…?"

"S-Sure."

He reaches for my hand and grasps it, his fingers intertwine with mine. I shudder the moment our skin touches, but soon get comfortable. We've held hands plenty of times before. This is nothing… or not. We're in the same futon, he has feelings for me, so this is just overwhelming…! But I have to stay strong for him, too. I'm sure he is suffering more than I am right now.

I look at him. His teal hair is messy, his eyes are closed, his chest heaving up and down in a rhythm. He looks so defenseless. Ah, he is asleep, isn't he? Already? Not even 5 minutes have passed. He must be really tired… maybe the tension left his body all at once so he fell asleep so fast.

I'm glad. If he can sleep like this, that means he feels safe. I close my eyes, feeling the heat of his body on my fingers comforting me.

It isn't one-sided, after all. I like being around him, too.

But when it comes to love… I have no idea.

"Uhh… Yamanbagiri… san…"

My eyes snap wide open when I hear Ichigo-senpai's mutters. No, I haven't gone to sleep yet, and Ichigo-senpai is still sleeping. His mouth is moving - sleep-talking? He's thinking about me even in his sleep… I'm so embarrassed. I feel like dying today.

"I love you… hh…"

After saying that, he falls silent again. C-Confessing in his sleep, that's not fair…

God knows why, my hand lets go of his and brushes his hair. It's soft… I think this is the first time I've pat his head. He doesn't give any particular reaction, deep in sleep. Unable to restrain myself, I embrace him. Considering my sleeping habits (of hugging either Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru), I'm sure we'll end up in this position anyway, so this is fine. He will be surprised when he wakes up for sure, though. I hope he can take it.

I can feel joy when I embrace him like this. Why? Because his body is warm? If that's the case, then anyone can do. What is special about Ichigo-senpai in my eyes?

… The fact that he pours the entirety his heart to me, I think. This is the first time someone has bared himself naked (or at least almost naked) like that, even when I don't think I deserve to know everything about him. Yoshiyuki is special as I've known him for years. I live with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, so it's easier for us to know each other. Hasebe… why did he cross my mind? I believe we are close, but I can tell he hides things from me. I hide things from him, too.
Ichigo-senpai risked being hated by me when he opened up to me. Being clingy and negative - not everyone can take someone like that. I understand. Not to mention his love for me, which is still…unique by today's society (thank god I'm gay). Our relationship might have broken apart the moment he said everything. He must've known the risks and consequences. Granted, he was emotionally unstable at the time, but I'm sure he was still conscious about the facts.

As someone who has been in his position, I know how hard it is to open up to another person. We're all afraid of being rejected. We're all afraid of being left behind. All we want is for someone to accept us as we are…well, at least that's how I view it. It might not apply to everyone.

That's why, when Ichigo-senpai told me everything, I was filled with joy. Indescribable joy. To think that he trusts me so much…and sees me as a special person, enough for him to overcome his fears…my heart is shaken up.

Is it wrong to feel happy about this? About being needed, about being loved, about being special, even from someone who isn't your lover? From a friend, maybe?

I believe it's just humanly. It is our nature. But once again, it boils down to how I actually feel about him…

Ahhh, damn it, I'm going in circles again. I should sleep. and recharge my energy. My mind and body are so tired, I'm getting sleepy…yes, this is good. Let me take a nap…

"I also want to sleep while hugging you," Mikazuki says with a melancholic voice. I can imagine what kind of face he is making right now.

Ah. Sorry. This futon is too small for 3 people. Wait until nightfall, okay?

"Yes, I will wait until I can indulge in you, after all that happened."

…I want to hit you so bad.

[Fadeout]

[Fadein]

"…up."

"Nggh…"

My body feels so heavy…I don't want to move. But my body is shaking for some reason…it's annoying, so I open an eye…geh, even my eyelids feel heavy. I want to sleep more…

"Kunihiro-san…"

"Wah!"
Seeing Kousetsu-senpai’s face so close, I shriek. My soul snaps into me. Now I'm completely awake.

"S-Sorry. Did I surprise you?" He pulls away and asks worriedly. He looks like he is afraid he has done something wrong.

"J-Just a bit. I'm awake now. Thank you for waking me up." I get up - or I try to, only to fail as I realize Ichigo-senpai's arm is holding me. He is still sound asleep. Realizing our position makes me flustered, but I try to act normal, gently and carefully pushing aside his hand and get up. "What time is it now?"

"5 afternoon. You were asleep for about 2 hours. I apologize for disturbing your nap, but Ishikirimaru-san has arrived. He wants to talk to you and Hitofuri-san, but…” He glances at Ichigo-senpai next to me. "I can't wake him up."

"I will wake up him. Thanks, senpai."

"We're waiting in the living room."

He nods with a faint smile before walking away. Oh, man…I wonder what he thought when he saw us sleeping like that? I slap my hot cheeks.

I shake Ichigo-senpai’s body in the same manner Kousetsu-senpai did to me. Ichigo-senpai just moans softly, but is still sleeping. I call his name a few times and pinch his cheeks, but he is still sleeping. It's a surprising to know it's hard to wake him up. He doesn't look like that kind of person…then again, it might be just because he is tired.

Hm, what should I do now that he can't be woken up with normal means? Scream in his ear? Explode fireworks? Pour cold water on him? Strangle him with Kogi's hair? Slap him with Mikazuki's fan?

"Kiss him," Mikazuki says.

Oh, you are awake. Good evening, darling. It's a good day.

"Don't ignore my words. Kiss him."

Please state your reasons.

"In stories, the prince kisses the princess to wake her up. Ichigo is the prince and you're the princess, but the situat-"

Okay, enough. I understand, you are still sleepy. Please go back to sleep and never wake up.

"How cruel!"

"Well, ignoring him, you can slap Ichigo's cheeks. Make it hurt. Better than kissing," Kogitsunemaru says, "I doubt he'll wake up even if you kiss him, anyway."

Ah, Kogi, the voice of reason. I love you. Alright…I crack my hands and prepare to slap Ichigo-senpai's cheeks. Even his sleeping face is elegant. I feel bad if I have to taint these pure cheeks, but I have to do it.

"Ichigo-senpai…wake up!"

I slap his cheeks with my two hands, not too hard and not too soft. There's even a sound.
"Gah!"

Thankfully, one slap is all it takes to jolt him awake. I apologize to him before explaining what Kousetsu-senpai said. We roll the futon and get up to the living room.

"I'm sorry you had to see such an unsightly sight of me," he says with a wry smile. "I am usually a light sleeper, but it was hard to wake up earlier. Sleeping was so comfortable."

"Ahaha. I understand. I'm surprised, but it's nice to see an unexpected part of you."

His cheeks turn red, but the smile stays on his face. He looks...happy? Seeing that makes me feel...weird. We step onto the living room before I can say anything. Ishikirimaru-san is seated on the cushion, sipping tea. Kousetsu-senpai is next to him, and Uguisumaru-senpai is on another side. Tsurumaru-senpai and Yoshiyuki are on the side, just lying down lazily. Ah, I think Yoshiyuki is asleep.

The air feels heavy. I gulp.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Ichigo-senpai says.

Ishikirimaru-san sets down the cup of tea on the table. "It is not a problem. I apologize for disturbing your rest." He stands up. "I've heard the story from Kuninaga-san. For now, I want to hear your sides. Starting from Yamanbagiri. Let's go somewhere more private."

I nod and follow him to an empty room near the room where I slept. There's only a table, a few cushions scattered around it, and a window. Just what is this room for? Ishikirimaru-san sits down on one of the cushion.

"I heard from Kuninaga-san. that Hitofuri-san confessed to you."

What a way to start a conversation! I sit in front of him before I reply. "Y-Yes, he did."

"I do not want to force you. However, if you reject him now, his ikiryou might go berserk again."

That goes without saying. "I know..."

"I'll talk to him first and train him to control his ikiryou. If you intend to reject him, then please wait for a few weeks until he is ready. If you accept him, there is also a risk for his euphoria to take over him, and he might get even more possessive - his ikiryou might come back as well, though it can be less dangerous than if you reject him."

"I understand." Ikiryou is the result of overwhelming emotions, so the source doesn't have to be a negative one. Whatever I do, there is always the shadow of ikiryou looming...this is harder than I thought.

"When you answer him, just make sure to have Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru standing by."

I nod. "Of course." They're always with me, anyway.

"Can you tell me what exactly happened before you saved Hitofuri-san at the end?"

"I don't understand, either. I felt that Ichigo-senpai was in danger, so I ran back to that direction, but then a hole appeared and I fell through there. Fortunately, I fell right into the monster and Ichigo-senpai. I just did what my instinct told me to do."

Ishikirimaru-san nods in understanding and shoots me a smile. "Alright, thank you. With this, I
already have enough information. Please call Hitofuri-san to this room."

Tsurumaru-senpai must've explained a lot, "Ah, wait…Ichigo-senpai, he…realized his ikiryou was running rampant. He told me he had visions about stalking me, but I don't know the details."

"I will ask him about that. Thank you."

I stand up and exit the room, calling for Ichigo-senpai. I think it's going to be long, so I just sit with Uguisumaru-senpai, Kousetsu-senpai, and Tsurumaru-senpai, idly chatting about nothing of importance just to kill time. As expected, they tease me about Ichigo-senpai. Even Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru appear for it, too. Uuugh.

An hour later, Ichigo-senpai hasn't come back. The questioning must dragged for so long…

"I'm getting hungry…" I complain, lazily setting down my chin on the table.

"I haven't cooked dinner yet. I guess it's time." Uguisumaru-senpai stands up and slaps Yoshiyuki awake. "Private chef, it's time for you to shine."

"Having dinner here, huh…" I mutter. I want to taste Yoshiyuki's food, but…now that the ikiryou problem has resolved, I can go back to my own house. I miss Brother Horikawa. I have to tell him what happened. "I'm going to pass. I want to go back to my house."

"Huh? Where did you sleep before, Manba-chan?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks. I guess nobody told them because it's not important, huh.

"Kousetsu-senpai's."

"I see." He suddenly looks uninterested.

I take out my smartphone and message Brother Horikawa. He replies immediately, saying that he is happy and is waiting for me to come home. He says that Brother Yamabushi is there too. I smile. As much as I like to be surrounded by my friends, my brothers are important - they are irreplaceable.

"You should take your belongings out of my house first. Souza is home, so he will unlock the door. I will tell Ishikirimaru-san about this."

"Thank you."

With that, I - with Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru, of course - take off for Kousetsu-senpai's house. The thought of going back to my own house and room after a few days makes me so ecstatic.

"Don't forget your promise," Mikazuki says.

Promise? Hugging you in bed? Okay. I do that all the time, I do not need reminder.
The next day arrived peacefully. Unfortunately, it's Monday, so I had to go to school. I had a good sleep, but my peace doesn't last long when I see my to-do-list on phone and find there's homework for today. *What. Why. Since when.* Desperate times call for desperate measures...!

"Can I copy your homework, Hasebe? Please." I plead the moment I see Hasebe in the classroom. He is early as always. There are only the 2 of us this early. "I forgot to do it."

"Sure. It's rare for you to not do homework," Hasebe says as he puts down the chalkboard eraser and walks to his seat, taking out a notebook from his bag. I sit down in front of him and sigh.

"I had a very busy weekend, so it slipped my mind."

"I see."

He looks like he is curious, but not saying anything further.

I wonder if Ichigo-senpai is going to school today...? And what did Ishikirimaru-san talk about with him yesterday? I think about him in worry as I copy Hasebe's homework.

"By the way, end of term exams are coming soon. Are you ready?" Hasebe suddenly speaks up as he stares at me.

"I'm kind ready. I just can't wait for summer break." I hope nothing happens this time.

"How about we study together for it, Yamanbagiri?"

I raise my eyebrows in confusion. "You? Asking for a study group? That's new." Hasebe is smart. He is way smarter than me and his grades are on top, but I somehow still have slightly better grades than him (I did lose to him a few times by small margin, though). Anyway, we have never studied together before, and yet our grades are stable...so this is not needed at all.

"I just feel like it. So, what about it?"

"Sure. I don't mind." I have good grades and study well, so I don't need group study, but it's nice once in a while. Maybe Hasebe thinks the same. Besides, I always teach Yoshiyuki whenever there are exams. "With Yoshiyuki too. He needs help. And maybe Yamato and Kashuu."

"Okay, please ask them. We'll talk about the plan later."

"Still, it's awfully rare for you to ask for a gathering like this." We didn't study together for midterms, so this is new.

"I just want to be with you. I don't care if others come along as long as you're there."

*Crack.*

The mechanical pencil's tip breaks under pressure. I'm the culprit - out of sheer shock, I broke the tip.
My mouth hangs slightly open as I look up at the unfazed Hasebe. Never mind, his lips are turning into a grin when he looks at my face. W-What does that mean?! I feel like that is something I can't just let go!

"W-What did you mean?" I put up the courage to ask.

He still keeps that annoying grin on his face. When he smiles, it's usually a (smug) grin like this. I think I've never seen him genuinely smiling...not even once. Hmmm, I wonder why. "I mean what I mean. By the way, it's your turn to guard the gate today, isn't it?"

He's changing the topic, as expected, but - "Ahh, you're right." The one thing I hate the most about being in a disciplinary committee is this, to be honest. Why should I stand at the gate when a teacher does it too?

"Focus on the homework, then. Do it quickly."

"You talked to me first." I grumble as I continue to write.

"Yes, yes."

Hasebe pats my head, treating me like a child before turning his head to look at the windows. His eyes look distant. I know he has been acting weird lately...I'm worried.

"Hasebe, please remember. If you have anything you're bothered about, you can talk to me."

He blinks a few times as if confused. "Yes, I am worried about you."

I didn't expect that at all so the mechanical pencil's tip breaks again. My face must be so red right now...I pull my hood to cover my face even further. I have to hide. "O-Okay, that was surprising."

"You didn't look so well the past few days, but your complexion is better today. I'm glad."

"I-Is that so? Thanks for worrying about me, I guess..."

He pats my head again and falls silent, looking back at the scenery beyond the windows. I'm really happy to hear his words, but I feel like he is still hiding something. My instinct is pretty good on this. Well, it's fine if he doesn't want to talk about it now. I will talk to him again after things calm down. There are more urgent things for me right now.

The bell rings, indicating the first break time.

"It's finally lunchtime!!" Yoshiyuki says, getting up from his seat almost immediately. The usual people consisting of me, Hasebe, Kashuu and Yamato approach him, leaving the classroom together. "I'm so hungry I was about to die! I didn't eat breakfast today..."

"Why not?" Kashuu asks.

"I woke up late. No time for that."

"You ended up being late anyway," I say, and Hasebe next to me nods. Imagine my shock when I saw Yoshiyuki running to the gate with all of his might, but alas, the gate was closed a few seconds before he arrived! It has been quite a long time since the last time he was late (it's usually just barely
safe), so…what happened last night, I wonder?

