Magical Osomatsu-san
by narwhalsonnets

Summary

When evil threatens his world - more specifically, his brothers - Matsuno Osomatsu is recruited by a talking kitten and signs a magical contract that transforms him into a gem-encrusted warrior. Now only he stands in the way of Planet Earth's enemies and their dark goal to control every human soul. The monsters are ugly, the battles gruelling and the thanks nonexistent. But hey, at least he's got work.

Osomatsu might fight alone. But he is only the first. Chosen to lead a powerful unit to save their world and so many others, the search for his four allies has begun.

Notes

Hello, lovely people. I've had a few ideas and shaky attempts, but this is my first real fic. I hope it reads okay - it's heaps of fun to write so far, at least, and I have so much planned :) I would treasure any feedback or comments you might have; please don't hold back with anything you'd like to tell me ... I can take it, I think. Or hope. First part is a bit long, sorry, but I'm thinking of chapters more like episodes ... Grew up with Sailor Moon and Cardcaptor Sakura, and am currently in love with Binan Koukou Chikyuu Boueibu Love, so that's where a lot of the inspiration comes from ... pretty obviously :) I'm going for a certain tone with the evil guys in honour of the 90s magical girl genre, but it may have surpassed cheesy - please don't let that put you off! Looking forward to getting more down, hope you enjoy it!
Oppressive as a blackened cell, stinking of sulphur and formless walls pressing in, impenetrable,
barely space to squat as sweat oozed rivulets between icy shoulder blades. A vast desert of
excrement shat of torment and broken souls, where new agonies bloomed hatefully beneath ripped
palms with every crawling, clawing reach, itching to ensnare and drag deep between jagged cracks
of dead earth. Blisteringly hot and cold as death, fires blazed beyond control to the horizon and
savage winds, shaped of every hair-raising wail and screeching lament, swept all into shattering,
numbing stillness. Atmospheres blurred, tainted by dark smoke and acid, poison to those who could
not die.

Such were the confines of their prison, the suffering to each mind that which would most undo, the
ultimate retribution warped and exacerbated by their own continuing damned existence.

Reduced to this, Lord Takuu became nothing, no more than a shrieking, indistinguishable mess of
broken flesh condemned to torment until the end of all being. But, stripped of all else, he maintained
some semblance of his dark power, trickling near-dormant through tapped veins, sparking faintly at
every synapse. It nursed him through the worst of torture, soothed his agonies. And after a time—
perhaps years, perhaps millennia; with no passing star and no death, there was no more accurate
marker for time’s passage than screams—he clawed back his presence of mind. He maintained it
through every tearing grief that assailed him. Soon they no longer assailed. The torment built him up.
Made him stronger. And he remembered.

He had had everything. The army, the resources. The power. The lust. All existence had stretched
before him, ripe to claim. Then those righteous fools of the Spectrum Alliance had risen in challenge.
A single system, woefully outnumbered and outmatched. It was laughable. Lord Takuu had laughed,
lifting his armoured claws to signal attack. The first system in his path toward interdimensional
domination was no threat, a nothing system, rich in resources and peaceful with no standing army,
scattered security forces a joke. But Lord Takuu had made a mistake. The Spectrum Alliance had
boasted defence he had never imagined in all his arrogant studies another mind could conceive, much
less carry out. And their five gem-encrusted warriors had bested his Liberation Force of countless
thousands, devout soldiers and slave cannon fodder, and summoned force to seal them in this hell.

His lust for revenge burnt hotter than hell fires. It stretched further than any foul desert, towered
higher than any pan-dimensional prison wall and empty space that roiled above. That lust was
powerful enough to rouse Lord Takuu further above the suffering of his soldiers. While their minds
were shredded, Lord Takuu pushed on undeterred, driven by dangerous purpose, loss of limb to a
lowly vassal less than a sickened tick bite to his dark might. The need to escape, unleash retribution
on those who had halted his advance and denied him his empire, swirled dangerously with the
surrounding hell that now fed and sustained his strengthening darkness. Torn and succumbed as he’d
been, such bleak chaos was the very well from which he’d first drawn his once-formidable powers.
Those fools of warriors had made a greater mistake than his underestimating them, shutting him in
such a realm.

Soon he sought out his closest and dragged them, kicking and screaming, into growing awareness.
Even separated from his obsessive studies and near-monopoly over known gates, Lord Takuu knew
more of interdimensional travel than any being still living. Gates were convenient, efficient. But
space was only matter. And, like all matter, it could be cleaved. All they needed was a lynchpin
beyond their prison, a being with the power to channel theirs, manipulated to lacerate the rippling
space of their prison and pull every last soldier unharmed through so many dimensions’ depths. A
being to restore them to full strength. A being around which to rally and raise a new Liberation
Force, one that will not be defeated. Lord Takuu’s own blood servant.

Infected by their lord’s wrath and passion, his most trusted got to work. Recalling arcane arts long since erased from their awareness, they began to scry the universes for that tell-tale blot of darkness. Lord Takuu was delighted to see that evil abounded, worlds laid to waste by their own inhabitants as often as enemies. But they didn’t scry for evil. Lord Takuu hardly sought an individual who might grow into a potential rival, nor even a successor to take under his dark wing. The greatest evil might make the poorest servant, the most worthless conduit. He sought something specific; Lord Takuu would hardly risk total destruction on some unsure bet. They had writhed already beyond all time. They would last a little longer.

Lord Takuu sought darkness. And he sought power. But he sought malleability, vulnerability. Turmoil. And it was only a matter of time. Soon their vengeance would stalk every doomed citizen of the Spectrum Alliance, gem-encrusted, courtier or witless civilian, every door burst in and lives snuffed by the mindless minions Lord Takuu’s servant would infect on his command.

Soon revenge would be his.

Even as Lord Takuu strode among his feverishly-working followers, bat-like folds of his cloak flapping in the sickening wind about his stripped-bone form, the maw of his closest lieutenant curled in pleasure. ‘Lord Takuu,’ they summoned, scrying claws lowering and clasping tight to restrain their rush of anticipation. Their fellows did the same, breaking focus and all gleaming evidence of their deep scry disintegrating around them. Not nearly so disciplined, they tittered gutturally with success.

Lord Takuu would be the judge of any so-called success. He turned his masked features towards them, bleached and scribed with harshly-cut characters of his self-proclaimed status. He said nothing, barely deigning to speak with even one so trusted. But he inclined his head, inviting his lieutenant speak. In his clawed fist he rolled a single stone, a dark opal. The stone was so utterly black it might have been void itself, drinking in all light and matter, absorbing until only that lone point of darkness remained.

‘We have your doll.’

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Matsuno Osomatsu stretched one arm behind his head, overloaded plastic bag knocking against his knee as the pharmacy doors slid back, granting him egress. Vacating the sprawling store, retina-stabbing sales signs glaring sun-bright from every flat surface, he cracked his neck and yawned a little with the menial chore. But Ichimatsu was well and truly stuffed. And mum had given him the cash, far extra to that required for the over the counter drugs she instructed he buy. Osomatsu inferred that extra was reward for his own use. He might have headed for his usual pachinko parlour, but he was expected home soon—what sacrifice wouldn’t he make for his little brothers? So instead he’d filled up on cheap snacks at the pharmacy’s well-stocked shelves, saving a chunk for future pachinko-related use. He’d spent a few coins more on hygienic masks. Whatever had Ichimatsu hammered didn’t seem to be spreading, but he was running low. Osomatsu knew his brother liked to keep a good supply close.

Osomatsu sighed and tilted his head back to enjoy the late-afternoon sun, so relaxed in its warmth. It had been a good day. He hadn’t done much—that only improved his contentment levels. Choromatsu was probably still down at the employment office. Osomatsu’s feet dragged a moment, a slight sobering barb to his good mood. He should probably get down there at least once before the week was out. But it was only Thursday. There was still plenty of time to work up the motivation.

At this point, riding the care wave his parents still devotedly, if with increasing exasperation,
provided for he and his five brothers for as long as he could pull it off was far more appealing than biting the bullet and getting serious about job hunting. But it did fluctuate. They all went through periods of moodiness and heightened self-awareness—some more than others. Osomatsu had consoled Choromatsu through an anxious session only last night, convinced that, as a NEET, he didn’t qualify as a real person.

‘We don’t contribute to society at all,’ he’d said, frowning face lowered as he gripped the knees of his trousers.

‘Yeah … but maybe we contribute more to society in the long run by not trying to contribute,’ Osomatsu had joked as he patted his brother’s back. He was somewhat relieved Choromatsu hadn’t been so upset he didn’t shoot down his carefree self-deprecation—or sextuplet-deprecation—and his brother had seemed keen enough at breakfast, powering through his rice and out the door in a flurry. He’d been positively glowing with optimism compared to poor Ichimatsu, dead on his knees, shoving aside Karamatsu’s sympathy as Jyushimatsu shouted happily about batting practice and Totty flirted with unknowns by text message.

Spotting motion ahead, the drab footpath washed by sunset and shadow, Osomatsu cocked his head and narrowed his eyes against the slight glare, making sure he wasn’t mistaken. A furry feline tail vanished down a little street just past his go-to pachinko parlour. The rattling racket within called to him, but he only let himself gaze longingly through the doors for a moment before walking past. He could come back later—he planned to, remaining cash heavy in his pocket. But a new kitty friend was just what Ichimatsu needed to perk him up—as much as Ichimatsu could be perked up. Osomatsu was hardly a furball whisperer, but he’d herded a few cats in his time.

‘Here, kitty,’ he called coaxingly as he turned past the blinking signs of the parlour that screamed for his patronage. The sun hadn’t vanished yet, but it was low enough that light was completely cut off in the close alley, like some mighty being had flicked the off switch. Squinting to better see through the dim, Osomatsu walked slowly past a few cages bulging with trash bags and whispered softly.

‘Kitty, want to come and meet my cranky brother?’ He couldn’t see any cat that belonged to the vanishing tabby tail, nor any other. ‘Come on, help us out,’ he said more loudly with some frustration his efforts might be wasted. ‘You’ll be getting a sweet deal, Ichimatsu keeps all your favourite fishy treats. They’re good, I know. Come on,’ he repeated, rattling his pharmacy bag. He wasn’t sure if he meant the rustle to be encouragement or a quiet threat to show their faces—whichever worked. ‘I know you’re down here. One of you is coming home with me, wherever you …’

A tentative mew sounded just to his left and straight down. Eyes orienting with a sure flick, Osomatsu smiled. Bingo. A little white kitten peeped from behind a few stacked boxes of discarded junk, whiskers twitching and ears pink and clean. At the small sound of their kin, the vanishing tabby and a pair of tortoise shells meandered from concealment, a bit dishevelled and toughened by the streets, but perfectly placid. ‘Hi,’ Osomatsu smiled around the quartet, struck by how out of place the kitten was. Far too well cared for—was it someone’s pet? If it was missing, that was more reason to invite it home. Quite apart from possible reward, he couldn’t leave the little thing to fend for itself. It was a big bad world for a lost kitten.

‘Hey, little one.’ Osomatsu knelt to better cat wrangle, setting his bag beside him and gesturing invitingly. The kitten was small enough to scoop up with one hand and settle safely in his hood. Osomatsu reached slowly towards it. The kitten cocked its head with near indignance, looking on his limb like it were an alien being. But it didn’t retreat, eyes locked on him—odd eyes. Dark for a cat, weren’t they?
Then its gaze jerked upwards.

‘Matsuno.’

Osomatsu almost tripped over his knees, barely avoiding tasting bitumen, as he scrambled to get up, badly startled. But there was no need to rush or worry; the trio of large newcomers helped him up quick smart. One grip rippling with rock-sized knuckles seizing his shoulder and another locking hard on his forearm, they forced Osomatsu against the alley wall.

‘Guys, guys, come on! What …’

Osomatsu groaned inwardly, exasperation eating his momentary rush of fear. He wasn’t being mugged. Not exactly. He knew these guys. Buttoned in cheap, pit-stained suits to a man, Osomatsu owed them money. Not a lot, but enough he supposed a more prickly customer might have reason to be a bit tetchy, that he’d left the debt hanging all these months. But that was no reason to ambush him, was it? He’d pay when he had it.

‘Not good enough,’ one declared from beneath his fedora when Osomatsu swore it was coming. Pinned to the wall, he sighed bleakly. He’d been having such a good day. He supposed it served him right, chasing cats down a back street by a pachinko parlour. If there was anywhere he was going to run into debtees, this was it.

Thanks kitties for leading me into strife, he blamed unfairly, but still in reasonable humour. And thanks for being sick, Ichimatsu, making me try to cheer you up.

Where were his brothers when he needed them? His small stab of annoyance at their perfectly-reasonable absence warped to passing regret. Five more of his face might be enough to stare this lot down where Osomatsu failed to elicit more than a smirk.

‘What, Matsuno? Are we putting you out here?’ The biggest of them, heavyset and Kansai accent thick, flicked his nose condescendingly. Osomatsu flinched a little. But his not-inconsiderable pride stung far worse than his nose, suddenly coursing with want to cause equal humiliation. A quick escape might do just that, among other benefits such a move offered. Namely, escape. ‘Not worth your time, are we? You got somewhere to be?’

‘Actually,’ Osomatsu said, testing the weight on his shoulder and beginning to slowly sidle from beneath. ‘Now that you mention it …’

Fedora’s grip tightened, whipping him around and hurling him to the street. Fast recovering, Osomatsu was back on his feet in a flash, spinning to snatch up his bag and sprint away until he was ready to deal with this situation. He had plenty of debts, but it had been awhile since anyone confronted him. He really had to watch who he borrowed off, keep it among friends rather than his ever-lengthening lists of shifty acquaintances.

But Osomatsu barely made it three steps before he was nearly jerked clean off his feet, a counterforce to his forward momentum snatching back his hood. Coughing with the sudden pull on his larynx, Osomatsu ducked, seeing the coming punch in his peripherals and cursing loudly. His downward movement dragged Fedora with him, not enough that Accent’s punch took him out instead, but it threw him off balance. Driving his feet into the bitumen, Osomatsu threw himself backwards, hard shoulder cracking Fedora’s teeth. The man let go fast, hands flying to his assaulted mouth.

‘Fuck,’ he heard muffled fury behind palms and paining teeth as Osomatsu kept low, making another break for the alley exit. But as he’d tangled with the two, the third—his tasteless tie was patterned by snakeskin—had cut off escape. Snakeskin looming ahead and Accent already winding up again,
Osomatsu fast weighed his options.

‘Look,’ he said quite calmly, trying to remember the change from the pharmacy. He took a wild stab as he ducked Accent’s next punch, flying for the side of his head. ‘I have about five thousand on me, have that, and then …’

He sidestepped fast, just avoiding a sharp kick to his knee. ‘Come on,’ he exclaimed, getting angry. ‘I’m trying to be reasonable here, and you …’

Fedora shoved him hard, eyes glinting with spite. ‘I’ll get you for that, Matsuno, you cheap fucker.’

Tripping backwards, Osomatsu hurriedly rolled aside before Accent could slam him against the wall again. If they weren’t before, the three were now beyond reason—when had that happened? Trying to run and personally booking a dentist appointment for Fedora might have something to do with it, he thought wryly, resigning himself to the fight—not quite resigning. Osomatsu had dragged his brothers into more scrapes growing up than he’d been dragged into himself. Even if Jyushimatsu and Karamatsu were now stronger, Osomatsu still had the best punch and kept in reasonable fighting form wresting with his brothers. He enjoyed the occasional tussle, so long as it didn’t land him in a police station—or a hospital. But he did prefer a fair fight. His three debtees all angrier and bigger than him, Osomatsu figured odds were skewed a touch in his opponents’ favour. But he shrugged aside sense before it overwhelmed his spirit and any chance with it, lurching to hurl a right hook at an unsuspecting Snakeskin.

Snakeskin threw up his hands more in surprise than a firm block. Other arm curling from his side, Osomatsu drove his hard fist into the bigger man’s stomach, pulling back quick as his foe doubled over wheezing. Incapacitated for the next few seconds, Osomatsu grabbed Snakeskin’s bony wrist and swung about, hurling the stumbling man into Fedora and Accent as they charged. Fedora went down under Snakeskin’s limp weight. Accent charged clean through, mad as a wronged rhino. Whipping his plastic bag from his elbow into his fist, Osomatsu swung it about, momentarily blinding Accent, the weighty bag catching him in the face. The man’s eyes teared with the pain of impact, and a few boxes of Pocky slipped free, raining down and adding to Accent’s confusion.

‘Real tough guys, three on one,’ Osomatsu taunted, dancing out of reach as Accent surged to grab him by the front of his hoodie. He was winning, Osomatsu realised elatedly. He was better than all three of them. Feinting left, the suddenly enthused Matsuno sextuplet aimed a heartened jab to Accent’s clavicle. The big man shrugged it off, the bug far more aggravating than the bite.

‘You think if you beat the crap outta me I’ll suddenly have what I owe you? What’s that logic? How’s this, then,’ Osomatsu offered jovially as Accent glared, an advancing threat from which he just kept prancing back, knotted fists up and ready to go. ‘You can have everything I owe you right here, right now. But first you’ve got to catch …’

Two hard sets of hand wrapped about his upper arms, nails digging in deep. He’d danced straight into Fedora and Snakeskin. Well, shit.

To his credit—his own credit; there was no one there to see and judge, he was somewhat relieved to know—Osomatsu didn’t get beaten to a bloody pulp. He got in a few good kicks as Accent pummelled him, even breaking free of Fedora briefly, using his hard head again against the man’s already-fragile teeth to land a last fiery uppercut to his assailant’s jutting chin. But they fast had him back under control, a heavy foot to the back of his knees shoving him into an unwilling kneel. Osomatsu grunted with each kick to his gut, instinctively flinching as Accent’s boot drew back again and again.

‘Cheap fucker,’ Fedora growled, yanking his head back by the hair. Osomatsu grinned up through
his newly-split lip, Fedora’s mouth just as bloody as his.

‘So how much is this pleasure worth? Are we even now? Debt paid in blood and …’

Osomatsu broke off with a sharp hiss, Accent’s answer glancing just past his eye. Screwing his eyes shut and finally deciding he ached enough without struggling further, he waited for them to tire of their debt collecting. Eventually they kicked him over. Back to the cold bitumen, Osomatsu couldn’t help it as the three loomed over him, ‘What, had enough already? I could keep …’

He just managed to roll aside before Snakeskin’s stamp smashed his nose. Watch it, he warned himself, needing a quick reminder of his general desire to stay out of hospitals. He managed to keep his smart mouth shut, feeling a bit of a coward as he closed his eyes and played dead while they rifled through his pockets for cash, handling him roughly. A few lewd insults occurred to him as he lay there; it was with great effort he kept them safely behind his teeth. A crunching rustle somewhere behind him told Osomatsu someone also looted his shopping. Just fucking great.

He waited until sounds of pilfering had ended and the three’s heavy footsteps had stalked a safe distance out of the alley. Then Osomatsu painfully pushed himself up on his elbows. ‘Argh,’ he groaned, rubbing at the fresh bruises by his eye. He definitely hadn’t planned on being beaten up today. But he supposed he never planned on much at all. Osomatsu was spontaneous like that, one of his charms. Pressing a hand to his paining gut, he needed a moment to physically compose himself, knees quivering with the after effects of a reasonably-sound pounding.

‘Does that count?’ he wondered to the alley with very little cheek, genuinely curious as he rubbed a finger comfortingly beneath his nose. ‘Do I still owe them anything? Unfair,’ he then complained, grumbling as he rested against the alley wall until his legs stopped shaking. ‘Didn’t even give me a fair fight, and I was winning, too … bastards.’

If he could summon the will after what experience said would be an unpleasant, sore sleep, this was near enough motivation to get him down to the employment office first thing tomorrow. He had to start generating his own funds to push through pachinko instead of borrowing to feed his gambling habit—gambling habit, Choromatsu would correct, but Osomatsu disregarded his more sensible brother. He’d stop if he wanted to. But he didn’t.

‘You just got thrashed—that’s not a good enough reason to stop?’ he questioned aloud, but only shrugged in answer. It wasn’t like pachinko had left him lying in an alley. With a wince, Osomatsu stooped to retrieve his now-battered shop bag. Most of his snacks were gone, but he was relieved at least Ichimatsu’s medicines had been of no interest to his violent detees. Still somewhat shaken, but feeling nothing more serious than cuts and bruises, Osomatsu was about to slink to the reassuring comfort of home—home didn’t care about the huge debt he’d racked up over the years—when he remembered the reason he’d ventured down that damn alley in the first place.

‘Kitty?’ he called, turning on the spot and scanning for any sign of the felines. Sure enough, the four had scattered with violence. More sense than fear, Osomatsu supposed. Still:

‘Your loss, cowards,’ he called after their already-vanished forms. Tensing with sudden concern his assailants might be near enough to hear and think the offhand insult for them, Osomatsu moved to hurry home.

The tiny white kitten sat neatly in his path. Dark eyes stark to its startling white fur, it gazed unblinkingely up at the worse-for-wear young man. Osomatsu stared back. Then he smiled, offering a hand from his height; he wasn’t about to stoop again when his jarred knees ached so badly. The kitten didn’t move, stare so intent. Osomatsu suddenly had the strangest impression, that the tiny creature considered him with more than passing feline curiosity. As though it scanned him,
‘I don’t need this shit from you,’ Osomatsu mumbled, feeling embarrassedly defensive. It was a cat, for god’s sake. Wasn’t it?

Now that he thought about it, there was something not quite cat like about the animal. Its ears were a little large for its head, reed-like tail a little too long. Paws a bit big for … since when was Osomatsu an expert on the physical attributes of kittens? But he couldn’t shake the odd sense the kitten’s unsettling gaze roused in him. Feeling a little foolish, Osomatsu shook himself to clear his clearly-rattled head, and decided the judgmental kitten could look after itself. He stepped over the little creature, thinking at the last moment to be careful not to crush its fragile curled tail.

He made it home with less shopping and more bruises than he’d intended. And, despite good intentions and effort expended, he returned distinctly catless. ‘I’m home.’

‘Welcome home. Did you … Osomatsu-niisan, what happened?’ Todomatsu exclaimed, almost dropping his smartphone in surprise as Osomatsu set down his bag on the low lounge table, digging out boxes of tablets and masks and depositing them before Ichimatsu. Shrouded in purple, it looked like he hadn’t shifted since Osomatsu had left.

‘Tell us what happened, brother,’ Karamatsu prompted when Osomatsu only shrugged, concern behind the second born’s tacky sunglasses deep as Jyushimatsu looked on, sprawled on his balancing ball and wide smile somewhat alarmed. Osomatsu grinned a little to hide his wince, nasty scrape by his eye smarting.

‘It’s nothing, it was nothing,’ he said. As satisfying as the idea was, all of them confronting and confusing his assailants together—preferably Jyushimatsu with bat in hand and Ichimatsu returned to his customarily-intimidating form—Osomatsu wanted his brothers to have absolutely nothing to do with any of his shady acquaintances.

Karamatsu looked far from convinced, but didn’t press the matter once Osomatsu agreed to let him clean his cuts. His face hurt like a son of a bitch; he wasn’t about to refuse. Sitting heavily at the table, he started slightly when Ichimatsu’s hand shot out, seizing his forearm. That one move belying his state, each that followed was pathetically sluggish, like his grip on his eldest brother held him trembling on the edge of a cliff. Slowly, Ichimatsu tilted his head, looking up at Osomatsu’s bruises from his slump. ‘You okay?’

‘Yeah, little brother, I’m okay. Ouch, fuck!’ he exclaimed at the sudden intense sting by his eye, flinching from Karamatsu’s dampened cloth. ‘Watch it!’

‘Yeah, watch it, Shittymatsu,’ Ichimatsu growled at Karamatsu’s clumsy care, grip loosening as he turned his face back to the table. Gritting his teeth, Osomatsu suffered through his brother’s caring attention, the worst of his cuts taped up with plasters. He then helped himself to Ichimatsu’s painkillers, popping tablets from their silvery casing.

‘How’s your head? I did go out and get these for you, you know. Want to actually take them?’

‘Mmph,’ Ichimatsu mumbled incoherently, but took the tablets when Osomatsu shared the glass of water he fetched.

‘I’m home!’ Choromatsu soon called tiredly from the entrance, just a few minutes ahead of dinner. Their mum and dad weren’t too troubled on seeing their eldest’s injuries; he’d come home with far worse. Just not recently. Joining his brothers as dinner was laid, Choromatsu had no more luck than his siblings making Osomatsu spill details, and proceeded to carry most of the mealtime conversation...
himself, revolving around the jobs he’d applied for and hopes to soon have another crack at moving out. Only Karamatsu offered much encouragement, Totty glaring and Ichimatsu barely even surfacing to eat. Trying to eat around his cut lip, Osomatsu caught Jyushimatsu staring, oddly intent as he stuffed his face, chopsticks working at ridiculous speeds.

‘What?’

‘You don’t fight much anymore, Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu said, perfectly bright tones at odds with something almost distress. ‘Did someone attack you?’

‘It’s not a big deal,’ Osomatsu maintained under his siblings’ eyes, feeling a spike of annoyance at their interference. He wasn’t telling them for their own good.

‘Because if you need me to go and …’

‘I don’t need you to do anything,’ Osomatsu cut harshly across Jyushimatsu’s unfinished offer, angry his brother hinted—even unwittingly—that he couldn’t handle himself. Osomatsu could fight his own battles. Tone apparently enough to quash any further questioning from his siblings, they finished eating in uncharacteristic quiet. By the time he’d swallowed his last mouthful, Osomatsu’s temper had petered out. He felt a little bad, that’d he’d been short with Jyushimatsu. He hoped his rough treatment that afternoon—a little deserved, maybe, for being such a cheap fucker—was some excuse for his brothers; however he pretended, it was no excuse to him.

‘So what’s everyone doing now?’ Osomatsu spoke up first as they stacked their emptied bowls for washing. Only Choromatsu had any firm intentions: to go to bed early. Osomatsu wheedled, trying to talk him out of it. ‘We could play poker or mahjong. Or wasn’t there some roleplay game you mentioned that you wanted to try …’

Osomatsu trailed off as Choromatsu coloured, clearing his throat awkwardly as though he’d accidentally ratted himself out. But it wasn’t Choromatsu’s embarrassment that silenced him. It was Ichimatsu’s quiet groan, shoulders hunching where he rested heavily on the table. Ichimatsu’s occasionally difficult personality demanded more personal time than the rest of them; being ill seemed to exponentially increase his necessary alone quota. Osomatsu should probably get the rest of them out of the house for a while, let Ichimatsu mope alone or fall asleep unhindered by Jyushimatsu’s profound, but sometimes overbearing love.

‘No roleplay? Shame, I was looking forward to it. How about pachinko, then? Let’s go.’

‘Let’s go, let’s go!’ Jyushimatsu cried with stirring enthusiasm, Totty giving a bored shrug of agreement—feigned boredom; Totty was as keen on the machines as any of them—as Osomatsu hustled them up the stairs to grab wallets, Choromatsu sighing as he resigned himself to an evening out.

‘You don’t seem too disappointed I’m cutting into your good habits,’ Osomatsu teased, shoving his lagging brother lightly. Choromatsu looked over his shoulder, no doubt aiming for aggravated. But his near-perpetual frown was tweaked in a small smile, and he shrugged like there was nothing for it. He’d spent the entire day alone with cold employment agents, every long hour more disheartening than the last. Some non-judgmental family activity would be good for him. Not to mention Fedora, Accent and Snakeskin had made off with Osomatsu’s pachinko funds. If he couldn’t filch enough from Karamatsu with sympathy his bait, Choromatsu was his next best bet. He would keep Osomatsu supplied with cash just to shut him up.

‘We won’t be home too late,’ Osomatsu said for their parents, dad complaining good-naturedly as mum stole his evening paper, replacing it with a tea towel. ‘Before the bathhouse closes. A soak
might do you good,’ he added, squatting beside Ichimatsu, touching him lightly on the shoulder.
Ichimatsu was hardly a paragon of good hygiene at the best of times, but his self-care habits had
diminished drastically with his health. ‘Don’t wait for us, if you want to go.’

Ichimatsu shrugged slightly, his only answer. Smiling a little, Osomatsu ruffled his brother’s messy
hair, scratching gently. To his surprise, Ichimatsu leaned into his touch, like a dishevelled young cat,
sleepy and confused. The eldest Matsuno was afflicted by sudden creeping dread at the fourth born’s
acceptance and apparent enjoyment of contact. Ichimatsu tolerated Osomatsu’s affection at best; his
pride was inflated past insufferable, worse even than his own. He’d been off colour for days, but for
the first time Osomatsu had to think something might be seriously wrong with his brother.

Osomatsu didn’t let it bother him long, compartmentalising like a pro in order to enjoy himself. With
a surge of good sense, he led the way to their second go-to pachinko place; he’d racked up fewer
debts there, his assailants less likely to be lurking nearby. Barely in the door, Osomatsu pulled his “I
just got hurt, look how sad I am” card with Karamatsu, scoring three thousand to play with from his
most compassionate brother. ‘Dear brother, never hesitate to request my aid! May this brighten your
day like sunshine and …’

Osomatsu skittered off before Karamatsu could finish; he was already in enough pain. Throwing
himself gleefully before a machine, Osomatsu fed his first note and jammed the start button with
optimism. He’d lost it all—hopes and money—within half an hour. Broad smile now drawn in a
regretful line as he glared enviously at the successful flashing of his neighbour’s machine, he shoved
himself up from his stool and, rubbing briefly at his bruising face, went to find Choromatsu and
annoy some cash out of him.

He found Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu first; they played side by side, Totty’s eyes roving from from
cascading spheres back to his phone, chatting on Line with his left hand while he twisted his balls’
speed with his right. Osomatsu knew better than to ask Todomatsu for money. The only sibling with
any employment, the youngest guarded his income with the providence of a hoarding dragon. A
particularly stingy one. And he didn’t like to bother Jyushimatsu. He watched as his machine
heralded REACH, wide-eyed and focussed, like the cartoon battle was some soul-shattering TV
drama.

Moving on through the smoke and flashing lights, Osomatsu tried calling through the racket.
‘Choromatsu? Where are you?’ No response but the wail of rolling balls and songs of success,
patrons politely quiet in victory and defeat. He squinted his eyes to slits to cut through the haze,
perusing the aisles for his brother. He finally spotted Choromatsu’s green hoodie, Karamatsu’s blue
beside him. The machine by Karamatsu’s was free. Osomatsu perched on its stool, talking over the
second born's head he silently seethed with bad luck.

‘Choromatsu, can you lend me some money? Choromatsu?’ he repeated when his brother didn’t
reply. His plastic tray neared full, and he already had some winnings piled behind him. Choromatsu
always checked a machine’s stats before he chose to play. It looked like he’d picked one of tonight’s
big winners. Excellent.

‘Hey, Choromatsu, lend me something,’ Osomatsu urged as Choromatsu carefully twisted his wheel,
re-establishing his sweet spot. Osomatsu helpfully offered a five yen coin to jam it in place.
Choromatsu ignored him. ‘Come on, you’re winning,’ he pushed, tucking the rejected coin in his
pocket. ‘You’ve already won at least twenty thousand, come on, help me out …’

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu finally quit ignoring him, tearing his eyes from his screen in
annoyance. ‘For god’s sake, will you …’

‘Do you hear that?’ Karamatsu asked suddenly, balls tumbling uselessly into the bottom of his
machine as he swivelled, brow creased above his sunglasses—sunglasses at night, in a pachinko parlour. Only Karamatsu. Remembering his question after fondly lamenting his brother’s would-be confident idiosyncrasies, Osomatsu listened. All he heard was typical of pachinko parlours, his eardrums thumping pleasantly with the familiar cacophony.

‘Hear what?]

‘I don’t know,’ Karamatsu said, now uncertain; he fiddled with the arm of his glasses, lifting them higher on his nose. Osomatsu eyed Choromatsu, who shrugged. ‘It sounded like … a cat.’

‘You’re losing all your money over a cat?’ Osomatsu said incredulously as Karamatsu again lost spectacularly, machine’s losing run now done. Not that he was one to talk, Osomatsu supposed; he’d just been beaten up thanks to the same. How would Karamatsu even hear a cat over the racket, if one could get inside there at all? He was hearing things, or maybe it was part of a new winning song.

‘Maybe.’ Karamatsu offered no opposition, flashing a smile as he spun back to regard his empty tray. ‘I think it’s about time I switched …’

A carrying shriek pierced the blares and bleeps down the aisles of machines. Heads lifted in confusion, seeking its source. Karamatsu was on his feet in an instant, Osomatsu hopping down half a second later. ‘What was …’

His question faded as Karamatsu lowered his sunglasses with one shaking hand, staring dumbstruck across the parlour. Nonplussed, Osomatsu followed his gaze. He might have been kicked in the gut again, his entire breath pushed from his body in shock and leaving him gasping.

Something stood just inside the entrance. Something—Osomatsu had no solid noun to apply. Some creature, some being the like of which he’d never seen. Its tall white form, narrow and shapeless, was wrapped in close-fitting, glaringly-bright swaths of colour, its cloak stark black by contrast and sweeping its booted feet. Body that of an elongated, painfully-thin human with broad pointed shoulders and a chopstick-narrow waist, it was its face that iced Osomatsu’s blood. Beneath a rough-hewn mask, seven beady eyes surveyed the parlour patrons independently, whipping this way and that over a gaping slash of a mouth and pencil-pointed chin.

‘Wh-wh-what …’ Choromatsu stammered, stumbling backwards into Karamatsu, who caught him firmly despite his own mute fear. ‘What is that?’

Osomatsu shook his head slowly, partly in inability to answer, but mostly inability to believe what unfolded before him. That was … that couldn’t be a costume. Even at his distance, he could see the dry texture of its bone-white skin, scaly and rough. And its voice when it rang out, high yet guttural as it flung its hands—claws. They were claws, Osomatsu saw with a sickening pang of terror, pointed and deadly. But what emitted from that creature’s maw was no human voice.

‘Weak inhabitants of Tokyo, pathetic and lowly citizens of Japan and doomed Earth. The Liberation Force now claims your souls,’ its words echoed eerily, mouth drawn wide like a bottomless pit. ‘Surrender yourselves to our dark might without resistance.’

‘What the fuck?’ Osomatsu managed to whisper, a hint of incredulity still his. What was going on? It claimed their souls? What in hell did that mean? No one in their right mind wanted Osomatsu’s soul—his girlfriend track record was solid proof of that. But whatever was going on, the evidence kept piling up: clearly this wasn’t his day.

‘I’m calling the police,’ Choromatsu said shakily. But the creature pointed before he could retrieve his shitty model flip phone, six claws aimed dead at six unfortunates who played nearest the door. A
gaseous dark substance, like some evaporated oozing shit, swirled into being at the apex of each claw and shot at each target, striking them hard in the chest. They immediately doubled over, foreheads striking their screens as they began to moan and shake.

‘What the …’ Osomatsu backed away, grabbing and dragging his brothers with him as the victims’ unexplainable ailment suddenly ceased under the creature’s gaping grin, seven eyes alight. The six patrons shambled to their feet. They stared over their fellow players, eyes deadened.

‘Do your Liberation Force’s bidding—capture them,’ the creature ordered. Immediately, the six struck by darkness turned on the rest of the parlour.

‘Holy shit!’ Osomatsu yelled, shoving his brothers behind him as half the parlour lost their heads and began trying to flee in all directions, abandoning their winnings and tripping as they collided head on. Someone—or many someones—accidentally upended trays, waves of silver balls streaming dangerously underfoot. The triumphant alien creature seemed to gloat over the mayhem as the six shambled like the raised dead, grabbing for anyone they could reach to restrain and no doubt receive the same shadowy treatment. ‘We have to get out of here!’

‘Where are Jyushimatsu and Totty?’ Karamatsu shouted over the panic, almost slipping on a few lost pachinko balls. Osomatsu turned back in panic, searching desperately for his little brothers. But he spotted no yellow or pink through the chaos.

‘Argh, fuck!’ he screamed as a zombie shot its grip through the rush of bodies to seize his sleeve. Dragging him forward hard, Karamatsu seized him harder, hauling him back. Osomatsu fought through swelling panic, jerking his arm to test his assailant’s strength. Though he seemed utterly brainwashed, the businessman was still weaker than him. ‘Let go!’ he shouted—not at his attacker, but Karamatsu. Startled, his brother released him. Osomatsu dove headlong into the zombie, knocking him down and ripping his arm free. Kicking him once and hoping he would stay down amid the torrent of running feet, Osomatsu backed up fast, heart hammering in his throat.

‘Get out of here!’ he shouted at his brothers; Karamatsu grip on his arm was all that seemed to keep wide-eyed Choromatsu from descending into all-out panic. ‘I’ll find the others.’

Karamatsu was torn. ‘But what about …’

‘Get Choromatsu out of here!’ Osomatsu amended his instruction, angry that Karamatsu delayed. ‘Move it, go!’

His brothers joined the rush towards the back exit, Karamatsu pulling Choromatsu along, other arm raised and ready to defend. At least two of his brothers hopefully safe, Osomatsu gulped and jumped up on the nearest stool, out of the mass exodus, scanning for his younger brothers. He quickly spotted Jyushimatsu, his hoodie a shining beacon. They were across two aisles, hemmed in by dead-eyed patrons. Totty crouched in terror behind a steadfast Jyushimatsu, bat drawn from Osomatsu didn’t know where and cocked to swing. ‘Jyushimatsu! Todomatsu!’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu.’

Gaze torn unwillingly from his brothers’ peril, Osomatsu looked down. A tiny white kitten stood on the stool beside his. It was the same kitten he’d met in the alley, it had to be. Osomatsu blinked. It blinked back.

‘There’s not much time, Matsuno Osomatsu. We need you.’

The cat was speaking. The goddamn cat was speaking, Osomatsu thought faintly, knees shuddering
dangerously on his perch. Well, he supposed shakily, a monster alien being was brainwashing pachinko players with smoky sludge. Cats talking wasn’t much of a stretch, was it?

‘Wh-what …’

‘I will explain everything later,’ the kitten said with growing urgency. It didn’t meow or purr—its mouth didn’t even move, timbre feminine and young, like a fresh junior high student. ‘For now, you must do exactly as I say.’

Osomatsu trembled on his stool, none of his customary wisecracks rising to shield him. He was an expert at shunting feelings aside, but was utterly stripped of his skills in face of this mess, unable to dampen the useless fear—Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu needed him!

‘Don’t!’ the kitten instructed with surprising force, nailing Osomatsu’s feet to the padded stool as he was about to leap to his brothers’ aid. ‘Take this, now!’

The kitten flipped something towards him—where were these things being pulled from? Osomatsu managed to catch the spinning cylindrical object in his shaking hands. Long and thin, Osomatsu brought it to his nose to examine. It was silvery-white, maybe the length of an average mechanical pencil. He looked down at the cat, dumbfounded. But it wasn’t there; it had sprung to sit on top of the machine, almost eye to eye with Osomatsu.

‘I offer you a temporary power contract. Do you accept? Accept!’ the kitten ordered shrilly when Osomatsu only stared. ‘Hurry, do it!’

‘I … I accept,’ Osomatsu stammered, heart seizing as Todomatsu began to scream. The thin cylinder pulsed warm beneath his fingers. What in hell?

‘Repeat after me: by this contract I submit my spark to salvation.’

‘What the fuck …’

‘Say it!’

‘By … by this contract,’ Osomatsu struggled to repeat as Jyushimatsu swung a feint; he didn’t want to hurt their attackers. The being watched with mounting humour, the chuckles that rattled deep in its throat sickening. Oh god … what in hell was Osomatsu doing?

‘If you want to help them, swear by your contract now!’ the kitten ordered.

‘By this contract I submit my spark to salvation!’ Osomatsu cried out. Beyond his control, he spun the cylinder between his fingers, and the next thing he knew his feet left the stool and he was surrounded by rippling flames. He tried to cry out, but could make no sound. Forces beyond him, centred on the cylinder as it twirled from his fingers to float before his chest, moved him through air, drawing his arms high and wide as the flames began to burn inside him, changing him deep within and reinforcing his soul. The cylinder morphed like molten starlight, rearranging as adornment, a sparkling red gem pulled from nothing setting itself in place. Osomatsu glistened, aware and distantly humiliated as his hoodie and jeans seemed to disintegrate in light, limbs and chest rippling as folds of flame helixed around him, snapping to form against his body. Twisted elegantly, Osomatsu punched out both his fists like it was commanded by heaven, and suddenly his hands glinted with black and white gold. Bringing his fists together in a hard hit, they burst with fire.

What … the actual fuck?

‘Flaming vanguard of onslaught, Salamander!’ he heard cried out in his own voice, strength of the
call belying his increasing bewilderment, leaving him almost bereft of sense. Osomatsu wasn’t sure when he landed in that ridiculous pose. But he broke it as fast as it formed, looking down on himself in disbelief. His clothes had changed. His hood was up, and some sort of slim lens covered his right eye. But his fists attracted more attention, swathed in massive knuckle dusters, gauntlets that consumed halfway up his forearms. Unable to help himself, Osomatsu pounded his fists together again. Flame flew on impact.

‘Right …’ he breathed weakly. He had no idea what had happened to him. But he felt strong. He’d never felt so strong.

‘Don’t attack the slaves unless you have to!’ the kitten was shouting as Jyushimatsu seized Todomatsu and, putting his back to their advancing attackers, pitched him bodily towards the exit, spending all his strength to hurl the frozen Totty from harm. ‘Get the soldier, that one!’

The kitten madly indicated the being, now leering down at Jyushimatsu and claws spinning with darkness. With his brief distraction, Osomatsu’s brother had been seized, four hands holding him hard, ripping his bat away. How? Jyushimatsu was so strong, he couldn’t be overwhelmed so … he still didn’t want to hurt them, the idiot!

‘Wh-what am I supposed to do!’ Osomatsu exclaimed wildly—tried to exclaim. His mouth and nose down to his chin, he realised, were shrouded by a close-fitting mesh mask that froze his lips.

‘Shut up and save them!’ the kitten heard somehow and shouted back. Tearing across the top of machines, the tiny creature heedlessly pelted towards the monstrous soldier. Ashamed his courage was dwarfed by a kitten—albeit a talking kitten that handed out magical girl trinkets … dear god, it had turned Osomatsu into a magical boy. Steeling himself, Osomatsu raced after the kitten. His feet, he saw, were now shod in strange running boots, black and blazing red. They looked heavy, but Osomatsu practically floated between strides—he wasn’t the worst runner, but he wasn’t this fast, particular leaping between swivelling pachinko stools.

The soldier hadn’t yet noticed him, too preoccupied with chaos and apparent celebration, Jyushimatsu and four more hapless captives dragged before it at the entrance as its claws pulsed with darkness, already pointed at their chests. Out of stools, Osomatsu froze as the creature shot the foul substance straight at his brother. It hit him hard, dissolving through his sunshine hoodie. Jyushimatsu’s eternally-smiling face hardened, chin dropping to his chest and already trembling.

‘No!’ Osomatsu shouted, his horror unheard. But for the first time, the soldier looked over its shaking victims and directly at him. Its seven eyes widened in recognition.

‘What are you waiting for!’ With that, the kitten flung itself on the head of the nearest shambling zombie. Immediately it released its spasming captive, flailing to dislodge the kitten’s claws. Stirred by its reckless bravery, Osomatsu’s breath was still short, barely sucking down enough to keep his head. But as Jyushimatsu’s shudders stopped and now dead eyes lifted, resolve banished all lingering fear and disbelief, his brother’s peril galvanising him.

Osomatsu lept straight at the towering white soldier. It was a powerful jump, and somehow the soldier seemed even more amazed to see Osomatsu than the other way around. Right fist flying and crackling with flames, Osomatsu struck a jarring hook to the side of its bony head, momentum of his leap sending them both flying. The creature struck the ground in a pile of spindly limbs, unprepared. Osomatsu landed catlike—he’d never been so graceful a day in his life—and spun into a guard position, flaming fists ready.

‘Don’t wait for it to get up! Kill it!’ the kitten shouted—it must shout in Osomatsu’s head. And if he couldn’t speak under his mask, that meant Osomatsu spoke in its head, too, and—wait, kill it?
‘Don’t hesitate! Don’t wait for …’

The kitten leapt from its victim back to the safety of the pachinko machines, hissing as the swollen slave ranks stumbled upright when the soldier on the ground clenched its claws, squawking orders. ‘Kill him now, do it—that’s the Salamander! Take him out now!’

‘Shit,’ Osomatsu swore, the zombies getting in his way, impeding access to the being he apparently had to kill. He might not make plans, but, if he did, murder definitely wouldn’t be part of them, even if the alien soldier thing was asking for it, somehow stealing souls. And he couldn’t hurt Jyushimatsu! ‘What’s wrong with them?’ he shouted, trusting the kitten heard him, as he dodged a hit from a dead-eyed businesswoman, all her strength nothing to his amplified power, but disturbingly accurate. Unless she was an underground martial arts champion, no way should her aim be so true. The soldier must direct their actions, a puppeteer.

‘They’re infected by darkness,’ the kitten explained as Osomatsu unwillingly faced his powerful little brother, haplessly controlled and empty eyes contracting Osomatsu’s chest so hard his ribs might snap. Jyushimatsu had retrieved his bat and handled it threateningly, aim improved by the puppeteer and strength already formidable. ‘Their souls belong to the Liberation Force. They aren’t in control of themselves.’

‘Yeah, I see that,’ Osomatsu grunted, steeling himself and catching Jyushimatsu’s next savage swing in his hands. Well protected, his flesh pulsed within his fiery gauntlets, and he wrenched his brother towards him, holding him fast as the rest closed in around them. ‘What do I do about it?’

The kitten repeated its instruction. ‘Kill the soldier! There are other ways, but you have no clue what you’re doing! Just get it done! You won’t be arrested,’ the kitten almost scoffed with Osomatsu’s hesitation. ‘This is war, not some back-alley assassination! Is there something you like about that one in particular?’ the kitten asked incredulously as Osomatsu struggled to defend himself and keep Jyushimatsu close, his brother intent on ripping his arms off. ‘By the Alliance, he does look like you …’

‘He’s my brother!’

The kitten showed a brief spark of understanding through its continuing frustration. ‘Then throw him from harm, you can lift him!’

He could lift Jyushimatsu? On his back, maybe, to haul home if he got drunk. But lift him clean off the ground and hurl him away, like Jyushimatsu had done to Totty? Osomatsu was under no illusion that was possible, under regular circumstances. But he’d just drifted naked in midair and been transformed into … what was it, a Salamander? He could run like on air, hit with power many times his own. It wasn’t so far-fetched set beside those fresh facts.

Acting fast, Osomatsu knocked two zombies aside, reluctantly using his sturdy brother as a weapon, then lifted him high, throwing him the entire length of the parlour. Jyushimatsu crashed bodily into the back wall. Osomatsu didn’t have time to worry he’d hurt him; the mindless puppets were all over him. Swearing as he ducked vicious swipes, he knew he had to break his vow not to hurt them. Osomatsu willed his strange weapons’ power be dimmed, aiming as carefully as he could, meaning to knock them out, or at least down. He flinched a little, pulling his punches. But no flames licked. He had sure control of these weapons, some link to his wish or gut instinct.

All but two zombies felled, Osomatsu swept them aside with a powerful kick, freeing his path to the soldier. It had raised itself from the floor, staring in shock at its puppets, their rambling force torn through like tissue paper. But they would rise again fast, Osomatsu somehow knew, pulled unwilling to their feet.
The soldier struggled to hide its dismay, many slitted pupils pulsing like a quickened heartbeat.
Sweeping aside its cloak and displaying threatening claws, it attempted cold nonchalance. ‘It seems
you somehow followed us here, Salamander. No matter. I am Juuku, loyal vassal to my Lord Takuu.
Strike me down, if you must; I have not your strength alone. But be warned: we have more power
now on our side than even your Spectrum Alliance can imagine.’

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’ Osomatsu shook his head, remembering the soldier couldn’t
hear him, and resolved to grit his teeth and do what the kitten commanded. If it would save
Jyushimatsu. Throwing himself forward, Osomatsu jumped and punched a fistful of flames that
exploded in Juuku’s face. The narrow being managed to weave around the solid hit, a few flying
flames flecking its cloak. Osomatsu spun, all his grace of power, driving punch after punch. Most
landing as the almost helpless soldier ducked and blocked, badly singed—god help him, Osomatsu
felt almost sorry for it before he caught sight of Jyushimatsu ambling mindlessly to attack with a flick
of its claws. Osomatsu growled, enraged words beyond Juuku’s hearing, ‘I won’t let you use him!
Give his soul back … right now!’

Osomatsu slammed the towering being into a still-bleeping pachinko machine, perpetual smoky
atmosphere almost cleared with the whipping fury of battle.

‘Strike it there, look!’ the kitten shouted from relative safety a few machines away. Osomatsu saw
where it indicated: set within its multicoloured wraps was a proudly-displayed dark crystal, cloudy
within and swirling as though with its bearer’s own turmoil. Osomatsu’s eye on his target, Juuku
struggled to protect the crystal, despite their apparent willingness to die for their Liberation Force.
Whatever the fuck it was.

‘You couldn’t have suggested that before?’

Holding the narrow being with the hard strength of one reinforced arm, Osomatsu drove a shattering
punch straight to the crystal, flames exploding through the woeful protection of thin arm and
billowing cloak. Osomatsu didn’t need to see; he felt it crush beneath his knuckles. Juuku’s pit-like
mouth fell wide in a hair-raising shriek. Osomatsu fell back in alarm and disgust, releasing the being
as it began to crumble, cloak to unravel, all matter falling in on itself until it was only a pile of ash
bedding a few shards of shattered crystal.

With its destruction, Jyushimatsu and and the other soulless attack puppets crumpled as well. ‘No!’
Osomatsu shouted, rushing to his brother’s side. Thank god, he saw through frenzied panic
Jyushimatsu already stirred.

‘He’ll be fine for now, come on!’

The kitten urged Osomatsu into shadow, the young man only obeying out of some numbing need to
follow instructions of someone who seemed to know what the hell was going on. The talking kitten
had more of its shit together than him, Osomatsu speechless with his gruesome defeat of the alien
puppeteer.

Hidden in the back corner as police sirens began to whine in the distance, Osomatsu looked down on
himself properly for the first time since his odd transformation. His worn old hoodie was replaced by
one thick and snug, reinforced like armour; he felt its fibres knitted hard and sure to his skin beneath
and was sure the blood-red fabric would turn a blade, if he ever got drunk enough to test it. The
battle hoodie was zipped over a tight dark top with white gold, zipper shining with what could only
be a deep garnet. His jeans were gone, now clad in charcoal-dark combat pants, loose enough for
comfort, close enough to never impede his movement. He’d seen his running boots briefly. Now he
looked closer, he noticed the soles glinted with some substance similar to his gauntlets. Inspired,
Osomatsu stamped the ground with intent. Flames bit the linoleum beneath his feet. His hood was
deep and wide, and obscured most of his face, though Osomatsu had no trouble seeing. If anything, his senses felt sharper. Reaching a quivering finger, he nudged the odd glass over his right eye. It flared briefly in his vision, glowing red and projecting odd symbols onto his retina.

‘I … I …’

‘This must be a shock,’ the kitten said, teenage girl voice now remarkably calm as Osomatsu stared. ‘But we can’t discuss this here. You must transform back, get your brother to safety.’

‘Brothers,’ Osomatsu corrected on automatic.

‘You don’t want to be here when your law enforcement arrives. I’m sure they mean well, but they will only cause us problems. Are you all right?’ the kitten showed concern for Osomatsu for the first time, no longer ordering him shrilly through unbelievable battle. ‘Take a moment if you must. We must speak properly, you and I. But not here.’

Osomatsu gulped, struggling for words. Panting for breath he hadn’t realised he’d lost, finally he managed a grin.

‘I … I look awesome!’
The Contract

Chapter Notes

Hi lovely people! Serious info dump coming up, so sorry. But it's all got to be said, and I think it all reads okay. Really long again too ... probably shouldn't have gotten into that habit. Thank you so much for reading and I'd love to know what you think, any feedback or comments, about this here awesome magical boy :) 

After at least a minute admiring himself as sirens wailed ever nearer, Osomatsu finally changed back on the kitten’s near-irate order, speaking the words she instructed. ‘My service this hour is complete.’ He had fully expected—almost looked forward to—more floating airborne, perhaps in reverse order to his initial transformation. But he simply phased back to his own shitbag self.

‘Why couldn’t I just transform like that?’ he had to ask, finger at his nose as he laboured to process all that had just occurred. The kitten seemed to shrug.

‘I didn’t write the contract. Now, get out of here. I will find you soon.’

Quickly, Osomatsu hurried to Jyushimatsu’s side, his previously soulless brother groaning as Osomatsu carefully pulled him to his feet. ‘Wh-what … Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu thankfully recognised him, the fear that he wouldn’t no longer crushing Osomatsu’s overworked heart. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know, buddy,’ Osomatsu gave an easy lie, unsure what else to say. ‘It all happened so fast. Let’s get you home, come on.’

Leaving the other victims—the police would help them, Osomatsu reasoned away the light prod of responsibility—he kicked aside pachinko balls and towed Jyushimatsu out the back exit. He dug out his prehistoric phone with some difficulty to find a dizzying array of texts and missed calls, all within the last few minutes. Juggling Jyushimatsu’s weight—his brother remained fairly out of it, stumbling with his arm draped over Osomatsu’s shoulders; it had to be pretty traumatic, having your soul stolen—Osomatsu hit Karamatsu’s number. His brother answered halfway through the first ring, voice choked and desperate.

‘We found Totty, but Jyushimatsu …’

‘I’ve got him,’ Osomatsu reassured, swallowing a sudden lump in his throat as Karamatsu released a jarring sob of relief. ‘Where are you?’

Following Karamatsu’s directions, Osomatsu led his younger brother gently, but quickly, to a nearby convenience store. Totty squatted on the footpath by the door, head in his hands. Choromatsu huddled by him, accepting as much comfort from proximity and shared dread as he offered. Karamatsu slouched against the wall; the plastic bag in his hand quivered lightly. ‘Jyushimatsu!’ Totty screamed, shooting to his feet and racing to his approaching brothers. ‘Oh no, oh no … Jyushimatsu!’

‘He’s all right,’ Osomatsu said, praying it was true as he tried to keep the youngest from throttling their still-dazed brother, his slow smile familiarly vacant rather than dead to the world. Swallowing hard, Karamatsu took over as Jyushimatsu’s walking support, passing the bag to Osomatsu. It was
full of drinks, bottled water, tea and Calpis. ‘Thanks,’ he said, choosing the water and gulping down half in one go.

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu said, rising unsteadily, hand to the convenience store window, clammy palm greasing the glass of its bright logo. ‘You’re all sweaty. Are you … what was that?’

‘No idea,’ Osomatsu lied again—barely a lie. A name and the word of a talking cat was hardly a wealth of reliable knowledge. ‘Probably just some sicko in cosplay. I bet those people pretending to be zombies were in on it.’

‘But it …’ Choromatsu stammered in disbelief, unopened water shaking in his grip. ‘It … they chased us. They … threatened us, hurt Jyushimatsu.’

‘The police are coming, they’ll take care of it. Come on, let’s get out of here.’

Jyushimatsu himself shaking off concern whether they should take him for medical treatment, Osomatsu and his brothers hurried home, taking a longer route that didn’t lead them past the attacked pachinko parlour; now doubt it now swarmed with police officers. News of the attack didn’t seem to have broken yet—at least not on television; their parents weren’t exactly internet proficient, barely using the household computer. But they did comment on the sirens, and the brothers couldn’t hide Jyushimatsu’s unsteady state or Totty’s tears. Osomatsu decided their parents deserved some explanation, however patchy.

‘Something weird happened at pachinko—some kind of staged cosplay flash mob, I think,’ he said as mum fussed over her dazed fifth born, brow creased with growing distress even as Osomatsu strove to downplay the situation. ‘A few of the actors got a bit too into it and caused a panic. Some people got hurt trying to get out, and Todomatsu and Jyushimatsu …’

‘I’m okay,’ Todomatsu whimpered, Karamatsu’s comforting arm around him. Osomatsu’s throat tightened, seeing Totty couldn’t tear his eyes from Jyushimatsu, slumped at the kitchen table. He had spared Totty a far worse fate than the poor youngest could know.

‘Are you all all right?’ their father kept asking, sharp eyes meeting each of his shaken sons’ before beginning an angry monologue about dangerous enthusiasts with no consideration for the common man’s right to go about his business; he suggested they go to the nearest police station to give statements.

‘I don’t think it’s anything too serious …’ Osomatsu tried to dissuade, remembering the kitten’s warning to avoid law enforcement. Their father’s dark eyes glinted.

‘If they assaulted Jyushimatsu …’

‘I’m fine, Dad.’ Jyushimatsu focussed and caught their father’s eye, grinning and lifting his arms in a good imitation of full health and hustle. Neither parent seemed convinced, but agreed to wait and see how he progressed.

‘And until we know exactly what happened down there,’ dad added darkly, still muttering about extremist fans disrupting society. Then he ordered every one of his adult children to bed. ‘You all look terrible.’

Their father was rarely openly affectionate. But his caring frown, shifting from pale face to pale face, Osomatsu felt radiate with unease and profound relief that none of his children were badly hurt. ‘Go sleep it off, go on.’

Jyushimatsu unfolded from their mother’s arms—it took two prompts from Osomatsu, the second far
more gentle, for her to let him go—the five brothers slowly climbed the stairs, honouring some unspoken agreement that they’d talk about it once they’d all calmed down. Totty sniffed desolately, still steadied by Karamatsu. A step behind, Osomatsu saw his little brother trembled badly.

Ichimatsu had kicked out their massive futon alone; it lay awkwardly, askew on their bedroom floor. Ichimatsu himself sprawled lengthways across it, breath even and deeply asleep. Osomatsu couldn’t help a worn smile, glad through his own troubles that their sick brother rested undisturbed.

‘Maybe let us,’ Osomatsu waved as Karamatsu straightaway knelt to move Ichimatsu and clear space for the rest of them. ‘Just in case he wakes up, you know?’

Karamatsu was about to say he was perfectly capable, but fell quiet with a slight wince when Osomatsu raised his eyebrow. Ichimatsu was particularly thorny when it came to Karamatsu. Osomatsu knew it hurt, that it seemed everything about him, from his guitar to his relentless kindness, rubbed Ichimatsu the wrong way. But Osomatsu also knew it wasn’t so simple. He pondered from time to time taking a shunned Karamatsu aside to talk; it was an eternal struggle for Osomatsu not to interfere. But he could hardly claim to understand the inner workings of his most complex brother. Better he not potentially worsen an already-strained relationship. Not to mention Ichimatsu would strangle him, if he found out.

Osomatsu took Ichimatsu gently by the shoulders, a still-distant Choromatsu moving a beat later to take his knees. Together, they carefully shifted him to his edge of the futon. Ichimatsu didn’t stir, not even as Karamatsu tugged the futon straight beneath him.

Ichimatsu’s deep breath something calming to latch onto, Jyushimatsu was out like a light. Most of them dropped off quickly; sheer terror and running for your life, however short the distance, was exhausting. When he heard Totty’s sniffs finally still, replaced by breath light and easy, Osomatsu slowly sat up. His mind was a mess of questions and confusion, his strange transformation and fiery battle with the soldier and its puppets gyrating, whirling giddily on repeat and keeping him from rest. What in hell was going on?

‘Matsuno Osomatsu.’

Osomatsu glanced over his sleeping brothers towards the window. Sure enough, the white kitten from the alley sat just beyond the grit-speckled pane. He could barely hear its dainty mew-like vocalisation through the muffling glass, but its haughty young voice was close, as though the creature spoke directly into both ears.

‘Is there somewhere we can talk? Where we won’t be overheard,’ the kitten added pointedly when Osomatsu tilted his head, indicating their room was fine.

Where they wouldn’t be overheard? So the fuzzball wasn’t speaking in his mind just now? Osomatsu scoffed at the pointless demand. Decidedly over his initial bewilderment that the creature could talk and sobered somewhat since the pachinko parlour, Osomatsu suddenly didn’t feel very generous. He didn’t want to give ground to the kitten; alien being aside, it was very much responsible for his current turmoil. And however thrilling moments had been, however awesome his transformation seemed in a light not tainted by battle … Jyushimatsu might have been killed, any of them! Osomatsu needed answers. And he’d prefer them on his terms, however uselessly stubborn. Still, Osomatsu found himself giving in, and whispered:

‘The roof, then.’

The kitten immediately bounded up and out of sight; Osomatsu heard as it skittered along the guttering, choked with autumn leaves blustered from a nearby park. Rising slowly so as not to
disturb his siblings, he left the darkened bedroom to join the kitten on the roof. It was cool outside in his pajamas, sky above clear but for a few thin wisps of cloud floating placidly across the moon. Rubbing his hands together for warmth as his breath rose white before him, Osomatsu sat on the chilled tiles. Beside him, the kitten’s tapering tail tipped with a thicker puff of fur twitched. Was it anxious, or just didn’t know where to start? Somehow, Osomatsu didn’t care much either way.

‘So how is this going to work?’ he eventually broke the silence. He spoke aloud—he may as well. He’d gone to the trouble of going up there. ‘Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on, or you’ll answer my questions, or what? Because I’ve got a few.’

‘Perhaps it’s best if I start,’ the kitten said, recovering a few points of steadying confidence, edging nearer its previous commanding demeanour. ‘I will explain all I can. Then, if I am able, I will answer your questions.’

‘If you’re able?’ Osomatsu repeated. Somehow that didn’t promise much end to his ignorance. ‘I deserve a bit more than that, don’t I? After all, I did just save a pachinko parlour.’

‘Perhaps if you listen to what I have to say, all your questions will be answered,’ the kitten was swift to suggest.

‘I doubt it,’ Osomatsu returned smartly. But he gestured for the kitten to begin. Lifting its nose in the air, it turned about a few times before settling into a comfortable curl, tail wrapped close about itself.

‘Beginning with introductions is traditional for you kind, I take it?’

‘I think we’re way past beginning, forget introductions,’ Osomatsu said without thinking; apparently he wasn’t going to make this easy. ‘You already know my name. What’s yours?’

The kitten, to its credit, reigned in most of its indignance, trying to appreciate that Osomatsu had had a difficult day. ‘For simplicity’s sake—I doubt you could pronounce my true name—you may call me Ahn.’

Osomatsu bristled, keen to challenge its—her?—presumption that he couldn’t spit out whatever uppity collection of syllables identified her, but instead asked, ‘And you’re a cat?’ As obvious a question it seemed, Osomatsu needed to confirm every fact in this maelstrom of uncertainty. It was just as well, too.

‘No, but it seems I’m like a cat,’ Ahn corrected and didn’t bother to elaborate. ‘I suppose all this begins with one Lord Takuu.’

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu vaguely remembered Juuku mentioning the name between the fire punches and Jyushimatsu being zombified. ‘What’s up with him?’

‘I’m getting to that,’ Ahn said with a prissy twitch of her fluffed tail. ‘If you would just let me …’

‘All right, all right.’ Osomatsu made a show of sealing his lips. The kitten eyed him, clearly doubtful of how long that seal would hold. But she went on.

‘Many thousands of your years ago, a highly intelligent, but dangerously arrogant scholar discovered a means to tap the void for its dark powers and …’

‘The void?’ Osomatsu interrupted. ‘What’s that?’

‘What do you mean, what is it? Void is void!’ Ahn exclaimed, speaking loudly over Osomatsu when he tried to pry for more information. Irritated, he shut his mouth. ‘Already possessed of foul abilities
unspeakable, with the addition of such a power to his arsenal as darkness itself, the power-hungry scholar took upon himself the title of Lord and set his sights on conquering the dimensions.’

‘That’s a step up, student to conquerer,’ Osomatsu observed. Aloof as he attempted to remain, his brothers’ danger and parents’ distress still so close to the bone, he couldn’t fail to notice creeping twines of excitement lace incessantly through his gut.

‘Using his powers and promise of wealth and prestige, Lord Takuu drew to himself a great army.’

‘The Liberation Force,’ Osomatsu nodded knowingly. Ahn shot him a look past disdainful—“Congratulations, you remembered a name, why don’t you just tell the whole damn story?” Osomatsu wasn’t deterred. ‘Why liberation? Isn’t that saving people? He wanted to take over, right?’

‘Correct,’ Ahn said a little coolly. ‘Liberation, as in, he will liberate your soul and take it as his own.’

‘Ah,’ Osomatsu said, harsh memories of Jyushimatsu’s dead eyes a brutal stab to his eagerness, deflating his chest a few puffs. The chill wind picked up with an eerie whisper; Osomatsu huddled, arms close about himself, from far more than cold. ‘Right.’

‘The majority of Lord Takuu’s forces comprised unwilling slaves, infected by darkness and souls controlled by Liberation Force soldiers. Mindless minions, their numbers could rip through any who dared oppose, heedless of pain or death—anything but their puppeteers’ goals. Seemingly unstoppable, Lord Takuu turned on his first target: the Spectrum Alliance.’

‘Wait,’ Osomatsu said, frowning with the vague familiarity. ‘Wasn’t that what Juuku …’

‘Yes! By the Alliance, will you let me speak unhindered?’ Ahn demanded. Osomatsu threw up his hands in hasty submission.

‘All right, sorry!’

‘The Spectrum Alliance—’ Ahn paused, looking at Osomatsu with a flash in her dark eyes that was almost threatening. When he said nothing, she went on somewhat tightly, but her youthful tones fast reverted to the compelling, almost trance-like waves of a storyteller. ‘The Spectrum Alliance was and is a single star system comprising a small number of planets, not unlike your own. Lord Takuu deemed it a desirable target due to its high influence with other systems, peaceful policies and plentiful natural resources. Additionally, its universities were and are the best known through the dimensions, and Lord Takuu’s greed for knowledge was second only to his lust for power. Army amassed, the lord signalled attack.’

‘That didn’t go so well?’ Osomatsu surmised.

‘It did not,’ Ahn agreed, apparently spoken without interruption long enough not to bristle with his interjection. ‘Lord Takuu employed certain advanced technology to empower his soldiers. This technology invoked the natural energy of crystals.’

Osomatsu had a sudden vivid recollection of his gauntleted fist shattering the dark crystal on Juuku’s narrow chest. He rubbed his knuckles hesitantly, as though to confirm that fiery warrior had indeed been him.

‘Lord Takuu’s methods were arcane, forcing the energy of countless crystals into submission to align with his dark purpose. He was unaware, however, that the scholars of the Spectrum Alliance had long employed the same technologies in secret, invoking the energies of gems in such a way that they operate symbiotically with their bearers, in mutual service rather than control. With the five gems they invoked, the scholars wrote solemn contracts of power, binding the gems to the contracts
and to the souls of those who pledged to use the abilities with which they were bestowed for the salvation of all innocents.’

‘By this contract I pledge my spark to salvation,’ Osomatsu murmured the words that had incited his flaming transformation. Ahn nodded solemnly.

‘Despite far superior numbers, Lord Takuu and his Liberation Force were overwhelmed by this unexpected opposition, five warriors with goodness on their side and so much to fight for, wielding power so pure. One of those warriors was you,’ Ahn said knowingly, Osomatsu swallowing hard against a rollercoaster of worming dread, lingering incredulity and unbelievable excitement. ‘A previous iteration of yourself, in any case: the Salamander, fiery vanguard of onslaught. The garnet is your gem, bound to your contract—your temporary contract, in any case.’

‘Wh-what?’ Osomatsu said, snapped rudely to attention. ‘What do you mean, temporary?’

‘You didn’t sign anything,’ Ahn reminded as Osomatsu stared, somehow even more disbelieving that these powers might be taken away than the fact they even existed. ‘I wouldn’t be wasting my precious breath telling you any this if I didn’t intend to offer a binding contract,’ she said impatiently as Osomatsu opened his mouth to protest. ‘You are a temperamental one, aren’t you? I suppose it’s to be expected, you are a spark …’

‘You’re one to talk,’ Osomatsu shot back.

‘I can see we may need the abbreviated version,’ Ahn decided sniffily as Osomatsu scowled. ‘If I’m ever going to get anything out without being interrupted. Those five warriors known as the Spectrum Guardians …’

Osomatsu snorted, not even bothering to hide his amusement. Ahn’s eyes might have pierced him clean through. ‘Just what is so funny?’

Osomatsu shrugged, grinning a little. The name wasn’t particularly imaginative, was it? Spectrum Alliance, Spectrum Guardians … Not exactly a name to strike fear into the hearts of one’s enemies.

‘And you could do better?’ Ahn demanded. Osomatsu’s grin widened.

‘Give me a night and a paid bar tab, and I’ll give you the most kickass magical superhero team name you’ve ever heard.’

‘The Spectrum Guardians defeated Lord Takuu, ending his attempts at interdimensional domination before they’d even begun,’ Ahn pushed on without deigning to answer. Osomatsu reluctantly reigned in his impulsive commenting; the creature was clearly insulted, and he wanted to know what happened next. ‘Using their combined powers, they freed every slave and sealed the entire Liberation Force in a prison realm the like of which even Lord Takuu, a master of interdimensional travel, could never hope to escape.’

‘But he did. What?’ Osomatsu said when Ahn hissed lightly. ‘He did, didn’t he?’

‘He was contained for thousands of your years,’ Ahn said defensively. ‘Barely days ago, by your time, Lord Takuu somehow ripped a hole through his prison and all his masses have descended to Earth. We can only assume he means to assemble a new force, enslave your world and wage a war of retribution on the Spectrum Alliance with its human army.’

‘You assume?’ Osomatsu repeated. That seemed kind of a big thing to not know for sure, enslavement of the whole human race. ‘The Spectrum Alliance doesn’t know?’
Ahn’s whiskers twitched; Osomatsu fast likened the motion to an quizzical eyebrow raise. ‘Tonight’s attempted soul stealing wasn’t enough to convince you they mean harm? But no, we can’t be sure of Lord Takuu’s exact plans. When he tore through space he distorted the algorithms and pre-determined pathways of the interdimensional gate system,’ Ahn explained, simplified technicalities going straight over Osomatsu’s head. But he figured he caught the gist: ripping space broke it. ‘The dimensions are in chaos. Travel is impossible. Stranded as they are, not the Spectrum Alliance nor any of their allies have any hope of stopping the Liberation Force before it gains strength and momentum.’

‘If travel is impossible, how did you get here?’ Osomatsu asked, latching to a hole in Ahn’s story. ‘You’re from the Spectrum Alliance, right? Single star system inhabited by jewellery-obsessed scientists and amazing talking animals? See,’ he grinned like the devil. ‘I’m paying attention.’

A moment later, he wished he’d kept his fat mouth shut. The bossy little creature’s dark eyes glassed over with moisture, entire tiny form huddling as small as it could go. ‘What, are you … how … I’m sorry,’ Osomatsu apologised hurriedly, innards twinging with guilt as she released a heart-rending mew of unbridled grief. ‘But what … what happened?’

Ahn needed several long moments to gather herself, Osomatsu fidgeting all the while. When she spoke again, her words were forced and weighted with sorrow. She sounded so like a young girl Osomatsu couldn’t shake the pestering shame that he’d made a little kid cry—how old was Ahn? And was that cat years or earth years or … Osomatsu shut up and listened.

‘We can’t travel, not reliably—we might end up anywhere in the universes! And we can’t mend the rip, we can’t even get near it without being … but in face of enslavement of innocent worlds and inevitable war, many of us … hundreds volunteered to carry power contracts through the tear in hopes some of us might be swept in the wake of the Liberation Force. I … was carried here,’ Ahn gulped, shuddering with what Osomatsu belatedly realised was survivor’s guilt. ‘Most of us … are now lost to space, I imagine.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Osomatsu could only repeat. He couldn’t have known. But he really could be an insensitive asshole. ‘That … was a very brave thing to do.’

‘Thank you.’ Ahn accepted her bravery as fact; it didn’t seem to affect her grief at the loss of her fellow volunteers. Osomatsu didn’t blame her. He couldn’t imagine walking willingly to his death, as those hundreds had done … were they all talking animals? In face of Ahn’s continuing struggle for composure, he decided not to ask. But she believed even the slimmest chance of defeating this Lord Takuu was worth her life—all of them had. Osomatsu wrapped his arms closer about himself, feeling suddenly very small, a tiny blip of life shivering unnoticed smack bang in the centre of the largest city on Earth.

With a few more deep breaths, almost purrs of misery in her little chest, Ahn went on. ‘It’s my task now to assemble a team of warriors to combat the Liberation Force and save your world, as well as ours. I’m asking you, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ she said, lowering somewhat rigidly into a bow. The plea was so at odds with her cavalier nature Osomatsu could practically feel as intense pride evaporated from her soul. That was what this plea cost. ‘The Spectrum Alliance asks you to sign a binding contract and pledge yourself as the flaming vanguard of onslaught and save the dimensions from Lord Takuu and the darkness with which he would engulf them.’

For all he’d known this was what Ahn worked up to, Osomatsu was still rendered dazed. When he didn’t speak for many long seconds, Ahn lifted her nose a notch from her bow, peeking up at him. ‘Well?’ she said, a little impatiently, brief spout of humility dried up. ‘I just offered you a permanent power contract. Do you accept?’
‘I … you threw me in unprepared,’ Osomatsu found he needed to say. There were a few things he still had to know, or at least say. ‘What if I’d screwed up? What if more people had gotten hurt, my brothers?’

‘I didn’t have a choice,’ Ahn said without much apology, before adding grudgingly. ‘And you did well—even though you didn’t know what you were doing, you followed my instructions and did well. I knew you would,’ she acknowledged even more resentfully. Osomatsu fought down a spark of annoyance at how much she didn’t want to praise him. He’d done more than well—he was king of goddamn fire fist tournament! ‘I saw you in the alley. You live for that.’

‘What, having the shit kicked outta me?’

‘No! You live for the fight, the adrenaline—for righteousness!’

‘Yeah … righteousness.’

Osomatsu flashed a thumbs up and made an indeterminable humming sound, not prepared to enlighten Ahn that that encounter had been less about righteousness and more—a lot more—about not paying his debts. Ahn seemed to take his hum as continuing doubt, and made an effort to be more encouraging.

‘I knew you were a spark the moment I saw you, a strong one. Weren’t you going on about how good you looked?’ she tried another tactic as Osomatsu still tried to get himself and his raging thoughts in order.

‘Yeah, because I did.’

‘You can’t tell me you didn’t enjoy that, the fight. Having the power to defeat that soldier, save those people—your brother,’ she added pointedly. ‘You could save many more.’

Those moments not knowing what he was doing had been terrifying. But the fight, the fire … he had been glowing with excitement until reality kicked him harshly in the guts, getting his family home to safety. Reminded again of how strong he’d been, the thrill of what he could do, Osomatsu was abruptly yanked back to twelve on a scale of zero to a frenzied flipping out 10.

He was a hero. He’d been chosen to be a hero, save the world. How fucking cool was that?

‘Well,’ Ahn said, for the first time sounding hesitant. ‘Actually … you were the first spark I’d seen in action.’

Osomatsu felt the smallest puncture in his enthusiastic bubble. ‘There’s more than me?’

‘Anyone might have spark,’ Ahn said carefully. ‘Becoming a Spectrum Guardian isn’t something anyone’s destined for, nothing so grand. It’s just an inclination. Anyone with that specific inclination might sign a contract to become a Spectrum Warrior, so long as they pledge themselves truly.’