My phone shakes just when we enter the packed cafeteria. I part ways with others and check it. I have a message.

From…Ichigo-senpai?!

"I went to school today. I wish to talk to you. How about the 2nd break time in the student council room?"

He went to school, even after all of that yesterday?! Amazing. I reply with a yes. I want to talk to him, too - as soon as possible. I prefer it if we could talk now, but I can't just run away from my friends.

I take a seat as usual and wait for others to come. Yoshiyuki is the one who comes first, holding a tray full of food.

"First! Nice." He smiles as he sets down the tray, sitting next to me.

I open my lunchbox. Brother Horikawa made it for me, of course, but it seems more grand than usual. With how the rice and side dishes shaped up, I feel like a kid - not that I mind. This fox-shaped rice must be Kogitsunemaru, while this crescent moon-shaped nugget must be Mikazuki. Ehehe. That's cute.

"When will you make lunch for me again, Yoshiyuki?" I ask.

"When I can. By the way, why did ya go home last night without telling me? I want ya to taste my cooking…" He replies with a frown, biting on his chopsticks.

"Sorry. I missed my brothers."

"Okay, that's a good reason. I forgive ya." He smiles, as bright as he always is. His finger pokes my cheek as his voice drops in volume, "Ya didn't eat my food, so I can eat ya…right?"

I don't have to ask what he means. The naughty grin on his face is enough to tell me that what I think is right. I-I mean, we're still stuck on kissing (we both want it slowly, okay), so it just means kissing and nothing else, b-but…aaagh. I'm so embarrassed. Who taught him to talk like that?

"Yoshiyuki is becoming so smooth. I'm proud of him," Mikazuki says, sniffing. What are you, his mother? So it's all your fault he became like this?!

"I-I'm going to talk to Ichigo-senpai on second break, but let's see if I can make enough time…if not, then after school…let's go home together."

"Okay! I love ya, Yamanbagiri!" He stretches out his arm and tries to hug me. I push his cheek.

"Not so loud! Sheesh…"

"What is this? Go get a room, you two. I'm getting jealous," Kashuu says, appearing out of nowhere. I quietly shriek. He puts on a playful grin as he sits across me, putting down a tray of his own lunch. "I'm kidding. The two of you are really close."

"I blame Yoshiyuki."

"Kashuu wants a hug too?" Yoshiyuki asks with a smile.
"Yes, but not from you, Yoshiyuki."

"Aww…"

"What are you guys talking about?" Yamato arrives with Hasebe behind him, his eyes blinking in curiosity. Yamato sits next to Kashu while Hasebe sits on the side like a boss in a meeting. Their trays are full of delicious-looking meals.

"Nothing, just Yoshiyuki being Yoshiyuki," Kashuu replies.

"What does that mean?!" Yoshiyuki protests.

We eat our lunches with idle chatter as always. Having this kind of peaceful atmosphere after a few days of adrenaline-filled actions make me so happy. I can relax and think of nothing with friends I haven't seen in a few days.

When we're about to finish our meals, Hasebe brings up the group study session. "Yamanbagiri and I are planning on studying together. Anyone wants to join?"

"Yoshiyuki has an obligation to join, by the way," I say. Yoshiyuki shrieks, his face going pale like a child caught in the act when he was about to get away.

"Sounds good to me," Kashuu says, "I'm weak in math. Hasebe and Yamanbagiri are good at it, right? It helps."

"Of course I'm going. I like studying in groups," Yamato replies with a hum. "So, where do we study? And when?"

"School library. We'll go to a cafe if it's full. How about Friday? And perhaps during weekends?" Hasebe suggests. Huh, he really planned this out.

"No problem with me," I say. The others nod.

With that, the first break time ends smoothly.

I immediately rush out of my classroom to student council room on the third floor when the bell rings. Ichigo-senpai is already sitting on a sofa with nobody else inside the room. He shoots me a smile, pats the seat next to him, beckoning me to sit. I do as he asked.

"I'm surprised to hear that you came to school today, senpai. Are you okay? You can rest at home if you want, you know…" I say in worry. "No need to push yourself."

"I'm okay. I've rested a lot. Exams are coming, so I don't want to skip school."

"You're too much of a honor student. Skipping school once in a while is fine."

"A disciplinary committee vice-president shouldn't say that," he chuckles as he pokes my cheek. "Don't worry, I feel better today, especially after seeing you." His bashful smile seems genuine, so I don't think he is lying. I sigh in relief. "No, maybe the right way to say it is…I can't bear to not see you. If I didn't come today, I wouldn't be able to see you…I don't want that."

H-Huh? This is… "You can't bear to not see me for a day?"
His cheeks turn pink and he averts his gaze. "The situation calls for it."

He really becomes so honest with me. I like it and I'm glad, but I'm not used to it yet, so my heart skips a beat. I have to change the topic before it gets too awkward. "A-Anyway, what do you want to talk about, senpai?"

"Yesterday, Ishikirimaru-san and I talked about a lot of things." He leans his back on the sofa, looking up at the ceiling. "Such as about how I can train myself to control my ikiryou. If I can do that, there won't be any danger anymore. In fact, I can even help people with it. It'll be some kind of familiar, he said."

"Wait…it's possible to control ikiryou?" First time I've heard about this.

"Yes. Not many people chose to do it, but it's possible. I just heard of it yesterday. He said it's hard, I have to control myself well, and I'll have to dedicate most of my summer break to train, but…" His hand balls into a fist, his face is firm. "…I will do it. I believe I can do it, to avoid further incidents… for me and others around me. I can't keep repeating the same mistakes in the future, after all. This is the best option."

I can see how determined he is. He no longer wavers. He has found what he needs to do and will see it to the end. I can't help but to smile. He has grown in such a short span of time.

"Being fired up is fine, but don't forget about exams and university entrance exams, senpai."

He grimaces. "O-Of course. I'm good at studying, so you don't have to worry about that. I'm more worried about your grades."

He has a point. He has never gone down from top 5 of the rankings, even last year when it happened. Amazing, if you ask me - though he might also study hard to distract himself. It depends on the individual.

"Good luck, senpai. I will come to watch your progress. You can do it." I'm curious to see the way, anyway. It's some kind of out-of-body experience, so maybe I can do it too.

"That's embarrassing…but you're welcome to. If you're watching, I think I can even do better." He chuckles. "In the first week of summer break, I'm going to visit my brothers. I usually visit them in spring and summer break…well, due to my cowardice, I haven't visited them at all this year. I think I can genuinely face them now."

"Are your brothers far from Suzuran?"

"Some are quite far, yes. I had to use an airplane to visit some."

"It must be tiring to move around like that."

"I'm used to it by now. At least it isn't too expensive. Mother is working in a travel firm, so I get discounts. The scenery at other places, especially countryside, is great as well. It's worth the journey."

"So if I want to travel somewhere, I can just ask you, senpai?"

"I will try my best to relay it to mother…a-Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. The rest is Ishikirimaru-san lecturing me. I doubt you want to know," he says with a wave of a hand, his cheeks turn slightly red.
"Yeah, spare me the details. I can imagine." I got lectured a few times myself. It felt like when Brother Horikawa lectured me...they give off similar vibes. "I'll leave now, then. If something comes up, just contact me again."

I'm about to stand up when senpai says, "Wait!"

I turn to look at him questioningly.

His cheeks turn even redder, his mouth agape. "A-Ah, I mean..." He gasps, searching for words until he eventually settles with a nod. Not a trace of hesitation is on his face. He grasps my hand tightly. "Let me thank you again, Yamanbagiri-san. Thank you so much for your help and support. There's no words for how grateful I am. No thanks are enough for you. Without you, I don't think I could have gotten this far. I can't give you anything in return for now...I know you don't want it, but let me get something in the future. You are a very important person to me."

His heartfelt words take me aback, making me remember that he loves me. "J-Just be happy, senpai. That's enough for me. I'm happy if you're happy."

He smiles. "I want to see you happy, so yes, I'll be happy. I want to make you happy if I can. That'd be my way of returning what you gave me and redeem for my sins. Of course, I can't get too dependant on you, so please don't spoil me too much."

I can't say no to that face, but I also can't shake off the feeling that it sounds like a proposal, and it makes me greatly embarrassed. "I-I will try to not spoil you, but remember, I will always be by your side no matter what."

He smiles, his cheeks colored in red as he lets go of my hand. He seems happy. "Thank you. I actually want to be with you for a bit longer, but I have something to do now. You can go now. See you tomorrow."

"Okay."

I nod and turn around, sliding the door open.

"I love you, Yamanbagiri-san."

Ichigo-senpai whispers just when I close the door.

I stand still in front of the door before my legs give out and I slide down to the floor, my body shaking. W-What...what just happened? My face is burning, my heart is beating dangerously fast. I sigh as I get up and walk away.

That was so unfair. Ichigo-senpai is really dangerous, in another way...I swear, if he does what Yoshiyuki did to me - saying that he loves me every day, I'll die out of embarrassment before I can answer.

I still have no idea how I feel about him...ugh, I have to reply at least before exams, so he can do exams in peace. Whatever choice I made, I'm sure we can never go back to the way we were - just friends. We are either going to be more or be less.

How do I feel about him? Am I willing to be his/ lover?

Myself, please answer this question as soon as possible.

Pat!
"Wah!"

As I was lost in thought while walking, I'm surprised when someone pats my shoulder. I turn around to hiss at the culprit and prepare to run away if he is Akashi Kuniyuki or Kikkou Sadamune. I find someone else standing in front of me.

"Oh it's just you, Tsurumaru-senpai."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Tsurumaru-senpai smiles as he cracks his neck. "I saw you coming out of the student council room. What happened? A sweet time with Ichigo?"

"S-Sweet…?!" Does that mean what I think? His playful grin seems to say yes. "No, not that, of course! Ichigo-senpai just told me what Ishikirimaru-san told him yesterday."

"Ah, too bad."

Just what did you expect…? I'm scared to find out. "Are you done teasing me? I'm leaving." There's still time before break time ends. Maybe I can spend time with Yoshiyuki and stop him from sulking.

"Wait wait wait. Why the hurry? Yoshiyuki isn't going anywhere."

…Did he just read my mind?

"Come with me for a bit," he says, turning around.

The air around him suddenly turns heavy, so I reluctantly follow him. We go to the stairway leading to the rooftop. The door should be locked, so Tsurumaru-senpai leans on the wall, putting his hands in his pockets. "So you haven't answered Ichigo yet. How many days did you make Yoshiyuki wait?"

"A few years…I know that's not what you meant. Around a week or more, I think. I don't remember." And I have no reason to remember. "What are you trying to say, senpai?"

"Nothing. Just curious." His gaze tells me otherwise. His face is kind of melancholic. "You have no reason to reject Ichigo and he is willing to share you with others. Why don't you just accept him? No need to prolong it when the end result will stay the same."

I knew it… "I wish it was that simple. Why are you so adamant on hooking us up?"

"I'm just a friend tired of seeing something that could end faster. It's normal."

"Stop lying."

A voice that doesn't belong to either of us appears along with the speaker - Ichigo-senpai. He glares at Tsurumaru-senpai, who in turn gazes at him back coldly. W-What's with this dangerous atmosphere? The air is getting colder…

"You are such a coward, Tsurumaru-san."

Tsurumaru-senpai doesn't even flinch and only chuckles, "That's rude."

"I am simply stating the truth. Just what are you trying to achieve, pressuring Yamanbagiri-san like that?" There is no hint of friendliness in Ichigo-senpai's face and voice. It almost looks like he is facing a pest.

That went from 0 to 100 real quick.
I don't know what to say as I watch sparks fly between them. W-What should I do? I feel like it's dangerous to let this go on for much longer.

"This is interesting. Just watch for now," Mikazuki says after a long silence, I almost thought he was sleeping. "Confrontations are needed in life."

Interesting, you said…I admit that I'm intrigued, but seeing my two upperclassmen actually have an argument isn't something I like. Why are they fighting in the first place? Why is Tsurumaru-senpai a coward? I don't understand what is happening.

"I already said it. I'm getting sick of watching you guys in that will-they-or-won't-they trope. From my view, Manba-chan just needs a little push. I'm not forcing him to. Besides, isn't it better for you if he replies soon?"

"Stop making excuses and running away from the truth. Nobody will buy your lies anymore." Ichigo-senpai's hands shake and ball up into fists. I can sense his emotions welling up from his voice and body. This is intense. "You are no idiot. You know your pressure is pretty forceful, and on top of that, absurd. We both know that something like that will just end badly, and none of us wants that. Even Yamanbagiri-san. I'd be happy if he answers me soon, but I'd rather wait than having him forced like that. This is, frankly speaking, none of your business. It's just between me and him. Please stop pushing us around for your own selfishness. You don't consider our feelings at all."

The two of us stay silent. The air is really suffocating. Seriously, what is this about? Although Tsurumaru-senpai's pressure is, admittedly, annoying, I don't feel forced. I'm not one to bend easily under pressure, though I do wonder why he is really persistent about it…it's like he is rushing something.

"Why do you keep running away, when you told me to face my own feelings? That's hypocrisy."

I hear Tsurumaru-senpai clicking his tongue. "You don't understand. You understand nothing." He simply says these words, not denying the other's accusations. So…is Ichigo-senpai speaking the truth?

"Yes, I don't understand, because you never told anyone. I've only got a hint of it, but I'm sure of it. Your actions make it as clear as day. Do you want me to say it? That day, I overheard your conversation with Yamanbagiri-san. Your past lover, he -"

"Shut up!"

Tsurumaru-senpai grabs Ichigo-senpai by the collar, his expression twisted in fury, shadow cast on his face. That is an expression I've never seen on him until this moment. My body shivers from the sheer anger he omits. This is dangerous, my instinct says.

"Shut. Up," he repeats. "Don't you dare say it, you mortal human."

Ichigo-senpai doesn't seem fazed at all by his fury and strength. "Then say it yourself, you coward. I don't want to care about your business, but if you keep poking into mine, I won't stay still."

Tsurumaru-senpai quietly lets him go and walks away without a word. The way he walks indicates that he is still angry.

"Tsurumaru lost," Mikazuki says with glee. What a sadistic god…

"I wonder what the secret is," Kogitsunemaru finally speaks up, his voice filled with both curiosity and worry. "I feel like I get the gist of what happened, but…hmm…"
"Sorry about that, Yamanbagiri-san." Ichigo-senpai turns around to me as he straightens his uniform, keeping a smile glued on his face. "I saw you walking with him, so I couldn't help but to follow."

"I-It's fine, but…I'm confused."

"I can't explain. He has to be the one to say it. I hope I managed to push him." He heaves a sigh. "The one getting sick of the situation is me."

I only look at him in silence, unable to say anything. I don't know what I should do in this kind of situation. My two upperclassmen are fighting now. I'm sure they can keep up a professional act in front of others, but behind the curtains…aagh, thinking about it is making me anxious.

He shoots me a gentle smile before he turns around. "I'm waiting for your answer, and you're waiting for his confession. That's how it is. Just take as much time as you need, Yamanbagiri-san. I'll always be here, loving you and watching over you."

"W-What?!" The confession part surprised me, but his last sentence shook me even further. Surprise attack!

"Ehehe. Your face is red. So adorable." He starts to chuckle and it's annoying in my ears, on par with Mikazuki's laugh. I'm so embarrassed! I can never get used to someone saying these things about me…it's bad for my heart. You want me to die young or what?

"S-Stop being so unfair, senpai…" I meekly say as I pull down my hood to cover my face.

"Ahahaha. Sorry, I can't help it. Whenever I look at you, I know I have to say it. Well, please tell me if it bothers you. I'll try to lower it down."

"I-I'm not greatly bothered…"

I take a peek at his face. He is smiling and he looks like he isn't bothered by what happened, but…

"…I'm sorry, senpai. Because of me, you and Tsurumaru-senpai…" I sigh. I let out what I think, after all. I can imagine his response.

"It's not your fault at all. This is something that was bound to happen sooner or later. Today happens to be the time," he replies, stroking my head gently. "Besides, we're rivals for your love, so we'll fight eventually. It's all unavoidable."

"I know, but…" First, I'm still doubtful that Tsurumaru-senpai loves me. Second, they're friends first, so for me to break them apart like that…like in fiction. I feel bad. If my existence caused more trouble, I…

"Please don't make that face." He puts his hands on my cheeks and pushes my face up to meet his eyes. "It isn't your fault. Who we fell for, you didn't decide on that. It's our own feelings. Whether we fight or not is also our own decision…Tsurumaru-san picked a fight first, in my opinion, so I simply fought back. It's hopefully temporary like any other fight. Don't worry about us. People said good friends fight, right? It's because we're friends, we fight."

I can't tell of any hesitation on his face and voice, so I quietly nod. He seems satisfied by this as he lets me go.

"You should go back now, Yamanbagiri-san. The bell is going to ring soon."

"A-Ah, you're right."
"Are you going home with Yoshiyuki today?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"Alright, then, I won't bother you. See you tomorrow. If anything comes up, feel free to tell me."

"Um. See you…"

We part ways just like that. He goes back to his classroom while I go back to mine. What happened earlier is still etched on my mind. I'm sorry, senpai…I can't just let it slide so easily.

"There's nothing you can do for now. No, you must not get involved. As long as it doesn't escalate to a physical fight, it's fine," Kogitsunemaru says with a soothing voice. "Take it as a manly fight. They're not small kids. They know what they're doing and the consequences."

What is this, a shounen manga?

But you're right…I can't just step in and stop them from fighting. This…might be a necessary step. For the both of them. Or even for me. I can only pray for the best.

At the end, I run out of time to spend time with Yoshiyuki.

Chapter End Notes

*Today, April 25th 2019, marks the 3rd anniversary of Miniature Garden. Wow, it has been that long…time sure flies. Although I'm free (as I'll be graduating high school) and anticipated this occasion with joy, I had no idea what to do to celebrate it (an artwork would be nice), so all I could do is this small note again. For now. As always, I sincerely thank everyone for their support. Thank you for reading Miniature Garden, a fanfic with a monstrous length, until this point. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do, and I hope you can continue reading it. There are still many, many more things I want to convey. I would be lying if I said the lack of comments didn't bother me, but seeing the kudos and hits going up are enough to push me forward. For that, I thank you once again.

*Many things have happened during writing, however, I refrained from being too sentimental in this occasion. I'll pour it on the Mega Afterword instead - a collection of long afterword, or author's notes for arc 1 until 3, which I'll post when arc 3 ends.

*Special thanks to WastefulPhoenix (Doggy), who had recently became my special person as well, for doing such a good job as a beta-reader, and also helping me with some ideas and scenes. I'm glad we met.

*Lastly, chapter 9 is finished. However, I decided to not post the remaining parts on this day for consistency (2 parts a month) and the fact that I haven't piled up enough parts for chapter 10. I apologize to make you wait for the conclusion of this arc.
I go home with Yoshiyuki as planned. One way or another, I end up at his house, in his room when his parents are away. This must be a special occasion for lovers, but as childhood friends, I've been to his room many times before.

"It's been a while," I say as I look around the room. The small study desk is messy, with a PC and school books scattered on it. There is a collection of gun toys on the walls, and the shelf is packed with action figures. There's even figures of girls with guns. Yoshiyuki is really a big fan of guns, most of the space is dedicated to them. The comics are instead put inside cardboard boxes on the floor. It's a bit messy for sure. "It looks the same as before. It's very Yoshiyuki-like."

"Hey, this isn't bad. I just cleaned up, ya know," Yoshiyuki says as he changes from his uniform to a comfortable T-shirt.

"So, what do you want to do today? Playing games before exams?"

"That'd be fun, but I know of something better." He closes the cabinet and walks to me, on the edge of bed.

"What is it?"

Without a word, he pushes me to bed, pinning me down.

*Oh. When I look at his red face as he looms over me, I belatedly realize what I've gotten myself into. No, it should be obvious. He’s wanted this since a few hours ago…he asked if he can eat me. That's so blatant. I can't believe I forgot for a moment.

"I can't wait any longer. Let me eat ya. Please," Yoshiyuki says meekly, his dog ears and tail have appeared. His tail is wiggling around and his ears are folded down. His expression is enough to weaken me, but to have a complete set like this…he is so cute! I'm so weak!

"N-No need to ask…I don't mind at all."

But...being on bed like this…it's comfortable for sure, but it's like we're stepping a few steps higher than where we are right now. Y-You know what I mean…this position, with Yoshiyuki on top of me, makes me more embarrassed than usual. I'm sure Yoshiyuki won't take that step, though…this is just a kiss…right?

Yoshiyuki takes no time to lean closer to me, but he stops before our lips can meet.

"Oh, don't mind us," Mikazuki says from next to the bed, crouching down and staring at us.

"Why are you stopping now? We've always been watching when you guys are kissing," Kogitsunemaru says, standing next to him.

"That's right. It's not a big deal," Mikazuki adds. He looks amused.

I feel like Yoshiyuki's face is turning even redder, almost like he is overheating. He moves away from me and screams, "Aaagh! Forget it!" Then he pulls me up and sits on my lap, facing me. "This is better."
I guess the position was embarrassing for him, too. "It was embarrassing, but I don't mind if we stay like that," I say. "Besides, we did kiss in that position before." Just not on bed.

"I-I mind! I'm not ready yet!" He retorts before kissing me without any notice, as if silencing me. It isn't soft, either - he presses on my lips quite hard as his hands grab my cheeks to pull me closer. I wrap my hands around his neck.

I can clearly feel his impatience seeping into me through our messy kisses, now with tongue. To be honest, he has always been quite wild, like the dog he is. Hmm, the last time we kissed like this was probably before sports festival...it's quite some time. He also went wild that time, greedily kissing me as though he is a hungry beast. It's no wonder that he goes wild now, all these days of not flirting must've taken a toll on him.

The feeling is mutual.

On another note...this kiss is so good, I'm so glad I'm not being pinned down on bed right now. Bed makes everything lewder than how it actually is, which is just dangerous for us. I...I don't think I'm willing to stop Yoshiyuki if he goes that far.

"Haa...you're so good at this now, Yoshiyuki." I say as our lips part ways, a bridge of saliva connecting us. "I guess I should be proud."

"Really? Ehehe. I'm happy." He kisses my cheek, his tail still wriggling around. "I love ya, Yamanbagiri."

He really likes to say that, doesn't he? I pat his head, lightly touching his ear. "I love you too."

We look into each others' eyes and end up kissing again. During these messy kisses, I can feel the other two's stares gouging deep into me. I feel like they're staring harder than usual, so I can't simply ignore their existence. I'm getting used to being watched now, for better or worse, but when I kiss Yoshiyuki like this, I still feel...tingling, uncomfortable sensations sometimes. I wonder why. There's no need for shame at this point, and yet...I guess it's a humanly reaction.

...Sometimes I wonder...hey, how do you guys feel, watching me like this? Your lover, kissing someone else?

"To be frank, it's hot," Kogitsunemaru replies telepathically. I can imagine his grin. "It was kinda hard at first, but when you got over the jealousy and possessiveness, it's great. You being happy and cute are all that matter."

"It's some kind of kink for humans, am I right? Vo...voyage...? Or something," Mikazuki adds. You got the term wrong, but okay. "Well, what Kogitsunemaru said summed it up. I do have people I'd like to strangle before they can touch you, but Yoshiyuki is out of that list."

I...I see. I'm scared to know who are in that list.

"Anyway, it's bad manners to think about someone else when you're with them, Yamanbagiri," Mikazuki says. Eh, r-really? Then I always have bad manners?!

"He is just trying to run from the pleasure, don't blame him," Kogitsunemaru chuckles.

...I can't deny that. Damn it. Although my voice is muffled, there's no doubt that I'm moaning. My body even trembles from the pleasure as my hand clenches his back. Why are all the kisses with Yoshiyuki so dangerous like this?
"Because you two are lustful teenagers," Mikazuki replies a matter-of-factly.

Please stop talking, you idiot.

After a while, Yoshiyuki finally pulls away (I have no guts to stop him, he'll just shoot me with his puppy eyes and melt me). His ears and tail are still out, so he hasn't calmed down yet, but he just stares at me without leaning closer. There are all kinds of emotions on his face.

"Are you satisfied now?" I ask.

"Nnn…not really," he replies. How honest. "But that is enough kissing for today." He gets off of me, moving to sit next to me. He wraps his arm around mine and rests his head on my shoulder. Ah, so he still wants to flirt around, but without a kiss. I can see his tail is still wiggling around…so cute. I pat his head. This is how it feels to have a dog, huh.

"Are we not going to play something?" I ask.

"Laaater. I still want to stay like this."

I bet he's going to sit on my lap when we play a game later, anyway. I don't understand what he is thinking sometimes, but I don't mind this.

"Uwah, I can see hearts falling out of you two," Mikazuki says with a somewhat terrified look.

"Riajuu…" Kogitsunemaru mumbles.

"Hello, you guys are riajuu too. With me. Besides, where did you get to know that term, Kogi?" I say.

"Your browser history, of course. Some kind of dictionary web."

"Oh…" I know which page he’s talking about. "Why are you rummaging around my browser's history in the first place? That's a violation of privacy." I know I'm the one lending you my laptop, but…

"Don't worry, we've seen each other naked bodies."

"This and that are different."

"Does Yamanbagiri have any weird searches?" Yoshiyuki asks. Oi, what kind of question is that?

"Unfortunately no." Kogitsunemaru replies with a frown.

"Aww."

"Why are you guys disappointed? I'm innocent." I sigh. "Putting that aside…Yoshiyuki, can I have dinner here?" I don't know why, but I am reminded of our promise from way back. How many weeks has it been now? I think it was before Kashuu jiangshi took us by the storm. I'm not sure.

"Sure!" His eyes light up immediately. "I was about to ask ya to stay for dinner. I'm glad ya asked first!"

I look at the clock on the wall. "We have enough time before dinner. Do you have the ingredients?"

"Yeah, I just shopped yesterday. It's enough for all of us. Let's play a game now, then I'll make dinner."
"I want to join!" Kogitsunemaru raises his hand. His eyes are sparkling. He has become quite a gamer lately, I wonder if it's good or not. "It's all your fault, Yamanbagiri. You're a bad influence, but games are good."

"Ehhhh."

"The merrier, the better!" Yoshiyuki exclaims, fired up.

We play a console game (Yoshiyuki ends up sitting on my lap as expected), switching between me, Yoshiyuki, and Kogitsunemaru for the joystick, since there are only two. Mikazuki watches and laughs whenever one of us makes a mistake. He also plays pranks to disturb us, like touching me, pulling Yoshiyuki's tail, and pulling Kogitsunemaru's hair like a child.

"Do you want to play or what?" I ask, annoyed. His touches can become sexual assault sooner or later and I want to prevent that.

"You know how bad I am at this," Mikazuki replies.

The image of the past - around 2 years ago. He finally got curious and tried to play a game with Kogitsunemaru, but it turned out he is (still) extremely bad with technology, including video games. He has no coordination at all. I'm pretty sure most grandparents are better than him at this. "Yes, I do. And I want to see you losing."

He pinches my cheek, clearly feeling offended. "I hear your mind."

"I want to see you suffer and lose miserably," I say. I can't get his expression when he lost out of my mind. It's great. Hilarious.

"Please suffer in my place instead."

Kogitsunemaru laughs and throws his joystick to him. "Okay, switch with me, Mikazuki."

"I refuse - "

"No hug tonight if you don't play," I take out my trump card. "No ear-cleaning, either. Actually, can I ignore you today?"

"Uuuugh…that's evil. You're evil." Mikazuki sulks, but takes the joystick on hand. "Fine, I'll play just for you, darling."

"Good luck!" Yoshiyuki cheers. "By the way, this is the hardest difficulty!"

This peaceful situation makes me forget about the things that happened.

Just having fun and laughing like this, free of any burden…my heart and body feel light. Were they heavy before? I didn't realize at all. This is…a nice feeling. Maybe I've been so stressed for a while without realizing it. But now…even if for just a moment, I am free.

Ah…right. I have to tell Yoshiyuki about what happened. I think he has the right to know. I missed my chance to tell him earlier. During dinner, maybe…

After eating the delicious dinner we cooked together (I barely helped, though, Yoshiyuki did most of
the work and shouted at us when we tried to help…apparently he wanted to show off his cooking skills), I tell Yoshiyuki about the fight between Ichigo-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai.

"Uwah…sounds bad and scary," he responds with a frown. "I never thought they'd fight like that."

"I thought the same…" I sigh as the feeling of helplessness rushes back into me. "I know it isn't really my fault and there's nothing I can do to help, but still…" I clench my fists, unable to continue. I'm sure he knows what I'm talking about. "All I can do right now is vent my frustrations. I don't even know why Ichigo-senpai said all of those to Tsurumaru-senpai."

Yoshiyuki stares at me with a melancholic smile. "I understand. Ya can just watch over them and make sure it doesn't escalate."

"As long as my existence doesn't fuel anything, yeah, I intend to do just that." I nod, then cover my face with my two hands. "Ahhh…I don't know how should I face them now. Ichigo-senpai is one thing, but Tsurumaru-senpai…"

"So, that's what that worries you the most," Mikazuki says after sipping a tea, recovering from his loss. "If he acts normally, then act like you always do. If he avoids you, avoids him as well. Just follow what he does."

"I wonder if it's the right choice…?"

"There is no such thing as the right or wrong answer. Well, it's subjective. It's up to you to be wrong or right. I trust you to not mess this up. Even if you do, there should be a chance to fix it."

He has a point. I slump to the table. "…Life is hard."

"Indeed it is."