‘So it could have been anyone?’ Osomatsu asked, high spirits teetering over the edge of a free fall.

‘Well … I’d seen you fight, and you were there …’

Osomatsu swallowed hard. He’d been convenient? That was the only reason? And for one glinting moment he’d believed he might be something more than an unemployed shitbag. Ahn was apparently unprepared for such a fragile response to her blunt honesty. ‘Don’t be like that,’ she said, equal measures waspish and embarrassed. ‘So what, if it might have been anyone? It was you, so it’s meant to be you. You’re powerful, I’ve seen it. They think you’ll do well.’
‘They?’ Osomatsu repeated; he recovered fast, almost pleased the haughty kitten tripped over herself to bolster his confidence.

The little creature nodded. ‘Travel isn’t an option, but some limited communications are open. The Spectrum Alliance knows Lord Takuu is on Earth. And they know about you. They have agreed to offer you a permanent contract. If you’ll take it,’ she added. Getting to her padded feet and turning about with a elegant flick of her tail, Ahn flipped the silvery transformation cylinder towards him. Catching it easily, he turned it over in his hands, scrutinising. There was no evidence it had altered in any way, morphing to the zip and gem of his battle hoodie.

‘So,’ Ahn prompted. ‘Will you take up the mantle of the Salamander? Will you fight and defeat Lord …’

‘Hell, yes!’

Ahn blinked, nonplussed. Osomatsu couldn’t stop grinning, heart leaping unrestrained about his ribcage. ‘For someone so excited,’ the kitten observed, eyes a touch narrowed that it had been so easy. ‘You took an awful lot of convincing.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Osomatsu insisted, mind made up. He had all the explanations he needed; he’d barely had to consider at all. This was all kinds of awesome. Except:

‘My family will be safe, won’t they?’ he asked, suddenly gripping the transformation cylinder hard. ‘My brothers?’

‘Lord Takuu aims to possess every human soul. Technically they’re in the same danger as anyone else. But with you looking out for them?’ Ahn said when Osomatsu’s forehead creased lightly. ‘Once you know what you’re doing, they’ll be a lot safer than anyone else.’

Osomatsu grinned broadly, all lingering misgivings settled. That was good enough for him. ‘So what do I do?’

Unable to fully conceal her pleasure with the solemnity of her task, she blinked towards the cylinder. ‘That is the scroll that contains your contract.’

Examining the cylinder—the scroll—more closely, Osomatsu noticed a tiny notch in its otherwise smooth surface. Laying the tip of his pointer nail to it, with a tiny snick it extruded like a latch. Osomatsu took it and pulled; a narrow sheet of fragile-looking paper rolled free. It spiralled with odd symbols. Osomatsu thought they might be the same as those briefly projected in his vision by the lens he’d worn transformed.

‘How do I sign?’

‘You must read it, first.’

Osomatsu indicated the alien script. ‘I can’t read this.’

Ahn drew herself up proudly. ‘I will gladly impart what …’

‘Nah, don’t bother,’ Osomatsu interrupted, eager to seal the deal. ‘Fight aliens, save the world—what more is there to know?’

‘A lot!’ Ahn exclaimed indignantly, beginning to outline the terms of the contract uninvited. Her high-pitched voice faded to a drone, Osomatsu paying no attention in the least as he leaned back and gazed brightly into the cold sky. Somewhere up there, past their protective atmosphere and own
small solar system, were countless dimensions and worlds. Osomatsu was going to save them all. It would be good to finally have something to do with his time—something awesome, he reminded himself, before the idea of a commitment levelled his enthusiasm. He would be doing something good, something useful—contributing to society, he smiled with Choromatsu’s words from the night before. Osomatsu lifted the alien document happily before his eyes; it was almost transparent, symbols glinting oddly with stars behind them. This was the first contract he would ever …

‘So this is a contract?’ he said suddenly, cutting off a frustrated Ahn mid-word. ‘Like, a real contract?’

‘Of course it’s a real contract,’ she snapped, finding her place. ‘As the flaming vanguard of onslaught, you will pledge to …’

‘As in, a job contract? This is a job, right?’

Ahn paused, Osomatsu eagerly awaiting her answer; he leaned so far forward he almost slipped down the tiles. ‘I … suppose it is a job, yes. If you consider saving all existence something so pedestrian as a job.’

This just got better and better.

‘People get paid for jobs where you’re from, don’t they? And it’s not like I’ll have time to job hunt,’ he went on as Ahn looked suddenly confused. ‘Not with such a huge responsibility, you know?’

‘You seek reward for your pledge?’ Ahn said, confusion slipping swiftly into incredulity and downright disapproval. ‘You want reward for doing the right thing, saving your world?’

‘Well,’ Osomatsu reasoned as he folded his arms across his chest, his grin slow and wide. ‘I would do it out of the goodness of my heart, but you know … with the economy like it is, and how hard it is to find a job …’ He conveniently forgot to mention that he wasn’t looking very hard. ‘And there’s probably some training involved on top of the actual evil alien fighting, right?’

‘Well, of course,’ Ahn said, badly flustered. Osomatsu’s grin wavered slightly—he had to train? It sure as hell didn’t feel like he needed training, in his fire warrior form. But he needed more ammunition.

‘How can I be expected to hold down a day job when I’m supposed to be busy saving the world? Sounds like a full-time gig to me. I still need to make a living, you know.’

Osomatsu made a crass symbol for cold hard cash, almost laughing at the kitten’s blatant disgust, but was very pleased with himself when Ahn told him to wait. Osomatsu fiddled with his scroll, unrolling and rerolling with a snap—the wafer-thin substance was far tougher than common paper—while she padded to the other side of the roof, presumably to attempt contact with the Spectrum Alliance. When she eventually returned, the kitten creature looked even more put out than usual.

‘I told them we could find someone else,’ she said, glaring up at Osomatsu as though no one was more terrible. Osomatsu smiled, unaffected. It was an empty threat. Given the various tactics and near-pleading she’d resorted to, thinking he would be hard to win over, he figured she was bullshitting, trying to make him feel bad. Osomatsu was an expert in that field. ‘But the Spectrum Alliance believes your request fair and will provide compensation enough to provide for a comfortable lifestyle. Transports are down indefinitely, until this crisis is over,’ Ahn said before Osomatsu could ask. ‘But interdimensional freight will soon resume. They can start your payments then.’
'For tonight as well?' Osomatsu pushed eagerly; temporary superhero work still warranted some form of remuneration. The kitten shook her little head, as though she only just realised the kind of person she was dealing with. Osomatsu grinned. He knew he shouldn’t enjoy winding up the little creature so badly.

‘I am sure you will be provided fair compensation for your services.’

‘Right,’ Osomatsu said, past satisfied with the deal—not only was he a hero, he was a professional hero. And he didn’t have to go to the employment office in the morning. ‘I’m ready to sign—do you have a pen? Is it a fingerprint, or something?’ he asked when Ahn shook her head, looking pained. ‘Seal in blood? I have to prick my finger?’

‘No!’

‘Well, what is it?’ Osomatsu asked, impatient as he whipped his contract out to full length. ‘I, Matsuno Osomatsu, pledge my spark, or whatever, to salvation already. Let’s do this thing.’

‘Wait!’ Ahn cried out. But the odd symbols comprising the contract already gleamed to rival the stars. A large character shimmered into being over the terms, ink like crimson light. The scroll itself pulsed warm as it had when Osomatsu accepted his temporary contract. He released the now-binding version; it snapped into the scroll, burning hotter against his fingertips. Entranced, Osomatsu watched as a shining garnet was pulled into being, affixing itself to the latch of the scroll, sealing it. Then the warmth faded. Whistling almost casually, he twirled the scroll between his fingers and tossed it briefly into the air, catching it surely.

‘You should have let me finish,’ Ahn scolded. Osomatsu shrugged; he hadn’t been listening. ‘You sign when you make your pledge and mean it. It’s done. You’re now the Salamander.’

‘That’s good, right? Looking forward to … working with you,’ Osomatsu said, realising for the first time Ahn might actually be his boss. He sniffed; he wasn’t about to take orders from some angsty kitten he could hold in one hand. Not about to mention the dubious chain of command, he grinned happily and jumped to his feet. He felt almost a new person, looking over the city spread before him, the world he now protected. No debtee would corner him again, when they saw him stepping out in that badass hoodie. Just wait till he told ...

‘No!’ Ahn blurted out; Osomatsu almost slipped at her sudden exclamation. Catching himself before he toppled clean off the roof, he grinned sheepishly. Apparently his Salamander abilities were no help whatsoever to his regular shitbag self.

‘No what?’

‘You can’t tell anyone,’ Ahn exclaimed like it was obvious.

‘Why not? It’s awesome. Maybe a little embarrassing,’ he had to acknowledge. His brothers would laugh their arses off when they saw him transform. But after the naked midair twirling, he’d show them just how sweet a deal being a magical boy was. ‘Why can’t I tell my brothers? We tell each other everything.’

Not entirely true; his brothers all had their secrets. But Osomatsu told his brothers … not quite everything, he realised suddenly. He hadn’t told them he was thrashed over his outstanding debts. But that was for their safety, for their own good. It was with slowly growing unease that Osomatsu realised this situation mirrored and amplified his alley encounter. His magical boy status had to be kept from everyone, especially family. He was shit at keeping secrets. But he would do it for them.
‘If you told them and word somehow made it to the enemy that you’re related, Lord Takuu could too
easily target them, putting you out of the picture.’ Ahn shook her furry head firmly. ‘There is too
much at stake. You’re better off on your own, Matsuno Osomatsu.’

Osomatsu chewed on those words barely a moment and he longed to spit them out. But he knew the
prissy kitten was right. He sighed. Osomatsu wasn’t good at being alone. He was everywhere,
going euphoria mixing slapdash with trepidation and blatant disappointment that he couldn’t share
how amazing he suddenly was with his brothers. But they were safer not knowing.

‘You won’t be alone for long,’ Ahn promised, following Osomatsu as he climbed down from the
roof, all his thoughts suddenly of sleep. He was really starting to feel that battering onslaught of
emotion wearing him down. Or maybe it was just the alien battle and sudden skewing of all he’d
known as fact that was so exhausting. ‘We have the rest of your unit to recruit.’

‘Rest of the unit?’ Osomatsu repeated tiredly.

‘There were five Spectrum Guardians before. Does that not imply there will be five now? Part of
your job,’ Ahn said, putting a mocking emphasis on “job” with an added mew, ‘is helping me to find
and recruit your team. We can be more selective about the rest,’ she said, sounding decidedly
thankful that was so. ‘You did fine in a pinch, but so long as you can handle yourself alone for a
while, we can dedicate time to finding perfect candidates.’

‘Hey,’ Osomatsu complained distantly, pretty sure he was being insulted. But he was so tired, he
barely cared. Stumbling off the roof, he retreated from the cold into the reassuring toaster-warmth of
their futon. Almost drifted off, he found himself wondering something suddenly very important, and
had to ask through waves of distorting drowsiness:

‘I get to keep the hoodie, right?’

‘That is what the Salamander now wears,’ he heard Ahn say. But she was nowhere in sight;
Osomatsu had no clue where she’d sneaked off to, or when. ‘It’s made through you. It’s yours to
wear.’

Osomatsu smiled dopily in reply as he nestled between his brothers, gentle hands of sleep touching
his weary eyelids and drawing him into deep rest, much needed recovery for that tumult of a day.

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Osomatsu was thrilled with the arrival of his first payment the very next afternoon. ‘How many
brothers do you have?’ Ahn complained, finally catching his attention and the two meeting unseen a
few streets away. ‘I almost showed myself to three young men who looked exactly like you! I was
alarmed when I sensed no spark in them,’ she said as though Osomatsu were at fault.

‘There’s six of us, all identical,’ he supplied, holding out his hand eagerly. Ahn looked distinctly put
out.

‘How are we supposed to meet in private, discuss the Liberation Force and recruiting?’

Osomatsu shrugged. ‘Talk in my head, I’ll talk in yours—you can hear me, right?’ he asked
suddenly, before repeating his question as a jarring shout in his mind. Ahn flinched badly, answering
that question. The kitten-like being didn’t seem happy, but agreed that arrangement would suffice for
the time being before producing a little sack, no bigger than the jewellery gift bags Osomatsu knew
boyfriends pleased girlfriends with. Untying it hungrily, he extracted a few gems and small ingots of
gold. His eyes lit as brightly as they sparkled. That was a good, old-fashioned hero’s paycheque if
there ever was one.

But that old-fashioned paycheque wasn’t particularly practical in his day and age; he couldn’t feed pachinko machines with gemstones. It took Osomatsu a surprisingly short time, however, to figure out how to convert his reward to cash. He knew more than a few shifty people. They would lead up the chain to even more shifty people. Osomatsu might have been beaten up by a few of them recently, but with a handful of gold waved enticingly under their nose they’d soon be singing his tune. Somehow it didn’t feel quite right, exchanging a hero’s wage for cash and paying commission through the morally-ambiguous backstreets of Tokyo. But what else was he supposed to do? Osomatsu was more than happy to compromise on that small facet of morality; it wasn’t like he was hurting anyone. And it filled his pockets with so much sweet yen.

Osomatsu told his family the closest thing to truth he could: that he’d found work. Face-down at the table, Ichimatsu barely acknowledged him. Jyushimatsu, however, who had bounced back from his brief stint as a Liberation Force slave with reliable gusto, tackled him with a carrying “Niiisaaaan!” before he’d even finished his sentence, knocking Osomatsu flat with near-rabid joy. His parents were stunned, then thrilled. ‘We didn’t even know you were looking!’ they said, smiling broadly, just so proud.

‘Well done, brother!’ Karamatsu congratulated him heartily as he helped Osomatsu to his feet, though Totty didn’t believe him until he displayed his first converted paycheque. A little guilt squished through his stomach, seeing how hard Choromatsu tried to be happy for him—he was happy for him. But he was jealous, too. And for entirely the wrong reason.

Masquerading as having a proper job, Osomatsu reluctantly accepted he had to spend normal work hours out of the house. ‘Good,’ Ahn said when he complained about not having anywhere to go. ‘You have lots of training to do.’

Walking beside him and appearing to anyone who didn’t look too closely like a friendly, albeit well-groomed stray, Ahn explained a few things Osomatsu had missed on the roof, more eager to sign than listen. Without anything else to do, he listened now and learnt that his power contract analysed and enhanced his own abilities when he transformed. ‘So it’s important to keep them honed,’ Ahn instructed briskly as Osomatsu sat with his lunch in a park far from home; he was unlikely to meet anyone he knew there. Before opening his convenience store bento box, he pulled from his pocket a crinkling package of fish treats. Ahn laboured to hide how much she wanted them, insisting she was neither animal nor pet.

‘If you don’t want them, don’t take them,’ Osomatsu teased, waggling one just before her nose. With a dainty snarl of defeat, she snapped it smartly from his fingers.

‘And you have to be fitter,’ she said through gnawing mouthfuls, devouring every treat Osomatsu offered. He smiled a little. The bossy creature grew on him in dribs and drabs.

‘Are you saying I’m not fit?’

‘I’m saying you look like you’ve lounged around your house doing nothing for years,’ she shot back. Osomatsu scowled, fast forgetting his growing fondness of her. ‘Take up running, learn a proper martial art. At least practice fighting. You haven’t transformed once since the pachinko parlour.’

‘It’s not like I have anywhere to transform,’ Osomatsu complained, throwing away his disposable chopsticks and bento packaging.

‘You need to become accustomed to your Salamander form,’ Ahn urged. ‘Get the feel for your weapons, your body. Learn how to move and jump—you can clear a three-storey building in one
Keen as he was to try that, Osomatsu could think of nowhere to transform and train while keeping his secret. And though he suddenly had a lot of free time with nowhere to be, he wasn’t so interested in putting his crappy regular self through anything more strenuous than a spontaneous fistfight.

‘Do I really have to train?’ he sighed as he wandered back towards home. It was nearing five, and he could soon collapse and laze in the lounge without raising suspicion. Ahn gave her now-familiar incredulous whisker twitch.

‘What else are you going to do? And the Spectrum Alliance is currently paying you,’ she reminded with a glare. ‘You should actually earn a few of those gems.’

‘I thought I was going to be fighting aliens,’ Osomatsu complained loudly without thinking. A couple walking nearby glanced over at him, expressions alarmed. A slight drop to his stomach, Osomatsu hurried on, Ahn leaping along at his heels, before he telepathically addressed something that had bothered him for a few days. ‘Aren’t these guys meant to be taking over the world? That’s a lot of souls to steal. I thought I’d be, you know,’ Osomatsu said, feeling a little embarrassed that he’d apparently thought so wrong. ‘Fighting another soldier every few hours, or something. Actually, you know … saving people.’

‘You’ll have far more than your fill of soldiers before this is over,’ Ahn chided as Osomatsu dragged his feet. ‘I suggest you prepare for it.’

‘But Juuku was a pushover,’ he pointed out, recalling his first battle with rush of excitement followed promptly by an almost painful clench in his stomach that he knew only too well: it was longing. Was really such a sucker for a fight? But he’d just been given fire fists, for god’s sake! Was it too much to ask for the chance to use them?

‘Maybe Juuku was, but now Lord Takuu knows you’re here. They will be much better prepared, and …’

‘Osomatsu-kun!’

There was that clench again. ‘Hi, Totoko-chan!’ Osomatsu lifted his hand in reply as their childhood friend waved cheerily from across the street, waiting at a crossing to join him. He waited, wondering in passing if it was only being a shitty NEET that made everything Totoko was so appealing. They had all grown up together; no one else could distinguish they sextuplets at a distance without missing a beat. And, with Totty as the exception, they didn’t really know any other girls.

There was another disappointment, Osomatsu thought glumly as Totoko skipped to meet him. If he could only show off in his battle hoodie, explode a few aliens in fire, girls would be lined up down the street to date him.

‘Are you coming home from work?’ Totoko asked in her most upbeat voice. She seemed in the best of spirits. It was often a toss up with her temper, and Osomatsu was hopeless at reading her moods. At least, not before they switched. ‘I heard you found a job, that’s so great! Finally one of you has graduated from being a NEET. Honestly, I didn’t think it’d be you,’ she smiled brightly, nudging him in the side with her elbow as her short skirt swished with each self-assured step.

‘How’s Ichimatsu-kun?’ she asked once Osomatsu had inquired clumsily after her good mood, getting a mass of enthusiastic information that crashed wave-like and foaming into his consciousness, briefly overwhelming then bubbling away before he could get a firm grip on anything she’d actually said. ‘Jyushimatsu-kun mentioned he wasn’t well. Is this little kitty coming home to make him feel
better?’ Totoko asked, putting on a cooing “aren’t you just so sweet” voice and squatting in the middle of the footpath to tickle Ahn under the chin.

‘Come on, just let her,’ Osomatsu said silently to the disgruntled not-kitten. ‘It’s easier if she just thinks you’re a cat, right?’

‘I know that,’ Ahn returned testily, pretending to enjoy Totoko’s affection, apparently just so degrading to one of her lofty position. ‘Silly attention-seeking animals, without one intelligent thing to say for themselves and no consideration whatsoever where they squat to …’

‘Be thankful there are cats here at all,’ Osomatsu said, somehow irritated by her disregard of the sweet creatures. What had cats ever done to her? And their existence saved Ahn a lot of trouble. ‘If there weren’t, you wouldn’t be able to hide so easily. And weren’t those strays looking after you the other day?’ he said, deliberately worming beneath her skin.

‘I didn’t need their help,’ Ahn said, narrowing her eyes that Osomatsu dared hint she was ungrateful. Osomatsu raised an eyebrow as a pedestrian behind them had to weave around their stop, muttering in annoyance. A tiny furball freshly arrived on Earth without a clue where she was and with no understanding of the culture, maybe not even knowing the dominant species, with every dimension in existence on the line?

‘Sure you didn’t.’

Ahn gave a little hiss at his sarcasm, fur bristling like an overused voodoo doll. Totoko abandoned her scratching and jumped to her feet at once, flash of anger at the kitten’s apparent rejection overrun by a glowing laugh. ‘Not very friendly, is it? I suppose it’ll get on well with Ichimatsu-kun. But I’m not doing anything tonight, Osomatsu-kun, and I feel like having some … Osomatsu-kun?’

Normally so attuned to any opportunity to spend time with the unpredictable subject of his yearnings, Osomatsu looked ahead along the path, his attention conducted by an unfamiliar spark deep in his gut. The pedestrian who had circumvented them as Totoko attempted to make friends with Ahn had stopped dead. There was no one else nearby; even the traffic had eased, the few cars that passed shooting by unimpeded and uninterested in whatever passed on the footpath parallel. Slowly, the dark-coated man turned, fading sunlight glinting off his balding plate.

Hidden deep in his hoodie pocket, Osomatsu’s scroll began to burn.

‘Shit!’ he yelled, seizing Totoko by the wrist and making a sharp right-angle turn straight into the street, dragging her along as the man’s limbs narrowed and lengthened, bleaching white as multiple eyes splashed his face. ‘Run, run!’

‘Transform, now! Down there!’ Ahn ordered shrilly, racing for a nearby alley. Osomatsu had been spending a lot of time down them lately.

‘Keep going, run!’ he shouted at Totoko, releasing her and speeding to transform, hand scorching in his pocket as he gripped his scroll hard. But he was brought up short, skidding to a screaming halt at the high-pitched shriek that pierced his eardrums. Totoko hadn’t kept running, frozen in the street on sight of the bizarre being as it lifted one scythe-like claw, pointed directly at her.

‘No!’

But the spinning projectile of darkness massed and shot, hammering into Totoko hard, far harder than Jyushimatsu and the victims in the pachinko parlour had been struck. Osomatsu cried out as Totoko stumbled backwards, clutching her chest. Horns blared jarringly as oncoming cars swerved
to miss her, ignorant of her plight. Osomatsu sprinted as fast as he could, dashing back into the middle of the street, heedless of oncoming traffic, and seized his friend, dragging her backwards before she was splattered. But she was shaking hard. A drawn-out groan leaked from her slack lips. Osomatsu knew with a jarring clench to his heart that when she next opened her eyes Totoko would no longer be there, emptiness staring blankly out, a slave prepared to end him at any cost to herself.

‘Where are you?!’ Ahn shrieked out of sight. Gathering his resolve, Osomatsu carefully lowered the trembling Totoko to the footpath and fled as the alien being across the street grinned, black slash of a mouth gaping.

‘Since when could they turn into people?’ Osomatsu demanded, lungs already pumping hard and sweat dribbling in his eyes, matting his fringe in sticky clumps to his forehead. Ahn’s black eyes flashed.

‘Can we discuss the Liberation Force’s tactics after you’ve killed that soldier? Transform, move it!’

‘By this contract I submit my spark to salvation!’ Osomatsu breathed raggedly, doubled over and panting as he pulled free his heated scroll. This wasn’t how he’d envisaged his first enlightened transformation. But, drawn into air, all breath seemed returned to him, body and spirit revitilised by the power of his pledge. Inferno roaring to engulf him, morphing to his battle hoodie as braiding twists of fire whipped down his limbs, Osomatsu brought his gauntlets together in an awesome crash of flames.

‘Flaming vanguard of onslaught, Salamander!’

Touching down in his boots, Osomatsu decided at once that the pose wasn’t ridiculous at all—the jaunty stance was as awesome as the rest of him—before he hurtled back to where he’d left Totoko lying, feet soaring, practically flying between strides that carried him further than a champion athlete, further than the muscled bound of a pouncing lion. Totoko was on her feet. Osomatsu couldn’t bear to look at her, and shot straight past even as her grabby fingers strained to latch to his arm as he cleared the street in one clean spring.

Dire as the situation was, he couldn’t help but grin as the road stretched beneath him: he was so badass. Osomatsu landed in a dynamic crouch and shouted out behind his mask, psyching himself up as his gauntlets glowed hot and unyielding with power that he lurched and drove directly at the alien’s chest, shining with its dark crystal.

‘What the …’

Osomatsu almost fell, pulling back mid-step in horror as the soldier grinned ever wider, entirely unfazed by the magical boy’s intent to violently reduce them to dust. Many eyes never leaving his, Lord Takuu’s vassal deliberately drew its razor claws and frail limbs close, digitigrade toes leaving the cement as its knees bent backwards, almost folding in on itself within its billowing cloak, which flew to cling to its form, hiding the foetal soldier like a cocoon. ‘Wh-what’s it …’ Osomatsu stuttered as Ahn slipped across the street to join him, scampering to sit atop a nearby wall, far enough for relative safety and near enough to watch and shout instructions. Osomatsu cursed inwardly. Damn it, as soon as something happened he didn’t expect he was reduced to a sputtering mess!

‘Salamander,’ a low voice spiralled in taunt from within the confines of the alien’s curled-over form. **Punch it,** Osomatsu tried to order himself. **Come on, knock it clean out of the air and break its crystal!**

But Osomatsu stalled, arrested by the now-pulsating cocoon as the once-fabric hardened in a protective shell that rippled as though it trapped a deluge of dark water.
‘Salamander, do not expect so pathetic a victory as you achieved in defeating one such as Juuku. We admit, we did not expect you. But now that you are here, know what you truly face, the full power of the Liberation Force! I am Kuurazu, loyal vassal to …’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ Osomatsu muttered to himself. But he could still only stare.

‘What are you doing?!” Ahn shrieked. Osomatsu flung up his hands with a sweep of flustered flames.

‘What am I supposed to do? It’s a floating cocoon!’

But even as the words left his mind, the strange sheltering shield began to splinter. Cracks exploding like the crackle of a smashed egg amplified hundreds over, the dark shell split in a dozen places, fissures meeting and bisecting as they rapidly multiplied, shooting across its surface as it began to drip oozing-thick fluids. Finally, it burst. Osomatsu threw up his arms, crouching and covering his face as the sick torrent struck him. For an insensible moment, he was terrified his flames were doused. But with a hard thought and grit of his fists, Osomatsu burnt as bright as ever. Raising his weapons, he straightened to face the revealed soldier.

Osomatsu’s jaw dropped. The narrow soldier had vanished, replaced by a lumbering mound of coarse muscle, six crushing limbs heavy beneath its bulk and five thickened trunks jutting from heavy, dripping lips, edged by three sets of jagged tusks. Seven eyes now spread, three each side of its massive elephantine head and one wide and glaring in the centre of its forehead, it slurried past its trunks as it released a guttural battle cry.

‘I, Kuurazu, will destroy you, Salamander! For the Liberation Force and my Lord Takuu!’

Osomatsu stared, slowly backing up a few stumbling steps. Then he flung an accusatory finger at Ahn, a tiny mass of white pins on her wall, every hair on end.

‘You didn’t tell me they could turn into monsters!’
Down to Earth

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry :( Meant to have the next magical teammate appear in this chapter, but then it was getting too long, and their introduction felt rushed, and it wouldn't be fair if the next magical teammate was rushed, but I feel really bad they're not in this one ... so next chapter is all for them! Over half is written - most of the harder stuff, anyway - so hopefully it won't take too long :) Chapter 3 is a bit shorter than the first two due to shifting the next teammate over, but I hope it's fun! Thanks so much for reading, all you lovely people!

By the way, check out this absolutely amazing art of Magical Osomatsu-san by tiunsu!

What the fuck?

What … the actual … fuck?

‘You didn’t say anything!’ Osomatsu accused, barely throwing himself aside in time as the armoured beast charged him dead-on, glinting tusks sweeping to impale. Rolling on impact, he skittered upright and swung about, flaming boots scorching the bitumen with the hard effort and still shouting at Ahn.

‘You didn’t say anything about monsters!’

‘If you had actually listened to me,’ Ahn spat back, venomous through blatant dread, ‘when I was reading your contract, perhaps you would ...LOOK OUT!’

‘Fuck, fuck!’ Osomatsu yelled as Kuurazu roared, trembling earth vibrating his bones as the monster thundered again to intercept, every devastating footfall tearing gravel free of pressured concrete as its trunks lashed violently. The magical boy skidded left and low, just avoiding a muscled trunk hammering him flat and snapping his spine. Almost tripping, Osomatsu ground one gauntlet against the path for balance as he spun, teeth clenched hard against the jarring scrape. ‘How do I beat this thing?!'

A deadly whistle of air hurtled towards him from behind. Something far more solid came lightning-fast in its wake.

‘Shit!’ Osomatsu screamed, throwing up his arms and barely bracing in time, boots squared hard to the ground. Swung with colossal strength, he caught the heavy triangle of a lurid red stop sign on his forearms with a jarring clash. Numbness conducted through his entire body from the point of impact, leaving him reeling.

‘How could you not see that coming?!’ Ahn demanded. Osomatsu’s body shuddered, teeth rattled in his skull and head blaring with white noise. Setting his jaw against the stubborn ringing, he thrust from his crouch and bodily shoved his friend off him. It took far too much of his intensified strength.

‘You couldn’t give me some warning?!!’

He’d completely forgotten about his infected friend, somewhat occupied by the rampaging Kuurazu. Pigtails flying as she hefted her stop sign, Totoko gave a savage grunt and swung it like a massive
bat. ‘Totoko-chan, come on …’ Osomatsu gasped unheard as he ducked and darted right, sign slamming into cement where he’d stood a second before. Choking dust flew up with a crunch.

Totoko glared with blank rage, face contorted by her monstrous puppet master’s intent. She was no waif under ordinary circumstances, but she’d just ripped a street sign clean from its foundations, cement clumps still crumbling from its previously-immersed base. She knew how to hit, and puppet Totoko was utterly brutal, somehow enhanced where the zombies in the pachinko parlour had been simply controlled.

‘They’re using her to distract you!’ Ahn shouted from the sidelines, racing along walls as near to the conflict as she dared venture.

‘I can see that!’ Osomatsu yelled back, noticing as Kuurazu lumbered their bulk into position and swiped the ground gratingly with blunt toes, like some warped bull that saw red. Immediately Osomatsu tried to vacate his position. But Totoko was on him in an instant. Forced to face her, Osomatsu pulled his hits as much as he dared, skirting through the reach of her impromptu polearm and willing his fires burn low. What was he supposed to do? He couldn’t hurt Totoko! She was far more than the crowning idol of his desperate longings. Totoko was his friend—he had to save her! But at this rate, if Osomatsu had any hope of facing Kuurazu before he was stampeded into the ground, she’d wind up charred to cinders!

Pole whirled about her small form, Totoko aimed another murderous strike as Kuurazu bayed and hurtled towards them. Haphazard thoughts flung suddenly to his first battle, how he’d disarmed Jyushimatsu, Osomatsu slid low beside her attack, seizing the heavy pole and pivoting. Puppet Totoko was stronger than his little brother. But, puppet or not, her hands still sweated under exertion. Grunting as he spun Totoko in a wide arc, his infected friend flew off the end of her own weapon, palms slipping with lack of friction. Not wasting a moment, Osomatsu drew back his arm and hurled the sign high and far from battle; javelin-like and surprisingly aerodynamic, it soared well out of reach.

Totoko disarmed and spiralled out of range—for now, at least—Osomatsu had moments to analyse the rapidly-approaching hazardous situation. ‘I can’t see their crystal!’ he exclaimed.

‘Are you a fool?! Get out of the way!’ Ahn shrieked as six heavy feet barraged toward the magical boy.

‘Once I’ve …’ Osomatsu began angrily, half an eye leaving his growing target to glower at his companion. But Kuurazu was too imminent an issue for squabbles. Osomatsu had to abandon his crystal search, eyes raking the monster’s thickened white hide for the tell-tale dark glisten.

Kuurazu was frighteningly powerful. But they couldn’t manoeuvre worth a damn; Osomatsu remembered their sluggish turning circle, needing Totoko to pin him in place while it lined up like a battering ram. He could use that. But for now:

Osomatsu jumped. Kuurazu thundered beneath him. Flipping neatly, the magical boy drove a swift series of searing punches down the monster’s back as he arced overhead. He’d barely considered the move, utterly instinctive. Or maybe it was a trick the Salamander had favoured in the past. Either way, awesome.

But Kuurazu’s hide was like armour; all Osomatsu did was enrage the beast further, raising a row of nasty hissing welts and leaving no deeper damage. Landing with a light burst of flames, his elbow immediately exploded in agony. ‘Shit!’ he choked, staggering as he clutched his left arm. Totoko had been waiting for him, a fresh sign twirled in her hands.
‘Matsuno Osomatsu! Are you all right? Are … why can’t you pay attention to two things at once?’ Ahn’s frustration superceded her fear as Osomatsu groaned, barely dodging Totoko’s low sweep as Kuurazu laboriously turned about.

‘Wh-what happened?’ he cried out, wavering and almost dropping to his knees as anguish coursed from his deadened elbow to his organs. Coughing, he was almost sick from pain.

‘What do you think?! You’re damaged!’ Ahn cried out. Osomatsu gaped.

‘But I … ’ he breathed almost dejectedly, as though his fire warrior form had betrayed him. ‘I thought …’

‘That you were invincible? Now do you wish you’d read the contract? Listen next time I have something to tell you,’ Ahn exclaimed, before getting hold of herself. ‘Just give yourself a moment, you’ll heal. Just …’

His damaged arm jarred as he dove from further harm, Osomatsu hissed as Totoko loomed over him. Untransformed, he might have shattered apart with that wallop. As it was, his arm had to be broken. But Ahn said he’d heal. That assurance fed his fire, lending him strength to keep on dodging through the few moments he had left before he was completely pulverised. Forced onto his back, Osomatsu tried to ignore the fresh burst of pain through his elbow, cells knitting beneath his hoodie, as blows rained on him like bullets. Rolling as he recovered, Osomatsu snapped fast to his feet, Kuurazu drawing thunderously near, and dove at Totoko’s legs, sending them both sprawling. He tucked and landed with a slight tremble to his knees, far more neatly than Totoko. The monster’s control slipped as they charged, leaving Totoko’s not uncoordinated, but vastly less agile non-controlled self to crash to the bitumen.

Osomatsu gingerly tested his arm: it ached slightly, but otherwise seemed fully-functional. Thank you, magical Salamander healing powers. Assuming he remained relatively undamaged from then on, he could keep jumping out of the way all day and Kuurazu would keep rocketing past. But he’d never find and smash their crystal at this rate. He needed a new approach, fast.

‘You have to lead it away from here,’ Ahn cut across his thought, and he realised with a lurch she was right. The footpath was pockmarked with Kuurazu’s monstrous footfalls. Several walls were damaged and two signs plucked from the road. If something that size got loose in the street … Kuurazu was as big as a family-sized sedan and ten times as mean. And this neighbourhood was mostly residential, family homes hidden behind all those stone walls. It was a miracle, that a crowd hadn’t gathered to stare at the carnage. But at this time kids would soon be walking home from club activities, parents returning from workplaces. Even if Kuurazu didn’t infect them, the beast would trample them flat.

How could he not have thought of this? How irresponsible was he, to think he could just wrestle with a two-tonne …

Osomatsu shoved his anger aside to deal with later. Wracking his brain as Totoko leapt up, pulled by her invisible strings, he tried to think where he could take the battle. But there was nowhere nearby, no safe open spaces to fight a monster without causing disastrous collateral damage. ‘There’s nowhere!’

‘Then at least keep it in one place, contain it,’ Ahn instructed, making a hasty escape as Totoko aimed a heavy swat at her tiny form; it seemed Kuurazu was aware she instructed the fledgling hero.

Osomatsu glanced fast around his surrounds. ‘How do I …’
His gaze fell on the nearest utility pole.

It wasn’t the Liberation Force’s goal to hurt humans. They wanted to control them, use them. He doubted Kuurazu would care if a few unfortunates got caught beneath their heavy toes. But so long as Osomatsu was their only actual target …

Eyes to the pole’s heights, Osomatsu gulped. He hadn’t tried this before. But when had he tried any of this before? His brash nature reared to make the jump: he was the Salamander, badass superhero extraordinaire. Confidence boosted, even in the face of Kuurazu and his own now-healed injury, Osomatsu again felt the bold assurance of indestructibility wrap him like a form-fitting shield. Knees bent low, he drove his feet powerfully into the ground and sprang with a propelling burst of fire. Osomatsu shot into the air, far and fast. His angle slightly off and overshooting the top of the pole, he rapidly arranged his fall and landed with a slight stumble on his small target.

‘Are you scared to face me, Salamander?’ Kuurazu’s terrible tones taunted behind flailing trunks as Totoko stared blankly up at him. ‘Where are the other guardians? Have they left you to face the Liberation Force alone, Salamander? Have they forsaken you, your so-called friends?’

On his perch, Osomatsu ground his teeth in frustration. He might have the monster contained by staying out of reach, but he also had no hope of locating their crystal.

‘Use your glass, the lens,’ Ahn said suddenly from so far below; Osomatsu could only discern her miniscule blip of white thanks to his enhanced senses. ‘Focus on it a moment.’

Osomatsu focussed on his previously-unused lens. It flared red, spiralling with alien symbols. ‘I can’t read it!’ he shouted as Kuurazu slowly, mockingly, backed up and lowered their head, ready to charge and bring the utility pole down.

‘Just give it a chance to configure to you, it’ll only take a moment.’

‘I’m kinda short on moments here,’ Osomatsu growled as the entire pole shuddered beneath him, arms flung wide for balance. Electrical wires strained with the impact; one sparked as it ripped dangerously free, slithering through air like a spitting snake. The pole couldn’t take another hit. Before Kuurazu could aim again, Osomatsu leapt the gaping distance to the next along. His jump flustered by urgency, he flew alarmingly off course. He was blessed by this agility, all this ability. But Osomatsu wasn’t yet used to his warrior body, full control still far beyond him.

‘Woah, woah!’ he shouted within his mask, managing to turn in midair and shoot himself back towards the pole with a few blasts from his boots. Steady atop the pole, he barely appreciated his new flying trick before his lens began to display in Japanese. ‘Wow,’ he exclaimed quietly as the advanced system read his surrounds, highlighting potential useful items and hazards. But what he needed to know … the lens abruptly focused on Kuurazu, displaying their health and strength—both still very high—and its weaknesses. Fire wasn’t one of them—no shit. But with a bright crosshair, the lens zeroed in on the monster’s weak points and crystal location, locking on to the apparently soft underside of its belly.

‘Its weak spot is underneath,’ Osomatsu let Ahn know, ignoring the lens as it informed of his own depleted energy. No doubt it had its uses, but he acted better on gut instinct; the glass actually calculated various routes to absail down from the top of the pole. Osomatsu grumbled, already feeling hassled by the thing. It’s not like the glass told him how to actually attack Kuurazu’s weak point. But the answer was clear enough: from underneath.

Atop the pole, Osomatsu straightened and, flight-directing boot blasts in mind, began to aim punches down at Kuurazu as they trundled threateningly into position. As he’d hoped, bursts of flame flew as
projectiles, his fists flamethrowers as Kuurazu howled.

‘What are you doing?’ Ahn demanded as Kuurazu hurled himself at the pole. It shook alarmingly, but without the monster’s careful aim and full power, shake was all it did. ‘You’re barely burning them!’

‘Don’t worry, I’ve got this!’ Osomatsu said, whipping his foot down in a fire kick for the hell of it, grin almost lazy from his relative safety as Kuurazu smoked and sizzled.

‘Why am I not filled with confidence?’ Ahn shot back. But Osomatsu ignored her, swearing as the monster had Totoko jump up on their wide back, making it harder to hit without scorching her in the process. ‘Bastard,’ he muttered, reigning in his attacks. In the brief lull, close as they were, Kuurazu began to tear at the utility pole with their many trunks. With a sudden blare of instruction from his lens, Osomatsu aimed a heavy punch directly down. Fire flew at full throttle, engulfing the five ripping limbs. It was right: they were thick, but not armoured. Wavering and scorched black, the monster roared in titanic rage.

‘I WILL DESTROY YOU FOR THAT, SALAMANDER!’

‘Weren’t you already? Doing a great job on that.’ Osomatsu grinned and, ignoring Ahn’s dissuading gasp and the careful schematics laid out by his glass, leapt directly down from the pole. He landed with such force the concrete cracked beneath his feet. Awesome, awesome.

‘Come at me, you ugly fucker!’ he yelled as he rose from his crouch, pressured knees barely buzzing. He flipped a rude gesture for good measure. Kuurazu neither heard him nor understood the hand motion, but they read the blatant insulting challenge and antagonistic gleam of his eyes. Eardrums pounded by their roar as spittle exploded beneath burnt trunks, Osomatsu held firm as the monster stampeded to mow him down, tactics out the window with frustration and fury, the magical boy’s burns and barbs increasingly-infuriating gnat bites. Unmoving, even as Totoko leaped off Kuurazu’s back, sign swinging to dismember, Osomatsu’s glass read his intentions and spat out timing. Vision gleaming with numbers and monster looming with a deep rush of air and power, Osomatsu fell backwards. The sky was blotted out entirely by the monster’s bulk as they passed above him, reeking of singed flesh and god knew what else. Fist already rocketing up and lens locking to the pulsing black crystal, Osomatsu smashed it soundly. Kuurazu’s death-cry shattering, the magical boy slid from beneath six rampaging legs as they collapsed to dust.

Osomatsu lay silently for a moment, somewhat dazed. It was over. He had won.

‘That’s what you get,’ he breathed, flipping upright because he could and grinning wildly down at the pile of dust. ‘That’s what you get when you take on the Salamander!’

Coursing with adrenaline, he barely noticed the trickles of blood from a dozen tiny cuts flecking his face; the shattered crystal had rained down on him even as Kuurazu disintegrated. He wiped at the tickle distractedly, lacerations already healing.

‘Don’t look so happy,’ Ahn grumbled as Osomatsu practically danced in triumph over his vanquished foe. ‘You were almost killed, more than once. Get out of here,’ she advised as faces began to gather at windows—now they heard?—and pedestrians appeared, approaching from either end of the footpath. ‘Help your friend, I’ll take care of this.’

Totoko had thumped hard to the ground when her last attack missed; if Osomatsu had misaimed she might have been crushed by her own puppet master. Scooping her up and no longer concerned his gauntlets may flare unexpectedly, Osomatsu leaped a safe distance from the scene, hiding down a side street and setting Totoko with her back to a wall before phasing back to his normal self.
Annoyed when he couldn’t lift her easily in his arms, Osomatsu settled for drawing Totoko’s arm around his shoulder and steering her the rest of the way home.

‘O-Osomatsu-kun,’ she murmured, blearily rousing as they turned onto her street. ‘Wh-what …’

‘You had a bit of a fainting spell,’ Osomatsu invented on the fly. ‘Maybe you’re anemic?’

Totoko looked surprised, no doubt disdainful that an iron deficiency might ever afflict her robust health. ‘But I … did you help me all the way home?’ she asked suddenly as her door appeared before them; again, she seemed surprised. Osomatsu couldn’t help but fidget, warm glow flowing from his heart to far lower down as she thanked him. But she yelped as he lifted her arm from around his neck, and he noticed her palms were reddened, slightly blistered. However he’d tried to contain it, he must have unintentionally heated her pole, damaging as she’d mindlessly clung to the burning steel. Stabbed by guilt, he remembered too how she’d attacked him, breaking his arm with a savage crunch. All wonderings about whether he could remind her of this later and get a date out of it quashed, Osomatsu bid Totoko farewell and hurried home, euphoria crashing hard.

‘You’re far too temperamental,’ Ahn sighed later that night, back on the roof. Todomatsu had announced through dinner, holding up his smartphone as evidence, that there’d been a small earthquake nearby that had caused minor damage. For once Osomatsu didn’t argue with the kitten-like creature, knees pulled to his chin and arms wrapped close about himself as the chilling autumn breeze lifted his still-damp hair. Karamatsu had held him up after their soak, waiting for their brothers to leave the bathhouse—Choromatsu had cast a hesitant look over his shoulder, but left with the second born’s urging—before asking about the livid bruises on Osomatsu’s arm. He had explained them away with smiles and shrugs, the full weight of the injury reinforcing itself, that its remnants showed so badly.

Brothers asleep below, Osomatsu listened, uncharacteristically sedate, as Ahn explained how soldiers could use an infected person’s soul to transform. ‘How they transform depends on the soldier. And the soul.’

Unsure he wanted to know exactly what Kuurazu’s monster form said about Totoko, Osomatsu asked, ‘What about at pachinko? Why didn’t Juuku turn into anything?’

‘That was a mass infection,’ Ahn said. ‘Very basic, less concentrated darkness for each target. And Juuku was hardly Lord Takuu’s finest. Your friend took a not-inconsiderable soldier’s full hit. No wonder Kuurazu could morph into something so monstrous. Those infected in such a manner are more powerful, as well,’ she added, affirming Osomatsu’s fleeting thought in battle for Totoko’s bloated strength. ‘Still manipulated, they are not totally mindless, drawing on the person they were to aid in attaining their masters’ goals.’

Despite heavy exhaustion, with his arm paining and mind stuffed full, Osomatsu had trouble sleeping. But more than pain and the distant, slightly-nauseating curl in his stomach as he wondered just how much of this deal he’d overlooked in his eagerness to sign, one thought barred his rest more than any: what if Jyushimatsu had been the only victim turned in the pachinko parlour? A full blast of concentrated darkness just for his sweet, energetic little brother.

Suddenly, Osomatsu was very thankful just to be alive.

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News began to spread, first by nervous word of mouth, then picked up by social media and finally the television and papers. Then the warnings began: Tokyo was under attack from within. A dangerous cult, some sources said, who powdered their bony bodies white and donned bright colours
masked by darkening cloaks. The cult members were rumoured to have some strange influence on those nearby; citizens were advised to avoid these cultists and any ruckuses they caused. There was even tell that a recent spurt of disappearances among the poor and voiceless, those the authorities barely acknowledged were missing, could be blamed on this cult.

‘I suppose they were bound to notice something,’ Ahn sighed one afternoon as Osomatsu wandered Ikebukuro’s backstreets in search of a fight. No longer bruised, he had already been putting up with Ahn’s increasingly heated nagging for days, for the first time in his life out of excuses. He had to train. Victory or not, his last battle had proved that fact with a vengeance.

‘What do you mean, notice something?’ Osomatsu said, strolling through gang territory like he owned the place, acting a lot more confident than he felt. He’d never gone looking for trouble—not to these extremes, anyway. Maybe there was something in Ahn’s suggestion, actually taking up a martial art. Hopefully in a dojo his opponents would be less tempted to knife him when he invariably got mouthy. ‘We all saw it at pachinko; Totty has been having nightmares ever since.’

‘I didn’t move fast enough that first attack, that’s what has caused this,’ Ahn berated herself as Osomatsu flashed a cocky salute down an alley at a group of rowdy teenagers, skipping school to smoke and compare toughness levels. Within a minute of intercepting him, those kids still on their feet backed off, dragging their fallen friends. Osomatsu winced. He didn’t like beating up kids, even ones as shitty as he’d been.

‘It’s not like we can hide it,’ he shrugged somewhat consolingly, getting around to addressing Ahn’s anger. Ahn shook her head and promptly scampered up onto his shoulder. She’d taken to hitching a lift when they walked long and far, small reserves of strength sapped. Osomatsu had teased relentlessly the first few times, earning himself a several painful nips on the ear.

‘But I can. How many cars drove past Kuurazu during your last battle?’

Osomatsu shrugged again. He hadn’t exactly been counting.

‘None of them saw, no one walked upon us by chance. That’s part of my job. I’m meant to …’

‘Ouch, shit,’ Osomatsu swore suddenly as his scroll burnt hot through his jumper. A soldier was active. And it was close.

‘Go!’ Ahn commanded immediately. Osomatsu flicked his eyes to check no one was nearby before transforming, glass immediately pointing him towards the disturbance, mere streets away.

Soon Osomatsu’s scroll began to heat at a moment’s notice, signalling enemy activity far and wide. ‘We can’t be everywhere at once,’ Ahn said when Osomatsu started to feel flustered, even distressed by how often he failed to reach a soldier in time to rescue their victims, already taken away. He didn’t know where, and his gut squirmed to learn that Ahn didn’t know either. She attempted to be supportive of her sole warrior, but Osomatsu couldn’t help but feel he faltered already.

‘Don’t be like that,’ Ahn said crossly one night on the roof. ‘You knew this would be hard. Didn’t you?’ she pushed as Osomatsu shrugged in the cloud-shrouded moonlight. He hadn’t thought much past fiery warrior and saving all existence. ‘You silly fool,’ the little creature had to sigh, but bounded lightly to sit on his thigh, curling there in comfort. ‘Try not to worry. Once we’ve assembled the full team, we’ll free every slave they’ve taken.’

‘You’re being surprisingly understanding,’ Osomatsu observed of the generally snooty creature. Ahn tensed a little, as though she made herself reply, but might do anything to avoid it if she only could.
‘Well … it’s hard for me, too. I’m not exactly trained in this. I’m one of hundreds of volunteers,’ Ahn said defensively when Osomatsu gaped, realising he was being coached by an amateur. ‘We took what you might refer to as a crash course.’

‘That fight with Kuurazu,’ Osomatsu eventually said after staring into Tokyo’s active darkness for the longest time, needed to get something off his chest and unsure who else to confide in when his brothers weren’t an option. ‘That was the first time … for a moment I thought I might be in real trouble.’

‘You were in real trouble,’ Ahn reminded, before sighing. ‘You didn’t think of that at all either, did you?’

Osomatsu hadn’t. He was young, quite healthy. Even without being enhanced, the idea of death barely occurred to him, even as he’d gambled with his own life.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn said tentatively after another stretch of silence, not even protesting when Osomatsu absentmindedly scratched her ears, curled like little white sails. ‘You know, you can always withdraw from the contract.’

‘Why would I do that?’ he asked, startled. ‘How could I? I said I would—pledged, whatever … do you want me out?’ he asked suddenly, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. Ahn immediately pulled from beneath his stroking hand with an irritated hiss.

‘Must you twist my words? No, of course I don’t want you out.’

‘She said it!’ Osomatsu exalted suddenly, holding a triumphant fist high and grinning as Ahn scowled. ‘Did you hear? Did anyone get that on the record? She said it herself: she doesn’t want me out. I’m the Salamander and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. And I’m doing good, aren’t I?’ he asked. He’d faced more than ten soldiers since Kuurazu, most of which had become some form of monster. Every victory had been easier than that brush with rampaging mortality.

‘Yes, you’re serving salvation well,’ Ahn agreed with far less reluctance than normal.

‘And we’ll find the other four soon?’

‘Very soon,’ Ahn promised. Osomatsu yawned and cracked his neck, the casual motion hiding two starkly different minds. He felt a little resistive, as though these new recruits might step on his hero territory. But he had to begrudgingly admit, it would be good, maybe even useful, to have someone to talk to about it.

Osomatsu sighed as he descended the ladder and returned to their room, lying on his side in his eternal space between Choromatsu and Todomatsu. Cheek propped by an unusually introspective fist, he watched, preoccupied, as Totty’s form rose and fell evenly beneath the futon blanket. The eldest Matsuno missed his brothers. With all he had to keep hidden, he felt increasingly distant from them, out all day to keep up his working pretense and slipping away at night. Osomatsu hoped once the Spectrum Guardian responsibility was shared, despite his hero load and the secrets he somehow managed to keep from blurtling out every time he caught a brother’s eye, things between them would soon settle back into relative, easy normality.

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A prehistoric dimension overlaid to his doll’s world had been simple to penetrate on arrival; deserted but for insignificant moulds and ooze of native life, it was ideal for Lord Takuu to base his operations. The realm was harsh and open, but after after countless eons of hell the frequent
ferocious cyclones did nothing to deter them, taking shelter and expanding networks of underground caverns into great halls that gleamed with dark power inlaid to the very rock. And though there was nothing to hunt, no food but primordial muck, Lord Takuu’s doll now channelled energy far beyond a body’s simple sustenance.

‘It appears they are alone,’ his closest lieutenant was saying as they traversed what had become the lord’s vast throne room, seat of power a raising of black rock over his forces. ‘They may have defeated Juuku and Kuurazu, but without the rest of the Spectrum Guardians they are merely an annoyance—particularly without the Unicorn,’ the lieutenant added. It seemed he’d meant this statement to be of some reassurance. But, mood quite foul by the unexpected re-emergence of a fresh iteration of the Salamander, on mention of his arch nemesis Lord Takuu lashed out, striking three bolts of darkness towards a small huddle of humans, mindlessly slumped in their holding pen. Collapsing with the impact, they rocked and shuddered as the lord’s darkness thickened and strengthened their bonds.

Immediately calmed with his violent outburst, Lord Takuu turned back to his only slightly-nervous lieutenant, enamoured by his lord’s might. ‘And how does my doll progress?’

‘Slowly,’ the lieutenant was reluctant, but still dutifully revealed less than welcome news. ‘He requires more time, more strength. And he only gains strength by showing strength, which means he must channel and enhance a great deal more power before he can take his true form, let alone incite mass infection of the species.’

Lord Takuu said no more, and silenced his lieutenant with a sharp lift of one claw. It was an unfortunate aggravation; during his last attempt at interdimensional domination he had performed several mass infections himself, exploding his army in hours. But he kept close to his bone the disastrous results of his previous attempt. And he had learnt such patience sealed in punishment. Now their power all rested with the doll, his weak human veins conveying every spurt of darkness Lord Takuu’s soldiers fired at their pathetic targets. By the time the doll took his true form, their power would tower beyond that the Spectrum Guardians had somehow overwhelmed all those aeons ago.

Lord Takuu intended to make good use of building his doll’s strength. He would have his soldiers fashioned into a force unbelievable, targetting specific human souls and adding stronger, more autonomous slaves to his army at the same time. It was a disappointment Kuurazu had been defeated on only a reconnaissance experiment: that random human’s soul had been a delight to warp. But potent darkness remained in her, deep and dormant. She would easily be tapped again, when the time came.

The lord paused by an industrious knot of his forces, claws weaving in formation as they scryed in search of targets.

‘The doll,’ Lord Takuu invoked, even that simple request laced with the menace his soldiers revered. ‘Show me.’

His vassals rushed to scry, pulling images from the air of the sleeping doll. Lord Takuu watched as his chest rose and fell with even breath, his mighty servant still so weak and frail.

‘Find the Salamander,’ the lord instructed, one of his seven eyes flicking back towards his lieutenant. ‘Find them and destroy them. Before the Spectrum Guardians assemble in full.’
This probably isn't as polished as it should be - I'll give it another blitz through after work tomorrow/today ...) and fix up anything glaringly grammatically unforgivable. Please be kind; I'm operating on a lot less sleep than I probably should be :) It is both longer and took longer than I would've liked. But now we have magical boy #2. I hope he pleases :)

Matsuno Choromatsu swallowed hard, mentally cheering himself on, ignoring the barbs of disparagement plentiful amid more supportive urges. Then he strapped on a falsely-confident smile and stepped inside the employment office. Every staff member turned toward him with a smile. Every smile deflated the moment they laid eyes on him, alone and exposed before the automatic doors. Oh god, not this guy. Hasn’t he given up again yet?

Painfully self-conscious, but still undeterred, Choromatsu was partway through fresh paperwork when they sent someone to speak with him. An agent he’d worked with several times over the years. ‘Matsuno-san,’ he said, still patient as Choromatsu lowered his head in an unnecessary bow. ‘We’re looking. I promise you we’re looking. We will let you know as soon as we find anything. You don’t need to keep coming here.’

But what else was he supposed to do? At least coming to the office gave him some purpose. Choromatsu stuck around, hovering awkwardly and harbouring distant hopes some agent might call his name to discuss again his employment options. After an hour or so, the nearest agent stealing looks at him that grew dirtier the longer he lingered, Choromatsu caved and attempted a quiet escape, sidling out the door. He promptly crashed into a tidy young woman in sharp business dress. Her crisp papers, previously in hand, scattered to the winds, flying up and fluttering lazily to the gleaming floor. ‘Excuse me!’ he exclaimed, hurriedly bending to gather them.

‘My fault, no need,’ the woman said, harsh tone not matching her words in the slightest. Papers snatched from him as Choromatsu rapidly straightened the recovered stack, aligning their edges, she flounced past. For a moment he was arrested under every eye in the office. Then, getting hold of himself, he swiftly completed his far more noticeable than desired escape, practically bolting away.

It was only mid-morning. He couldn’t go straight home; his brothers knew what his day’s plans had been. With the tightening in his stomach, he knew he couldn’t face them, not yet. After lunch shouldn’t raise many questions. With nowhere else to go, Choromatsu wandered, directionless feet guiding him through cluttered streets and eventually to a sprawling park where all but the stoutest of autumn leaves had long since been whipped from branches and now majestically carpeted the walkways in red and proud dull gold.

Why didn’t he need to keep coming to the office? Were they embarrassed to have him there? Did he make them look bad, that he still didn’t have work? Was it scribed neatly in his files that he was a hopeless case, that he reeked of commitment issues? Did he …

Choromatsu attacked the destructive train of thought with metaphorical scissors. But they were totally blunt, not up to the task; his thinking barely frayed. He was always doing that, overanalysing every situation, every conversation—his every insignificant move. But for all that whirlwind thought,
did he pause to wonder: maybe he didn’t need to come to the office because he didn’t need to be there? That there was no more to it than that, no ulterior meaning or purpose designed to highlight his faults?

With the agents’ reaction on seeing him, somehow Choromatsu didn’t think so.

His sigh traversed to a forlorn groan as he slumped heavily on a park bench, one hand gripping his forehead vice-like. All this time without distraction only worsened his rumination, clogged mind gyrating with mounting distress. He was at that point again. Osomatsu’s success had driven him a little longer than usual. But it seemed clear enough: no one would hire him. He would never make it in the real world. And it was that inescapable defeatist attitude that sent him spiralling from an army’s worth of motivation to scraping the barrel for even a pinch, no desire to do anything at all. He would settle into that mindset, keeping up appearances but quickly content with coasting under parental care—wasn’t failure so much easier, when you didn’t actually try? And that would last a few months, until his cringing self-disgust, his choking need to feel accomplished, to be accepted somewhere—even just the basic want to afford to buy and do the things he liked without scrutiny—shoved him back on his feet. For a little while, anyway.

He wasn’t meant to be spiralling, he couldn’t afford to keep this up! They were meant to work! Become independent! That’s what adults did, what they were meant to do—what he was meant to do! He rambled about it constantly, annoying his brothers about job hunting, being the grounded one, the voice of reason. Choromatsu released an unrestrained gust from his nose, not quite chuckle or whimper. Why should his brothers listen to him? He was just as hopeless as the rest of them—more so, even: hopeless among the hopeless, totally unacceptable.

Choromatsu’s shoulders hunched, discomfort with himself deep and dire. He had once thought himself the safest bet among they sextuplets—a cold hard fact, not narcissism or pride. God knew he had no pride left. But there was no one left to bet on. They were all doomed. Except Osomatsu, maybe.

Guilt twinged painfully in Choromatsu’s already-overwrought gut. Was he really so terrible that he’d never even considered his flaky eldest brother might break the cycle and get out first? At the very least, he supposed with dislike that slinked deep within and ever nearer the surface—at complete insignificant piddling least, it was hard for Choromatsu to be any worse than he already was.

His slumps grew longer, bouts of motivation shorter. But Choromatsu knew exactly how all this would pan out in the end. He groaned again, mashing his face into his palms. He would never be more than a shitty load on society, and everyone knew it. How could he show his face at the employment office again, now that he’d been advised away?

Just wait, Choromatsu strove to be sensible, breath uncomfortably short with dismay. That’s who he was, after all: the sensible Matsuno. They’ll contact you if something comes up. There’s nothing more you can do right now.

For the time being settled by the sense and promise of others far more than his own, Choromatsu kept track of time as the morning breezed lazily by, leaves swirling at his feet, until he was quite sure no one would doubt he’d spent his time usefully. Only then did he rise and turn towards home.

Even Choromatsu was shocked by how disheartened his voice sounded when he called out his arrival. So much for sounding like he’d had a good morning. Removing his shoes and lining them up, toes turned neatly perpendicular to the door, Choromatsu straightened.

‘Bweh!’
His heart contracted, squeezed to pulp by the cruel fist of panic, finding himself nose to nose with a monster. ‘What the … shit!’

‘Bweh!’ the monster shouted again, waving its arms madly. ‘Bweh, bweh … Niisan?’

The monster’s oddly-jovial hollering stalled. A moment later Choromatsu realised the hideous thing held him steady. His weakened knees had nearly gone AWOL, leaving the rest of him to crash back into the entrance. ‘Jyushimatsu,’ he realised belatedly as he gasped back lost breath, growing rosy with shame. Of course it was Jyushimatsu; his store-bought mask wasn’t even that convincing. But it was gory, flapping folds of flesh coated with glistening silicon blood. And Choromatsu had been particularly heightened since that night at pachinko with the cosplay cultists. Already edgy with his increasing unacceptability, now he cringed at the smallest threats, shadows and critiques. And, apparently, at his little brothers in bad fancy dress.

That’s right, some helpful sense finally sang out in understanding. It was Monday, the 31st. Halloween.

Swallowing what felt like a leaden ball, Choromatsu stepped from Jyushimatsu’s stabilising arms and dabbed at the fresh sweat on his brow. Ichimatsu lounged to the wall just ahead, watching. ‘Didn’t think it’d be that effective,’ was all he said.

‘Fuck you.’ Choromatsu didn’t even try to smile, saw nothing funny. How old were they, nine? Ichimatsu knew what had happened in the pachinko parlour, he’d seen the news. And he acted like it was a joke, putting Jyushimatsu up to terrorising him. Choromatsu resisted the urge to slam his brother into the wall as he passed; Ichimatsu was barely on his feet. Behind his hygienic mask, Choromatsu saw he still looked terrible, dull eyes weighted by shadow.

‘Come on, Choromatsu-niisan,’ Jyushimatsu urged through the afternoon, burrowing mole-like within mounds of masks and costumes he’d dumped through the lounge room, accumulated over the years and never discarded. ‘It’s Halloween!’

Quiet behind his book as Jyushimatsu ran riot, Choromatsu shook his head. He had no intention of dressing up or doing anything spookier than eating a few pieces of chocolate. Any other day he might have been up for it, for all he pointed out their ever-increasing age. But Choromatsu approached the point of no return; a crash was imminent. He just wanted to be left alone to wallow. But Jyushimatsu either didn’t notice, or did and kept pestering him from worry; it was hard to be sure.

‘Come on, don’t be boring, Niisan,’ he said eventually, words slipping out and hammering Choromatsu hard. He didn’t answer, gripping his book tight with a crumple of pristine pages, all meaning knocked from the sentence he’d been trying to read. He wasn’t boring. Was he? Looking for work wasn’t boring. Sensible wasn’t boring, it was … but was he really sensible at all? Was that him? Or did he just act sensibly because he knew someone had to? Someone had to wear the straight face, fill that level-headed role in their warped household. Choromatsu sure as hell got dragged from playing that part easily enough, drunk or caught up in spontaneity and mischief—or being an ass, as mischief was known colloquially in the adult world. And if he only acted sensibly … but if sensible didn’t mean boring, but he was only acting sensibly, he could still be …

Choromatsu moaned, pinching his nose as a stress headache nudged tauntingly through his brain. Act or not, he tried so hard to be the steady one. What was he if not the sensible Matsuno? God, he didn’t know anymore. Trash, probably. Nothing but trash.

Stop overanalysing! he ordered himself, hiding his stress behind his book as Jyushimatsu paused suddenly in his costume diving, as though his aerial had suddenly been straightened and he
immediately attuned to his brother nearby. *Maybe everything wouldn’t get to you so badly if you would just stop picking everything apart!* But he couldn’t help it. He brooded on two-second conversations with strangers for hours afterwards, how he might have done better. That 20 seconds he’d once bought with Nyaa-chan—Choromatsu recalled with a curl of regret and lingering resentment how Osomatsu had ruining it, but knew he’d botched it himself long before his brother even arrived. He’d had every moment planned in minute detail, his all-encompassing, doomed-to-fail intent to pass himself off as smooth, acceptable—even a good guy—to his idol. Removed from the situation, Choromatsu knew his days of preparation had been ridiculous, even plain sad. At the same time, he knew if he somehow wrangled another VIP ticket he would do exactly the same thing.

At least he’d gone through with meeting Nyaa-chan. But his hopeless habit extended to analysing others, anyone he might encounter, to determine if they had a hope of connecting on the same level. Always finding himself wanting—he wasn’t allowed to talk to someone so pretty, so likeable—Choromatsu rarely engaged with anyone but his brothers and a few fellow fans. He talked himself out of every gut urge and hammering want of his heart to the extent that, though he had the same woeful girlfriend history as his brothers, he had the fewest attempts to remedy it, never once gritting his teeth and making himself choke out those terrifying words: will you go out with me?

Choromatsu gave in and donned the spangled wizard hat Jyushimatsu threw at him. Even Ichimatsu in cat ears, only Osomatsu was out of costume at dinner, just back from work and oddly quiet. He’d been oddly quiet since he’d unexpectedly announced he’d been hired. Choromatsu had put it down to upheaval, adjusting to the workplace. But he’d been employed for weeks now, earning Karamatsu a healthy fistful of yen in the process; Totty had bet their brother would quit before the month was out. And it was Osomatsu, for god’s sake: if his mouth was shut, Choromatsu was tempted to check he still breathed.

‘It’s going … ah, fine,’ Choromatsu cursed his inelegance when their father asked after his job hunt, fumbling not to lose his chopsticks. ‘Still at it.’

‘There’s still university, if nothing turns up,’ dad went on with more than a hint of a nag. ‘You’ve got the brains. Exams in January.’

‘That’s, ah … another option, I guess,’ Choromatsu said only to end the conversation, throwing the sporadic topic back up on the shelf to gather dust. He was quite relieved and a little guilty when their father’s badgering turned on the others.

‘Why can’t you NEETs be more like your brother and actually try? Or like Osomatsu—how was work today?’ he directed at his eldest as Choromatsu couldn’t suppress a fidget. At least he was trying now, he thought. Probably.

Osomatsu shrugged, his grin preoccupied. ‘Fine, Dad. No problems.’

Jyushimatsu was eager to trick-or-treat, but Choromatsu put his foot down, reminding his brothers of a few past Halloween-related issues—the issues being them. ‘Not to mention the … cult thing that’s going on,’ he added more nervously after his outburst of dissent.

‘That’s a point,’ Osomatsu agreed unexpectedly as Todomatsu’s bright brown eyes widened fearfully. ‘Sickos like them will be out in force tonight. Let’s stay in, have a party or something.’

‘Yeah, party!’ Jyushimatsu was immediately placated with the promise of sugar and alcohol, the brothers gathering to decide in their usual way who would be sent to buy snacks. Osomatsu complained briefly, the first to win the honour of the task.
‘What? I just got home, I was working all day …’

‘That means you have the money,’ Todomatsu pointed out, smug as his paper lost to Choromatsu’s scissors; the third born would be joining the eldest. Anxious as he pulled off his wizard hat, memories of the pachinko parlour melding with the suddenly forbidding atmosphere of Halloween, Choromatsu cleared his throat. He didn’t want his brothers to know he was afraid.

‘I, ah …’ He looked to Karamatsu, usually so attune to his brothers’ needs and willing, despite his general penchant for drama, to unobtrusively step in. But he was deep in long-winded one-sided conversation with a perpetually-disinterested Ichimatsu. But the time Ichimatsu hid his grey face in the table to escape, Osomatsu had already slung an arm around Choromatsu’s shoulders.

‘Looks like it’s you and me. Come on, let’s get this over with.’

He would admit it only to himself. But Choromatsu felt a lot safer walking to the nearby convenience store on Halloween night, cultists on the loose, with his big brother beside him. Osomatsu’s easy stride projected far more confidence that his own more halting step. And Osomatsu’s month of working seemed to have been good for him. He seemed fitter, stronger. But Choromatsu couldn’t unsee those awful bruises on his brother’s arm a few weeks ago. And there had been a smattering of smaller injuries since. Choromatsu worried his brother’s workplace didn’t have a stringent health and safety policy in place. And he’d not yet mentioned his brother’s sporadic night time disappearances, waking up and finding the space on his right empty. Osomatsu was an adult; he could go where he liked when he liked. Still … it was odd.

‘How is work?’ Choromatsu repeated their father’s question, getting much the same response and no more. ‘It is labouring, isn’t it? Outdoor work?’ It seemed strange that he had to double-check, but Osomatsu never said more than it was fine. ‘What happened to becoming a national treasure?’ he attempted a joke when Osomatsu only nodded and smiled vaguely in agreement.

‘I already am, little brother.’

‘You seem … distracted,’ Choromatsu observed the obvious when Osomatsu made no attempt to change the subject or ask a question himself. When had it become a challenge to hold a conversation with his chatty brother? Osomatsu shrugged again, his finger familiarly at his nose reassuring Choromatsu that not everything had changed.

‘It’s just work, you know?’

Stung, Choromatsu couldn’t bite back his reflexive harsh response. ‘No, actually, I don’t know.’

Passing a few close huddles of people on corners, Choromatsu instinctively shied back, first thought of the cultists and their strange effect on those nearby—a few reports had suggested short-acting airborne toxins. Osomatsu seemed to notice his anxiety. ‘They’re just people hanging out, no one suspicious. They look kinda scared too,’ he added; all their conversation was low, and they stood far closer together than the casually comfortable would.

‘I’m not scared,’ Choromatsu’s sliver of lasting pride made him insist. Osomatsu grinned, so infuriatingly knowing. Reading the look and not a retort in him, Choromatsu resigned himself to ridicule, sure Osomatsu would tease him the rest of the errand for his jitters. But:

‘Hey, I was there,’ his brother said, unexpectedly empathetic. ‘I was scared, too.’

Oddly for Halloween, but not so oddly with warnings to be watchful of dangerous people in costume, the streets weren’t overly crowded; there were practically no trick-or-treaters out, which
had become a staple of the Western holiday since their own childhood. The brightly-lit convenience store toned cheerfully on their entry; it was empty but for them and the lone attendant. ‘Welcome!’ he called out in falsely bright tones, clearly tired; he looked like he wanted nothing more than to kick them out so he could go back to sleep.

Enthusiasm picked up somewhat, Osomatsu grabbed all their favourite snacks and loaded up on beers while Choromatsu held the basket, occasionally suggesting he put something back. ‘Can you afford all this, Osomatsu-niisan?’ he had to ask.

‘That’s what working means,’ Osomatsu said with an galling grin as the store rang out with the entry of another patron; Choromatsu fought the urge to upend the loaded basket on his brother’s head. ‘You can afford shit. Trust me, you’ll …’

Osomatsu trailed off, gaze fixated at the entrance over Choromatsu’s shoulder. Innards seized by panic as his brother’s eyes widened and the clerk gave a strangled cry, Choromatsu suddenly had trouble breathing. But before he could turn around, Osomatsu grabbed him, yanking him down behind the shelves. ‘Stay down, stay quiet,’ he hissed.

‘Is it …’ Choromatsu croaked, eating his heart and eyes stretched wide. ‘One of them? The cultists?’

He almost gagged when Osomatsu nodded, brow furrowed deep. ‘But I don’t think they’re after us. We should be able to …’

Without warning, Osomatsu sprang to his feet, leaving Choromatsu huddled on the linoleum and dashing into the open. ‘Wh-what are you …?’ Before he could comprehend more than his brother had left him, Osomatsu had smashed out one wide window, foot flying in a series of quick kicks. Shattered glass rained over the magazine racks.

‘Come on.’ Abandoning their basket, he seized Choromatsu’s sleeve and hauled him to the broken window. Choromatsu just caught sight of the towering white being—god, it was happening again; it sure didn’t look like a costume—advancing on the terrified clerk before Osomatsu shoved him through the jagged opening. Jumping after him, Osomatsu grabbed his wrist in a death grip and began to run, dragging him behind. Choromatsu had used to be the fastest of them. But he barely kept up, scarcely seeing where they were going as his arm strained, Osomatsu drawing further ahead and refusing to let go. And Choromatsu didn’t think to demand release, all sense iced by fear.

Finally Osomatsu stopped. They were bathed in bright streetlight somewhere; Choromatsu had no clue what street. Heaving for breath as his brother released him, Choromatsu stumbled forward and bent over, hands braced to his knees and panting. ‘Stay here,’ Osomatsu’s voice wavered in Choromatsu’s stress-dimmed ears; he sounded like he’d just enjoyed a brisk stroll, not smashed his way out of a convenience store. ‘I’ll be back, I’m getting help.’

‘N-no!’ Choromatsu tried to grab his brother’s hood and stop him. Osomatsu gripped the younger Matsuno’s shoulders hard; Choromatsu would have complained, if he weren’t so afraid.

‘Choromatsu, look at me,’ he said, compelling Choromatsu’s frightened eyes up to lock on his. ‘Look, I’ve got this. Everything will be all right. Just stay here, I’ll be back for you.’

Giving Choromatsu a bracing shake and pushing him against the streetlight in case his knees gave out, Osomatsu sprinted back the way they’d come. ‘W-wait!’ Choromatsu shouted too late after his vanishing back. ‘What do you mean you’ve got this, what can you possibly do? The police will … come back! Don’t …’

Words sticking in his throat, Choromatsu groaned and struck the light pole hard with his sweaty
pals. What the hell was Osomatsu thinking? He was headed straight back there! His brother would never just call police; he was too often just scraping out of trouble beneath their noses. Was he actually … was he going to confront the cultist?

Choromatsu clung to the streetlight like a glowing lifeline. Airways squeezed by panic, he strove to breathe, slow and even, even as his knees trembled, barely holding him up. Gradually the third born Matsuno forced some semblance of control over his stress reaction, fight, flight or freeze skirmishing for control of his systems. Choromatsu gritted his teeth, tears crystallising at the apex of each screwed-shut eye as the realisation struck him hard. He was useless, he just let his idiot brother rush straight back into danger. What good was it trying to be the grounded one if he fell apart the moment his brothers actually needed grounding? Damn it, he should have gotten angry, made Osomatsu listen. Yelled at him …

… And he couldn’t yell at him from here.

Convinced he was somehow making one of the biggest mistakes of his life—and there’d already been so many—but not delaying another second, Choromatsu stole a final fortifying breath and released the street light, hurtling after his brother. His stride clumsy, once-proud form and technique glimmered beneath so many sedentary years and pushed him on while air still teased. Recognising a few landmarks, he saw where he was and speeded back to the convenience store.

Pulling up just beyond the busted window, Choromatsu stared. The store was trashed, shelves flipped and stock scattered. Inside, the cultist had vanished.

Choromatsu clutched his chest, fighting the return of panic as he struggled to accept what unfolded before his widening eyes. A supple creature, pale and so large the crest of its globular form shoved in the ceiling panels, slithering with countless tentacles that puckered wetly with suction cups, whipped its limbs in coordinated attack. A red-hooded figure capered between them, dipping and jumping as they snaked to pin him. Choromatsu almost shouted out in terror, but then the figure shot through the tentacles and delivered a punch to the monster’s thick body. His fist burst with flames. Chromatsu calmed an iota. This wasn’t Osomatsu. Osomatsu couldn’t … this was someone else.

Lithe appendages catching up, the monster caught its foe in a web of rubbery flesh and flung him back. The warrior crashed into the upended magazine rack, right beneath the shattered window. On his feet in an instant, he shook itself and leapt back into the fray. Choromatsu barely glimpsed his features. But his lower face was shrouded in a close-fitting mask. Like some sort of hero, blown straight from the pages of a comic book.