Now I realize how powerful Ichigo-senpai is - he has shown how good he is at acting normally after something bad happens. He has such good self-control, even around me (after the aquarium incident, at least). Well, you can say he is good at pretending or suppressing his own true feelings (which is a fact), and it can be dangerous at times, but it is useful (and good) at the right times. Some might even call it professional. I'm very bad at acting and just come off as awkward, so I'd like to get this skill, even a bit…

"Just ask me for anything. I'll help as long as I can," Yoshiyuki says. "Though I have no idea what I can do."

"Mm. Thanks, Yoshiyuki. Let us pray for now."

"I have no problems if ya accept them, by the way."

"Accept?" It takes me a few seconds to realize what he means. He obviously refers to love confession. "O-Oh…right, there's that thing too."

"Yamanbagiri is about to explode," Kogitsunemaru says with a chuckle. "You think too hard on things sometimes. It's bad for your health and everyday life. Learn from Yoshiyuki and take it easy."

"I will try…no promises."

I don't think I want to be like Yoshiyuki the Gluttonous Dog, anyway. Looking at these three, I'm amazed they can act so normally like this, as though nothing of note happened. Even though I'm their lover, and might get another lover…isn't that a serious topic? A problem, even? And yet they give
their consent so easily, and even pushed me to pursue and accept others…

Mikazuki, reading my mind, adds, "Well, we have to get used to you unintentionally adding people to your harem. If not, we'll break."

H-Harem…this term again. And uh…break? Is that the kind of break I think?

Kogitsunemaru nods in agreement. "You are a natural magnet. Even when you don't want to, you attract people, oddities, and disasters alike. It's unavoidable."

D-Disasters…I hate how I can't deny it.

"It's natural to get jealous when we see you with others. But, keep jealous all the time, and it'll drain your health and relationship," he continues. "We're all confident we can overcome our jealousy, so we accept this relationship with you, and I think it's the right course of action. We love you as you are, not because you're ours, so this is fine. We'll get used to it, and you'll get used to it. Jealousy will come from time to time, that's normal, but we must not let it get the better of us."

"Improvise, adapt, overcome," Yoshiyuki adds with a wink. That's a meme. "We all just want ya to be happy. As long as you're happy, we'll support ya."

"You have many people crushing on you, so we have to get ready," Mikazuki says, sipping on his tea. "Naturally, we can't just accept everyone so easily. Everyone is bad unless proven otherwise. We will protect you. I will give them divine punishment myself if they're proven to be bad. If someone makes you sad, I'll punish them as well."

"That's extreme." My lips curl into a smile. "But thank you I'm glad I have all of you with me."

Though, I doubt the 'many people crushing on me' part.

"We are not exactly normal in the first place, so it's fine to be different from the norm," Yoshiyuki says.

"That's quite deep," I say. "But you're right. As long as you guys are okay with it, I have no reason to refuse."

"Ah, so you're going to accept Ichigo-senpai?"

"N-Not that one! I don't know how I feel yet…"

"Come on, it's obvious to us how you feel," Kogitsunemaru says with a bored expression.

"Then tell me how I feel, idiot fox."

"Not to me," Yoshiyuki says.

"…You might be even more oblivious than Yamanbagiri. No wonder your jealousy level is so low," Kogitsunemaru says, sighing in awe. Yoshiyuki only smiles as he stands up and starts to take the empty plates.

"Ah, let me help you clean the dishes," I say.

"No, let me do it," Kogitsunemaru says, standing up. "Just go rest and think about your feelings, Yamanbagiri."

"That's not exactly a rest…but okay."
The two of them go to the kitchen, leaving me and Mikazuki in the dining room. I can see the other two's backs from here...hmm, I feel like having 2 good wives. It's kinda nice. I can cook and do housework to a degree, but they're so much more better than me.

"I'm sorry I'm an irresponsible husband," Mikazuki says. Wait, is he sulking?

"I'm even more irresponsible than you, then." I mean, polyamory like this...

"At least you're responsible enough to date people whose hearts you took."

"What am I, Magic Kaito? Lupin?" I chuckle.

Mikazuki smiles, then closes his eyes. He sets down the cup on the table and says, "I think I know the reason of that fight between your upperclassmen."

That's sudden, but welcomed. "Really?"

He nods. "If what I think is true, I can't say it to you."

My shoulders slump down. This again... "Is it that much of a problem to tell me?"

"It clearly is, for the crane. I can't just tell you the truth..." He heaves a very grandpa-like sigh. "I will tell you this, however. Reincarnation exists."

"According to Buddhism, yes, but...what about it?"

"I'll leave it up to you to think for yourself."

"That's a hard riddle. And I have to think about Ichigo-senpai, too..."

"You like him, for god's sake." Now he sounds frustrated.

"I-I'm not so sure about that," I retort. Seeing his face like that pisses me off. "Oh right, I never asked you this...but how did you realize you love me, with that big pride of yours?"

"You should've asked that long ago. I forgot the details now."

"Ouch." Please blame my brain for just realizing this.

He crosses his arms and closes his eyes again, looking serious. "If I have to answer...I struggled to realize my feelings more than you do, though your reasons for both Yoshiyuki and Ichigo are not admirable at all. I thought, you are a human and I am not. As a shinrei, I stand above humans and most oddities. Why should I bow down to someone lower than me?"

"That's so frank, I love and hate it."

He chuckles. "But being with you melted my heart. Although Shishiou accompanied me, at the end, I still felt lonely when I was isolated from the outside world. Your existence, slowly but surely, healed that, and for the first time in many years I felt happy. It makes me think that my long life is worth living, and I was stupid for just stepping out of my world. I must've missed a lot of things."

Mikazuki...I remember we had a conversation about his past before. It was pretty sentimental.

"However, as Kogitsunemaru kept on advancing with you, I started to become scared...scared of what? Scared of losing your attention. Scared of you abandoning me. Scared of you choosing him over me. I think that's how I realized I love you, as rotten as it seems. I didn't want to keep my
feelings hidden and let you get taken away before I can say anything. I hated the thought."

"That's... a bit abstract to me."

"Yes, it doesn't apply to you. You naturally love people. I am different. You are my first and only
love. If I must add, of course I love your appearance and personality, but I just realized that after the
fear came. Now, I can say with certainty that you're dear to me. Your kindness and recklessness, I
love all of it."

I'm sure I'm blushing right now and a smile is threatening to come up on my face.

"I think it'd be easier for you to think of this as how you accepted me and Kogitsunemaru," he adds.
"How did you come to like and accept us, again?"

"You guys were amazingly persistent so it's annoying, and... I realized how much I care about you
guys. How much you two are important to me now. Kogitsunemaru was getting frustrated and I felt
bad... then I thought over it. I've never had anyone confessing to me before, so I was completely lost.
I thought at least trying doesn't sound bad since I trust you guys. Didn't I say that when I accepted
you?"

"I vaguely remember, yes."

"To be honest, I am still unsure whether I truly love you and Kogi, even after a year. All I'm sure of
is that I don't want to lose you, being with you makes me happy, and... I don't mind doing
embarrassing things with you. The same goes for Yoshiyuki... and some other people. So, is it a
romantic feeling? Isn't a romantic feeling supposed to be special, only directed to one person?"

"That's a good question. Unfortunately, I do not have the answer. You better ask someone who is in
a polyamorous relationship like you. Perhaps over the internet."

I sigh and slump down to the table, stretching my arms. "Is I don't mind doing romantic things with
you, I trust you and such enough as a reason to accept someone, anyway? Sure, I did say Ichigo-
senpai is important to me, and I want to support him, but is it love? Is he truly special in my eyes?
What does it mean to love someone? Ahhh. My life would be easier if I only had one special person.
Why am I like this?" I've never wished for this. I never wished to become a magnet. Life truly sucks.

"You sure ask a lot of questions all at once..." He coughs a few times as if to prepare himself. "First
of all, your reason is enough for me, as being with you makes me happy. For me, loving someone
means you're willing to give that person your trust, body, and heart. As for the last one, it is just your
nature, I believe. You... unconditionally love everyone and don't want anyone to get hurt. Anyone
except yourself, that is."

"Hm? Am I?" That's kinda hard to understand...

"Just what I think. It might be true or not. Let's put that side for now. I think it's fine if you want to
try with Ichigo, like you did with us. At the end, we're still lovers now. I heard in TV that some
people try to date to see if they fall in love with the other. Sometimes they did, sometimes they
didn't."

"I've read comics like that too. Hmm, that makes sense... alright, I will do that after some more
thinking. Thank you, Mikazuki."

He shoots me a smile. "Hug me at night, okay?"

"You sure like being spoiled... understood."
His smile turns sour soon afterwards, as though he was thinking about something sad. "Yamanbagiri…do you think our relationship can last for a long time? And maybe your relationship with others? Not counting death, of course."

My back goes stiff. "W-What's with that question?"

"I've been wondering about it. Just answer me honestly."

I look down at my hands on my lap. The three of us - me, Mikazuki, and Kogitsunemaru - are bound in a contract, but that contract can vanish when our feelings burn out. "Realistically speaking, being together forever is close to impossible. I mean, being together at least until I die is nice, but there's no guarantee it will happen. I think everything is transient - oh wait, there's Tsurumaru-senpai." Damn it, immortal senpai.

"Let's keep immortals from the equation," Mikazuki chuckles. "I agree with you…first of all, to be honest, anyone can be my lover as long as they make me happy. I don't have a type, after all. It doesn't have to be you."

Oh wow.

"But you're the one who happened to come, and I'm glad I met you now, so it doesn't matter."

Well…that makes sense when you think about it. "I guess the same goes for everyone else. It's all about the right place and time."

He nods. "Secondly, if I got sick being in your harem, I might leave and search for someone else. If I find someone better, I'll chase after them."

That bold statement makes my heart jump.

"But," he continues with a smile. My expression must be amusing. "Right now, I love you too much to care. It hurts sometimes and I do get jealous, but seeing your smile erases these thoughts. It feels like everything is worth it for your happiness."

Hearing that pushes away my fear, but I have to say it. I grab his hand resting on the table, and shakily say, "I…I don't want you to leave."

"I know. I feel the same. For the current me, you're my everything."

My mouth moves, but I stop my voice from coming out. I was about to ask whether this feeling of monopoly is love, but it's quite obvious, even to me. Who can stand being apart from their beloved ones? Even family? For instance, I got used to Brother Yamabushi's disappearance, but sometimes I still feel sad.

I love my family. I love my friends. And I love my lovers. These are all different kinds of love, but they share similarities more than I thought.

"The unknown future…is a scary thing. Even I…might just forget you and seek someone else." As cruel as it is…there's no point in telling sweet nothings. The future is always uncertain and that's an undeniable fact.

He nods and smiles. "And that is why we have to enjoy what we have at the present. As someone who had stopped in my tracks before, I think changes are better, as painful as they might be. Not moving while everyone else does is a scary thing."
I don't know how to respond to his very personal remarks. I know what he went through, and we talked about it a few times in the past, but I can only imagine how it felt. It…is far from pleasant. Now I wonder…is this transient life scarier than eternal life, or is it the opposite? Tsurumaru-senpai's face comes up in my mind. I'm curious on what he thinks now, but I may never know.

"A-Anyway, going back a bit…" The moment has passed, but I have to say it. "Mikazuki, I - "

"I know," he cuts me off before I can say what's on my mind. "We all know. You don't have to say it if it pains you."

"But - "

He grabs my wrist tightly to stop me from talking. Even though his expression is calm, I feel a bit scared, so I shut my mouth tight.

"I'm…we…are not your everything. That's fine. It's subjective. Even if you feel bad about it, there is nothing you can do but to accept it as a part of yourself and move on."

"Y-You're right…" I know, I understand in theory, but…aaaagh. Too many buts today. I make too many excuses. "…I have a long way to go, it seems."

Now Ichigo-senpai seems even stronger. I'm sure there's a part of him that hasn't accepted himself, but he is already in front of me, in such a short span of time. His determination and willpower are overwhelming - there's no words to describe it. I lost on that front. I thought I had grown, but that was just a small part of me. In the end, my feet haven't moved at all. Okay, they might have moved, but just a bit.

Although I accept others' help now, I haven't gotten used to it yet, so I still feel bad and reluctant about it. My mind still likes to run back to my past mindset, thinking it was for the best. Like an endless cycle…is it because I still hate myself?

"I am no different than you, really," Mikazuki says.

I stare at him in doubt. "Really?"

"Really. I'm too embarrassed to explain now, though."

Now I'm curious.

"I will tell you later. You have more important matters to think about. I don't want you to blow your mind." He stands up and takes my hand, kissing the back. W-What?! "If you are not used to being spoiled and loved, then get used to it," he says with a smile.

"I-I'm trying."

"Try harder, idiot. Stop feeling bad about every single thing. You'll break like that."

"Hearing the word idiot from you is a bit funny."

He huffs and crosses his arms. Now he looks like a tsundere. I don't know why he suddenly prompted all of that, but it is a good conversation. I'm glad I talked to him. Now my body and heart feel light, without any extra burdens. Without realizing it, they have been piling up, slowly corroding my mind. It'd be dangerous to let them grow, so this is good.

"Did you notice my stress?" I ask him.
"Of course. It's obvious, even without having a connection with you."

At that moment, my phone in my pocket shakes. I take it out and see a message notification…the name says Akashi Kuniyuki, with one ominous sentence:

"Come to club tomorrow. Gun."

…I have to write a will now.
"Haa…" I sigh. Even though the day is still early, my body is like a zombie's, lacking energy.

"Every time you sigh, your happiness sli-"

You said it many times, Kogi. Please stop.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

I will forgive you if you massage me and let me sleep in your hair.

"O-Okay, deal."

I sugglishly slide open the classroom door and walk to my seat. Hasebe, cleaning the chalkboard as usual, looks at me. I can't tell what he is feeling.

"You look even worse today," he says. "What happened?"

I slump to the desk. "Come on, you already know."

"IT club."

"Yeah…"

He sets down the eraser and walks up to me. "Is it that hard? Or are you just forcing yourself?"

Ah, he looks worried. His expression gives me energy for some reason. "It's hard. I have so many things to do, even at home. This is slavery, I tell you." And then there's another thing that takes a toll on my mind.

"Sleep well, please. Exams are coming soon. It'd be bad if you get sick and missed it."

"I agree. Don't worry, I've been sleeping well. My body just hates to go to school. I want to sleep more."

"Alright. Tell me if you need anything."

I nod and he walks away to do his other morning tasks.

This feeling in my heavy body reminds me of a few years back…when I was in middle school, I slept at night, wishing for eternal darkness, only to be greeted by morning. I had to get up and repeat the weekly routine in reluctance, walking to that hellish place with a weak body…I'm glad I'm alive now, but the past me didn't enjoy life.

Every day was difficult. Even my brothers' kindness became poison - it was that kind of depressing school days I had in middle school. Now, a similar feeling struck my body, asking me to escape from this place.

Okay, pushing that depressing flashback aside…it has been 2 days ever since that day.