What in hell was happening? Why wasn’t anyone … Choromatsu tore his staggered gaze from the battle. The cold night wasn’t crowded, but people bundled in coats and scarves walked by in pairs and threes. They were utterly disinterested in what unfolded just a step inside. ‘Hey, are you okay?’ one young woman spared Choromatsu’s pasty face some concern. But his throat was suctioned shut; Chromatsu couldn’t wrench out a sound. Nailing him with a disparaging frown, her partner tightened his hold on her waist and motioned her on. An older man in a jumpsuit jogged from across the street, clearly meaning to enter the store. But before his weight could trigger the doors, a look of realisation struck his sun-browned features. He immediately abandoned his errand, running instead around the corner.

They couldn’t see … how could they not see? Unless … with a surge of desperate hope, Choromatsu sized the flesh of his wrist and pinched hard. Very real pain rocketed through his nerves and stabbed his bain. ‘Oww!’

It wasn’t a dream. What in hell was going on? Costumed cultists were one thing, but this … Choromatsu’s hands clawed his sweat-stained hoodie over his belting heart, consciousness numbing
with disbelief that only fuelled his rising panic. All sense suddenly useless and mind wiped unpleasantly blank, his few jumbled thoughts fastened briefly on his brother. He had to find Osomatsu, find help … what possible help could he find?! This was a goddamn monster! He had to get out of there!

Escape screamed at him. But Choromatsu inched forward, drawn nearer the fight like a self-aware bug hypnotised by light. Stupid, stupid … He crouched behind the rubbish bins by the storefront. He was aware just how creepy he must look, peeking through the window from down there. But the familiar cringe of societal dread was promptly crushed as the warrior made a grievous misstep, tripped by a sweeping tentacle. Shivering cry high like a falcon’s shriek behind its savage beak, the tentacled monster fastened tight around his ankle, yanking him in the air.

Choromatsu went cold, paralysed as as the red warrior was whipped through the air. Flailing for a clean shot, he twisted, aiming blasts of fire at the limbs that held him prisoner. But the tentacles wove too fast. Choromatsu wheezed, gasp throttled by his closing throat as the warrior was slammed violently into the ceiling, banging loose panels. Finally contorting his flying form and getting his other boot flush against the squeezing grip on his ankle, the warrior stamped flames directly into the beast’s rubbery flesh and his own leg beneath. The monster howled, its grip slipping. Stealing that moment, he kicked free, fists blasting the thicker body of a pale tentacle that snaked beneath him, aiming to snag his waist. His flames propelled him up and back, out of reach.

Choromatsu watched, mouth dry and heaving, as the warrior landed. Immediately he wavered, slumping slightly. One gauntleted hand strayed for his ankle. He was hurt … god, where was Osomatsu? Choromatsu gritted shaking fists as the warrior stamped through his pain and grabbed a dislodged ceiling panel, hurling it bodily at the monster.

Osomatsu wasn’t here. He had to do something.

Choromatsu skidded the short distance to the broken window—it was a miracle the rest remained intact; the monster seemed focussed on the warrior more than intentionally wrecking the store—and leapt through, flinging himself behind a pile of levelled shelving. What are you doing? Some sense wormed through frothing layers of nameless fear and confused daring to demand. You can’t even get a job, how can you possibly help? What happened to being the sensible Matsuno, idiot?!

Answerless and well past so-called reason, Choromatsu went on grappling for cans, bottles—anything he could lob. Flat on his stomach, he peered over his scanty cover. Every one of the monster’s seven rolling eyes followed the warrior as he cavorted through trip traps, fighting to break its defences and lay into its unwieldy body with fire. Choromatsu tried to think. The monster believed its foe was alone. If he could make it look away with another threat …

The hooded warrior flipped, shooting flames and drawing the monster’s eyes high and left. Choromatsu seized his chance, hurling a can of spray deodorant right. It clattered loudly against the cooler shelves behind the beast. With an air-splitting shriek, the monster’s entire rubbery form ponderously swivelled, orienting to the clang. Choromatsu pressed himself flat against the linoleum, sure he’d been seen. But he heard the bursts of flame and a cawing shriek, nostrils assaulted as the beast’s white flesh charred like squid on a hotplate.

Choromatsu barely enjoyed a brief flutter of elation before he heard the unmistakeable sound of feet kicking through debris, searching. Shit. Fear raking his gut, he hurriedly looked for better cover. Before he’d so much as gotten off his front, the store attendant loomed over him. Choromatsu barely kept from yelling: he had the same dead eyes as the mindless zombies from the pachinko parlour. Between his fingers the clerk clutched an array of wooden skewers with deadly points; a few were still greasy, fried chicken ripped from the impromptu weapons.
The clerk charged at Choromatsu, thrusting wildly with his skewers. ‘Shit!’ he wheezed, just managing to swivel on his arse and kick out his feet, redirecting a savage blow to his chest. Any escape cut off as the monster sent one eye and a few tentacles swooping to deal with him, Choromatsu tripped to his feet. Throwing up his arms in defence as the clerk rushed him, he screamed, skewers puncturing his forearm. The warrior’s attention whipped, immediately orienting to his anguish. Features mostly erased by his mask, Choromatsu still saw his blatant shock. Redirecting in mid-air with a blaze of fire, the warrior immediately tried to reach him.

_He can’t risk himself for me_, Choromatsu thought faintly as the monster rallied an onslaught against the warrior, getting in his way. _I have to … get out of sight. Where can I …_

The bathroom. Choromatsu bolted for the door at the very back of the store, jumping over felled shelves and skidding through scattered products, the attendant crushing his heels in pursuit. He choked as a tentacle slithered beneath his feet, tripping him. But he stumbled upright before the clerk could nail him there with skewers, throwing the bathroom door open and slamming it in his face, dark with empty wrath.

Throwing the pitiful lock, Choromatsu sank to the cold tiles, clutching his arm. Two skewers jutted there, buried deep in muscle and caked with sticky blood. He recalled distantly that he shouldn’t just pull them out, but any thought of slapdash first aid was driven from his mind as the door began to rattle in its frame. The clerk … was kicking it down. A tougher, squelching slap followed, tentacles straining the length of the store to pummel the lone defence of his pathetic haven.

Door trembling ominously, Choromatsu shoved his back against it and braced his feet to the opposite wall, whimpering with each shuddering strike. He couldn’t breathe … he couldn’t breathe …

Sounds of battle raging beyond the battering at his back, Choromatsu floundered through consciousness, panic constricting his larynx and sure he was about to die, moments from fainting with lack of oxygen and fear. He would deprive the buckling door of the only bolster it had. Damaged arm braced to his chest, his entire body shook with the ceaseless pounding. But at the very least, he reasoned dizzily, he served some purpose, a distraction for the warrior. He’d helped fight a monster. Even just for these moments, he was … useful.

At that distant realisation, Choromatsu felt almost at peace with himself even as the door began to splinter. He had accomplished something with his failure of a life, after all.

‘Matsuno Choromatsu.’

When had he closed his eyes? Squinting blearily, Choromatsu saw a tiny kitten perched on the edge of the sink. Gracefully, it blurred across his vision, leaping to the tiles. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu?’ the voice repeated, now more question than statement, as the kitten cocked its little white head to regard him, sweat raining cold and arm weeping red.

‘Y-yes?’ was all Choromatsu could croak. It was a cute teenage girl’s voice, he dimly realised. But there was no one here. Just him and the little cat.

‘Calm down. You … you’re hurt,’ the voice realised with concern. The kitten padded nearer, but started as the door gave a violent jolt. It wouldn’t take much more; either the door or the lock would buckle. But as his world crumbled around him, Choromatsu could only pant.

‘Matsuno Choromatsu. You have … breath.’

‘Wh-what?’ he managed to gasp, barely clawing down air. Was this … a joke? Choromatsu was far more offended than bewildered, no thought to spare that he was hearing voices. Tilting its head back,
the kitten gazed at him with eyes like night sky.

‘I haven’t seen you fight, but I know what you did. You risked yourself despite your fears, risked yourself for good. That was smart, distracting that soldier. It was brave.’

He just wanted … to help. To be useful … needed … Choromatsu wanted … to be who he was meant to be.

The kitten nodded, and the young voice sounded suddenly decided. ‘This is hardly ideal, but … you are a powerful breath; I can feel it in you. Please,’ the voice appealed as Choromatsu’s eyes glazed, losing to unconsciousness. ‘You have to calm down, you have to breathe … I offer you a temporary power contract,’ the voice said in a rush. Choromatsu realised dimly that the kitten now stood in his lap, claws digging into his thigh. Was it … trying to keep him awake? No, he reasoned blearily, drifting away and wishing his final thoughts had been more profound. It was … just a cat …

‘Matsuno Choromatsu!’

Choromatsu gasped, jerked back to wakefulness. ‘I offer you a temporary power contract,’ the voice repeated. The kitten held something long and thin in its teeth and pushed it into Choromatsu’s hand. Instinctively, his weakened fingers closed around it. ‘You must accept it, Matsuno Choromatsu. If you don’t, you’ll surely be killed for interfering.’

Choromatsu’s head rolled back, knocking heavily into the door. He’d be killed … if he didn’t suffocate first. How was this … how was this happening?

‘Matsuno Choromatsu,’ the voice said, urgent edge somewhat softened. ‘I know it’s hard, that you’re frightened. But right now your brother needs you.’

His brother …

‘That’s … Osomatsu … out there?’ he asked weakly, somehow reeling with the revelation even as he faded. The kitten nodded, hissing as chips of wood flew from the door, almost busted in. But how … how could Choromatsu help him? ‘I … I don’t … understand …’

‘Please, you must hurry—accept the temporary contract!’

‘I … accept,’ Choromatsu heard himself rasp. He vaguely noticed the object in his fist tingle with warmth, as though he watched himself through clouded glass a world away.

‘Say … you must breathe!’ the voice exclaimed as Choromatsu’s empty lungs stalled. ‘Please, you have to … by this contract I submit my breath to salvation!’

‘By this contract,’ he made himself gurgle for his brother, kitten streaking for cover as the door finally yielded under pressure, Choromatsu hurled bodily into the sink as it erupted open. Wracked by pain and face-down on the tiles, he felt the shadow of the possessed attendant shroud his prone form, skewers at the ready.

‘Matsuno Choromatsu!’

‘I submit … my breath … to salvation.’

With a crack of thunder and brilliant flash of lightning, Choromatsu was subsumed by a storm. Wind whistling violently in his ears, he grew more and more aware as somehow he stood on air, skewers falling from his arm and battered body drawing healing and breath as his clothes unravelled into roiling cloud. Too astonished to register overwhelming embarrassment, that he floated naked in a
narrow convenience store bathroom, Choromatsu surged with crackling electricity as the cyclone embraced him, caressing like the tender arms of his own mother. He shimmered with the tempest, overwhelming power somehow a comfort as it drew his body in a graceful arc, now a part of him—he was the storm. Wind whirling down his body in streamers and straight through his soul, Choromatsu raised his arms behind his head and drew glinting pistols from air. Whipping them around himself with an agile spin, Choromatsu saw as the silvery cylinder the kitten had given him rearranged its atoms, pinning itself below his throat with a glint of green.

‘Rising tempest of wisdom, Wyvern!’

Slowly, Choromatsu lowered his arms from his pose, feet returned to solid ground and staring at the strange clothes he now wore, the gleaming pistols in his hands. What the … what was going on? What had … how …

But he could breathe. Choromatsu was still afraid. But he felt … composed. He hadn’t felt so together in years. And he could breathe.

‘Are you all right?’ The voice spared only a moment for concern as Choromatsu nodded, so bewildered. But so calm. ‘Go, now!’

The clerk had been lifted clean off his feet with the power of Choromatsu’s transformation. The mindless man now crawled, snatching up skewers bare steps away. Choromatsu looked on his weapons, disconcerted. He’d never fired a gun in his life. But somehow he kept his head, attention caught by a lens that drifted before his right eye. With his brief focus the glass breathed to life, flashing green with symbols that rapidly spiralled to Japanese as the clerk clawed to riddle him with holes. Pressed to the wall as the glass captured both his weapons and the brainwashed clerk, it suddenly spilled forth advice. ‘Stun,’ Choromatsu read in relief, raising a pistol and aiming straight at the clerk’s heaving chest. With only the barest hesitation, he fired point-blank just as the zombie sprang.

A bolt streaked from the slender barrel; with a spark, it dissolved into the clerk’s chest. He wasn’t thrown backwards or blasted apart; Choromatsu had barely worried, somehow sure of his shot. The clerk froze, arrested mid-spring before crumpling anew, out of commission.

‘Good work,’ the voice applauded, but starting to bite under pressure. ‘Now help your brother!’

Choromatsu already moved. The empty doorframe writhed with tentacles clambering to seize him; apparently his transformation hadn’t gone unnoticed. ‘Laser,’ he altered his pistols’ function as his glass recommended, beginning to fire into their mass. Loosing a flustering spray of bolts, it took only moments for Choromatsu to blast a path through the wounded appendages, emerging in the main body of the convenience store.

The red warrior—Osomatsu struggled with a tentacle thicker than a tree trunk, chest slowly crushed to the wall, unable to punch through its thickened sinew. How could he not have recognised his brother? ‘Osomatsu!’

Realising he shouted without sound beneath his mask, but storing the interesting yet unimportant point aside for later analysis, Choromatsu fell effortlessly in sync with his glass as it surveyed for enemy movement, carefully avoiding the clinging grip of tentacles as he lined up his shot. Diving forward as four narrow limbs sneaked for his wrists at once, he adjusted and fired. ‘Full power.’

‘Choromatsu?’ Osomatsu seemed torn between delight and distress as the monster shrieked, chunks torn from the foundations of a dominant tentacle. Rubbery grip weakened, Osomatsu slid free and laid into the chunky injury, finally blasting the entire limb off with a splatter of steaming ooze; the
heat of the concentrated explosion washed over Choromatsu as he fell back, evading tentacles that flailed in agony. ‘It’s you! What are you …’

‘Keep it busy,’ Choromatsu said, firing off shots as he analysed the beast, glass throwing up facts. He kept one eye on his information, the other on his surrounds, phasing his attention between so many focuses with astounding ease, knowing he could—why couldn’t he be so composed in his own skin? This was amazing, he felt so in control.

Osomatsu flashed him severe annoyance, stealing a moment to nurse his clearly-aching ribcage. ‘Keep it busy? Why didn’t you say so? I’ll cancel my fucking tea party and get right on that. Maybe give me a little cover?’ he added pointedly, cocking his fists and barrelling into the beast, his target ever its savage beak; the monster protected it like its life lay just behind.

‘Wyvern,’ it hissed as Choromatsu fired on limbs that twisted for his brother, keeping out of range as best he could as he scanned his glass for any weakness they could use against it. ‘So now you join the Salamander’s meaningless crusade. Know you struggle in vain. Tremble with the sheer power of darkness you face: I am Kuuika, loyal vassal to my Lord Takuu and proud soldier of the Liberation Force!’

‘I have no idea what’s going on,’ Choromatsu said almost casually. Osomatsu actually laughed.

‘Can you wait till we’re out of this? Ahn can explain everything.’

‘Far better than you can, anyway,’ the teenaged voice muttered in Choromatsu’s mind, apparently joining the soundless conversation. Osomatsu laughed again, bright as the fire he wielded. As lost as ever, Choromatsu found he actually smiled beneath his mask.

‘No matter what you do, however many of you pathetic Spectrum Guardians assemble,’ Kuuika taunted; a thoroughly-provoked Osomatsu hurled debris while Choromatsu stored his aggression, picking through data as he aimed for beast’s eyes. Appendages swarmed to shield them. Kuuika was a hydra, another three tentacles springing for each one incapacitated. But there had to be something … there would be something …

‘Concentrate on its eyes.’

‘With the Doll of Darkness we are invincible! He will wipe every one of your …’

‘It can’t see in the dark!’ Choromatsu immediately aimed for the lights, firing off a volley. Every fluorescent tube shattered, glass showered as electricity spat into darkness. ‘Turn off your goddam fire!’

Osomatsu immediately doused himself. The store plunged into total blackness; lights outside barely blinked through the windows as distant stars, shrouded by whatever force kept those beyond from noticing the chaos. The beast howled in alarm, vision all but stolen. But Choromatsu saw perfectly, lens focussing on something that gleamed behind its beak.

‘What’s … its crystal?’

‘Come on!’ Osomatsu shouted, throwing himself through blinded tentacles and finally getting his gauntleted hands on its piercing beak, as big as his torso. The monster roared, trying to buck him off, but Choromatsu kept every flailing tentacle at bay as Osomatsu dug his feet into the ground, heaving with all his strength. Finally, with a deep crack and nauseating squelch, he ripped the monstrous beak clean off.

‘Shoot it out!’ Osomatsu yelled. Choromatsu laid eyes to the dark sparkle for a split-second before
firing dead into Kuuika’s injured maw, lasers shredding to countless shards.

‘Well,’ Osomatsu sparkled with his hidden grin as he slung a heavy arm around Choromatsu’s shoulders, the beast dissolving before their eyes. His brother seemed entirely unperturbed by the gruesome disintegration, tentacles crumbling to dust as suckers smacked and shrivelled. Unprepared, Choromatsu shivered, repulsed. Stepping back with Osomatsu, he watched as the ceiling-high mound of white sand, once Kuuika’s lumberous body, collapsed in a wave that spread to every corner of the store, coating the scene like gleaming snow.

‘That was fun.’

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It took a few moments to convince Choromatsu to leave the unfortunate clerk to the care of the imminent emergency services. ‘He just got knocked around, he’ll be fine.’

‘Can’t they see us?’ Choromatsu asked somewhat hesitantly as Osomatsu strolled easily out the door; it was one of the only fixtures that remained intact. On the outside, all remained oblivious, city churning on unaffected by the Liberation Force. Thanks to Osomatsu. And Choromatsu, he amended, unease rising in his chest like the slow warning of smoke. Wafting it away—he’d deal with its source soon enough—Osomatsu glowed with enthusiasm.

‘Not yet. Follow me—try to keep up,’ he grinned, pestering Ahn to get a move on as she padded briskly from her pipe-reinforced cover, pouncing to nestle in the safety of his hoodie pocket. With a loosening of mass sensory feedback and mild waves of repellant, Ahn dropped her suppressing hold over the area. Osomatsu immediately took off, streaking into the air as suddenly people shouted out and came running, at last noticing the convenience store was wrecked. A hasty glance over his shoulder reassured him Choromatsu was a quick study, only half a jump behind.

‘This is unreal,’ he breathed as their toes touched briefly on rooftops, the statement not hampering his soaring in the least. Choromatsu looked good airborne.

‘Welcome to my world.’ Osomatsu gestured briefly at the city as it rose to meet them; too long would mess with his gut aerodynamics. ‘How do you like my office?’

Osomatsu laughed, as though without care—most of his more blatant concerns had been put down by Choromatsu’s stellar debut. But he would be having blunt words with Ahn. Sensing his ire, the little creature stiffened. She should be worried. What was she thinking, transforming his little brother like that without even a word? She’d said his family would be safe. In the thick of battle wasn’t exactly what Osomatsu had in mind. And they hadn’t even started looking for someone with breath —what were the odds, that Choromatsu was even a candidate? But beneath his glee and the weight of ever-burgeoning responsibility he could no longer cast off, Osomatsu shelved most of his pride, grateful to his brother. Choromatsu might have just saved his life. And now—Osomatsu knew he was being dramatic and didn’t care—he had one of his brothers back.

Osomatsu led his brother to an abandoned warehouse in a once-industrial outer suburb of Tokyo, now tagged for mass demolition. The grungy brick shell cavernous and isolated enough to train while transformed, he’d stumbled upon the deserted area during one of his extended morning walks. Jumping through a skylight he’d kicked in earlier, Osomatsu beckoned him down. Choromatsu hesitated a moment, but followed. He hadn’t fire to slow his descent, but Osomatsu’s brother moved gracefully through air, instinctively riding the barest changes of wind and pressure. He did have breath, Osomatsu reminded himself, touched by fleeting envy as Choromatsu touched down, barely needing to crouch; he seemed far more astounded than Osomatsu. So utterly composed through battle, he straightened with the barest tremble, features stark with ongoing amazement.
‘Let’s have a look at you,’ Osomatsu teased, taking Choromatsu by the arm and planting him beneath the broken skylight. But the moon was new, not even a faint sheen from heaven. ‘Hmm, not enough light.’

‘Watch it!’ Choromatsu exclaimed as Osomatsu pulled spurts like candlelight onto his fingertips: his newest trick. Far from impressed, his brother leaned away from the illuminating flames. Following his retreat, Osomatsu waggled his burning fingers in Choromatsu’s pained face.

‘What? It’s not going to hurt you.’

Chuckling, Osomatsu admired his brother’s magical boy getup. Not quite as badass as his—he set a high precedent. But the odd hooded gakuran suited him, right down to the scowl shrouded by his mask, steel grey to Osomatsu’s charcoal. Vibrant green jacket edged in the same grey, it was a little long for military style and slashed for freedom of movement. Reaching with the tip of a knuckle duster, Osomatsu scraped roughly at the fabric, trying to dig into its tight stitching.

‘Hey, stop it,’ Choromatsu complained, shoving him away. Osomatsu let himself be pushed, satisfied his brother wore solid woven armour. Below the armour of his grey trousers, Choromatsu’s running boots looked lighter than Osomatsu’s, not doubling as weapons but so sleek he was sure they tripled whatever advantage his brother had in air. Choromatsu’s sparkling emerald, set in white gold, was pinned just below his throat. Osomatsu’s flaming hand strayed to his own garnet. He wasn’t alone any more. Slowly, the Spectrum Guardians assembled.

‘Where do I …’ Choromatsu raised his pistols. Twin barrels so narrow, the elegant firearms flowed into handles a perfect fit to his palms. He glanced down, confirming his hip was empty of holsters. Osomatsu shrugged. But Ahn poked her head from his hoodie.

‘Return them from whence they came.’

Choromatsu’s head snapped up. ‘You are … hearing that voice, right?’

‘What voice?’ Osomatsu asked, nonplussed as Ahn sprang nimbly to the floor. ‘It’s just us.’

‘It spoke to me before I … and it was there during the fight,’ Choromatsu said, eyes cautiously traversing the wide empty space, corner to swinging rafter, as though some spirit watched them from shadow. ‘And what’s with the cat?’ he added as Ahn tried to claim his attention, miffed when he offered only passing curiosity. ‘I’ve been wondering.’

Mirth fizzed and immediately burst through Osomatsu as a ringing laugh, colouring the entire warehouse. ‘You … you thought … I can’t believe you didn’t figure out it was her!’

Choromatsu’s eyes widened to learn it was little Ahn who spoke, but narrowed as Osomatsu went on chortling. ‘I was kinda trying not to faint … what’s so unbelievable about not making that connection?’ he demanded; Osomatsu’s eyes tearing, he grinned so hard he wouldn’t want for humour for years. Until tomorrow morning, anyway. ‘There could be any number of other explanations. What’s far more concerning is you made that leap straightaway!’

‘Put away your weapons how you drew them,’ Ahn instructed Choromatsu again, far less touchy now she had his attention. Still harbouring doubts—but Osomatsu had to hand it to his uptight brother: he handled this far better than he’d have expected—Choromatsu raised his pistols, motioning as though he holstered one on each shoulder blade, and hesitantly released them. Osomatsu whistled, impressed as they phased into subspace.

‘Useful. Spectrum Alliance make, you know—you get far more than you paid for. Or in our case,
they pay us.’

‘If you could shut your mouth for one moment,’ Ahn said so prissly Osomatsu couldn’t resist a sweeping bow, at her mocking service. ‘Your brother and I have much to discuss.’

Phasing back to themselves, Choromatsu had to sit in a hurry, knees suddenly shaking. His brother now far less sedate and, the entire situation dropped heavily on him, Osomatsu saw his brother rub tentatively at his right forearm. The puncture wounds looked raw and red, still painful. But they seemed mostly healed. Joining him, Ahn spoke calmly, reassuringly—Osomatsu sniffed; she’d never shown such patience with him—until Choromatsu seemed ready to handle her explanations. Osomatsu threw himself down by them, interjecting helpfully through their enemy’s history and annoying Ahn as Choromatsu listened without a word, his occasional nods all that prompted he understood—he heard, in any case.

‘I knew something was up with you,’ he finally said when Ahn was done, turning his transformation scroll over in his hands. Osomatsu huffed, sure he’d had them all fooled. ‘The bruises,’ Choromatsu listed distantly, and went on listing, much to Osomatsu annoyance. ‘Disappearing at night, going up on the roof alone …’

‘You were awake?!’

‘And you just weren’t talking, butting in on our business. I knew something was up …’

‘So, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn lowered her little head as Osomatsu courted a full-blown pout, offering Choromatsu a binding contract. ‘Will you pledge yourself as the rising tempest of wisdom? The Spectrum Alliance would be proud, should you take up the mantle of the Wyvern.’

Choromatsu sighed, rolling his scroll through his fingers repetitively. ‘I’m not a hero,’ he murmured, more to the darkness then Osomatsu or Ahn. ‘I’m a NEET …’

The eldest Matsuno lay back and folded his arms behind his head, gaze to the empty sky as some struggle stormed behind his brother’s eyes. Choromatsu liked the term least of them all, even when used semi-affectionately by their parents. And Osomatsu knew if he’d even suggested Lord Takuu, their transformations—any of this was possible without the convenience of a store being ripped apart by tentacles, Choromatsu would have been the first to shoot the notion down. It must be far harder for him than it had been for Osomatsu, to accept the unbelievable so fast. But again, Choromatsu proved sturdier than he looked.

‘What would I have to do?’ he said, pulling free his contract at Ahn’s instruction. She practically glowed with smugness when Choromatsu asked she translate—“see, this is how you sign a power contract”. Choromatsu listened intently, brow furrowed and injured arm clasped loosely to his chest. Osomatsu tried to sit through it with his brother, but fast sank into stupor.

‘This is boring,’ he soon announced. Rolling to his feet, he immediately transformed.

‘Could you not?’ Choromatsu asked irritably as Osomatsu began practicing double jumps, leaping as high as he could before putting on a burst of fire. ‘I’m trying to concentrate.’

‘You should really listen,’ Ahn added as Osomatsu whooped, shoving his power against a wall and shooting the full length of the warehouse like a cork from a champagne bottle. Looking back, he grinned to see charred brick, a shallow pit marking his launch. ‘This is the perfect opportunity for you to …’

‘No, I’m good. It’s boring,’ he repeated from the ceiling when Ahn glared.
‘Maybe if you were more boring and less reckless you wouldn’t have nearly been killed—again.’

‘You really charged blindly into this,’ Choromatsu shook his head as Ahn hissed in frustration at Osomatsu’s stubborn levity. He rubbed his greyed brow, third born looking suddenly many years older. ‘Somehow, I’m not surprised at all.’

Osomatsu powered up his gauntlets, using his fiery fists to accelerate and brake as he flew, claps of flame echoing with his cheers. Insisting he was training and grinning when he got another rise out of Choromatsu, practically bellowing for him to stop, all joy derived from annoying his brother soon fizzled; Osomatsu saw how carefully he tried to study the contract. Dropping heavily to the ground, he began to pace, impatience growing. How much longer would they take?

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn finally caught his attention.

‘So?’ Osomatsu asked, folding his gauntleted arms and looking down on his brother. He now bore the full weight, full knowledge of their contract. ‘What are you going to do?’

Choromatsu sat quiet more long minutes. Osomatsu made himself be patient for his brother. ‘This is an important thing,’ Choromatsu said finally, barely projecting over knees pulled to his chin. ‘I already feel some responsibility, now that I … I know what I can do. I’m not sure I’m right for the position—I’m definitely not sure you are,’ he added; Osomatsu’s spurt of emotion was more glee than anger at the blatant jibe, knowing where his brother headed. ‘But it seems it can’t be helped. And someone needs to keep you out of trouble … I’ll do it.’

‘Yes!’ Osomatsu exalted as Choromatsu’s emerald sparkled into existence, sealing his scroll. Rising, Choromatsu stretched with a light moan.

‘Come on, we need to get home. We’ve been gone for ages.’

‘Transform then, hurry up,’ Osomatsu said, already crouched for the jump out the skylight. ‘The first time was kind of weird, but all the naked twirling really grows on you.’

Choromatsu pursed his lips, Ahn perched on his shoulder, looking every bit as neurotic. It was a match made in heaven.

‘I’m not sure this should be used for transport.’

‘Have fun walking to the station then,’ Osomatsu grinned, punching his brother in his good arm as Choromatsu muttered, almost indignant:

‘I didn’t say I wouldn’t … what’s the Doll of Darkness?’ he asked as they landed a street from home and changed again. He looked questioningly between Osomatsu and Ahn as they approached their front door. ‘Kuuika mentioned it, but I don’t think you did.’

Osomatsu shrugged. ‘Never heard of it.’

He was surprised when Ahn, their only spring of enemy knowledge, was as dry on insights as they. ‘I will contact the Spectrum Alliance,’ she decided, unease bolstered by their possible fortune, if Kuuika had revealed information they shouldn’t have. ‘We may be able to use this to our advantage …’

The door burst open before Osomatsu even laid a hand to it; quick smart, Ahn dashed from sight. So eager to see them, Jyushimatsu almost bowled them over. No shorter than them, his bright eyes might have been a head lower, their marginally younger brother somehow beaming up at them from eye level. ‘Hey, buddy,’ Osomatsu smiled with his eternal vigor as Choromatsu took a moment to
recover from his sudden appearance, ‘We’re home.’

‘Welcome home! It’s party time! Partyyyy!’

Oh, shit … Choromatsu gave Osomatsu a look of alarm. He returned a deep wince, realising their mistake. It was painful to see Jyushimatsu’s slow confusion, eventually noticing their lack of shop bags but not quite cottoning on: his brothers were complicit in the crime of omitting to ration their Halloween. Osomatsu was fast trying to produce some excuse that wouldn’t dim their little brother’s trusting eyes when Ichimatsu slouched into the narrow hall.

‘How fucking long does it take to buy snacks?’ he grumbled. Choromatsu tensed under the strength of his glower. Osomatsu plastered on a winning grin, all he could do. He knew with a coil in his gut that any excuse that satisfied their Jyushimatsu would be chewed up and spat out by their Ichimatsu. At least, he thought wryly as the fourth born’s sullen eyes surveyed their conspicuously empty hands, Ichimatsu seemed to be recovering.

‘You’re fucking kidding me,’ he growled, voice low and heralding danger. ‘You total shitbags, what were you doing …’

‘I, ah …’ Choromatsu suddenly interrupted, head lifting and actually smiling as Karamatsu and Todomatsu poked their heads in, confused and aghast respectively that Osomatsu and Choromatsu seemed to have decided unilaterally that there would be no Halloween this year. But Osomatsu relaxed, realising fast-thinking Choromatsu had them covered. The third born was no liar. But there was so much truth in it, he didn’t even sweat.

‘I got a job.’

***

Those assholes, Ichimatsu thought morosely on the couch in their bedroom while his brothers did whatever a Halloween party was without snacks and booze. Who cared if Choromatsu had gotten a call and had to organise the imminent end to his unemployment? That wasn’t a reason to forget about the existence of sweets. Jyushimatsu had been looking forward to it … god help him, Ichimatsu had almost looked forward to it.

Assholes, he thought again, curling slightly tighter on his side against a sudden crash and burst of laughter below. Osomatsu, Choromatsu … together, they really were the worst.

Face in a cushion and back to the room, Ichimatsu’s head pounded as it had for near a month. His throat was sore; he twitched against the discomfort. It felt tight, restricted … coughing a little, he massaged his neck, not expecting it to improve. Ichimatsu had finally let mum cajole him to the doctor’s a week ago; he wasn’t pleased to hear the pompous intellectual’s highly-professional opinion that there was nothing wrong—let him put up with this shit for weeks on end, then look Ichimatsu in his cold dead eyes and say that again. He thought he’d felt a little better today, and had even raised his head for the occasion. But it seemed he was only getting used to permanent shit health. Either way, he could probably force himself to leave the house now … if he had any reason to go out. Not fucking likely. And Jyushimatsu was looking after the cats … shit, he was feeding them, wasn’t he?

Speaking of Jyushimatsu … Ichimatsu realised his brother stood behind him; no one else alive had such a dynamic shadow. He huddled even more miserably, face hidden. Jyushimatsu should be downstairs partying, not putting up with Ichimatsu’s shit. ‘Leave me alone,’ he finally muttered, low voice harsh with ill-health. Jyushimatsu stayed right where he was, bouncing lightly on his toes and hanging sleeves swaying, unable to stopper his relentless energy for a moment. ‘I mean it,’ Ichimatsu
repeated, not wanting to ruin his brother’s stupid holiday more than their older brothers, in all their idiocy, had already managed. ‘I want to be alone, go away!’

Silence. Then:

‘All right, Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu finally spoke; Ichimatsu hunched against his understanding, penetrating his lies like a fissure shooting through fragile earth. ‘But if you want to play, I’ll be here.’
So this was a bit of a marathon to get done. What was chapter 5 is now chapters 5, 6 and 7, chapter 6 being partly complete, but in dire need of polishing, and chapter 7 should now come straight from the gut in an action-y hurry. ALL OF THE PLANS! But wow ... marathon, I'm tired. Hopefully it all reads okay, would cherish any and all feedback and hope you like the ongoing adventures of these magical boys :) 

Just as a bit of a note in case anyone's interested, aside from the theme song and main battle song from Bouei-bu, which I listen to when writing any and all transformation sequences, the song I've listened to on long-lasting repeat every time I've sat down to write this thing is Empty Threat by Chvrches - it's become the unofficial theme of Magical Osomatsu-san in my head :) 

Osomatsu yawned and shuffled lazily, stretched on a bench in Ueno Park. Small voices lilted distantly with excitement, endless trails of school children on excursion in the nearby zoo. Warmth beat gently on his eyelids and drowsy contentment wandered all over his face, cheeks pulled lopsided by slowly-grinning lips and his eyes crinkled. November hadn’t completely eaten the sun yet, not so near to noon. And what with the late nights and early hours saving the world tended to demand, Osomatsu was woefully behind in his preferred sloth sleeping hours. He fully intended to nap until …

‘Osomatsu-niisan.’

Shit.

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu repeated more insistently when Osomatsu moaned but otherwise refused to acknowledge him.

‘What?’ Osomatsu complained, dragging out his vowels and not bothering to open his eyes, sure he could make Choromatsu regret rousing him without actually needing to completely rouse.

‘Osomatsu-niisan, would you get up please?’

‘Why?’ he whinged loudly. He hoped some midday passers-by, mums with gurgling prams, retirees or salarymen on early lunch breaks, might stroll by and hear as he protested, all the better to embarrass his brother and win back his lazing rights. What the hell did he want, anyway? Wasn’t he meant to be helping Ahn with some kind of database, organising the guardian candidates they scouted? For all they had only three positions to fill, Ahn had them tramping all over the prefecture, in pursuit as she detected powerful surges of inclination.

‘Why does this always happen when we’re in the middle of a fight?’ Osomatsu had demanded only last night, fed up. ‘We’re tired, damn it! In case you hadn’t noticed, we just fought a bear!’

Hairless, seven-eyed and passionately monologuing their inevitable defeat and triumph of the Liberation Force, a bear was still a bear. The soul-snatching soldier had transfigured into the monstrous white Tuukuma and forced Osomatsu to grapple strength to strength, their greater weight
slowly forcing him gasping to the ground as Choromatsu riddled their scaly hide with blasts, raising roars that vibrated Osomatsu’s bones, shuddering against the cement pressed painfully against his cracking back. Burnt and smoking, then pathetically limping, knee destroyed by an incensed Osomatsu’s brazen tackle, Tuukuma had shrugged off their every attack, refusing to go down as though their entire oversized mass ran on pure spite and tenacity. But they’d finally worn the beast out, Choromatsu seizing his first clear shot at its darkly-glittering crystal. ‘That … wasn’t so hard,’ Osomatsu had panted, barely recovered his breath before Ahn dragged them out again, having sensed a strong light in the city’s north.

‘Seriously? That far away? Shouldn’t you be paying a little more attention to us?’ Osomatsu had bitched through real hurt, that the kitten had better things to do than look out for them—wasn’t that why she was there? ‘Have you thought about, I don’t know, keeping the guardians you already have in one piece before hunting for more?’

Ahn had bristled at his accusation of neglect. ‘I happen,’ she said testily, ‘to be at my most alert mid-battle—in the utterly futile hope, I’m sure, that I may yet prevent the untimely death you seem determined to embrace. I can hardly help if that heightened state is also ideal for sensing inclinations.’

‘Why are you being so fussy?’ Osomatsu had pressed once they touched down in Adachi, partitioning his still-smoldering upset with an attempt at humour. ‘It’s not like your standards are that high—you let us in. Just pick someone.’

‘That’s exactly why we need to be fussy now!’ she’d snapped, Choromatsu scanning their new candidate, recording her details as she walked home from a late-running study group. ‘The Spectrum Guardians are supposed to be an elite force of warriors, pure of deed and heart.’

‘Good thing pure of mind isn’t a requirement,’ Osomatsu had said, deeply appreciating even at their hidden distance just how adorable the seventeenth Unicorn candidate was. ‘Or no way would we be in work right now.’

‘You were accidents,’ Ahn went on like he hadn’t spoken, though her eyes flashed at Osomatsu’s blatant perving. ‘The rest of the unit must be perfect.’

‘She’s not wrong,’ Choromatsu had shrugged, but Osomatsu saw as he slumped, his brother’s somewhat tender feelings trampled beneath Ahn’s insensitive outsized paws.

‘Look,’ he’d said, surprising Ahn with more heat when a moment before he’d joked. ‘You could have refused to give us the contract, yeah? You could have just used us for the emergencies, then moved on to bigger and better guardians, right?’

‘Well,’ Ahn had said, flustered. ‘I suppose I could have, but …’

‘Right,’ Osomatsu nodded. ‘But you kept us on. So quit your bitching, and quit making out like we’re second-rate, just because I was convenient,’ he’d listed, before indicating his brother, intently focussed on their candidate, ‘and he could have died if you … Choromatsu, what are you doing?’

Already tinged quite pink, Choromatsu had flushed vibrant scarlet, caught zoomed in and zoning out, staring as their candidate answered her smartphone, chatting and giggling cutely outside her building as her many phone charms clinked and jingled. ‘You’re supposed to be warriors, not opportunistic peeping toms! You’re both awful,’ Ahn had decreed harshly as Osomatsu howled with telepathic laughter and Choromatsu stammered apology.

Ahn seemed to have forgiven Choromatsu his moment of weakness—faster than she’d forgiven Osomatsu, anyway. The two had been working together all morning. Osomatsu was very keen for
Choromatsu to return to said work and let him sleep.

‘Leave me alone, I’m tired, I don’t wanna, don’t make me suffer for whatever stupid thing you want to …’

No response. Osomatsu smiled smugly, sure he’d annoyed his brother off. Then his sunshine stalled. ‘Come on, stop it,’ he whined. Skin already cooled in its short moments of sun deprivation, Osomatsu groaned and finally squinted an eye open. As expected, Choromatsu’s blurred form stood directly over him. His brother held something in Osomatsu’s face—his tablet, he realised blearily. Choromatsu had spent a good chunk of his first paycheque on the first-rate device. Insisting it was strictly for work had so far kept a jealous Todomatsu from sabotage, but Osomatsu wasn’t convinced Ichimatsu wouldn’t fuck with it once he had the energy. Choromatsu wasn’t overly worried, saying he kept everything Spectrum Guardian-related under dull desk drudgery names, nothing their brothers would be game to snoop from fear they’d be heinously bored to death.

‘What …’ Something was written at the top of the screen; without thinking, Osomatsu blinked through gunk and shuffled for a better angle. The flat device distorted; reflected daylight bored straight through his unsuspecting skull. ‘Argh, fuck!’

One hand clapped to his eyes, Osomatsu abandoned any instinct to read and tried to shove the tablet away, swiping sightlessly and moaning in protest. But when his brother refused to shift, very slowly he peeked through his fingers: Spectrum Guardian Contract: Simplified Japanese Version. ‘Really?’ he groaned, mashing his swimming vision with the heels of his palms. ‘You’re going to make me read this? But it’s soooooo boring …’

‘I’ve been working on it for days,’ Choromatsu said, nudging Osomatsu along enough so there was room for him to sit. Osomatsu reluctantly swung his legs off the bench, sitting up, but only took the tablet when his brother pushed it in his hands. ‘You need to know exactly what you’ve gotten yourself into. And I need to know that you know exactly what we’re doing,’ Choromatsu added.

‘What do you mean?’ Osomatsu said, yawning out the worst of his torpor. ‘We’re fighting monsters, freeing people. That’s what we do.’

Choromatsu tapped his tablet, scrolling to the first subheading. ‘Just read.’

Even after so many near-misses that might have been avoided had he just listened to Ahn in the first place—even recognising that Choromatsu had gone out of his way for his sake—Osomatsu still griped fluently. But his grumblings gradually petered out, seeing his brother had translated specifically with Osomatsu’s short attention span in mind, every point brief and punchy; once he finally accepted he was reading the thing, it was no longer such a chore.

‘This is awesome,’ he soon grinned, perking up and devouring a section subtitled Upgrades.

‘Only once there’s all five of us,’ Choromatsu said, rubbing his eyes tiredly, but his frustration ebbed now that Osomatsu no longer purposely nullified his work. ‘We can advance our contracts, gain additional abilities, upgraded weaponry …’

‘Choromatsu, do you want me to read it or not? Shut up,’ Osomatsu grinned as his brother sighed. But his lips tugged in a small smile, resting his chin in his hands as Osomatsu skimmed contractual conditions, detail of transformations, abilities, limitations—most had already come out one way or another fumbling through battle, learning through experience—then began to peruse the heavier stuff: Lord Takuu, the Liberation Force and how to defeat them. He charged into the bullet points, confident he knew his enemy and wanting the satisfaction of proving it to his fine print-reading brother. But by the time he passed the tablet back, Osomatsu had grown quite sedate. ‘Right …’
‘How far did you think you were going to get, just fighting soldiers you happened to run across?’ Choromatsu asked, correctly guessing what troubled his brother. ‘The Liberation Force is an army, thousands upon thousands, most able to become monsters, depending on how many slaves they take. How many soldiers have you destroyed?’

‘Dunno,’ Osomatsu shrugged. ‘I’ve lost count.’

‘You haven’t killed enough to have lost count already,’ Choromatsu chided. ‘In any case, picking off soldiers won’t win this thing. They might attempt a mass infection at any point—the Spectrum Alliance thinks Lord Takuu need more time to build strength,’ he interrupted himself with that bare comfort before surging on. ‘But as he does, the soldiers will get stronger, too. Eventually we’re going to have to face them. You didn’t wonder how five people …’

‘Five people with magical powers,’ Osomatsu had to cut in. But for the first time that thought didn’t make him feel much better, stomach a distinct knot above his squirming gut.

‘… are supposed to fight an entire army, let alone win? And then there’s the rift,’ Choromatsu nailed what truly had Osomatsu in sudden unbearable doubt. Ahn had told him the history. He recalled, snatching at memory of the overwhelming night he’d signed his contract, that the previous Spectrum Guardians had sealed the Liberation Force in some sort of prison dimension. Maybe it should have gone without saying, they were expected to do the same. But Osomatsu hadn’t even thought of it. And this time not only seal away: they had to repair the calamitous tear in space Lord Takuu had made to escape. Beating up monsters wasn’t so hard. Defeating an entire evil empire and shutting it away for all time suddenly seemed a little over their heads.

‘You signed knowing all this,’ Osomatsu realised, deciding after a minute of uneasy reflection to handle this how he handled most tricky situations: deal with what he could now, come back to the rest if or when he was ready. ‘You knew it’s …’

No, it wasn’t impossible. It had been done before—by them, in a sense. They could do it again.

‘You didn’t just rush in like an idiot,’ Osomatsu said instead, indicating himself somewhat ruefully as exhibit A. ‘You knew how hard it would be, and you still signed.’

‘Yeah …’ Choromatsu nodded, folding away his tablet and looking a little embarrassed as Osomatsu shook his head, impressed. Whatever their reasons for signing, those they shared and those kept unspoken by their hearts: that had taken guts. Osomatsu wished he’d shown more patience in the warehouse, Choromatsu’s decision a far more tortured process than his own.

‘I’m buying you lunch. Oh, shit,’ Osomatsu remembered as he went for his wallet, nudging the tiny drawstring bag of treasure nestled in his hoodie, beside his phone. ‘What’s the time?’

‘Eleven fifty-seven,’ Choromatsu said, flipping out his own shitty model. They could both afford to upgrade now. But there was enough unhealthy Totty-flavoured envy tainting the aura at home already. And it was too much trouble, sitting through hours to get a new plan when Osomatsu’s phone puttered through calls and texts just fine. He’d rather be transforming.

Swearing breezily, Osomatsu threw himself to his feet; he had to meet Tanaka and exchange for their pay. ‘I still can’t believe you asked for money,’ Choromatsu said as Osomatsu jogged on the spot, getting his sluggish blood circulating for the short jog to the station.

‘There’s no point us being starving heros, is there?’ he asked, smiling broadly at Choromatsu’s obvious dilemma. Principle eventually won out over his want and need; it was a constant struggle for the third born.
‘Don’t compare this to being a starving artist.’

‘How is it different? Come on, it’s fair work,’ Osomatsu wheedled, both teasing and trying to ease his brother’s tense mind. ‘This is our chance—we’re becoming independent, you know?’

‘This isn’t exactly what I had in mind when I used to think about becoming independent,’ Choromatsu returned, little bite to the quick retort.

‘No—it’s much more awesome. I’m good,’ Osomatsu declined, shoving him lightly when Choromatsu stood and offered to go with him. ‘Don’t you and Ahn have some more Unicorn stalking to do? Don’t worry, you can trust me, I’ll split it straight down the middle with you.’

‘I don’t think you’re ripping me off. That’s not why I offered,’ Choromatsu said with a bit of a nervous hint. Osomatsu ignored it. Saying he’d meet his brother at Ueno Station in an hour, he ran off to jump on the loop. He’d had to reveal how he was turning treasure into yen so easily, and felt a bit silly, still taking so many precautions with his magical brother. Choromatsu as the Wyvern was more than a match for Osomatsu’s underworld acquaintances if any of the unsavouries turned sour. But regular Choromatsu would be pulverised. Osomatsu still wanted his brothers—magical or not—as far from as much trouble as possible.

Osomatsu met his middleman a few turns from Tamachi Station. In an backstreet by a pachinko parlour—there was no point in being coy. With his usual bright greeting in contrast to Tanaka’s overt sleaze and permanent indisposition at Osomatsu’s fluid punctuality, he tossed the suited intermediary the gold and smattering of rainbow-flashing gems. ‘People are very interested to know where you’ve been getting all this, Matsuno,’ Tanaka said, voice low and oily slipping over Osomatsu as he gleefully tucked a thick wad of notes in his wallet. He paid little notice, offering only his customary grin and lip.

‘Sure they are.’

Back to the minor gangster as he strolled away with a whistle, Osomatsu realised suddenly the implications of what Tanaka had just said. There might come a time the shifty people up top decided to forego Osomatsu and try to go straight to the source. Osomatsu tsked to himself—he wasn’t so hard to deal with, was he? He should probably make it clear that his source dealt only with him, and removing Osomatsu from the equation was not an option. If his underground relations went south in such a way it would be annoying. But he could take care of himself just fine. If this somehow put his brothers in danger, however …

Osomatsu wrung the creeping chill of fear from his bones. None of these people knew he had brothers. Osomatsu intended to keep it that way; six young men with the same face would be a boon to any criminal organisation.

‘Hey, Matsuno.’

‘What?’ Osomatsu said, barely looking up as two men fell in step with him, not recognising them … wait, he realised, peripherals flicking. He knew that hat. Osomatsu sighed and picked up the pace. Fedora and Accent picked it up right with him, pressing close on either side.

‘We’ve heard you’ve had a bit of fortune of late,’ Fedora said, slinging a tight arm around Osomatsu’s neck and drawing him to a halt. ‘We’ll be taking our share now.’

‘Haven’t you already taken it?’ Osomatsu returned listlessly, low tone a dead ringer for Ichimatsu at his most disconcerting. But Osomatsu didn’t have the same effect as his brother, and the two weren’t intimidated.
'Have you already forgotten what happened last time you pissed us off? You cheap fucker,' Fedora growled when Osomatsu only shrugged, Accent’s right hook already swinging while Fedora clamped him still. In a beat, Osomatsu had slithered from Fedora’s hold and pivoted, hard knee rocketing for bulky Accent’s midriff. In two beats, he and lanky Fedora lay tangled, out cold in the narrow street. By the third, Osomatsu had resumed his easy stroll, wondering what they should have for lunch. Maybe they could play some pachinko later, he thought, smiling as he patted his full wallet. If he could put up with Ahn’s bellyaching.

‘I have a fool for a spark,’ she’d lamented a few weeks ago when Osomatsu returned from a parlour beggared, flashing a sheepish wince with barely a note to his name.

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Almost against his better judgment and entirely against his will, Osomatsu finally caved to Ahn’s relentless health haranguing and took up jogging. Every day now—every weekday; Osomatsu flat out refused to relinquish sleeping late on weekends—he rose with Choromatsu even earlier than it took to keep up the appearance of working day jobs and ran through the dawn-greyed streets, quiet and increasingly crisp with only the rattle of early trains and their own echoing footfalls to disturb the stillness.

More specifically, they rose with Todomatsu. Or they were supposed to.

‘Osomatsu-niisan, wake up—he got up before his alarm, he’s already gone.’

That sneaky little shit, Osomatsu thought with drowsy animosity as he pulled on his jumpsuit. Todomatsu knew they were using his alarm, and he’d just let them sleep straight through … he was pulling out all the stops to avoid them, like his morning jogs were a sacred rite the very idea of their presence desecrated. Stretching out sleep-numbed legs, Osomatsu and Choromatsu took off, and soon glimpsed their brother a block or so ahead. Back to them, he somehow noticed them at roughly the same time. Todomatsu abruptly picked up speed, the slap of his soles against grease-stained road blurring together as he sprinted away. ‘Come on, Totty!’ Osomatsu yelled out, surging to full-tilt in pursuit, arms pumping. ‘Hey, don’t ignore me!’

But Osomatsu’s heady spike of motivation was blunted as his every breath became an agonised heave through his chest, heart hammering and pins prickling painfully through his side. This morning torture was only for his work. But Todomatsu actually cared for his health, trim and quick. Though fitter than he’d been in years, Osomatsu couldn’t hope to outpace him. Not yet.

‘We don’t have to run with him,’ Choromatsu pointed out, catching up easily as Osomatsu stumbled to a near-stop, panting hard and clutching his stitch as Todomatsu vanished around a distant corner, looking back to smirk over his shoulder. It hadn’t taken long for the third born Matsuno’s inbuilt attunement to speed to kick back in after so long without running; Osomatsu’s stride quickly grew sloppy if his attention wandered, whereas Choromatsu moved as naturally on road as he did in the air. As such, he was marginally less annoyed by their even earlier starts.

‘But if we’re all running, why not?’ Osomatsu complained, pushing off his knees and trying to match Choromatsu’s pace. Whether a kindness or dirty pleasure at watching him suffer, Choromatsu never strayed too far ahead. ‘We’re not that embarrassing, are we?’

‘We’re pretty bad,’ Choromatsu had to remind, Osomatsu sore with Totty’s blunt rejection and already concocting retribution to even the score. ‘There’s a reason he never tells us anything—especially you,’ he emphasised as Osomatsu scowled, wiping at a heavy sweat before it dribbled stinging into his eyes. ‘You’re the nosiest. You’d never leave him alone, always trying to tag along, annoying his friends …’
'We used to be embarrassing,' Osomatsu could accept willingly, a little irritated that his neediness was so obvious to his brothers, but more that they couldn’t cut their doting big brother some slack. ‘But we’re working now.’

‘What people don’t know won’t affect our social standing.’

‘I don’t mean this,’ Osomatsu waved generally at himself as they jogged over the foot bridge in the nearby park. A brief flash of steadily-paced pink in the distance informed them Totty had returned to his regular route, his brothers sufficiently thrown. ‘But he knows we’re doing something with ourselves—wasn’t that the problem?’

‘One of many,’ Choromatsu said simply. Osomatsu pouted. He knew they were bad, but did Choromatsu have to accept it so easily? It hurt, when Totty begged they leave him alone and turned cruel home truths into projectile weapons, piercing his brothers’ hearts and limited self-respect.

‘Still,’ he moped, more dejected than angry now as they circled the park, footsteps pounding almost in synchrony. ‘He doesn’t have to drag us that far from the dregs of humanity.’

It was Todomatsu’s most solemn vow: that one day, as the only socially-competent sextuplet, he would find a way to make his brothers acceptable in the eyes of society. At moments like this, coldly shunned and still distinctly girlfriend-less despite Todomatsu’s increasingly-exasperated insistence that he was looking, it was hard for Osomatsu to hold much stock in the youngest Matsuno, his promises proving increasingly empty. But the drive to cover his easily-provoked brother in mud faded as he recalled Todomatsu’s earnest eyes, his determination to do the seemingly-impossible for his brothers. Beneath all his canny charm and ambition, he really was a sweet kid. And Osomatsu did give him a hard time, he allowed glumly, kicking at the gutter with his reluctant admission. It must be hard, to have lousy older brothers like them; Totty put up with a lot. Not quietly. But he still put up with it.

‘I … found somewhere to practice shooting,’ Choromatsu said in a rush as Osomatsu kicked off his sweat-soaked sneakers back home. His interest peaked immediately. It sounded like Choromatsu had meant to say it through the whole run, and was finally able to force out the simple statement, but only by splattering words through his barely-opened lips until they were nigh-on incomprehensible. Osomatsu’s brother had been conspicuously absent the last few days around lunchtime; all Ahn had said was he was training. ‘I just … wanted to let you know.’

‘Really?’ Osomatsu asked, interest mounting even higher as Choromatsu reddened. ‘Where?’

‘Ah …’ Choromatsu sounded suspiciously flustered, even for him. What was so embarrassing about finding a gun range? So despite his abject protests—‘Osomatsu-niisan, you really don’t need to come’—Osomatsu ignored Ahn’s pointed reminders that he had his own training and followed his brother to the loop when he tried to sneak off late that morning. Ahn leaped inconspicuously into his hoodie as they passed through the station turnstiles, staying hidden through the journey. Osomatsu stared when his brother disembarked at Akihabara. That home of fandoms, fetishes and electronics catered to plenty of diehards, but didn’t seem likely to house anything so singularly alarming as a weapons range—not a real one, anyway. It only clicked when they stood outside the establishment: Choromatsu’s so-called shooting range. Osomatsu blinked. Then he grinned, jabbing his brother roughly in the side.

‘You kinky fucker.’

‘It’s not like that,’ Choromatsu muttered as a waitress decked out in an adorable laced maid outfit with a serious-looking rifle slung over her back passed them two menus: meals and weaponry. Air guns bedecked every wall, a parade of handguns and rifles from which gunslinging diners could
gleefully select. ‘I couldn’t find any serious ranges. I looked into war games, but it’s too much of a commitment with … you know, all we have to do. And I don’t have a team. And I tried shooters in arcades,’ he kept making excuses as Osomatsu’s grin flipped repeatedly from his shame to the waitressing weapons experts. He didn’t have an overt kink himself, but … damn. ‘But it’s just not … this just …’

‘Has other benefits,’ Osomatsu supplied with a knowing smirk, ordering a beef bowl and splurging on a mini gun. ‘And a beer … tea, actually,’ he amended quickly with Ahn’s snapped reminder from outside where she waited.

‘You are supposed to be the saviours of the dimensions!’ she fumed every time Osomatsu dared consume anything more potent than cola. ‘This is war! You must be in top form at all times!’

‘I’ve never been in top form in my life. And I never agreed to give up drinking,’ he often argued, but had reluctantly curbed his alcohol intake nonetheless, seeing her point. Though he sometimes wondered about drunken transformation—the worst of their many injuries were healed by their Spectrum Guardian forms; wasn’t severe inebriation just another unfortunate physical limitation for impressive Spectrum Alliance technology to conquer?—Osomatsu had decided, more with an upsurge of sense and responsibility than simple compliance to get their cranky caretaker off his back, not to test his curious theories.

It was still early for lunch, the cafe quite empty. Their food soon arrived and the brothers ate quickly, a friendly maid showing them upstairs to the range when they were done. It was just as well. The dining area was beginning to fill with leary suits sneaked from offices and hardcore enthusiasts pulling apart and cleaning their own weaponry. Choromatsu practically melted from embarrassment, oozing in clumps down the sides of his chair.

‘But this is your kind of place,’ Osomatsu noted, more an observation than an intentional jibe, once he’d snapped on his safety goggles and had a noisy tilt with a few targets, barely processing the maid’s brief instructions and just letting loose. ‘You’re into this sort of thing, like that idol you crush on and …’

‘Shut up,’ Choromatsu mumbled as their designated maid sweetly lamented Osomatsu’s inept enthusiasm. He grinned back, a little sheepish with lack of targets hit as he returned her the mini gun.

‘You’ve been here a few times now,’ the maid said, putting the mini gun aside and taking up one of the handguns Choromatsu had ordered. ‘Thought you’d try the mini on for size first?’

‘No, it’s my first time. That’s my brother,’ Osomatsu grinned, tugging him front and centre from where he loitered a few steps back, trying to vanish into the wall. ‘He’s a beginner, but he’s just starting to get into it. He likes it here,’ he added, grin more devil than saviour.

‘You’re identical!’ the maid made the obvious observation with such delight Osomatsu didn’t care she was paid to overdo the cute. Choromatsu fumbled his entire first magazine fighting not to be besotted with her. So flushed as he accepted his next weapon, Osomatsu watched, not exactly expecting any improvement, as his brother took a deep breath and tried to salvage his composure, facing down the range. The eldest Matsuno had to swallow his doubt: the air was soon rife with resounding tings as he struck target after target.

‘Not so shitty at all,’ he said, impressed. Shooting as the Wyvern was one thing, but from zero experience Choromatsu had improved leagues in very little time. Transformation enhanced their own abilities, Osomatsu recalled. Maybe it was a shame, that Choromatsu only discovered his shooting instincts now. If this was three days’ training, he might have been an olympian. Despite Osomatsu’s urging when the maid offered a shootout challenge, Choromatsu wouldn’t speak, shaking his head.
hard as his cheeks increasingly resembled bulbous overripe tomatoes. Her attention squarely on his form as she offered advice to the promising shot, Choromatsu promptly missed his first three targets with his last handgun before sending the remainder tumbling.

‘You get distracted way too easily,’ Osomatsu announced as they left the cafe, Choromatsu with the VIP membership card Osomatsu had bullied him into acquiring—this was his brother’s serious training, and he deserved priority attention. Recovered now they were safely distanced from the costumed waitresses, Choromatsu punched his shoulder so hard Osomatsu nearly lost his balance and sprawled right in the middle of the crowded zebra crossing. ‘Oww, come on! What was that for?’

‘Don’t you ever come with me here again!’ Choromatsu seethed, shoving a threatening fist in Osomatsu’s face. Osomatsu rubbed his assaulted arm resentfully—what the hell? Where had that come from? He’d only been having a bit of fun. And he could have his brother face-down on the bitumen three dozen ways before the burn in his cheeks subsided; he took a moment of satisfaction to imagine a more creative takedown, flipping aggressive-edition Choromatsu smartly and slamming him straight into the nearest wall. But he let his brother have the hit. Osomatsu preferred a fair fight. And it wasn’t like he was their ranged attack, he didn’t need to be here. So Osomatsu reluctantly left his brother to his maid cafes and tried to focus on himself. He wandered through a few different martial arts classes over the weeks, but quickly grew frustrated when the instructors wouldn’t just let him spar, insisting he learn the style from the beginning.

‘I can’t take it any more,’ he fumed after yet another lesson of perfecting stances and re-learning how to throw a punch in minute detail; damn it, he knew how to get his fist from point A to point B! ‘And I’m sick of how they talk down to me, like I’m some dumb bruiser with no technique.’

‘You are a bruiser with no technique,’ Ahn quipped at his ankle, daintily sidestepping as Osomatsu aimed a non-committal kick at her tail. ‘But you’re right, I don’t think this is helping. And you haven’t time to commit to mastering a style, not now.’

‘I have technique,’ Osomatsu muttered, unable to let it go as Ahn wondered how else he might improve besides street fighting. ‘Someone starts a fight, I end it.’

‘That hardly counts as …’

‘Shit,’ Osomatsu swore as his scroll burnt through his clothes. It took a while to find somewhere to transform; mid-afternoon in the city there were people everywhere. He finally took a chance, ducking into a briefly deserted side street and rocketing up, propelling between walls to the rooftops the instant he transformed. ‘It’s too far … where’s Choromatsu? Shit, we really need to stick together …’

‘He’ll be there,’ Ahn said, safe in his pocket and urging him on. By the time they finally landed, not far from the mammoth Torii gate that straddled the entrance of Asakusa Shrine, Choromatsu was already there; he leant against a stone fence in his hooded gakuran. It was a strange thing, to see his brother look so casual. Particularly when anyone might see him in his magical getup; this was one of the most famous shrines in Tokyo.

‘What are you doing, just standing out here in the open …’

‘I’ve blanked the area,’ he said by way of greeting Osomatsu’s incredulous eyebrow raise. ‘No one will see us now.’

‘You can do that?’
‘Well enough,’ Choromatsu agreed as Osomatsu shot Ahn daggers—she hadn’t taught him to secure their battlezones from civilian eyes. Ahn’s tail flick and short hiss required no words—“when you actually listen to me, you’ll get battlefield privileges.”

‘Are we too late?’ she asked urgently, Osomatsu furiously shutting up as Choromatsu nodded, regret lacing through his calm.

‘The alert faded just as I got here. They must have …’

‘Fuck, again?’ Osomatsu cried out as his garnet burnt against his chest, Choromatsu’s hand reaching for his emerald brooch as it heated his collarbone. ‘What’s with all these daytime attacks? They’ve all been at night for ages now, this is really throwing me off!’

This soldier was much closer; they cleared the short distance in bare minutes. ‘I’m going in,’ Osomatsu declared, seeing their pale enemy and firing up his boots to change direction and barrel straight into them. To his surprise, Choromatsu seized his arm, throwing off his flight pattern. ‘The fuck, Choromatsu …’

‘Wait,’ his brother said, guiding them easily down around the wall of the house opposite. Together, Choromatsu still gripping Osomatsu’s elbow to keep him from from hurtling into combat unchecked, they peered around their cover. Osomatsu trembled lightly in anger and everlasting repulsion as he watched the chillingly narrow being, all points and unnatural height within its sweeping cloak, raise one curved claw to a small woman carrying a trash bag to the cage down the street. Substance like noxious smog roiled into putrid being at its glinting tip. With a deep wave of horror, Osomatsu heard a small child’s plaintive cry from somewhere within the house.

‘What the fuck are we waiting for?’

‘For me to disembark, to start with,’ Ahn said, climbing awkwardly from Osomatsu’s pocket and bounding up his crouched body, claws digging lightly into his hoodie for traction, to leap atop the wall. ‘If you plan to get yourself killed, please be considerate enough to leave me out of it.’

‘Wait,’ Choromatsu only repeated, holding steady as the soldier, unaware of their presence, fired directly into the petrified woman’s chest. Darkness sucked beneath her skin like a vacuum, she staggered backwards, losing her trash bag and landing heavily on her backside. Fuck this shit, Osomatsu growled as she spasmed painfully and her eyes, before alight with fear, deadened to mindless service. He tried to wrench free, swearing profusely beneath his mask as his little brother hung on determinedly. ‘Why the fuck are we just sitting here when …’

‘Don’t you want to see where they’re taking them, how the soldiers are getting here?’ Choromatsu hissed, making Osomatsu freeze in his struggles to break away and save the woman’s soul, no matter how many street signs her puppet master forced her to swing at him. ‘See, look …’

Osomatsu followed the point of Choromatsu’s pistol. The woman had stopped trembling and was on her feet, awaiting command. Raising its claw again, the soldier seemed to draw it harshly down reality, the depth of scenery splitting willingly at the seams as he ripped space clean open. ‘Holy shit …’ Osomatsu breathed, innards clenching at the blatant slight to sense as it warped his mind, almost giving him vertigo. Without a word, Choromatsu grimly raised his pistol, stepping into view just as the soldier began to herd its new slave into another dimension. Osomatsu just glimpsed angry purple clouds clogging distant skies beyond before Choromatsu shot out their enemy’s dark crystal, exposed on their colour-swathed chest just as Juuku’s had been. With a shrill cry of surprise, the soldier burst to dust. Their puppet hit the ground a second time in a tangle of akimbo limbs, as though her strings had been suddenly cut. Before their eyes, the tear shimmered briefly before stitching itself up in reverse, sealing away the destroyed soldier’s retreat.
Phasing hurriedly to himself, Osomatsu ran past his brother to the woman’s side. ‘Ma’am … ma’am, are you okay?’ The woman roused blearily as Osomatsu helped her up, as confused as Jyushimatsu and Totoko had been.

‘Wh-what … who are …’

Not wanting her to suffer the added trauma of thinking she’d been attacked by cultists, Osomatsu hoped her memory was jumbled and said only that he’d seen her fall, helping her to stumble inside. She too disoriented to offer much thanks, and Osomatsu too weirded out to care much that he missed out on one of the few chances he’d get for thanks in this thankless, world-saving gig, he left the poor woman to shiver through the after effects of the Liberation Force’s claim to her soul, and rejoined his brother and small mentor outside.

‘What … the actual fuck … was that?’

‘A transient interdimensional gateway,’ Ahn said as Choromatsu wiped his hands on his trousers—his jeans; he’d phased back, too—having thrown the woman’s garbage in its cage. ‘Not designed for distance, only … they’re hiding in a world layered to this one. As we thought,’ she added, making Osomatsu draw himself rigid as his temper sparked dangerously.

‘As you thought? So we let some poor person go through the trauma of having their soul stolen to confirm something you already thought when we could have taken it out before it had the chance to even …’

‘Knowledge is power, verified knowledge doubly so,’ Ahn returned shrilly. Choromatsu sighed, resigned to stand by as she and Osomatsu argued yet again. ‘This is an important discovery! It confirms they can’t just appear anywhere on Earth, they are restricted to the area aligned to where they …’

‘We already knew that, didn’t we?’

‘No,’ Ahn returned, maddeningly condescending. ‘Just because attacks seem to be concentrated in this city doesn’t mean they can’t …’

‘Guys, come on …’ Choromatsu tried half-heartedly to intervene. Osomatsu took the opportunity to leap immediately down his throat.

‘She put you up to that, didn’t she? And what the hell was that? “Wait”? Just “wait”? Osomatsu shook his head in dubious disgust as Choromatsu tried and failed to answer, stumbling as Osomatsu pushed him, hoping the message stuck. ‘Work on your goddamn communication skills.’

‘What are you … are you all right?’ A voice called haltingly toward them. Osomatsu glanced over his shoulder and saw their rescuee teetered unsteadily in her doorway. She looked between the Matsuno brothers, apparently caught in a one-sided shoving match.

‘We’re fine,’ Osomatsu called back brightly, anger at what she’d been put through sufficiently vented as Choromatsu gingerly rubbed his chest. ‘My brother’s a moron, that’s all. All my brothers are morons,’ he amended drearily that night, having just talked himself out of spending the evening playing pachinko with Karamatsu. ‘I’m exhausted,’ he’d moaned, somewhat revelling in his brother’s sympathy amid annoyance and true fatigue. ‘I don’t feel like it …’

Choromatsu wormed out with an easily believable, ‘I don’t think I’m ready to play again yet, you know, after what happened … with the cultists. We need to be careful with them,’ he said, eyes lingering on the door once Karamatsu left, having recruited only Jyushimatsu to join him. ‘You’ve
never not wanted to gamble your life away. Karamatsu-niisan will believe anything we say, but
Jyushimatsu …’

‘You think Jyushimatsu’s figured us out?’ Osomatsu arched his brow, doubting it.

‘Not exactly.’ Choromatsu tried to voice the apparently broad scope of his concerns as they gathered
their bathing gear, but couldn’t quite manage, saying only that their rowdy little brother was more
perceptive than he let on. ‘And Ichimatsu …’

‘Won’t care,’ Osomatsu said immediately. Now quite adept at telepathy, he conversed fluently in his
mind with Choromatsu while trying to coax Ichimatsu from his curl on the couch. Osomatsu mightn’t
be around much anymore, but a big brother could tell: Ichimatsu hadn’t bathed in days. ‘Come on,
you’ll feel better. It’ll be good for you—it’ll be good for all of us, you’re really starting to stink …
We could be the ones trying to take over the world and he wouldn’t even blink. And even if
Todomatsu thinks we’re hiding something,’ he fluidly switched conversations, alleviating any
potential concerns over their secretive youngest brother as he finally hauled a death-staring Ichimatsu
to his feet, ‘it’s not like he can call us out when he does exactly the same thing.’

Osomatsu had done all right on his own. And now he had Choromatsu he was even less concerned
they’d let something slip and endanger their brothers. Osomatsu was shit at secrets. But it was far
easier to keep one close when it was shared.

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Osomatsu wasn’t sure he’d expected otherwise—maybe he lived in the moment enough that he
hadn’t expected anything at all. But while he and Choromatsu had their disagreements, often and
loudly, the two found themselves working together against the Liberation Force, for the most part,
very well. Osomatsu had been closest with his third-born brother when they were young, and
realised they’d remained quite close, even with their marked divergence of personality as they grew.
It annoyed him at first, how often Choromatsu wasted time interfacing with his glass in the thick of
battle—‘You’re playing with your little computer when you should be shooting,’ he complained
more than once. But as a team they fast developed complementary roles: Osomatsu was their pugilist,
Choromatsu vital support. And Osomatsu quickly realised that the more Choromatsu pulled apart
their opponents and battlefields, studying with his glass—an almost effortless process for him where
Osomatsu’s grasp of his was clunky at best—the more Osomatsu could go on disregarding his own
glass, only drawing information for the barest of necessities.

Choromatsu fought consistently well, improving more slowly but with fewer bumbles than Osomatsu
had had in the beginning, brought about by the calm head his transformation seemed to afford him
and padded by complete knowledge their situation. Despite this, Osomatsu’s brother had a hard time
getting used to his new status as the green magical boy.

‘It might be for a good cause, but it’s so embarrassing,’ he kept saying, flushing with ongoing
discomfort even as November neared its end, so many monsters reduced to dust in his wake. ‘The
transformation, the catchphrase thing, the posing …’

‘I don’t hear you complain when you’re stopping people being dragged off for Takuu’s slave army,’
Osomatsu observed, though he knew where Choromatsu was coming from. He’d felt it himself
briefly, that slight shame the first few times he transformed—what the hell was he doing, he was a
fucking magical boy, god help him, what are people going to think. Then he got a good look at
himself and remembered he was awesome, and those thoughts didn’t bother him any more. Far more
insecure, it might take Choromatsu longer to settle; he was too self-aware for his own good.

‘It’s not embarrassing,’ Ahn exclaimed when she heard, offended. ‘It’s an honour and a solemn duty
‘Or anyone nearby,’ Osomatsu cracked, earning a withering glare from Ahn, redirecting her ire. His self-consciousness over being the Wyvern was one of the few things Ahn got cranky with Choromatsu over; in general the two got on very well. She wasn’t even aggravated when he exclaimed with increasing bewilderment over the series of highly convenient events that had seen the two Matsunos transformed.

‘Isn’t it messed up?’ he said shakily after a particularly perilous brush with their first airborne opponent. Zuuhane, a monstrous raptor the size of a light plane, steel feathers razorsharp, had forced Choromatsu to test a series of untried aerial manoeuvres atop the heights of their victim’s flash Shinjuku apartment while the victim herself dangled soullessly from deadly claws. Osomatsu declared it his brother’s best performance to date, catching the puppet as she fell from a grip become silvery dust. But Choromatsu had needed to sit a long while on the roof back home afterwards, trembling as Osomatsu tried to encourage and comfort.

‘Come on, you were amazing, you were fine.’

‘But we were right there!’ Choromatsu said again and again, arms clasping tight around his knees, like he had to physically contain the worst of his anxiety, before addressing Osomatsu’s blank look. ‘We were there in Shinjuku—touching off on the next building! And the soldier was right there, and they saw us, and then that disgusting cocoon was right … freaking … there!

‘We were at pachinko,’ he explained better the next day once he’d slept off some of the stress. ‘You were there when Totoko was attacked, we were both at the convenience store … it seems weirdly convenient, doesn’t it?’

Osomatsu shrugged. It had never struck him as strange before Choromatsu strung these events out in a damning line. Even then, there were so many abductions they missed. That they happened to be present so often seemed more good fortune than suspicious happenstance. Ahn was more intrigued than distrusting of these coincidences and made mention of them in her reports to the Spectrum Alliance. ‘I will let you know should they have any insights.’

He wasn’t overly interested. But Osomatsu wasn’t sure Ahn would think to inform them of said insights, were any formed by their intergalactic employers. She was hopelessly distracted, almost obsessed now with her search for the Unicorn. Osomatsu objected no end, losing training hours—and, more importantly, sleep—to haunt their potential teammates. Choromatsu looked up social media pages and other hits online, compiling profiles that Ahn studied closely, little nose brushing the tablet as she scrolled. Osomatsu and Choromatsu each had their favourite candidates—their most admired, anyway; Osomatsu was intensely pleased three-quarters of Ahn’s shortlist were women—but Ahn only grew more frustrated.

‘It is not only the strongest light we need,’ she said as they prepared to transform and leap home after a particularly boring night watching a bespectacled teenager feverishly study in a public library. ‘There are many other considerations, the utmost being they are someone you two can get along and work with well.’

‘And they actually need the time,’ Choromatsu added, opining it wouldn’t be fair to expect a high schooler to neglect their studies if another person with more free time met the criteria.

‘And if you expect me to work with a goddamn teenager … why the Unicorn?’ Osomatsu asked mid-jump, the city sprawled beneath him now a familiar sight, both a comfort and exhilarating. ‘We’ve got three to find, but you wanted the Unicorn even before the Wyvern.’
‘I wanted the Unicorn before you,’ Ahn revealed, safe in flight within Osomatsu’s hoodie. ‘The Unicorn was supposed to be first, they’re the leader of the Spectrum Guardians … be careful!’ she cried out as Osomatsu’s flight jolted, rattling them in the air. ‘Watch what you’re doing, do you want me to fall?’

‘What do you mean, they’re the leader?’ Osomatsu exclaimed indignantly. ‘I’m the leader here. Aren’t I?’

‘No,’ Ahn said, infuriatingly matter-of-fact. ‘You just happened to be first. I’m afraid you are a caretaker leader at most.’

‘What about the other two?’ Choromatsu asked from his graceful soar above while Osomatsu seethed like a birthright had been ripped from him. He seriously considered dragging their haughty mascot out by the tail and dangling her, writhing and spitting, a hundred metres over the flashing lights of Tokyo. ‘We’ve only got a few candidates so far.’

‘Of course the rest of you are important,’ Ahn said, Osomatsu deeply resenting how her tone indicated otherwise in his slighted ears. ‘But better we find a Kraken and Sphinx who can work with our Unicorn then try to find a light who is both powerful and can miraculously assume command of four people already established as a team.’

The cool air whipping his face stole some of the heat that had risen there, and by the time they landed near home Osomatsu had started to recover from the revelation. He was used to being at the centre of attention, the eldest of six; Osomatsu automatically assumed leadership whether expected of him or whether others even wanted him to, a habit and a calling. Still, he wasn’t so conceited that, beneath thick coatings of anger and unreasonable betrayal, he wasn’t a touch embarrassed by how hard this hit him, natural expectation and pride ground into cement.

‘Shut up,’ he growled, seeing Choromatsu’s clear amusement. His brother made an attempt to subdue it, forcing his frown back in place.

‘Well, you can’t just assume these things.’

‘But I was first,’ Osomatsu mumbled, kicking at the street. ‘The first is always leader …’

‘By the Alliance, don’t be like that,’ Ahn said huffily, trailing off into mutters about temperamental sparks. ‘I shouldn’t have to deal with this level of immaturity.’

‘You’ve still been doing this the longest,’ Choromatsu pointed out, swapping to telepathy only as they sneaked into the house. ‘Once we find them, the Unicorn will be relying on you.’

Creeping up the stairs, Osomatsu only grumbled. It wasn’t much of a comfort, thinking you were the young hero only to learn that, in fact, you’re the mentor figure. ‘The old mentor who dies after the first hour of the movie?’ his brother suggested, a poor attempt at innocence.

‘Shut up,’ Osomatsu said again, this time Choromatsu unable to hold back his mirth either mentally or aloud; he clamped his hand over his mouth in the otherwise silent house as Osomatsu glared. ‘I’m the hero, damn it. What does that make you then?’ he demanded as Choromatsu swallowed his chuckles and massaged his humour-strained cheeks.

‘Oww, my face hurts … I don’t know. The dashing rogue?’

‘Have you even met you?’ Osomatsu exclaimed aloud, far louder than Choromatsu had been laughing. Choromatsu immediately tensed, Osomatsu a moment later. Tentatively, he eased open their bedroom door. Sure enough, one of their brothers was no longer asleep.
‘Where have you been?’ Ichimatsu slurred, in the process of slowly sitting up, hauled from heavy sleep by Osomatsu’s exclamation. Hunching over, he groggily regarded his brothers in the doorframe. Choromatsu looked to Osomatsu, the more accomplished sidestepper. Osomatsu already smiled through the dark, waving casually that it wasn’t important.

‘Just out, nothing much. Sorry for waking you.’

‘Sorry, Ichimatsu,’ Choromatsu apologised as they grabbed their pajamas. ‘We know you need your sleep. How are you …’

‘I’m fine,’ Ichimatsu growled, cutting Choromatsu off with a glare. Exchanging another look with Osomatsu, he shrugged.

‘Whatever you say.’

‘Not whatever he says,’ Osomatsu disagreed, wearing Ichimatsu’s deepening scowl as they changed.

‘If you don’t start getting better soon …’

‘I said I’m fine,’ Ichimatsu’s low tone might have cut skin while everything from his posture to his pallor screamed dissent. His glare flickered between them and Karamatsu conked out beside him, arm now stretched obliviously into the space Ichimatsu’s head should rest. ‘The last thing I need is all you shitbags constantly …’

Ahn chose that moment to trot inside, licking her chops from the beef offcuts left in a little bowl in the kitchen. Seeing Ichimatsu was awake, she immediately arched her back and hissed, spitting at him.

Osomatsu had been a little taken aback when Choromatsu asked why Ahn hadn’t been staying with them. ‘You did ask, didn’t you?’ he’d said as Osomatsu shuffled his feet, torn between guilt for tactlessly leaving Ahn out in the cold and wanting to cling to his last pseudo-sanctuary from their coach-mascot-boss-kitten. ‘Where have you been staying?’

‘Around,’ Ahn had said a little pathetically, annoying Osomatsu—it wasn’t like she’d thought of it, either. But it did make sense. The cats Ichimatsu cared for came and went as they pleased; one more cat-like creature taking up transient residence wouldn’t look strange at all. What did look strange, however, was that Ahn took an immediate disliking to Ichimatsu. She recoiled from his every coaxingly-offered finger and tentative smile as though his pores leaked poison.

‘Can you at least make an effort?’ Osomatsu said as he waited for sleep, addressing Ahn where she curled between his and Choromatsu’s calves. Ichimatsu tried to hide it with gruff disinterest, but Osomatsu saw: the little white kitten despised him, and he was devastated. ‘Our brother might be dark, antisocial, disturbing and sometimes downright terrifying …’

‘You’re truly selling his winning personality,’ Ahn grumbled, nestling into their warmth very like the animals she resembled and so looked down on.

‘But he’s just a lonely kid who loves cats.’

‘Well, I’m not a cat, am I.’

‘It looks weird, that you don’t like him. And he’s sick,’ Osomatsu added, unable to bear his brother’s repressed loneliness. ‘You’re not helping him feel any better, okay? And you’ve already dragged one of my brothers into shit. Don’t mess with the rest of them, if you can help it.’

‘You would be one brother short if I hadn’t …’
Ahn paused in her blunt retort, cocking her head. Nonplussed, Osomatsu propped himself on his elbow and watched as Ahn suddenly crouched, wiggled her little rear in concentration, and sprang. ‘What are you doing?’ he said as she remained alert, scouting briefly about the tatami at their feet, broad ears pricked up.

‘I thought I saw …’

Osomatsu slowly grinned. Seeing his devilish smile, Ahn immediately began to splutter denials, excuses. But he’d seen. There was no getting out of this.

‘Ahn, you sweet little kitten—were you pouncing?’

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‘I seem to recall ordering that the Salamander be taken care of before the remainder of the Spectrum Guardians assembled.’

‘Yes, Lord Takuu,’ the lord’s most trusted lieutenant agreed, cloak wrapped close against the numbing chill and bowed before their lord’s throne. Beneath their feet, the stone floors beat with the living darkness Lord Takuu exuded, still rage warping the caves all the way to the craggy ceiling.

‘And now, not only is the Salamander still destroying my soldiers, impeding my plans, but they have been joined by the Wyvern.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘And so my question remains of you, my most trusted: why hasn’t anything been done about it?’

It had been several weeks since the emerald-encrusted warrior had joined the garnet. The soldiers who had failed to defeat first the Salamander and now the Wyvern all far beyond punishment, Lord Takuu had ordered flayed bloody every one of his lieutenants who’d overseen their botched missions. The trusted lieutenant touched the cruel whip looped at their hip; every searing lash was theirs to deliver at their lord’s command.

‘My lord should be furious. There is no excuse and but one explanation, as unacceptable as our repeated failures. This is a conundrum we face. The doll gains strength, but so do the guardians. Until our power is complete, we do not deem it wise to deploy our strongest and risk their defeat. As such,’ the lieutenant swept out their claws as Lord Takuu nodded slowly, masked eyes unfathomable behind hewn sockets. ‘When they encounter the guardians, our lesser soldiers, despite taking such formidable forms, are defeated. At our lord’s command we would of course begin to deploy our stronger forces …’

‘No.’ Lord Takuu scythed an end to the suggestion with a curl of his claws. His lieutenant was right: he would not risk his best’s destruction when they were needed to defeat the Spectrum Alliance. And their slave taking was only delayed. Already missions were planned to reclaim the infected souls scattered among the population, those the Spectrum Guardians had managed to “save”. Their darkness deepened and enhanced by new masters, these slaves would catalyse forbidding transformation of his ranks far from the interference of the Salamander and Wyvern. Even as he lorded from his throne, soldiers awaited deployment, tasked to measure the potential of his doll, imprisoned by his still-pathetic state. This was the first true test of the power that awaited them.

‘Where is the experiment to be held?’

It was inconvenient, that they were so constrained among humans. Lord Takuu spared no thought for destruction they caused, and took pleasure in spreading terror among such lesser beings. But his
scouts were exposed, easily recognised and vulnerable even to such pitiful military forces. Projecting human likeness was a complicated procedure, not one most soldiers could endure for long. And while they rapidly expanded through their overlaid dimension, their cave network was not vast enough to stretch far beyond the sprawling metropolis the guardians protected.

‘Far enough from the guardians’ haunting grounds even a fully-developed Wyvern could not fly there on time,’ his lieutenant assured. ‘The tunnel in question is almost complete. We will acquire the target slaves without interference.’

Lord Takuu gripped the black opal he turned over in his claws in cruel satisfaction. ‘Good. Drain him dry.’
Try Solace

Chapter Notes

There’s an anime-esque trope in here I had to salute eventually - an obligatory episode of sorts. More will probably pop up as the story goes. And I wasn’t entirely sure on the title of this chapter, but it makes sense in my head and I think it’s pretty to look at :) I hope it’s a fun read and would love so much any feedback you’re happy to share.

Matsuno Karamatsu crossed one leg over his knee and flipped to the next glossy page. A few strips of sticky tabs sat on the arm of the couch in easy reach. That November’s edition, the magazine was already liberally scattered with markers, coloured to Karamatsu’s long-established code. Drawn immediately to a striking trench coat that swept to the ankle, he had a white tab peeled and halfway to the page before he paused. No … it wasn’t white. Damn it, he knew he wasn’t white—was he an idiot? Knitting his heavy brows resentfully at the offending trench coat, he crumpled the tab between his fingers and replaced it with one of deep blue, smoothing it in place unnecessarily hard, rubbing the adhesive strip as though he erased the tab and the coat it marked from all existence.

An unexpected shred tore through his intent as unwilling fibres separated beneath his fingers: he’d smoothed so hard the page tore in protest, leaving a jagged scar straight through the coat’s gushing, adjective-choked description.

Karamatsu’s fists clenched. So frustrated and with no ability to lash out, nowhere to direct his anger besides inwards, he could only breathe out the spasm of hot emotion. Abruptly, he slapped his magazine aside. Any lingering want to peruse fashion had drained once again with his never-ending stupidity. He’d have to start faking his own passion soon, if he kept up this nonsense—there was a goddamn surprise. Idiot.

But it didn’t matter anyway, he realised suddenly, anger backflipping dizzyingly into pangs of grief that hollowed his abdomen, not an organ spared. It didn’t matter. He realised that more and more and shut himself away, hiding behind his dark glasses and hoping, praying that he was wrong. But whatever hope he clung to … however hard he tried …

Realising he clutched his head in shaking hands when his nails began to prick into his scalp, Karamatsu looked up hurriedly. No brother had stolen into the bedroom unnoticed and witnessed his brief breakdown. Thank god. Still, he pulled out his mirror to ensure his eyes were dry, that his meticulously-styled hair remained perfect. Adjusting an errant strand with a vicious swipe of his finger, Karamatsu pulled his sunglasses from his pocket and pressed them on his face so hard he almost cut the bridge of his nose. It was almost instantaneous; he felt a little better, safer. As though without those dark lenses, even though he was alone, someone still saw straight through those dull twin windows to the pathetic soul he hid from view.

Karamatsu thought he’d caught himself in time; he wasn’t at risk of giving himself away. But he decided he might still have a nap. Nothing cleared his head like a few hours of blissful blankness. Glasses still on, Karamatsu stretched out on his back with a quiet groan as his joints released tension. Sighing as he put his feet up on the arm of the couch, he accidentally clipped his magazine, sending it tumbling to the tatami with the soft rustle of sleek pages to gravity. The quiet sound slammed into him; he immediately knelt and picked it up, slipping the tabs securely within the pages. He’d barely
returned the magazine to his section of the bookshelf when he was suckerpunched again, this time by a piercing shriek.

‘Todomatsu?!’

All thought but his brother’s unknown peril dissolving, Karamatsu tore from the bedroom, following the carrying wail downstairs. He streaked past Ichimatsu in the lounge, slumped in the corner and cuddling a skinny grey cat to his chest. ‘What’s going on?’ he asked, unfocused eyes following Karamatsu to the little toilet room by the laundry. It hurt too much to leave his poor dazed brother with nothing; Karamatsu called out as he passed:

‘Fear not, brother: I will return once I …’

Skidding to a halt by the toilet, Karamatsu pounded on the door. No response. He tried to throw it open, but it refused to yield, locked. ‘Totty, what’s wrong? Todomatsu, speak to me!’

‘K-Karamatsu-niisan?’ his youngest brother’s voice came small and tight from within. A few seconds later there was a tiny snick; Karamatsu immediately pushed the sliding door open. It must have taken some creative balancing for Totty to reach the lock. He stood one foot either side of the toilet’s rim in the flat toilet slippers, eyes stretched wide with revulsion.

‘Todomatsu, what on …’ Karamatsu followed his brother’s shaking finger to the corner. A fat black cockroach lorded over the tiles there, bigger than Karamatsu’s bony thumb, right down to the knuckle. He shuddered, almost driven a step back. He hated cockroaches. But at Totty’s whimper, arms flung wide for balance and apparently determined to take up permanent residence on the toilet before facing the roach, Karamatsu strangled his own disgust. Not wasting a breath, he stepped back and retrieved an old dustpan and bristly brush from a cupboard in the laundry. He recoiled as it tried to scamper past his guard, but Karamatsu set his jaw and swept up the cockroach, trapping it with the brush. Carrying it to the front door, he tossed the unwelcome critter into the gutter and closed it out of the house.

Todomatsu had gathered enough courage to cautiously descend from his porcelain perch by the time Karamatsu returned with the dustpan. His baby brother trod cautiously, exploring each step until convinced it was roach-free. It was sometimes hard to remember he was a bare half hour younger than Osomatsu; their youngest claimed a tender corner in all their hearts. Karamatsu would do anything for him, for all his brothers.

Sufficiently rescued, Todomatsu began to return his brother’s easy smile. But in a split-second his naked relief and foundations of pure gratitude were slathered by inbred resentment. ‘I could have done it myself,’ he said, folding his arms and youthful features drawn in a huffy pout. ‘It just surprised me, okay?’

‘Of course, dear brother.’

‘Why didn’t you just kill it?’ he demanded, scorning Karamatsu’s roach-control measures. ‘Why bother taking it outside, it’s disgusting … I was going to squash it,’ Todomatsu insisted through a fresh shudder, dirty look daring Karamatsu to disagree. Of course he wouldn’t, not ever. ‘I didn’t need you, all right?’

Karamatsu’s heart skipped a taunting beat. Crestfallen, he sheltered behind his customary flair. It didn’t matter. A good brother wouldn’t even care—god, he was an idiot, that he cared. Weak, pathetic—no wonder his brothers couldn’t stand him. He had to do better … he had to be better. Whatever his brothers needed, Karamatsu would be there. He would provide.
Adjusting his sunglasses, he layered confidence so thickly the second born Matsuno almost convinced himself. ‘Sweet Totty, I don’t doubt your courage. It is but the greatest longing of my heart to spare you any and all trouble. No need to thank me.’

‘I didn’t plan to,’ Todomatsu shot back coolly, kicking out of the toilet slippers and banging the door shut. Karamatsu held his sculpted smile as he slowly fractured within.

‘To have offered myself in your stead is all the thanks I …’

‘For god’s sake,’ Ichimatsu muttered from the lounge. ‘Shut the fuck up, Shittymatsu.’

Totty’s toilet encounter was only the first. Through the evening and into Friday, the already unusually-high ratio of unpleasant discoveries in their household spiked. Roaches emboldened by numbers scuttled the walls in broad daylight. Never daunted, their mother chased legions through her infested kitchen, shouting war cries and swatting with a rolled-up newspaper, and Choromatsu almost had a heart attack, yanked from sleep before Totty’s alarm as a roach wandered off the overhead light and landed on his face with a skitter of prickly legs. The infestation dramatically surpassed any hope of control by sprays and traps, and Karamatsu looked up a local exterminator that afternoon, arranging they come the next morning. Mum insisted they vacate the house for the weekend.

‘Just to be safe,’ she said as Karamatsu helped her seal food against the imminent fumes, carting what couldn’t be safely secured to the neighbour’s. Jyushimatsu aided in peaks and troughs; he kept growing hopelessly distracted, watching with intense fascination, ogling as roach formations traversed every flat surface. Karamatsu could never have denied his brother’s keen offer to assist. But the task might have gone more smoothly without him. Jyushimatsu had slightly misinterpreted their purpose in the kitchen, and raced to empty its entire contents single-handedly, dumping it outside. ‘Just the food, Jyushimatsu! Dad’s booking us a hotel,’ Mum turned back to Karamatsu, her fifth born wrangled before he donated a teetering stack of pans to the neighbourhood. ‘Can you boys take care of yourselves?’

At once Karamatsu remembered, plucked deep from amid so many aimless discussions in boredom, Osomatsu’s offhand suggestion they all head off on a trip. That had been some time ago; like most of their grand schemes, they’d never managed to get that notion rolling. They’d never travelled much, too much to ask of their long-suffering parents to marshall six unruly children to the local supermarket, let alone around the country. And none of them had the cash to travel now … or they hadn’t. Karamatsu brightened, tentative thoughts beginning to twine into such hopeful possibility. It would be only a night, and they couldn’t venture too far afield. But—he hoped, tentatively figuring in the value of his own small savings—if Osomatsu and Choromatsu chipped in and he found a good place, he might be able to … he would bestow on his tired, hardworking brothers and their beloved younger siblings a break the like of which they’d ever deserved, but never known.

Karamatsu sparkled, within and without. The infestation was a beautiful blessing in darkly-scampering disguise. Hefting the last of the groceries next door, he swiped a small roach from the cramped computer desk with his sleeve, aversion somewhat dulled by sheer exposure, and pulled up close to the screen. Already he basked, content in the rejuvenating warmth his brothers’ imminent delight would shine.

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‘Why are we here?’ Osomatsu complained, frothing seas stretched to sky’s end before them as Todomatsu demanded yet again: it was the end of November. Why in hell were they at the beach?

‘Why the beach?’ Karamatsu repeated blithely, twirling once on the brindled volcanic sand and
drawing his lungs full of sharp salted air, hands outstretched like he paid the ocean homage. ‘The sea
is lost in summer! But in the days before winter, the solitary crash of waves under greyed skies spurs
introspection as deep as the ocean itself!’

Karamatsu spun again, facing his brothers. Osomatsu cringed. He felt less guilty, spying that he
wasn’t the only one. ‘We can rest here, brothers! Let the cool breeze soothe our souls and …’

‘Why are we here?’ Osomatsu repeated, this time only to Choromatsu in the otherwise quiet of their
minds. It was a desolate tract of blackened sand, leaden ocean beyond. No sun, no blue skies, no
girls in swimsuits—it was as bad as he’d predicted. Choromatsu resettled his grip on his small
carrybag and sighed.

‘Because he wouldn’t shut up. And because …’

Five brothers flinched in concert, eardrums blasted by a primal whoop: Jyushimatsu could hold back
no longer. He’d bounced the whole way on the train, and, now they were there, he was
overwhelmed by the sight of the sea and the raw ocean smells, practically vibrating with pure joy that
he stood there with his siblings. Braying with all the good that assailed him, Jyushimatsu barged for
the water, stripping to his shorts as he ran, stirring sands with each eager footfall until he reached the
lapping precipice. He submerged without hesitation, vanished beneath the languid waves.

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu squeaked, all bitching stilled as the others only gazed after him;
somehow, Jyushimatsu could still render them speechless. ‘That water’s freezing!’

‘Oh, sweet Jyushimatsu,’ Karamatsu found his voice first and sighed dramatically. But his broad
beam was barely overdone, and Osomatsu realised, in spite of himself, he joined in. Suddenly
Shittymatsu’s unilateral plans seemed much less shitty.

‘He really is something else.’

‘As in, an entirely unknown species,’ Choromatsu spoke up dryly, raising an amused snort from
Osomatsu. They would know. He and Choromatsu had had far too much experience of late with
alien species. Todomatsu didn’t join their laughter, eyes sweeping repeatedly from his brothers to the
ocean and back. Jyushimatsu hadn’t resurfaced.

‘Shouldn’t we …’

Osomatsu shook his head, grinning at Karamatsu; he already waited, hand funnelled expectantly at
his ear. ‘Just give him another second to …’

‘COLD?!’

The frigid temperature clicking, Jyushimatsu sprang rigid, ejected from the ocean as though the
depths were suddenly electrified. Twisting mid-air, he tumbled onto the slippery sand, carrying yells
whipped down the otherwise-deserted beach by shivering gusts of wind, ‘IT’S COLD! WHY IS IT
SO COLD?! I WANT TO GO SWIMMING, KARAMATSU-NIISAN, BUT IT’S TOO
FREAKING COLD! WHY?!’ Grit-streaked and entire body exploded with goosebumps, he bolted
away as fast as he’d jumped in. Ichimatsu had already stumbled halfway down the sands, their
brother’s sunshine hoodie retrieved and draped over his shoulder. Not their usual robust tackle,
Ichimatsu just managed to snag Jyushimatsu in a wide purple towel as he streaked by, clumsily
wrapping his trembling form in warmth before they toppled with the younger’s irrepressible
momentum.

‘There, there, calm down …’
Jyushimatsu had vaulted clean over thrilled and straight to ecstatic when Karamatsu announced their surprise weekend plans the night before, the six of them cleared out of the roach-infested house to eat. His oden cart almost falling victim to the fifth born’s fervour, Chibita had sworn crassly, calling their oddball brother every name under the sun. ‘The hell? Watch it, you idjit!’

But Jyushimatsu, as so often the case, was an outlier; the rest of them hadn’t been so impressed. ‘But I was planning to stay with friends, we were going to go shopping … No one else will be there,’ Todomatsu had whined at the prospect of being stranded on some bleak beach with no one but his brothers for company, bolstering Osomatsu’s loud objections. Why couldn’t Karamatsu have consulted him first? He was the eldest, damn it! Didn’t that count for anything?

Osomatsu wasn’t against the idea of a trip per se. It would’ve been way too much trouble if he’d had to plan the thing himself, but Karamatsu had seen to that—seriously, the fucking beach in November? But even impulsive Osomatsu knew that leaving ground zero undefended in mid-war was a dick move. Surreptitiously, he’d looked to Choromatsu, gauging his reaction to Shittymatsu’s brainless scheme to drag them from their post. The third born was a deer frozen in high beams.

‘Well … if we have to be out of the house anyway,’ was all he’d managed to say before swigging the rest of his tea in a rush—any excuse to stop talking. Thank you, oh wise Wyvern, Osomatsu had thought uncharitably, glaring across Karamatsu at his hapless brother as he immediately choked. And this asshole was supposed to be their brains.

As their brother spluttered, Karamatsu had rubbed Choromatsu’s back between his sharp shoulder blades, gently beating coughs out of him. ‘Down the wrong pipe, brother? Just breathe, it’s all right …’

‘He can’t fucking breathe if he’s gagging, can he,’ Osomatsu had said roughly, riled at the exasperating second born. But Karamatsu had gone on attempting to soothe until Choromatsu shook him off, the worst of his hacking subsided. ‘I’m … fine,’ he breathed hoarsely, eyes streaming as Chibita screeched, promising death if so much as a single fleck of spit tainted his oden.

It was an easy thing to dump blame on Karamatsu, and Osomatsu had blamed him instantly for putting himself and Choromatsu in such a bind. He knew that wasn’t fair; the guy was oblivious to a lot more than what constituted a good holiday. But that didn’t stop Osomatsu from being annoyed. He might be off the cuff, but Karamatsu was supposed to be more considerate than this … not that planning them an extravagant surprise holiday was overly inconsiderate. But Osomatsu was more than prepared to sacrifice his brother’s crappy execution of good intentions for the sake of a few souls. It would be a low blow, but Karamatsu would get over it—he always did. But as the bearer of shit news had prepared to stomach Karamatsu verbose regret and Jyushimatsu’s wide-eyed, albeit short-lived disappointment, Ichimatsu had shocked them all with a would-be indifferent shrug. ‘You know, I kinda like the beach grey.’

He’d looked to immediately regret speaking up as a delighted Karamatsu swooped to springboard off his inadvertent support. ‘If you don’t forget I said anything right fucking now, Shittymatsu …’

Maybe it was his health, maybe more; Ichimatsu so rarely showed interest in anything. And his interest had been real, however foully he’d tried to deny it, body wracked by relentless fatigue huddled over the counter. Whatever the cause, Osomatsu had found himself unsettlingly twisted around his dark brother’s finger, unable to deny him that dreary beach. And maybe Karamatsu was onto something. Maybe some sea air would be good for the ailing Ichimatsu—that was some kind of old folklore remedy or something, right?

Ichimatsu had been stony on the early train, glare fixed on streaming scenery behind the glass opposite as nervous commuters edged from his blistering line of sight. He had been forced to turn his
cats from their home with the looming fumigation. ‘Get a grip, they’ll be fine. They live on the streets anyway,’ Osomatsu had yawned, losing his pillow as Ichimatsu jerked his shoulder from beneath his resting cheek. On his other side, Karamatsu had stepped up to the consoling plate. Before he opened his mouth, forewarning pinched Osomatsu’s big brother instinct. He might have intervened, caused some distraction to spare both brothers grief. But … it was just too early to be up on a Saturday. Warning signs be damned, Osomatsu had already sunk back into semi-consciousness, head lolling on a lightly-dozing Todomatsu’s shoulder as Jyushimatsu raced a few hyperactive kids up and down the car. Maybe it was cruel. But Karamatsu had to keep making his mistakes if he was ever going to learn from them.

‘It’s the lesser of two evils, Ichimatsu. Better suffer one night cold than …’

He’d cut off hurriedly, Ichimatsu’s fist slamming into the narrow space between them. Lucky, Osomatsu observed through the fog of looming dreams, lulled deeper by the compelling locomotive momentum. He got off pretty lightly …

Ahn had returned to the streets among Ichimatsu’s friends. Fully expecting to be chewed up and spat out, Osomatsu was floored when the kitten was unperturbed by their vacating the city. ‘I don’t see it will do much harm. We fail to rescue so many slaves as it is.’

‘Thanks,’ Osomatsu grumbled. Ahn flicked her tail in agitation.

‘That is merely fact; you needn’t take everything I say as disparagement. It is only one night. And it was kind of your brother to plan this for you. You both deserve rest,’ she’d said, looking between her youthful warriors. Osomatsu shrugged. Choromatsu had nodded once, resting his face in his hands; Osomatsu noted with a ripple of worry how wan his brother was. And he’d only been at it a month. It didn’t say much for the state of the workforce, if they were expected to look so exhausted after mere months in employment. Maybe they’d been on the right track, avoiding it for so long.

‘So what’s Ahn up to?’ Osomatsu asked, plonking down on the sand a distance from the water. Choromatsu threw out his towel, taking off his shoes before sitting beside him.

‘Unicorn stuff.’

‘Why am I not surprised,’ Osomatsu yawned, shaping his own towel into a head rest. Stretched out to nap, he realised it was the first time he’d been properly apart from the pint-sized tyrant since he’d signed his contract. Grinning sleepily, he vowed to enjoy that brief freedom.

It was actually kind of nice, lying there wrapped in his warm hoodie in the cool, fresh atmosphere while the quiet sea churned unseen, the promise of dire potential beneath its gentle pretences. Seabirds cooed overhead, mingling with muted electronic snaps as Todomatsu flitted between their brothers, filling his selfie library. Osomatsu threw up a lazy peace sign for the imminent pictures, feeling the shift in sands as Totty sat beside him, laying out his broad pink towel. Already Choromatsu had sunk beneath coherence, usually tense facial muscles relaxed beneath smoothed skin, unburdened with rest. Rolling onto his side, Osomatsu yawned once more and joined him, dropping immediately out of commission.

He roused refreshed a few hours later, letting himself come awake gradually and slowly sitting up. Choromatsu was still dead to the world, snoring softly. Totty had been out combing the sands; he’d gathered a small collection of shells and a shard or two of frosty sea glass in a hand towel.

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan tried to bury you,’ Todomatsu informed as he sorted shells, Osomatsu realising his legs were far sandier than they ought be. ‘Consider yourself rescued, Osomatsu-niisan.’
‘Souvenirs for your friends?’ Osomatsu asked, nodding towards the shells. Smiling sweetly, Totty nodded beneath the tilt of his stylish strawhat. Endearing, tasteful and completely fucking priceless—the scavenged gifts were the very essence of Todomatsu. ‘See, this isn’t so bad.’

‘You complained more than anyone,’ Todomatsu reminded swiftly. Osomatsu shrugged, a rueful smile tugged out of him and an easy excuse at the ready.

‘Yeah … I was tired.’

‘You two must be working hard,’ Totty said, glancing toward Choromatsu’s ongoing sleep with something resembling respect. Osomatsu craved the admiration of their youngest far beyond his control, and his chest swelled, so pleased by the freely-offered regard. That was, until he realised the more favourable sentiment was beset by never-ceasing incredulity that neither he nor Choromatsu had flaked out of their jobs yet. ‘I’ve never seen you so burned out.’

‘Why did you come?’ Osomatsu asked of his youngest brother, savouring their easy conversation. All he’d seen of Totty lately was his back, purposely keeping far ahead of him on their dawn jogs. It was a kind reminder, that their relationship wasn’t only defined by Todomatsu’s shame. ‘You didn’t have to—I kinda thought you’d stay back.’

Totty pouted, apparently hurt Osomatsu considered him so heartless. ‘Sure, I could have stayed. But I wouldn’t abandon you to …’

He lifted his eyes, surveying a little way down the beach. Jyushimatsu played unabashedly, rolling in the frigid water until he could bear it no longer and snuggling within a virtual cave of towels, breathing hard until he warmed enough to leap out and resume his raucous frolicking. Karamatsu preened nearby, somehow strutting even as he lounged carelessly on his massive towel. The terrible sunglasses perched on his nose would only be more pointless in moonlight.

‘And they wanted to come,’ Todomatsu added more hesitantly once they’d shared a snigger. Osomatsu considered his slightly furrowed brow as Todomatsu gripped his lower lip between his teeth. The youngest was unsure he needed to say this, and even more unsure he’d say it right. But he wanted it out anyway—before he thought better of it. ‘It’s … been a while now. Since we all spent real time together.’

With a visceral surge of affection, Osomatsu knocked off his brother’s hat to rumple his hair, teasing him terribly. ‘You sentimental boy, you!’

‘Get off,’ Todomatsu grouched, slightly pink and one hand at his hair once he’d elbowed Osomatsu in the ribs. Undiscouraged, Osomatsu flung a warm arm around his shoulders. Fully expecting to be shrugged from beneath and for once not particularly caring, Osomatsu instead found himself happily posing as Totty leaned into him briefly, tucking his head in the nook between Osomatsu’s shoulder and cheek to take their picture, another good memory immortalised. This wasn’t what either of them expected of a beach holiday. But it was nice. And—god, it was so painful to agree with Shittymatsu—Osomatsu’s soul almost felt soothed.

Ichimatsu sat not far from Jyushimatsu’s towel fort, his hood drawn and staring out to sea. Smart phone slipped safely back in his pocket, Todomatsu followed Osomatsu’s eyes. ‘He’s just been sitting there,’ he said, like he’d read Osomatsu’s wondering.

‘Do you think he’s having a good time?’

Todomatsu shrugged; it was hard to read Ichimatsu at the best of times. ‘He’s barely moved since you fell asleep. Wait …’ He paused as Karamatsu flopped beside Ichimatsu. Osomatsu couldn’t hear
what the second born said, but saw his smooth smile and familiar knitting of his thick brow as he adjusted his glasses. One cue, Ichimatsu lay down to escape into sleep.

‘Now he’s moved,’ Totty amended with a sly tweak of his lips, but groaned as Karamatsu’s awful board shorts flashed in the weak trickles of sunlight. ‘Why does he have to wear those? I’m sooo glad no one else is here …’

Osomatsu laughed through his own grimace, fondly exasperated. They knew Karamatsu’s painful warning signs; it was practically self-preservation. Squinting to sharpen the greyed landscape, Osomatsu saw as Karamatsu’s facial muscles seemed to briefly lock up. He frowned—what was that about? But the second born now smiled down at their prone brother and took up Ichimatsu’s previous station, watching the ocean. With a passing change in direction, the cavorting winds blew sound towards Osomatsu. Needing to look away as flying sand flecked and teared his eyes, he realised Karamatsu hummed what might be lullabies. Ichimatsu must be a lone twitch from fastening both hands around his throat.

Wiping grit and moisture from his stinging eyes and deciding the odd expression had been some trick of the atmosphere, Osomatsu had to smile. Karamatsu might be boring if he didn’t try so excruciatingly to be gallant. But beneath the overblown ego, he really was such a good guy.

Osomatsu soon began to annoy Choromatsu awake, tickling his feet with the corner of his towel and wafting sand in his face. ‘Mmph,’ he mumbled, swatting his manically giggling brother away as sand spilt on his lips, glueing to a strand of drool that clung at the corner of his mouth. Inspired, Osomatsu scooped a fresh handful and waited, poised with the devil’s patience. When Choromatsu’s lips parted in a heedless yawn, Osomatsu dumped his sand quicksmart, filling his half-open mouth.

‘Argh! Osomatsu, I’ll shoot you!’ Choromatsu yelled, wide awake as he swigged and spat water furiously to wash the grit from his tongue as Osomatsu and Todomatsu were reduced to stitches. ‘I swear to god, I will fucking shoot you!’

‘Sh-shoot him?’ Totty managed to wheeze, clutching his shuddering stomach as Choromatsu glared at the disgusting fun at his expense. ‘G-good luck with that, Choromatsu-niisan—you’ve never even held a gun!’

‘Actually,’ Choromatsu said almost threateningly, snapping open his wallet. ‘I took it up.’ Todomatsu’s giggles gradually, then abruptly faded, big brown eyes wide as he reached for the discreet membership card Choromatsu flashed; he snatched it away before Totty could see more than the pistol emblem. ‘A few of my coworkers have a thing for gun bars,’ Choromatsu said, Osomatsu astounded by his smooth lie, when Todomatsu demanded more information. ‘I got into it at a few work parties.’

‘You have work parties at gun bars? You never told me!’ Totty exclaimed repeatedly, indignant he’d been left out of the loop.

‘Look who’s talking,’ Choromatsu returned dryly. Todomatsu scrambled to excuse his hypocrisy, but was defeated by the unprecedented development of his most neurotic brother into a gunslinger.

‘Where did that come from?’ Osomatsu asked silently as Totty pried, asking if he planned to acquire his own weaponry. ‘You practically swallow your foot failing to get us out of this, and then out of nowhere …’

‘It’s close enough to the truth,’ Choromatsu shrugged as Totty skidded, kicking up sand to seize Karamatsu by the arm and frantically waving Jyushimatsu over as Ichimatsu propped on his elbow to better hear the youngest spill the latest headline of their sibling press. ‘I was planning to tell them
soon anyway. About shooting, at least. And they’re only air guns,’ he added, but Osomatsu saw him resignedly eye their brothers’ huddle. He knew Choromatsu wished he’d thought to grab their gossipy bitch of a brother before he scarpered to tell the world his business.

‘Can’t you at least be consistent?’ Osomatsu complained jokingly as Karamatsu’s neck swivelled almost one eighty to gape at the third born, lid flipped from his known world. Ichimatsu, by contrast, looked utterly unsurprised by the revelation. He even offered a brief nod over his shoulder with a distant “you took your sweet fucking time, but I completely respect this particular life choice of yours” sort of expression. ‘Give your poor leader some idea what to expect.’

‘Temporary leader … I don’t think I’ve been consistent in a long time,’ Choromatsu returned out of the blue, stiffened slightly under the eyes of his brothers and gone quiet, like his sudden admission annoyed or troubled him. Deciding to ignore the jibe faster than it lit his spark, Osomatsu shoved his brother in a show of support and flopped onto his back, crossing his arms behind his head.

‘Well, you’re consistent in battle, at least. That’s where it counts.’

For a moment, Choromatsu seemed to forget his older brother had just tried to smother him with sand, awkward with the much-appreciated compliment. ‘Thanks, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘Taking up shooting is something you should tell us, Choromatsu-niisan!’ Jyushimatsu shouted out; it might be admonishment if he didn’t smile so widely. ‘Do we need to sit you down to talk next? But you will take me to a gun bar, won’t you? Please Niisan?’

‘You’ll take him, won’t you?’ Osomatsu mimicked evilly, Choromatsu blanched chalky at only the passing imagery that dared combine their unintentionally-hazardous little brother with projectile weaponry. His arms formed a massive X in a universally recognisable “no”; the unwavering sentiment would have been seen from a passing helicopter.

Well past noon, they shared out the lunch boxes they’d bought at a nearby convenience store before indulging Jyushimatsu with a few lazy innings of baseball, which came to a somewhat abrupt end when one wild swing from their powerful brother sent his ball soaring clean across the ocean.

‘What do you think?’ Karamatsu eagerly sought Osomatsu’s approval as they flicked sand from towels, gathering their belongings to leave. ‘The greatest travel destination of late autumn, no?’

‘Not so shitty at all,’ Osomatsu had to agree, pounding Karamatsu affably in the chest. ‘But couldn’t you have at least invited Totoko?’

Every one of them gone suddenly leaden with lusty impressions of the friend they collectively idolised showing off in fish-themed swimwear, the six tramped through the tiny town, every soul they passed enacting that familiar double-take. Karamatsu had booked them a room at a small traditional inn; the three eldest split the cost with minimal squabbles. ‘Shittymatsu’s trying to make us pay for everything,’ Osomatsu had already complained before realising just how cheap the room became when six stayed together.

‘We are the ones with income,’ Choromatsu had reminded. ‘And he is paying the same as us.’

‘Only because we cornered him,’ Osomatsu maintained, his grin grown smug with slightly-twisted righteousness. Karamatsu had sprung the excursion on them. At the very least, he could help pay for it.

Six neat futons already laid out, the brothers dumped their bags and immediately took over the bath house, showering their day at the beach from every crease of skin before settling back for a soak. ‘I
don’t feel like it,’ Ichimatsu had tried to sidle out of washing, already collapsed on his futon, but had joined them, dragging his feet, when Osomatsu instructed Jyushimatsu to make him—“By any means necessary … that includes the octopus hold.”

Wrinkly clean amid rising steam and lunch at once feeling far more distant than a few hours, Osomatsu’s stomach gurgled noisily. Grinning with an unnecessary “wow, I’m hungry”, his was soon joined by a chorus of peckish grumbles.

‘I’ll go ahead,’ Todomatsu said as he tossed a complimentary plastic comb in a tub to be sterilised and re-packaged, the first of them dried and freshly dressed. ‘I’ll text when I find somewhere to eat.’

Shrugged straight back into his slightly-sandy hoodie, Osomatsu loitered outside the inn, waiting for his brothers. He absentlly sparred air in fast-mounting impatience, bored by his compliant insubstantial enemy by the time Totty’s text arrived with directions. Snapping his phone closed, his stomach coiled with hunger ratcheted to an unreasonable nine. Stalking back to the entrance, Osomatsu stuck his head inside. ‘Oi, hurry up!’ he yelled through the lobby, earning himself a few huffs from offended staff members.

‘Finally,’ Osomatsu grumbled as his brothers trundled out the entrance—he must have been out there almost ten minutes. Even Ichimatsu was dressed reasonably neatly, maybe a comb run once through his shaggy mane. So cleaned up, he’d look almost good if he didn’t look like shit. ‘What took so fucking long?’

‘Ichimatsu-niisan isn’t fast,’ Jyushimatsu informed almost solemnly, keeping near their sluggish brother as an ever-ready support. Osomatsu tsked at Ichimatsu’s unapologetic shrug, all patience out the window to clear space for his impending dinner.

‘Yeah, you don’t say.’

The town was so small, the walk to the chain izakaya-style pub Todomatsu had located took only minutes, even at Ichimatsu’s lagging trudge. Slotting their shoes in lockers, a host showed them to their table and slid back the partition, where they caught Totty bright-eyed and bantering with a waitress as she set out water glasses and six identical dishes of pickled appetisers. Even as he gave his blushing brother sufficient hell, Osomatsu’s eyes fell to his glass, and he slowly grinned as he again realised: Ahn wasn’t there to hang over their shoulders, yowling in disapproval. He and Choromatsu could drink.

‘Come on, it’s fine,’ he silently pressed an unconvinced, but painfully keen Choromatsu. ‘We’re off duty, everything’s happening in Tokyo.’

‘Right now, yeah.’

‘Exactly,’ Osomatsu nodded. ‘Right now.’

He got the hint. They shouldn’t let their guard down. But Choromatsu sighed: said hint made zero impression on his bullheaded brother. ‘And right now, we’re not there. Our scrolls have been stone cold all day, there’s no soldiers all the way out here. Come on,’ he wheedled, twisting Choromatsu’s arm until he ordered a light beer as a scanty compromise. ‘For me, too!’ Osomatsu sang out.

Eagerly snatching his icy glass the moment it arrived, Osomatsu chugged it fast. He grinned over his stein brim to see Choromatsu did the same, head tilted so far back Osomatsu could almost draw a straight line from the tip of his nose to the smoky ceiling; his brother hadn’t taken much convincing. Throats pleasantly tingling, they slammed empty glasses down, Osomatsu a beat ahead. It was their first and last night off in a long time. They meant to make the most of it.
Osomatsu wiped his palms on his trouser leg, dampened by condensation, as Jyushimatsu slid a huge picture menu across the glossed table surface towards him. ‘Niisan, you’re letting loose,’ he observed spiritedly, pleased his hardworking brothers remembered how to relax. But even with his full voice, the air seemed a little empty—shouldn’t someone else be vocal right about now? Osomatsu had expected to garner a little more reaction; their brothers hadn’t exactly been quiet over their sudden sobriety. But Totty was still furious with his cock-blocking brothers, Ichimatsu already marked a corner to curl up in.

‘Still waiting for one?’ the waitress asked as she rose, empty tray flat to her hip.

‘No,’ Todomatsu shook his head, glaring briefly around his brothers. ‘We’re all …’

He trailed off slowly as Choromatsu’s eyes widened in realisation and Jyushimatsu’s mouth dropped in a cavernous O of alarm. Shit—it finally penetrated Osomatsu’s thick skull they were one short. Every brother’s eyes turned automatically to their eldest, and he groaned, having salivated like a Pavlovian mongrel from the moment they’d spotted the izakaya facade. But Osomatsu grudgingly shoved himself up and jammed his feet back in his sneakers, backtracking to intercept their wayward brother.

The very grey day darkened into a blustery evening; every other gust of wind spiralled viciously down the narrow streets, and a lumbering mass of stormcloud pushed sluggishly inland, crackling with energy. Osomatsu hitched up his hood with a few early splatters of rain on his nose, sure he heard the sea growing angry beyond the low rooftops, an undertone to more typical sounds of impending night time—early revelry in tiny pubs, the final farewells of tired shopkeepers to persistent patrons, and the leisurely scrape of soles to the road as couples and families strolled. Envying their easy pace, Osomatsu skirted a father who paused to scoop a bawling toddler onto his back and realised with a digging thorn of annoyance that his shower had been pointless, sweating lightly as he jogged back to the inn. Karamatsu didn’t wait outside, confused but expectant. Exhaling sharply in frustration, Osomatsu fanned out into the surrounding streets. Giving each a cursory scan, he only recalled the existence of phones as his own buzzed with a text. “Found the asshole yet?”

Osomatsu growled, that not one of his brothers had stopped him running off when they could have simply called Karamatsu. That the izakaya was barely two turns from the inn was hardly consolation.

‘There you are!’ Osomatsu called out, at last spotting a deep blue hoodie wandering off the main street, poking their nose in every eatery they passed.

‘Brother!’ Karamatsu exclaimed, flashing a wide smile and slanting his glasses within his hood as Osomatsu pulled up a step ahead of him. ‘I knew you hadn’t …’

‘Why’d you have to take so long? And why didn’t you just call when you couldn’t find us?’ Catching Karamatsu’s wrist as his hand flew to accentuate some dramatic point Osomatsu didn’t want to hear, he tugged him roughly in the direction of the izakaya. The second born fell immediately into step beside him, quietened uncharacteristically fast.

‘I’m sorry I took so long,’ Karamatsu ventured, strangely hesitant, as he removed his boots, Osomatsu forcibly shoving his sneakers back in their locker and radiating with ongoing annoyance. Glancing over his shoulder as he banged the locker door shut and pocketed the key, Osomatsu regarded his brother. Then he looked more closely, aggravation folded back like darkened theatre curtains to permit a glimpse of Karamatsu under spotlight. His ostentatious brother was ever ready to accept blame, but was usually more self-sacrificing and grand about it, or else only raised his hand to keep the peace. That apology didn’t align with either of those scenarios, and Osomatsu felt a little unsettled, seeing Karamatsu awaited his response with one boot still on and apparently forgotten. His
eyes were unreadable, shrouded by his sunglasses.

‘It’s not a big deal,’ Osomatsu said to get his brother moving, swinging open an empty locker for him. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

Karamatsu’s expression flashed instantly into such misguided self-possession, so fast the eldest Matsuno had to wonder if that moment of vulnerability had been real or a ploy for attention, like Osomatsu played Karamatsu for sympathy and Todomatsu played all of them for everything. Resentful again, that his brother had been too slow to fix his perfect hair, Osomatsu made a mess of it, rumpling with a jolly “Found him!” as he wrestled him down by the table. Chopsticks shooting out, he beat Choromatsu to a steaming fillet of seared mackerel as Karamatsu whipped out his mirror to attend the damage, expression pained.

Alcohol deprived and irrationally hungry as he was, the drink was heavenly and the simple food even better. Spurred by their seaside location, Osomatsu’s brothers had over ordered on seafood, table buckling beneath platters of grilled scallops in melted butter and assorted sashimi, so pink and perfect the raw flesh might have been delicate desserts spun with sugar. Finished his mackerel with a lick of his lips, Osomatsu began loading up on tuna, hailing Ichimatsu for the soy sauce and hitting the buzzer for his next beer.

The brothers’ glasses piled up, every tray carted off not quite making enough room for fresh rounds. Osomatsu bitched liberally, that they in employment were being taken advantage of by their mooching brothers. ‘But didn’t we promise?’ Todomatsu pointed out, sickeningly sweet as Osomatsu scowled behind his fourth beer, already swapped to full strength. ‘If any of us ever found our feet, they’d help out the others.’

‘Right,’ Ichimatsu agreed, hefting his emptied glass unsteadily from his corner and motioning for a refill. ‘Help us out, Osomatsu-niisan, Choromatsu-niisan.’

‘Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu cried out, eyes increased somewhat in their cheerful unfocus, pupils slightly skewed. ‘Another one, please!’

Heavily flushed and wide smile jarringly out of place, pasted atop his terminal funk, Choromatsu smacked at the buzzer again. He had to jab several times for a solid hit, aim slipping alongside his coordination. Nettled, Osomatsu kicked him under the table. Pliably drunk edition Choromatsu could cover the lot himself, if he was that keen to spoil the freeloading little shitbags. ‘You lot are the worst, you know that?’ he said, glaring particularly at a gloating Todomatsu as he flashed Karamatsu a bright thumbs up, like he’d somehow tricked them into paying. Karamatsu looked almost surprised, but then shot back an unnecessarily long wink, as though it had all been planned. Assholes.

Osomatsu remained vocally pissed with his conniving brothers for a few more rounds. But as he contributed more than his share to their daunting collection of used glasses, he cared less that the party came directly from his pocket—he was a professional hero, for god’s sake, paid in treasure! He could afford to splurge now and then. And though he wouldn’t admit they were worth it—and he made sure they knew it, pulling his legs from beneath the table and kneeling up to deliver a sardonic toast when Ichimatsu began ordering shochu—Osomatsu decided he did like it, that he could treat his brothers, and sneakily chose to leave how much his wallet wouldn’t like it, once alcohol no longer warmed his blood, for future Osomatsu to deal with.

‘It’s definitely Ichimatsu’s fault,’ Todomatsu declared tipsily as Jyushimatsu swallowed handfuls of deep fried tentacles almost whole, conversation meandering to the infestation that had driven them from house and home. ‘You’re disgusting, Niisan—they were attracted to you.’

‘Thanks, Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu could finally target his pleasure for the unexpected insect fix. ‘I’ve
never seen so many cockroaches in one place at once!’

‘I’ve heard a house doesn’t need to be dirty to get infested,’ Karamatsu offered, swallowing so he didn’t have to speak around a mouthful of lotus root. Osomatsu didn’t bother to stifle his snigger.

‘Sure, it doesn’t need to be dirty,’ he emphasised as he shuffled on his arse to bear down on Ichimatsu. The floor by his feet was scattered with little plates Jyushimatsu had filled for him to pick at. A few tidbits were nibbled, but most had gone cold; Ichimatsu had apparently taken up a liquid diet. ‘But it sure as hell makes it easier! Now will you bathe when we tell you?’

Ichimatsu shrugged, not saying much in his defence as Osomatsu and increasingly drunk edition Choromatsu taunted, knocking aside the fourth born's half-hearted swats and ignoring his slight recoil as they dragged him from his corner. Osomatsu deposited him between himself and Karamatsu.

‘You’re well enough to sit at the goddamn table. Bloody eat something,’ Osomatsu slurred, sliding Ichimatsu’s fresh shochu in front of him in the same breath. Beside them, Karamatsu raised his hand, then hesitated. But then he tried to slide Ichimatsu’s glass away again.

‘Hey!’ Ichimatsu exclaimed, slapping at Karamatsu’s hand and missing, instead flipping an empty bowl of karaage and showering a disgruntled Todomatsu with crumbs and lemon juice. ‘Fuck off, Shittymatsu!’

Karamatsu withdrew his hand, but had to at least voice his concern. ‘Ichimatsu … dear brother, you really shouldn’t drink so much in your condition. You’ll only make yourself …’

He fell silent as Ichimatsu’s dull eyes seized his, gaining focus with his eternal contempt for Karamatsu his lynchpin. Karamatsu looking on, the fourth born raised his shochu in mockery of a toast. Osomatsu laughed outright, brothers grinning as Ichimatsu slowly, deliberately knocked back the lot, never breaking eye contact. Slamming the tumbler down with a short gasp for air, he flipped Karamatsu a blunt “go to hell”. ‘Choromatsu-niichan.’

The inconsistently-reasonable Matsuno had already buzzed, waiter straining to hide his exasperation for the disorderly Matsunos as he tugged open their partition a little harder than necessary. ‘He’s an adult,’ Osomatsu reminded the subdued second born, his wasted efforts to regulate Ichimatsu’s soaring alcoholic intake reigned in. Shove miscalculated by a mind fluffed like drifting dandelions, Osomatsu would have slammed his brother straight through the fragile paper partitions if Karamatsu weren’t so sturdy, catching the heavy blow. ‘He can make his own stupid decisions, he doesn’t need your help.’

‘Damn right,’ Ichimatsu agreed almost genially. Lips tweaked in somewhat disoriented content, his hostility had petered to nothing the moment he severed eye contact with Karamatsu. It was some kind of compensation from the heavens, or a lack of the twists and subtleties of epigenetics that funneled the sextuplets’ unnumbered differences. And Osomatsu thanked whatever force responsible, that Ichimatsu was typically a happy drunk.

‘I’m so glad you weren’t hurt, Jyushimatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu was slung over Jyushimatsu’s shoulders a few hours later, eyes shining with tears yet unshed. For all they’d begun early, the time nudged later and later, flying by for the brothers with the manipulative hands of inebriation on the clock. ‘That was so scary, those creepy cultists. How do they do that?’ he wondered hazily as Osomatsu and Choromatsu shared a knowing grin, trusting their siblings were too sloshed to connect it to Totty’s ramblings. ‘Make people zone out like that and just attack … and they’re everywhere now! I’m sooo glad we haven’t seen them again. And you saved me … I never thanked you for saving me,’ Todomatsu seemed to realise, looking at once appalled with himself as he half-strangled
Jyushimatsu. ‘I’m such a—’ he broke off with a hiccup, and suffered a moment of priceless confusion before remembering why he throttled his brother, and wailed, ‘I’m such a monster, thank you so much, you’re so brave, Jyushimatsu-niisan!’

‘I don’t really remember much,’ Jyushimatsu said, unruffled beneath his brother’s smothering affection and only the slightest whiff of embarrassment tinged his modesty as he laughed at his poor memory. Osomatsu staved off the worst of his scowl as Totty looked on their sunshine-hooded brother with such sparkling adoration. Jyushimatsu deserved all the praise in the world. But didn’t he deserve a little, too? He was the one who’d blasted Juuku to fucking kingdom come. That’s something the comics never mentioned: complete and utter lack of appreciation. Maybe heroes weren’t supposed to care—fuck that, Osomatsu thought with a moody swig of beer. He was saving the world and doing a damn good job. If he didn’t get a little acknowledgement soon … Ahn’s reluctant praise hardly counted.

‘That cult, you know,’ Totty was saying, carrying most of the conversation himself as his older brothers lazed. He’d barely been able to mention the pachinko incident until then, fears loosed healthily hand in hand with inhibition. ‘People are saying they’re recruiting followers to train in the mountains in Mongolia, or something. They study up there, and meditate—and learn to control people with their minds!’

‘Then they dress up and terrorise the innocent citizens of Tokyo?’ Choromatsu asked with a shade of his usual cynicism. ‘I know not to say more!’ he exclaimed when Osomatsu warned him telepathically to shut up. ‘I’m drunk, not stupid. I’d be nailing that rumour even if I didn’t know what was happening!’

‘Yeah, the toxin thing is more likely,’ Ichimatsu mumbled in agreement. It was amazing he snatched at the conversation at all, let alone was compelled to participate.

‘I’ve heard they’re from outer space,’ Karamatsu eventually joined in the speculation, legs under the table but the rest of him sprawled flat, gazing up at the round paper lamp overhead. ‘Aliens. And they’re collecting human energy as a power source to fuel …’

‘What the fuck?’ Ichimatsu snorted into the dregs of his ice as Totty burst out laughing.

‘Aliens, Karamatsu-niisan? Really?’ he choked as Jyushimatsu smiled, heavy head spilled in the nest of his oversized sleeves and blinking slowly, the first of them starting to wind down. But Osomatsu looked to his immediate junior sharply. Even as he lounged, every cell soaked in alcohol, he realised how dangerously near the truth that was; Choromatsu’s look of damning alarm was confirmation if there ever was any. Either Ahn’s efforts to suppress the intergalactic war from human notice failed, or closet fans of old magical girl animes spread their genre-tinged theories loud enough to reach his idiot brother’s ears. Or his brother was just an idiot. Whatever the idea’s origin, it pissed him off.

‘Who the hell said that?’ Osomatsu demanded, the irrepressible hand of responsibility laid heavy to his shoulder requiring he crush the rumour. ‘Did you make that shit up?’

‘No,’ Karamatsu said. He sat up slowly, glasses half fallen off his head. ‘I said I heard it.’

‘That’s fucking ridiculous,’ Osomatsu scoffed. ‘They’re just fanatics in costume, that’s all.’

‘Very good costume,’ Jyushimatsu noted from his horizontal tilt, tone unnervingly distant. Osomatsu spared him only brief acknowledgement, too wrapped up in debunking Karamatsu’s theories to wonder at the fifth born’s vagueness. Jyushimatsu lived on another plane of existence without any aid of ethanol.
'Yeah, but it’s not aliens, all right? We’d know if it was fucking aliens, it’d be on NHK.'

'Yeah, of course,' Karamatsu nodded incessantly. 'But I’m just saying what I …'

'You’ll believe anything,' Ichimatsu cut him off, and Karamatsu flinched slightly with his brother’s oddly-smiling scorn. His hand lifted to fiddle with his glasses, lowering them over slightly hurt eyes. 'Don’t just trust the shit people tell you like a fucking …'

With jarring rattle and the dull crack of crockery as his upper body abruptly met the table, Ichimatsu collapsed mid-sentence. The brothers stared. 'Is he …' Osomatsu ventured as Choromatsu almost instinctively cleared the few broken plates, shoving the shards away with his safely-sleeved forearm. 'Is he sick? Is he just drunk …'

'Don’t know …' Choromatsu murmured. 'Maybe we should go.'

Osomatsu was worried. He was. But suddenly he couldn’t stop giggling, prodding Ichimatsu's prone form as Jyushimatsu shook him blearily to no avail. 'Ichimatsu-niisan, come on, wake up …'

'That’s enough, then,’ Karamatsu decided; by his unusually brusque tone, it was clear he’d thought so for some time. ‘We need to get him back to the inn,’ he said, lurching to his knees as Todomatsu raised his smart phone, capturing Ichimatsu out cold for future blackmail purposes, giggling immaturely. ‘Osomatsu, help me with him.’

Karamatsu pulled one of Ichimatsu’s arms over his shoulder. Still unable to still his chuckles, Osomatsu made to imitate his brother and lever Ichimatsu upright, pulling his legs from beneath the table. But as they straightened, Ichimatsu balanced between them, his scroll torched through Osomatsu’s hoodie pocket. ‘Ouch, fuck!’

‘What the hell?’ Karamatsu demanded as Osomatsu clapped his hands to his burning stomach, Ichimatsu’s dead weight slipping abruptly onto Karamatsu’s unprepared shoulders. Ichimatsu’s slack grimace didn’t even stir.

‘My guts,’ Osomatsu invented, coiling over and groaning to add effect and flashing outright alarm at Choromatsu. Their scrolls pulsed lividly, and he recalled abruptly through his previously-pleasant haze exactly what that meant. Liberation Force. What the hell?

‘What’s happening?’ Todomatsu asked suddenly. Osomatsu was about to repeat his gut cover only to realise the youngest didn’t look at him. He’d slid the partition back to let his brothers lumber through, and suddenly the rest of them noticed as he had the hectic movement beyond. Few shouted, but voices mingled in rising and ebbing commotion as word seemed passed hastily through the establishment. Screens slid and the wooden floors drummed with egress as feet were hurriedly shod in the blockaded entrance, every patron eager to vacate at once; the izakaya cleared as though at the insistence of an air raid siren.

‘Hey, what’s going on?’ Osomatsu stumbled past Todomatsu to grab at the sleeve of a rapidly-passing host, pulling him up.

‘They’re saying it’s like in Tokyo,’ the harried host said, Osomatsu dragged a few steps along behind him as he strove to hurry on, apparently far more important things to attend. ‘Someone reckons they saw funny people in costume, like on the news.’

‘The cultists?!” Todomatsu squeaked. Osomatsu gripped the searing scroll in his pocket. Even so far from ground zero, these small towners were scared. At only an unconfirmed sighting they fled; it was better safe than sorry, with such fears of being manipulated for unknown purposes beyond their own.
And now they had their confirmation.

‘We need to move.’

Instincts piercing the fog of inebriation, Osomatsu herded his brothers ahead of him, Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu supporting Ichimatsu as Todomatsu clung to Choromatsu’s elbow. ‘We need to go,’ Osomatsu directed silently at the third born. Hampered by their youngest, Choromatsu worked a handful of notes from his wallet and joined the clogged but fast-moving queue to pay as Osomatsu waded through outstretched legs and slamming lockers, matching keys and collecting their shoes. Shoving Ichimatsu’s sandals at Jyushimatsu, Osomatsu helped to heft their unconscious brother securely onto Karamatsu’s back. As kindly as the situation allowed, Choromatsu pried Todomatsu’s vice-like grip from his arm.

‘I need to pay … can you help Karamatsu with Ichimatsu?’ Choromatsu asked, gifting their frightened brother some diverting purpose and freeing himself, setting Totty on the already brother-beset second born. The least affected of them, Karamatsu automatically assumed responsibility.

‘Stay together,’ he called out as they pushed into the street, winds buffeting and freezing rain now bucketing almost unheeded. It was a small town, but a Saturday night—despite the foul weather, the emptying streets were as full as a festival. Word of the cultist hadn’t missed disrupting a single business. ‘Jyushimatsu, wait, hold up …’

Snagging Jyushimatsu by the hood to keep him close as he began to automatically wander with the sweeping pull of bodies, Karamatsu adjusted Ichimatsu’s weight on his back, helped only minimally by Todomatsu, who clung to his upper arm, absorbing the security he imbued by simply being his older brother. Osomatsu and Choromatsu kept close as Karamatsu’s gaze swung to find them, ensuring they were safe.

Osomatsu hated to leave them; Todomatsu might panic when he realised they were gone. But it couldn't be helped. Waiting for an opportune moment, the two ducked as a party of entitled businessmen shoved through the crowd. Jostled from their brothers, the pair of magical boys kept low and sneaked swiftly away. By the time Karamatsu’s neck performed its next watchful swivel, they had vanished within the thinning press of bodies.

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‘Where are they?!’

All four of them drenched to the bone, Karamatsu lowered Ichimatsu as best he could to his futon, almost dropping him with the impeding obstacle of Todomatsu latched to his arm like spreading lichen. The second born’s heart hammered, near bruising his chest. Two of his brothers were missing. One was unconscious, one distraught. This wasn’t what he’d wanted … this wasn’t what he’d planned for his family …

Jyushimatsu hovered over Ichimatsu, turning eyes alight with uncertainty to his conscious older brother. ‘What do we do, Karamatsu-niisan?’

Extracting his phone as Todomatsu sobbed like a child, Karamatsu strove to comfort him. But, overfilled and overwrought, his stomach churned unpleasantly—his words could so easily become lies, depending on the outcome of his calls. ‘Sweet Totty, shh, it’ll be all right … they’ll be all right …’

Karamatsu cradled him awkwardly, cheek pressed into Todomatsu’s mussed hair, as he called Osomatsu, then Choromatsu, phone jammed to his ear. Osomatsu’s phone rang out. Choromatsu’s
was directed to a holding message. ‘H-hi, you’ve reached Matsuno Choromatsu. I’m not available …’

‘Damn it … no, it’s all right,’ he rapidly covered his outburst as Todomatsu groaned, burying his face in Karamatsu’s chest. Shoving his phone back in his pocket, abundance of charms almost outweighing the outmoded tech itself, Karamatsu tried to think. It might only be a false alarm, a few locals getting overexcited with news reports and nothing. But Karamatsu couldn’t take that risk, not when his brothers were still out there. All need but their safety wasted away, he would have taken off in pursuit the moment he realised they were gone—god, he was such an idiot, how could he have let this happen? But he had more brothers than Osomatsu and Choromatsu to think about, pulled agonisingly in two.

‘Jyushimatsu,’ he sought out his only other functional brother, levering Todomatsu over and almost tripping over Ichimatsu to grip him firmly by the arm, seizing his attention and praying they were safe in the inn. ‘Jyushimatsu, listen to me. You need to stay here. Look after them, okay?’ he said as Jyushimatsu nodded, wide stare so empty and utterly overwhelmed. ‘Jyushimatsu?’ he pressed, tone courting desperate. ‘Can you do that for us? We need you.’

‘Yes, Karamatsu-niisan.’ Jyushimatsu drew his odd focus, locking on to his brother’s instructions like a crosshair to a distant target. Karamatsu knew he’d never look away until relieved of that solemn duty.

‘I trust you.’

‘N-no! Where are you going?!’ Todomatsu cried out, digging fingertips cutting off his circulation as Karamatsu’s ear rang with shrill proximity. With as much patience he could muster, he knelt on Totty’s futon, drawing his distressed brother with him. Tugging firmly, he reclaimed his numbed arm for his own use.

‘Stay here, I’m going to look for them. I’ll find them,’ he promised, daubing courage to his would-be confident smile for his own benefit as much as his brother’s peace of mind. Todomatsu shook his head violently, tears arcing from his cheeks as he begged.

‘Don’t go! Please don’t leave me …’

Heart rent by his pleas, Karamatsu reluctantly left their youngest in Jyushimatsu’s safe arms and seized his dripping boots, tearing for the lobby. Slipping and sliding all the way on the polished floors, he took barely a second to stamp into his shoes and draw his sodden hood. Moments later, the doors expelled him back into the swelling tempest.

‘Osomatsu!’ he yelled, yanking off glasses he hadn’t processed were still on; he couldn’t see a damn thing, black lenses distorted by droplets tinting his already-darkened surrounds to a claustrophobic cave. ‘Choromatsu!’

Shouts cleaved by rain like bullets, Karamatsu took off down the slick street.
Hurricane Drunk I

Chapter Notes

So this has become a two-part chapter/episode deal, hope that's okay :) Was just a little too long. I've spent a while on this one with a bit of second guessing over style and concern over being in character - probably why it took much longer than I meant - so I hope it's turned out okay in the end. Reading it through after it was done I felt better about it - definitely enjoyed reading it through at once, so that's a good sign. Let me know if it drags a bit, though, and I'll work on that for the rest of the story. As always, would love to know what people think, any speculations or critiques or general "reading this was pretty good" sort of things. It always makes my day to get an email with a comment; I get to read them sneakily at work :) Hope so much that you enjoy it, and Hurricane Drunk II is all done and should be up tomorrow!

Also, these are the first chapters named directly after a song ... I thought it was appropriate :) Also also, check out sweetie Magical Choro by TsukiHotaru!

What the hell were soldiers doing there? The questionable holiday destination was a hundred kilometres from Liberation Force hunting grounds. Tokyo teemed with potential slaves—were pickings really so slim their enemy had to prey on sparsely-populated seaside communities? Osomatsu pressed to the dampened wall of the little town post office, practically tasting the unease as the remaining nightlife evacuated.

‘Fuck you, too, Takuu,’ he thought sarcastically as the back of his hoodie soaked through. The alien lord seriously needed to give them a break.

‘This was supposed to be our night off,’ he muttered as legs hastened past, Choromatsu hunkered by him as the streets cleared. Choromatsu nodded vigorously, clearly on edge.

‘But it can’t be helped …’

Braced to the wall and trusting Karamatsu to get their younger siblings to safety, Osomatsu shoved himself upright and stumbled into the now-empty road, waving for Choromatsu to follow. Time to earn their living. ‘Right. By this contract …’

‘What are you doing?!’ Choromatsu cried, grabbing Osomatsu’s wrist as he twirled his scroll. Knocked off kilter and diminished hand-eye coordination not helping, Osomatsu lost his grip and the narrow scroll slipped between his fingers, striking the road with a silvery peal.

‘The fuck, Choromatsu?!’ Osomatsu exclaimed as it rolled out of sight. Dropping to the ground—painfully, he appreciated several moments later, lower body jarred and chunks of gravel cramming into his kneecaps—he fumbled through the dark, slapping at the wet bitumen for his scroll. Spying the garnet in the misty streetlight, he scrambled to snatch it up. ‘Ouch, fuck it’s hot!’

Tottered back to his feet, Osomatsu cocked his head, nonplussed as Choromatsu gesticulated wildly at the empty space around them. ‘We’re out in the open, we can’t transform!’

‘You want to talk any louder?’ Osomatsu asked. Reckless insensibly blown light years out of
proportion and his brother’s concerns suddenly very funny, he waved his scroll over his head and shouted at the top of his lungs. ‘Hey, come out and see the magical boys, we’re all sparkly and …’

The rest of his words muffled by Choromatsu’s clammy palm, Osomatsu laughed and shouldered his brother off him. ‘See, there’s no one here, everyone’s run away. Come on.’ He waved his scroll like a wand, tapping Choromatsu smartly on the head. ‘Let’s do this thing. Defenders of Earth, drunken magical boys—away!’

‘Not out here,’ Choromatsu wouldn’t budge, embarrassment rising to colour the few gaps in his alcohol-flushed cheeks. ‘Someone might see us—see us naked! And Ahn said …’

‘The prissy kitty isn’t here,’ Osomatsu stressed, rapping him harder and spinning out of range, unsteady and giggling as Choromatsu tried to snatch his scroll away. God help them—the only thing more wasted than they were was the effort they’d expended trying to avoid this very situation. Tossing up whether he was even capable of fighting—of course he was, he thought brightly; Osomatsu got into most of his fights drunk—he seized a bedraggled Choromatsu by his hood as he tried to careen in search of some hidden change room.

‘We’re not wasting any more time just cause the Wyvern’s shy. I’m still leader here,’ Osomatsu declared with all the authority he could muster through a cascade of hiccoughs that bubbled wetly up his throat. ‘We’re changing, right here, right now. By this contract I submit my spark to salvation!’

‘By this contract I submit my breath to salvation,’ Choromatsu mumbled, his winds whistling grudgingly as Osomatsu flared. By then he’d lost count of how many times he’d transformed, not exactly bored by his fiery metamorphosis. But it was almost a daily thing now. He’d thought he was used to it. But transforming under the influence was an entirely new experience. Every motion seemed exponentially deliberate, his body drawn as a pedantic diagram pinned to a backdrop ignited. Slowed by his depressed systems, power flowed measuredly through him, and Osomatsu sensed as his abilities and fortitude were lit one by one, candles become towering beacons of fire.

Fuck, he thought suddenly, engulfed by the ungodly sensation of what could only be forced metabolism, alcohol siphoned to his liver kicked into overdrive. I guess transformation can deal with drunk … kinda. Soundly grateful his untried theories proved at least partially correct and vision clearing at its numbed edges, Osomatsu watched, enraptured as fire twined around his shining body—it was so pretty, how hadn’t he noticed before?—and snapped snugly into his battle hoodie, gauntlets charged and ready. It would take far more than a rainstorm to put him out. ‘Flaming vanguard of onslaught, Salamander!’

‘Rising tempest of wisdom, Wyvern!’

The moment Choromatsu touched down he dropped to his knees, dry retching. At least, Osomatsu hoped he only dry retched. If he was actually sick behind that mask … ‘Even magical you can’t hold your liquor, can you?’ Osomatsu scolded lightly. Avoiding an overflowing puddle of stormwater, he squatted by his poor brother and held him as he heaved with whatever suffering drinking and transforming caused his sensitive stomach. He was incapacitated only moments, Choromatsu back on his feet without another falter. Osomatsu slapped his back bracingly. ‘You good?’

Choromatsu nodded, settled more fully into his transformed self now his body was done rejecting its rough treatment. ‘But let’s not do this again.’

‘I dunno, I could get used to it,’ Osomatsu gave a crooked grin as Choromatsu winced. His brother recovered, Osomatsu made a show of peering through the downpour, surveying the vacant streets with quick impatience. ‘So where the fuck are they, oh wise Wyvern?’
'Give me a second …’ Choromatsu’s brow contorted with concentration, like engaging with his glass took more effort than normal. But he fast zeroed in on the soldier and pointed the way, Osomatsu bounding after him with a spirited whoop in flight.

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Karamatsu dashed through the storm, charging back to the izakaya they’d only just vacated. No one manned the pay counter. ‘Hey! Excuse me!’ he called from the entrance, shouting until someone bustled from around a bend of the near deserted pub’s wood and paper labyrinth.

‘Welcome to … oh,’ the host cut off, business smile erased when he recognised Karamatsu. He had already done any penance he owed, putting up with the Matsuno sextuplets for hours without warning. ‘Can I help you?’

‘My brothers,’ Karamatsu said, one hand massaging the slight ache over his pattering heartbeat and raising a breathless peace symbol with his other. ‘Two of them … they haven’t come back here, have they?’

The host shook his head, feigned politeness only accentuating the plain sentiment beneath: “And thank god for that.”

Karamatsu hovered only a moment in the izakaya’s relative warmth, allowing himself no more comfort until he found his brothers. Returned to the storm’s wrath and already drenched, he broke into a jog, scanning every street in the little town centre, inspecting every nook and sticking his nose briefly within every business still open for trade—“Sorry, have you seen two guys who look just like me?” Karamatsu hunted through the deserted train station and the convenience store with mounting desperation—where were they?

Airways burning with exertion tripled by stress, when his feet nearly flew out from beneath him, skidding on the slick road, Karamatsu stumbled to a halt and huddled beneath an outcropping of roof tiles. It was some shelter from the howling wind and horizontal raindrops, though water cascaded from the inundated gutter above, splattering his boots. Shoving fingers reddened with cold into his hoodie for his phone, charms adding their soft voices to the cacophony, Karamatsu tried Osomatsu and Choromatsu again. No reply. Exhaling hard in frustration and dread that trickled chillingly down his spine with rainwater, the second born Matsuno hunched over, groaning.

Where would they go? He’d searched everywhere … and met no cultists, he realised with a spout of relief. But it hardly absolved the overpowering need for Karamatsu to find his brothers, springs of hope cruelly dammed as worsening scenarios inundated his mind, cresting in turn to torment him. What if they were hurt? What if they’d met cultists and been spirited away? His nails dug at his hairline—missing persons reports had been on the rise, law enforcement and media placing the blame squarely with the disconcerting fanatics … god, why had he brought his family here? This was all his fault, he was such an idiot!

Karamatsu slammed his head against the wall, swiping at angry tears that burned down his cheeks. He didn’t have time for this! He could kick himself for all eternity after he found his brothers.

Disregarding the ache of his bony skull and scrubbing at his bloodshot eyes, Karamatsu pressured himself to stay cool. They couldn’t have gone far. Not on foot, and the trains there didn’t run so late. If they were lying somewhere hurt, odds were he’d have run across them already, and if someone else had he’d have received a call by now. Unless the cultists … Karamatsu shook his head, glad he could cancel out that scenario. He had confidence in his brothers. They might be drunk, but no Matsuno was a pushover in a fight. Osomatsu wouldn’t have just let himself be snatched, and Choromatsu … well, he definitely wouldn’t have gone quietly. And he had Osomatsu with him.
Reasonably placated by reason, Karamatsu resumed his search with kickstarted morale as he turned toward the town’s outer limits. It was a long shot, but his brothers might have taken shelter with some locals. It wasn’t well lit out there and the weather toyed with visibility; he barely saw two metres in any direction, and relied on the frequent lightning to check he didn’t stray from the crumbly road. Karamatsu swallowed hard, fearful as forked electricity sizzled overhead, bisecting into crackling branches that briefly washed the world in light and dull colour. The immediate clap of thunder weakened his knees; the storm was almost directly overhead.

So occupied by his search, it finally punctured Karamatsu’s awareness exactly how dangerous it was, running around it what could easily be a hurricane … all the more reason to find his brothers now and get the hell out of it. Forced to check his pace and squint at his feet as he pressed on infuriatingly slowly—he couldn’t risk a misstep, snap his ankle and potentially doom his brothers as a result—finally little lights within cramped cottage windows ahead winked through the storm. Karamatsu ran for the nearest door, prepared to knock on every one until …

‘What the …’

He flung his head back, hood flying free and eyes whipping to follow as a powerful rush hurtled overhead. What the hell was that, a bird? Karamatsu narrowed his eyes to shielded slits, but he couldn’t see shit, no clue what had just blasted over him—a low-flying light aircraft? Whatever it was, flying through lightning like this, it had a death wish. Blinking through droplets that bedewed his lashes, Karamatsu gazed after the unknown soaring presence, scenery distorted as waves crashed furiously over the beach … he hadn’t looked at the beach!

Without warning, the sky exploded as though the planet was encased in one monstrous plasma globe, eye-blistering pillars of lightning wrapping the world as a mammoth roll of thunder splintered it. The ancient fury of nature shuddered Karamatsu to the core, and he cried out, crouched in evolutionary reaction to imminent threat, huddled and arms flung over his head. He cowered there, heart hammering madly, for many long moments before snapping out of it, furious with himself—damn it, why was he just standing there?!

Cursing his idiocy, Karamatsu abandoned his time-consuming door-knock plan and hurtled for the beach. He didn’t know why his brothers might go there, but it was the only other place they’d been. He had to exclude it, at least. Forcing his aching calves on—Karamatsu was hardly unfit, but his search was desperate, and he was no runner under the best of circumstances—he pushed through a little stand of scrub, stumbling on the stony ground, when he came to a skidding halt. Rain pounded his shoulders, his heavy brow creased as his mind was thrown into sudden disarray.