For the past 2 days, I've been forced to be a good student and keep going to the club by the
president. He also gives me heavy tasks so I can't do anything else during club. It feels like it's been ages, so I understand why he is angry. I have no excuses and I expected this sooner or later, but it sure is annoying. At least he hasn't started terrorizing me outside club, yet. He is too lazy for things outside club and I hope he stays that way.

I've seen Ichigo-senpai a few times during breaks, but we just greet each other without talking any further - not like we're avoiding each other, but he seems busy with others, having books as they have lunch. I haven't seen Tsurumaru-senpai at all. I wonder if he is actively avoiding me somehow, skips school altogether (there's no reason for him to be in school, to be honest), or it is just pure coincidence? I still have no idea how to face him, so I'll let him go for now.

Sure, I've been busy with club, but I still think about Ichigo-senpai's confession and get embarrassed about it. I'm running out of time - midterms are coming next week. And that's why my body feels so heavy today.

After convincing myself many times, I decided to answer Ichigo-senpai's feelings. I thought hard about it, and at the end, this is the only conclusion I came to. I'm a bit scared of his reaction as Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru laughed at me as they said, "I knew you would say that!".

"Are you still angry about that?" Mikazuki asks. "It's just funny, no matter how hard you think, you ended up at the same conclusion, and yet you were too stubborn to accept it."

Don't talk as if you didn't go through the same thing.

"I admit I did the same. More the reason I can laugh."

This guy…!

"Now, now, stop bullying him. Poor Yamanbagiri," Kogitsunemaru says with a chuckle, "He tried his best. It's good to not just accept our words as facts. It's better for him to think and reach a decision alone, even if it seems stupid. It's good to not be rash."

Well…I learned my lesson now. Simplicity is best. Better late than never on realizing this.

I already sent Ichigo-senpai a message to meet me after school, and asked him to persuade the president to let me off for a bit today, so all that's left is…I take a deep breath and let it go. Answering his confession…the hardest part. I'm not good at speaking, damn it.

"I think you do well when the situation calls for it, so don't worry," Kogi says. "If you mess up, we won't help you, though. We can't spoil you on this topic."

That makes me more anxious, but I understand. Thanks, Kogi, Mikazuki…for everything you've done. No words are enough to express how much you've done for me. I appreciate it.

"Shh, it's fine. No need to thank us. It's a given to help," Kogitsunemaru says.

"He is right. We just want you to be happy, remember?" Mikazuki adds.

Sheesh…you guys are so bad for my heart. I'm too happy, it's bad. I have to hide my smile. Please stop trying to kill me.

"We are just trying to calm you- oh wait, there's no point in doing it now. We should save up good lines for later."

You have a list of lines to say?
"Yes, in my heart...wait, at least retort me! Please!"

After that chaotic morning, the first break arrives normally. I do my routine of securing seats. However, this time, Yamato is with me, as he brought his own lunch (Yoshiyuki forgot his).

"I think this is the first time I've seen you with a homemade lunch," I say as we sit down. Yamato sits across from me.

"I thought it'd be good once in a while. I can cook, so it's a bit weird for me to not bring my own lunch, right?" he replies with a bashful smile, opening the lid of his lunchbox. "D-Do you want to taste it?"

"Can I?"

"Of course."

"Then..." I use my chopsticks to get hold of an octopus-shaped sausage. Seeing it boils my blood for some reason. I take a bit with that kind of anger. "Mm, it's good."

"I'm glad!"

We continue munching down our own lunches, not waiting for others as we are hungry. However, Yamato doesn't have the energy he usually has. He eventually stops moving his chopsticks.

"Yamanbagiri, have you forgotten?"

"About what?"

He sighs. "It seems you forgot."

My heart feels like breaking apart seeing his sad expression. "W-What did I forget?"

"Mm, nothing too important, really. Are you perhaps caught up in another case?"

"I am...it's over, now, though." Is it obvious, or is he just sharp? "But that is still no excuse for me to forget. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. It's not very important. I'm sure your new case requires urgent attention," he replies with a wry smile. "I was just afraid. I know I should've pressed him for answer, but..."

"What is this about?" I'm confused and the gears on my mind don't work at all. They're exhausted.

"Uh...a few weeks ago, Kashuu was given a solution to his condition. He looked uneasy about it, but he refused to tell me anything. I asked you if you can ask Kashuu or the specialists about it."

"...Ah." Now I remember. He did ask me of that. It completely slipped my mind. "I'm sorry. I'm going to ask Ishikirimaru-san now." I take out my smartphone and send that question to Ishikirimaru-san. "Let's wait for his answer. I will tell you what he says."

"Thanks. I didn't know you were busy...I should be the one apologizing."

"A professional shouldn't let many jobs burden their mind...wait, I'm not a pro."
Yamato chuckles. "Do you want to be a professional specialist in the future?"

"I haven't decided that yet. I can't stay still when I know someone is in trouble, so I keep getting mixed up in things, that's all." And the cases happened to my schoolmates. My friends. There's no way I can stay put.

"You are really kind."

"This is something other people will do. It's nothing special."

"You think so, but..." He looks down at his lunchbox, hiding his expression. "...In reality, not many people are willing to help others, even if they're schoolmates..."

These words, said in a whisper but enough to reach me, contains power to gouge into my bad memories. The way he said it make it seems like he as a personal experience about it. "I guess that's true. There's no use in thinking about them, though. Let's think about the good people."

He lifts his head and smiles. Although it looks as sweet as ever, I feel a sense of unease. "You are right!"

My phone shakes at that moment, so I can change the subject. I look at the screen. "Ishikirimaru-san replied."

Yamato's eyes light up. "What did he say?"

I read the long message...it gets harder for me to take in as it goes on. I look at Yamato to see him looking at me in anticipation. This is...really hard to explain well. Ishikirimaru-san sent me quite a detailed explanation with terms I'm confused about, so...uhhh. Huh. Hmm. Okay. I get the gist now. "Ah, uh...so basically, Kashuu...will get blood packs from the specialists for him to drink every 2 weeks."

"Huh?"

Although he looks confused, I must go on. "I don't know exactly where or how they get the packs, but Kashuu needs to drink blood at last every 2 weeks to maintain his control over his vampiric impulses. If not, he'll attack people. Oh, it isn't much blood, either, but he still needs it to live normally. He said it tasted bad but he had no choice. I think that's all."

Yamato leans back to his seat, his expression mixed with various emotions. He is silent for a few moments. "I wonder he doesn't want to tell me..."

"I think he doesn't want you to be scared of him, now that he drinks blood regularly."

"Yeah, that's the most plausible reason..." He sighs. "Kashuu has always been like this. He likes to keep things to himself, even when it's important. He didn't tell me about the incident, actually. I realized there was something wrong with him and pressed him until he told me."

"I see..."

"Even though I've been his friend for so long...at times like this, I feel like he is distant from me." He bites a rolled egg with a melancholic expression.

"Sometimes it's harder to tell people you are close with, especially if you don't want them to go away. It means he wants you to stay with him, Yamato."
"Mm…I know."

"You can confront him about this later. I said confront, but just tell him how you feel and that you're his friend no matter what happens."

"Good idea. I will think about it."

He doesn't seem satisfied at all. I understand the feeling. I'm…the same as Kashuu, and in turn hurt Yoshiyuki. Maybe I should talk to him later after I finish things up. Besides…I trust Ishikirimaru-san, but blood packs? Really? I think it's better if he drinks my blood instead.

"I wonder how your blood tastes like to him," Mikazuki says, "I heard that when a vampire drinks a loved one's blood, it tastes good, but the rest are garbage."

That's interesting trivia. My blood might taste bad, then.

"…Hmm, who knows."

[c].

The second break time. I decide to escape from my classroom and Yoshiyuki. I'm sorry, I need some time alone without any disturbances…granted, Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru are with me, but they know how to shut their mouths…I hope.

Where should I go now? Library? Backyard? Hmm…my legs end up taking me to the stairs. The stairway leading to the rooftop should be empty…and indeed it is. This is where the fight happened. Why did I go here, again? I sigh as I climb the stairway.

…Hm? Is that a person on the rooftop? I see a figure from the glass on the door. It's a bit unclear, though. The rooftop is usually off-limits, even during breaks. It sometimes opens up, but when it does, there should be a commotion. There isn't right now. When I turn the knob, it opens easily.

Who is this bad student stealing the key to the rooftop? My curiosity and sense of responsibility win. I enter the rooftop and close the door. The wind is quite strong, so I have difficulty seeing for a moment, until everything clears up.

"Ah."

"Oh."

There stands the figure of someone who has just noticed me, and I notice him too. He is standing in front of the railings, looking like he is about to get swallowed by the sunlight.

"Manba-chan."

None other than someone I want to avoid, Tsurumaru-senpai. He looks surprised to see me (and so I am), but he soon smiles as though it's not a problem. With his white hair swinging around in the wind, it looks almost out of this world.

"Fancy meeting you here," he says. "Yes, I stole the key to unlock the door."

"Thanks for admitting. Now you are under arrest. Easy catch."

"Please spare me just this once, police! Please!"
I stand next to him. I still have no idea how am I supposed to act now, but... "I will spare you if you tell me why you are here and answer my questions."

"That's quite the bribery," he smiles bitterly. "I just want to feel the wind...and think about a lot of things."

"What are these things? That fight with Ichigo-senpai?" The air suffocates me all at once. T-This pressure is, undoubtedly, coming from Tsurumaru-senpai. Even his expression is dark, looking like I betrayed him. It's scary. I want to hide, but I won't yield so easily. I stare back at him.

He eventually gives up with a sigh. He turns away from my gaze, looking up at the vast blue sky with lonely eyes. "That fight wasn't my intention at all."

"Mm."

"I just...want the best for my friends. That feeling is genuine. Although I've gone through this high school life a few times now, I never get bored of it. I enjoy making friends and talking to people. I admit what Ichigo said is right. I'm a coward, doing things for my own selfishness."

I am still unable to grasp the full story. "Senpai...?"

His mouth is open, but no voice comes out. He grabs the railing and eventually says, with his head hanging low, "Manba-chan, do you think an eternal life is a blessing? Or a curse?"

What's with the sudden question? I see no correlation, but I'll answer him for now. "It depends. If you are alone, you'll be lonely, as you are always left behind. If you have someone living eternally too, then you aren't alone and it can be more bearable. If you don't want to die, you might be able to take it all...that's it, I guess?"

"So it's both a blessing and a curse?"

"I think so, yeah."

"For me, it's a curse."

"I suspect so."

He shoots me a heart-wrenching smile. "I want to be mortal. I really wish I could die. Sometimes, I feel like becoming a xian was a mistake. It's exactly as you said - it's lonely, it's crushing...to see the world going around, humans going through the cycle of birth and death, with only you left behind, watching everything meet its end...except yourself. Sometimes I wonder what will happen to me when the universe comes to an end. If I liked to observe, I'd feel better, but I'm not...I'm too sociable for this. I can't life in solitude. But if I get too close, I'd get attached and feel sad when we have to part...it's painful. I'd rather die many times than seeing people I hold dear die every time."

I closely listen to his words. The secretive Tsurumaru-senpai is talking about himself and his own feelings? It seems Ichigo-senpai shook his heart enough. This is a very rare chance I'm happy to get. Ever since he told me about his lover, I've been hoping to hear more of his story, out of curiosity. Now, the circumstances have changed slightly.

I want to know about his past. I want to know about his feelings.

I want to understand him as a person.
"I became a xian... for no reason. The one who was supposed to be a xian was my master. He was an elderly man who took me in, an orphan. He was my father figure. The way to become immortal is hard. He lived as a hermit, and as his son, I followed him. The one getting immortality ended up being me as he died before he could."

"I'm... sorry to hear that." What else can I say in this kind of situation?

"At the beginning, living as an immortal didn't feel bad or heavy at all. I thought, I could finally leave this hermit life and enjoy life! I can use magic I couldn't use before and even fly, it's amazing! I don't have to be scared of death anymore!" He spreads his arms wide with a voice imitating a child's, before his expression turns grim. "As time passed, however, I start to feel how despairing it was to be the only immortal. It was starting to crush me. I'm afraid of making relationships with people, knowing the heartbreak it will bring. Even if I have friends, I keep a distance, separating us with a line, and eventually vanish from their lives. I don't age, after all, so it'd be weird for many people."

I nod. That makes sense. Of course, there are people who naturally have young looks despite their age, but that is quite rare...and this is just what I think, he might feel guilty if he lied like that, so it's better to just disappear (at least on his mind).

"But, senpai, telling me these things...you are way past that line now." ...Oh wait, did I just say something I shouldn't have said?

He huffs. "You're right. I wonder how many years it has been since the last time I talked about this? Maybe 200 years or more. I hate to open myself up and admit my weakness to people, and yet here I am."

"I'm not complaining, but why do you talk to me?"

He lets go of the railing and turns around. "It's just for my own sake. I want to feel better. Even I need to vent sometimes. And because...you're special."

My heart pounds at the word 'special'. W-what kind of special is this? D-Does he really love me?

He walks further before I can tell what kind of face he is making. Now I can only see his distant back. "I'm sure I will regret this soon...I'm too attached to you now, even though I know I shouldn't be."

"Senpai..." Hearing that pains my heart. I understand how he feels...afraid of getting attached...I was the same. Or maybe I'm still like that. Everyone is scared of getting hurt, and would rather escape than face it. It's human instinct, coded in our genes. "I understand. But even so..."

Sometimes, escaping brings forth happiness. Sometimes, it brings up misery. Sometimes, facing things brings ruin. Sometimes, facing things brings a better future. I do not know what is the answer that will bring happiness for Tsurumaru-senpai, but...I think, this is just my personal thoughts - you have to face it eventually. You can't run forever.

Many people can overcome that fear...like Ichigo-senpai.

So, I'm sure he -

"I'm sorry, Manba-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai speaks up before I can continue, as if he knows what I'm about to say. "I'm pathetic, after all. Running away and hiding suit me the best."

SLAP!
Before I can retort, a sound echoes in the air. Mikazuki is the cause, slapping Tsurumaru-senpai's cheek without warning. The temperature drops at that moment. I walk a bit further to see the two of them facing each other and feel myself panicking. Mikazuki, why…? If anyone did this, I thought it'd be Kogitsunemaru.

"...What is it?" Tsurumaru-senpai says, emotionless as he rubs his reddened cheek. "Slapping people is rude."

"You simply disgust me," Mikazuki replies, his expression twisted in fury…or no…something beyond that. It's scary to look at, but senpai looks completely unfazed. "Ichigo is right. You are indeed a coward. Pathetic. The worst kind I've ever seen in my life. It's sickening to even watch you."

Senpai stays silent, staring at him as though he isn't interested.

"How long are you planning to be an escape artist? You think everything can get resolved like this?" His fist shakes, his voice trembles. "Are you planning to live like this until the universe ends? Running away for all eternity?"

"...Maybe."

Mikazuki looks like he wants to slap him again, but refrains from executing it. "Why are you so scared of being honest? Doing this…talking to Yamanbagiri like that…it's too late now. It's too late to run away from him…from us. If you do, you will only bring pain to other people."

"...I know."

With a gasp, he raises his voice until the air trembles. "Then **stop** being a selfish piece of garbage! There's limit to how selfish you are!"

"But what else can I do?!" Tsurumaru-senpai doesn't lose in intensity of his voice. "If it's not others, then it's me! I'm weak! I can't stand all of this! The pain and memories will haunt me forever. And even if I do stay, I'll have to watch people die! I don't want it! I'm sick of it!"

"That is no excuse to run away!" Mikazuki shouts, waving his hand to the side. I feel like this is more personal for him, rather than speaking for senpai's sake. "Stop being such a coward! Don't you love your friends? Yamanbagiri? I'm sure you want them to be happy! That's why you asked us to help Ichigo. There's no need to hurt yourself further by leaving them. You know this isn't what you truly want!"

"Gh..." Tsurumaru-senpai visibly wavers, his face contorted in pain. "What do you know?! You know nothing! Don't talk like - "

"Oh, I know things. I'm similar to you, so I understand your feelings. I was left behind by the world…but that was because I was an idiot who chose that route. You are the same right now! Your misery, pain, *it's all your own fault!* You bring this upon yourself and others!"

I think that's too harsh! It's out of line! "Mikazu - nghh?!" Kogitsunemaru appears behind me and put his hand on my mouth to shut me up. Oi, what, why?!

"What..." Tsurumaru-senpai looks down on the ground, his body shaking, balling his hand into a fist. "*It's all my fault?* I never wish for this! If I had known becoming immortal means suffering like this, I would not be one! Master always said how wonderful it is to be an immortal, but now I know very well how wrong he is. This is a curse I'm happy to let go if possible! If I don't do this, my heart will surely break!"
"I never wished to be worshiped as a god, either! I'm undoubtedly weak and scared of the ever-changing world! And yet...here I am. When I step out of my room, I realize how vast and beautiful this world is. Although there is still pain, the joy overcomes that. I learned that if you don't move on, you will keep wallowing in misery...like you do right now." Mikazuki's voice becomes gentler at the end. "That is what I meant. You can't change the past and fix your regrets now, but you can move forward and make your life better, instead of mulling over your past and misery. There is no point in despairing."

Ah, this is personal, after all. He sees his past self in Tsurumaru-senpai, so he can't bear to simply look at him without doing anything. That is why...I can't intervene, yet. I'm an outsider. Saying I understand everything is wrong - I will never know how it feels to live a long life all alone, as a mortal human. Only oddities like them know.

"It isn't absolute. That is just what you think," Senpai hisses, but no longer shouting, "I don't want to take the risk. I've felt pain from it and I had enough."

"Then, are you satisfied with repeating stupid actions for centuries? For eternity? If your life is boring and lonely, you should make it fun. Meetings and partings are unavoidable - you will have to face them no matter what. Immortal or not, you can never run away."

Tsurumaru-senpai is silent. He clenches his fist so hard that his hand is bleeding now. I...I want to do something, but there's nothing I can do. I only bite my lower lip in frustration, watching how the scene unfolds.

"...I see your point. People say that all the time. But even so - "

"Quit being so stubborn, for god's sake!" Mikazuki raises his voice again. It's clear how frustrated he is. It's like how Kogitsunemaru was when he slapped me. "Be honest with yourself already! Just what it is that you want?! There is no point in living while lying to your own self! You are not an idiot, you know this! Stop beating yourself up!"

"I don't want to feel pain - "

"And? You can't avoid it. What is it that you truly want?"

Senpai grits his teeth and clenches his arms. He seems reluctant, but eventually speaks up, trembling, "The 100 years I spent with my lover...it was unbearably good. After tasting the joy of being with someone, I could no longer go back to that lonely life. I couldn't. I don't want to be alone anymore, but on the other hand, I know very well how painful it is for me...that it's better if I keep being alone. So, I try my best to keep a distance from people, to not get too attached. And yet...I fell in love with Manba-chan. It's wrong, but I can't stop this overwhelming feeling."

My heart throbs at his confession - at the confirmation on what Ichigo-senpai said. No, I feel like sinking. Senpai really sees me in that way, and I never realized - looking back, it's still hard to tell. The truth makes me feel happy and bitter at the same time. I am far from being a respectable human being. Nothing good comes from loving me, I personally think.

That sounds like an insult, I'm sorry. My mind is running in negative mode right now.

What...should I say? What can I say?

"Being with Manba-chan makes me happy. I feel truly alive, after living like a zombie, putting on fake masks...however, when I come back to reality and realize that he'll die someday, leaving me all alone again... I can't bring myself to admit this love. He is better off without me, too." He bends
forward, his bangs covering his face so I can't tell what kind of expression he has. All I know is how pained he sounds. 'I'm weak. I'm pathetic. I don't know what I really want as my feelings are all tangled up. I don't know what I am supposed to do. Even then…I doubt my love for Manba-chan is genuine.'

Huh? What does that mean?

"I haven't moved on from him. I don't think I can. Memories are still fresh in my mind. They are haunting me."

Is he…referring to his past lover?

"That's because you haven't moved forward at all. The one stopping yourself from catching up with the world is none other than yourself," Mikazuki says. "As long as you refuse to let go of the past and move on, you will never attain happiness."

"…I know. All this time, I know it's a fact." His hand reaches for his face, covering one side. He looks tired… "It isn't as easy as it sounds. I wish it was easy so I wouldn't have to be like this in front of Manba-chan…sorry, I'm not the funny senpai I'm trying to be. I'm far from cool."

Kogitsunemaru, being quiet the whole time, finally releases me from his grip. I don't know what to do and I think of nothing, but my body, as if being pushed by an invisible force, moves to embrace Tsurumaru-senpai.

"Wha - ?"

"Senpai is an idiot. Truly, an idiot…" I feel my heart pounding so fast, both in embarrassment and sadness as I bury myself in his chest. "I like you, senpai. This uncool side of you is fine, I like it too. I'm glad you opened up to me. All I want is for senpai to be happy. If you are scared to move forward…I am here to accompany you. I might be mortal, but I want to spend more time with you and watch over you for as long as I can. So please…"

My eyes feel hot. Tsurumaru-senpai puts a hand on my cheek and lifts my head. Tear drops to my cheek at that moment. "If you say things like that, people will misunderstand and hope, you know." His lips curl into a weak smile. "Don't cry, Manba-chan. It's making me sad…but then again, I guess I'm the culprit."

"N-No…I don't know why I'm crying. When I hear your past, I just…" I wipe away my tears with my finger. What is this feeling? It's different…but what? I hold his warm hands. "Senpai…I want to be your strength. If you can't move, I will pull you forward. I won't let you give up on my watch. I'll make sure you are happy."

He blinks a few times, turning his head away and covers a part of his face with his hand. It's clear how red his face is, though. This is nice. The ever-annoying prankster succumbing to me? I think I'm going to get addicted to this…It's also revenge after how many times he's pranked me. Feels nice.
"I am happy…so much I can die."

"I'm glad." I pat his head. "Don't you want to feel more?"

There's a pause - no, calling it a pause is an understatement. He simply stands there, head hanging low, fist balled so tight his hand might be bleeding for quite some time. I let time pass as I watch him. When he does reply with a nod, it is not firm; like he is still confused about something. He is obviously still hesitant. Of course, the belief he holds for hundreds of years can't be changed so easily in such short span of time. Improvement is still improvement, however. Just like me…just like Ichigo-senpai…we can take baby steps to the future.

"I love you, Manba-chan," he says meekly, like he is grasping for straws, desperately reaching for something. "I love you."

I think it's obvious what my answer is to his confession, after every embarrassing thing I've said. There is no need to think any longer. "Senpai, I -"

"Sorry." But he stops me. "I'm sorry. I…I am happy, and I feel like being slapped like that woke me up from my idiocy, but…let me think for a bit. I'm still hiding something from you, so don't give me your answer yet."

He is sharp, as always…but…so he is still hiding something? I wonder what it is…

I nod in confusion and he stands up after patting my head, walking to the door. I watch as his back is getting further and further away. That ended well for something that became violent halfway through. I feel it isn't enough, though.

I don't want him to just go away like that. What if he is lying?

"Tsurumaru-senpai!" I shout just before he opens the door. "Today, I'm going to answer Ichigo-senpai's feelings. I'm going to -"

When I complete my sentence, he turns around with wide eyes, clearly surprised, but soon turns into a smile.

"I see."
"Sorry to keep you waiting, senpai. I had to escape the clubroom first. It was hard," I say when I arrive late at the riverbank, even though I was the one that asked to come here. This happened with Yoshiyuki too. What's with my bad luck kicking in at important times?

Ichigo-senpai smiles as he turns around, illuminated by the sunset. "That's fine. I didn't wait for long." A breeze passes by before he adds, "Are you going to answer my confession?" To the point, I see. I think he's anxious as well.

I nod, feeling sweat dripping from my forehead even though the temperature isn't quite hot yet. That's how nervous I am.

"That's quicker than I thought," he says.

"I…I don't want you to wait any longer. Besides, it's pointless to think more about it. I'd just waste time like that." I kept going in circles and it wasn't pleasant. I felt like an idiot for being so indecisive.

"This is my answer after thinking hard, senpai. This is an answer coming from myself."

He nods, his hand gripping his bag. "Whatever it is, I'm…ready."

I take a few deep breaths. "To be honest, I still don't know how I exactly feel about you, senpai. You are certainly an important person for me, someone I want to accompany, someone I want to help. But is it love? At the end, I can't get an answer. The thought of being lovers with you isn't bad, so is it enough as a reason for me to accept you? I don't know. I'm lost."

Senpai nods, showing that he is listening as I am not done yet.

"So, um…this sounds weird, but if you don't mind, I want to try to date you and see how I feel. I'm sure I won't hate it, but…if I do, well…" There's no need to continue as it is as clear as day.

Ichigo-senpai blinks a few times. "Does this mean you accept me?"

"Yes, if you don't mind. I realize that I'm weird for thinking and feeling like this…you can think of it as a trial period, but doing romantic things is fine. A-As long as they are not crossing the line, of course."

As though frozen, he stays still with a blank expression. I stare at him in worry. Does he hate the idea, after all? Then tears suddenly fall from his eyes and I feel myself panicking. W-Why?! Does he hate it that much?!

"S-Senpai? What's wrong?"

"Oh, ah…" Ichigo-senpai seems to just realized that he is crying as his fingers touch his cheeks. "S-Sorry. I feel so happy that I just…" The tears just keep on dripping and I don't know what to do. I have no handkerchief…oh wait, there are tissues in my pockets somehow. I take it and wipe away senpai's wet cheeks.

Seeing him in tears like this, even if out of joy, pains my heart. "Do you not mind? Dating someone indecisive like me…not to mention that I have other lovers…"
He shakes his head as he takes the tissue to wipe his own tears, his cheeks red. "I don't mind. I know how you are and I love everything about you. This kindness is what attracts me first. I'm glad you're even giving me the chance to try."

Uwah, I feel like I'm not good enough for someone like him…but saying that is an insult to him, so I can't say it.

"You just think that you don't deserve to be with me, don't you?" He suddenly asks with a dry chuckle. H-How does he know?! "You are easy to read sometimes."

"Uh, s-sorry…"

"No need to apologize. I understand. I also like that side of you." He smiles. "To be frank, I don't think I deserve you, especially after what I've done…but nobody is a saint who has never sinned. I think what matters is if we can make each other happy. Our stance and our self-depreciation don't matter."

After a few moments of thinking, I nod. "You are right. We can't keep degrading ourselves like that."

Ichigo-senpai suddenly embraces me, his hands on my back. My body sizzles up all at once. "Thank you, Yamanbagiri-san. Thank you for accepting my ugly self and accepting me like this. I love you," he whispers. "I'm easily jealous, but I'll try my best to control myself. I won't stop you from flirting with others. I want to make you happy, that's all."

I pat his back, not knowing what to say as my heartbeat is going awry.

"I don't know how long can we be in a relationship. I don't know how long my feelings can hold, but…for now, please stay by my side," he adds, voice shaky.

"Of course. That is what I want," I reply. "I will spoil you and slap you when needed. I will push and pull you. And we'll remind each other to not fall into darkness."

"Ehehe. I'm glad."

We part from each other, eyes locked. It goes without saying that this situation is perfect for…

"Can I?" Ichigo-senpai asks as he grasps my hands. I nod. He hesitantly comes closer to me. Ah, his face is completely red now…or is it because of the sunlight? My face must be the same. I lean to him until our lips finally meet.

It isn't unpleasant at all. In fact, I like it. I can feel his lips trembling. Man, senpai is so cute. Though that is a normal reaction for first kiss, I suppose. I'm just too calm about it now - or not, my heart is going to explode, but I have to stay calm. Our lips part soon after, with Ichigo-senpai bashfully smiling…that doesn't last long as he covers his face with his hands, sobbing again.

"I can't believe it…I just kissed Yamanbagiri-san…I'm so happy I can die! I can't stop smiling!"

His reaction is amusing. "I won't allow you to die. Besides, your smile is nice to look at."

"You kill me when you say that!"

I chuckle as I pat his head. If this was a game, we might be covered in cherry blossom petals right now. I can feel his joy radiating from his body. "Please take care of me from now on, senpai."
Senpai stands up, wipes away his tears, and nods. "Likewise, Yamanbagiri-san."

"Congratulations!" Hotarumaru, without prompt, suddenly appears and actually throws pink petals to us. A bit late from my mind, but okay. Ichigo-senpai looks at him, face saying how confused he is. Ah, so he can see oddities now, but I've never introduced Hotarumaru to him.

"This is Hotarumaru, a ghost, you can say," I say.

Ichigo-senpai shows a professional smile, as if all his embarrassing cries don't exist at all. "Nice to meet you. I'm Ichigo Hitofuri."

Hotarumaru smiles and nods. "Nice to meet you, Ichi-nii! Ah, can I call you Ichi-nii?"

Senpai looks surprised when he is called like that, but he pats the kid's head soon after. "Yes, that is fine. I'd like to be your brother."

WHY?! I guess Hotarumaru reminds him of his own brothers. I leave them to talk for a while as I see the sun sinking. It is going to be dark real soon. Why did I choose this place, instead of something like a classroom or the student council room? No reason, really…but maybe I want to make more good memories here.

"That went smoothly, huh," Kogitsunemaru says as he approaches me, patting my shoulder. "You did well."

"We all know you chose that route," Mikazuki says with a shrug. "At least it ends faster."

What does that shrug mean? "It's not over yet. There is one other person," I say.

A very, very stubborn person. Maybe even more stubborn than me, considering he has been stuck for hundreds of years. I guess that's what happens when your sense of time is warped - you stop moving as well.

"How is it, Tsurumaru-senpai?" I call him out.

"Eh?" Ichigo-senpai looks surprised by the sudden call.