What was he doing out there? Why was he … he had to find his brothers. Clarity lighting a tiny beacon, Karamatsu immediately made to run onto the sand. He’d barely made another step before his raised foot lowered again. What the hell …

He had important things to do, his mind informed rather matter-of-factly beneath Karamatsu’s dismay. He had to go and do them now. Yeah, I know! he thought, struggling to push through the debilitating confusion that cemented him to the spot. What are you doing, you idiot! Don’t just stand there!

Karamatsu groaned as his head began to pound insistently. He had to go and do important things far away from here. He had to …

No! He had to make sure his brothers weren’t on the beach, what the fuck was wrong with him? Breathing hard in self-directed fury and barely able to peel the sole of his boot from the ground, Karamatsu instead shuffled forward, like he tested unknown waters. Instantly he was assailed by insensible panic. It shoved him to his knees, panting as breath was ripped from him. His head seared,
every fibre of his awareness shrieking that he run, get away … why? Why the hell …

It didn’t fucking matter, he had to get out of there right now! But his brothers …

Karamatsu moaned, curling into a ball on the sodden earth, streaked with mud and hammered by the storm as hysteria shot through his neurons, screaming like a predator while his senses shredded. Distantly, he recognised as everything he’d consumed that night came up in a frenzy, burning his throat. Shit … shit, he had to run … he’d die if he didn’t. He had to run …

Osomatsu … Choromatsu … His brothers permeated the anguish, and Karamatsu latched to them, clinging for all they were worth. Drawing strength from Osomatsu’s offhand smile, Choromatsu’s frowning sense, Karamatsu stretched a shaking arm, scrambling to haul himself forward. He crawled weakly, sobs breaking pitifully in his throat as his brain was sprayed with acid, all input from the world blanked but for nerves ravaged by pain, a conspiracy to stop him. But he wouldn’t, not ever. Unseeing and no idea how long he’d squirmed upwards, Karamatsu crested a bluff that could have been a mountain and, with a final grunt of effort, toppled over the precipice.

Tumbling down a shallow incline, Karamatsu lay very still where he crashed. His brain battered against his skull, entire essence pulsing with sickening awareness that he should not be there. But he could see, vision wafting to imprint out of focus on his retinas. Gripping his forehead to stave off the throb, Karamatsu rolled onto his stomach awkwardly, shambling like a half-feasted on seal. Slowly, he raised his head. The few simple movements sapped him of his little steam that remained, and Karamatsu’s muscles fast surrendered to gravity, cheek smacking back to earth. But not before he saw waves a stone's throw distant, the ocean’s fury rising one with the storm.

He was on the beach. He’d made it.

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Airborne, Osomatsu only admired the apparent water resistance of his stitched armour for a few smug moments before lumbering slightly off course. Noting with unease that his every jump was half a beat off, he knew it wasn’t only the storm that threw him, compensating for the pull of the gale. Clearly transformation didn’t entirely negate the effect of alcohol; Osomatsu grew increasingly aware that he was still tipsy. Not excessively. Still, shit. His reaction time would be off, his aim … Come on, it’s not that funny, he chastised, snorting at his imminent disadvantage as he and Choromatsu skidded back onto the black sand they’d somehow enjoyed through the day.

A skeletal silhouette loomed just up the deserted beach—three silhouettes, he realised, rising tides of apprehension crashing into his nonsensical amusement. Triple attack, three on two, showdown … Osomatsu made a concerted effort to control himself. ‘Looks like we made it just in time—no thanks to you.’ He aimed a flimsy punch at his brother, and failed to restrain himself before lifting a cheery gauntlet to the enemy. ‘Well, hi!’

So much for control. Sense wormed through porous layers of awareness to kick him up the arse as Osomatsu doubled over laughing. Damn it, Ahn was going to kill him. Forget experimenting with moderation: after this, Osomatsu would never drink again. Salamander-sharpened vision kicking in, he reined in his shorties as he got his first good look at the storm-swathed scene. Levity severed, he immediately signalled Choromatsu back, edging guardedly ahead of him.

An athletic man, shirtless beneath his waterlogged jacket, flailed wildly on the ground. A soldier leant over him, eerie being pummelling his arching body with a prolonged flux of blackened vapour, all six claws extended. The wretched man pumped so full Osomatsu was amazed darkness didn’t leak from his nostrils, he clawed at the rain-thickened sand, palpably agonised. A second soldier stood just beyond, restraining a woman with limbs like scythes. Built every bit as powerfully as the
man, she whimpered as the alien’s claws clasp tight enough to draw blood that oozed scarlet beads down their inbuilt blades. Noticing Osomatsu and Choromatsu, she immediately shrieked for help.

‘Keep her quiet,’ the third soldier instructed tersely. Her cries were instantly reduced to haggard gasps, captor’s claws constricting with the command. With a snarl, Osomatsu shifted into a threatening stance, gauntlets cocked in challenge. They’d never faced three at once, but Osomatsu reared to go—he knew the soldiers were rubbish at close quarters. He’d turn them to dust long before they became monsters.

‘Something’s up,’ Choromatsu murmured, pistols raised as he grimly analysed. ‘It’s always just one bolt, why don’t they mutate?’

‘Dunno,’ Osomatsu shrugged faintly and angled to engage.

‘Spectrum Guardians, hold!’ the third soldier stretched their lipless maw, Osomatsu skidding to a bewildered halt as they raised their claws in ceasefire—they wanted to talk? Osomatsu mocked and yawned over their rehearsed doomsday speeches, but this soldier seemed after an actual mutual exchange. Osomatsu felt Choromatsu shift with distrust behind him. He didn’t like it either, gauntleted finger lifting to rub restlessly at his nose.

‘You did follow us across the dimensions. Perhaps we should have expected you would find some way to follow us here,’ they said, echoing tones twisting spectrally through the hurricane. Their seven eyes, dark like tunnels bored dangerously deep in earth, glinted with menace. ‘I am lieutenant to my Lord Takuu.’

‘Is that supposed to impress us?’ Osomatsu jeered from behind his mask.

‘Shut it,’ Choromatsu breathed a veiled order at his caretaker leader, symbols of his glass spiralling into overdrive as he collated new information.

‘Why? It’s not like they can hear us.’ Osomatsu was at once distinctly nostalgic for his brief solo career, a lone dramatic figure with no precocious little Wyvern to get snippy with him for no reason. Granted, impertinence was the only sign of stress the Wyvern generally showed. Imagining far too vividly his skittish brother in combat without that benefit, Osomatsu decided to let him be curt.

The lieutenant did look a little different from their fellows. Claws equally curved and sharp, their upper limbs weren’t so crooked, corded with strength, and their disturbing mask bore a crudely-etched character beneath its lowest gaping socket, any bright wraps they might wear hidden by their billowing cloak. ‘Know you will suffer, that you might have disturbed our experiment.’

‘Experiment?’ Osomatsu repeated, the word scraping unpleasantly off his tongue as his eyes dropped to the still-thrashing man with burgeoning realisation. This wasn’t simple slave taking. They’d interrupted something important to the Liberation Force.

‘It would be no greater pleasure than to turn every particle of power now tapped of the Doll of Darkness against you and witness your despair, knowing our present might is nothing but a shade to what the Doll will become. But I am willing to negotiate with you, and offer the chance to postpone your looming destruction.’

There it was. Osomatsu almost relaxed in the charged atmosphere—that sounded more familiar.

‘Allow us to leave with these slaves,’ the lieutenant continued, gesturing toward the frightened woman and violently shuddering man. ‘And my soldiers Mizuushita and Uuminaga won’t destroy you.’
‘Destroy us? I can’t wait to see them try,’ Osomatsu taunted. Unable to otherwise convey his feelings on the matter, he thought he got his point across well enough by violating the shaky ceasefire without warning, ploughing outnumbered into enemy territory. The lieutenant instantly shot out its arm, claw tips pulsing ominously.

‘Look out!’ Choromatsu shouted in warning. Spooked, Osomatsu swerved and ducked, really not wanting to be on the receiving end of a darkness blast. Could he become a puppet, he thought suddenly. Could infection even penetrate his hoodie of power? No time to waste wondering, but sure it would at least hurt, Osomatsu transferred all his power into his knees and shot forward with a burst from his boots. Sand hardened to glassy fragments beneath him, he feinted and slung his favoured right hook for the crystal emblazoned on the unwitting first soldier’s chest. Bent over their victim, the quaking being did nothing to stop him.

‘Watch it!’ Choromatsu cried out, a shade too late as blackness flashed in Osomatsu’s peripherals. Too close to avoid impact, he gasped numbly as his gauntlet collided with a sheen slithered and expanded into a billowing shield, separating him from his shaken, but unhurt target. Forcefield dissolved into void as Osomatsu’s fist ricocheted back, his entire body rotated uncontrollably, thrown backwards in a heap with the force of the collision. Spitting venomously at the Liberation Force’s new trick, he vaulted to his feet at full tilt and immediately wished he hadn’t.

‘Shit,’ he gulped, staggering with sick vibrations that centred on his fist and radiated through the depths of his viscera like poison. Wavering with taint, a few heated pings in rapid succession told him Choromatsu fired on the lieutenant, covering him while Osomatsu was exposed.

‘Hardly surprising from the Salamander,’ the lieutenant smirked as Choromatsu’s bolts repelled harmlessly off their renewed forcefield. But they didn’t try to attack—they didn’t have to, Osomatsu realised. So long as the lieutenant protected their so-called experiment to its end, they would have two overpowered monsters to contend with. Osomatsu grinned fiercely, body regaining a few sparks of vigor. Monsters he could handle.

Ailing body rapidly recovered from the unexpected blow, Osomatsu re-engaged with only slightly more caution, probing the new technology and letting Choromatsu analyse at a safe distance—he might find some way to break through. The lieutenant traced his unpredictable strikes, protecting themselves and their underlings whatever angle he charged from. Trusting his brother to find some opening, Osomatsu fought to stay a beat ahead, dodging through close quarters as best he could, and hissed as he struck the shield twice more.

‘Call off your attack animal, Wyvern,’ the lieutenant addressed Choromatsu, many eyes pinning him in the air as he coasted on a downdraft, sharp senses and glass alert for any possible advantage. The alien sounded almost bored as Osomatsu managed to right himself mid-hurl and land upright with a squelch of saturated sand. Knees straightened with barely a quiver, he braced for the nausea; first a shock, now it only fuelled his fire. ‘Neither of you can breach my guard, don’t waste your energy—I believe you will need it.’

‘Still nothing? Don’t fly so near them,’ Osomatsu warned his brother as he swallowed the passing sickness, less intense third time around. Compliant, Choromatsu sidestepped, dropping easily into a fresh current to join him. ‘Watch where you’re going!’ Osomatsu exclaimed, leaning hastily out of the way as Choromatsu’s oddly-rapid descent almost took him out. Despite his incoming speed, his brother’s boots barely touched down; if Osomatsu didn’t know better, he’d swear Choromatsu drifted above the sand. ‘What are you, drunk?’

‘Yeah …’

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu ribbed as their enemy stared, soldiers sparing a few of their eyes to flick towards
the slightly inebriated magical boys and exchange a look of bewilderment, gaping mouths slack over their pin-pointed chins. ‘I think the aliens just noticed.’

Choromatsu was sheepish as Osomatsu laughed almost spritely and told him to back the hell up. ‘I want to try something.’

It didn’t look like they were getting through the forcefield, but Osomatsu wasn’t about to back off and give the self-satisfied lieutenant that pleasure. Spurred by intuition of the Salamander, apparently keen to foster development in the still-novice bearer of their name and powers, Osomatsu pounded his gauntlets together and dropped to one knee for stability. ‘What are you doing?’ Choromatsu asked as the lieutenant eyed Osomatsu’s soldered stance, grown suddenly wary. Noting his enemy’s rousing endorsement, Osomatsu couldn’t help a wry grin behind his mask as he steeled for imminent recoil.

‘I’m about to find out.’

Ever an optimist, Osomatsu barely considered his gut gamble—why wouldn’t it work; he had an illustrious history of success with the past Salamander’s antics… it had worked once, at least—before he mustered as much energy as he could contain, wresting from every shred of his stamina to blast in a continuous wave of fire. Blaring with intense power that swiped his exposed face with immediate sweat, Osomatsu was rushed by the dangerous invulnerability he courted every time he failed to fuck up, blood coursing with elation.

The temperature rose alarmingly, tongues ripping through the storm. Searing hisses abounded as raindrops evaporated, steam rising and sand crystallising below as Osomatsu grunted, digging in his boots and barely holding his balance as he was shoved back by the sheer force of his own fire. Snarling, the lieutenant was forced to fling out an encompassing dome to keep the savage heat from blistering their white scaled skin and eating straight to the bone. The flamed warrior grinned. He might be the veteran guardian, but he was hardly done being blown away: introducing Matsuno Osomatsu, living death ray.

‘Yes!’ Choromatsu shouted in triumph, leaping skyward to ride a jet of wind over the undulating dome, lining up his shot from above. ‘They can’t keep this up non-stop!’ Staying airborne far longer than Osomatsu ever managed, Choromatsu worked seamlessly with his glass to target their enemy’s shelter. Osomatsu rallied and shoved everything he had into the beam, the lieutenant pushed to separate their efforts between him and Choromatsu’s aerial barrage, claws stretched wide as they strained to reinforce. Squinting through his sun-bright bombardment, Osomatsu crowed as the curved structure began to shudder, losing consistency. Choromatsu immediately aimed for shivering patches of weakness, adjusting his lasers to spare the victims inside should he bust through.

But the shield didn’t corrode fast enough. Osomatsu’s euphoria abruptly dissolved, dismayed as his ray of fire began to falter—he realised with a lurch he couldn’t keep this up either—and the first soldier finally severed their connection to the man on the ground. Body stilled, he lay as though dead. Completely oblivious as he’d weakened in spades, caught up in the thrill of his power, Osomatsu’s knees buckled. Drained of all but a spark of strength, his concentrated pulse imploded with a puff of smoke, almost apologetic as he collapsed. ‘Osomatsu!’ he heard his brother shout, swooping from his assault to land by his side.

‘I …’ Osomatsu breathed as Choromatsu hauled him upright. He barely kept his feet, heart plummeting as any chance of sparing the captive woman from becoming a Liberation Force labrat was lost, already taken the man’s place thrashing at her captor’s feet as darkness seeped through her pores. ‘I probably probably should have saved that … for the monsters.’

‘It seems they won’t let us walk out of here unhindered,’ the lieutenant was saying, addressing the
first soldier with somewhat passive displeasure. ‘I won’t pretend that’s not vexing. Still, the guardians seem so earnest to face you; who are we to deny them? Soldier Mizuushita, are you prepared to give yourself for your Liberation Force?’

‘I am loyal vassal to my Lord Takuu,’ they returned, long spine curving in deference and showing little trace of their earlier fears. ‘My fate is of no consequence, but that it brings the Liberation Force a stride nearer its glorious victory.’

Choromatsu’s supporting arm at his waist as he sagged weakly, Osomatsu could only watch as Mizuushita swept their hardening cloak and drew their limbs close, curling to hover off the ground. Osomatsu knew by then the cocoons were armoured fortresses, but he’d never been more formidable than only moments before. Angry he’d wasted that power battering at the lieutenant—already they’d bolstered their frayed shield, fortified to hold off the magical boys should they burst from their current standstill—Osomatsu was convinced even his failing flamethrower would have torn the pulsating mass apart and boiled the soldier in their own mutating fluids. Damn it, why hadn’t he held out a little longer?

Shifting around his brother’s steadying hold, Osomatsu tentatively summoned flame. A pathetic flicker at his fingertips and a tiny waft of smoke was all he got. ‘Stop it,’ Choromatsu said as Osomatsu tried harder, entire being contorted with effort he didn’t have to spare. His gauntlet remained stubbornly unlit. Osomatsu let his weighted fist drop, mortified as he heard the lieutenant’s cool laugh.

‘Huh,’ a weak chuckle fell from his own lips like a foreign object, all that kept him together through encroaching panic. He had no fire left. He’d never run out of fire. ‘Well, that’s not good …’

‘Give yourself time,’ Choromatsu said, visibly alarmed beneath his unruffled exterior. ‘We’ve always recovered from injury quick enough, exhaustion may be the same. I’ll call Ahn,’ he said suddenly, glass glowing with activity. ‘She’ll know.’

‘What?!’ Osomatsu had eyed the dark cocoon, fluids beneath eerily distorting streaks of lightning in its pearly sheen, but his attention was harshly redirected by the revelation they could contact their mentor. He was still embarrassingly ignorant of so many useful tidbits Ahn had bestowed on his more attentive brother.

‘If she can call the Spectrum Alliance dimensions and light years away,’ Choromatsu said, infuriatingly sensible, ‘we can contact her from here.’

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu allowed, for once his outcry not over their fluffy mentor playing favourites. Voice gone dangerously casual, Osomatsu’s smile was thorny. ‘But Choromatsu, just out of interest: why are you only telling me this now?!’

Choromatsu shrugged, a flicker of regret in his steady gaze. ‘I’m sorry, I thought we were doing well enough.’

‘WELL ENOUGH?’ Osomatsu bellowed, finally getting a cringe from the Wyvern. ‘Are you serious? Our first battle alone, odds against us, and the wise Wyvern thinks it’s a good idea not to call the the one being who actually knows what the fuck is going on in all this shit before I get fucking wiped?’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu, why are you … Matsuno Choromatsu, what exactly is going on?’ Ahn’s familiar urgency came brisk and clear in Osomatsu’s head as though she perched with claws dug lightly into his shoulder. Brushing off Osomatsu’s earful, Choromatsu succinctly filled her in.
‘And that’s nothing,’ Osomatsu garbled as Choromatsu fast described the lieutenant’s apparent experiment. ‘I’ve literally burnt out over here, I …’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu, are you drunk?!’

‘He is too!’ Osomatsu exclaimed, wounded as he threw an accusatory finger at Choromatsu.

‘We’re on holiday, Ahn,’ Choromatsu said, Osomatsu somewhat placated that his less-affected brother seemed prepared to suffer rebuke in solidarity. ‘We didn’t think …’

‘Clearly,’ Ahn returned harshly. ‘At least the only sign you are worse for wear, Matsuno Choromatsu, is your serious lapse in judgement for not contacting me immediately! I expect more of you. You, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ she snapped at Osomatsu, pinpointing blame as Choromatsu slightly wilted, ‘are a fool, drunk or sober.’

‘Hey, you’re the one who told us to take a break!’ Osomatsu exclaimed; their mentor was being completely unfair. ‘This is a totally unprecedented situation. Fine, I suggested it,’ he claimed responsibility to shut the kitten up, throwing up his gauntlets with a puff of tired smoke. ‘Can we focus on what’s important here: I’m out of fire!’

‘And how did that happen? And why would you do anything so foolish?’ she asked, disdain overriding stark concern as he summarised the destructive new attack, Choromatsu’s reliable attention squarely on the lieutenant as the alien eyed their huddle.

‘Because I could, I didn’t know it would drain me! I had to improvise—when have I ever known what I’m doing?’ he demanded when Ahn hissed bitterly, but she was swift to assure him it wasn’t permanent.

‘But such recovery is hardly the simple knitting of bodily tissues. It will take more time.’

‘I don’t know how long we’ve got,’ Osomatsu said as the lieutenant watched them guardedly, woman writhing in silent pain as her captor pushed on, noticeably strained, like they squeezed a few final drops before their dark stream stoppered. With a nod from their superior, the soldier hardened their transformative defences.

A single concentrated bolt was enough to birth a rampaging rhino-elephant and a tentacled monstrosity. Osomatsu didn’t want to know what the lieutenant's experiment had done to the stricken pair, what manner of overwhelming beasts they may now generate. But he shrugged off his doubts. He couldn’t let them get to him, not if they were to stand any chance underpowered and outnumbered. But even through Choromatsu’s deep-rooted composure, Osomatsu spied his brother’s equally deep-rooted pessimism at work. ‘Hey, it’s all right,’ he said, snapping a lid on his fatigue to grip Choromatsu’s shoulder. ‘We can do this.’

‘Of course you can,’ Ahn agreed briskly, Osomatsu suddenly embarrassingly grateful she was there. He would never admit it, but the the consistency of her snooty disembodied presence almost normalised their unenviable position. This was just another fight. And now three on three, Ahn evened the odds. She was about to go on with some encouragement or advice, but fell silent when the lieutenant’s mocking tones raised over the wind, deactivating their shield to stand between the cocoons, shells oozing like the disturbed surface of a murky pond.

‘Another chance,’ the lieutenant said, looking on Osomatsu and Choromatsu with weirdly nonchalant disdain, like the magical boys who had slain so many of their colleagues were merely an aggravation, hardly worth their precious time. ‘Retreat now. Let us leave. Or …’
Their eyes glinted as they flicked toward the floating vessels nurturing monsters. With a snap of their claws, they took control from the fermenting soldiers, jerking the man and woman prone beneath him to their feet. Linking arms tightly—girlfriend and boyfriend, Osomatsu thought with inappropriate jealousy at others’ luck in love—they stood at attention before their puppet master, insipid stares stretching for kilometres.

‘What say you, guardians? Why do I even bother asking,’ the lieutenant said witheringly when Osomatsu only flipped his thumb insultingly, no need for cultural education to interpret. ‘And you, Wyvern?’ the lieutenant shifted their hard gaze to Choromatsu. ‘You were always the most reasonable among you mute fools. Do you stand by your degenerate ally?’

‘I’ll show you degenerate,’ Osomatsu growled soundlessly, almost surprised when he didn’t light up with indignance. He couldn’t let his absent flames snare him against whatever burst from those cocoons.

‘The Spectrum Alliance hasn’t found any information on the Doll of Darkness,’ Ahn whispered fast as Choromatsu hesitated under the lieutenant’s seven-way stare. ‘But if they’re testing their power, these slaves may be the most powerful they’ve yet made. They shouldn’t use them against you here—they want them too badly. But it would be very bad,’ Ahn stressed unnecessarily, Osomatsu’s relief not insignificant they would have no opponent like overpowered street sign-wielding Totoko to contend with, ‘if two such powerful puppets joined their army.’

‘Like we’d let them,’ Osomatsu declared, already feeling much better with the brief reprieve; antagonising the lieutenant only reinforced his confidence. ‘You going to answer him, Choromatsu?’

Quietly galvanised, Choromatsu met the uppermost of the lieutenant’s eyes, lifting his chin in defiance.

‘Very well,’ the lieutenant said, holding for a cruel second before releasing Choromatsu’s eyes. He almost stumbled, like they’d physically shaken him.

‘Keep it together,’ Osomatsu muttered as the cocoons rocked dangerously. Choromatsu nodded, drawing a deep breath to compose himself. That was all it took for calm to encase him in a protective coat, brow smoothed and jaw set. The Wyvern’s cool head, the Salamander’s raw power. What would the remaining three guardians bring to the team?

No clue what he was doing and almost invigorated—he’d gotten by so far flying by the seat of his magical trousers—Osomatsu gripped his sparkling garnet like a token. ‘Choromatsu, find a way to stop the lieutenant,’ he directed, taking charge as the alien retreated a pace, slaves walking disturbingly backwards between the cocoons as they began to splinter, seeping thickened sludge as jagged networks of cracks fissured across their curved surfaces. ‘Don’t let them get away with those people. I’ll handle the monsters.’

‘No!’ Ahn exclaimed, aghast.

‘You can’t fight two by yourself,’ Choromatsu agreed, horror made known only by a slight twitch beneath his eye. ‘Not without your fire.’

Osomatsu tuned out their dissent, undaunted and grinning boldy like the gambler he was. ‘If I beat one, there’s only one left. I like those odds. And I won’t figure out how to get through that forcefield,’ Osomatsu added when Choromatsu tried to argue. ‘You will. Just … don’t overthink it,’ Osomatsu recommended almost jokingly as the cocoons exploded, rivaling thunder with the twin geysers of gunk that splattered the waterlogged beach. ‘That’s really fucking gross … I’ll keep them off you.’
From the blown-out remnants of shell raised the condensed muscle of two massive snakes, thicker than suspension bridge supports. Pale bulk uncoiling, their jaws spiked with four fangs each, stalactites longer than Osomatsu’s arm. The beasts’ heads fanned with proud crests of translucent skin that swam down their spines, one massive central eye flanked by three either side and nostrils flared wide. Craning his neck as far as it could go, Osomatsu swallowed hard, Choromatsu gazing in mute amazement. They weren’t as big as skyscrapers; he stamped on his first insensible impression. But they were really fucking big; the smaller towered over the sparse autumn-stripped trees that lined the shore.

‘Do your duty to your Liberation Force and Lord Takuu—destroy them,’ the lieutenant commanded, a claw curved possessively over each puppet’s shoulder.

The snakes reared, spitting in overlapping hisses that shivered through Osomatsu’s skin. ‘For the Liberation force, I, Mizuushita, will destroy you!’

‘I am Uuminaga! Salamander, Wyvern, prepare to meet your end! For the Liberation Force and my Lord Takuu!’

With a burst of common sense as the smaller, more loquacious snake—Uuminaga? Fuck it, who cared—lashed out from their height, Osomatsu threw himself sideways and engaged his glass to check they weren’t venomous. ‘Shit,’ he breathed, keeping his feet as the sand undulated with the force of impact. The bulky beasts were fast—or Osomatsu was just too tired. And drunk. Damn it. Shoving the thought aside, he dashed to intercept Mizuushita; the larger snake wove to snag Choromatsu from the sky as he fired on the lieutenant. Unable to reach its business end from the ground, Osomatsu flung himself heedlessly on the beast’s curving back—nothing like the direct approach. ‘Hey, asshole!’

Osomatsu squeezed a leg firmly either side of its spine, securing him on his involuntary steed. Angling his reinforced fists, he barraged their sides with a heartening return of his hard strength; Osomatsu felt rib bones crack satisfyingly through their toughened hide. Immediately disregarding Choromatsu, Mizuushita whipped their maddened head around and lunged with terrifying speed, jaw unhinged and gaping wide.

‘What are you trying to do, eat …’ Osomatsu jumped up and unsteadily ran length of their spine as the monster almost bit straight through its own body. Fuck, it did want to eat him. ‘You sick bastards!’ Trying to ignore the nausea that rooked his own stomach, Osomatsu teetered and rapidly adjusted his footing on the squirming monster, clutching its crest like a hand strap.

‘I have the Wyvern,’ he heard the lieutenant’s voice carry ethereally to his massive underlings. ‘Both of you, take the Salamander.’

Osomatsu yelped and threw himself off the larger snake as Uuminaga slithered with the instruction. Tumbled to the ground, he fumbled a handful of sodden grit as he flipped upright and lobbed it as the monster breathed around him, contracting their muscles alarmingly. Caught in the eyes and momentarily blinded, the beast floundered as Osomatsu jumped from their coils. He was promptly almost trounced by Mizuushita, their mouth stretched unsettlingly wide. ‘I swear to god, if you eat me I will give you fucking indigestion.’

Keeping low, Osomatsu stole through their smooth clutches. The snakes taunted, vocalisations chilling as the monstrous creatures twined in pursuit of their vanished target. ‘Salamander, are you frightened to face us?’

‘Are we too much for the fabled garnet-encrusted warrior? Where is your Unicorn, Salamander? Do you need your precious Unicorn to save you?’
Slinking towards the water, Osomatsu lay flat on the ground, somewhat humiliated by the gambit. But he hoped the serpents’ eyes might slip over him in the dark until his heart stopped thumping and he figured how to apply his usual hotheaded, in-your-face tactics to limbless lengths of brawn that could crush him into his own transformation scroll. ‘I’m kinda busy,’ he thought shortly as his glass blustered for attention. ‘What do you want?’

Eager to finally assist, the lens confirmed the reptiles’ fangs would only hurt, not cause agonising vomit-choked death. More, it locked onto the tip of each tail, glinting darkly in the lightning. Shit, Osomatsu groaned to himself. If he had his fire he could have taken a few potshots from where he lay. In combat was the only time he ever got lucky; he could have taken out at least one of them. But a quick test, fist stuffed in the obscuring granules beneath him, told Osomatsu he still didn’t burn. Chin pressed in the sand, he spied his brother flitting beyond the snakes. Choromatsu shot unwaveringly at the lieutenant, trying to fluster them into a mistake. But they seemed utterly unconcerned as they swept their arms, tracing impervious arcs of darkness that shimmered and died as the alien refocused their energy to meet Choromatsu’s next cluster of attacks. Every bolt rebounded with a sharp ping split seconds after he fired.

Getting his breath back, Osomatsu watched, heart clenching cruelly and unable to do a thing as Choromatsu jumped again, rotating agilely to fire from above. At least the lieutenant still didn’t attack back. More, they seemed unable or unwilling to open a portal to take their slaves away while Choromatsu remained a threat. Osomatsu saw that the pair watched Choromatsu’s assault from obedient crouches. Not quite vacant and no exuding senseless wrath, Osomatsu was disturbed by the grins the slaves flashed, so wide their faces seemed split ear to ear. Trying not to imagine what the two would be made to do if they failed to rescue them, Osomatsu knew he couldn’t lie unseen for long. If he didn’t move the serpents might attack Choromatsu to draw him out.

‘How long will this last,’ Osomatsu heard the lieutenant’s ask, forcefield flapping like a sail before snapping to rigid form and meeting Choromatsu’s lasers. ‘One of us will run out of energy eventually. And the Salamander will fall long before then—he isn’t looking so good, is he? Over there.’ The lieutenant directed with one glaring eye that drew an invisible sizzling line through the filmy rain directly to Osomatsu. He barely saw Choromatsu’s eyes widen before the serpents oriented simultaneously to his shattered concealment, fourteen eyes agleam.

‘Fuck.’

‘No, he’s doing fine, you’re both doing fine,’ Ahn assured a deeply-concerned Choromatsu, kitten unable to do much more without being kept constantly up to date.

‘Easy for you to say,’ Osomatsu grunted, scrambling up as both reptiles charged at once. Rolling and on his feet in an instant, he cursed as his lens recommended various stunts to engage the snakes. Unhelpfully, every blinking schematic it drew over reality fast erased, each ploy eventually requiring either a burst of fire or hard energy to power him into the air.

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence,’ Osomatsu drawled, sure the symbols quailed at his sarcasm. He was tired, but he could still jump. Keen to prove it—as much to his glass as his wearied, bitching bones—Osomatsu shot straight at the smaller Uuminaga, aiming to leap and straddle its head. But he swore, almost knocked flying as the snakes seemed to come to some agreement and arced left. Slithering into the ocean, they disappeared. Osomatsu landed in a heavy crouch, staring after them. What the hell …

Mizuushita suddenly expelled from the depths. ‘Shit!’ Body starting to drag from prolonged exertion, Osomatsu rolled again as the second sprang and slammed their long weight down, almost crushing him. Just snatching his knees to his chin and sparing his leg bones being reduced to powder as the
hellish serpent’s body loomed over him, Osomatsu at once remembered why he preferred fair fights. Hurriedly, he dragged himself backwards on his arse as Uuminaga jeered at him, snapping and retreating to lurk again in the water. Only their front halves surfaced, tapered tails and crystals craftily submerged god knew how far out in the sea.

If he stayed where he was, no way could he kill them. Eventually they would pick him off—pick him out of their teeth, he thought unhappily—leaving the path to Choromatsu unobstructed. He couldn’t let that happen, he had to take this somewhere else. And there was only one place to take it.

‘I know it’s a shit idea,’ he gulped as his glass had the technological equivalent of a nervous breakdown. But what else did it expect him to do? Barely hesitating, Osomatsu sprinted after the snakes, veins rocketing with adrenaline as he drove his knees deep and took off like a bullet, soaring over his opponents’ watery lair—how do you like that, magic floating lens? He could jump.

‘What are you doing?’ Choromatsu cried out, noticing Osomatsu took the fight where he had no foothold with only a prayer the monsters would even cooperate. Stupid, stupid … Osomatsu’s innards knotted as he realised it would be so much easier to let him drown. And if they caught him in the water, he was finished.

‘No, no, no …’ Osomatsu breathed on repeat, nothing between him and the churning ocean as his arc began to descend. God, this was a shit idea, this was such a shit idea … ‘Come on, come on, you wanna fucking eat me or what?’

Finally, as Osomatsu plunged into all-out panic, Mizuushita hurtled from below with a terrific spray of saltwater. With a flashed directive from his glass, Osomatsu managed to hook a gauntlet on the edge of their gaping mouth and swing onto the monster’s back. Quickly, he tethered himself there with a yank at its rippling crest. ‘Thanks,’ he muttered to his overwhelmed lens; it had no idea what to do with him over water. That made two of them.

Back on the shore, the lieutenant seemed amused by Osomatsu’s brazen antics. ‘Do you think I would fail to recognise a substance-affected warrior?’ they said to Choromatsu, Osomatsu sure they intended he hear and adding such a scathing “pathetic” he would have burst in indignation if he didn’t have two very large concerns—one beneath his feet and one careening straight for him. But he still managed to grumble.

‘Now the entire Liberation Force thinks I’m a drunk.’

‘Consider it logically,’ Ahn spoke up as Osomatsu strove to herd the monsters further out to sea. He got the distinct impression from their disparaging comments that the serpents only humoured him, and seemed to make a game of trying to hurl him off, no doubt to catch him in their jaws.

‘I’m a little short on logic right now.’

‘Clearly. But they may start to underestimate you if they believe so. It is my hope one good thing may still come of this debacle.’

Osomatsu scowled, trying to crawl down the monster’s whipping tail towards its crystal. If Ahn actually saw his peril, she wouldn’t be nearly so flippant. ‘But I don’t want them gossiping about me, it’s the principle of the …’

Angling abruptly, Mizuushita broke the surface, flicking an unprepared Osomatsu high into the air. He managed to right himself by the pinnacle of his trajectory, but a quick scan below revealed his enemies had vanished beneath the waves. ‘Shit, shit …’ he hissed, stomach plummeting a good second before he did. This was no arena for the flaming vanguard of onslaught, even bereft of fire.
Nothing but empty space and ocean beneath him, Osomatsu searched desperately for some hidden perch, some strength to charge his flames—anything to get him through this. A twisted answer to his prayer, Uuminaga suddenly hurled their massive span from the water. Fangs bared, they flew directly at him.

That’d do. Unable to break his fall, Osomatsu ignored his patently dissuading glass—it wasn’t like it had any better ideas—and threw every fortifying thought that remained to him into his boots. His heart bounded as they responded with a short sputter, the nudge of kinetic force pathetic. But it was enough. Aim adjusted, Osomatsu hurtled in a heavy dive as Uuminaga rocketed to shuttle his passage down their gaping throat. Instead, Osomatsu smashed directly into their right upper fang. His gauntlets slipped on the saliva-coated length as it snapped with the collision, Uuminaga howling as though preyed on by some deranged dentist. Osomatsu clung on doggedly, avoiding their flailing snaps and ripping the fang entirely off. Moving fast, he snatched at their rippling crest and, with a grunt, scrambled atop their head.

Cementing his stance wide on their slick scales, Osomatsu gripped his improvised weapon and hammered its vicious point directly into Uuminaga’s dominant eye. ‘I will kill you for that, Salamander!’ they hissed as thickened globs of translucent fluid flooded from their punctured vision.

‘You all keep saying saying that,’ Osomatsu mocked. ‘You’d think word would’ve gotten around by now, it’s not that easy. Ouch, though,’ he added, driving the fang deeper and hanging on as the beast screamed, great length of tongue lolling pathetically in agony. ‘Biting your tongue must be a bitch. It’s not like you could miss it.’

Ripping his weapon free and boosted by first blood, Osomatsu reluctantly engaged with his clamouring glass, beginning again to calculate his way towards the crystal.

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Karamatsu stumbled along the beach, weakening calls dying on his lips as he stared at massive tracks through the sand. They hadn’t been there through the day, intersecting grooves as thick as winding rivers. What the hell could have made them? He gripped his aching head, nails digging in as his stomach gave a hopeful jolt, sure he glimpsed figures through the storm. Shielding with his other hand, Karamatsu desperately narrowed his eyes. But there was no one there. Discouraged and smarting from the vicious attack on his senses, he kicked through the sand as tears mingled with rain on his freezing cheeks. He was terrified, no idea what was going on or where his brothers were—if such an impossible thing had happened to him, who knew what his brothers might now suffer?

Gulping wetly as his throat ached with frustration and fright, Karamatsu tried to disregard the unreasonable and focus on what mattered. His brothers weren’t there. He wasn’t doing them any good by being there. Maybe it was time for him to give up, wait out the storm and then … no, he couldn’t give up! Who gave a shit if he was a bit shaken, his brothers needed him! He would keep calling them, look elsewhere.

About to abandon his traipe down the beach and praying the unsettling mental assault didn’t work on departure as well as arrival, a deafening crash out to sea brought him to an immediate standstill. Water launched into the sky seemingly at random a short distance off the shore, great sprays carried every which way on the turbulent wind. Karamatsu stared—waves didn’t do that. The sight of the ocean behaving so strangely set off alarms in his wired mind: tsunami. The thought harpooned him in place, already-unsteady knees now trembling like they straddled an offending earthquake. And if not that … Karamatsu breathed harshly in disbelief, seeing it almost looked like something was jumping out of the water, diving back in. Something invisible … What the hell was going on? God, where
were his brothers? What …

Karamatsu went rigid, entire being encased in ice. Something long and sharp had just laid across his shoulders.
Hurricane Drunk II

Chapter Notes

Okay, time for second part of the two-part chapter/episode :) I’ve already picked at it for far too long. Was awesome to read what people thought might be coming up; I hope where the story winds up heading doesn’t disappoint!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘There’s someone on the beach,’ Choromatsu spoke up, his fluidly-divided attention as much on Osomatsu’s tangle as his own, lasers ever blazing. Osomatsu spared a quick glance back to shore. A lone figure rambled past his brother’s battleground, drenched by the storm. They staggered slightly, as though unbearably tired or maybe confused.

‘So there is. Maybe because someone forgot to blank us before battle,’ Osomatsu reprimanded his brother lightly, the only viable explanation. He wasn’t overly concerned. Sure, they’d never been stumbled on by civilians before, but how likely was it, that some random strolled by in the middle of a hurricane? It wasn’t the worst mistake drunk edition Wyvern could’ve made. Still, he’d make Choromatsu explain the soon to be dust-exploded giant snakes to the poor bastard. Ahn, however, didn’t take the news nearly as well as Osomatsu—and he was the one currently being dragged through the ocean, Uuminaga infuriated by their wounding. Absently, Osomatsu blessed his battle hoodie’s water resistance.

‘Are you so drunk you forgot to take control of the area?!’

‘No,’ Choromatsu said, calm but clearly upset. ‘I didn’t forget. I must have screwed up … oh god,’ his voice cracked suddenly, pistols shocked silent.

‘What?!’ Osomatsu cried out, breaking the surface and straining to see his brother from where he rode backwards, partway down the serpent’s back. ‘Are you okay …’

A flash of lightning threw the shore into brief harsh relief. But Osomatsu’s superhuman senses didn’t need the extra help. He’d already picked the blue hoodie.

Karamatsu …

Paralysed, Osomatsu barely clung onto his horror coaster. His brother … his painful, obnoxious, loving, non-magical little brother …

‘Don’t draw attention to him,’ Choromatsu swiftly salvaged his abounding calm as Osomatsu surged into action. Karamatsu so threatened, the eldest was a slave to panic. What if the lieutenant grabbed his helpless brother, what if the Liberation Force stole his soul and they were forced to face him, as Osomatsu had unwillingly squared off against a Jyushimatsu vacant in all the wrong ways … what if the fucking snakes ate him? Cursing frantically, Osomatsu pulled up his desperate efforts to direct the beasts back to shore.

‘We can’t just leave him! What is he even doing here, the moron?!” Osomatsu raged, choking on the same fear that had ravaged him in the convenience store as he’d fought to reach a wounded Choromatsu’s side. Why was this happening? His brothers were supposed to be safer because he
signed his contract, damn it!

‘But if they figure out he’s more than a random bystander … I’ll protect him! But you’ve got to destroy them, quickly!’

‘What do you think I’m trying to do!’ Osomatsu cried as Karamatsu stared wide-eyed out to sea, utterly exposed. Even from his distance, Osomatsu saw with distress how he trembled, one hand pressed to his brow like he might pass out.

‘Matsuno Choromatsu, you have your own battle,’ Ahn sharply reminded the third born. But Choromatsu had already seen, a tendril of attention securely latched to the lieutenant amid his brothers’ turmoil. Between increasingly-distressed attempts to approach his steed’s crystal and the larger serpent’s stealthy approaches, Osomatsu strained to see as the lieutenant tore a portal through the landscape, existence pulled apart like it was nothing. Their defences lowered with Choromatsu’s brief distraction, his brother immediately loosed a tight cluster of bolts. The lieutenant hissed, target limb curled to their narrow chest as the portal immediately knitted closed with their aborted effort.

Straightaway, Choromatsu turned his pistols on the slaves. They crumpled, stunned a moment before the maimed lieutenant could summon darkness to deflect the bolts. Acting as impulsively as Osomatsu, Choromatsu swept an arm towards his chest, catching the puppets in a gust of wind that hurled them in a chaotic tumble of limbs towards him; he skidded back as they crashed at his feet. Petrified for Karamatsu and increasingly for himself, Osomatsu still felt a warm bloom of pride. Choromatsu had never manipulated air like that before. But the glow was short-lived. Osomatsu cried out as he was dunked again, just seeing as the lieutenant closed distance between themselves and his shell-shocked brother. By the time he surfaced, bedraggled and shaking, the lieutenant had placed their claws over Karamatsu’s shaking shoulders.

‘You’re a quick thinker, aren’t you?’ the lieutenant addressed an aghast Choromatsu with soft intent, drifting voice laced with venom. ‘Let’s see if you can think your way out of this. Soldier Uuminaga.’ Thier name a command, the beast Osomatsu clung to raised abruptly, most of its body angling vertically out of the water and somehow holding themselves stiff like a massive stake. Slipping dangerously from sudden immense height, Osomatsu ditched his makeshift weapon and grappled for a better hold. An ominous sweep through the water caught his frantic eye—Mizuushita circled lazily like a shark, just beneath the surface. Osomatsu gulped. The larger beast would move in fast, finish the job when … if he fell.

The lieutenant forced Karamatsu the short distance to where Choromatsu stood over the recovered puppets, currently immune to their dark influence. ‘I offer you a final chance, Wyvern,’ the lieutenant said, pressing a claw to Karamatsu’s throat. He gasped, instinctively drawing his head back from the threat. ‘The slaves for your partner and this one,’ they said, nudging Karamatsu cruelly forward. ‘I assume you have some care for the Salamander,’ they said, Osomatsu’s chest bursting with desperate fury as the lieutenant looked carelessly towards his helplessly-dangling form. ‘And we all know how the Spectrum Guardians feel about the unnecessary suffering of innocents.’

‘Stop it,’ Choromatsu choked soundlessly, Osomatsu almost losing his hold on Uuminaga’s slippery webbing as the lieutenant nicked Karamatsu’s throat. Their brother cried out, hands flying to his neck and barely missing snagging the alien’s razor-edged claw and slicing them off mid-palm.

Slipping a perilous metre down the snake, Osomatsu almost sobbed as he scrabbled for a stronger grip, hot tears blurring his vision past the film of the ongoing storm. ‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Choromatsu’s attention lurched, frantic to fly and rescue him.

‘Don’t worry about me!’ Osomatsu screamed at him, now sure the cunning serpents had been
playing with him the whole time. Damn it, he should have traded with Choromatsu the moment they
burst from their cocoons; with his insufferable goddamn pride to feed, he’d never imagined the
snakes might be too much for him. But Choromatsu could have ridden the storm over the ocean and
taken them out long ago, Osomatsu could have kept the lieutenant busy … But now Karamatsu was
… and their youngest might lose three siblings instead of two …

Imagining Karamatsu’s throat ravaged and pulseless and their brothers’ grief all too vividly,
Osomatsu’s whimper was soundless, strangled by his mask. Suspended, he could only squeeze his
eyes shut and cling on as tightly as he could, even as his every finger threatened to slip. How had he
fucked this up so badly?

‘Wyvern, if you go to him you are agreeing to hand over the slaves. If you do not, I will kill this one
and your Salamander … he looks like he’s in trouble, doesn’t he?’

Osomatsu strained to get his aching legs around Uuminaga’s upright spine as the two monsters
guffawed at his struggles, tossed by wind as he shouted silently at his conflicted brother. ‘Get him
out of here—save Karamatsu, understand? Do whatever it takes!’

‘But we can’t abandon these people—we’ve never not saved someone before. And I’m not leaving
you,’ Choromatsu added, Osomatsu’s strained elbows shaking with fatigue and fury that Choromatsu
delayed—those claws could open Karamatsu’s juglar at any moment.

‘I’m your older brother and your goddamn leader, do what I fucking say right now!’

‘You will lose both your brothers if you don’t do something, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn said with
difficulty, picked up enough of what was going on to be very concerned. ‘Please hold on, Matsuno
Osomatsu.’

‘Well?’ the lieutenant said, looking on Choromatsu’s distress with clear pleasure. ‘What will it be,
Wyvern?’

Osomatsu coughed hoarsely from wasted effort, pressing his forehead into the slightly pliant scales of
his enemy; they were oddly soft. He could see no way out of this. But he couldn’t abandon
Choromatsu to such a torturous decision, pressure piling on his poor brother every moment he
delayed. He could do nothing to help him. But Osomatsu could at least give him one less thing to
worry about.

‘Don’t come after me.’

‘Osomatsu … no, what the hell are you …’

Letting go of his brother and shrieking mentor in case their pleas pierced his resolve, Osomatsu
loosed his hold on Uuminaga. Rocketing down the snake’s length with dizzying speed, he hit the
waves with a brutal crash. Dazed by the blow as he was pulled underwater, Osomatsu realised he
was the closest to the monster’s crystal he’d yet gotten. His fists instinctively closed tight. Impossibly,
he still gripped Uuminaga’s much-narrowed tail, now only the breadth of his own wrist. The crystal
could only be a little further along.

Feeling miniscule vertebrae twitching beneath his gauntlets as he kicked out his feet for propulsion,
Osomatsu followed the tail hand over hand. Mizuzuhsita’s shadow blackening overhead, he rapidly
swam as low as he could, dragging the tail with him, out of range a few moments longer. But
suddenly Osomatsu whipped upwards through water. Hands fastening in a death grip, he clung on as
Uuminaga lashed its tail up and out. Barely thinking, Osomatsu loosened his grip the moment he
broke the surface, the force of the monster’s motion whipping him along the slippery limb. Feeling
texture change from smooth scales to glassy, Osomatsu clamped his fist shut blindly. His reflexes were rewarded by a sharp crunch, catching hold of the crystal and crushing it just before it slid from his hand.

Hardly hearing the smaller beast’s pitiful cry as it fell into dust and was borne away on the wind, Osomatsu struck the water again. Feeling the remaining reptile’s body slither ominously near, more massive eel than snake, Osomatsu futilely tried to orient himself underwater and power his boots. The pattered piteously, but still no boost. Osomatsu groaned, his every muscle seized up and sluggish, nothing left to give. He couldn’t get out of there. He was done. Who knew how long it would take for his Salamander form to drown.

*Don’t worry,* he thought dismally as he felt Mizuushita’s threatening whispers ripple distortedly through the currents. *They’ll eat you long before you have time to drown.*

Knowing he was finished, Osomatsu only hoped poor Choromatsu had managed to save Karamatsu, get him home … What were they going to tell their brothers? What were they going to tell their parents …

Osomatsu released an unwilling sob, almost insensibly grateful there was no one to see him die like this. ‘Do not worry, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn’s voice drifted unexpectedly, shattering the comforting yet godforsaken illusion that he was dying alone. Osomatsu gave a miserable snort—if he shouldn’t worry then, when should he? But Ahn was usually a good indicator whether he should be concerned or not … maybe she was in denial.

A small, sad warmth lit the pit of his despair as he drifted, watching the stormclouds blur darkly beyond the water’s surface above, that Ahn might grieve him. But even as he almost smiled, Osomatsu realised the water around him began to churn. Slowly first, then with rapidly-mounting speed, Osomatsu floated in limp amazement as he was swept in wide circles, fast and faster, a whirlpool in reverse hauling him incessantly upwards. Breaking the surface, Osomatsu didn’t stop spinning, supported high into the air by a rising twister. He immediately tensed, nothing but bad feelings about this unknown force when tonight had been a shitstorm from beginning to end. The dangerous spiral of wind, however, bore him surprisingly gently, and fast dumped him on blessed land.

Dizzy and shivering with so much gratitude he could barely string two thoughts together, Osomatsu sat as quickly as his aching muscles and spinning head allowed. Slowly, his mouth fell open. He watched, gobsmacked as Choromatsu skated an easy twenty metres over the ocean like it was an ice rink, suspended by air in the pelting rain as he swept his pistols in aggressive compulsion. The storm responded rousingly, concentrating around him and hammering all its power into Mizuushita below. The snake howled, but couldn’t twist away as Choromatsu whipped a second tornado from the winds around him, catching the massive snake up and hurling them like a plaything. With a savage gesture of a glimmering pistol, the rising tempest of wisdom directed a streaking bolt of electricity from its cloud. With a shivering buzz on impact, Mizuushita’s crystal exploded.

‘Wow …’ Osomatsu breathed as the second snake’s remnants blew away. ‘How …’

‘I probably couldn’t … without the storm,’ Choromatsu said self-consciously, Osomatsu shaking his head in amazement as his brother floated to join him. ‘And I was … under pressure.’

Barely touched down, Choromatsu instantly dropped to his knees. Neither had expended so much energy in their lives; they’d been shitty NEETS only weeks ago. They were both wrecked. But Karamatsu …

‘He’s fine,’ Choromatsu breathed weakly, Osomatsu semi-recovering first and helping his brother
up. ‘I … let the lieutenant leave with the slaves.’

‘It’s all right,’ Ahn tried to comfort as Choromatsu shook off Osomatsu’s supporting arm, head bowed with failure. ‘It is a blow, but we will save them eventually.’

‘Eventually,’ Osomatsu repeated, slowly leading his brother over to where he spotted Karamatsu, shivering on his knees in the sand. Osomatsu hadn’t seen from his distance, but close up he realised something hadn’t been right with Karamatsu before he stumbled on their battle. He was completely filthy, like he’d been rolling in muck—Karamatsu would never let himself be seen like that. And he was bleeding. Osomatsu saw with a small stab of alarm that, apart from the vicious cut the lieutenant had opened, Karamatsu’s nostrils and ears were coated with crusted crimson, a small drip trickled from the corner of his mouth and chin sticky with what could be vomit.

‘You didn’t make a mistake, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn said very slowly once she’d heard Karamatsu’s condition. ‘Your brother broke through your barrier.’

‘I didn’t think that was even possible,’ Choromatsu said as Osomatsu confirmed Karamatsu couldn’t see them, waving directly in his face. He didn’t even look up, arrested in shock. He hadn’t seen or heard anything, wandering obliviously through the fight and taken hostage just as unawares. Well, that was something—they wouldn’t have to explain themselves, at least. Karamatsu, on the other hand, Osomatsu thought with anger that simmered upwards through his exhausted systems, wouldn’t be so lucky.

‘If someone has a strong enough purpose, it is possible.’

‘What possible purpose could he have had? If he hadn’t shown up,’ Osomatsu said, gesture furious as the second born breathed raggedly, hands lifting incessantly to his slightly-damaged throat. ‘We could have turned it around, we could have saved those people! What the fuck is he doing here?! Why isn’t he looking after the others?! Ichimatsu’s sick, Totty is …’

Overwrought physically and emotionally and no longer petrified for his wellbeing, Osomatsu seriously considered killing Karamatsu himself. ‘That’s not fair,’ Choromatsu managed to be more charitable, though he looked on his cowering brother with regret. ‘He didn’t know anything.’

Osomatsu growled. He knew it wasn’t fair. That didn’t stop him from being furious, every shred of his resentment displaced on the shitty brother they could have lost. ‘Do you want to do the honours, or should I?’ he asked roughly, grabbing at one of Choromatsu’s pistols. Choromatsu tightened his gloved grip, refusing to relinquish his gun.

‘Don’t be like that, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn tried to comfort; if she weren’t a hundred kilometres away, Osomatsu might have kicked her.

‘We just nearly fucking died, and so did he! I’ll be however I fucking want. Come on,’ he said tensely, managing to compartmentalise the worst of his anger. He couldn’t deal with it now, he was just too fucking tired. ‘Let’s just stun him and get the fuck out of here.’

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Slowly, then all at once, Karamatsu became aware he was being carried, one arm each pulled over another set of shoulders. Confused, he tried to mumble through lips that felt thickened and stupid, asking what was going on. ‘Don’t,’ a voice drifted roughly. After a moment, he recognised it as Osomatsu. Immediately Karamatsu flooded with golden relief—his brother was safe. It took a few moments more for him to realise through that balm that, even with his older brother’s quick temper, he’d rarely heard him so angry.
Managing to open his gritty eyes next, Karamatsu glanced to his other side. Choromatsu was his other bearer. Catching his eye, the slightly younger Matsuno gave a small shake of his head—"It’s better if you just keep quiet for now."

Completely at sea, but soon noticing the lagging step of his brothers and realising they must be exhausted, Karamatsu was keen to free them of his burden. He didn’t want to trouble them by speaking up either, but the need to relieve their suffering was far greater. Karamatsu began to put up a little resistance, planting his toes to the bitumen.

‘What?’ Osomatsu said loudly in his ear, coming to an abrupt halt.

‘I’m sorry, but I … I can walk.’

With a shrug, Osomatsu released him, Choromatsu following suit more slowly. On his own feet, Karamatsu took only two faltering steps before stumbling, alarmed by his weakness. ‘For fuck’s sake,’ Osomatsu growled, catching him before he ate the road and pushing him at Choromatsu. ‘Have you got him?’

Choromatsu nodded without a word, pulling Karamatsu’s arm back over his shoulder. Walking in unnatural silence, helped by his brother and Osomatsu a few paces ahead, Karamatsu shivered with shame. He meant to keep quiet and not piss off a clearly agitated Osomatsu again. But he couldn’t help it. He was so confused, and odd flashes resurfaced of the ocean crashing against the waves and the cold edge of a formless blade to his throat, his body dragged on an unwilling stumble across the beach.

‘What happened?’

Osomatsu said nothing, but Karamatsu saw his fists clench at his sides. Choromatsu was quiet a moment, but then asked in forced voice, ‘Karamatsu-niisan, what were you doing out there?’

‘I was looking for you,’ Karamatsu returned, surprised he asked.

‘We were at the izakaya,’ Osomatsu said tightly, not turning around. ‘I forgot my wallet.’

‘But I looked there,’ Karamatsu exclaimed, softening his voice when he saw Osomatsu’s shoulders tense. Why was he so angry … god, what had he done to make his brother so angry? ‘I asked, they said you weren’t there.’

Osomatsu shrugged from ahead. ‘We snuck in. The storm was bad, so we hid until they found us and kicked us out. Then we heard the staff going on about some idiot in blue running around in the storm. What the hell were you doing on the beach?’ he demanded. Karamatsu stumbled again, confused and hurt by his older brother’s smouldering heat. Still, his heavy brow creased. Did Osomatsu really have the right to act tough right now? He was the one who’d run off without a word.

‘Does it matter?’ Karamatsu returned with a rare surge of assertiveness. ‘My brothers were missing, I went to find them. And you weren’t answering your phones, you …’

‘We didn’t need you!’ Osomatsu blazed unexpectedly, swivelling to yell in Karamatsu’s face. ‘We didn’t need you and they did, and you just left them!’

‘They … our brothers?’ Karamatsu surmised slowly, Osomatsu’s lip twitching in a sarcastic “congratulations you’ve caught up”. ‘But they were safe, I took them back to the inn. Jyushimatsu was …’
'Ichimatsu had collapsed!' Osomatsu hissed, shoving him hard in the chest; Choromatsu almost tripped, stumbling beneath Karamatsu’s slightly-heavier frame.

‘Hey! Osomatsu, quit it!’

Unexpected fear stroked Karamatsu’s spine as his older brother raised threatening fists, sure Osomatsu was about to hit him. The six of them weren’t gentle with each other, roughhousing among themselves on almost a daily basis. It was almost always in fun. But until that moment, Karamatsu, more than his match in strength and just as big, had never felt truly afraid of his older brother.

‘He’s out of it, he’s sick, we don’t know what’s wrong with him! And Todomatsu was petrified, how could you just leave him?’

‘But,’ Karamatsu tried to speak evenly, hating himself as his voice quavered. ‘I asked Jyushimatsu to …’

‘Jyushimatsu?! He can’t be left in charge of anything, let alone at a time like this!’ Osomatsu shouted. Alarmed, Karamatsu raised his free arm, half to hide behind, half to catch the blow if his brother unexpectedly flew at him. But he spoke more strongly from behind his scanty shield, not liking what Osomatsu insinuated about their younger brother.

‘I trust Jyushimatsu to …’

‘Then you’re an idiot, too!’ Osomatsu spat.

‘Osomatsu!’ Choromatsu shouted as their older brother’s shoulders heaved.

‘What did you expect me to do?!” Karamatsu finally exclaimed, anger at the insult to Jyushimatsu—he might be confused at the best of times, that didn’t make him an idiot—colliding with ongoing disorientation to override his crippling need to please. ‘If you’re angry I left them alone when you did exactly the same thing, fine! If not, just tell me what I did so I can’t do it again!’

Osomatsu and Choromatsu shared a long look. It hurt Karamatsu far more than Osomatsu’s accusations. It was as though they had a whole conversation with only their eyes, shutting him out completely. When had they grown so close and left him out? When had they grown so close and left him out? God, they couldn’t stand him … and now he’d made things so much worse.

‘Want to know why I’m angry? Because we didn’t need you and they did and you’re too shitty to know the difference. And by the looks of you,’ he added as Karamatsu slumped, ‘you just missed getting snatched by the cultists. If they’d gotten you, then what would we have done?’

‘Wh-what?’ Karamatsu stammered. Fishing awkwardly in his brother’s hoodie pocket, Choromatsu retrieved Karamatsu’s mirror. Seeing his reflection, he froze. Filthy he’d expected. But his face was covered in blood. ‘Wh-what the hell …’

Choromatsu had awkwardly carted him a few more steps before Karamatsu remembered to keep his feet churning, trying to order thoughts that spiralled through sludge. If Osomatsu was right and he’d been targeted by cultists, that would explain just about everything—no, it was the only explanation! God, he was such an idiot! What else would explain the assault on his mind, the brief forced march, the inexplicable grooves in the sand? He’d been affected by their toxins, or however the frightening individuals controlled their targets. He’d been hallucinating, helpless … and his brothers had saved him.

‘I …’ he stuttered, gratitude and embarrassment so turbulent they threatened to overcome him. Feeling so pathetic, suddenly Karamatsu needed his sunglasses with urgency that almost brought him
to a total standstill. His hand twitched by their imprint against his jeans pocket. But it was so dark. He couldn’t put them on, he couldn’t see. And Osomatsu would call him all the names he hated; Karamatsu didn’t think he could cope, his cool already badly mangled. Even worse, Choromatsu might ask him why. ‘I’m sorry. I …’

‘We’ll talk about this later,’ Osomatsu said shortly as they climbed the inn’s step, smacking the buzzer for late entry. Karamatsu swallowed hard. He’d never heard a more ominous promise from his brother, a more obvious show of authority. Like Karamatsu deserved some warning or punishment for what he’d done. For abandoning three of his brothers and failing to save the other two, needing to be rescued himself … how could he have fucked up so badly?

Karamatsu tried to gulp back the sudden burn in his throat, but failed to stifle a sob. It echoed around the quiet lobby, his own grief assailing him from without. Osomatsu looked briefly over his shoulder at the pitiful sound, eyes still on fire. But this time he spoke more softly.

‘You’re a fucking mess, take a damn shower. I’m going to bed.’

With that he stalked off, leaving Choromatsu to help lever Karamatsu to the bath house. He could barely feel the smooth wood flooring beneath his socks, numb like a destructive wave had just crashed straight through him.

The next morning as the brothers gathered their belongings, Ichimatsu remained determinedly dead to the world. They left him to sleep, picking up around him. The atmosphere was slightly cool and uncomfortable, Jyushimatsu bewildered and Todomatsu on tip-toes, unsure what had passed between their older brothers; they had arrived back so late, drenched and spent, stumbling to a man. It was only when they were about to check out and Jyushimatsu knelt at Ichimatsu’s side to shake his shoulder that they realised he couldn’t be roused.

Then they realised he was burning up.

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It was like clawing his way out of a bottomless pit, freedom a miniscule twinkling glow far above his upturned nose. Or it had been, until Ichimatsu stopped putting in the effort. It was too hard, and he was just too fucking tired. And it was dark there, wrapped in unnumbered muffling layers that both cushioned and kept him perfectly still. It was quiet, almost comfortable. Safe. Did it really make a difference, if he stayed down there forever? It would probably be better for everyone involved. So long as Jyushimatsu kept feeding the cats.

Despite his stubborn assertions—he couldn’t try anymore and he didn’t care either way—eventually his surrounds seemed to sharpen. Only marginally; it was like blinking through fog. And it was warm, very warm. Ichimatsu gradually became aware of his mouth, only because it felt like it was stuffed full of cotton wool. He couldn’t move, but his muscles twitched involuntarily as consciousness briefly tipped the scales. He dimly felt something narrow and bony beneath his head, barely cushioned by something softer, maybe a folded coat. Vision swimming briefly to take a look at reality, he discerned twin flags of sunshine waving in his face.

‘Niisan?’

The moan Ichimatsu produced in response was so far from his brother’s name, so far from human that even so woozy he was swamped by humiliation and sank fast back into unconsciousness. He wallowed senseless for a while longer and didn’t want to resurface when he felt the pull. But he had no control, and the next time he roused his mind was a little clearer, moan slightly more comprehensible.
‘Ichimatsu, are you awake? We’re on the train,’ Choromatsu spoke softly and slowly at his affirming mutter, like Ichimatsu failed to understand even the simplest of concepts. Ichimatsu mumbled incoherently—he could fucking tell they were on the train, why else would the world be jostling like that? ‘We’re almost home, Mum and Dad will meet us at the station.’

‘He’s awake?’

‘Choromatsu-niisan, is he … all right?’

‘I don’t know, it still feels like his temperature’s up …’

‘Brother … I’m sorry. But you’ll be all right, we’re going to look after you.’

His various brothers’ questions and comments swelling and ebbing too haphazardly for him to follow, Ichimatsu submerged briefly into blankness, but was forced more permanently awake as he felt his brothers hoisting him up and helping him through the train doors onto the platform. Dimly aware as they met their parents, Ichimatsu recoiled weakly on feeling a worn palm press to his cheek. It withdrew reluctantly … their mother’s.

‘It’s okay,’ he heard Osomatsu say, Ichimatsu confused by the brightness and kerfuffle of the surrounding station. He was glad when they quickly exited, hanging almost totally limp in his brothers’ support.

‘Wh-what …’ he managed to swallow out some sense, noticing as he was directed towards a waiting taxi.

‘We’re taking you to the hospital,’ Osomatsu said, and for some reason shot a dirty look at Karamatsu. But Ichimatsu balked at the thought of more doctors, overriding what should be reflexive backup of any quip at the second born. The first had already insisted there was nothing wrong … and he was fine, damn it! He didn’t need … why would another doctor say any different?

‘Niisan, this isn’t nothing,’ Jyushimatsu spoke seriously in his ear, gently re-adjusting Ichimatsu’s weight over his strong shoulders. Usually when Jyushimatsu was grave, Ichimatsu listened. Still he dug his dragging feet into the ground, putting up what resistance he could.

‘I don’t … want …’

‘Give him here.’

Ichimatsu blearily followed as Osomatsu made Karamatsu relinquish his role as support and towed the protesting fourth born into the back of the taxi. Pushing him into the middle seat, Osomatsu had fastened his seatbelt before he could fully comprehend he now sat down, the eldest taking the seat on his left. Jyushimatsu jumped on in his right, effectively trapping him there. He couldn’t tell if it was Mum or Dad in the front seat until he heard his mother’s voice. ‘My sweet Ichimatsu …’

He drifted unpleasantly through the taxi ride, and the unpleasantness peaked when he suddenly realised he no longer sat in the backseat, but in a wheelchair. ‘Fuck, no.’

Making a fuss and trying to turn the chair over when no one listened to him, finally his brothers pulled him up again and supported him into the hospital almost on his own feet. It took both Osomatsu and Jyushimatsu to hold him down for the long-suffering nurse to draw blood for tests. Coherent or not, Ichimatsu hated needles and fast made a bad reputation for himself among the staff. Osomatsu and their mother did most of the talking, Mum filling them in on his recent illness and Osomatsu recounting the events of the night before. ‘So the drunken rampage probably didn’t help, but …’ Ichimatsu was vaguely aware as his eldest brother shrugged, rubbing his nose as the fourth
born suffered through more tests, flinching as fluids were set to seep into his bloodstream, his body badly dehydrated. ‘We thought he was okay.’

Ichimatsu only grumbled answers when judged alert enough for doctors to probe his symptoms, Jyushimatsu hovering near as his shadow. ‘Headaches … my throat. Yeah, I ache … yeah … yeah,’ he trailed into heavy nods when the doctors asked about general wellness and tiredness. ‘But I haven’t …’ he swallowed thickly, for the first time afraid of what these tests might reveal. ‘The fever is new.’

Ichimatsu was admitted for observation, and passed out as soon as he fell into his designated bed, despite the fact he’d been out almost fifteen hours straight. He slept many more, rising once to use the bathroom and half-roused when his family had to leave, promising to return soon. But in the middle of the night Ichimatsu sat up very suddenly, and drew the needle from the crook of his arm, leaving the tube of his drip to swing. He strode slowly and quietly from the ward, ducking out of sight when medical staff strolled or hurried by, and vanished from the hospital.

He returned a few hours later, stumbling and confused. ‘There you are,’ a nurse huffed, finding and hustling him back to the ward. ‘You didn’t mention you were a sleepwalker, that might have been useful to know.’

‘Huh?’ Ichimatsu slurred, confused as he realised sheets were being re-tucked around him—he must have squirmed them off in his sleep. But he drifted away before he could properly ask what the nurse meant.

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Stock looped firmly through their claws, Lord Takuu’s closest drew back their whip and cracked it again across the ashen torso of the lower lieutenant, opening a fresh strip of scaly flesh. Seventeen raw wounds already glistened with translucent blood that trickled slowly down their bent spine, flecking the flagstones as the thong recoiled, tiny globules spraying from its cruel length. They never paused, rhythm and form of their art perfected as they struck again, lashing all their fierce strength into the punishment with no animosity, only purpose, their masked face drawn purposefully blank.

The lower lieutenant finally hissed, pain catching in their throat after an commendable stint scourged in near silence. Claws secured just over their head, they struggled to balance on a precarious outcropping from a narrow stone pillar erected before Lord Takuu’s throne. The step down from the tiny platform was just high enough to snap their claws and dislocate every joint in their bound upper limbs if they surrendered to weakness and fell.

From his slightly-raised dais, Lord Takuu impassively observed the flogging he’d sentenced. A young man, dark and pale, stood just to his side and a step behind. The human was notably shadowed even in that cavernous hall that consumed darkness as its lifeblood, veined within every slab of stone. A throng of Lord Takuu’s followers had been summoned from their tasks to witness the reminder: this is what came of shaming their Liberation Force. The crowd was thick, but there was little sound but for guttural anguish as the lower lieutenant reached their limit, and the interaction of the lash with the pressured air, a low whipping whistle and crack as speed splintered sound. The shadowed young man’s stare was unbreaking, and he seemed to shiver, darkened eyes aglow with every thrash of thong to skin forced to peel apart with each stinging impact.

Fibrous muscles heated with exertion against the deep chill of their underground fortress as the lower lieutenant slumped against the pillar, Lord Takuu’s trusted cracked their whip a twentieth time. The tortured soldier at last cried out, knees buckling. But with a drawn-out groan that rose to a ragged expletive as their weakened legs shook dangerously, agonised, they held.
'Enough,' Lord Takuu said evenly, sitting back in his throne. His lord’s vassal, the trusted lieutenant cracked his whip once more, flicking bodily fluid from its coils before winding and setting the instrument at his gaunt waist.

'I am pleased,' Lord Takuu saw fit to address his closest, called to counsel as the lower lieutenant's claws were unclamped; they fell in a heap at the pillar’s base.

'They allowed the Spectrum Guardians to escape again,' the lieutenant named indiscretions that warranted the flogging, ‘and we have lost two further devoted soldiers. But the lower lieutenant returned alive, both subjects intact.’

‘Indeed,’ the lord inclined his head in satisfaction. None who had faced the Spectrum Guardians had returned alive until now. And the lower lieutenant had cleverly manipulated the situation, forcing the gem-encrusted warriors to abandon the slaves to save themselves, humiliating them; Lord Takuu’s closest wouldn’t be surprised if they were promoted to their lord’s inner circle. Quite apart from the successful experiment—far more successful than they’d predicted, the lieutenant thought, eyeing the young man at Lord Takuu’s shoulder—every encounter with the troublesome Salamander and Wyvern was closely scried with intent to lay open their minds and secrets—preferably long before their Unicorn joined them. Now the lower lieutenant may possess the firsthand knowledge required to tear them apart.

‘The doll tells me,’ Lord Takuu said eventually, cloak rippling as he gestured over his shoulder at the young man, who stood at lazy attention and bowed with a slow smirk. At once irked by his impudence, and instinctively ensnared by the dark human that coursed with their lord’s might, the trusted lieutenant knew well the true source of Lord Takuu’s supreme pleasure. ‘The human that stumbled upon our work, that our esteemed lieutenant—’

Dragged from before their lord, said esteemed lieutenant released hoarse grunts as they were patched up, powdered salve smeared stinging into their wounds.

‘—used against the Wyvern,’ Lord Takuu continued when his trusted lowered his eyes to be informed of whatever his lord desired. ‘That was our doll’s own brother.’

‘This is already getting confusing,’ the doll spoke suddenly, voice low and strange, punctured by cold vigour. A black opal gleamed at his throat, fixed to a seamless collar of servitude; the stone was twin to that Lord Takuu never released. ‘He may be your precious husk, but I am your darkness. Save us all the aggravation and distinguish the difference.’

The lieutenant stiffened at the disrespect, a barely-perceptible twitch of sinewy muscle. There was no differentiation to be had; the so-called husk and darkness were one and the same. The combined intellect of the most obsessed scholars from every dimension’s birth through destruction could not hope to rival Lord Takuu’s abounding knowledge of the arcane, yet this paltry human, this insolent child dared challenge lore even the lord’s ignoble closest knew beyond question. The doll saw their disapproval, and his teeth flashed, clearly thrilled to be the cause.

Lord Takuu actually laughed; every soul within a hundred metres shivered with fear and thirst to serve. ‘Our husk has many brothers,’ he went on, not acknowledging the doll’s comment but to acquiesce to his demand for some distinction. ‘But it seems due to this one that our experiment was so successful. It is because of him the doll travelled to that settlement, the very reason he now stands awakened before us,’ the lord revealed when his closest’s bowed expression professed ignorance. ‘It is almost as though this brother knew to bring him to us. And even if coincidence merely plays its games,’ the lord went on, sneering his contempt for the worthless notion of coincidence. ‘There is something about this one …’
‘I like him,’ the doll declared unexpectedly. Lord Takuu mused, pulling a scry into the space between them.

‘It is not impossible that near perfection strikes twice in the one bloodline.’

‘I like him,’ the doll repeated more forcefully, as though driven to dispel some rumour to the contrary, the slow curl of his lip covetous as he eyed his brother, shimmering miserably before them. ‘I like him, and I want him.’

Lord Takuu nodded slowly, considering the young man in the scry, so like their doll. The lieutenant stood rigidly straight. Only Lord Takuu commanded his blood servant, until his will dictated otherwise. But they were again displeased, that they could not rebuke such an idle demand from no more than a slave. The favoured slave around which the Liberation Force’s resurgence mustered, perhaps. But still a slave.

‘Set a team to scry, our best,’ the lord instructed; apparently decided, he let the image of the doll’s intriguing brother fade. ‘I want this one watched, he may prove useful. At the very least, he will make a powerful slave. At most …’

He trailed off with possibility, and the doll grinned, like their lord had just promised the stars, mania disconcerting on his haggard face. He was still far from invulnerable, hindered by a form sickened from constant use, his body and soul their power’s very passage. But even with the added strength of proximity, they hadn’t dreamed predict the doll might awaken to his true form with only a simple test. They had not been mistaken in selecting this individual, pinpointed across so many layers of space; the disturbed mass of previously-untapped potential already advanced their plans. Now directly under their lord’s guidance and nurtured by his own turmoil, the Doll of Darkness would enhance exponentially, empowered far beyond the ongoing infirmity of his ignorant self. Soon there would be no need to return to that wretched form at all.

Then, Lord Takuu’s trusted lieutenant thought with single-minded hunger, dismissed to assemble a dedicated team for their new target. Then the Liberation Force reborn would bring the Spectrum Alliance and every senseless glittering warrior they dispatched keening to their knees.

Chapter End Notes

I am completely serious, I'm really sorry if this has disappointed anyone :( But I thought it was about time for them to mess up a little bit :) And given what I've had planned for Kara from very early on, it just wasn't viable for him to get all sparkly at this point - but such plans for him :D

Upcoming schedule is now Chapter 9, a bit of a recovery shortie, followed by Chapter 10 finally presenting the next magical boy - sorry if it's taken a bit long, and thanks so much for being patient with me :(
So you get this. Because I have absolutely no self control.

... I feel some explanation is due. This was meant to be a bit of a shortie between big events of previous chapters and big events coming up in Chapter 10. It was planned to be six short parts showing kind of where each brother was at that point. Then I got the absolutely brilliant (insert sarcasm here) idea to connect them all. Because I have to make everything ridiculously difficult for myself. And this ensued. Regrets were had. I'm happy with how they all turned out in the end ... but not so much with the ridiculous length of the thing. Should probably be split up, but for entirely self-indulgent aesthetic reasons, I really want the next chapter to be Chapter 10. My general rule for chapter lengths is if it's as long as The Council of Elrond, it's too freaking long ... I really hope this isn't as long as The Council of Elrond. So this shall forever be known as the ridiculously long mess among ridiculously long messes. But this mess is just for all of you :)

Happiest with how Oso and Kara's stuff turned out - it's closest to what I'd originally planned. Choro's isn't too bad, but I had my usual second-guessing issues with him. Ichi's was fine to write, but I had to tread a bit carefully given where stuff's headed with him, make sure to do everything right. Hooray for Jyushi and Totty's debuts as POV! THEY ARE SIDE CHARACTERS TO NO ONE! Loved writing Jyushi, but he gave me a bit of a hard time ... got into Jyushi mode, then fell out again, then in then out ... spent most of the last week trying to stay in his mindset and wound up wearing this ridiculous grin that whenever I let it slip I burst into uncontrollable giggles. And Totty came quite quickly at the end - hope that doesn't show too badly. Didn't give me as much trouble as I thought he would. Totty is the Matsuno I am probably furthest from, but he's a bit of a sweetheart. I think it turned out okay.

Thank you so much for being patient and putting up with my ridiculousness and reading my stuff. Would love to know what you think about the why-is-it-so-freaking-long experimental short story connected chapter - your support and comments are all of the things to me :) 

So NEXT CHAPTER! MAGICAL BOY NUMBER THREE HOORAY EVERYBODY!

‘Osomatsu-niisan?’

‘Hmm?’

By the time they’d skidded into the underground car park, the threatened soul was already stolen. Choromatsu’s attempt to end the confrontation early was thwarted when the victim was lifted on puppet strings, shielding the soldier’s crystal the instant he locked onto its multi-faceted sparkle. The particularly spindly soldier folded into a glistening orb of obsidian, reciting the usual “your resistance is both futile and pathetic, I, insert-soldier-name-here will destroy you, long live Lord Takuu” lines—was it Kuruumaru? Osomatsu shrugged, yawning behind his mask. He didn’t care, already zoned
out. That probably wasn’t smart, pre-battle. But Osomatsu knew the score. This claustrophobic encounter, three am with the flickering fluorescent tubes set in concrete overhead the only illumination bar the glowing exit signs, bore every sign of being a perfectly normal fight. Osomatsu stubbornly refused to acknowledge how relieved he was by that fact.

As soon as the alien master began to mutate, their puppet had bolted for cover, spoiled for choice by hulking concrete supports and row upon row of parked cars—if this got messy, a few nightshifters would be calling insurance companies by morning. Osomatsu wasn’t overly keen to dash after the man where there were any number of bumper bars and car doors he could bust off and clobber him with. He’d flicked an expectant glance at Choromatsu; his brother could remove violent slaves from the picture without causing any lasting damage. But with the plethora of lurking shadows the car park offered, Choromatsu simply expanded his attention, pistols at the ready. He would stun the moment the puppet revealed himself.

It was a hospital car park. Osomatsu figured from his slightly-faded jumpsuit that the victim was a maintenance worker just come off shift. He blamed the bottlenecking emergency stairs they’d had to descend, and the need to skirt the hubbub inside, that they hadn’t been quick enough to get down there. ‘It’s the most direct route,’ Choromatsu had insisted. Within the hospital, Ahn had adjusted her repellant hold on their surrounds until the barrier hovered just off their skin to avoid a mass-exodus of the building. Osomatsu was glad she’d thought of it. Interrupting doctors in work and patients in treatment would be a pretty shitty thing to do, totally inadvertent or not. And this was the university hospital they’d taken Ichimatsu; Osomatsu wasn’t about to mess with it, if he could help it.

The fourth born had been made to return several times already. As the dense cocoon pulsed and a few insects were drawn to its odd shimmer, abandoning the fluorescent tubes above, Osomatsu fidgeted against the increasingly-familiar cold touch of unease. It was harder to disregard now it was confirmed: there was something very wrong with Ichimatsu. And the moron only showed for his appointments because they took it in turns to drag him.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu!’

‘All right!’ he exclaimed, Ahn perched with Choromatsu in his scanty vantage point atop a small van. Blinking from his bothered daydreams, Osomatsu focussed on his job. ‘Aww, did I miss the speech?’

‘You didn’t miss much,’ Choromatsu replied almost like the question didn’t drown in sarcasm as Osomatsu marched straight up to the cocoon and rapped it with a knuckleduster. ‘They mentioned the Doll of Darkness again … Osomatsu-niisan, really?’ he sighed as Osomatsu hammered the cocoon, sending a shockwave spurting across its surface, spreading from the point of impact to encase it in flames. Tongues licked like they consumed oil, but the dense mass was entirely unaffected.

‘Choromatsu, shoot it,’ Osomatsu said, stepping from his line of fire. From his elevated crouch, the younger man sighed again while Ahn tsked. Her timbre piping and so youthful, Osomatsu remembered suddenly that they now spent most of their time with essentially a teenage girl. If their situation was any different, that would be really creepy. But at least this fluffy kid had her shit together. That was something, given she’d been thrown into this as surely as Osomatsu. How did she cope, he wondered in a moment of almost protectiveness. She hadn’t mentioned her one-in-a-million hitchhike through space since Choromatsu had signed his contract.

‘You cannot damage the soldiers while they are …’ Ahn was reinforcing, increasingly-frustrated by Osomatsu’s cocoon inspections. But the kitten jumped, hair prickling to needles as Choromatsu humoured his brother with a streaking volley. As expected, the bolts ricocheted, leaving no trace the
irregular surface had been struck. Undeterred, Osomatsu fired up as much power as he dared and hurled his fist directly into the cocoon. The resultant burst was small by his usual standards; he was still a touch flighty after losing his fire on the beach. He didn’t plan on losing it again, badass death rays be damned. Firmly cemented in air, the cocoon didn’t even shudder. Ahn was right: it would break when it was good and ready.

‘I’ve been right every time!’ Ahn almost squawked with Osomatsu’s casual concession. ‘And yet you still…’

‘Wow, back up …’ Osomatsu broke his heavy stance to skip backwards as the cocoon began to splinter, throwing his arms up against the deluge of slime. It was lucky he did; the moment Kuruumaru burst free they launched at Osomatsu with a weighty flap like … wet washing on a line?

‘What the …’ Osomatsu barely had the chance to swear before the broad blanket-like being swept him up, wrapping him far too close. Arms already raised, he straightaway drew them to protect his chest, tucking his chin and bringing his knees up to shield his organ-stuffed abdomen as the monster trapped him in a close-fitting womb. An instant later, they began to squeeze. Thanks to gut instinct, Osomatsu’s ribs weren’t immediately crushed. But his limbs were moments from snapping and his lungs compressed, quickened breath pressuring them further. Even if he could breathe easily, the air wouldn’t last long in there.

Every monster they’d fought to that point somewhat resembling an animal, Kuruumaru was objectively the most frightening Osomatsu had faced. If they’d crept through the bedroom window, the beast could have suffocated him and all five of his brothers in their sleep. But for all their boneless strength, they were still a sheet of dry, scaly skin. And he was the Salamander, flaming vanguard of onslaught.

Psyching himself up—he wouldn’t lose his fire, he wouldn’t—Osomatsu ignited. Glowing with molten heat, flames erupted through his hoodie from his very skin—he was on fire, and the monster that trussed him screamed from its slashed mouth unseen, to touch him an unknown agony. As suddenly as he’d been encased, Osomatsu felt himself freed as Kuruumaru shrivelled, peeling from his form as they charred, flat body eaten straight through in a large Osomatsu-shaped hole. A moment later, the monster collapsed into dust. ‘Huh?’

‘The crystal couldn’t stand the heat,’ Choromatsu explained, swooping to join him, Ahn safe in the crook of his arm. ‘It only held out a few seconds before exploding.’

‘Oh,’ Osomatsu said, seeing as he oriented from his brief imprisonment that tiny shards scattered the concrete, stained by years of spilt petrol and the scuff of squealing tyres. Beneath his feet was a large black scorch mark. ‘Well …’ he broke off to cough, gauntlet pressing to his assaulted chest. He shrugged off the slight hurt, already healing and grinning as Ahn blustered to hide her concern. ‘That was anticlimactic.’

‘It is fortunate they targeted you,’ Ahn said unexpectedly.

‘Fortunate?’ Osomatsu exclaimed indignantly. ‘Just what kind of …’

‘By the Alliance, it is only that you were better equipped to deal with them!’ Ahn exclaimed right back as Osomatsu bristled. ‘Your brother may not have emerged so unscathed.’

‘Sure he …’ Osomatsu trailed off, realising with an unpleasant lurch that had Choromatsu been on point he would have almost certainly been crushed.

Choromatsu shrugged. Matter-of-fact, he was clearly as relieved for his frequent support duty as
Osomatsu was. ‘That’s why I was back there, and you were here: I can’t explode. Do you have to check every cocoon,’ he asked as Osomatsu surveyed the damage. Besides his scorch mark, there was nothing worse than slightly-scratched paintwork of the cars nearest, rained on by exploded crystal. It was hardly noticeable, and the fight had barely lasted 10 seconds. Everyone had got off easy tonight.

‘Yes,’ Ahn agreed, pouncing into Osomatsu’s hoodie pocket for the flight home. ‘Every time you attack them, every time to no avail. I don’t know how many times I’ve told you …’

‘Hitting things is fun,’ Osomatsu shrugged, his grin practically audible as Ahn spluttered. ‘And you never know when it might be the one time it works.’

‘I don’t know how you stay so optimistic,’ Choromatsu said, any attempt to reprimand for wishful thinking subsumed in something more like admiration. Deserved or not—it wasn’t just optimism that kept him banging on those cocoons—Osomatsu gleefully lapped up the regard. ‘Are we good to go, Osomatsu-niisan?’

‘Yeah … can’t we wait till he wakes up?’ Osomatsu indicated the puppet. He’d almost forgotten about him, collapsed from concealment with his master’s defeat. The few coming and going through the car park hadn’t noticed when Ahn reduced her barrier over their low-ceilinged battledome, but were now almost drawn to the area they’d previously avoided. One had already run off, no doubt to alert security, and another had gone to the fallen maintenance worker. ‘We could wait until more people get here … why not?’ he exclaimed a few days later, irritating Choromatsu as he tried to find patterns in Liberation Force attacks, marking and mapping on his tablet. Osomatsu noisily dragged out a chair and slumped over the table in the public library where he’d found his brother. ‘I swear to god,’ he muttered into his arms as Choromatsu bent lower over his work. ‘If we don’t get some appreciation soon …’

He scowled, thinking of the nurse who had brought the victim around in the car park. No doubt she’d been just showered with praise, praise that was rightfully his. Was it so wrong to want someone to know they were saving the world?

‘I understand it’s frustrating,’ Ahn said, unusually sympathetic as they returned to their warehouse training centre. ‘But it’s just policy: no planet or race can be influenced from the outside until they join the intergalactic ranks on their own. No one can know what is actually happening here. Spectrum Guardians,’ she said as Osomatsu opened his mouth to retort, ‘of course, are an exception.’

‘Takuu doesn’t seem to care who knows he’s here,’ Osomatsu pointed out, seriously considering taking up crime fighting in his spare time. Taking out bank robbers and dropping in on high-speed chases would have to provide the recognition they deserved. With the Liberation Force to take out, it wasn’t like an actual side project was viable. But if Osomatsu ever stumbled on a mugging—assuming he wasn’t the one being mugged, he thought ruefully—he’d be all over that shit.

‘Lord Takuu is hardly an exemplary member of the intergalactic community. And see?’ she added somewhat irritably when Choromatsu loaded a video on his tablet. ‘It’s not as though you haven’t been seen.’

‘Wow …’ Osomatsu grinned wildly as he watched himself vanish in a burst of flames, captured on someone’s phone—someone who apparently had very quick reflexes. And the video’s hit count wasn’t too shabby, either. ‘That’s awesome! Have you shared that? Come on, retweet!’

‘No!’ Choromatsu exclaimed, yanking his tablet away as Osomatsu grabbed for it. Pretending to give up, he stole it the instant Choromatsu’s guard lowered and scrolled eagerly through the video’s comments section. It took barely thirty seconds for his grin to straighten to a tight line.
‘Don’t you know, Osomatsu-niisan? Never, ever read comments. There’s this idol forum I sometimes … Anyway,’ Choromatsu cleared his throat as Osomatsu read and re-read the bullshit. ‘A lot of people think we’re in on the attacks. Soon there’ll be a police alert with our descriptions. We’ll probably have to start being more careful.’

But they were already being careful, that’s what was so aggravating! It was unbelievable, that the police might soon be giving them trouble. ‘But not everyone believes that,’ he said, unable to reconcile they were being lumped in with Earth’s greatest enemy by those they tried to protect. ‘They can’t …’

‘We’ve been seen at a lot of scenes they think are cult attacks,’ Choromatsu shrugged, bringing up a clip of the two of them decamping skyward from the gutted convenience store. ‘And now we’re on camera, we can’t exactly be explained by costumes and toxins. It’s not like we can call a press conference to set everyone straight. Is there any reason this is bothering you now?’ Choromatsu asked, setting his tablet on an empty crate; they’d dragged a few together as an office/lounge area. Osomatsu threw himself on his usual crate, littered with cushions from the nearest hundred yen store. Lack of recognition bothered him. A lot. But he knew he blew that aggravation out of proportion to avoid dealing with something else.

‘Osomatsu-niisan?’ Choromatsu said, looking over his shoulder as he retrieved his scroll, about to transform for target practice. ‘What’s wrong?’

Osomatsu shrugged from where he lay, staring up at the broken skylight. He wasn’t actively hiding it, as driven to share with his brother as ever. But the battle on the beach was a difficult subject. And it was one of the rare occasions Osomatsu cared how he might sound. He didn’t want his brother or their mentor getting the wrong idea. ‘I don’t know,’ he finally said, swapping to telepathy so Choromatsu didn’t have to stop shooting to hear him; already-battered targets smoked all over the warehouse. ‘It just feels like … we’re not doing much. You know,’ he waved unseeingly behind his head, indicating himself and Choromatsu. ‘As guardians.’

‘You are doing more than enough, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn was quick to say, jumping up to peer on his tired expression. ‘Please do not concern yourself over such things, you are only being your temperamental self.’

‘Am I?’ Osomatsu asked, mood swinging low. ‘I don’t know … we screwed up at the beach so badly—I should have asked for help,’ Osomatsu lamented his gross failure, jaw clenched tight. ‘Told you to take a shot if you could. And with everything else … it’s like the reasons I started doing this thing … like to protect people … we’re not protecting anyone,’ Osomatsu said, thinking of Karamatsu with a rush of residual panic like he’d almost tripped onto train tracks. ‘And they were messing with us, they beat me so easily,’ he muttered, invincibility taken a dire pummelling. ‘If that’s what the stronger ones are like …’

‘Are you thinking of quitting?’ Ahn asked suddenly, dark eyes rounding with alarm. Osomatsu huffed—he should have known that would be her reaction. Why did everyone always expect him to quit? Probably, he allowed grudgingly, because if his job was any less awesome he would have by now.

‘No, I don’t want to quit. But I’m feeling, I guess … disenchanted with the hero thing. A bit. I’ll get over it,’ he shrugged, sitting up as Ahn almost tentatively put her oversized front paws on his knee. The heated chorusing of laser-struck junk subsided, and Osomatsu heard Choromatsu phase back to himself.

‘I, ah, don’t know if it’ll help. But I compiled a list,’ he said, collecting his tablet and sitting beside Osomatsu, Ahn shifting to give him room. ‘Of everything that went wrong on the beach.’ His
brother tapped open a file, screen balanced lightly in his lap. Osomatsu groaned.

‘How long does it take to say don’t ever drink again?’

But the eldest only put up brief resistance. Going through it step by step might be painful, but even if it didn’t help him, it might help Choromatsu. Though he’d been by far the better performer that botched mission, Osomatsu hadn’t failed to notice his younger brother’s stress levels had climbed: far more stammering and yelping, far fewer bone-dry comebacks. That troubled him; Choromatsu had been doing so well coping with his anxiety. And however Osomatsu and Ahn tried to boost his confidence, his brother still had far less pride to lose.

To his guilty relief, Choromatsu summarised his list fairly well. Ahn brought up a few discussion points as they went, and Osomatsu surprised himself by offering a few offhand comments. ‘I think what we have to try to remember,’ Choromatsu finished somewhat awkwardly. ‘Is that … you know, a lot that went wrong was beyond our control. We can’t dwell on it.’

‘Exactly,’ Ahn agreed far more positively, glad to close that difficult chapter of their history. ‘You must learn from this and move on.’

Osomatsu shrugged, not sure he felt much better. But the eldest Matsuno was a resilient spark. Within a few days he was his confident self again. Though he still had a lot on his mind (it grated on him, that he’d accidentally insulted Jyushimatsu and was unable to apologise, and he still twinged to think of the verbal battering he’d given Karamatsu after they’d left Ichimatsu to sleep in hospital; he hadn’t figured how to even the score when, despite being so unfair to his brother, Osomatsu still felt he’d had a perfectly legitimate reason to be pissed) and though he’d probably keep checking cocoons for some time (and figured sheepishly if he ever succeeded in breaking them he’d get bored with lack of action and start letting the monsters out again anyway), Osomatsu no longer worried about the beach. It seemed Choromatsu was over it, too. Osomatsu grinned as his brother practiced late one afternoon, drawing air around himself in tentative streamers that ruffled his hooded gakuran. He’d been downright terrifying in the middle of a storm, and Osomatsu knew his brother would soon get the hang of his element without the outside input.

‘Hey,’ Choromatsu continued their easy banter, carefully caressing air into a gentle whirlwind as Osomatsu experimented, no longer so afraid of losing his fire. ‘Do you know what a Salamander actually is?’

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Karamatsu formed a simple chord, light pressure of strings and smoothed frets against his calloused fingertips a comfort in themselves before he even strummed. He’d taught himself to play through high school, convinced it would boost his confidence—rebels and romantics played guitar, not kids who struggled to look up when they walked and fell meekly silent when spoken over. People liked people who played guitar. Almost everything else had become a prop in his ongoing charade, but music was one of the few things that made him feel better. And not only the music itself, but that he made it. And he wasn’t terrible. Not a shred of music ability in their blood, he’d doggedly picked away at the secondhand instrument for months. Hearing mum hum tunelessly along from the kitchen as he picked out an old folk song, Karamatsu was so glad he’d kept at it. Finished the tune, he segued into a more modern rock ballad, smiling as he heard mum absently pick it up with him, wavering around the few lyrics she threw in. So soothed by their combined sound, Karamatsu could almost forget the gulf that had opened between him and his brothers. He didn’t kid himself, that it hadn’t been there for a long time. But if he’d reached out his hand, he could still brush their shoulders. Now it had widened dizzyingly. He was stranded, gazing at his distant brothers who now barely looked back.
It was worst with Osomatsu; even thinking of his older brother Karamatsu hunched slightly, cradling his precious instrument as his strumming faltered. Swallowing, he kept playing, trying to sink again in peace. But now he’d started, his thoughts tumbled beyond control. Karamatsu had thought he was closest with Osomatsu … if being close with a fraud like him counted for anything, he thought painfully. He’d thought they’d shared something as the eldest, some unspoken understanding and responsibility. But now it was too clear: Karamatsu knew nothing of what it meant to be a big brother. Things were strange with Choromatsu, as well; Karamatsu was sure he was avoiding him. And the others …

‘Karamatsu-nisan?’ Todomatsu’s voice wafted smog from reality as Karamatsu’s thoughts depressingly greyed. Blinking, he realised he and Jyushimatsu had set up the checkerboard. Jyushimatsu grinned widely, bent over the board like at starting blocks for a hundred-metre sprint. Todomatsu lounged, elbows on the table as he frowned lightly over his next move. His frown had drifted to Karamatsu. ‘Could you be quiet a second? I’m trying to concentrate.’

‘Anything for you, brother.’ Karamatsu lowered the instrument to his lap, holding a smile through Todomatsu’s wince. He watched as the youngest prodded his pieces around the board in delicate strategy, Jyushimatsu almost scattering the lot every time he made a move. As Totty began to shrilly tell Jyushimatsu off—“you just can’t do that, Niisan!”—Karamatsu quietly got to his feet and climbed the stairs to their bedroom. Neither brother seemed to notice he left.

Sitting cross-legged, Karamatsu hugged his guitar briefly before settling it comfortably back in his arms. Not even mum to hear him, he abandoned cool pretences and, almost liberated, began to pick out comforting melodies of their childhood. Almost through “Sakura”, Karamatsu heard the door slide open behind him. Ichimatsu slouched inside and immediately fell into the couch, back to his brother. Hating to leave a song unfinished, though embarrassed to be caught strumming a nursery rhyme, Karamatsu played the final few bars. His tempo slowed increasingly until he stopped, engulfed by concern. Ichimatsu had been worryingly listless since his regular hospital visits had begun. He hadn’t even had the willpower to insult the second born as he’d slumped by.

Ichimatsu, the most troubled and troubling of his siblings. Karamatsu loved his dark brother, so much. He loved Ichimatsu. His perpetual derision would never change that. It couldn’t. But god … why did it have to hurt so much? A better person wouldn’t even care, why couldn’t he be better? But Karamatsu was already fragile, and knew his composure might crumble if Ichimatsu lashed out at him now. He couldn’t risk that. Swallowing hard against his selfishness, Karamatsu asked almost tentatively, ‘How is your head, brother?’

‘Like shit,’ Ichimatsu mumbled, face pressed into a cushion and clearly in pain. Ashamed by his relief, having expected a “fuck off, Shittymatsu” or an ominously hanging “if anyone asks how I am one more fucking time …” Karamatsu couldn’t handle the thought of making his brother’s aches worse. Everything he did was painful, even playing guitar. At once, Karamatsu was slammed by a sudden, irrefutable realisation: it was only painful because he was the one playing. Almost gasping and scrambling for his glasses as his eyes heated dangerously, Karamatsu desperately kept his voice even.

‘I’ll leave you then. Rest well, Ichimatsu.’

Ichimatsu only grunted. The couch creaked as Karamatsu withdrew to the roof, his brother shifting slightly, perhaps already half asleep. That was good. He knew better than any of them, kept awake for hours by his pained whimpers: the sleep Ichimatsu managed through the night was hardly restful.

He always wound up on the roof eventually, by choice or otherwise. Karamatsu turned his face to the pale sun, letting its soft warmth beat on him even as he shivered; he’d forgotten his outer coat. It
was supposed to snow tonight.

He couldn’t play anything he liked up there: anyone who passed on the street below might hear. So Karamatsu returned to easy karaoke favourites. Closing his eyes as he hummed, shaping songs from sightless memory, he didn’t notice when a small presence joined him, hesitantly creeping over the tiles to sit by him. Only when the small creature briefly touched their nose to his knee did Karamatsu open his eyes and look down.

‘Little kitty,’ he murmured, slightly apprehensive. Most of the cats who followed him to the roof seemed possessed by Ichimatsu himself; at best Karamatsu escaped a little scratched up, at worst he escaped via two-storey drop into the street. But this was the little one Choromatsu had brought in. She didn’t come when Ichimatsu called. In fact, Karamatsu had noticed she almost avoided him completely. That was so strange—if any true cat whisperer lived, it was Ichimatsu.

‘Have you come to enjoy the sunshine?’ he asked of the kitten. ‘Or perhaps to share a song?’ The kitten—Ann, did Choromatsu call her?—looked up at him with such dark, solemn eyes. Slowly, almost shyly, she settled down before him, her warm side pressed to his shin. The first cat to show him affection in he didn’t know how long, Karamatsu swallowed through his clogged throat and scratched her ears, tickling gently beneath her chin. She didn’t seem to like that, pulling away slightly. Not wanting to lose her company, Karamatsu stopped immediately. ‘Apologies, sweet lady; I would never dream to upset you. Shall I play for you?’ he asked, raising his guitar slowly so as not to startle her. The kitten curled nearer as he played, eventually settling her head on his ankle. Karamatsu was struck by how sad the tiny creature seemed, eyes closing like she bore the world’s troubles on her narrow shoulders. ‘Try not to worry, little one,’ he murmured, hoping he gifted her the same comfort she bestowed on him. ‘Things will get better … they have to get better …’

‘Karamatsu-niiisssaaaaannmmm!’

Jyushimatsu waved frantically from below as a taxi pulled up. Beside him, Ichimatsu muttered angrily and tried to grab his flailing arms. Apparently spooked by Jyushimatsu’s carrying shout, the kitten leapt to her oversized paws. Casting Karamatsu a final lingering look, she streaked from the roof.

‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ Jyushimatsu called again as Karamatsu regretfully watched the kitten vanish beyond the gutters. ‘Come with us!’

‘Stop it,’ Ichimatsu seemed to mumble, finally catching one of Jyushimatsu’s sleeves and dragging a flapping hand down. ‘If we have to fucking go, let’s just go.’

‘Go where?’ Karamatsu asked. Jyushimatsu made up for the loss of one arm by doubling his exuberance with the other, gestures so wide and wild he might have brought a plane in to land. Very dangerously.

‘The hospital! Come with us, Ichimatsu-niisan might need more needles! We all know he can’t deal with them!’

‘Shut up,’ Ichimatsu growled as Karamatsu’s heart suddenly floated to the top of his swelling chest; he hadn’t felt so light in months. Sweet Jyushimatsu. He was so kind, so honest … Jyushimatsu liked him. And if one brother still liked him, Karamatsu wasn’t stranded. He wasn’t alone. There was still hope.

Shooting to his feet with a cry in the affirmative, Karamatsu scooted down the ladder, almost losing grip on his guitar in haste as Ichimatsu tried in vain to drag Jyushimatsu into the taxi before he made it down.
Measuring to his breaths, Choromatsu painstakingly worked the air around him. His element didn’t come as naturally to him as Osomatsu. He knew he had been a fluke. Without the storm, no way could Choromatsu have summoned that kind of power. Not that it had helped in the end; he thought with a lasting prickle of guilt: he’d still abandoned two people to slavery. He’d almost lost two brothers. Choromatsu had to improve, and fast. And it just wasn’t happening.

Just be patient, he tried to encourage over internal disparagement that he’d never get this, eyeing the limp whirlwind he’d conjured, picking out every flaw as it fell apart. But seeing as Osomatsu summoned a towering pillar of fire, Choromatsu couldn’t ignore the anxious tighten about his abdomen. His brother was so far ahead. At this rate he’d never catch up—so much for contributing, he thought degradingly as his harsh gesture barely summoned a whit of wind. All he’d done was graduate from being a shitty load on society to being a shitty load on this team. How was someone like him supposed to do this … god, why had he ever signed that contract?

Because it was the right thing to do, he reminded more steadily. Though actually having work had boosted his self-esteem, Choromatsu was still vulnerable to slumps. And though his persistent negativity spiralled dangerously, he was transformed. It was much easier to listen to sense as the Wyvern. He might feel terrible about himself. He might question his position as a Spectrum Guardian, convinced anyone else would do a better job. But Choromatsu refused to be overcome. He didn’t have to be. He knew a powerful counterforce to such harmful thoughts: his interfering, inappropriate, but eternally-supportive eldest brother.

‘Have you seen you in the sky?’ Osomatsu exclaimed as Choromatsu voiced his difficulty. ‘The windwalking, the acrobatics! If that’s not using air, what the hell is? I know I’m a hard act to follow with all the explosions, but … we’re different. You’re doing fine,’ he said, Choromatsu grateful his brother never tired of repeating much-needed encouragement. ‘How many times have you saved my sorry ass? And with all the techy crap you do, how could you think you’re dragging us down? You’re practically carrying this team!’

Choromatsu coloured as his brother exaggerated shamelessly. But reminded of his value, his rampaging self doubt quietened to a whisper. For the first time—maybe since leaving school—Choromatsu had begun to feel accomplished. And self-fulfilment was a far healthier drive than self-d disgust. While Osomatsu looked for fights and ferried in punching bags, Choromatsu dedicated countless hours to analysing their enemy. He studiously compiled his observations and everything his lens picked up, anything that might help them gain some insight or advantage. Pleased by his efforts, much to Osomatsu’s annoyance, Ahn insisted they study Choromatsu’s work regularly. Interfacing with his lens was as intuitive to him as hitting things was to Osomatsu; when Ahn wasn’t engrossed with her ongoing search for their teammates, she taught him more of its capabilities. She’d even promised to put him in contact with tech experts from the Spectrum Alliance. But one aspect of his training had stalled.

‘Can’t you do it?’ Osomatsu had asked several times, Choromatsu deferring to Ahn and fiddling with his pistols when she suggested he should practice. Whatever the others said, he knew it was his fault that Karamatsu had been on the beach. It was bad enough, that his barrier hadn’t had the strength or subtlety to keep out his brother’s determination. But it was his barrier. And from Karamatsu’s garbled account of what the “cultists” had done to him, there was no mistake. How did his barrier handle stubborn intruders? Gave them crippling anxiety attacks, of course! That would stop them in their goddamn tracks!

Choromatsu grimaced. He hadn’t known. But he really didn’t like the idea he was forcing his own demons on anyone who crashed too heavily into his barriers. That went doubly so for family. ‘I told
you to go easy on him,’ he said, following the shift of conversation as Osomatsu bitched regretfully how he’d let loose on Karamatsu. ‘At least you can apologise, just get it over with.’

Osomatsu only shrugged. Choromatsu exhaled heavily, the careless breath blowing apart his next tornado attempt. Osomatsu had such an easy way out, why didn’t he take it? If it was as simple as apologising for him, Choromatsu wouldn’t still avoid Karamatsu’s eyes, guilt stricken for something he could never explain. And Ahn had flat out refused his hesitant suggestion she teach Osomatsu; he couldn’t avoid laying barriers forever. But Choromatsu hoped to get a better hold of himself first, or find some way to tweak the alien tech so this never happened again.

‘Hey, do you know what a Salamander actually is?’ he asked suddenly, needing to give himself something else to think about. He’d looked up their guardian names on a whim. And Choromatsu had been far more pleased than he probably should be—his brother was going to love this.

‘No,’ Osomatsu said from where he played with increasingly large bursts of fire. Choromatsu was washed intermittently with intense warmth that would have been very pleasant, if he weren’t sure Osomatsu was going to set the warehouse alight. Choromatsu struggled to control his grin as his brother glanced over curiously.

‘So a wyvern is kind of like a dragon, a mythical creature. A salamander,’ he went on, but words failed him as he rotated his outstretched hands and somehow wove a small, but beautifully-perfect tornado. Barely believing it, Choromatsu flexed his wrists and fingers like a conductor. The whirlwind responded eagerly to his pull and push, utterly under his control as it swept up every little cushion strewn across their lounge crates.

‘Look, you’re doing it! Good work, Ahn will be thrilled. Now, tell me what’s a Salamander,’ Osomatsu pushed impatiently. ‘If you’re a dragon, I’ve got to be something pretty out there. What am I, some kind of demon? A fire deity?’

‘Salamanders,’ Choromatsu repeated, face contorting as he fought not to burst out laughing. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, salamanders are little lizards.’

‘WHAT?!’

‘Look out!’ Choromatsu cried. Clearly flustered as his armload of flames slipped, Osomatsu’s eyes shot wide in alarm as they cartwheeled directly for his brother. Choromatsu threw his arms over his face, tornado flipping with the defensive motion and ripping from his control. ‘No, no!’

Petrified, Choromatsu flinched for the burn. It didn’t come. But the air before him suddenly roiled with heat. Opening his eyes, Choromatsu gazed in horror as his tornado subsumed the flames. They coiled through the phenomenon, wind on fire as they incinerated cushions in a blazing whirlwind.

‘Whoa, whoa! What the actual fuck is … Holy shit …’ Osomatsu breathed after his initial exclamation, far more impressed than frightened. ‘That … is … amazing.’

Choromatsu might have shoved the entire flaming vortex down his brother’s throat, if he weren’t trapped on the other side of it. And if he still had any control.

‘I’m not …’ Choromatsu waved his hands pointlessly, unable to better articulate. With a stab of panic, he felt his throat horrendously tighten as it hadn’t in a month. ‘What do we … what …’

‘Calm down,’ Osomatsu said, infuriatingly casual as he approached the firestorm for a better look. ‘It’s already spinning itself out. Look, I’ll pull the fire out, it’ll be fine.’

‘What the hell are you doing?!’ Choromatsu yelled, stamping his elegant boot as Osomatsu easily
siphoned the flames back to himself, gesturing in a grand “ta-dah” as the shaky remnants of the tornado dissolved. The fine ashes of half a dozen cushions dropped and scattered the short distance between them. It might have widened a kilometre, the volume Choromatsu shouted. ‘What if that had gotten out of control, we could have burnt down the whole suburb!’

‘That little thing?’ Osomatsu said incredulously, shaking his gauntlets of fire like he’d flick his hands of droplets after washing. ‘You’re not that powerful yet, little brother. It couldn’t even pick up your phone,’ he added. Choromatsu phone and tablet sat undisturbed on a crate; he always removed it from his pocket before transforming in case of emergencies. ‘And there’s nothing good left to burn in here; Ahn’s just as uptight as you, you know? And I know my fire,’ Osomatsu said with conviction, little trace of his usual rashness. ‘Even if the whole building went up, I could put it out. Have a bit of faith in me, would you?’

‘But it …’ Choromatsu stammered, realising the fiery tornado had barely reached over their heads. And Osomatsu was right: without Choromatsu to ground it, it had lost structure almost immediately. ‘But what if it had gotten bigger and … what if it hadn’t sucked up the fire?’ he exclaimed, doggedly keeping his speeded breath from hitching in his constricted airway. ‘You almost blasted me! If you ever do that again, I will shoot you for it! Do you think I’m joking?!’

‘Hey, you surprised me!’ Osomatsu exclaimed, throwing up his gauntlets as Choromatsu unsheathed a pistol; the weapon quavered violently in his grip. ‘You can’t just say shit like that and not expect some kind of reaction. Seriously, a fucking lizard? What the hell, Spectrum Alliance?’

‘Re-reaction?!’ Choromatsu wheezed, shoving his brother away when Osomatsu attempted a bracing slap on the arm, heedless of the threat to shoot. ‘Trying to explode me is not exactly the reaction I had in mind!’

‘You’re transformed,’ Osomatsu reminded like that was sufficient apology. ‘Sure, it might have hurt, but you would have … look, I’m sorry,’ he said, finally rueful in face of Choromatsu’s wrath. ‘It was an accident. But … that was awesome. Let’s do it again! Combo attack, Choromatsu!’ he exclaimed, shaking his brother by the shoulders and eyes glinting like he’d just unlocked a surprise achievement.

‘What?’ Choromatsu said weakly, dragged back and forward by his brother’s enthusiasm. ‘You’re not serious?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Osomatsu wheedled. ‘I’ve got this.’

‘Like you “had this” when you nearly took me out?’ he retorted, breathing hard as his windpipe thankfully slackened. His brother was insane. But now Choromatsu was far more upset with himself than Osomatsu. With a drawn-out moan, he sank onto a crate, heavy sweat on his brow from stress or fire. Or both. Why had he gone to pieces like that? The Wyvern wasn’t supposed to fall apart! With all he’d come to expect and almost envy of his transformed self, Choromatsu couldn’t help but feel forsaken by his powerful form.

‘Hey, I almost … okay, maybe I overreacted a bit. But I almost slammed you with fire. Then it got sucked into a tornado,’ Osomatsu reminded. ‘Freaking out is totally understandable.’

Lowered head in his hand, Choromatsu felt as Osomatsu sat by him and nudged him in the arm. The kind gesture was almost painful, even to Choromatsu’s transformation-toughened skin. The eldest barely knew his strength anymore. ‘Give the Wyvern a break. Give yourself a break,’ Osomatsu added, squeezing Choromatsu in a brief one-armed hug before swinging his legs in buoyant anticipation. ‘So are we doing this again or what? We don’t have to,’ he was quick to say when Choromatsu moaned again. He actually felt a little better with Osomatsu’s support—his big brother really was surprisingly reliable. But he hated losing control like that—of his element or of himself.
They couldn’t try it again, it was too dangerous.

‘What isn’t dangerous about any of this?’ Osomatsu asked, but managed his disappointment quite well. A few beats after he’d shot down the notion of combo attacks, Choromatsu reluctantly accepted his brother had a point. More, he realised the hard beating of his heart now had nothing to do with panic. He wanted to try it again. Badly.

With the rising tempo of his pulse, Choromatsu realised he liked power. That sounded pretty bad, he thought with a twitch of his finger against his pistol trigger. He liked it, but more … he liked not being helpless. The destructive winds of his transformation were so comforting he actually looked forward to the embarrassing things. And when he’d flown through lightning Choromatsu had been almost serene in his aggression, knowing he had the power to turn the tides.

Even if he lost control, Choromatsu wasn’t helpless anymore. The Wyvern could handle power. So could the Salamander. And a full-blown firestorm would have so much power.

Choromatsu took another moment to gather himself. Osomatsu showed surprising patience as he waited, only a few scuffs of his boot to indicate how restless he was. Then Choromatsu slipped his pistol back over his shoulder. When he spoke, his voice was totally steady. ‘Okay. Let’s try again.’

Clearing space—Choromatsu blasted back a few of his junked shooting targets at Osomatsu’s enthusiastic suggestion, quickly mastering wind as brute force—Choromatsu jumped across the ceiling to double-check for anything that would burn, and they began to experiment. The brothers had raised their fifteenth firestorm as a miniature cyclone that burned over their heads when Choromatsu’s phone sang out Nyaa-chan’s latest single. Letting Osomatsu clean up the waning force, with the barest hesitation, he scooped his phone towards him. It flipped, over and over, soaring twenty metres straight toward him. Slowing it with a counter gust as gravity took charge, Choromatsu caught the crappy device in a small vortex that twirled earnestly over his palm. Weary, but high on progress and praying it wasn’t all a fluke, he phased back to himself and answered, slightly breathless with all he’d spent. ‘This is Matsuno Choromatsu.’

‘Choromatsu?’ Karamatsu’s voice came urgently through the speaker.

‘Karamatsu-niisan?’ Choromatsu said in surprise, motioning Osomatsu keep quiet as he phased too. They didn’t often call each other; Choromatsu didn’t think Ichimatsu or Jyushimatsu even carried their phones.

‘I’m sorry to call you at work. I hope I’m not …’

‘No, I’m leaving now,’ Choromatsu said, pushing through the slightly awkward strain on his vocal cords, still not settled with the brother he’d hurt. But what had him so agitated? ‘Karamatsu-niisan, what’s wrong?’

‘It’s just … I’m not sure how worried we should be. We are adults, after all, and he’s only … I mean, it’s important,’ he said in a rush over his prattle. ‘But it’s … we can’t find him.’

‘Find who?’ Choromatsu demanded, waving again for Osomatsu to shut up, about to demand the same. ‘Karamatsu, what’s going on?’

On the other end of the line, Karamatsu swallowed audibly. ‘It’s Ichimatsu. He’s wandered off, he’s gone.’

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God, he was too tired for this shit. He should never have followed Jyushimatsu’s lead when they left
the hospital, spiting Karamatsu wasn’t worth this agony. He should have just let him call a damn taxi … how was it that, whatever either of them did, Shittymatsu always had to make his life so fucking painful?

It was a gorgeous day, cold but bright with little sign of the snow promised for that evening. Ichimatsu had liked going for walks. It was the only exercise he got, easy and relaxing. Walking was where he met his cats, brought them treats, scratched their ears while purrs rumbled happily in their throats. But along with his health and whatever illusions of peace he’d once maintained, disease had stolen that, too. The gorgeous day could go fuck itself.

Disease. He had one. That, and a future of hospital visits to look forward to while they figured out what the hell it was. Ichimatsu grunted as he trudged, aches permeating every layer of tissue down to his marrow while Jyushimatsu gamboled ahead and Karamatsu walked stiflingly close. If any of his brothers noticed he didn’t take his freshly-prescribed medications—and one of them would, six of them crammed in that narrow house with the noisiest bastard in the world for an eldest brother—they’d have Jyushimatsu hold him down while they forced the the drugs down his throat. Ichimatsu sure as hell wouldn’t refuse the more powerful painkillers, but was furious over his distinct lack of diagnosis. He didn’t trust the overpaid pricks, these so-called medical professionals. All he wanted was a simple explanation, and he wouldn’t go along with anything they said until he had it. How many fucking tests had he suffered through? It wasn’t glandular fever, nothing infectious. And now they were talking about psychological causes … god, how fucking hard was it? Diagnose him already!

‘Fuck,’ he muttered, headache finding new and exciting ways to dig through his brain with every dragging step. He’d only just taken some damn painkillers, weren’t they supposed to be fast acting?

‘Ichimatsu? Are you …’

‘I’m fine,’ he spat at Karamatsu, and promptly invalidated that assertion by almost falling flat on his face. He flinched, brother’s arm encircling his waist to hold him steady. ‘Get the hell off me,’ he hissed, trying to jerk away. Karamatsu hesitated, but surprisingly didn’t obey.

‘I’m sorry, brother. But I can’t let you fall.’

‘I’m not going to fucking fall, am I?’ Ichimatsu shot back, wavering frailly and ignoring every sign from his body that he would never make it home like this. Even before he got sick, Ichimatsu had always been highly aware of his limitations. But he hated showing weakness, especially now that he was nothing but weak. And especially in front of Shittymatsu, who hatefully seemed to see straight through him as Ichimatsu lied through his teeth.

‘I could carry you, if you need …’

‘Over my dead body,’ Ichimatsu growled. From what he’d heard, he’d been lugged around by his painful brother far too much of late.

‘Niisan?’ Jyushimatsu loped back to keep pace with his brothers, beaming face alight with the fine weather and activity. ‘Isn’t this nice? We haven’t been walking in so long!’

‘Yeah,’ Ichimatsu mumbled, biting back snark that maybe there was a good reason he hadn’t been out. He couldn’t hold it against Jyushimatsu, that he forget his altered needs. Not when he so often deprived himself to keep Ichimatsu company. It probably never occurred to him to complain. But Jyushimatsu had needs, too. Ichimatsu couldn’t stand it, that his shittiness kept his energetic brother from all he thrived on.
‘Sunshine, brisk air, the company of brothers—this day is nothing short of glorious. The park’s not far away,’ Karamatsu broke off his agonising proclamations. Ichimatsu glanced at him sharply as Karamatsu released him, motioning Jyushimatsu to take his place as pre-emptive support. He complied with almost overwhelming enthusiasm, but Ichimatsu barely recoiled, always more willing to let Jyushimatsu help him. ‘I’m feeling a bit tired, why don’t we sit down for a few minutes?’

‘Can we play?’ Jyushimatsu asked, swinging out his baseball bat in his free hand. Karamatsu blinked, ever bewildered where the fifth born kept the bat.

‘Sure, why not?’

Shittymatsu had better not expect him to be grateful, Ichimatsu thought mutinously as they entered the park. He wasn’t sure Jyushimatsu caught their older brother’s clear undertone, that the rest was for his sake. Regardless, his younger brother’s arm was steady, steps painstakingly measured to Ichimatsu’s shamble as he guided him to a bench, helping him sit with barely a jostle. ‘Are you okay there, Niisan?’

‘Fine,’ Ichimatsu mumbled. ‘You go play, okay?’

‘Okaaayyyyy!’ Jyushimatsu’s shout carried halfway across the park. Half a metre away, it scrambled Ichimatsu’s brain. Gripping his protesting head between his palms, he glared when Karamatsu sat beside him. But the slightly older man didn’t stay long, Jyushimatsu already waving vigorously.

‘Karamatsu-niisan, are you coming?! Do you want to pitch for me!’

‘Coming, Jyushimatsu! Rest all you need,’ Karamatsu said, lowering his voice considerately after Jyushimatsu’s unintended assault on their eardrums. ‘We’ll leave when you’re ready.’

Ichimatsu could only watch his brothers play a short while before needing to close his eyes. His brain needed a break from the flood of painful input—too much light, too much colour, too much streaking movement. The moment his eyes closed he felt himself begin to drop off. Ichimatsu didn’t fight it; he seized any moment of actual rest he could get. Unfortunately, his sleep was an unwelcome instance where he dropped into subconsciousness only to be hoisted out what felt like a second later, feeling no more refreshed. But time had passed. It was dark, he realised dazedly, cracking an eye open after grudgingly accepting he was awake. And it was snowing. Ichimatsu shivered, though he wore his hoodie and outer coat. And he didn’t feel overly cold … he probably had another fever, he thought glumly. Disoriented, he raised his lolling head.

Then Ichimatsu saw he didn’t know where he was. He wasn’t on the park bench, not even in the park. He sat on the cold ground, slumped to a wall by the mouth of a narrow alley. And he was alone, his brothers nowhere in sight. ‘Wh-what the hell …’

Needing to brace heavily to the wall, Ichimatsu stumbled upright and lurched from the darkened alley. It was barely lighter in the open; snowflakes whirled obscuringly from a now-leaden sky. Ichimatsu fought down a rush of dread. He didn’t recognise this block, he didn’t know these shopfronts. Clearly he was still in Tokyo, but what kind of reassurance was that? It was the biggest fucking city on Earth! Shuffling to the nearest intersection, Ichimatsu squinted through the flurry at entirely unfamiliar street names.

Where the hell was he? He had no idea. But he was uneasily bewildered only seconds before a far more pressing concern dawned on him. Its dread was colder, icily dripping his veins full. Not where the hell was he—how the hell had he gotten there? He’d fallen asleep in the park; that was the last he remembered. Had he been out of it, wandered away without realising? However he’d gotten there, it was completely erased from his memory. Ichimatsu swallowed painfully. That wasn’t good. He’d been practically incoherent after passing out for so long at the beach, but there was a big difference
Ichimatsu shakily raised the back of his hand to his forehead, frightened and desperate for some explanation, however unpleasant. But he was shit at telling body temperature; he might be raving and have absolutely no idea. Was this raving? A frenzied chuckle dribbling from his lips, Ichimatsu tried to tell if he was lucid. He quickly grew frustrated, no idea how to know. But if he was delirious he probably couldn’t be trusted to judge his state of mind, anyway.

Ichimatsu moaned long and low, slouched in the middle of the footpath. Registering the insecure slink through his stomach as people huffed in annoyance and separated to stream around him, he hoisted his hygienic mask from where it rested on his chin, shielding his lower face. What was he supposed to do? Ichimatsu never carried his phone, and a quick scrabble in his pockets revealed he had no change for pay phones. Who would he call anyway, he reasoned bluntly, staring down mounting panic. Like hell he’d let Shittymatsu see him so lost and confused, and Jyushimatsu wouldn’t have his phone either. The others were probably still at work, and he wouldn’t call them if they weren’t—he’d never hear the end of it. This was humiliating enough; Ichimatsu wouldn’t beg for rescue. But he teetered where he stood, already losing his limited strength to stress. He had to sit down before his shitty body gave out.

Looking up and down the street, he spotted a Mos Burger and hurried towards it. Slumped on a stool in the heated restaurant, Ichimatsu braced his elbows on the counter and clasped his sweaty hair, trying to calm down. Dimly noting as a staff member wiped the counter beside him, Ichimatsu considered asking her for help. Yeah, he thought sarcastically a moment later with a deep snort. Like he'd really announce to some random he didn’t know where the fuck he was. There would be maps in a train station, he could figure it out on his own. Refusing to even ask where the nearest station was—he was far too proud and too socially inept—Ichimatsu glanced away abruptly when she saw him looking. The staffer inexplicably smiled. It had to be a condition of her employment, to act so friendly; he was getting weird looks from all over the restaurant. Ichimatsu knew he looked an even worse mess than usual, dishevelled and shaking.

‘Did you want to order anything?’

‘Mmm,’ he grunted ambiguously, ramping up disinterest to avoid further interaction. Though he made it blatantly obvious he didn’t want to talk, the girl hovered, and Ichimatsu reddened with her misplaced concern. But finally she left him in peace, and he breathed out in slow relief. The replenishing inhale took more effort than it should, and Ichimatsu noted listlessly it was slightly hard to swallow. That wasn’t unusual. His throat always burned now, so tight and … Ichimatsu’s dulled eyes shot wide as he prodded the aching tissue, realising there was something beneath his fingers, something metallic.

Blood drained from his face, he almost fell off his stool in his rush for the bathroom. Pulling his upper layers down at the neck, Ichimatsu leaned right up into the wide mirror over the sink. Angling his chin left and right, he examined his throat. The degrading sniggers of patrons who sauntered behind him in the glass—“What is he doing?”—faded in his ears as he strained to see something that —another few moments of desperate hunting seemed to confirm—just wasn’t there. Slowly, Ichimatsu released the neckline of clothing, wadded tight in his fist. He’d been sure he felt … something. Like a band, looping his throat tight …

Shakes worsened, Ichimatsu ran a spurt of water into the sink and splashed his heated face. He rested his forehead to the mirror, icy by contrast. ‘This is nothing,’ he made himself murmur. He was sick, that was all. Frightened as he was, Ichimatsu got three-quarters to convincing himself there was nothing more to it. Even so, he had no intention of telling anybody what had happened that afternoon. His family’s fussing was already infuriating, and his doctors could go to hell. He was fine,
Ichimatsu decided more stoically, and glared at his reflection until he stood by it, stamping down all honesty that he knew better. He was fine. He would be fine.

Releasing his numbed grip from the edge of the sink, Ichimatsu slowly straightened. He had to get home. And he could do it alone. Stumbling from the bathroom, he lowered his eyes and began his tortuous search for a train station.

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Matsuno Jyushimatsu didn’t wear a watch. He barely even turned his phone on. But somehow he still knew. ‘Hey, Totty, it’s almost one, isn’t it?’

‘Hmm?’ Fingertips drifting over the checkerboard as he considered his next move, Todomatsu’s most treasured possession rested screen up on the table, ever near to hand. ‘Almost, Jyushimatsu-niisan,’ he said, checking the smartphone. ‘Why?’

Jyushimatsu immediately leapt up. Accidentally bumping the table with his sudden movement, Todomatsu dove to rescue the game pieces. ‘Time to take Ichimatsu-niisan to the doctor!’

‘What!’ Todomatsu exclaimed. ‘You’re leaving now?’

Apparently Totty was a few short moves from victory now he’d salvaged the game from Jyushimatsu’s unintentional skirting of conventional rules. Jyushimatsu’s broad grin tweaked sheepishly. It was hard not to get caught up in excitement. And when he got excited, he could be hasty. Rules were overlooked, mix-ups were made. It all happened. But it was all good.

‘We can finish later!’ he promised, already looking forward to it.

‘I guess I should get ready for my shift,’ Todomatsu groused, eyeing the aborted game resentfully as Jyushimatsu pumped his arms over his head, flexing at the knee to encourage sitting still out of his system. ‘How did you even remember his appointment?’ the youngest asked as he stretched. Todomatsu sounded surprised. Jyushimatsu’s brothers were often surprised over such simple things. He wasn’t sure why. Ichimatsu’s hospital visits were important. Jyushimatsu’s grin sank a millimetre, hurt that Totty thought he’d forget about them. But he shrugged it off, fast reclaimed by events at hand.

Clearing the stairs in two great leaps, Jyushimatsu caught himself before he threw open the bedroom door with a bang. Ichimatsu was having headaches. Often informed he was noisy by nature, Jyushimatsu made a mighty effort to control said nature for his brother’s sake and slid the door open with exaggerated care, just to be sure. ‘Ichimatsu-niisan,’ he whispered loudly, squatting by the couch. Careful not to shake him too vigorously, he laid a strong hand on his brother’s somewhat-diminished shoulder. Ichimatsu should really be eating better; the sick needed every bit of energy they could swallow to get healthy. ‘Ichimatsu-niisan!’

Ichimatsu groaned. He didn’t seem to register his guided movement, being levered to his feet and towed diligently along, until Jyushimatsu propped him up in the entrance. ‘Wh-what … shit,’ he grumbled, remembering his appointment as Jyushimatsu dialled a taxi.

‘We’ll be waiting, thank you very much!’ he sang out, giving their address to the operator.

‘Th-thank you for using our service,’ they said, sounding thoroughly discombobulated. They hung up in a hurry. Jyushimatsu blinked at the receiver. Then he threw it down, charging to jump into his outside slippers.

‘Isn’t the weather nice, Niisan?’ he said, beaming skyward as Ichimatsu shielded his eyes, shuffling
behind him. Seeing shadows on the roof, Jyushimatsu squinted for a face and name. Sunglasses, guitar, slight slump when alone.

‘Karamatsu-niiiiisssaaannnnnn!’ he shouted, waving his arms over his head in case he didn’t hear. So glad to see him, a bouquet of helium balloons inflated in his chest. Karamatsu had to come with them. He was always so much fun, always ready to listen and play no matter what, always ready with plasters and lollipops when Jyushimatsu disagreed with gravity and ground level. Karamatsu was, by a super mega homerun, their most devoted brother. That made him one of the coolest people in the world, in Jyushimatsu’s eyes. He wished he understood, why his big brother cried when he thought they were all asleep.

‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ he called again, gleefully waving faster as Ichimatsu saw who he signalled and straightaway tried to capture his swishing sleeves and stop him. ‘Come with us!’

‘Stop it,’ Ichimatsu mumbled. ‘If we have to fucking go, let’s just go.’

He didn’t have much energy to spare, Jyushimatsu thought suddenly, and slowed one windmilling oversized sleeve to let Ichimatsu tug it down. Immediately, he transferred all his boundless spirit to empower his other arm.

‘Go where?’ Karamatsu called. Ichimatsu groaned loudly. Poor Ichimatsu-niisan, Jyushimatsu thought sympathetically as he beckoned their brother down. He was in so much pain.

‘The hospital! Come with us, Ichimatsu-niisan might need more needles! We all know he can’t deal with them!’

‘Shut up.’ Ichimatsu growled, too late as Karamatsu eagerly shouted he’d be right down. ‘Look, the taxi’s already here. Let’s just go.’

Jyushimatsu regarded the taxi in mild surprise. When had it gotten there? But he wasn’t flummoxed long. Suddenly super keen to get to his appointment, Ichimatsu wrenched open the taxi door and tried to haul the younger man into the backseat. But Jyushimatsu planted his feet to the gutter, too sturdy for the weakened Ichimatsu to shift.

‘Excited for the doctor?’ Jyushimatsu asked cheerfully, swinging his brother’s arm as Ichimatsu panted breath back. ‘That’s a nice change. You never could push me over, Niisan,’ he added matter-of-factly as Ichimatsu tried again, grunting with effort. Jyushimatsu was highly aware of his disproportionate strength. He was glad of it most of the time, but sometimes it made life hard. Like when he lost control with overexcitement. Or when people joked that his ample muscle made up for what he lacked in other departments. ‘Stop it, okay? You’re getting tired. We’ll leave in a minute, we’re just waiting for Karamatsu-niisan.’

‘Why did you have to ask him?’ Ichimatsu grumbled as Karamatsu sashayed through the front door, pulling on his overcoat with a spin on his heel. The fourth born demanded to sit by a window, but Karamatsu arranged them as Osomatsu had in the taxi from the train station: Ichimatsu in the middle, brothers either side. Jyushimatsu was happy to enforce this, sure their brother would benefit from support at both shoulders. But Karamatsu didn’t need to worry. Ichimatsu hated the hospital, but he wouldn’t jump out at a red light. Maybe Osomatsu or even a panicky Choromatsu might risk it, but it was too much hassle for Ichimatsu to bother, even if he were up to the manoeuvre. Jyushimatsu grinned: for someone who disliked fuss and trouble, Ichimatsu sure caused enough of it in face of his healthcare.

So naturally, Jyushimatsu hooked his arm through Ichimatsu’s as he jabbered through the drive. His was one of the few touches his ill brother accepted. Whoever insisted otherwise—even Ichimatsu
himself—his brother was no different to anyone else: he needed contact, and Jyushimatsu was keen to give everything Ichimatsu could cope with.

There were a lot of people Jyushimatsu liked—he couldn’t think of anyone he outright disliked, easily zooming in on the best of everyone he met. He loved his parents and brothers with abandon even he sometimes couldn’t believe. But he was closest with Ichimatsu. They were close in a way he wasn’t sure many were blessed to be. It wasn’t quite opposites attract or soulmates; their dynamic was harder to label. They were counterbalanced. Jyushimatsu was utterly unashamed of all he was and wasn’t. But he wouldn’t be Jyushimatsu in the way he understood Jyushimatsu should be without Ichimatsu as his equal and opposite reaction.

Beside him, Ichimatsu shifted as though to rest his head on Jyushimatsu’s shoulder. But he pulled up mid-motion, eyes flicking to Karamatsu on his right. Shooting him a wrathful glare, Ichimatsu instead pressed his head into the padding of his seat. Jyushimatsu’s eternal smiled saddened. Poor Karamatsu. Ichimatsu’s problem with the second born was something he couldn’t quite fathom. Osomatsu had once suggested that Ichimatsu felt smothered by him. That had only enhanced Jyushimatsu’s confusion—he was a million times more overbearing than Karamatsu. He knew there was a difference. But still he didn’t understand what had caused this rift with Karamatsu.

They understood each other so well, both distinct outliers in the world’s expectations. But while Jyushimatsu’s heart was full and open, there were so many secret doors to Ichimatsu’s soul. It didn’t upset him exactly, that he couldn’t break them all down. But Jyushimatsu experienced an odd tug where his emotions lived in his chest every time he saw how much of himself Ichimatsu shut away.

Jyushimatsu was immediately engaged in the hospital waiting room by an abandoned health monitor on wheels. By the time the flustered receptionist had rescued the machine, extracting him from a snare of wires, Ichimatsu had already withdrawn to an exam room. ‘Aww, he didn’t wait for us,’ Jyushimatsu pouted, flopping into a plastic seat by Karamatsu.

‘He wanted to go by himself,’ Karamatsu replied, hoping to soothe any hurt feelings. Jyushimatsu returned his smile. He didn’t need the reassurance. But he appreciated it all the same.

Draped in his hard little seat, one leg kicked over his knee, Karamatsu flicked through a magazine. Jyushimatsu bounced, taking in the familiar waiting area with eyes wide open. When sitting and waiting offered no more than its basic description, he soon sprang to his feet and followed them.

‘He wanted high speed!’ he explained as Karamatsu caught up and bowed to an irate nurse. Emphatically miming their race through the corridors, Jyushimatsu wafted his sunshine sleeves as finish line banners for the bundle-of-sticks old man he’d just shared a joyride with. The man beamed as he was wheeled from the crash scene, unhurt and elated. He hadn’t had that kind of fun in a long time. Jyushimatsu lit like a firework with the other’s delight. ‘First place, congratulations! Thanks for your hard work, we couldn’t have done it without you!’

The wheels of the trolley they’d overturned still spun squeakily. Tubing and tongue depressors were strewn ankle-deep across the floor. Slightly dishevelled and out of breath from the chase, the nurse’s eye twitched. ‘Please keep your voice down,’ she snapped, not sounding like she meant please at all. ‘And will you leave that?’ she added as Karamatsu began trying to clean up, hunkering to gather the spilt implements. Fed up, the nurse breathed a shuddering whoosh as she glared between the brothers as though the havoc had been intention. Jyushimatsu’s head tilted, a little taken aback as Karamatsu drew himself up almost grandly and assumed full responsibility.

‘S-sorry for the mess?!’ he offered belatedly, the angles his chin made with his neck increasingly bizarre as the nurse went on rousing herself hoarse. She must be stressed, he thought, confusion somersaulting cleanly into compassion, to be this upset over an accident.
'Ichimatsu-san causes enough trouble without the rest of you … Please just … go. Just go.'

Spinning about, Jyushimatsu’s slight unease twanged itself out of his chest as he raced Karamatsu back to their seats. Getting a step ahead of Jyushimatsu’s scarper, Karamatsu had barely returned his grinning high five when the older brother was called sharply to the reception desk. ‘You’re disturbing patients,’ Jyushimatsu heard the receptionist say in a voice low and strained. Karamatsu was sure getting a good workout, all the bowing he was doing today. ‘Either leave him at home or get him under control.’

Jyushimatsu’s healthily bounding heart missed a hurdle. Alarmed that he might be barred from the hospital, he promised the moment Karamatsu dropped back into his chair, ‘I can sit still and wait, Niisan. See?’

He eagerly demonstrated, fixing his widened gaze to a blank patch of wall. Held perfectly still, he fully intended to keep it up until Ichimatsu was done. But “sit and wait” was always harder than he remembered. With nothing crucial in that moment to cement it, though he tried valiantly his focus slipped as water invariably escapes cupped hands. Already squirming, Jyushimatsu was pleased when they were called to Ichimatsu’s exam room and surrendered his staring contest, offering the inanimate victor a lively bow.

Jyushimatsu cheerfully caught Ichimatsu as he tried escape past them. ‘Let me go!’ he shouted raggedly as Jyushimatsu hauled him back to the examination table, sitting up there with him. ‘Jyushimatsu, let me go right now! I’m not doing this shit anymore, I’ve had it!’

Ichimatsu yelled so loudly a security guard stuck his head in the room and asked if they needed help. Jyushimatsu pressed his cheek to his brother’s heated one as Karamatsu assured both doctors and guard there would be no more problems. Shouting took a lot of energy, he knew. Jyushimatsu shouted a lot, volume easily matched to his high intensity. Ichimatsu couldn’t afford to shout, not like this. ‘You really don’t like needles, do you, Niisan? Calm down, there, there …’ he sang quietly, eternal movement reduced to gentle rocking of his enraged brother.

‘Don’t you dare “calm down” me …’

Practically spitting while Jyushimatsu hugged him still, Ichimatsu flinched as Karamatsu gently extended his arm, pulling up his sleeve to give the hassled medical professionals access to his elbow. There were more tests to run, they explained briefly, Karamatsu hanging on every word of their precious brother’s health. Ichimatsu couldn’t help but try to twist away, clamping teeth down on his whimper as blood was drawn.

‘He’s not finishing his meals,’ Jyushimatsu supplied brightly, enthusiasm slightly out of place as Ichimatsu sulkily refused to talk to the doctors about exercise and eating habits. ‘And he used to go walking almost every day, but now he hardly goes out at all! Sometimes he doesn’t get up all day!’

‘Will you shut up?’ Ichimatsu demanded as the doctors spoke quietly, Karamatsu vocally dismayed to see in numbers much weight he had lost. Jyushimatsu wasn’t surprised. It was hard to see, but there was plenty meant to be beneath Ichimatsu’s baggy hoodie that was no longer there; snuggled against him, there was no doubt. Already in a bad mood, the fourth born grew increasingly hot in the face as the doctors addressed a highly-responsive Karamatsu more than him—“But what does that mean, doctor? If there’s anything I can do … what’s mine is his, down to the last drop of blood in my veins!”

‘I don’t want your blood,’ Ichimatsu uttered, looking like he wanted to physically kick both his brothers out. A little confused by Karamatsu’s dramatic, but deathly serious donation offers, the doctors sent them to the hospital pharmacy with a long list. ‘Wait outside when you get back. We’d
like a few more words with …’ they trailed off, eyeing their problem patient. Ichimatsu stared hostilely back. Jyushimatsu hopped and skittered as they queued at the pharmacy counter, shedding his extended period of stillness as Karamatsu scanned the list.

‘You’ve turned pale, Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu observed, bending backwards from his nearby frolic to regard his brother’s greyed features, list crumpled in his fist as the cash register bleeped. ‘Don’t worry, Ichimatsu-niisan will be okay! There’s so many people looking after him!’

‘I know, I trust his doctors. It’s just … a little expensive,’ Karamatsu reached apprehensively for his wallet. Remembering suddenly, Jyushimatsu sprang to his brother’s rescue: dad had given him a wad of notes for medical costs before leaving the house that morning—“And you won’t lose it? You won’t forget what it’s for and spend it on something else? Jyushimatsu, are you sure? This is a lot of money. I need you to look at me … concentrate, son … and promise you’ll be careful.”

Back in the waiting area, Jyushimatsu was in the grips of a heated face-pulling contest with a kid in a cast when Ichimatsu reappeared and slouched for the reception desk. ‘Bweh!’ he cried in defeat. Clutching his heart, Jyushimatsu’s own grotesque expression contorted, features pulled to the centre of his face as he hammed it up for the wildly-giggling kid, he jumped to his feet. ‘Niisan, you’re all done! Ready to go home?’

But it was the way life did things that getting home wasn’t so easy. A restful walk was exactly what his brother needed—Jyushimatsu had known. And Ichimatsu had wanted to walk, pulling down his mask to smile slowly as Karamatsu sighed, disconnecting his call to the taxi company. But he hadn’t smiled for long, and Jyushimatsu was stuck trying to understand how his wrecked brother could get healthy if he straight out couldn’t exercise while Karamatsu took charge. Following his lead, they soon had Ichimatsu resting on a bench, Jyushimatsu hyped for the baseball Karamatsu had promised. Bat swinging heartily, he dove in every direction to crack every pitch flying, loving his brother’s laughter as he tore after his own powerful hits and crash tackled the ball to the dirt. But though he laughed, Karamatsu wasn’t in the game. Not really. ‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ he shouted from fifty metres. ‘Are you okay!!’

Karamatsu tried to brush off his concern with a confident pose, waving for Jyushimatsu to toss him the ball. But even at his distance, Jyushimatsu felt his brother waver. Ball loose in his grip and bat dragging, he padded right up to Karamatsu and looked on him wide-eyed. ‘Are you sure, Niisan? You’re shivering,’ he saw as Karamatsu’s shoulders twitched, and checked his brother wore enough layers. ‘It is cold, are you cold?’

‘Dearest brother, I’m absolutely … I’m fine,’ Karamatsu fell off his usual roller coaster of words. Jyushimatsu was thrown by the weight of his brother’s sudden nervousness as it twitched through his own limbs in sympathy. Karamatsu wore his sunglasses and played with one arm, shifting them higher onto his nose. ‘But I was wondering … about something. Something only you might know about.’

Jyushimatsu blinked. What would only he know about? ‘If you don’t want to talk about it, I completely understand,’ Karamatsu went on, making an attempt at casual that Jyushimatsu barely saw. This upset his brother too much for casual to be real. Karamatsu had been acting a little different, since their beach trip. Maybe this wondering was the reason why. ‘But I was wondering … about that night at pachinko. The first time the cultists attacked, do you remember?’

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Jyushimatsu nodded at once, planting one end of his bat to the ground and swinging off it. He remembered. Sort of. ‘But it’s all everywhere, like my head’s a bowl of wriggly noodles.’

‘You were … affected by them. Controlled, like the news says. I was wondering what it felt like,’ Karamatsu said hurriedly, like the words had boiled in his mouth and he had to get them out before
they burnt him. ‘You don’t have to talk about it,’ he assured again, immediately concerned he’d
overstepped an unspoken boundary. Jyushimatsu shook his head, his turn to reassure. His smile had
shrunk, but it was only concentration as he straightaway tried to think back. There wasn’t a lot
Jyushimatsu had trouble talking about. He would be happy to share his time as a zombie, but that
was one part of that weird night he definitely didn’t retain.

‘I remember my chest feeling funny, when the black stuff hit,’ Jyushimatsu gestured emphatically
over his heart, trying even harder to remember when he saw Karamatsu scraped up his every word. It
was almost intimidating; Jyushimatsu knew no one had listened to him so closely before. ‘Then
Osomatsu-niisan was waking me up. I don’t know what happened in between at all, I wasn’t there.
Maybe Osomatsu-niisan knows,’ Jyushimatsu brightened at the thought. Karamatsu didn’t.

‘Wh-why would he know better than you?’

‘He was there, and I still wasn’t!’ Jyushimatsu reminded with a broadening smile. ‘And he does have
a secret, maybe that’s it!’

‘What are you talking about, what secret?’ Karamatsu asked, so perplexed that Jyushimatsu pressed
the baseball in his hands to give him something solid to focus on. That sometimes worked for him.

‘The one he stopped sharing for. Osomatsu-niisan doesn’t like secrets,’ Jyushimatsu said, gone
solemn as he balanced his bat vertically on the flat of his palm. ‘He only keeps them if he thinks he
has to, like when he gets beaten up for his debts.’

‘What?!’

Jyushimatsu nodded in fervent agreement. ‘But Choromatsu-niisan knows now, so he doesn’t need
to be so lonely anymore! Hasn’t Choromatsu-niisan been doing better since he started working?’
Jyushimatsu smiled happily, swinging a home run hit for his anxious brother’s progress. But his sad
brother, though he gripped the offered baseball tight in whitened knuckles, looked like he’d been
transported to another planet without warning.

‘How do you notice these things?’ Karamatsu asked weakly. For the second time that afternoon,
Jyushimatsu was wounded. Life was a lot to take in. But they were his brothers. Why wouldn’t he
notice?

‘But I didn’t know … any of that. You’re not making that up?’ Karamatsu demanded almost
desperately as Jyushimatsu was reclaimed by surprise, all his hurt drop-kicked into the stratosphere
and forgotten. Karamatsu didn’t know about the secret, or Choromatsu’s anxiety attacks? Weird …
The thought that he might see things the others didn’t made his feelings twist through his chest,
chafing his ribs. Needing more confirmation, Jyushimatsu turned immediately to consult Ichimatsu.

‘Ichimatsu-niisan, you know that … Ichimatsu-niisan?! NIISAN?!’

‘Jyushimatsu, no! Stop, please! Come back!’

Karamatsu’s pleading shouts grew small in Jyushimatsu’s ears with distance and were already locked
out of his brain, all he was now totally focussed. Sometimes Ichimatsu played tricks. But this wasn’t
a joke. He was gone. There was no space in him for shock or dismay; both had shot clean through
his heart and come out the other side. Jyushimatsu ran at top speed, slipping and sliding in his
slippers, straight out of the park and into the streets. ‘Niiisaaaaa! Where are you, Niisan?!’

Hustling through city wards, his full-tilt search might have been aimless. Jyushimatsu had no plan,
didn’t know where Ichimatsu might have gone or even how he could have gone. But every thought
of his brother so tired and in such pain brought a fresh surge of resolve to his boundless stamina and the muscles it powered, and he barely tired as minutes and distance clustered to eat into his driving legs. And even more than his strength, one of Jyushimatsu’s greatest attributes was his luck. He tracked his brother not by scent, but like scent. Not by reason, but like reason. It just was, and Jyushimatsu never questioned it. Hardly slowed the entire way and winding through backstreets, checking every police box to be sure, within an hour Jyushimatsu’s sights snapped on a glimpse of purple as it rounded a corner across the street and two blocks back. ‘NIISAN!’

Bolting the pedestrian crossing on a lucky tail end of a walk signal, Jyushimatsu hurtled down the footpath, people shouting and leaping out of his way before he even had the chance to dodge them. ‘NIISAN!’ Swinging around the corner, he immediately spotted as his brother staggered away, heedless and unhearing. With a hard sprint, Jyushimatsu covered the small distance between them in moments and crash tackled his missing brother from behind. Every thought of his sickness erased by soaring happiness he was found, Jyushimatsu remembered mid-flight and suffered a moment of blank panic before fast pulling Ichimatsu into a bear hug and rolling in air. Hitting the cement hard with his brother on top of him, Jyushimatsu lay very still, grinning dazedly into the sky. When had it started snowing?

‘J-Jyushimatsu …’ he heard Ichimatsu murmur in shock. Nothing else he managed to convey made sense, his poor brother’s awareness almost totally wiped from reality.

‘It’s okay, Niisan. You don’t have to talk.’

Slowly rolling from beneath him with all his extra care, Jyushimatsu shook himself from head to toes, discarding his own sudden tiredness and the jar of impact. Then he pulled Ichimatsu over his shoulder. Utterly oblivious to the stares of passers-by, he carried his exhausted brother all the way home and put him to bed, tucking him in at his end of their massive futon. Jyushimatsu dozed deeply, still kneeling at his side, when Karamatsu threw the bedroom door open like there was fire on the other side. ‘Ichimatsu! Are you … J-Jyushimatsu,’ he stammered, Jyushimatsu orienting to the bang of the door as Ichimatsu slept on like death. ‘You’re here …’

‘Yeah!’ Jyushimatsu smiled, blinking placidly up at his big brother. But his wearied cheerfulness stalled, seeing Karamatsu’s dishevelled hair, the sweat on his greyed face. Snow melted off his shoulders, dampening his hoodie in freezing drips. ‘Niisan, what's wrong?’

‘I … we’ve been looking for hours,’ he gulped out with difficulty, arm shaking where he gripped the doorframe. Tears leaked in silent pain from the corners of his eyes, streaming down his screwed-up face. Jyushimatsu was stunned. Karamatsu was crying in front of him, he never did that. He only ever cried alone. ‘S-sweet Jyushimatsu … why didn’t you call when you got back? The phone’s just downstairs if yours isn’t …’

Jyushimatsu gazed, open mouth widening in a smile suddenly stricken. He hadn’t told Karamatsu that he’d found their brother, hadn’t even thought of it. Jyushimatsu had let him think for hours that all sorts of terrible things might be happening to Ichimatsu. His chest invaded by palpitations, Jyushimatsu blinked slowly up at his older brother. Karamatsu trembled in the doorframe, physically and emotionally wrecked. ‘Nii … san …’ the almost primordial syllables trickled unstoppered and meaningless from his wide open mouth. He was always so buoyantly resilient, so quick to snap back. But, flickering through unmanageable bewilderment at what he’d done, Jyushimatsu knew he was a fool. He was everything, all those words people had thrown around since high school, believing he couldn’t hear or understand. He was all of it. He’d made mistakes before, said the wrong thing, done the wrong thing. It all happened. But shame had never torn his heart out like this.

‘No, no, Jyushimatsu … it’s all right. Ichimatsu’s home, that’s what’s important.’
Roles entirely reversed from what they ought be, Karamatsu hunkered to comfort, enveloping a totally overwhelmed Jyushimatsu in his arms. Arrested in spaced-out distress, the younger Matsuno could only stare, and gazed vacantly wherever his line of sight was shifted by his older brother’s care.

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Matsuno Todomatsu shoved his smartphone back in his pocket far harder than necessary. Of course Ichimatsu had up and wandered off, that was so typical. His health was no excuse, Ichimatsu would never be satisfied doing anything unless he put out at least half the city in the process. Scowling, Todomatsu knew he should help find him. But he was now on a double shift; he’d stuck his hand up to cover for a workmate who had tickets to a trendy exhibition. In theory, he’d prefer to join them (though he’d cringed at his workmates’ gushing excitement over “Keystones of Japanese Horror in the Late 20th Century”). But Todomatsu hadn’t warranted any invites since his brothers had infiltrated his workplace, and he would do anything to mend his tattered reputation in the barista social scene. He’d been elated when his once-warm workmate had pounced on his offer—god, her hair had smelt so good, bouncing in his direction with her cute nod of thanks. Todomatsu would be climbing from the pit those five demons had cracked beneath his feet any day now.

He knew he wouldn’t get off, and he didn’t want to ask. But duty to family eventually prevailed, and Todomatsu stealthily wove through casual conversation with his manager that he might need an hour or two off. ‘It’s a bit of a family emergency,’ he said, making his sick brother’s vanishing act sound annoying, but increasingly dire when his manager was reluctant. While he gained sympathy points he might cash in later, and even compelled his manager to call nearby stores for assistance with a calculated tremble in his voice, Todomatsu was stuck at the counter until a replacement was dug up. Between customers, he tapped a quick reply message into a group chat he’d long ago dubbed “Those Trashy Brothers”.

Sounds like him—remind me to poison his next meal. Can’t leave work. Will help look as soon as I can get off. Let me know what’s happening.

Already a compulsion, Todomatsu checked his phone incessantly through his busy evening shift, following Osomatsu, Karamatsu and Choromatsu’s exchange, keeping each other up to date as they searched for the wayward fourth born. So distracted, he messed up two orders in a row and bowed deeply in apology. Confronted by his big brown eyes, the nettled customers fast became more understanding, probably deciding the young barista was stressed from a long day, and accepted their remade coffees without further complaint.

God damn it, Ichimatsu, this is all your fault, Todomatsu seethed behind the steam of the coffee maker, manager’s kind reprimand in his ears as fear nudged deeper into his gut. It was warm and bright in the Starbucks, lively with students from the nearby university meeting after class. But it was getting late, and a glance at the flurry beyond the wide windows confirmed it snowed steadily. He was already sick. And with more and more reports of people missing, and more terrifying cultist attacks, if they didn’t find Ichimatsu soon …

Todomatsu gasped when his phone vibrated again. Resentful that his desperation was completely real, he shot a pleading look at his manager. He nodded, and as soon as Todomatsu shoved his last order across the counter he hurried into the back room and yanked his phone from his pocket to see what had happened. The newest message was from Karamatsu: He’s at home, Jyushimatsu found him.