Tsurumaru-senpai comes out from behind a tree, scratching the back of his head with a troubled expression. "Geez. I feel bad for peeking, so I was about to walk away…"

"I asked you to be here, so it's fine."

Ichigo-senpai doesn't seem to take this well, however. His face turns red. "Y-You saw everything…?"

"I think it's too late for you to save your face from me. I saw your ikiryō, you know. I know many unpleasant things," Tsurumaru-senpai says with a chuckle. "Don't worry about it."

"Don't forget that we are here," Kogitsunemaru raises his hand. Both Mikazuki and Hotarumaru smile. Ichigo-senpai slumps to the ground, hiding his face with his hands.

"Now, now." I pat his head, feeling a little bad. I do realize that he only wants to be naked in front of me, not others. However, when it comes to be with me, this kind of thing is unavoidable. Since Kogi and Mikazuki are always with me, for instance, there are pretty much no way to keep secrets (unless I kick them out). As for Tsurumaru-senpai, I just want to shake him up a bit. I wonder if it works. I didn't think hard about it at all.
"I don't know why you want me here, Manba-chan. Why am I here? What am I supposed to do?" Tsurumaru-senpai says. "But…ugh." He sighs. "Okay, I get it. I'm undoubtedly jealous, too. You're seriously evil."

So it worked. "I just can't wait any longer. External push is necessary. Besides…it's simple, isn't it?"

"…Perhaps, Okay." He takes a deep breath then releases it. "I will talk about everything. You will understand why I'm hesitant on loving you. We should sit somewhere."

"Uh…am I allowed to hear this?" Ichigo-senpai asks.

"You are fine. Meanwhile…” Tsurumaru-senpai turns to the other 3 oddities. "You guys can go. Shoo."

"Bleh." Kogitsunemaru and Hotarumaru puff out their cheeks in annoyance, but they still nod and go away with Mikazuki - not too far away, as they are still in the riverbank, just enough to not eavesdrop.

The three of us sit on the grass, wind brushing our cheeks. The air is getting colder along with the darkening sky. The color of red and orange are almost completely swallowed by darkness by now.

"Well…where do I start with this?" Tsurumaru-senpai asks to himself, his fingers playing around with his white hair. He looks lost and troubled, unlike his normal self. It's refreshing to see, as sadistic as it sounds.

"Just get to the point," Ichigo-senpai says begrudgingly. Why is he so pissed?

"Okay, okay!" Tsurumaru-senpai looks at me, face completely serious. "Manba-chan, you are similar to my past lover…no, I believe you're his reincarnation. You look completely the same as him. I was surprised when I saw you."

Huh?

Before I can process on the new information, he continues with solemn eyes. "After his death, I decided to not date anyone again…to not fall in love. Even now, I still clearly remember him and our time. In short, I can't move on. Pathetic, isn't it?" He lets out a self-depreciating chuckle. "And that's why I feel conflicted. I fell in love with you…but is that true? What if I'm just seeing my past lover through you? What if I don't love you for who you are, but instead someone else I projected on you? I can't tell. That's why I feel like I shouldn't admit this feeling."

With his shoulders slumped, eyes averting my gaze, he ends his story.

Well, that was quicker than I thought. "Uh, give me time to swallow everything for a bit." I close my eyes and think about what he said. My brain is working especially slow today. This is beyond my expectations. After a few seconds, I nod. "Okay…I understand now." Hopefully.

Reincarnation is a concept existing in Buddhism and other religions, so I believe it exists, but to be one myself is surprising. Not to mention that…I was Tsurumaru-senpai’s lover in the past…

Is that why I sometimes feel weird when I see him, having foreign feelings from the past?

"And that's why, Manba-chan, I can't be with you. Especially as an immortal."

"Mikazuki will slap you if he hears that." Oh wait, he should still be listening through my mind right now. "If I wasn't your past lover's reincarnation, would you date me?"
"...Maybe."

"Only yes or no is acceptable. Will you date me?"

"...Yes."

I cross my arms. "I see." So it's mainly because I'm his past lover's reincarnation...I can't say I completely understand, but I do get where he comes from. Getting in a relationship, but not actually loving the other, seeing someone else...hurt both parties. I'd say that is quite shitty, so the fact that he is careful is good.

"You look completely the same as him, like his splitting image...even your voice. When I see you, I just..." Senpai hangs his head low, his words trailing off. He seems pained...

My appearance is identical to that person's, but...that begs the question. "Is my personality the same, too?"

"He's a lot kinder than you, doesn't tease as much as you do, doesn't look as emo as you do, and not a harem leader. Oh, and less dense. He's sensitive, actually."

"Excuse me for being evil, emo, a harem leader, and dense."

He laughs, seemingly more relaxed as he recalls the warm memories. "I guess the two of you have similarities in personality, like when you said the same thing as he did and had that self-sacrifice tendency, but still different."

Alright, the way it is going is good for me. "Then...what do you think on how I am now, senpai? Do you like me as I am?" Asking it so blatantly is making me feel like dying, but I have to ask. I need to.

"T-That's..." He turns away from me, cheeks reddening. Hm? This reaction is...

"Look at me."

He refuses, so I put my hands on his cheeks and pull his face closer. "Whoa, Manba-chan - "

"Look at me. No running away. Tell me the truth." I realize how pushy I am today and it embarrasses me, but I think this is the best way to face the stubborn Tsurumaru-senpai. Sometimes force is the answer. "Do you like me as I am right now?"

Tsurumaru-senpai's face twists into that of annoyance, like sulking, but I keep on pressing his white cheeks. After a seemingly long silence, he eventually answers. "I think I like you as you are. You are cute when you smile and blush...no, even like this, your honest face is cute. It's refreshing to see your gap between your emo self and teasing friends. I like how brave and how caring you are. And...I like hanging out with you."

I feel like my face is getting hot now. "T-Then...if you acknowledge that, then you see me not as that person's reincarnation, but as another human being. Your feelings toward me are valid."

His eyes snap wide open, as though he never expected that at all.

"It's simple, isn't it? I might have the same appearance, but as you said, we have different personalities...and yet, despite that difference, you still like me. You accept me as I am. Isn't that enough?"
"But…does that equal love?"

"I have no way of knowing that. What do you think?"

"I…I don't know."

"Well, if you are still so indecisive, I'll just make you realize you love me." These words are beyond cheesy and I want to sink in the sea right now, but I have to say it. With a flat face. Don't blush, don't smile! "Or well, I will make you fall for me." I don't have any idea how to, but I'll try when push comes to shove.

"W-What's with that?" His face turns even redder, complete with a shocked expression. "You're just making me fall harder for you!"

"That's good."

"Geez…you're a little devil, you know that?" He holds my hand on his cheek and hangs his head low. "I give up. Yes, I love you." He pulls away from me and looks into my eyes, hesitation no longer on his face. "Take responsibility for making me fall for you. I mean…please go out with me, Manba-chan."

I nod and smile. "You already know my answer."

The two of us lean closer and naturally kiss. No awkwardness, no hesitation. It's nice how confident he is. He is clearly experienced. Though I wonder when was the last time he got into this kind of relationship? Long time, I bet.

"Am I…allowed to be happy like this?" He mutters when he pulls away, staring at me with melancholic eyes.

I rub his warm cheeks. "Of course. Everyone deserves it, including you, senpai. It's okay to be happy and ride along that flow."

"…Thank you. It's been a long time, so it feels weird."

"Get used to it, please."

"Getting another boyfriend and kissing someone else right in front of your new lover, Yamanbagiri-san is amazing." A voice calls out.

…I forgot Ichigo-senpai was right next to me all along. He is looking at me with crossed arms and puffed cheeks. I-Is he angry? Oh no. His face is adorable, but oh no.

"Manba-chan is such a playboy," Tsurumaru-senpai says, shrugging. "So good at playing with people's hearts."

"Indeed he is." Ichigo-senpai sighs. "He is hopeless."

"S-Sorry about that…" I say weakly, shrinking between them.

"I'm joking. I am jealous, but I have to fight it. First step to becoming better," Ichigo-senpai says with a smile, his hand balling into a fist. "Besides, I'm still drowning in joy right now, it's killing my negativity. Don't worry about me."

He does look happier and brighter than ever before. I'm glad.
"Still, Tsurumaru-san. I will not hesitate if you make Yamanbagiri-san unhappy," he adds, this time his smile turns terrifying. I can see darkness spreading on his back, stabbing Tsumaru-senpai. I back away as he leans closer to the crane. "Don't get cocky just because you can flirt with him now."

"Oh? Is this a warning? Declaration of war?" Tsurumaru-senpai smirks. I can see sparks between the two of them. What is happening? "The one that shouldn't get cocky is you. I'm more experienced than you are."

Ichigo-senpai clicks his tongue, but soon smiles like a salesperson on the streets who just got lashed out by a passerby. "Ah, yes, you are indeed old. A grandpa. Are you sure you can take care of Yamanbagiri-san? I'm sure it's the opposite instead."

"Speak to yourself. You're a baby, crying and clinging to him."

"Just say that you're jealous he's spoiling me."

"What?!"

"What?!"

They stand in front of each other with their arms crossed, glaring at hissing at each other. This is so comical. It's like seeing two children fighting. Why did they snap like this? Even the conversation doesn't make sense.

It's cute, though.

"They're just trying to let out some steam and all the grudges they've felt for the past year," Kogitsunemaru says, suddenly appearing behind me.

"This is how men fight," Mikazuki says with a shrug, as if it can't be helped. I don't really understand, but if it isn't bad, there's no reason to stop them. I don't feel actual animosity coming from them, so I think it's fine. They said fights make people closer.

"Oh right, senpai. Want to go to my house now?" I ask with a loud voice to override their voices.

Ichigo-senpai elegantly falls down to the ground while Tsurumaru-senpai shouts, "Isn't that too fast?!"

"What? I'm thinking you should meet my brothers as soon as possible."

"O-Oh…" Tsurumaru-senpai now looks calm, but Ichigo-senpai is clearly not, as he is still on the ground, clearly shaking.

"Ichigo-senpai, what's wrong?" I ask as I kneel next to him.

"I-It's too fast!!" He says, his expression is one of panic, excitement, and anxiety blended in one.

"It's just to meet my brothers. Besides, you've met them. I'll just say we're dating now."

"That's exactly why it's too fast!!" He says, hanging his head with his two hands. "I'm not ready yet…! It's too sudden. What if I mess up? Let me prepare myself first…!"

"Okay. I'll count to 5. 1, 2, 3 - "

"That's way too sudden!!"
I chuckle seeing his panicking expression as he grasps my hands. "If you don't want it today, that's fine, but I don't know when Brother Yamabushi will go on a long journey again, so I want you guys to meet them as soon as possible. I'm nervous too." I'm not lying - I *am* nervous. Just what kind of person dates 5 people? But I believe my brothers will accept this news.

Hearing that, Ichigo-senpai's expression turns soft. He stands up and pulls me up. "I understand. I... can't be a coward now." He inhales and exhales air deeply, calming himself down. Well, that fear is understandable. He knows my brothers are protective of me.

I kiss his cheek to calm him down and tease him then nod. "Don't worry. My brothers won't bite." Maybe. I can't guarantee it., but let's keep that part a secret. I can't put more fear in him. I think Brother Horikawa will do something to them to make sure they're trusted.

His face turns completely red up to the ears. "Surprise kiss is unfair," he says with a meek face. It stabs my heart and I almost scream *moe* because of how cute it is.

I'm glad I don't have to use force by having Kogi drags him.

"So that's your evil plan all along?" Kogitsunemaru shrieks.

"Manba-chan, I demand a kiss too!" Tsurumaru-senpai says. I quickly give him what he wants, seeing his face turns red before I walk away. This is nice. It's so amusing.

"Alright, let's - "

Chu.

Suddenly, I feel something soft - lips - touching my cheek as a hand grasps for mine. I look at the culprit, none other than the grinning Tsurumaru-senpai. Before I can hit him with words, someone else pulls my hand and kisses my other cheek. Before looking, I can already tell that it's Ichigo-senpai, putting on an even sulkier face.

"I won't lose," he says, intertwining my fingers with his. Both of my hands and face feel so hot now.

Tsurumaru-senpai chuckles. "This isn't a competition, but sure."

At loss for words, they catch me off-guard again by kissing my cheeks at the same time. It's ticklish and makes me flustered for so many times today, with a surge of happiness. It's not like I haven't experienced this - being sandwiched with two men as they kiss me - but as this is the first with them, I...

"You have a great expression right now," Tsurumaru-senpai says with a very evil grin.

"You are good at dishing it out, but bad at taking it," Ichigo-senpai smiles. Although his smile is innocent and I'm glad he looks happy, it's annoying.

"S- Shut up. Don't surprise me like that." I pull down my hood to cover my red face, but Tsurumaru-senpai pulls down the hood.

"It's sweet revenge. No need to hide your face. It's cute," he says.

"Precisely why I want to hide...!"

"This is nothing compared to how you tease them," Mikazuki says with a chuckle, "Call it karma."

"Please bear with us, Yamanbagiri-san. I love you," Ichigo-senpai says with a smile.
Damn it, I completely lost at the end. I should have revenge later too…

"Brother, I'm dating these two starting today." I wish I could form better words, but my mind can only think of these. I awkwardly introduce Ichigo-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai. "This is Ichigo-senpai, you already know him, and this is Tsurumaru-senpai, a xian."

The two bow deeply, visibly nervous and sweating.

"…I see." Brother Horikawa smiles, then gestures to the sofa where Brother Yamabushi is already sitting at. "Please sit and let us have a talk." He sits down on the sofa. My two upperclassmen hesitantly sit down across from him. There's no place for me, Kogi, and Mikazuki, so we sit at the dining room instead.

Silence descends. Even Brother Yamabushi has been quiet the whole time with crossed arms. The air drops a few degrees and strangles me. It's so heavy now. I gulp in anticipation for what's going to happen.

"I expected Brother to get another lover, but two at once…" Brother Horikawa sighs and shakes his head with a very motherly gesture. "Brother, you're quite the playboy."

"I-I'm not." I sulk. "I just attract people, it seems."

He smiles at me then turns his attention to the two in front of him again. "Are you guys sure with this decision? I believe he'll get other lovers sooner or later. He's already dating 5 people right now. It must be hard to look after everyone."

Why is he asking them about me like that? Now I'm scared.

The two of them nod without any hesitation. "This is what we decided. I thought hard about it. For me, it isn't about sharing him with others - it's about our lifespan. I'm a xian, so I can't die. It pains me even more since I have to see him die someday - well, if we stay that long, that is. However, I decided that I want to stay at his side for as long as I can. Manba-chan is a wonderful person. I realize how hard it is to be in this kind of relationship, but we are learning together as we go. I'm sure we can do it. I believe in Manba-chan. He's a wonderful person," Tsurumaru-senpai says.

Hearing that makes me want to hit him out of embarrassment.

Ichigo-senpai nods again. "I feel the same. I'm easily jealous, but in the end, I can't give up on my feelings for Yamanbagiri-san. I’ve made trouble many times and yet he still helps me. I owe him a lot. Being patient and not lash out in jealousy like a normal person is nothing compared to what he's done for me. I'll do anything for him to make him happy. To be honest, I'm still not sure about the means of sharing him or how it works yet, but I'm going to do my best."

Oh god, I'm dying. I hide myself behind the chair. My face must be completely red right now.

Brother Horikawa seems pleased to hear their replies, but Brother Yamabushi is still silent. His eyes are staring at the two of them, like assessing their worth. It's the same kind of gaze he has when he is faced with a case. I'm scared to know what he is thinking.

"So, are you two the ones involved in the latest case?" Brother Horikawa asks.
"Yes…I'm the cause." Ichigo-senpai looks down on the ground, bowing. "I apologize for harming Yamanbagiri-san." His fist on his lap shakes. "It was unforgiveable of me. I have no excuses for creating a destructive ikiryou out of my intense feelings."

I've never told Brother Horikawa the full story, but it seems he understands. I think Brother Yamabushi filled him in about it. "Do you love my brother?"

"I do."

"Can you do something about it? The ikiryou, your emotions?"

Ichigo-senpai straightens his back. "I'm going to train with Ishikirimaru-san's help to control my ikiryou so it won't go berserk again. If I can control it, I can control my emotions better - that's what he said. This relationship with Yamanbagiri-san too…I'm trying to control myself. I can't repeat that mistake again. I can't harm the one I love over and over again."

Brother nods. This feels more like a job interview with how tense it is.

"To be frank, I don't trust the two of you yet," he says. "But if Brother Yamanbagiri trusts you, I'll try to. Please show me I can safely leave him in your care."

"Of course." The two of them reply in unison.

"Brother Yamabushi, do you have anything to add?" He finally turns to the still-eerily-quiet Brother Yamabushi.

"Hmm, well…I'm not good at this kind of thing at all." Brother Yamabushi slaps his thighs, then his serious expression turns to a warm smile. "But the two of you have good expressions and gestures. Your feelings are genuine and I can tell, kakaka! I'm more worried if Brother will break your hearts."

"Oi," I hiss. That's true, though… "Well, if there's any complaints or demands, just tell me. I'll do my best." It feels like a business, but communication is important in any relationship - especially at this kind of out of norm relationship.

"If you hurt Brother, though…" Brother Yamabushi cracks his hands and show his muscles. Everyone in this room loses in terms of pure strength. "…You know the consequences." Brother Horikawa also shows a deadly, sweet smile. Tsurumaru-senpai and Ichigo-senpai nod vigorously.

"I have more things I need to confirm. Not in front of Brother Yamanbagiri, however," Brother Horikawa says. That sounds like a threat. "I will let you go for now. I'm going to prepare dinner… for the two of you as well," he says as he stands up.

"Alright. Senpai, let's go to my room as we wait."

"Don't do weird things, okay?" Brother Horikawa, your face is terrifying…

"Of course," I say.

"I can help with cooking, but…" Ichigo-senpai offers.

"It's okay. Go ahead and spend time with Brother."

With that, Kogitsunemaru helps Brother Horikawa with cooking. Brother Yamabushi does paperwork, and the rest go upstairs to my room. I've planned this so I cleaned my room yesterday. It is never messy thanks to Kogitsunemaru, but I had to take out garbage and organize things to make it
"So this is Yamanbagiri-san's room..." Ichigo-senpai says, looking around with sparkling, wide eyes. "I'm so happy I can finally set my foot in here."

"Don't stare too much, there's nothing interesting here." Why is he happy, anyway? "Go ahead and sit anywhere you like."

Tsurumaru-senpai immediately sits on my bed like he owns it. Ichigo-senpai has more decency as he hesitantly sits next to him as he looks around, patting the sheets of blanket. He looks mesmerized more than anything.

"This room is filled with Yamanbagiri-san's scent. It's nice," he says.

I set down my bag and sit on the chair. "M-My scent?"

"That's a line only a pervert says," Tsurumaru-senpai says. Ichigo-senpai hits his stomach with his elbow.

"Well, there's also my and Kogitsunemaru's scent," Mikazuki says as he takes off a layer of his thick *yukata* and puts it inside the cupboard.

"Ah, right. The three of you sleep together." Tsurumaru-senpai nods in understanding.

"I'm jealous." Ichigo-senpai sulks. His expression is like a child's. It's cute.

"We slept together once, though, Ichigo-senpai," I say. "A few days ago."

"T-That's true, but..."

"I also hugged you."

"I don't remember that!"

"Well, you were asleep, and I woke up before you."

He makes weird sounds, showing how frustrated he is to not feel my hug when Tsurumaru-senpai says, "Now I'm jealous. We haven't slept together."

"Someday. Or do you want to sleep here tonight? I don't mind."

"Am I being kicked out?!" Mikazuki yelps, walks up to me, then pinches my cheek. "I know you're happy to get another mistress, but please don't forget about me."

M-Mistress... "I won't forget, don't worry."

He crosses his arms. "Good. I believe in you."

It's unusual that he doesn't cling to me like a koala and asks to be spoiled. I guess even he refuses to act so shameful in front of senpai, keeping a relatively good persona.

"By the way, Manba-chan," Tsurumaru-senpai calls, "Have you told Yoshiyuki about this?"

"I forgot. I will do it now." I take out my smartphone, plug in the charger, and as it is charging I message Yoshiyuki.
"I have an idea. How about we make a LINE group?" He adds. "Manba-chan and his lovers. Please suggest the name."

"Eh? A group? Why?"

"Because we need it," he replies with a clap of a hand, his face is brighter than ever. "We need to communicate with each other, like planning for dates, hang out, and share our love of Manba-chan. I'm sure it'd be fun and helpful!"

"Basically, Yamanbagiri-san's fan club, huh…" Ichigo-senpai mutters. "Yes, sounds like a good idea. We can share photos of Yamanbagiri-san."

"Tsurumaru-senpai, it seemed like you planned this all along," I comment at how detailed it is. I'd never thought about the creation of that group and its function. It's beyond me. "It's a bit awkward, but I'll make it now. What should the name be?"

"Yamanbagiri Fan Club?" Ichigo-senpai suggests.

"Rejected." That's too embarrassing, and if I'm in it feels like I'm a narcissist.

"You know anyone can always change the name and profile picture," Tsumaru-senpai says with a smirk. "So it doesn't matter what you think."

"Let's make a Discord server, then. I'll be the moderator."

"No, no, that's not fun! You'll be a dictator!"

I click my tongue in annoyance. "Alright, LINE it is then. I'll just name it IDK for now." I tap on my smartphone, creating the group, and send the invite to Yoshiyuki, Tsurumaru-senpai, and Ichigo-senpai. "Done."

Tsurumaru-senpai immediately takes out his smartphone and taps the screen. He takes no time to join and change the group's name into…Manba-chan Maji Tenshi? Senpai, what the heck? I stare at him in both bewilderment and fluster. "I'm no angel." Even Fan Club sounds better than this.

"Yeah, you are half evil half angel, but YMT sounds good, isn't it?"

"No it isn't!"

"Aahh…I wish I had a phone," Mikazuki says, sulking at the corner of the room. "I also want to chat…"

"Even if I give you one, I'm sure you'll break it," I say. Even then, I have no money to buy a budget phone. I can trust Kogi, but he likes to play games, which needs a better smartphone - so more expensive. For now, he uses my phone. "I don't think flip phones have LINE." But I think he can destroy flip phones, somehow.

"That's precisely why. I'm sad," he starts to sob, clearly faking it.

"At least you're always with me, so no need for long-range communication." Or not. I learned from this case how worried I am when we're separated…I'll think of buying a flip phone for him just to contact me.

I complain about the group's name to Yoshiyuki, who seems to be away from his phone as he hasn't read my message. Perhaps he is cooking right now. When I go back to see the newly-made group
where Tsurumaru-senpai spams stickers, I realize the profile picture is different. This is…me?!

Thankfully, LINE put who did what in the chat. "Ichigo-senpai, where did you get a picture of me…?" I ask him, shuddering. In this almost close-up photo, I wasn't looking at the camera, hood off, and I was wearing casual clothes. "Ah, is this when we went to aquarium?"

"Yup. Personal collection," Ichigo-senpai says with a very happy smile. "My phone's camera is amazing. I have around 100 photos here…ah, I haven't deleted bad takes."

"Uwah, what a stalker," Tsurumaru-senpai snickers.

"Are you sure you didn't take photos me in secret too?" I ask, doubtful.

"Nope. I didn't want to admit I love you, remem- Oi! Stop!"

Ichigo-senpai snatches away Tsurumaru-senpai's phone during that moment of weakness and taps on the screen, ignoring Tsurumaru-senpai who grabs his shirt and pulls his hair. He seems unfazed by the relentless attacks and smiles when he finds something. "This album explains otherwise," he says as he shoves the phone to me, pushing Tsurumaru-senpai aside.

"N-Noo, that album is - !"

Tsurumaru-senpai's screams don't reach my ears as I stare at the phone screen, showing a series of photos. They are none other than me. Although there's less than 10 photos, this is still…

"Tsurumaru-senpai, you liar. Creep."

"My crime is lighter than Ichigo's!" He retorts.

"At least he is honest about it." Honesty is nice. At this point, I can only nod and accept whatever things fate throw at me. I am no longer creeped out by these things. "Well, it's embarrassing, but I don't mind. Just don't go out of control."

"Of course," Ichigo-senpai smiles as he gives back the phone to its owner.

At that moment, my phone shakes. Yoshiyuki has replied with "Wow" and joined the group. There, he says, "Aahahaha! This is interesting! What a good idea." and sends a few stickers. He and Tsurumaru-senpai start a conversation, with the crane saying how Ichigo-senpai put that group picture and that he has 100 photos of me. Ichigo-senpai doesn't let this be and replies how Tsurumaru-senpai also has photos of me but was too tsundere to admit it. Of course, Tsurumaru-senpai retorts, and a fight happens. I can see sparks of competition between the two of them once again.

It feels weird since they're talking about me, but it's fun, and they seem to be enjoying it as well. This is a good way to become closer to one another even when we're apart. I sit and just watch their banter while Mikazuki peeks from behind me to look at the chat.

"You can use it," I say, giving him, my phone. "You know how to use it, right?"

"Alright. Don't blame me if it breaks."

"I'm watching you to make sure it won't."

He said something like that, but I can tell he is being extra careful in holding my phone and fiddling with it, while Ichigo-senpai and Tsurumaru-senpai start to fight in real life. Watching them like this… makes reality finally sets in.
I'm dating 5 people now.

To be honest, I feel a bit overwhelmed by this growing number in...romantic relationships, you can say, but I was the one who decided to go through this path. There's no way I can do it half-heartedly. I read on the internet that in this kind of relationship requires a lot, especially justice, care, and honesty. I hope it goes well...no, I'll take care of it so everything goes smoothly. I swear on myself I'll make them happy, like how they make me happy.

Mikazuki, Kogitsunemaru, Yoshiyuki, Ichigo-senpai, Tsurumaru-senpai...

I really do care about them, after all.
Email (Sent July 2nd 09:00 AM JST)

To: 89-75-83-78@mail.com

Subject: Ikiryou case resolved and more things

Hello and good day. How are you? I'm fine and am in a good mood. It's been a few days.

I forgot to send you more updates after that aquarium incident email as things were hectic, and my mind was too occupied to write about it. Sorry about that. I hope you aren't greatly worried about me. Nothing terrifying happened other than that cursed weekend and the aquarium incident. It's the scariest thing I've ever experienced so far. I hope I won't experience something scarier.

As you know, Ichigo-senpai confessed to me, so I have to answer him. I didn't write much about my thoughts on the matter, as far as I remember, as I shoved all of them to Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru. I think you can correctly guess what kind of things showed up in my mind. I'm a pretty simple man.

Tsurumaru-senpai kept on pushing me to accept Ichigo-senpai and the two of them had a fight. An argument, right in front of me. I was confused at the time, having no idea what went through their minds. I was shocked on top of that, as they're such good friends. Yeah, I undoubtedly feel bad as I was the cause.

I talked to Tsurumaru-senpai a few days later and he told me about his past...and how he loves me, but yet couldn't accept it and walked away. I planned to answer Ichigo-senpai on that day, so I told him about it. After school, I met Ichigo-senpai. I guess it's as clear as day - I accepted him. He cried out of joy when he realized that. Ah, uh, I'm not going to be sentimental and talk deeply about it here, but despite what he (his ikiryou) had done, he is a good person. He wants to atone for his sins. He wants to become a better human being. I want to accompany him in his journey and make him happy. I won't let negative emotions overcome him again on my watch.

Ehem. Anyway, Tsurumaru-senpai was listening, and he finally told me what's up with his confusing behavior. Apparently, I'm his past lover's reincarnation, and he still hadn't moved on from him. He is afraid that he doesn't see me as I am, but instead his past lover. He is an immortal, so heartbreak is bound to happen. He is afraid of getting hurt and getting lonely again and again...but in the end, he acknowledges his feelings for me, and we also start to go out. As long as I'm alive, I won't let him feel lonely.

So yes, I'm dating 5 people at the same time now. Calling it five-timing would be an insult, I think, as everyone in the party knows and accepts it. They even made an embarrassing LINE group named "Manba-chan Maji Tenshi". I blame Tsurumaru-senpai. He was hesitant to love me, and yet here he is now! In the span of a few minutes, his switch flipped. He is really weird. Is it because he is so old? Ah, Mikazuki is hitting me now. Alright, maybe because he accepted his feelings, there's no need to act all tsundere anymore. I think I'd feel bad if he kept acting the same.

Either way, they make me happy, so I want to make them happy as well. I'm going to do my best in this abnormal relationship. I can't feel bad and think that I don't deserve so much happiness (they will get angry if I do...ah, Kogi is glaring at me at this moment of writing). If you ask me whether I still feel self-deprecation, then the answer is yes. It is very hard to not unconsciously think about such
negative things, but I think I'm doing better than I was.

Being loved and loving feels nice. It gives me strength. Is that weird? I can say that I genuinely love them, though. I'm willing to do anything for their happiness…outside self-sacrifice. I'm still trying to get away from that mindset.

Anyway, summer holiday is coming, which means midterms soon. I'm getting busier and busier…I just hope no big incident happens prior to exams. This case and my new lovers are enough distraction.

How are you? When are your exams? What about holiday? Tell me about your day and cats. I also demand cat photos.

By the way, I attached photos of me and senpai during weekend. The white-haired one is Tsurumaru-senpai and the teal-haired one is Ichigo-senpai. Too bad I can never take photos of Mikazuki and Kogitsunemaru and show it to you…I hope you can come back here soon to meet them.

5 attachments: 27383923.jpg, 2374738.jpg, 32963739.jpg, 343723732.jpg, 3648290.jpg

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