Gone almost lightheaded with relief, Todomatsu dropped into the nearest chair, so glad none of his brothers were there to see just how worried he’d been about the dark bastard. But at least he was
safe. He’d make Ichimatsu regret scaring him like that soon enough—as soon as he recovered, Todomatsu was going to kill him. Okay, heading home he saw Choromatsu’s reply light up his smartphone and quickly sent his own, letting his brothers know he’d stop looking for a replacement and finish his shift.

Returned to the counter and letting his manager know the crisis was over, Todomatsu settled more comfortably into his tasks, brewing and interpreting garbled orders like a pro—“Is there anything else I can do for you today? If you could please wait, your order will be ready in just a moment. Thank you so much!” So relaxed in the normality of his prized part-time job, the good smells and status and scintillating conversations he overheard, he started badly when Choromatsu walked in. Flustered by the unexpected melding of his brothers with his sacred workplace, Todomatsu pretended not to notice—how dare he show himself here, after … he shuddered, not even wanting to think about it. When he loitered over his current order, the manager stepped up to take Choromatsu’s, eyes performing that familiar annoying flick between his young employee and the identical customer.

‘Ah, what do you recommend? A hot chocolate, maybe,’ Choromatsu said, trying and failing to catch Todomatsu’s stubbornly-averted eye.

Choromatsu took a seat at a table in the corner. Eyes darting surreptitiously his way as he worked, Todomatsu struggled between the principle of ignoring his brother in public and the strong urge to know why he was there. When Osomatsu sauntered through the door not long after and took forever ordering, looking between menus and umming and ahhing while a disgruntled queue gathered behind him, Todomatsu huffed lightly in defeat. Finished wiping up a spill, he made himself look busied, clearing tables as he worked his way over to his brothers.

‘Is it really that hard to order a drink, Osomatsu-niisan? What are you doing here?’ he asked, his curiosity and budding concern layered liberally over the blunt question. Choromatsu sighed tiredly, trying to smile at his youngest brother. Osomatsu managed his grin, just a little wearied.

‘Just warming up,’ he said, making a show of gripping his piping-hot mug and leaning over its steam. ‘We’ve been out in the snow for ages.’ Huddled as though unbearably cold, he took a long slurp and pulled a mournful “look at how freezing and tired I am” expression, clearly hoping to cash in for sympathy. As always torn between amusement and reproach, Todomatsu gave him what he wanted and pocketed the ammunition for future use.

‘My poor big brothers,’ he intoned, softhearted comfort only a little stretched. ‘It’s probably been a rough night for you.’

‘Yeah, but at least we could do something,’ Osomatsu said, glancing around the bright coffee shop a little darkly, like it had physically shackled Todomatsu from joining the search. ‘It can’t have been fun being stuck here while he was missing. Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu flashed a pet smile, saying nothing of how torturous the helpless hours had become and his embarrassingly-giddy relief when it was finally over.

‘We came to walk you home,’ Choromatsu got a word in when Osomatsu shut up to finish his cooling coffee. Redistributing the weight of his tray, Todomatsu noticed his manager trying to catch his eye, signaling he wrap up his chat and get back to work. ‘Like you said, it’s been a rough night for all of us.’

Actually touched by the gesture, Todomatsu almost hated to tell them he was on until close. ‘I’m going to be really late, and you’ve both got work tomorrow.’

‘Suppose you’re right,’ Osomatsu drawled, shoving his chair back with a noisy scrape. Todomatsu
was almost surprised; the eldest gave in far more easily than he’d expected. He’d been all ready with a sweet smile to cajole them home, laying on thick the “please, Nisan, you have to go and rest after your long search, it must have been so horrible” and holding back on the “please for the love of god just leave me in peace”.

Todomatsu watched his brothers leave with an irritating mix of emotions vying for influence. There were good reasons the youngest kept his two lives totally separate—there were five very good reasons. But when Osomatsu and Choromatsu began working, he hadn’t expected to notice their absence so badly. At home he thrived on the attention freely showered on him, and he cheekily revelled in playing on his older brothers’ blatant soft spots. With two of his brothers’ presence no longer constants in the house, Todomatsu had been feeling distinctly less pampered.

But it was more than that. Only a little bothered by how shameless he was—Todomatsu knew he was the worst and was usually rather accepting, even proud of the fact—he quickly turned his feigned busyness into the kind that could rightfully be exchanged for pay. But beneath his confident service smile, his renewed conflicts never ceased. Life got complicated when who you loved clashed so horribly with what you wanted.

Todomatsu didn’t only miss being spoilt, he missed his big brothers, too. The house was emptier, more boring without them. And the truth was, he grudgingly began to accept through the rest of his shift, Osomatsu and Choromatsu weren’t the same shithags who’d writhed on that very floor, tormenting the admittedly pretentious youngest in his overt lies about himself and humiliation over them, desperate to make it in a world where his brothers would only ever drag him down. As much as it pained to admit it, neither was as terrible to endure as they’d once been. They had work, they were fitter—now they’d taken over his morning jogs. Osomatsu didn’t ask nonstop after his plans anymore; almost scalding himself at the thought, the youngest flat out refused to admit that he might even miss Osomatsu’s constant neediness.

He reserved one life for his brothers. In his other, they just weren’t acceptable, and he worked fanatically to keep them apart, his social life and career unblemished by his trashy siblings. But realising that Osomatsu and Choromatsu had practically wormed their way to respectability, as he switched off the lights and shut up shop, Todomatsu’s smile was pure. Maybe all his promises to drag their social standing kicking and screaming into the light wouldn’t be empty after all. And he was always on his toes, so careful with his secrets and image moving between his personas. It would be a nice shift of pace, to keep only one life for a while instead of two … but he couldn’t see Karamatsu, Jyushimatsu, and especially not Ichimatsu meeting society’s standards any time soon.

The next morning when he rose it was still freezing, sky black with cloud and the unrisen winter sun. Shivering lightly, but not put off, Todomatsu dressed quickly for his jog. In spite of himself, he double-checked that Ichimatsu hadn’t wandered off again through the night. The fourth born slept fitfully, a light sheen of sweat on his brow despite the cold. Furious as Todomatsu still was, his heart instantly went out to Ichimatsu—even asleep he looked terrible. He’d been out of it since Jyushimatsu carried him home, so none of them knew why he’d taken off like that, apparently
stumbling around the city until he could barely think. As soon as he was coherent, Todomatsu had a feeling their older brothers planned to sit Ichimatsu down for a long, firm chat. The fourth born had to start taking better care of himself.

Leaving Ichimatsu in restless peace, Todomatsu hurried to the entrance. Osomatsu and Choromatsu were already there. ‘Beat you,’ Osomatsu said triumphantly as he pulled on his sneakers, like it was some competition. And Todomatsu responded like it was, bristling as he yanked at his laces. They shouldn’t be beating him at his routine.

‘F-fuck, it’s cold,’ Osomatsu shuddered as he opened the door, palm recoiling from the frigid doorknob. ‘Argh, it’s still snowing, this is such a pain …’

Shivering just as hard with the blast of ice, Todomatsu bitched right back. ‘It’s not like you have to be here, is it?’

‘Osomatsu-niisan cares far too much about his health to be put off by a little snow,’ Choromatsu said, stretching his neck and totally deadpan as Osomatsu grumbled. So did Todomatsu—Choromatsu didn’t seem bothered by the cold at all, leisurely stretching like the biting wind was pleasantly mild. ‘Don’t you, Osomatsu-niisan?’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ he muttered, jumping on the spot to thaw near-solidified blood, rubbing his hands together. Then he slowed, eyes lighting with realisation. Todomatsu watched nonplussed as his eldest brother blew liberally on his hands and rubbed them together hard. What the hell is he … congratulations, Todomatsu thought a little condescendingly at Osomatsu’s smug expression as he enjoyed the warmth. You’ve discovered friction, well done. Why did he have to be weird just when Todomatsu had decided he could put up with him in either life?

‘Right,’ Osomatsu sighed resignedly as Choromatsu joined him outside. ‘Let’s get this over with.’

‘Wait!’ Todomatsu called as his brothers began to jog away. Almost surprising himself, but no turning back now, he finished tying his lace and jumped to follow, a little breathless with sudden butterflies. His older brothers paused, turning back. Todomatsu halted a few steps away, gone almost shy in the snow. ‘You know,’ he said, going for nonchalant. But this was unplanned, and he scuffed his soles against the footpath, cheeks pinking and embarrassingly aware the sweetness beneath wasn’t artificial or played up in the least. The overall effect was almost hopefully tentative, something Todomatsu knew he wouldn’t live down for a long time.

‘You can run with me, if you like.’
That took an unforeseen amount of time. Won't go into huge detail as to why ... smashed into a few walls, slipped in a few slumps, and so on ... don't think I've had quite so many scrapped drafts before. Bit of a rough time, anyway. Couldn't fit everything I wanted in here - was getting as ridiculously long as things normally do when I'm involved, so have divided up EVEN MORE. Given how hard this was to hammer out, would particularly treasure any feedback you'd like to give. Thanks so much for sticking with me, hope you enjoy it, and more to come in the hopefully very near future :) 

Beware the blatant 90s magical girl references in here - couldn't help myself :) 

When he first began magically transforming to face down an army of aliens hell bent on enslaving humankind, Osomatsu hadn’t expected the bane of his existence to be bathtime. 

‘It’s nothing,’ he made light of some nasty welts that crosshatched his collarbone. He’d barely dodged being stuck full as a voodoo doll the night before, countless hair-narrow spikes spearing through his hooded armour. Gauntlet clapped to the sting, Osomatsu had used a split-second of reprieve to investigate the fine rents and fume. Apparently impenetrable wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. ‘Come on, you’re fucking kidding me!’ 

‘I never said it was impenetrable,’ Ahn had parried, to Osomatsu’s disgust. She was relatively safe cloistered on the mezzanine above, napping victim cornered in a swank Ginza hotel. Lithe like a puma, Kizuubari’s claws had screeched against the shiny lobby tiles as they wheeled to re-engage, bristling with deadly needles. But even with his armour in doubt, they were nothing Osomatsu couldn’t handle. With a flame-boosted stamp, he’d corkscrewed over the pale monster’s next flying pounce. Rotating in mid-air, Osomatsu had fast rolled his shoulder when he felt his sleeve snag the tips of their spiny back. To his intense relief, the spikes had slipped free and Kizuubari smashed into the reception desk, helped the last few metres by a fiery kick launched directly from the magical boy’s 10/10—if he did say so himself … and he did—landing. ‘Nice,’ Osomatsu had breathed, dosed up on adrenaline and almost enjoying the carnage as bonsai pots smashed, decks of upset business cards raining heavy on the scene. Wounded and wrathful, Kizuubari had brayed to riddle him with retaliatory holes. ‘I wouldn’t put money on it,’ Osomatsu had smirked, arms stretched brazenly wide to provoke assault. It was too much fun to play the bait while Choromatsu timed his clever shot. Twisting gymnast-like from hundreds of lethal shafts was actually a nice change. The whole “I don’t care if I’ve got coils or tentacles or massive fucking feet, I’m gonna crush you into dust” policy was getting kind of old. 

‘I ran into something at work, do you have to make me admit I’m a clumsy ass?’ Osomatsu brushed Karamatsu off with humour, breezy smile broadening when the younger man upped his sympathy. But as he soaked in the lusciously hot water, he noticed his brother’s eyes flick through steam wafting off its surface, covertly checking for more injuries. Osomatsu staved off a damning fidget beneath his brother’s caring, but oddly cautious eyes. Karamatsu hadn’t mentioned his growing collection of hurts for a while. Eyeing his brother right back, Osomatsu realised it wasn’t because he
hadn’t noticed. He just hadn’t spoken up. Usually such a hotshot, Karamatsu must have avoided any possibility of the eldest flaring at him again. Osomatsu grimaced. It was his own fault. But he didn’t like having that kind of hold over any of his siblings.

The Salamander might heal in moments, but Osomatsu always suffered after a rough fight, blotched by blows that would have liquefied his unenhanced innards. Gone almost pensive, Osomatsu ducked underwater to immerse his smarting clavicle. Protecting his secrets would be less a chore if his brothers’ eyes didn’t expand in shock every time he removed his hoodie. His natural instinct was honesty far beyond what society deemed the best policy; Osomatsu forever collided with keeping his tongue on lockdown. It was true, confiding in Choromatsu made things easier. But he ached for the unreserved company of all his siblings, Lord Takuu a sky-high barricade dropped unceremoniously to divide them—the rotten bastard, Osomatsu thought antagonistically, wringing his sodden hand towel in savage coils and snapping them out. Safety issues or not, it was impossible not to hate keeping something so huge from his brothers.

At least his injuries had honest explanations: Osomatsu only said they happened at work. Thankfully, Choromatsu’s wounds were far fewer; it would be harder for the fake salaryman to explain himself if he was ever badly hurt. But though he constantly upped his game and Osomatsu revelled in having Choromatsu at his back, a battle couldn’t pass where the eldest didn’t tear himself a new one for as good as dragging his little brother into this inescapable scrape.

‘Really, it’s nothing,’ he maintained, shelving less pleasant thoughts and trying to enjoy the attention. Totty’s smooth brow was divided by a crease of worry, gaze lingering on the ugly lacerations. ‘You need to be more careful,’ Choromatsu chided, blending in with their brothers’ ignorance. ‘And don’t just sit on your own, Ichimatsu,’ he addressed the fourth born, holed up in a corner of the bath. ‘Get over here, say something to the clumsy ass.’

Ichimatsu shrugged drearily, no apparent plans to move. But Osomatsu never expected a rousing conversation from him, doubly so recently. He was almost surprised when Ichimatsu inched nearer, the others preoccupied with Jyushimatsu’s surf-like splashes, drenching the surrounding tiles as he stroked up and down the bath with peaking gusto.

‘Sure you’re okay? Watch it, would you?’ he mumbled crankily. Osomatsu grinned, pleased his brother spoke at all: he’d predicted dull hostility for at least another week. Following the fourth born’s poorly-explained vanishing act, Osomatsu had sucked it up and patched things with Karamatsu so they three eldest could combine forces. Their target: Ichimatsu’s relentless disregard for himself. He might petrify a sturdy amphibian’s heartbeat with his glare. But when his older brothers turned against him Ichimatsu had no one to hide behind. Under Choromatsu’s firm instructions, he now took his medications with minimal intervention. He hadn’t protested leaving the house to bathe either, shooting weary daggers over his shoulder when Osomatsu prodded him, keeping him in front where Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu flanked him. Totty had clung anxiously to Choromatsu’s elbow through the entire short, well-lit journey.

‘Brother, are you sure that happened at work?’ Karamatsu asked as they dressed, indicating Osomatsu’s livid welts. The eldest gave an ungainly wobble, halfway into his jeans. Recovering, he flashed an easy smile as he hitched them up. ‘Yeah, man, I’m sure. I was there, wasn’t I?’

‘Of course,’ Karamatsu smiled back. But though he remained hesitant, the second born didn’t let it go. ‘It just looks like … what happened, brother? You know you can tell me anything.’

*If only*, Osomatsu thought almost wistfully. ‘Not much to tell,’ he shrugged, but gauged from
Karamatsu’s avid attention that he needed more. He wasn’t a fan, but Osomatsu kept a few fibs at the ready to get his brothers off his back. Damn it, Karamatsu, you just had to go and make me dishonest. ‘It was just a stupid accident,’ he said, impulsively nicking Karamatsu’s sunglasses and putting them on as his brother vanished briefly, pulling on his hoodie. ‘I crashed into a gate moving some shit.’ Yanking his hoodie straight, Karamatsu’s gave such a trusting smile, awful lenses tinting him in Osomatsu’s eyes as he pretended to grab them straight off the first born’s face. Laughing, Osomatsu tossed them back.

‘Of course I believe you,’ Karamatsu said. ‘I don’t mean to trouble you, dear brother. It is only ever your wellbeing that I …’

‘Ouch,’ Osomatsu cringed and mimed stabbing himself in the stomach. ‘I’m already in pain over here, don’t make it worse. Every word out of your mouth, “dear brother”,’ he grinned as Karamatsu smiled through the friendly wisecrack, resting casually against the lockers. Sometimes Osomatsu wondered if he overdid the act just to make them laugh. But as Todomatsu chuckled and Jyushimatsu hung off Karamatsu’s elbow like he wrestled a swinging gate, Osomatsu’s sibling instinct blared. It was so soft he barely noticed. But once he paid attention he got the distinct impression Karamatsu still wasn’t convinced. ‘What happened to believing everything we say?’ he invaded Choromatsu’s mind to complain.

‘He’s just worried about you,’ Choromatsu replied as he finished buttoning his top.

‘Yeah, I know.’ Osomatsu scrambled into his hoodie, hiding his sigh. He was lucky Karamatsu was so forgiving. If he’d had even a drop of aggression in him, the younger man would have kicked the shit out of his brother for the things he’d said. And Karamatsu was no pushover. Said shit kicking would have hurt.

‘Well,’ Choromatsu said like the solution was obvious, Osomatsu matching arms to sleeves as the vending machine thudded with purchases. ‘Don’t be such an asshole next time Karamatsu being a good guy gets in the way of …’

‘Osomatsu-niisan.’

Osomatsu popped his head into the open in time to see Todomatsu sharing around coffee milk drinks. ‘Totty!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed in gleeful thanks, slurping noisily and juggling Ichimatsu’s bottle while he dried so slowly it might have been an art.

‘Thanks,’ Choromatsu said in mild surprise. Osomatsu cracked his bottle happily—everything tasted better when he didn’t have to pay. But he had to ask between gulps:

‘So what’s this for? You never buy.’

Totty daintily dabbed the corner of his smiling mouth with a tissue and dropped it in a bin. ‘No reason. I wanted to.’

‘You expect us to believe that? Come on, why?’ Osomatsu baited, laughing as Totty glowed vibrant sunrise. He might command the cosiest corner of all their fraternal affection. But the youngest brought this on himself. When he stopped being so sly, Osomatsu might believe he’d treat them solely from the goodness of his heart. But his needling grin was smeared into non-existence when Totty’s soft eyes glistened.

‘I … I was just trying to …’

‘Hey, come on,’ Osomatsu blustered as Karamatsu wrapped a comforting arm around the youngest’s
shoulders. ‘What’s wrong with you? I was just teasing, I didn’t mean …’

The rest of his explanation fizzled on lips gone slack, at a total loss. He cast between his brothers for assistance—he’d banked on retaliation via sass cannon, not tears. Choromatsu looked at him a bit sternly, but no one offered anything remotely useful. Osomatsu’s short spike of resentment—he had that many brothers, was it too much to ask that just one of them helped him out?—phased to remorse as Totty sniffed wetly, hiding his face in Karamatsu’s arm.

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ he tried, freshly-scrubbed skin crawling with shame. From the very little he’d planned for the evening, Osomatsu definitely hadn’t set out to make anyone cry. Especially not Totty. Seeing Jyushimatsu’s grin plastered disturbingly still, the eldest’s muscles tensed uncomfortably, and he thought to scull his drink to plug the hanging silence. Better, it plugged his damn mouth for the next few seconds while he scrambled for some joke, some offering or self-deprecation—anything that could salvage this. ‘Look, if there’s anything I can … I’m sorry I …’

The tiny plinks of condensation striking bathwater peppered their quiet like bullets. God, he’d take another round with Kizuubari over this … no, scratch that, he’d taunt the goddamn sea snakes into a rematch. And that really hadn’t been his battle. He knew it, Ahn knew it. The good citizens of the Spectrum Alliance knew it.

Almost as well as Todomatsu knew how to swindle his brothers.

‘You sneaky little …’ Osomatsu burst as Totty emerged from Karamatsu’s hoodie with a sly grin. ‘Why would you …’

None of their brothers even bothering to stifle their sniggers, Todomatsu waggled a chiding finger in Osomatsu’s face. ‘You made me cry, Osomatsu-niisan,’ he declared, previously heart-moulding tears dried impressively fast. ‘Now face the consequences. I’ll remember this next time you need something from me. Or maybe you can pay at Chibita’s until the new year …’

‘Todomatsu, you’re a genius,’ a somewhat hazy Ichimatsu caught on and grinned evilly.

‘Was any of that real?’ Osomatsu demanded as Totty beamed and the rest of the shitbags suggested even more ridiculous demands. Already he felt hard-earned yen filched from his pockets. ‘You were putting it on the whole time, you monster!’

Todomatsu blinked perfectly-clear eyes, all innocence. ‘Of course it was real, Osomatsu-niisan. That hurts—you really think I wouldn’t even buy you a drink without an ulterior motive?’

‘Can you blame me after that?!’ Osomatsu exclaimed. But quick as he was to flare, he tempered as fast. And he could never stay mad with Totty, gut already drained of the boiling emotion. Osomatsu settled for knocking the youngest into the change room lockers with a noisy clatter. The youngest swatted him once with his comb, but otherwise let him have the small satisfaction. Releasing him with a friendly push, Osomatsu stretched an arm behind his head and yawned. He could really do with a full night’s … he swung in an impressive double take, a small white shape at the edge of his peripherals hooking his attention. ‘What the …’

Ahn sat by the vending machine, gaze fixed on the brothers. Osomatsu felt his face heat and immediately looked down, needing the visual confirmation he was fully clothed. Spotting her a second later, Choromatsu spat out the dregs of his drink.

‘What are you …’ Todomatsu followed their mortified gazes. His lips parted slightly in a baffled “oh?” when he saw Ahn. Then it clicked. Promptly, the youngest forgot how to breathe. ‘You’re serious? But it’s … just … a cat!’ Doubled over, Totty clutched his stomach as Karamatsu slowly
grinned and Jyushimatsu’s laughter swelled and bounced through the bathhouse, almost embracing them in cheer. Not thinking it funny in the least, Osomatsu gritted his teeth as Totty gushed fresh tears at their irrational embarrassment, caught changing by a kitten. ‘I’d have thought,’ he gasped as Choromatsu stalked out, unable to handle the twofold humiliation. ‘Ichimatsu-niisan maybe …’

‘Huh?’ Ichimatsu oriented to his name as he dropped his towel. He hadn’t noticed the cause of their amusement. Seeing all his effort directed to navigating into his sweatpants, Osomatsu’s flush suddenly had a lot more to do with second-hand than personal indignity.

‘Would you mind, I don’t know, not doing that again?’ he demanded the next morning. His annoyance hiked when Ahn was entirely unruffled.

‘You are only overacting. I hardly expect otherwise, such a temperamental spark.’

‘I am not overreacting! Maybe if you actually were a cat, instead of … How long were you … Ichimatsu wasn’t even …’ Osomatsu spluttered as Ahn angled her little head at him and scoffed. Running at his side, her outsized paws carried her triple her stunted body length with every bound.

‘I was hardly there for the view—such that it was,’ she added, somehow infuriating Osomatsu further. Hard feelings wafted off him like steam, and Ahn put on a spurt and joined Choromatsu where he ran with Totty, leaving him behind to simmer. Apparently her decision to uncurl from the toasty futon blankets and join the tail end of their icy jog had nothing to do with the profound apology she owed them. ‘Given your own appreciation of our Unicorn candidates,’ she went on, no less snippy even as Osomatsu plotted retribution short of drop-kicking her back to the Spectrum Alliance. ‘I hardly think you’re entitled to protest your own brothers being so objectified, were that the case.’

‘What?’ Osomatsu spat. ‘Just what are you …’

‘I had an agenda. It goes without saying I followed you last night to confirm something of great significance.’

‘You couldn’t do that while we’re fully clothed?’ Osomatsu asked testily as the back of Choromatsu’s neck burnt with residual embarrassment. ‘What exactly can you confirm spying on us in the bath anyway?’

‘That your brother has light.’

‘What?!’ If he’d expected a good answer, it wasn’t that. Flabbergasted, Osomatsu almost stumbled to a halt. Choromatsu just stumbled. Badly.

‘Be careful!’ Ahn cried as his arms pinwheeled, nailed in an ungainly moment between equilibrium and a hard fall.

‘Choromatsu-niisan!’ Totty exclaimed. Quickly, he grabbed Choromatsu’s wrist and yanked. With his counterweight, the third born almost immediately fell back into balance. Slightly shaken, Choromatsu brushed off the youngest’s ongoing concern that he remain vertical.

‘I’m fine … thanks,’ he swallowed, sneaking a glance over his shoulder at Osomatsu. Osomatsu snickered a little with his near tumble, but said nothing as they picked up pace again. The eldest practically saw his brother’s growing grace, entirely forsaken him a moment before, slink apologetically back into his feet.

‘So,’ Osomatsu directed at Ahn as they rounded a corner a few turns from home. ‘Our brother has light. You might have to be a bit more specific.’
Osomatsu had picked up idly tuning in to his brother and small mentor’s deep discussions that inclinations weren’t exactly common. A spark and a breath already in the family, it had to be pretty slim odds that one of their brothers met basic Unicorn requirements. Not sure why it mattered, but very eager to know who, Osomatsu had to guess. ‘It’s got to be Jyushimatsu. He … come on, really?’ he groaned aloud as his fitter brothers—not by much now, he gave himself all due boasting credit—pulled away in a final push.

‘You’re almost keeping up, Osomatsu-niisan!’ Totty’s high voice floated over his shoulder as Osomatsu panted. Sparked by the barely-concealed taunt, he pounded his soles harder into the path, the glint of sunrise through gaps in the darkened skyline edging his brothers’ racing silhouettes silver.

Osomatsu was barely willing to give up his leadership for one of their—he grinned a little, red spots on his cheekbones nothing to do with the cramping blade that slid beneath his ribcage—fine Unicorn candidates. They hadn’t been scouted, no way would any of his brothers have made the shortlist—he’d like to see them try giving him orders. But if it was Jyushimatsu …

He’d need the details spelt out a few times a mission. But he was already disproportionately strong. And—Osomatsu’s lips tweaked crookedly—his most cheerful brother was also the most suggestible. The eldest wouldn’t have to kiss goodbye being in charge at all, if Jyushimatsu were the Unicorn. Stumbling heavily through the front door behind his brothers, Osomatsu took a moment’s pleasure to picture loosing a magic-enhanced Jyushimatsu on your average Liberation Force monster. The beast wouldn’t know what crash tackled it.

‘It’s Jyushimatsu, right?’ he repeated, resting on his knees as he got his breath back. Shivering, Ahn crowded Osomatsu’s shins for warmth. Todomatsu bantered brightly as he stepped from his shoes, no clue he was the sole non-participant in the inaudible exchange.

‘She does seem sweet on you,’ he was saying, barely tousled as he indicated Ahn’s apparent attachment. Osomatsu scowled, nudging her out of the way so he could unknot his stinking sneakers. ‘I’m starting to get why you were so embarrassed last night.’

Drawing his desired hot reaction from Osomatsu, Todomatsu’s self-satisfied smirk softened as he sprang up the stairs to change into his Starbucks uniform.

‘Who is it, Ahn?’ Choromatsu asked as he lined up his shoes. He hadn’t reacted to Totty’s salting their sore pride at all. Busy glaring after the youngest, that still caught Osomatsu’s attention.

‘What’s up with you?’ he said, swiping his sweat-clogged fringe with his sleeve. ‘I thought you were going to hit the ceiling when he …’

But Choromatsu shook his head, all attention on Ahn. ‘Who has light?’

Osomatsu grumbled—he wanted to know too, that was no reason to snub him. But, nose harkening to warmed air infused with mum’s cooking, his stomach took serious priority. Mild ache of his muscles almost pleasant—compared to being hurled into a wall, anyway—Osomatsu stretched and strolled for the stairs. The sooner he readied for “work”, the sooner he’d be filling up an a well-earned …

‘Matsuno Todomatsu.’

Osomatsu swore loudly, accidentally cracking his neck as the name wrenched him in an abrupt swivel. ‘Good morning, Karamatsu-niisan,’ he heard Totty chirp through the ceiling, unabashedly waking their brothers with his humming. Osomatsu’s eyes fastened to Choromatsu’s identical disbelief, all thoughts of breakfast driven from mind. Until he smelt the eggs.
‘Seriously? That guy, a light?’ Clothes changed and shovelling down his rolled omelette, Osomatsu returned to the matter at hand. Rostered on an early shift, Todomatsu already finished up, rising just as Choromatsu sat down. Eyes flicking to follow him into the kitchen, Osomatsu saw him peck mum on the cheek before catching dad’s attention over his paper.

‘See you, Dad. Bye-bye, Mum, thanks for breakfast. Have a good day at work, Osomatsu-niisan, Choromatsu-niisan!’

‘That is what I said,’ Ahn replied as she gnawed on fish scraps, watching as Totty waved brightly and skipped out the door.

‘No way,’ Osomatsu shook his head, automatically holding his bowls steady as Jyushimatsu barrelled in and shot beneath the kotatsu. ‘You know, one time I thought he was being weirdly nice pouring me tea, but it was all a trick—trying to make me pee so I’d refill the kerosene heater when I got up to go.’

‘He told us to our faces,’ Choromatsu said, only a little hassled keeping audible and telepathic conversations straight. Nodding as Jyushimatsu rambled directly at him, he stuffed his mouth full so he didn’t have to answer. ‘That having us for brothers is like a principal holding up your dirty underwear in front of the whole school.’

‘He pretended he didn’t know me!’ Osomatsu wouldn’t be outdone, humiliation at Totty’s hands not the strangest thing they’d gotten competitive over. ‘When I ran into him on a date once, he can be so damn cold. And he made out he was all noble and bewitched Mum into letting him live with her—remember, when they were going to separate? At least I was honest.’

‘You were honest eventually,’ Choromatsu reminded as Karamatsu stumbled in. Blinking blearily, he lumbered upright almost straightaway to collect the tea kettle, filling all their cups. ‘And you’re honestly trash. There was that time he needed someone to take to a mixer,’ Choromatsu added more fuel to Todomatsu’s pyre. ‘He literally could not get it through his head that taking one of us was an option. Believe me, I know we’re bad,’ he sighed as Ahn gave a little sniff. Apparently, she might just see where their youngest was coming from. ‘But we’re not that repulsive … are we?’

Osomatsu raised an eyebrow. Was that self-esteem? From Choromatsu? Sort of, anyway. But they both knew where Totty stood, far better than Ahn. Osomatsu actually accepted that more easily than usual. Bitch session complete, a broad grin slid across his face. So Totty had light. And the Spectrum Alliance had a sense of humour.

‘I will admit,’ Ahn got a word in as she wriggled beneath the kotatsu blanket, chilled fur tickling Osomatsu’s calf as he sniggered into his topped-up tea. ‘Matsuno Todomatsu is an unconventional light. His inclination is unusual … but it is pure,’ she insisted as Osomatsu’s facial muscles twitched, scanty composure springing leaks as he struggled to hold in outright laughter. ‘Do you honestly doubt, beneath your brother’s … eccentricities—’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, I’ve never seen you so happy so early in the morning!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, accidentally dunking his sleeves in Choromatsu’s miso soup. The third born frowned as he jerked his spilling soup out of range. Osomatsu smiled wider, something as warm as his mother’s soup settling unexpectedly in his stomach. Who said his brother was inconsistent? If anything in their lives was still normal, it was that Choromatsu wore his smile ever inverted.

‘—that Matsuno Todomatsu is a wellspring overflowing with love, a paragon of goodness? A champion of justice to triumph over the evils of the universes?’

‘Hey, it’s not that I doubt that,’ Osomatsu said, barely pulling a straight face as the corners of
Choromatsu’s lips finally spasmed in a miniscule smile. ‘He’s a good kid, beneath the …’ he paused for the perfect word to assign Totty’s tender little heart drenched in viscous, sweet-scented oil.

‘Deviousness,’ Choromatsu was almost too quick to supply.

‘There you go,’ Osomatsu agreed, grinning devilishly when he felt Ahn stiffen beneath the table.

‘Osomatsu, what’s so funny?’ Karamatsu asked as he poured Ichimatsu’s tea, about to walk mum upstairs; they had to at least try to interest her fourth son in his food.

‘You brother asks a fine question,’ Ahn said unseen, gone rather cool.

‘N-nothing,’ Osomatsu forced between his fingers, pressing his hands to his mouth to physically hold his humour in like vomit. He might as well have been sick all over the kotatsu, Ahn was so disgusted. Giving up, he collapsed over Jyushimatsu and let loose. Raucous laughter shaking through his brother, Jyushimatsu took it up like a birthright, no care he didn’t know why. That Osomatsu had reason to laugh was enough. Ahn grew steadily less aloof and far more heated, cross when Osomatsu wouldn’t calm down long enough for her to go on. He yelped in surprise at a sudden pain in his ankle. ‘H-hey, quit it!’ he tried to exclaim as she clawed him—not hard enough to break skin, but her feelings were still pretty clear. Fed up, Ahn finally popped her head from beneath the blanket.

‘I suppose you will find it just as amusing, then, that I am left in no doubt that Matsuno Todomatsu is this unit’s leader and light!’

‘Huh?’ Osomatsu’s shoulders stopped shuddering at once, one last residual chuckle steamrolled as he withdrew from Jyushimatsu. Choromatsu gave the barest nod, already added two and two. But Osomatsu blinked, sure he must have misheard—that was a joke, right? Staring straight at Osomatsu, the kitten blinked right back. Then he remembered: Ahn didn’t joke.

‘You want to run that by me again?’

***

Agile thumb at his phone screen, Todomatsu chatted on Line as he strolled home. Bundled in a nest of winter accessories, it was cold in his thin uniform, even beneath his heavy outer coat; a little snow crusted the gutters, remnants of light falls overnight. But the sun was bright, and he stepped quickly, keeping his heart rate up and blood warm. And though he was alone, he felt almost relaxed. Almost safe. Then a notification had to pop up and ruin it.

Heart fisted by dread, Todomatsu jammed the police update. There’d just been an attack in Roppongi—god, that was close, way too close. But it happened almost daily now. There would be no sign of trouble at all, only for everyone nearby to notice at once a store had been ransacked or a roadway littered with crumbling craters. Then there were the victims—those who escaped the cult’s clutches. Like Jyushimatsu. Eyes skimming feverishly, Todomatsu read there was no damage, one victim. Shaken and memories muddied, most described the willowy white beings the freakish abductors dressed as, down to the monstrous claws and smoke, traceless toxins that diluted through Tokyo’s air supply rendering those nearby virtual zombies.

Body shaking, Todomatsu needed a minute to calm down. These grim phone alerts pin-pricked his life with trepidation. He’d disabled them several times, sure they only made him feel worse. But he always reset them in minutes with a flutter of panic. He had to stay informed. But information would do him little good if he was snatched in silence—the missing far outnumbered crime scenes. Todomatsu groaned at his obvious appeal. He was young, healthy, attractive—what cult wouldn’t want to spirit him to the highest peaks of Mongolia?
But it was harder to vanish in sunlight. Reminding himself so on steadying repeat, Todomatsu re-opened his blissfully-unrelated Line conversation. So jumpy walking home at night, Todomatsu had sweet talked his way into as few evening shifts as possible. But with the prospect of losing hours and precious income, he couldn’t refuse them all. Atsushi had driven him home a few nights ago. He’d told Todomatsu to always call if he felt unsafe.

Barely looking up, the familiar route mapped to the soles of his shoes, some sixth sense for cute raised his eyes to spot a tiny snow owl crafted on a frosty bike seat. Snapping a picture, Todomatsu wished he could take Atsushi up on that offer right freaking now. But his friend worked full time. And even if he hadn’t … a low level of dependence might be appealing, but there was nothing cute about overt clinginess.

There was always Osomatsu, he thought with only slightly less enthusiasm. Maybe he could walk Todomatsu home at night—he’d practically offered already. The youngest couldn’t deny he felt much safer jogging with him now it was so dark in the mornings. All that reimbursed lugging had enhanced the eldest somewhat. Even Choromatsu seemed a little more self-assured. Todomatsu put that down to achievement in his office; gainful employment was so good for him. He didn’t quite radiate confidence to derail a knife-wielding mugger, a trait Todomatsu preferred in his walking buddies. But Choromatsu was his go-to security blanket. The youngest knew that role pissed him off sometimes, long past the age hand holding stopped being cute. But the third born never refused to walk him to the bathroom in the dark, or comfort him after a nightmare. Choromatsu was easier to approach than shit-grinning Osomatsu when it came to being afraid. And Todomatsu’s composure teetered on a knife’s edge—a shitty, shitty knife that couldn’t even slice through this damn atmosphere; Tokyo was a city haunted. At this rate, he might even take Karamatsu up on his constant offer to chaperone him.

Sending a message and a cute sticker, Todomatsu glanced up at a crossing. With the signal his eyes habitually returned to his screen, feet crunching lightly through snow as he hopped up onto the path. Step still far from confident, Todomatsu tried to reclaim his even pace. There’s nothing to worry about, he tried to convince himself. It was a main road lined with shops, busy at all hours. He walked that route for good reason, actively avoiding back streets. Cars trundled regularly past and the path was lively with foot traffic, suits from nearby businesses congregating in cafes over their lunch breaks. It’s fine, you’re safe …

Pretend you’re walking with someone, Todomatsu then tried, still feeling like he’d swallowed a horde of butterflies. Almost exasperated, that he automatically wrapped himself in the secure sense instilled by his absent brothers, he gradually shook off the glaring mannerisms of a young man hunted. Fluttering stomach mostly settled, he was again absorbed in his Line conversation when Todomatsu was struck by an odd need to cross the street. Not consciously thinking it odd in the slightest, he immediately turned 90 degrees and went on his way.

‘Hey, look out!’

Horns blared in his ears, the screech of brakes splitting air. The jarring sounds drifted through thickened fog. Todomatsu’s eyes flickered from his phone, confused. Were they honking at him? Why was he …

‘Hey!’ someone shouted again, and Todomatsu found himself tripping behind a hard yank, someone dashed out to seize his wrist and haul him to the safety of the far footpath.

‘What the hell’s going on?’

‘That’s the fifth one, I’m calling the police.’
Muttered comments spoken around but not to him floated by Todomatsu’s ears. He shook his muddled head, trying to focus. ‘Are you all right?’ a much nearer voice asked. Assuming that question was for him, he nodded, realising with creeping unease that he’d walked straight into the middle of a busy street. Why had he done that? Todomatsu had the most robust survival instinct of anyone he knew.

More unsettled than embarrassed, but decidedly returned from whatever fugue had inexplicably redirected his path, Todomatsu thanked his rescuer profusely. ‘Are you okay to get home?’

‘I … don’t know,’ Todomatsu replied in a small voice, quaver entirely unplanned. His kind rescuer seemed prepared to walk with him as far as he asked, but before Todomatsu could accept, his every sense tingled, suddenly highly aware of an alleyway back across the street. Straightaway his eyes whipped to take it in. His rescuer looked too, and the small cluster that had witnessed Todomatsu’s unintended challenge to noon traffic, narrow opening between buildings become a spontaneous focal point for the entire block.

‘What’s going on?’ Todomatsu exclaimed as mutters rose to shouts.

‘I don’t know,’ his rescuer said uncertainly. ‘But maybe …’

Smartphone almost forgotten, Todomatsu’s heart shot up his throat when it toned, light vibration rattling through him. He jabbed open the alert on autopilot, clammy thumb leaving a small streak on his screen. There was a second attack. Akatsuka ward. All up and down the street, more looked from the alley to their phones and began to move fast. Diners in the ramen shop they stood outside hastily wrapped up conversation and vacated, leaving their noodles behind. As people retreated to the safety of their workplaces with the orderly practice of a fire drill, Todomatsu’s rescuer was already moving.

‘Will you be okay?’ Todomatsu nodded, feeling an undue flicker of abandonment. ‘There might be someone down there, I’ve got to …’

She spared a moment to check for cars before weaving at speed across the street, stylish heels clacking against bitumen as she ran to investigate. How could she run towards … Todomatsu crowded against the ramen shop window, heart a hammer and knees trembling relentlessly. Only vague appreciation wormed through to him, that the static-riddled ring in his ears wasn’t only panic: police sirens whirred piercingly in his direction. Cultists were here … right here!

Thoughts ragged and incomplete, Todomatsu’s mind almost voided, left with nothing but a future made suddenly sickeningly possible: snatched from his comparatively happy life, torn from his parents and friends, his shitty brothers.

Latent instinct zapped through stalled nerves. What was he doing?! He couldn’t take the time to stop shaking, he had to get the hell out of there right now!

Shoving himself off the wall, Todomatsu slipped a little on the snow-slickened path in his haste. But his devotion to health and fitness didn’t fail him: finding purchase, he pelted away faster than he’d ever run in his life. Sweat soaking his scarf as it rippled behind him, he ran almost blind, heart rate skyrocketing out of control as his feet tore to match it. I’m almost home, he thought desperately, feeling sick like the claws of terrifying costume settled on his shoulder every time he was forced to pause at a crossing. Just a few more turns …

Almost swung clean off his feet as he rounded the corner flower shop, Todomatsu was suddenly pulled close by strong arms.
‘No! Let me go!’ he screamed, squirming vainly for freedom. ‘Let me go, don’t take me to Mongolia! If you kidnap me my brothers will find you and beat the shit out of you!’

‘Hey, Totty, Totty! It’s us, calm down …’

‘Let … me … go!’ he screeched, grappling and captor’s attempts to placate a nothing haze in panic-muffled ears. Finally they gripped his shoulders and shoved him back a step. Todomatsu blinked through streaming eyes—when had he started crying?—and got a good look at who had “kidnapped” him.

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ he realised faintly, wavering in his brothers’ hold. ‘Choromatsu-niisan … I … I thought you were …’

Howl catching hard in his chest, Todomatsu flung himself at Choromatsu. Surprised by the ferocity of his hug, a moment later Choromatsu held him close. Face buried in his shoulder, Todomatsu felt as Osomatsu patted his back, hand so warm even through his heavy coat. Their presence was enough, all the assurance he needed. Nothing would hurt him now. He was safe. Todomatsu sobbed even harder, so grateful to have them. ‘There … there was an attack …’

‘We know, it’s all right. Get your shit together,’ he heard Osomatsu say, needling kindly as Todomatsu shuddered out his terror. ‘We won’t take you to Mongolia, I promise.’

‘Wh-what are you doing here?’ Todomatsu finally choked more than wet sniffles through his waterworks, extracting his face and leaving a blotchy print on Choromatsu’s sleeve. ‘You’re s-s-supposed to b-be at … you d-didn’t quit, did you?’ Todomatsu’s tear-dewed eyes narrowed, already suspicious. It was incredible, how calming a veiled accusation could be.

‘Would we do that? No, we’re responsible adults now,’ Osomatsu smiled when Todomatsu sniffed in doubt. But it wasn’t his usual lazy grin. If Todomatsu hadn’t known him all their lives, he’d swear his eldest brother was serious. Well, he thought, tearfully accepting a bundle of tissues from Choromatsu, he had just crashed straight into them. Finding their youngest sibling a weeping wreck was pretty serious. But if they were still employed what were they doing so close to home during work hours?

‘Do you know what Jyushimatsu’s plans were today?’ Osomatsu asked unexpectedly.

‘Wh-why? I …’ Todomatsu swallowed through his aching throat. ‘I think he was t-talking last night about practising his swing.’

‘Good, he’ll be at it all day. Mum’s off with friends, and you said,’ he looked to Choromatsu, who Todomatsu felt nod; he still clung too close to see. ‘Karamatsu was going to the park to … do whatever he does there. So the only one in the house is Ichimatsu …’

Instructing them to wait, Osomatsu jogged around the corner, leaving Todomatsu clutching Choromatsu, each curled finger locked with the tenacity of a leech. Eventually he remembered they stood in plain view and reluctantly let him go. Seeing he’d yanked it askew, Todomatsu straightened his brother’s outer coat. ‘Why don’t you dress properly for work,’ he complained, sniffing deeply. ‘You were neater before you got work, look at your hair.’

Choromatsu shrugged, comfortable in his hoodie and hand lifting self-consciously to flatten his rumpled hair. ‘My office … the people I work with are very, ah, casual about appearances. No one wears suits.’

‘That’s so weird,’ Totty put on a pout, tears mostly stemmed. The only good thing about office work,
besides the parties, was the snazzy dress. But a workplace chock-full of gun fanatics could hardly be expected to meet any social norms. ‘You can afford nicer things, I need to take you shopping. Why are you here?’ he ventured again, tentatively prodding the reddened, puffy skin around his eyes with a clean tissue. Choromatsu smiled, but his expression was slightly pinched.

‘Maybe wait until … we’ll tell you soon. Should Ichimatsu be home alone?’ Choromatsu wondered. Todomatsu shrugged. They were all adults, Ichimatsu shouldn’t need babysitting. But that didn’t mean he didn’t.

‘I don’t know. You three bullied him into behaving, right?’

‘We didn’t bully him,’ Choromatsu protested. Todomatsu shrugged again. Bullying Ichimatsu was fine by him, if that’s what got the job done. ‘But I think we’ve talked him into cooperating, for now. But Ichimatsu’s hard to …’

‘Did you miss me?’ Glancing behind him, Todomatsu only saw the top of Osomatsu’s dark head. The rest of his face was hidden by the massive sack of fluff he hauled. ‘She’s one of Ichimatsu’s, right? Let’s head home.’

So relieved to be home he barely raised an eyebrow, Todomatsu did as Osomatsu asked and tiptoed into the house to find Ichimatsu. The fourth born was conked out in the living room, bundled under the kotatsu. ‘He’s asleep in there,’ he reported back.

‘Perfect. Now if he wakes up,’ Osomatsu said, voice low as he crept up to their brother and deposited the cat in his blanket-swathed lap. Recognising Ichimatsu, the large feline immediately settled in comfortably. ‘He can’t get up. Ball and chain, kitty style. Come on, let’s go upstairs.’

‘Why can’t he get up?’ Todomatsu asked as Osomatsu sauntered into their room and dropped onto the couch. Some annoyance prickled when neither he nor Choromatsu replied. Vocalising said aggravation, however, was put on hold when he spotted the kitten.

An impish smile crawled across his face. It was the same one he’d given Osomatsu and Choromatsu hell over last night. Seated upright on the arm of the couch, she held herself regally, as straight and tall as her small stature allowed. When their eyes met—that shade had to be rare, shining dark and bright as a star-splashed skyline—she dipped her little head low, nose brushing her toes in an unmistakable bow. Todomatsu was immediately charmed. The tiny thing was so well trained, so sleek and shiny—nothing like the mangy animals Ichimatsu brought in. Pursing his lips, Todomatsu tried to place her in his life to that moment, sure he’d seen her before the bathhouse. But their narrow house hosted a neverending parade of felines. Particular specimens rarely stood out to Todomatsu, even ones as adorable as this.

‘She’s so sweet!’ he exclaimed as Choromatsu closed the door firmly. Kneeling by the couch, Todomatsu offered a perfectly-manicured fingertip to the kitten. She gave the digit a cursory glance, almost like an obligation. But she seemed far more interested in his face.

‘She doesn’t really like that,’ Choromatsu said as a besotted Todomatsu scratched beneath her chin. As if to confirm, the kitten pulled away slightly.

‘Yeah, she thinks it’s demeaning,’ Osomatsu added, knocking Todomatsu’s hand away to tickle himself, laughing when the kitten looked at him almost severely. Todomatsu pouted, but resisted the urge to shower her with attention.

‘This is Ahn,’ Choromatsu named the kitten as he settled on the floor, Todomatsu shuffling slightly so the three brothers faced, become points of a skewed triangle.
‘She’s not from off the street, is she a real pet? Our pet?’ Todomatsu asked hopefully, unable to help stroking her immaculate ears, not a flea-bitten edge in sight. Ahn didn’t seem to mind that so much, stiff posture lowering into something more comfortable. ‘Is she yours, Choromatsu-niisan? She looks expensive. And we all know you can afford expensive,’ he said, tone tinged by envy as he thought of his brother’s top-of-the-range tablet.

‘She’s not exactly, ah, ours. But she’ll be here for a while,’ Choromatsu affirmed over Osomatsu’s snort of amusement. Briefly aghast the dainty houseguest hadn’t been acquired for permanent pampering purposes, Todomatsu relaxed back into pleasure at her promised company. A while was deliciously uncertain; already he imagined taking Ahn out on dates and buying collars to offset his favourite outfits. It would be a nice change to have a pretty kitty around, especially one that was actually theirs, instead of …

‘Are you absolutely sure she’s a kitty?’ Osomatsu said suddenly, grinning at Todomatsu’s expression.

‘Osomatsu-niisan, do you have to mess with him? This is going to be hard enough without you …’ Choromatsu broke off with a disapproving humph when Osomatsu’s grin widened. Frowning lightly and expecting some stupid trick, Todomatsu still inspected the kitten, ticking boxes as he went. Four legs, soft fur, whiskers. He picked any number of slight deviations from generic feline examples—her eyes, large round paws, and there was an adorable tuft at the tip of her thinning tail. But none of these unique features detracted from the general understanding of “cat”.

Brief distraction eclipsed, Todomatsu huffed a long-suffering gust of air. Would they just get to the point? Choromatsu had promised an answer. So far his brothers had very conspicuously failed to deliver. Was it too much to ask for simple answers to simple questions? Why weren’t they at work? Why didn’t they want Ichimatsu to … actually, fine, he decided waspishly, flicking over to no longer particularly interested. If they wanted to be all cryptic and weird, they could go right ahead. Todomatsu was sapped by stress and approaching wit’s end. He just wanted to steal some of Ichimatsu’s drugs and nap until he felt better. Not that Osomatsu or Choromatsu were responsible for that state, he allowed. Almost the opposite. But they sure weren’t helping him now.

‘I don’t know what you’re getting at, Osomatsu-niisan,’ he said lightly, undertone thick with “just don’t screw with me right now”, ‘but any time you’d like to enlighten me, I’m …’

‘Matsuno Todomatsu.’

Todomatsu yelped and skidded backwards, seat of his trousers snagging against the tatami. ‘Wh-what …’ he strangled out, raising a weakly-trembling finger at the kitten. Already badly heightened from his peripheral brush with cultists, Todomatsu was less prepared than usual to cope with the unexpected; he shook his head so hard that his vertebrae creaked. ‘What’s going on? Is this … a prank? For laughing at you last night? How are you making her talk? Is someone …’

All he could think of, Todomatsu waited desperately for Totoko to fling herself laughing from behind the couch. ‘Niisan, s-stop it, this isn’t funny … wh-what are you …’

Osomatsu was on his feet. ‘There’s no easy way to do this,’ he said, hauling Todomatsu’s shrinking form upright, warm grip towing his stumbling weight to the couch. Todomatsu bounced off the cushions, deposited in a heap. ‘Just stay there. Totty, come on,’ Osomatsu caught the youngest as he scrambled to put distance between himself and the unknown entity who watched solemnly from the arm of the couch. Squeezing his upper arms so hard Todomatsu yelped again, his pleading eyes latched to Osomatsu’s.

‘Osomatsu-niisan, just … please … tell me what’s going on!’
‘Everything’s fine,’ Osomatsu maintained as Choromatsu got to his feet. ‘Just sit down and watch.’
Firmly, he pushed Todomatsu back down and backed up, pulling what looked like a silvery pen
from his pocket. Todomatsu just saw a flash of blood red as Osomatsu spun it between his fingers.
‘By this contract I submit my spark to salvation!’

‘By this contract I submit my breath to salvation,’ Choromatsu’s intonation threaded through
Osomatsu’s half a second later. Todomatsu’s hair whipped back with savage wind, blanched face
drenched in sweat as flames reared. Mouth falling open, he tried to scream. But he could make no
more sound than a throttled squeak. He shoved himself as far back into the couch as he could while
one brother silhouetted in a ball of fire, another in a whirlwind veined with electricity. Todomatsu
couldn’t tear his eyes away, every nerve shot as forces of nature roared unbelievably through their
bedroom.

‘Flaming vanguard of onslaught, Salamander!’

‘Rising tempest of wisdom, Wyvern!’

‘…Oh,’ Todomatsu exhaled weakly.
Don't know how it was even physically possible this one turned out so long ... but with the way Totty is introduced to the magical boy world, a chapter along these lines was a little necessary, I thought. Hope it doesn't drag, tried not to rehash anything too direly. I don't think even Jyushi caused me as much trouble as Totty has this last month and a half or so. But he is a dear sweet boy, hope I've done him justice. He's a tough one ... just soooo many different ways he might have reacted to this, and I, silly person that I am, thought through far to many of them instead of picking one and sticking with it. We got there in the end, though. I know I always say this, but hopefully slightly smoother sailing for here on. Thanks so much for reading, as always comments are my lifeblood, love so much to hear what you think!

Also argh! Completely slipped my mind last chapter to pop up a link to this amazingly awesome art by Misa of Magical Oso and Choro, and little Ahn! Makes me smile so much every time I see it :)

It was a reasonable thing to expect, wasn’t it? Not that reason seemed to count for much anymore, Todomatsu’s entire reality table flipped and poor stunned brain trying to spark him on to some reaction beyond his open-ended gape. As the inexplicable power before him waned, that scrap of logic shouldered its way into awareness.

Brothers go in, brothers come out. That’s what he’d expected. And that automatic expectancy jarred when Todomatsu saw exactly who emerged from the condensed inferno and hurricane. He noted in the still switched-on recesses of himself that he’d seen these masked characters before. But they weren’t his brothers. They couldn’t be. Their clothes were different, for one. Though they too favoured hooded apparel, Osomatsu and Choromatsu weren’t nearly so stylish about it. And—Todomatsu gulped—they didn’t usually go about business armed, either. There were strangers packing weaponry in his room!

‘Wh-who …’ So frightened, Todomatsu tried to moisten his bone-dry mouth. ‘Who are you? Wh-where are my b-b-brothers?’

The red and green intruders’ eyebrows raised in what little expression they could show. Despite the notable barrier of being half-faceless, their surprise was plain—they were surprised? What about him? Todomatsu took some small comfort that his incredulity remained intact. Gesturing and foreheads creased, the two seemed to converse, no overt intention of kidnapping, maiming, or otherwise harming him at all—apart from any damage their sudden appearance had done his overwrought heart. The abused organ throbbing hard, Todomatsu hesitantly broke eye contact to take in the room. It wasn’t burnt to a crisp; the tatami and door were somehow unscorched. Not a magazine or manga had blown from the shelf.

Whatever their exchange, it didn’t take long for the one in red to get impatient. Emitting a silent, but distinct burst of “sod it all”, they grabbed at their mask and yanked before the one in green could stop them. ‘Hey, it does come off! We probably should have tried that before now … Ahn, you didn’t want to maybe tell us we can’t pull the telepathy shit with him yet?’
‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu cried out, recognising him the instant the mask slid past his chin. The green stranger imitated him, revealing Choromatsu beneath.

‘Hey, Totty!’ Osomatsu grinned, showing off heavy gauntlets as Choromatsu slipped a pair of sleek pistols over his shoulders. ‘Pretty cool, yeah?’

‘C-cool?’ Todomatsu stuttered through the woefully inadequate syllable. He felt boneless. He couldn’t have gotten up if he’d tried. ‘Wh-what’s going on?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Osomatsu struck the same pose he’d pulled as flames licked down his limbs. ‘We’re magical boys! Heroes!’

‘Do you have to keep calling us that?’ Choromatsu demanded as Todomatsu’s mouth fell open. ‘We’re spectrum guardians, not …’

‘Magical boys!’ Todomatsu got his lips in order and adopted the words with an unrestrained squeal, barely following his own giddy snap to ecstatic. He had no idea what was going on. But whatever it was … it was … incredible! They’d just transformed in front of him!

‘Keep it down, you’ll wake Ichimatsu,’ Osomatsu teased in an exaggeratedly-lowered voice.

‘That’s what you’re worried about? But how did you … when did … Niisan, you look amazing!’ Todomatsu fawned over their costumes, so perfectly suited to each he might have picked them out himself. His brothers had never looked so good, accentuated by a glittering feature gem each; Todomatsu dizzily imagined their worth. ‘Garnet and emerald … those are real?’

‘As … far as we know,’ Choromatsu took a moment to say, not quite ready for such an enthusiastic reaction as Todomatsu tore his phone from his trouser pocket, thumb going into immediate overdrive. The third born ducked out of frame, leaning away as the youngest tried to take a selfie with him. ‘Don’t take pictures, someone will see!’

‘He’ll be careful with them,’ Osomatsu clamped Choromatsu firmly to his side with one gauntlet and waved peace for Todomatsu with the other while he happily snapped away.

‘Matsuno Choromatsu is right,’ Ahn voiced from the couch. ‘If anyone connects Matsuno Todomatsu with you … will you at least pull your masks up,’ she demanded when her words had zero effect on the photo frenzy. But her irritation whipped straight past Todomatsu to lash the eldest. ‘I am highly aware of your recognition complex, but are you actually trying to expose yourself?’

Choromatsu’s escape attempts made more sense with Ahn’s shrill points to back them up—exactly what did the kitten have to do with all this? Todomatsu reluctantly deleted the compromising pictures and crammed his selfie library with a fresh selection, posing with his re-masked brothers. ‘That is so weird,’ he marvelled as he scrolled back through the shots, knowing it was his brothers but unable to recognise them at all.

Todomatsu had so much more to marvel at. ‘Heroes? These shitbags?’ he summoned every whit of sass to his name and got the show he wanted. Todomatsu regressed to a child enthralled by a magician’s pretty deceptions as Osomatsu showered real fire from his fingertips and Choromatsu, only to shut them up when they obnoxiously cheered and applauded—‘Are you two seriously trying to wake up Ichimatsu?’—sculpted a minute tornado on his palm. ‘Shitbags, huh? Just watch this,’ Osomatsu added, goading an exasperated Choromatsu into an encore. With a heavy sigh, the third born’s sharp eyes flicked to lock on a tiny buzzing target across the room. He stunned the fly squarely, pistol drawn in the same unbroken motion.
'Choromatsu-niisan,' Todomatsu breathed in amazement as it dropped to the floor. ‘So you took up shooting for this … And who are you?’

He knelt back by the couch, putting himself eye-to-eye with the kitten. She’d now said much more than his name. But it was all a matter of scale. After all he’d now seen, Todomatsu had no qualms accepting that the odd cat or two might indulge in civilised conversation. And with so much curiosity to slake, he figured the mysterious creature was gifted with far more than words. ‘Ahn, was it? That’s such a cute name.’

‘My true name is beyond your language,’ Ahn said as the three Matsunos gathered around her, disregarding Osomatsu’s challenge to try him, betting he could wrap his teeth around it first try. ‘But Ahn is sufficient for my purposes on Earth.’

‘Which are?’ Todomatsu bubbled to know. She was just too adorable, conduct so mature but quirky voice exactly like a sweet little kid just out of elementary school. Reaching to scratch the scruff of her neck, Todomatsu wondered suddenly if that might be rude. She did talk. That made her more person than animal. After a moment, he shrugged and dove in regardless. She didn’t sound old at all. What little kid didn’t like a bit of affection? ‘If my brothers are magical boys—’

‘—then what are you to them?’ Todomatsu’s questions tumbled, and he smiled apology with extra syrup when Ahn couldn’t hide frustration that he couldn’t stop and listen. ‘If you’re not from Earth, where do you come from? Why are you showing me all this, isn’t it a huge secret? Are you a cat?’ he asked, the previously obvious answer no longer quite so obvious. ‘If you’re not, what are you? How did they do that, transform in that fire and the … Why are they magical boys—spectrum guardians,’ he used her preferred term, even then hoping to score a few social points. ‘And, um … what is your purpose here?’

Run out of immediate questions, though sure he’d have a million more by morning, Todomatsu returned to his first and waited expectantly for answers.

‘My purpose here? At its heart, my purpose is them,’ Ahn said, tail flicking towards a grinning Osomatsu and a slightly-coloured Choromatsu. ‘The Salamander and the Wyvern, fiery vanguard of onslaught and rising tempest of wisdom, noble warriors in sealed service of the Spectrum Alliance.’

‘You’ll think twice about blowing us off again, right, Totty?’ Osomatsu teased, chest puffed with the lofty titles. Ahn shot him a thunderous look, refusing to speak again without some assurance that he wouldn’t. Todomatsu knew her pain. And the kitten clearly knew Osomatsu, unnumbered warts and all. They must have been together for a while … wait, was this his brothers’ job? Osomatsu put on a sarcastic display of buttoning his lips. Just waiting for him to break his promise of silence, the kitten went on.

‘I was sent here to assemble a unit of five warriors to combat the Liberation Force and prevent their destructive sweep through the dimensions. Matsuno Osomatsu and Matsuno Choromatsu make two. The Spectrum Alliance that I serve and speak for would be honoured beyond words if you, Matsuno Todomatsu, would be the third.’

Todomatsu felt suddenly weightless. ‘Wh-what?’

‘I’m asking you,’ Ahn said in earnest, head bowed reverently low as Todomatsu gaped, ‘to assume the solemn responsibilities of the Unicorn and become this unit’s leader and light. Will you, Matsuno Todomatsu, lead the spectrum guardians in glorious victory against Lord Takuu?’
‘So … you’re saying you want me—’

Todomatsu gestured loosely about his nose, needing to make absolutely certain he both understood and was understood.

‘—to lead them—’

He indicated his big brothers, excitement building rapidly in his chest as his heart understood what his head still struggled to wedge itself around.

‘—in a fight against … who is Lord Takuu?’ Todomatsu recalled the odd name before surging into what actually mattered. ‘So you want me to be a magical boy?!’

‘Ahn, you want to try that again?’ Osomatsu jibed as the kitten blustered, imperious demeanor dashed to realise how far she’d gotten ahead of herself. ‘I reckon you could be just a little bit more confusing.’

‘She’s just excited,’ Choromatsu explained as poor Ahn hid her eyes in embarrassment. ‘We’ve been looking for our light for a long time.’

Playing off Choromatsu’s objections—“You can’t go downstairs transformed!”—and Ahn’s reprimands—“Do you think at all?”—Osomatsu loped to grab snacks for the imminent explanations. So much to occupy his mind already and much more on the way, it wasn’t lost on Todomatsu how surreal it was, to be sitting casually around a popcorn bowl with—it was soon revealed—a cat-like being from outer space and magical versions of his brothers. Todomatsu listened rapt as Ahn’s voice ebbed and flowed entrancingly, telling her tale of an evil empire, an alliance threatened and the gem-encrusted warriors who had saved the universe.

As she segued into more immediate issues—the escape of Takuu, the assembly of fresh iterations of the spectrum guardians and his brothers’ toils to date—Todomatsu noticed his right side was much warmer than his left and slid nearer Osomatsu, keen to capitalise on the heat he emitted. His multiplying shivers had little to do with the cold season that passed outside; Ahn had revealed that Liberation Force aliens and the cultists he was so terrified of were one and the same. But Osomatsu’s toasty arm tucked around him worked wonders whatever his rippling goosebumps’ cause. Leaning into his brother’s thick hoodie, Todomatsu snaked out a hand and swiped the last few pieces of popcorn.

‘So, Matsuno Todomatsu,’ Ahn said when she was done. Todomatsu was acutely aware every eye in the room focussed on him, and pushed his shoulders proudly back. ‘The Spectrum Alliance appeals to you to serve as the pure paladin of liberation. We have handselected you from among many worthy candidates …’

‘You’re so worthy, you weren’t even on the shortlist,’ Osomatsu interrupted to inform. ‘We didn’t even know you had light till this morning.’

Todomatsu nodded a few times, unsure how he was supposed to feel about that. Probably good—he’d come from behind and outshone the main contenders! Smugly settled on feeling even better about himself, he looked back to Ahn with eager eyes.

‘We humbly,’ she went on, flashing Osomatsu a healthy dose of disgust, ‘offer you a binding power contract, one to lead the spectrum guardians in their battle against Lord Takuu and his Liberation Force, preventing the enslavement of your race and the destruction of so many more. We are asking you, Matsuno Todomatsu, to save the universes.’
‘Want to lay it on any heavier?’ Osomatsu asked archly as Todomatsu sagged slightly against him, the full awe and weight of Ahn’s words boggling. ‘In case it’s slipped your mind, we’re actually trying to recruit him here, not scare him off. There’s more than enough waiting to do that without you getting in early.’

‘Todomatsu?’ Choromatsu ventured, shutting up Osomatsu and stilling Ahn as she began to bite back. ‘How are you coping with all this?’

‘I’m fine, Choromatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu straightened and put on his best smile. ‘I think I’ll fix us some tea,’ he announced suddenly, shrugging from beneath Osomatsu. Mindfully casual through his brothers’ concern, he grabbed the empty popcorn bowl and took it downstairs, stealing a few moments alone.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, Todomatsu slowly pulled out his phone, scooting backwards through Line conversations to find the links a friend had sent him a few weeks ago. He knew he’d seen the Salamander and Wyvern before. Watching the short clips anew, so-called menaces flying away with impossible bounds, Todomatsu leaned low over the kitchen bench, breathing out slowly. He gripped its edge so hard the bench patterned grooves into his palms.

‘Yes,’ he exulted under his breath. Magical powers, space kittens, bossing his brothers around—just show him the dotted line. Lit by a smile to rival Jyushimatsu, Todomatsu’s hands trembled as he poured three cups of tea and filled a shallow dish for Ahn. Setting the kettle back on the hob, the youngest Matsuno heard a frail cough from the lounge room. At first he ignored it, arranging their cups on a tray. But sympathy tugged him to the doorway as soon as he was done. Todomatsu looked down on the misshapen lump of Ichimatsu beneath his blankets. The cough had started a few days ago. Already it was worse.

Bare seconds in Todomatsu’s line of sight, Ichimatsu’s shadowed eyes winched apart a crack. The youngest cursed inwardly. He didn’t know what irked him more: that Ichimatsu managed to make life harder only by waking up, or that Osomatsu prancing around in superhero cosplay hadn’t been enough to disturb him, but if Todomatsu so much as looked at him … Todomatsu made himself wrangle any acidic thoughts towards Ichimatsu, knowing that wasn’t fair. His brother was sick. And so long as he stayed downstairs, his being awake wasn’t that big of a deal. It wasn’t like Todomatsu was transformed … not yet, he thought with a fresh sparkle of excitement.

He barely understood Ichimatsu’s attempt at speech. As slow as his slur, the fourth born grew aware of his total failure to convey himself and darkened, riddled with shame. Todomatsu quickly guessed before he had to try again. ‘I’m making tea, Ichimatsu-niisan, would you like some?’

His pained head shake was easier to read, Todomatsu was thankful. Shifting with a forlorn groan, Ichimatsu’s expression softened when he noticed the cat curled in his lap. Todomatsu dutifully fetched a glass of water and his brother’s powerful painkillers, setting them on the kotatsu with a pointed clink. Drumming his nails as Ichimatsu clumsily stroked the sleeping animal, the youngest noticed a badly crumpled magazine and smoothed it flat.

‘Ichimatsu-niisan, you can’t look for work now!’ he exclaimed, seeing it was an employment magazine. How could he even think about job hunting in his condition? If the state of the magazine was anything to go by, it must be so disheartening. But apparently there came a point even Ichimatsu was so bored that a steady job became almost appealing. Todomatsu felt so bad for his brother. It was one of his worse days, a sobering thing to see Ichimatsu’s distress up close. But he couldn’t help it. Todomatsu grinned, a mismatched expression to his kind words as he helped his unfocussed brother swallow his medication. They’d all used to get bored. But Todomatsu wasn’t bored now. His semi-charmed life had just gotten a whole lot more interesting. And he’d let nothing—nothing and no
one—drag that wonder away from him.

Todomatsu knelt and set the tray down back upstairs. ‘Thanks, Totty.’ Osomatsu immediately reached for a cup. But his hand stalled mid-motion, hovering to test the air over the tray.

‘Anything wrong, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu asked a little tartly as the eldest pulled a face.

‘Yeah, you took forever,’ he complained. ‘You let them go cold.’

‘I have not,’ Todomatsu shot back, barista soul offended. ‘They’re still steaming, just look …’

Not waiting for him to finish, Osomatsu dunked a fingertip in each cup. Instantly, the barely-cooled tea began to bubble and spit.

‘Could you not?’ Choromatsu demanded as Todomatsu applauded the trick for the grinning eldest.

‘That’s disgusting, when did you last wash your hands?’

‘So,’ Ahn said as she lapped; unlike Choromatsu, she had no issues with Osomatsu-tainted tea.

‘Have you made up your mind? I’m sure you have many questions.’

So was Todomatsu. But for the life of him, he couldn’t think of them now, bursting to skip ahead into his gleeful, unrestrained yes. But he caught himself, trying to kerb his enthusiasm—or at least give the impression he did. This wasn’t quite like other things he wanted, a much-anticipated date or even a mountain climb to throw himself into. Saving the universes—his organs somersaulted as he consciously thought those unbelievable words for the first time—was a big commitment. He had to be smart about this.

‘I’m leaning towards yes,’ he chose his words carefully, sipping his tea. The tip of Ahn’s ears twitched with his played-up indecision. He couldn’t deny it: the warmth that bathed him, seeing how badly the kitten wanted him to sign, was very pleasant. ‘But this is all so new to me …’

Todomatsu didn’t know where to start, but encouraging Ahn to speak wasn’t hard. Directing the eager-to-inform kitten with a few vague wonderings, he quickly found himself inundated with Unicorn fun facts. Wound so tight with nervy excitement, Todomatsu relaxed a little to learn the leader of the spectrum guardians was a healer. ‘That which foul Lord Takuu reviles the most,’ Ahn said earnestly. Todomatsu smiled sweetly in return, a few niggling worries cleared up. He’d never been much of a brawler, helping out at the edges when one of his siblings had dragged them into strife growing up.

Todomatsu’s smile only grew as Ahn went on. Apparently, the Unicorn was one of her favourite subjects. ‘It’s fine,’ he insisted when Choromatsu suggested she slow down. Todomatsu barely processed half of what she said. But there’d be plenty of time to fact check later, when he wasn’t busy gaining centimetres on his brothers, pride nicely swelled along with his hat size.

‘The Unicorn is inspiration,’ Ahn said. ‘They are a wellspring of love, a paragon of goodness and a champion of justice, the rightful leader that binds the spectrum guardians together and unites them in their just cause.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, I’m trying to listen,’ Todomatsu half-whined as Osomatsu released a loud snort. Osomatsu looked like he was about to say something, but Choromatsu shut him up with an elbow to the ribs. Almost considerately, his red magical brother pulled up his mask to snigger on behind its muting press.

‘And it goes without saying, the leader of the spectrum guardians is hardly defenseless … will you control yourself?’ Ahn finally demanded, Osomatsu’s silenced laughter distracting her like he
Hey, we could ask you the same thing,’ Osomatsu tugged his mouth free to flash a cheeky grin. Tender age only hinted at, Ahn bristled like he’d outright questioned her competence. Todomatsu took note what got under the proud little creature’s skin, storing the information away. But as he pinned down Ahn’s personality for potential future use, Todomatsu found his attention returned to Osomatsu. Until he’d started chortling, he’d been almost completely quiet, listening closely as Ahn glorified Todomatsu’s imminent position. As pleased as he was, that Osomatsu heard it too, his brother had gone too long without butting in. Something was up.

‘Huh?’ Osomatsu cocked his head when Todomatsu had to ask. ‘Nothing’s up, where did that come from?’

‘Nothing especially,’ Todomatsu lied, keeping his voice light as he picked more signs that his brother, however he laughed, was far from happy. ‘It’s only … I can’t believe how amazing this all is. You have fire powers,’ he said, buttering Osomatsu up with admiration. ‘You’re fighting evil, saving the world,’ he expanded, amazement at all his brothers had accomplished very real, whatever use he put it to. They’d been chosen as surely as he had, though why was still beyond him. ‘You’re someone very special, Niisan.’

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu prompted, grin stretched wide. Choromatsu’s eyes narrowed, tuned to the emotional heist. But he waited to see where the youngest headed.

‘Well,’ Todomatsu paused for effect, like he just didn’t know how to phrase this. ‘Honestly, I’d have thought you’d be … I don’t know. More … into it.’

‘What?’ Osomatsu exclaimed loudly, miming a few punches in good imitation of his lifelong fighter spirit. ‘Of course I’m into it!’

‘He gets off on it,’ Choromatsu put Osomatsu’s enthusiasm for the magical hero trade more bluntly. But Todomatsu saw through the veil of humour the eldest drew about himself, joking that he might as well get off to something. He had more than a sneaking suspicion that what bothered his brother had a lot to do with Todomatsu’s own recruitment.

‘Please, Osomatsu-niisan. Tell me what’s wrong.’

‘Like I said, it’s nothing. Only …’ Osomatsu caved as Todomatsu held his eyes at their most compelling widest. ‘You’re taking all this a lot better than I would’ve thought.’

It was Todomatsu’s turn to snort. Did Osomatsu seriously think he was that dense? He wasn’t about to squeeze his eyes shut and stubbornly deny what was right in front of him. ‘And that’s a bad thing how?’

‘It’s not bad,’ Osomatsu said, now unsettlingly pensive. Eyes slowly travelled to take Todomatsu’s, the youngest’s fingers twined in his lap, suddenly nervous and wishing he’d just enjoyed the quiet Osomatsu phenomenon for what it was. ‘But you did hear us say monsters, right?’

Osomatsu raised his gauntlets and curled his fingers into claws, in case Todomatsu was in any doubt as to what monsters were. ‘We’re talking about fighting monsters here. Talons, teeth, tentacles, tusks —take your pick, we’ve had them all.’

‘I heard you,’ Todomatsu returned, swatting Osomatsu’s hand away as he feinted a demonstrative swipe to his chest. Doggedly, he disguised the slight tremor in his voice as an airy lilt. ‘You don’t think I can handle it?’
‘I didn’t say that,’ Osomatsu said, stretching out prolonged inactivity over his head and laying flat on his back, staring at the overhead light. Was he avoiding looking at him? ‘But I’m not joking, they’re big, scary fuckers. And you do get scared, Totty.’

‘So do we,’ Choromatsu intervened, Todomatsu almost surprised when he deflated slightly, shoulders drooping. ‘It’s smart to be afraid. Maybe if you got a little more scared you wouldn’t get the crap beaten out of you every fight.’

‘Argh, you sound like Ahn,’ Osomatsu groaned, nudging his boot in the kitten’s general direction. That support from Choromatsu’s salvaged Todomatsu’s spirits, but he had to squash this topic. Osomatsu wasn’t exactly subtle, but he had as many ways to coax out truth as he did. And Todomatsu couldn’t say it aloud. That might ruin everything. But he wasn’t ready to cope with the monstrous details that blemished this otherwise shining dream.

‘Totty, there’s a lot more to this than a costume and glittery transformation.’

‘I’m aware of that, Niisan,’ Todomatsu said, threading a clear hint through his slightly-lowered tone to back off.

‘I just don’t want you to get the wrong idea. And I don’t think you get it, exactly how dangerous … see, this is what makes picking people out like this a problem,’ Osomatsu said from his horizontal position as Todomatsu floundered to get astride his apprehension. ‘This isn’t the Spectrum Alliance, none of this is normal. You can’t just say what it’s really like out there,’ he waved indiscriminately over his head. ‘You have to see it. Do it.’

Ahn apparently wasn’t going to put up with this from Osomatsu. ‘If you will recall, I did try to lead him to observe a battle …’

‘Remind me,’ Osomatsu said sarcastically, feigning thoughtful as he propped himself on one elbow. ‘Was that when you ran off after we told you it was a pisspoor idea for you to talk to him first? Or maybe when you ran out on me, and I had to take out a soldier before they mutated, because you left me without a fucking barrier? I’m hazy on the details. I totally owned that soldier, by the way,’ he added, a big fat “no thanks to you” heavily implied.

‘What are you talking about?’ Todomatsu asked, leaping to expertly steer the conversation.

‘Two soldiers attacked earlier,’ Choromatsu explained as Ahn humphed, embarrassed again. ‘We had to split up. One—the one I fought—was really near where you walk home.’

‘I figured that out myself,’ Todomatsu said, barely staving off his shiver.

‘Ahn got a little excited. She wanted to find you, show you what we do. We … didn’t think that was such a good idea,’ he said as Ahn’s whiskers angled despondently down. ‘But she …’

‘But she went anyway,’ Osomatsu finished less diplomatically. ‘Ingeniously bolting off from Roppongi on her own stumpy legs—how excited do you have to be to forget you’d fit three times in a kid-size shoebox? And you’d better have been excited,’ he added as Ahn growled, ‘because if you seriously thought you’d find him in time …’

‘What did you mean before, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu asked over his and Ahn’s bickering. This was a lot to come to terms with in one afternoon, but the youngest Matsuno was sturdy. Todomatsu was already well into the process of realigning himself so his world offset all he now knew, and Osomatsu had said something that didn’t quite fit. ‘What about picking people out like this? Weren’t you and Choromatsu-niisan recruited like me?’
‘Well … not exactly,’ Osomatsu said, sitting up and smiling like it wasn’t important. Todomatsu was immediately suspicious.

‘Not “not exactly”, not at all. We weren’t scouted,’ reliable Choromatsu confirmed. ‘We just happened to be there in emergencies—Osomatsu that night at pachinko, me on Halloween. The convenience store that got trashed …’

‘When you forgot the party snacks!’ Todomatsu exclaimed. That realisation was promptly followed by another: that Halloween night Choromatsu had gone through exactly what Todomatsu did now, but under far more pressured circumstances. Flushing slightly, Todomatsu made himself interested in his spotless nails, ashamed to remember exactly what he’d thought of his brothers when they’d returned empty handed.

‘We weren’t chosen like you,’ Choromatsu summarised, eyes down as he fiddled with his tablet, trying to hide a hint of shame. ‘We’re accidents, more than anything.’

Todomatsu immediately got a foul taste in his mouth. What was shameful about being thrust into an impossible fight and winning? But the lingering bitterness dissolved when he realised the implications of Choromatsu’s words. At insensitive bluntest, his brothers were emergency stock. But Todomatsu was prime hero material. Practically oozing superiority, the youngest Matsuno smiled. He’d always known he was destined for better things. And now here he was, a chosen magical boy. Not only that: chosen leader of the magical boys.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu,’ Ahn caught his attention reluctantly. ‘That’s not quite right, you weren’t selected as leader.’

Todomatsu’s internal tapdance missed a step. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You are our light,’ Ahn said carefully. ‘The light always leads.’

‘… Oh,’ Todomatsu said. He wasn’t disappointed long, logic come to his rescue. Light or not, the youngest was the only real choice for leadership among his brothers. The only other contender was Osomatsu by default. And Todomatsu was so used to working his way to the top, expending every effort and pulling every trick he knew. He couldn’t pretend it didn’t feel good, to finally meet no resistance. Apart from any Osomatsu might give him. Todomatsu smirked a little, sure the eldest had fancied himself leader until he’d come along. Well, the sulky Salamander would just have to suck it up: the Unicorn was in charge, now.

Confidence lapping at his don’t fill past line, it still took Todomatsu a moment to work up the nerve to ask something he ached to know, a kneejerk rumination for any one individual plucked from billions: ‘Why me? What makes me so special?’

Again Ahn was reluctant, but completely honest with him. ‘You are inclined to light. And you are the best candidate in our vicinity for our very specific needs. Nothing more impressive than that, I’m afraid.’

‘… Okay,’ Todomatsu made himself nod. The motion was stiff, his assurance sprung a leak. He wasn’t exactly happy with her straightforward answer. Todomatsu was a romantic as much as a realist. To hear this was his destiny—his and his alone—would have shone welcome light through the remaining dark doubts of his mind. ‘So … if this was happening anywhere else …’

‘Don’t worry, Totty,’ Osomatsu had to tease his sudden despondence, as much a kindness as a laugh. ‘I know better than anyone what that feels like, to just be convenient.’ Ahn shushed him, going about managing Todomatsu’s negative reaction.
‘Perhaps it might have been someone else. But the Spectrum Alliance chose you. Not because of destiny. Because of you. Because I see the light in you. I see how brightly it shines,’ she said. Suspended in his petulance, Todomatsu suddenly dangled precariously between unable and unwilling to admit just how special he felt. Did Ahn already entrust her own fate to him? Todomatsu savoured being admired too much not to feel smug. But he was a little unnerved by her faith.

‘You are powerful, Matsuno Todomatsu. And you would make your brothers more powerful than any other Unicorn might dream. I know they will protect you,’ Ahn added significantly.

‘We will,’ Choromatsu promised, words a quiet pledge. Todomatsu felt so protected in that moment his thoughts barely alighted on the flaming arrows he could shoot through that assertion—this was Osomatsu and Choromatsu, for god’s sake. He hadn’t quite made the switch in his mind, converting the shitbag extraordinaires into magical heros. That would be a long and arduous process, a lot harder than anything else he’d had to accept today.

‘Yeah, of course we would,’ Osomatsu said like it was an insult to even think otherwise. ‘But I mean it, Totty. You really have to think about this.’

‘I know, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu was sick of saying it.

‘You were scared bad enough when you thought they were creepy sickos in costume,’ the eldest reminded, ignoring Choromatsu hinting they could talk this through later, warning creeping into his usually-hesitant tones.

‘Just give everything a chance to sink in, then we can talk about …’

‘Back at pachinko, at the beach—even today,’ Osomatsu ticked off on his fingers as Todomatsu’s neck hatefully shrank between his shoulders, plunged in ice with terrifying memory. But Osomatsu wouldn’t stop, and Todomatsu couldn’t scrape a word off his tongue to demand it. ‘One mention of cultists and you’re too scared to function! How are you going to fight something a million times worse?’

Todomatsu gnawed a whimper into his lower lip. He wasn’t trying to fool himself … not exactly. He was too well acquainted with fear not to know its lurk, creeping beneath delight ever since Ahn had stumbled over her first offer of power. And he’d seen Osomatsu’s bruises. Thinking it hiked his nerves even worse, but Todomatsu couldn’t kid himself. He couldn’t believe this wouldn’t be hard. And dangerous. And frightening. He was almost too aware: being told monsters were real in the safety of his own sunlit home was very different to a dark close encounter. Todomatsu wasn’t as scared as he probably should be. And thanks to Osomatsu screwing with his resolve, he was pretty damn shaken.

This was all happening so fast, he could barely believe it. But Todomatsu wanted this. He wanted it. Magical powers aside—if that was even possible—something far more personal twinged at the base of his heart. Whatever the circumstances, he’d been chosen to do something incredible. Him. Doted on all his life, that selection meant far more to him than it probably should. Todomatsu had gone to extreme lengths, trying to stand out among six identical faces. He worked so hard to be seen. Now it was finally happening, Todomatsu blinked back a few hot tears. He’d always felt a little overlooked, but hadn’t realised just how deep its roots spread.

Ahn tried a few times to speak, but was reluctant to break this silence between brothers. Osomatsu watched the youngest with eagle eyes. Todomatsu masterfully masked his sniff, tears gone as he examined his brother right back. There was little ridicule on Osomatsu’s face, the expressive canvass dominated by fierce protectiveness. Todomatsu’s sharp edge softened, the full extent of his brothers’ care for him on display. But they always screwed everything up for him! He wasn’t about to let them
ruin this.

Todomatsu made the flippant declaration, topping it off with a yawn caught behind two fingers. ‘And honestly,’ he added, extracting delectable scowls from both Osomatsu and Choromatsu, ‘if you two can do it, how hard can it be? Now,’ he clapped his hands, keen to move on. There were far more important matters at hand—literally, if Ahn would hand over his scroll already. ‘Can I try transforming? Please?’

Ahn was delighted to practically have Todomatsu on board. But though he pouted endearingly and elongated his vowels to hell and back—‘Pleeease? I reeeally want to try my powers’—the kitten wouldn’t produce his scroll. ‘I am sorry,’ she said with true regret, ‘but you cannot sign a permanent power contract until you understand the terms. There have been issues,’ she explained, Osomatsu’s rueful grin giving him away even before Ahn nailed him with a look, ‘of candidates signing without reading the terms of their contracts in full.’

‘Or at all,’ Choromatsu embellished.

Todomatsu giggled through his fingers at the eldest. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, you didn’t even read it?’ Somehow, that didn’t surprise him at all.

‘I was on a high,’ Osomatsu’s loud complaints resounded through their room so familiarly. ‘Come on, I’d just saved a pachinko parlour from zombified gamblers, can you blame me?’

‘He didn’t listen when I signed either,’ Choromatsu said, rare smile at the eldest’s expense deliciously wicked. ‘Intergalactic paperwork is too much for him.’

‘I can interpret your contract now,’ Ahn said, ignoring Osomatsu’s groan and executing a cute turn like she chased her pretty tufted tail. ‘Once you sign, you can transform to your heart’s content.’

‘Wait!’ Todomatsu’s exclamation came too late. The slender scroll Ahn spun towards him pinged off his forehead.

‘Graceful,’ Osomatsu snorted. Choromatsu bit back another smile as the eldest snatched up the scroll before Todomatsu could reach and waggled it in his face.

‘Stop it,’ he whined. Gone rosy, Todomatsu swiped for it, missing twice as Osomatsu held it teasingly out of reach. Sufficiently provoked, the youngest tackled him, grappling for his scroll. He remembered what had caused his embarrassing lapse once he’d yanked it away and disentangled from a breathlessly-laughing Osomatsu. ‘So I can’t transform until I sign a permanent contract? That means,’ Todomatsu’s grip on the cool length tightened with Ahn’s affirming nod, ‘you were going to send me out there—’

He swished his scroll towards the sun-drenched window like a silvered wand.

‘—no turning back, without even some kind of trial run?’

He felt the tiniest bit bad for Ahn, the kitten clearly not expecting any kind of opposition from her chosen light. But Todomatsu didn’t back down. Magical powers were a pretty tempting incentive to do just about anything. But about the stoutest part of Todomatsu was his survival instinct. He wouldn’t sign his safety away blind, a little miffed Ahn thought he’d do something so stupid. ‘That’s not really fair, is it? Is it, Ahn-chan?’ he used the affectionate diminutive, sure it would catch the aloof creature off guard.

‘No, it’s not,’ Osomatsu agreed as Ahn’s ears gathered blush. Realising how closely his line of reasoning resembled the eldest’s from earlier, Todomatsu felt the slightest barb of annoyance. Fine,
so Osomatsu had made a valid point. It had to happen at least once in their lifetime. ‘Ahn, give him a temporary contract.’

‘What?’ Ahn spluttered.

‘You heard me,’ Osomatsu said roughly. Todomatsu wouldn’t think it much, that Osomatsu held his ground when Ahn rounded on him. But he had to admit, that ball of fluff knew how to impart displeasure.

‘And when,’ she spat, maddened past anything Todomatsu had thought such a sweet thing capable, ‘my infuriating spark, did the Spectrum Alliance grant you authority to …’

Belatedly realising insulting her had been the last thing on Osomatsu’s mind, Ahn’s effort to reign in her offence was almost tangible. ‘Matsuno brothers,’ she addressed all three as Todomatsu found his scroll’s tiny latch and carefully pulled. The delicate sheet of his contract was decorated with beautiful alien designs that shone across its surface. Todomatsu wondered in a brief aside of normality if he’d ever find stationery like it. His friends would love it.

‘Temporary contracts are only bestowed when there is dire need,’ Ahn was saying, her embellished patience almost condescending. Todomatsu chose not to hold that against her. She’d been putting up with Osomatsu and Choromatsu for months. And, handselected or not, the youngest did share their face. He scowled, readying himself for yet another hard slog. This time, to surmount the bad impression his brothers must have already made of him.

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu nodded emphatically. ‘A need. He,’ he pushed, trailing sparks as he flicked a would-be careless gesture Todomatsu’s way, ‘needs to know exactly what he’s getting himself into, before he’s locked in.’

‘Ahn,’ Choromatsu ventured as she made her negative thoughts on the matter unquestionably clear. ‘I think he might be right.’

‘Oh, fine,’ Ahn grumbled. A piping laugh burst from Todomatsu, the kitten relenting immediately with Choromatsu’s endorsement. Osomatsu muttered indignantly—that whiff was an awful lot like nepotism. Choromatsu was the kitten’s pet. But if that got Todomatsu his free trial transformation, no strings attached, the third born would be getting off light for it. Even Ahn’s assertion that here and now wasn’t an option barely punctured his glee.

‘We must wait until there is enemy movement. A temporary contract may be bestowed on a candidate only once, and then …’

‘Ouch!’ Searing with heat so intense he was amazed the fragile paper didn’t combust, Todomatsu dropped his scroll and stuck his scorched fingers in his mouth. The contract snapped neatly inside well before it struck the tatami, an unearthly ring filling every corner of the room, lifting the sensitive hairs on the back of Todomatsu’s neck.

‘You can’t be serious,’ Choromatsu exhaled, hand crept halfway to the gleaming emerald at his throat in disbelief. Osomatsu clutched hard his garnet-adorned zip. ‘We were just saying …’

‘You have already fought two soldiers today,’ Ahn said, recovered from the coincidence far quicker than Choromatsu. ‘It is only another cluster of attacks, this has happened many times. There is nothing more sinister at work.’

The third born shook his head weakly. ‘This is seriously messed up … how does this keep happening?’
It didn’t take a genius to figure what was going on. And Todomatsu was pretty quick on the uptake.

‘Good,’ Osomatsu nodded, no thought for disarming happenstance. ‘No time better than now. Can you handle it?’

He released his garnet and, rocking backwards, flipped to his feet. Sure the agile move was beyond his brother under normal circumstances, Todomatsu’s heart pattered erratically against his ribs. He’d been floating skyward with all his life had become. Now it was laid out before him, all the glamour and grit in one foul hit. He was almost distraught when he hesitated.

This was too soon! He’d banked on having more time, he needed to work up to this part of the deal. He wasn’t ready. He couldn’t just agree, here and now, to fight a monster! Why not? Part of Todomatsu questioned as his bones numbed clean through. You want this, don’t you? It’s like Osomatsu-niisan said: there’s more to it than the magic. Magic, Todomatsu stressed the mysterious power promised to him to fight off Earth’s enemies. You were chosen for this, he snapped at his cowering. The Spectrum Alliance wouldn’t pick someone who didn’t stand a chance.

But he’d seen the look on Osomatsu’s face, a scrawl of horror wiped hastily clean as he teased Choromatsu’s paranoia. Todomatsu wished he hadn’t, dread re-stirred so badly. For a paralysing moment, unfiltered fear threatened to spill over. This was insane! What had happened to being smart? He was being smart, his remaining composure insisted. He’d asked for a trial run. This was his chance to prove he could face up to his nightmares. He’d prove it to Osomatsu, to Choromatsu. And to himself.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu, we must hurry if we are not to waste this opportunity.’

Seconds sped by as he rambled inwardly. Would Ahn deny him the chance altogether, if she saw his indecision now? Would they choose someone else, replace him? The prospect was more awful than any other that loomed on his near horizon. Ahn looked more worried by the moment. And Choromatsu was sharp, Osomatsu’s brother instincts sometimes frightening. They would see through him if he didn’t do something. He had to get himself in order. He wanted this.

A mess of emotion, a few strands of sparkling resolve wove through his sickened apprehension, and Todomatsu lifted his head high. It was exhausting to feel so much, to control his reactions with picture-perfect precision. But he rallied once more and erased anything less than confident from his features. He spoke with the same zest, feeling the outward show bolster that within.

‘I’m ready, what do I do?’

Almost giddy with fresh excitement now he’d made his decision, Todomatsu retrieved his scroll, holding the flaming cylinder gingerly as Ahn instructed. ‘I offer you a temporary power contract,’ she said in a flurry that still managed to be very formal, almost like she knighted him. In a way, Todomatsu thought with a flutter at the fantasy, that’s exactly what was happening—Sir Todomatsu the Unicorn. Karamatsu would love that, if he could only know. ‘Do you accept?’

‘I do,’ Todomatsu intoned. The heat of his scroll softened, becoming the purest understanding of warm he could comprehend.

‘Now, repeat after me: by this contract I submit my light to salvation. Hurry,’ Ahn urged. ‘The soldier isn’t far, but if they escape before we arrive …’

Todomatsu backed up, giving himself space. He’d barely chanted a syllable when something important occurred to him. ‘This doesn’t hurt, does it?’
‘Not at all. It feels kinda weird,’ Choromatsu admitted, allaying Todomatsu’s apprehension as he recalled Osomatsu’s transformative fires and wondered if he’d felt the burn. ‘But it’s actually … kinda nice.’

‘You’ll like it,’ Osomatsu promised, motioning with a sweep of his arm that the youngest had the floor and their undivided attention. ‘Just don’t pay too much attention when you lose your clothes, and you’ll be fine.’

Todomatsu blinked. But he was only bothered a moment. He guessed they had to go somewhere when transformation took hold. But with Osomatsu’s flames in mind, he took his smartphone and set it on the bookshelf. He hated being separated from it, slightly obsessive tendrils already twining about his fingers, compelling him to return it to his pocket. But he left it there and returned to the centre of the room, facing his brothers and Ahn. The boy trembled, rife with anticipation. This was it.

‘We don’t have all day,’ Osomatsu drawled, folding his gauntlets and slouching against the wall. Todomatsu managed to sneer and licked his lips, not wanting to bungle what could be the most important words of his life. He was very annoyed with his voice wavered unplanned, first act as head magical boy not nearly as inspiring as he’d envisioned.

‘B-b-by this contract I submit my light to salvation!’

Todomatsu swept the silvered scroll high like it was something he was always meant to do. Instantly it gleamed, intensifying as the illumination of moon and stars was drawn in streams from beyond the atmosphere. Their brightly-lit room darkened, day itself bending a knee to the pure starlight Todomatsu now trapped in his fist. He saw Osomatsu and Choromatsu throw their arms over their eyes and, realising the danger, attempted the same. But though he blinked against the brilliance, strangely aware as the long curls of his lashes bounced off his cheeks, his eyes glistened beyond tears, unaffected by the intensity that blinded his brothers. Even if he were, Todomatsu found he couldn’t contract a muscle, not consciously. For a moment that frightened him. But Osomatsu had emerged from the flames, Choromatsu from a raging storm. Todomatsu would pass through this. Forgotten whimper lifting in a peal of laughter as all his fears seemed to contract, he relinquished control to the mesmerising will of his light.

Quicksilver shot thrillingly through him. Veined beneath his skin, it filled his deepest chasms to the brim, and Todomatsu threw back his head as power burst in a bright shower of fireworks. Radiance washed down his body, purifying his soul and Starbucks uniform evaporating in its wake. Prewarned of the stripping side effect, he barely paid it attention, barely even cared. There were only his half-blinded brothers to see. And even were he thrust suddenly on stage, Todomatsu knew how good he looked. Springing into the air, he entered realms of weightlessness, every motion beyond himself as his spirit soared. He released his scroll with a skyward flick, cylinder collapsed into a single shining mote that descended to glint at his brow while glimmering ribbons twirled around his torso. Crossing his forearms, rays wrapped his splayed fingers, embossing past his elbows as his toes received the same treatment, and his flashing limbs swept through the air in a vibrant dance as Todomatsu was enveloped in a sphere of light.

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‘He’s still twirling,’ Osomatsu said conversationally. Eyes adjusted, he settled back on the couch, stretching out as his little brother executed a perfect aerial backflip, ringed by the glow of unnumbered full moons. ‘He coming down any time soon?’

‘He is taking a lot longer than us,’ remarked Choromatsu, uneasy with more than lost time despite Ahn’s assurance Todomatsu was fine.
‘Well, he is the leader,’ Osomatsu nodded knowingly.

‘Don’t say that like it makes sense!’

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Todomatsu glittered as the full spectrum of light gained substance against his skin. Fingers skimming air that sparkled as diamond dust, he spun from it a shimmering sceptre, twirling its length deftly about his form and turning illusions as the elegant weapon rippled with energy. Toes touching down, all the light and love Todomatsu had to give and more bloomed.

‘Pure paladin of liberation, Unicorn!’ a voice he knew must be his lifted heavenward. The lionhearted cry resounded unlike any he’d made all his life. Todomatsu immediately broke his audacious pose and spun in delight. Dazzling white, his costume fanned out around him. Festooned in ruffled gauze of palest pink and silver was a fitted top and trim shorts beneath a soft hooded tunic. Long and bright, it flared past his knees. Lifting one arm gleefully before his eyes, Todomatsu admired a slimming glove, stretched to kiss the laced frills of his sleeves. A lens like his brothers’ hovered before one eye. Reaching a finger to brush it, Todomatsu exclaimed—it really just drifted there! But his attention was hooked from the magical technology, heart popping when he felt the bright circlet atop his hair. Reading his hopes as nerve impulses, his lens flickered to show him: white gold, it twined about his brow to cradle a perfect pink diamond cut in a delicate loveheart. Eyes shining, Todomatsu spun eagerly for his brothers’ verdict. ‘Niisan? Ahn-chan, what do you think?’

‘Very nice,’ Ahn was the first to speak. Her youthful voice had gone rather husky, unable to take her eyes off him. Todomatsu glowed with her admiration.

‘Careful not to trip,’ Choromatsu added. Looking down, Todomatsu saw his plain work shoes had been replaced by shimmering white boots taller than his knee. He tried a few experimental steps. He’d only worn heels a few times, but moved so naturally he might have been born in them. Choromatsu smiled at his elation. In a sudden reversal of Earth’s poles, Osomatsu didn’t.

‘What the fuck is this?’ he exclaimed, grabbing at the exposed skin of Todomatsu’s arms, glaring down at his bare thighs. Todomatsu whacked him lightly with his sceptre, high on his cloud. ‘Is he taking the soldiers out literally? Is he asking them for drinks? This is meant to be armour!’

‘Magical girls have it worse,’ Todomatsu pointed out, retort as quick and light as he felt. Always vivacious, Todomatsu's vigor was now off the charts.

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu said, shoultering away Choromatsu’s attempts to calm him. ‘Maybe it escaped your attention when you were spinning around near the ceiling, but this is not a TV show!’

‘There isn’t time for this, move!’ Ahn exclaimed, her wonder blunted as time slipped away, perhaps taking their target with it. Throwing up his gauntlets, Osomatsu angrily threw open the window. ‘Wait!’ Ahn cried, barely skittering to jump into his hoodie pocket before he leapt out. Running forward, Todomatsu stuck his head outside, just seeing as his brother streaked onto the roof of the neighbouring building, nothing but a fiery blur.

‘Can’t people see?’ he asked as Choromatsu sighed behind him.

‘Yeah … it’s dangerous leaving here like this, but I suppose it can’t be helped. We can’t hold barriers in the air,’ Choromatsu said, motioning Todomatsu aside so the city no longer had a free view of him in the window frame. ‘We’re moving too fast, and it’s harder without something, you know, solid-ish to ground it with.’
Todomatsu didn’t know, barely able to finish one thought before it collided with his next. ‘Do I need to make a barrier?’

‘No, that’s Ahn’s job,’ Choromatsu said, a little too quickly. Todomatsu immediately called him out. ‘Yeah, I can do it too, sort of. But I’m not …’

‘What’s keeping you two?’ Ahn spoke in his mind, sudden and shrill. Todomatsu started, realising this was the telepathy Osomatsu had mentioned. Their kitten-like friend must have used it all along without him cottoning on. It was strange to think they’d been talking mind-to-mind all this time. Todomatsu tried to speak beneath the white mask moulded to his lower face and found his lips unresponsive.

‘You can make this jump easily,’ Choromatsu began to talk him through. ‘Just trust in it, our abilities now … Totty,’ he sighed again as Todomatsu took his arm, linking them close. Charged with positive energy or not, he had no intention of jumping out that window alone. ‘All right,’ Choromatsu relented. Todomatsu clung tighter when his brother tried to ease away, but loosened his grip when he realised Choromatsu tried to hold his hand instead. ‘I need more room to move. Jump on three, okay?’

‘Okay?’ Todomatsu replied, telepathic voice gone stratospherically high.

‘Okay.’ Choromatsu sounded like he knew exactly what he was doing. Odd as it was to see his brother so collected, Todomatsu found he trusted without a smidgen of doubt. Wow … of course I trust my brothers, he thought, revelling in the freedom that came with unreserved faith. Most of the time. But still … wow. Shuffling slightly, he imitated his brother’s comfortable pre-jump stance. ‘One, two …’

‘Whee!!’ Todomatsu cried, stomach dropping as his body rocketed upwards. ‘This is amazing, I can’t believe this!’ he exclaimed, exhilarated as they soared over the sun-touched city. Osomatsu a crimson blip ahead, they bounded between rooftops as the hum of urban life sounded distantly below, cars and trains shrunken to industrious multi-coloured insects. It was freezing up there, but Todomatsu’s sparse outfit was amazingly insulated. And with Choromatsu alert to his balance and lift, he was far too busy enjoying flight to worry about a little cold.

‘Should I let go?’ Choromatsu asked, target not far away.

‘No!’ Todomatsu cried, a little afraid to lose his training wheels. And he wanted to drag out flying with Choromatsu for as long as possible. The third born belonged up there in the sky, reacting like a bird to the wind. Comparing styles as they gained on and overtook Osomatsu, Todomatsu judged Choromatsu, without doubt, as the better flier. A series of quick blasts sounded behind him, corresponding bursts of heat on his back as Osomatsu re-directed to take up position on Todomatsu’s other side. He remained crabby, glaring sideways at the youngest’s magical fashion and not saying much until Choromatsu steered them towards a few block-shaped utilitarian buildings by a dusty playing field. Todomatsu instantly saw it was a high school.

‘I will guide you,’ Ahn promised, nose poking from Osomatsu’s pocket as they brushed shedded treetops and cruised for a smooth landing inside the red rolling gate. Straightaway something set Todomatsu’s teeth on edge, an invasive shiver through the atmosphere like feedback made tangible. Then it flexed around them, distorting the world slightly and settling into what could only be a barrier. ‘Keep behind your brothers. Observe and learn, then at the right moment I will help you to …’

‘No,’ Osomatsu cut Ahn off with one blunt word.
‘To which part?’ she said, gone rather cool. Todomatsu’s eyes flickered between the pair. Just who was in charge here … wait, he thought with a slightly antagonistic smile. Wasn’t he? But Todomatsu kept the comment to himself, Osomatsu dead set against him getting involved in any way.

‘Give him his own barrier—you can do that, right?’

‘That’s actually not a bad idea,’ Choromatsu had to side with Osomatsu over a highly-disgruntled Ahn, Todomatsu finally returning him ownership of his hand. ‘Maybe the Liberation Force shouldn’t know we’ve recruited the Unicorn yet, not until he signs. And I’ve been thinking … maybe we should plan something showier for his first fight.’

‘I don’t think he could get any showier if he tried,’ Osomatsu grouched with a tug at Todomatsu’s ruffles.

‘But this is going to be a huge blow to them,’ Choromatsu maintained as Ahn nodded slowly, intrigued. ‘He’s Lord Takuu’s arch nemesis.’

‘I’m what?’ Todomatsu exclaimed, that tidbit news to him. But Ahn closed herself and Todomatsu in a smaller version of her dome. ‘It doesn’t affect you?’ he asked, enthusiastic wave returned by a less-enthusiastic Osomatsu, still not convinced they took precautions enough for a stimulating, but safe learning experience. ‘It’s fine, Niisan,’ Todomatsu smiled for his brothers. They didn’t need to know, beneath effervescent frivolity, just how grateful he was for the safety measures.

‘They’re almost on the roof,’ Choromatsu updated as they looked up at the school building, nothing but a repellant shimmer to any bored student who stared down toward the gate and freedom beyond.

‘Ahn, evacuate the school,’ Osomatsu said, shelving his gripes and taking charge. ‘We don’t know if we can contain it up there, it’s too dangerous.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu said, impressed. Ahn muttered that she was fully capable of evacuating a school without his say-so.

‘He’s enjoying leadership while it lasts,’ Choromatsu said, unsheathing his pistols.

‘Shut up,’ Osomatsu muttered as Ahn pushed out her barrier to enclose the entire grounds. Caught within, the school population flowed outside in streams, pooling into the surrounding streets. They huddled together for warmth, but otherwise looked none too concerned their schedules had been disrupted. Choromatsu gazed on Ahn’s efficient work. Tender heart tugged, Todomatsu read his downcast expression as an all too familiar “I’m not good enough to do that and I never will be”. The youngest reached and took his wrist, giving his brother the support he needed.

Shaking him off gently, agile Choromatsu set his face and took off for the roof. Todomatsu scooped up tiny Ahn and was about to follow, but was pulled up by a tight grip on his arm. ‘Remember, stay back,’ Osomatsu warned in a low voice, determined nothing would happen to Todomatsu on his watch. ‘Stick with Ahn. If everything goes to hell, get the hell out of here.’

‘How likely is everything to go to hell?’ Todomatsu had to ask, shuddering as a highly-unpleasant whine, streaked by the growing cracks of a ghostly adolescent, wafted from above. For the first time in a long while, Osomatsu flashed a confident grin.

‘We’re pretty good at this by now.’

‘They know what they’re doing, for the most part,’ Ahn admitted. Though his brother glared, Todomatsu got the sense that her support, though less than rousing, was worth more than a medal to Osomatsu. Wondering in passing at the dynamics of their turbulent relationship, Todomatsu bent his
knees low and took his first solo leap. He could have cleaved gravity, he repelled upwards so easily. It would be a long time before that amazement wore off.

Landing with his arms stretched wide for balance, he drove his heels into the narrow ledge a little too enthusiastically, overshooting the chain-link fence that looped the roof. ‘Be careful,’ Ahn warned unnecessarily. Eyes on his fast-descending feet to stick his landing, Todomatsu hit the concrete, knees absorbing the slight shock bending easily in his flexible boots. Alight with success, he looked up in time to see a teenage girl attack Choromatsu.

Todomatsu couldn’t bite off his silent screech. Scraggly hair all over her face, she crouched on all fours and scampered spider-like, conjuring bladder-voiding images of dislocated women from horror movies he’d forced himself to watch only so he wouldn’t be left out of conversations. ‘Choromatsu-niisan!’

‘He’s fine,’ Ahn said, jumping down to stand alert at his ankles. Todomatsu’s eyes rounded as Choromatsu leapt out of range and fired, rapidly adjusting his aim as the girl scuttled sideways before falling flat on her face, stunning bolt catching her in the chest.

‘I see I have the pleasure of meeting the Salamander and the Wyvern,’ the whining voice grated from across the roof. Eyes drawn to the elongated form that had haunted his dreams for months, seven eyes masked and cloak whipping over its garish wraps, Todomatsu’s lower half turned to jelly. He was distantly frustrated that he was affected so badly—god, why did he have to be so afraid, why had he come here, why had he wanted to come … He’d had a full list of reasons, why did he have to forget now?

But whether cultists or aliens, they’d been at the heart of his terrors for months. It was natural, wasn’t it? To react like this the first time he saw them again? He would—Todomatsu groaned, hunching to clutch his vibrating knees with an unpleasant wave of stress response—get used to it.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu, are you …’ Todomatsu made himself nod before Ahn finished, both brothers glancing surreptitiously his way. Needing to focus on something else as his systems saturated with survival chemicals, Todomatsu shakily recalled the soldier’s zombie puppet was already out of the picture. There was no one else nearby to infect with darkness. And however frightening it looked, peeking through the distorting curtain of his fears Todomatsu brightened to see the unnatural spindly being wasn’t much threat on its own—Osomatsu could probably take it out without even transforming!

‘Hey!’ he shouted suddenly. ‘My brothers are going to kick your arse!’

‘They can’t hear you,’ Choromatsu and Ahn reminded at the same moment. Beneath his mask, Todomatsu smiled so sweetly.

‘I know.’

But then the alien’s limbs disjointed, folding gruesomely in on themselves. Todomatsu’s stomach pitched sickly. Hands flying to his masked mouth, he gasped as their cloak hardened into some kind of casing that glistened black as beetle shells.

‘I am Kikuukyou,’ their voice sounded eerily within the mass. ‘Far greater a pleasure than our meeting shall be ending you for my Lord Takuu’s glory.’

‘They really need to change up the vows to destroy a bit,’ Osomatsu commented as he shifted the fallen teenager, unconcerned by Kikuukyou’s antics. Todomatsu hadn’t that pleasure.
‘Wh-what’s it doing?’ He shrank into the fence, forgetting for a moment he was invisible to all but his brothers.

‘Mutating,’ Osomatsu shrugged like it was nothing and pumped his flaming gauntlets, dropping into a guard position. ‘It’s monster time.’

‘Oh …’ Todomatsu jumped, clutching his sceptre as terrifying cracks split the air. Choromatsu perched precariously on the chain-link fence, aim cemented on their hovering target as it split apart. Then, with a massive crunch and splatter like a lost carton of eggs, but amplified a million times more disgusting, the dark mass exploded.

‘Gross, gross!’ Todomatsu shuddered in revulsion as glutinous globules rained down and spattered all over his boots. Visceral disgust taking over—he wanted that gunk off him right freaking now—he tried to scrape his boots clean on the fence. He didn’t notice the long black shadow fall across the roof. Not until Osomatsu swore.

Every drop of blood drained from Todomatsu’s face. Almost comically slowly, he craned his neck and gazed glassy-eyed up at the towering ramifications of his decision.

He’d been right about one thing, at least. Being told monsters were real and a close encounter were very different.
The Haunted

Chapter Notes

I suppose it's getting a bit old, me apologising for how long these things are. Managed to trim it a bit, but ... stuff happens. Would love to hear your thoughts on the beast, much inspiration drawn from two hopefully-obvious sources. They were fun to imagine, but hard to figure out how to fight, so let me know how you think it turned out! Hope it's heaps of fun to read, always love to hear from you - it's so wonderful you take the time to read my stuff, thank you so much :) I've been a little off, sorry, not quite recovered from my chapter 10 slump - thanks for hanging around, even though it takes an unpredictable time between chapters. Would love to be more consistent, but gaps are probably going to start getting wider and wider - I'm wanting to go back to picking at some original stuff, so I'll have to figure out how to balance that with precious Osomatsu. Will definitely finish the next chapter first, though :D

Also insanely-adorable art of the Unicorn by Misa! Thank you so much, I love it to pieces, it's amazing :D

Also also, this is a bit of a last-minute chapter title. Not quite sure it's perfectly matched, but it looks good with the rest of the titles and I like it - named after another song, The Haunted by Northeast Party House.

It was an imminent kind of thing. Still, Osomatsu hadn’t expected to recruit the Unicorn today. And that was more than his general good-humoured, take life as it bowls you over attitude—Ahn had been at it nonstop for weeks. A shortlist agonisingly whittled to three was all she’d had to show for her pains. And with that equally-imminent alien force bearing down on the fledgling heroes, even Choromatsu had ventured that she might be overdoing it. ‘Just a little, maybe.’

‘Or a lot,’ Osomatsu had said, sick of their mentor’s attitude. Was she that determined to “make up” for them with a flawless Unicorn? Was there more to all her haughty little comments, she really thought they weren’t up to scratch? Stubbornly denying how wounded he was—how could she think so little of them after all they’d been through?—Osomatsu had turned snarky.

‘If the Unicorn was meant to be first, we needed them back in September. You’re wasting time,’ he’d said impatiently, Ahn snapping for quiet as she pored once more over candidate profiles. ‘I’ve been saying it for ages,’ Osomatsu drawled on, ignoring the slight shake of Choromatsu’s head. His brother’s eyes were closed, partway through his elemental breathing exercises. ‘Just pick someone if they’re so damn important—or I will.’

He’d meant the impromptu threat as more a joke, uneasy in the tense atmosphere even as he fanned the flames. But Ahn had hissed like he grabbed at the Unicorn’s scroll, her own solemn duty to bestow. Then, with no more sign or signal, the tiny kitten had crumpled. Unprepared for her mewel of distress, it immediately burrowed under Osomatsu’s skin—there he was, making the kid cry again.

‘We … we know you …’

Second-guessing every word and even more hesitant than usual, Choromatsu had shifted his tablet to sit by their young mentor in crisis. ‘We know you … want us to be the best team we can. You want
to do a good job.’

Osomatsu only able to stare like an idiot, his brother had tentatively stroked Ahn’s silken fur. At his touch the kitten choked. Sobs rattled through her little chest as she buried her face in his knee, but Choromatsu had relaxed somewhat now she accepted his comfort. ‘You’re under so much pressure,’ he’d murmured. ‘And I … know you’re scared of screwing up. I get that. But you can do this,’ Choromatsu had swallowed out, throat pressured by empathy. ‘You’ll choose the right person. Everything … everything will be fine.’

Thick with flustered guilt, Osomatsu had groaned. Ahn’s indecision had nothing to do with them. Hadn’t he wondered how the capable kitten coped with the stress, coaching subpar saviours?

‘Tell us when you can’t handle shit,’ Osomatsu had eventually got words in order and out. Whatever the peaks and plummeting troughs of their relationship, he cared so much for Ahn. And now he actually thought about it, he couldn’t remember thanking the kitten for her unending support even once. ‘We’re a team, right? We need to look out for each other. You’re a really good mentor,’ he’d tried, hoping to perk her up. But Osomatsu was about as emotionally able as a prepubescent gnat. When Ahn’s cries intensified he’d shot Choromatsu a look of pure bewilderment, no clue why. ‘I’m sorry, I’m really sorry I’m such an asshole.’

Ahn’s head had shaken furiously with each attempted apology. ‘The one thing you don’t need to be sorry for … I’m so glad,’ she’d finally peeked out from Choromatsu’s knee, her whisper halting and waterworks dammed by eyes screwed shut, ‘that the two of you are my warriors.’

‘Did you hear her say it? I heard her,’ Osomatsu had needled, fun finally frothing in his own brand of stress repellent. He was rewarded by the disgruntled tsk he’d hoped for.

That had been a few days ago. Ahn no longer embroiled in her unhealthy quest for perfection, it was only a matter of time—hopefully less than she’d already spent. And Osomatsu was almost too pleased by the final candidates. He could almost put his pride to bed over his short-lived time on top, smug that he’d soon serve under such an adorable Unicorn—the sum total of women in his life would finally lift to three!

Realising bang over his breakfast bowls this was no longer the case, Osomatsu experienced an upsurge of regret as one short-lived rush. Those rapids were fast overwhelmed by the ego-stripping notion that Ahn, honest to god, meant Todomatsu to lead the spectrum guardians—lead Osomatsu! Fuck that for a joke! But that second torrent drained as fast as the first. And all Osomatsu was left with was a frighteningly vivid image of his youngest brother, painted small and alone before Lord Takuu and his spreading armies of nightmare.

‘But … what about the shortlist?’ he asked later in the day, lighting a fire in the drafty warehouse for Ahn to curl beside. Try as he might, Osomatsu couldn’t blink the horrifying scene away. ‘He’s not even a candidate, how’s he suddenly bumped to number one?’

‘I hardly envisaged this,’ Ahn grumbled. ‘Three identical guardians … I have only just come to distinguish the two of you without sensing your inclinations—at least until the spark opens his mouth,’ she added, Osomatsu too worked up to react. ‘Matsuno Todomatsu’s inclination surges in the most peculiar fashion; it was difficult for me to sense. But the Spectrum Alliance believes such an unusual Unicorn may take Lord Takuu by surprise.’

‘Totty actually does make sense,’ Choromatsu said after a long pause. ‘I mean,’ he stumbled when Osomatsu’s eyebrow disappeared into his fringe. ‘I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and, ah … it’s pretty obvious we … I,’ he amended quickly, tones morose but matter-of-fact. ‘I never had a chance working with anyone on the shortlist. They’re all smart, pretty … well-liked girls.’
‘We’re heroes,’ Osomatsu said when Ahn reluctantly admitted that too had been a factor in her decision. ‘We’re good enough for anyone.

Concerned that Choromatsu was still so down on himself, the eldest Matsuno had to accept his brother would have severe issues interacting with any shortlisted Unicorn. And while Osomatsu champed at the bit to engage, his need for an inappropriateness spotter might have hindered the team dynamic just as badly. It would be funny, but not particularly helpful to bring in someone who didn’t know what—more specifically, who—they were in for. And if anyone knew how to tolerate them, it was Todomatsu.

Taken aback by the intensity, Osomatsu’s heart pulled with such desolate hope his chest pained. To be open and free with his brother again was more than he—his poor optimistic soul was almost resigned to an eternity of secrets and lies—dared imagine. But Totty …

‘He can’t even handle the pressure playing mahjong,’ Osomatsu cracked. ‘He’s seriously the best we’ve got?’

‘He’s afraid of the dark,’ Choromatsu murmured, one of unnumbered thoughts skimming to his surface.

‘Exactly!’ Osomatsu latched to his apparent support. ‘Soldiers are practically powered by darkness, how’s that going to go down? Totty’s terrified of the cultists,’ he threw in mocking inverted commas. He wasn’t exactly sure who he wound up mocking—whatever kept Totty out of this. ‘He was terrified at pachinko.’

‘So was I,’ Choromatsu reminded. Osomatsu went on like he hadn’t.

‘He screams if he sees a fucking cockroach. Drop a monster in front of him and he’ll piss himself!’ Osomatsu rubbed his nose, trying to joke around and diminish Totty to a totally unviable option.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn’s affection for him won out over irritation. She knew what had him so tense—Todomatsu becoming the Unicorn was somehow both the best and worst possible thing she could have suggested. ‘I know he is your youngest brother. But there is so much at stake. The Spectrum Alliance would never ask this of any of you were there not.’

‘I know that!’ Osomatsu exclaimed. The universes relied on them, he got that already! But there were so many candidates—he’d know! He’d lost god-knew how much sleep scouting them! ‘But you promised me my brothers would be safe! Last time I checked,’ he said tightly, fists wringing the knees of his trousers, ‘safe was as far from this shit as possible.’

‘The Unicorn’s place is hardly at the forefront of conflict,’ Ahn said like it was some great assurance—as if anywhere else in conflict was the safest place Totty could be. ‘And I never promised they would be safe,’ she reminded, Osomatsu’s vivid memory of the night they’d met jumbled in emotions and explanations. ‘I said they would be safer than anyone whilst you protected them. Matsuno Choromatsu?’ she turned to the Wyvern, his lowered eyes only raising when she spoke his name. Osomatsu scoffed, not caring that Ahn heard. She’d decided without consulting them. If she needed anything to feel less culpable about it, she wasn’t getting it from them. A little guarded, Choromatsu chose his words carefully, speaking to the crackle of flames.

‘I don’t like it either. But Todomatsu would be thinking the same about us, if he’d been first. And with everything at risk, as much as we don’t like it … I think we need him. If he says yes.’

‘Oh, come on! Ahn, please,’ Osomatsu tried to sound reasonable—what was Choromatsu’s problem? He was supposed to be the sensible one, and he was practically supporting this mad shit. ‘I
get why Choromatsu’s here, we were in a pinch!’

‘And pachinko wasn’t?’ Choromatsu demanded. Any insult unintended, Osomatsu couldn’t worry about the third born’s fragile ego when another brother required his full attention.

‘Are you saying we just ask him to submit his whatever to salvation?’

‘And the alternative?’ Ahn asked, infuriatingly level. ‘Are you suggesting we wait until a suitable light is in a compromising situation and compel them to transform?’

‘That’s what you did to us,’ Osomatsu shot back.

‘And if this does not occur?’ Ahn’s whiskers twitched, stretching out her frayed patience. Lured by strange powers and excitement, it had been simple to persuade Osomatsu to sign a power contract. Apparently he wouldn’t be convinced so easily when it came to his brothers. ‘Do we generate such a compromising situation and lead a candidate into danger unawares?’

‘Of course not!’ Osomatsu exploded, furious and getting clumsy as he snatched for any flaw in Ahn’s proposal, beyond the peril it rained on Todomatsu. ‘Totty just doesn’t belong in a fight, okay? I’ve already got one brother to deal with, don’t make this any harder than it is!’

‘What?!’ Choromatsu squawked. ‘Deal with … just how hard is it, dealing with me? You always say I’m doing fine, don’t you mean it?’

‘I mean every goddamn word! That has nothing to do with …’

Choromatsu’s withering glare sliced clean through his excuses. Osomatsu had been upset when the third born was recruited. But he’d already been there, no chance to ruminate before he was signed and sealed. Asking Totty flatout to put his life on the line was totally different. ‘I just don’t want to drag our baby brother into this too! Don’t you want to protect him?’

‘Of course I do! But who else will put up with us? This is too important to screw up. And you didn’t drag me into this,’ Choromatsu added tightly. ‘I chose it.’

‘If it weren’t for me you wouldn’t have even had the choice,’ Osomatsu fired back, ammunition blasted past his teeth before it fully crossed his mind. Shivers stilled by the licking flames, Ahn’s gaze flickered sadly between them. But her resolve was unaffected, only heating the eldest Matsuno further. ‘Come on, Choromatsu! How close have you come to dying?’

‘I’ve saved you … more times than you’ve saved me,’ Choromatsu owned with difficulty, words barely slotted through his clenched teeth. ‘I’m just trying to be sensible about this.’

‘Well, you’re doing a pretty shit job,’ Osomatsu sneered. Choromatsu’s spine stiffened, the eldest strangely satisfied to see he’d hit a nerve. Facing his brother dead on from his crate, he dared Choromatsu to come at him. He didn’t disappoint.

‘You think none of us can handle this but you?’ he yelled in verbal variant of a full-frontal assault. ‘That it’s okay if you put yourself in danger, but not the rest of us? You’re not responsible for us!’

‘I am! I’m your big brother …’

‘By 10 minutes!’ Choromatsu burst, fists driven hard into the crate beneath him, anger sponged up by cheap cushions. ‘Even if it was 10 years, it’s not your decision! Don’t let your inability to handle that destroy the human race, or anything! If I die tomorrow,’ he said suddenly, Osomatsu’s stomach jerked sickeningly backwards through air. ‘That’s not on you. And I worry about you too,’ he added,
Osomatsu had to look away. ‘You can’t get enough of this, it’s who you are now. Could you give that up if I said it’d make me happy?’

‘You live for the fight,’ Ahn agreed quietly as Osomatsu’s mouth fell open.

‘This is who I am, too. So don’t take it away from Totty,’ Choromatsu said, voice strained. ‘Not until he says he doesn’t want it.’

‘I …’ Osomatsu struggled to deny it. ‘This isn’t about me. It’s too dangerous, do you want to get Totty killed or …’

‘Like hell it’s not about you! If you could stop being selfish for one second …’

Osomatsu slammed all his formidable upper body strength into his crate. Lurching to his feet, he’d barely cemented the aggressive stance, blood thumping in his ears and ready to shout god-knew what —Osomatsu sure as hell didn’t—at his tensed, but defiant brother, when sense caught up.

Confronted by his stupidity, an involuntary chuckle tickled him like gas. It was a little wild, but his body seized the relief and convinced the rest of him along for the ride, temper fizzling.

‘I’m sorry,’ Ahn said as Osomatsu dropped heavily with his own apology. Choromatsu acknowledged it with a somewhat cool nod; Osomatsu fidgeted, not forgiven yet. ‘But that is my decision. I will offer Matsuno Todomatsu a power contract with or without your support. Let him choose, a right both you and Matsuno Choromatsu were afforded. When does he finish his shift?’

Ahn directed at Choromatsu.

‘Any minute now,’ he said, rising a little stiffly. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, are you coming?’

Osomatsu groaned, mashing his face in his hands. This wouldn’t get any easier the longer they put it off. But how would they even ask him? They’d screwed with Totty too many times for him to believe them. The moment they said aliens he’d start giggling, ask how Karamatsu had convinced them. How would they explain Earth’s peril without the benefit of a tentacled monster bringing down a store around them?

‘I will approach him myself,’ Ahn decreed from Osomatsu’s hoodie pocket, tiny nose just poking out into fresh air as they flew home. The brothers exchanged a sidelong glance.

‘Ahn,’ Osomatsu took point, trying not to tease her mercilessly. ‘That’s not the best idea.’

‘And why is that?’ Ahn asked prissily.

‘Well,’ Osomatsu couldn’t resist. ‘I hate to bring this up, but … you kinda look like a cat.’

‘I have been made abundantly aware of that fact,’ Ahn replied brusquely. ‘Just what does that have to do with anything?’

‘Cats don’t talk,’ he reminded. ‘You really think you can just …’

‘He might freak out a bit,’ Choromatsu took over as Ahn bristled. ‘Maybe you should let us …’

‘Shit,’ Osomatsu swore, never ready for the unearthly burn of his garnet. Choromatsu pinpointing their target, they’d barely rocketed into Roppongi when a second alert flared.

‘We have to split up.’

Osomatsu felt a thrill of fear—Choromatsu had never faced an enemy alone. He realised more and
more every day, his brothers’ safety was the deal clincher in taking up this gig. And that promise slipped away from him, one brother at a time as Osomatsu led them astray. But did he? It was the hardest thing he’d ever admitted, but Choromatsu was right.

‘Get going,’ he made himself say against all his protective instinct, Choromatsu angling for their nearby home ward. ‘Be careful and keep your fucking distance.’

Osomatsu had a world of responsibility now. But it was one Choromatsu shared. And if Todomatsu shared it too, he had to quit his bitching and deal with it.

***

‘Todomatsu. They can’t see you. Just … don’t … panic.’

Eyes locked ahead, Osomatsu kept Totty in the edge of his sights, the novice Unicorn pressed deep into the fence perimeter. They’re going to notice, he couldn’t shut out dread, mouth drying out as the chain links strained, the pressure of Totty’s body marking him in space. He cowered behind his sceptre, angled trembling before him like some shoddy shield or sacrifice—seriously, that glorified magic wand was all he got? Osomatsu clenched his jaw so hard it clicked—what the fuck, Spectrum Alliance? What was that about quitting bitching? This was a shit idea, shit, shit, shit …

‘We won’t let them near you. Just … Hey!’ Osomatsu yelled, soundless as he psyched himself for the fight and walled off vamping anxiety. He’d make this a whole lot worse if he got distracted now.

‘Osomatsu …’ Choromatsu rasped unexpectedly. Alarmed, Osomatsu flicked attention his way, all he could spare. The third born breathed apprehension and not much else. Gripped by shallow wheezes, he trembled atop his suddenly not-so-elevated perch on the swaying fence, totally exposed.

‘You’re fine,’ Osomatsu said bracingly as Choromatsu struggled to throw the mild attack. ‘Keep it together, we need you. Come on, how do we beat them?’

He couldn’t criticise the Wyvern, fractured like a bedraggled child crawled through a static-riddled TV screen. Shivers and sweat stroked a cruel finger between Osomatsu’s shoulder blades—Kikuukyou looked almost human. But he’d never seen anything further, a monstrous imitation from the sick twists of Lord Takuu’s depravity. Hulking high over them, they crouched menacingly on outstretched hands and knees—feet, Osomatsu saw with a kick to his stomach. The waxen humanoid bulged at the hip, joints jerked outward so their kneecaps faced the sky and bony toes planted flat to the ground. Gaunt and out-of-proportion, Kikuukyou was all freakish angles and horror, face eclipsed by a shredded curtain of skin hanging sick metres to drag against the ground. Their grin peeked from behind, tombstone teeth tearing bare features apart.

‘I-it’s … all right,’ Ahn’s voice wobbled with Totty’s whimper. Somehow Osomatsu didn’t think their mentor barely keeping a lid on dismay was much comfort to their quivering recruit. God, why did this have to be Totty’s first …

Eyes flaring challenge, he cocked his fists, ready. Osomatsu was distracted, huh? He’d give Kikuukyou a fucking distraction. ‘So how’s this going to work?’ he demanded. ‘You gonna sit there leering at us, or you gonna come at me?’

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu’s voice steadied, recovered with characteristic ease and formidable attention everywhere. ‘We can’t stay up here.’

‘Why not?’ Osomatsu asked; staying put seemed a pretty good plan to him. ‘We can trap it …’
On cue he felt the shudder beneath his boots, pressured foundations rocked like he rode a slow wave of concrete. He grumbled with Choromatsu’s eternal correctness—the building couldn’t take this kind of concentrated weight. Osomatsu barely enjoyed scant relief—at least the school was evacuated if the place decided to crumble—when Totty strangled a gasp. Kikuukyou contorted repulsively, one meaty shoulder hunching almost behind their neck as they regarded the visible warriors, still in no hurry to attack. Osomatsu would kick things off himself. But realising exactly what this thing resembled, the fiery Salamander flooded with nerves reborn—this was a goddamn Titan!

‘Spectrum guardians … you expel such a stench of fear. I see rumour of your inept invincibility is no more than idle hearsay.’

Osomatsu rolled his eyes. How could he even think of fighting? There was so much more belittling to be had!

‘Do you believe you have achieved something? A few lost soldiers, a few scattered slaves. But you have not yet faced the calibre of my Lord Takuu’s most loyal of vassals. Now,’ the beast’s self-important monologuing maw drew back, overlong limbs coiled to spring. ‘Surrender yourselves to the void.’

Kikuukyou sprang. No way to stop them, Osomatsu got the hell out of the way. Blasting twin craters under his feet, he shot straight up. With an agile twist, he aimed a few flaming punches straight down to see if they blistered. Welts exploded down their ribs. Kikuukyou screeched, spinning to engage. But Choromatsu already moved, snaring their one-track attention as the entire building groaned beneath them.

Smiling broadly at the Titan’s aversion to fire—he hated when his element was sidelined—Osomatsu caught a faceful of scorched hide. The smell staggered him mid-descent. Embarrassingly lightheaded, he stung with the indignity—since when was the Salamander squeamish?

‘Get away from the fence!’ he heard Choromatsu shout, brother streaking on wind rallied his way. A little woozy and sun just starting to sink west, Osomatsu squinted to bring the slightly-glary scene into focus.

‘Oh, shit—Totty, move!’ he yelled. Ahn a tiny blip on his shoulder, the youngest shrank into the fence, a rabbit in headlights as Kikuukyou obliviously thundered to flatten them. Choromatsu fired bolt after bolt, trying to redirect the monster’s charge across the rapidly-diminishing stretch of rooftop. Osomatsu swore foully and kicked an inferno into his boots to catch up, Choromatsu barely slanting ahead of straining fingers thicker than hams. With a cyclonic burst, he cleared the chain links. A frenzied heartbeat later, Kikuukyou stampeded through the flimsy barrier. A frenzied heartbeat later, Kikuukyou stampeded through the flimsy barrier. The fence ripped clean off its palings, unravelled structure sweeping Todomatsu straight over the edge. Ahn buried her claws in his puffed sleeve, dangling as they flailed over the four-storey drop. ‘Totty!’ Osomatsu screamed. Below, Kikuukyou struck earth with a gut-busting rumble—shit, who cared? ‘Totty, I’m coming! Ahn, hold on!’

‘It’s okay!’ Choromatsu called as the eldest hurtled to save them.

‘How the fuck is this …’

Osomatsu dug in brakes at the building ledge, flooding with relief. Choromatsu was too quick for him, inconspicuously working the air around Totty from his glide high over the grounds. ‘He’s got you, let go!’

‘No, no, no,’ Totty sobbed. But, with Ahn shrill in his ears as they slipped, he released the broken
rail. Air cradling him and coaxing out the Unicorn’s own untapped potential as he fell, Osomatsu gave him points for poise. Right up until he landed. Started by the slight thump, Totty’s ridiculously-high boots splayed beneath him, and the chosen leader of spectrum guardians sprawled face first in the dirt.

‘Whose bright idea was *heels* on the battlefield?’ Osomatsu made time to grumble and vaulted over the ledge. Landing low with a burst of dust, he edged into a defensive crouch while Totty gingerly picked himself up.

‘Do you have a plan?’ Choromatsu asked, edgy as he squared off against the looming beast. Osomatsu quirked a grin.

‘Isn’t that why you’re here?’ Bouncing on his toes and relaxing scores as Totty pelted for cover, Osomatsu suddenly liked their odds a lot more. Overpowered, overblown, and definitely overcompensating—*that* was something Osomatsu had not needed to see—when it came down to it, a Titan was basically—very basically—a big squishy person. And any squishy person would tell you it sucked to start a fight with a suckerpunch to the gut—there you go, the Salamander was strategising. Did he get a gold star?

Trusting Choromatsu to keep up a steady stream of intel, Osomatsu threw himself forward. He charged headlong into his enemy’s personal space, hard fist curling from his waist. Gauntlet connecting with their soft belly, he grimaced in satisfaction as spare blubber rippled beneath his knuckles. ‘How do you like that, you piece of shit?! You taking notes, Totty?’

Osomatsu grinned, slinging his second punch. Then an odd pop tickled his eardrums. Suddenly the charred folds of the monster’s stomach released such a stink of rotten flesh it knocked Osomatsu flat. Mind taking off in a dozen muddled directions, he hazily realised the cause of his earlier dizziness. He gave his head a steadying shake, wrinkling his nose against the reek.

‘Urgh, that is disgusting, makes you feel like you’re gonna … shit, what is that!’ he exclaimed, Kikuukyou’s throbbing blisters releasing tendrils of yellowed smoke. Not like Jyushimatsu’s sunshine—this was gaseous piss. Shit, it *was* gas! Osomatsu’s hands flew to his mask, but he didn’t escape a breathful as he skipped out of range. Thick and murky, it tasted like he’d swallowed a simmering swamp. The gas had barely scalded down his windpipe before coughs began to rip their way back up.

‘Ch-Choromatsu!’ he wheezed, doubled over and just making out through tearing eyes as his brother slid into a descending air current, path spiralling towards him. Straight through the rising gas. ‘S-stay away from that!’

Choromatsu pulled up like a brick wall plunged centimetres from his nose. ‘It’s some kind of defence mechanism,’ he analysed from a not-quite-safe distance, frowning and lens spiralling into overtime.

‘They need it?’

‘Pathetic,’ Kikuukyou breathed as Osomatsu hacked, belting a gauntlet against his chest. In very un-Osomatsu fashion, he was too daunted to be riled by the quip. Not only were they 10 times his size and could squash him like a roach. They just had to give off fumes, too.

‘Please tell me that’s not *p*-poison,’ he croaked. Trying to ignore his tainted airways, he pivoted in a flying roundhouse, cracking his reinforced boot into the monster’s weight-bearing elbow. Discoloured gas spurted. Cause and effect confirmed, Osomatsu dodged the spreading vapour. But his head spun; he couldn’t focus on his frantic lens. But its anxious flashing didn’t look good. ‘Ch-Ch-Choromatsu? Ahn?’
'Poison,' Choromatsu confirmed shortly as Osomatsu fought to keep on the move. Osomatsu’s heart clenched; his brother swooped far too close. ‘You can’t stay near long enough to do any real damage.’

‘I’ve noticed,’ Osomatsu grunted, sliding past an almost lazy backhand with all the kinetic energy of a bullet train. Lashing out, he left a searing scorch on their wrist and danced back from the puff of exhaust.

‘They prefer the dark and cool,’ Choromatsu said, Kikuukyou whinging petulantly in the slight glare. The bright afternoon was about their only advantage. ‘Go for the eyes. Crystal’s buried in the back of their neck.’

‘Of course it is.’ Somehow Osomatsu wasn’t surprised. Keeping low and wary as three eyes rolled after him behind their veil of skin, four more roaming the sky as Choromatsu swept in calculated formation trying to keep behind them, Osomatsu got right in Kikuukyou’s face.

‘What about the poison?’ Totty cried out. Way too agile for their size, Kikuukyou swivelled away, one forearm raised to shield their face.

‘Their masks should protect them,’ Ahn tried to assure.

'Should?' Osomatsu exclaimed, eyes stinging and burying his own face in the crook of his elbow as he was swamped by shimmering fumes. ‘They’re waterproof, soundproof, goddamn identity-proof. What, you didn’t think of poison-proof?’

‘You would be dead if they had not,’ Ahn said with the barest disapproval; she had far more to worry about than her spark’s temper. ‘The Spectrum Alliance doesn’t work miracles. If guardians could be made invulnerable, don’t you think we would have …’

‘Shit,’ Osomatsu hissed. Kikuukyou deftly scuttling under a hailstorm of Choromatsu’s bolts, the beast decided Osomatsu had watched the fun too long. Blinking rapidly to clear his vision, the Salamander crouched and sprang, ricocheting like a pinball. Aiming to fluster so he could take out their eyes, Osomatsu slammed bodily into them, springboarding off their chest before they knew what hit them. Not that they cared what hit them.

‘What the shit?’ Osomatsu panted, unnerved as he fired his boots. Rocketing in a tight circle, he feinted at the black sparkle in scruff of their neck. Kikuukyou twisted away, protecting their crystal. But though they hissed, the beast otherwise took Osomatsu’s not-insignificant pounding. ‘You’re not even going to try to hit me?’

‘They don’t need to,’ Choromatsu said grimly, Osomatsu’s chest heaving painfully, edge dangerously dulled as poison seeped through his senses.

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu grumbled. ‘But it’s a matter of pride. Come on,’ he appealed, throwing his arms wide. ‘You’re seriously gonna let me clobber …’

Flinging himself flat, Osomatsu barely escaped as a solid.

‘Handsy bastard,’ he tossed out, shaking off how close he’d come to limited edition Salamander putty beneath the Titian’s futon-sized palm. Off-balance and not liking it, he gave in and let his lens direct, augmenting reality as it scribed tactics and timing across Kikuukyou’s ceaseless scuttle, rearing like a massive preying mantis. Suddenly liking how his lens thought, Osomatsu flipped high and landed on one broad shoulder blade. ‘Shit,’ he swore, not sure what else he expected when one of Kikuukyou’s inanely-long arms whisked to drag him off. Rolling as the monster lurched,
Osomatsu lit with a burst of inspiration and snapped to his feet, grinding down the monster’s knobbled spine like a fire-powered skateboarder. Kikuukyou bellowed, welt-ridden trail burping all down their back. Skidding to the dirt, Osomatsu risked a glance Totty’s way. Seeing him crouched safely by the sports sheds, his thudding heart relaxed a few beats. But apparently he’d pissed the beast off enough that passive killing just wouldn’t cut it.

‘How could you miss that!’ Ahn exclaimed, Osomatsu slammed hard into the ground. ‘What fight are you … are you all right?’

‘I’m dizzy, okay?’ he burst, head reeling as spots pummeled his vision. Drenched in shadow and rattled brain suddenly connecting the dots, Osomatsu yelped. Reflexes kicking in, he put on a blast and shot forward, a scarlet bullet from a gun.

‘Shit,’ he coughed, friction burning his exposed face as propulsion dragged him halfway across the playing field. Grit-streaked grazes mending as fast as they opened, Osomatsu winced as angry bruises expanded all down his ribs.

‘Get up, get up …’ Choromatsu hissed, raining cover fire from somewhere over his head. Almost tasting dirt and fighting the urge to spit behind his mask, Osomatsu set his jaw and rolled onto his back. The nimble mass of monster sidled menacingly his way. His best bet was to play dead. Osomatsu sighed, but obeyed the odds. Lying very still and peering through barely-slitted eyes, his heart bounded when Kikuukyou bought it. They must think their gas had finally got to him … shit, he’d never complain about Ichimatsu’s curry farts again.

Too close and guard down, the monster protected their crystal from Choromatsu’s barrage with one hand and raised the other high over their head. Not a twitch of muscle to betray him, Osomatsu slammed his gauntlets together. Taking an instant to power up, he launched flamethrowers into their exposed face. Kikuukyou hollered, skinned hair lighting like a torch and flames eating into their eyes beneath.

‘Choromatsu!’ His brother already moving, Osomatsu capered through the beast’s flails and shut off his fire. Their hulking enemy well and truly distracted, Osomatsu slipped beneath the scanty safety of their bulk as the monster blundered, groping furiously at the airspace he’d just vacated. He grinned as Choromatsu dropped for the beast’s exposed neck, taking perfect aim.

Then, with a click like a gunshot, Kikuukyou’s spine twisted. From the ground, Osomatsu stared, appalled. Neck wrenched nearly 180, the beast smirked through glutinous glops of blood and tears, crystal contorted from harm’s way.

Choromatsu nearly fell out of the sky. Osomatsu saw his brother’s stunned eyes widen as Kikuukyou shot out a hand backwards. Only instinct and half a second on his side, Choromatsu released the air around him, plunging in freefall. But he was too close. Todomatsu shrieked as the third born Matsuno was swiped out of the air.

Osomatsu’s gut dropped deadly. How dare they. Frothing with rage, he rammed his boots into the ground and hurtled brazenly at the beast’s barrel-broad wrist. ‘Let him go, you bastard!’

Totally exposed and giving no shits, Osomatsu seized handfuls of pale flesh to anchor himself and jammed his soles flush against the monster’s thick forearm. Concentrated hellfire flaring, his boots sank in melting flesh. Kikuukyou withered, desperate to flick him off. Osomatsu dug in deep, coughing violently as gas hissed from under his feet, swallowing the whole scene. Captor’s grip understandably loosened, Choromatsu hastily shoved himself free. But he’d sucked down his share of poison. Confused, he crashed to the ground.
‘Matsuno Choromatsu!’ Ahn screamed. Terror lashing as his brother stirred in the dust, Kikuukyou’s snarl whipped by his ears as the beast shook Osomatsu madly. Then he ploughed into earth again, all their enemy’s brutish muscle behind him. Sick lungs shocked empty and bones cracked up and down his deadened body, Osomatsu flopped involuntarily through air, flipped into Kikuukyou’s fist. Appreciating maybe for the first time in his life just how dangerous thumbs were—especially really, really big ones—another thought tripped tiredly for attention. Wasn’t he about to get crushed? What was with Liberation Force soldiers and crushing him …

‘Osomatsu-niisan, no!

Saved by Totty’s scream, Osomatsu sparked all the power he could muster and shoved it through his skin. Combusting under their bulging knuckles and howl slashing his muted eardrums, the still-burning warrior found himself spinning uncontrolled. Bemusedly watching the scenery tumble by, something suggested he’d just been pitched across the field. Maybe he should reorient, catch himself.

It was a good thought. In theory. But Osomatsu was a ragdoll. And by the time his indignant spirit roused—he wasn’t about to just let himself be tossed around—he’d already smashed into cement.

Body crunching like he tripped over broken glass, he crumpled at the base of the building, nothing left to hold him up. Osomatsu … tasted blood. Shit, did his lens have to blink so brightly? He knew he was hurt. He could tell, trust him. Groaning brokenly and head pounding like an army, he wondered if this was the lowest his health bar had dwindled. It wasn’t like he had the time to waste watching it fall.

‘Maybe you should make time! By … the Alliance,’ Ahn breathed hard as Osomatsu gasped spasmodically, shattered body painstakingly knitting. The processing unsettling slow, he tried an experimental fist. His muscles replied with all the initiative of a leaden slug.

‘Come on, heal,’ he mumbled, this entire battle a serious boot up his pride’s ass. And Totty was watching and everything. This was hardly an accurate indication of the badassery he was …

Osomatsu was suddenly seized from behind, slack arms clamped to his sides. ‘What the fuck …’ Squirming, he felt the itch of thick hair and hot breath on the back of his neck. He’d forgotten completely about Kikuukyou’s stunned puppet. Apparently, she’d come to.

Somehow Choromatsu was back in the air. Skating storeys over ground, his pistols sang as he wheeled like a vibrant bird of prey, peppering Kikuukyou with his lasers. He aimed stunning rounds as he went, fighting to free Osomatsu. He hissed, healing body jostled as the girl twisted him into her own personal shield. A flurry of bolts thudded into his chest. Hardly stunned, it wasn’t exactly pleasant. ‘H-hey, stop!’ he complained, battle hoodie absorbing the worst of the impact.

‘It’s not like I’m trying to hit you,’ Choromatsu said tersely, cartwheeling out of reach as Kikuukyou’s grabby hands flew. ‘Are you okay? Did you notice?’

‘Notice what?’ Osomatsu demanded. More ghoul than girl, his captor trussed her legs tight around his middle.

‘That you’re being held down by a teenage girl.’

Osomatsu growled. Kikuukyou gave a horrible chuckle, even worse than Choromatsu’s dry battle humour. ‘How the mighty have fallen,’ they ridiculed. Fuming, Osomatsu struggled to buck the slender teen off him. But what she lacked in soul she made up with in phenomenal wiry strength. ‘Perhaps once I’ve eliminated you, I will allow this slave to further hone her ability. Despair,’ the
beast taunted eerily, Osomatsu realising with a jolt they’d lose the girl on her hapless schoolmates. ‘Know that your failure will doom them.’

Cawing in frustration, Osomatsu drove his hard head backwards. He barely pulled back before shattering her nose, peripherals snagging her plaid skirt against the charcoal of his pants. Distantly uncomfortable with her warmth, too distinctive through his Salamander heat, Osomatsu wasn’t game to lash out. First just a trickle, now his strength flooded back, body clicking into wholeness. Enhanced or not, the girl was no match for the Salamander at this range. Feeling sick, Osomatsu remembered how he’d unwittingly burned Totoko’s hands. This wasn’t right, they weren’t supposed to hurt the people they were trying to save! What was he supposed to …

Thunk!

The puppet abruptly slipped from their stranglehold, lost all tension. Quicksmart, Osomatsu shoved her off him and scrambled upright. Todomatsu stood over the slumped girl. His sceptre hovered uncertainly, still raised from the whack he’d aimed at her skull. He looked stunned. ‘Thanks Totty,’ Osomatsu breathed, hustling him back into hiding. Daze breaking, Totty’s gloved hand shot out, nabbing his sleeve.

‘That thing will kill you! Please don’t go’

Prickling a little—this was his job, who else was supposed to do it?—Osomatsu shook free. ‘I can’t leave Choromatsu out there alone, Don’t worry,’ he said, quick to comfort as tears slipped to encrust Totty’s shining mask. ‘Not much longer, we’ll get them. It’ll take a lot more than that to kill me.’

‘I’m sure your brothers—not to mention your mother—would appreciate it, if you didn’t go to such lengths trying to find out exactly what will. My spark has a death wish,’ Ahn muttered, fur sticking out at all angles.

Back in one piece, but not quite as good as new, Osomatsu soon fought as though concussed. The school became an impressionist streak, the young warrior dangerously faint and frustrated as his eyes streamed from smoke exposure. Most of their eyes fried, Kikuukyou’s vision was as screwed as Osomatsu’s. But they barely slowed, ceaselessly guarding their crystal and tormenting the guardians, drifting whispers threatening to unleash their power on the people in the street.

Hit and run tactics driving him flat out, Osomatsu’s briefly-restored stamina stripped back with every wracking cough. His blows steadily weakened, gruelling action far outstripping the clean oxygen he could gulp. He could barely even coordinate with Choromatsu—they were good at that, damn it! But every strike he scored barely scratched them. No longer so quick on his feet, Osomatsu staggered backwards, hacking through a faceful of poison. Why … won’t … they … just … die?!

‘Concentrate on the arms!’ Choromatsu called from overhead. ‘If they can’t grab me, I can get past them!’ Osomatsu nodded dazedly, numbly grateful Choromatsu’s coughs were so mild. But even he started to teeter, prolonged exposure wearing at the edges of his clear head.

‘Just … give me a …’

Breath short, Osomatsu rushed upwards, slinging a fiery uppercut to the beast’s pointed chin. He meant to keep going, outstrip the billow of gas and hover on his boots. Just for a second. He needed air … but his mind tottered worse than drunk. Osomatsu barely changed directions in time, Kikuukyou’s swat shaving him. He was a fly. That’s what he was to this monster. Nothing but an annoying bloody fly.

Disoriented, he managed to right himself and land on his feet. ‘Crap, crap, crap …’ he gasped,
hurling left in a roll as the monster slapped down their massive hand.

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Totty cried as the earth rumbled like an aftershock. But gas swirled everywhere. Osomatsu was done, lungs reached their limit. Hitting the ground at a crawl, he wretched, coughs torn savagely from his chest. He couldn’t stop, every shallow breath syphoning more toxin straight down his tubes. He couldn’t see. He couldn’t breathe. Fuck … this … shit …

Skin baked by the heat of battle cooled as the sun blotted out overhead. Osomatsu tensed horribly, fully expecting some first hand experience in exactly what it meant to be a pancake. Then a torrent of air whooshed out of nowhere. Whistling hard in his ears and whipping at his hood, Osomatsu squinted through the whirlwind. A small, but ferocious twister whirled around him, funnelling the gas away. ‘Move your arse!’ Choromatsu shouted, strained by the effort.

Shooting clumsily from their shadow. Osomatsu raised his guard as Choromatsu harried the beast. The funnels tripped and infuriated them, but Kikuukyou was just too big. ‘If I can hold them still,’ Choromatsu said suddenly, angling sharply from his sail to try something else. ‘You can crush their crystal. But I need to land.’

‘Don’t!’

‘You don’t think I can do it?’ Choromatsu demanded.

‘You’re bringing this up now?!’ Osomatsu exclaimed, gauntlets spitting a few frustrated embers. ‘It’s not that!’

‘Then why …’

‘Because I don’t know if I can protect you!’ Osomatsu blurted. ‘Please, stay …’

‘Both of you!’ Totty cried out unexpectedly. ‘Get out of there! I-I can help you!’

‘Like hell,’ Osomatsu snapped as Choromatsu soared overhead, alert for any opening, any advantage. Even at speed and half-swathed, the strain on the Wyvern’s face was plain. ‘I owe you one, but you’re not giving orders yet. Stay the hell back.’

‘But look at you!’ Todomatsu almost wept. ‘You can’t keep going like this!’

‘Listen to him,’ Ahn urged as Osomatsu scowled, furious that she even considered letting Totty onto the battlefield. ‘The only way you will succeed at this rate is through pure luck. I am not about to rest all our fates on a dice roll!’

‘Maybe not you,’ Osomatsu retorted wearily, sprawling out of the way as Kikuukyou bore down on him. ‘But I’ve been winging this thing since …’

Not fast enough, Osomatsu barely heard Choromatsu’s cry of dismay as he was drawn back and lobbed again. He only had a moment to rage before he smacked with the weight of a wrecking ball into … he wasn’t sure. His head, probably. Shit, shit … drifting panic strangled as Osomatsu’s awareness took a dive. They’d never kill this thing if he blacked out … like some stupid … fucking …

Very slowly, Osomatsu attuned to the figure crouched over him. He narrowed his eyes, clouded mind shuffling faces. Jyushimatsu, Ichimatsu, Karamatsu … Not Choromatsu. Their eyes were too big, sparkling with … Totty.

What the hell was he doing, Kikuukyou would be all over them in seconds! In what he later figured
must be total incoherence, Osomatsu yelled for him to run. Ahn was there too, but he barely
processed her youthful lilt, low and fast. He did, however, notice when his cracked skull began to
stitch, oppressive throb fading. Next, all the biting pains of injury and exertion subsided. Finally, his
sapped power returned in droves. And not only his. Osomatsu shuddered violently as bright energy
 Richie. More than a second wind, more than a hearty surge of adrenaline, he charged
far beyond his own spark.

‘What did you …’ he breathed, grabbing Totty’s gleaming sceptre and hauling himself up. The
youngest stumbled forward slightly with the eldest’s sudden weight, but held.

‘I have no idea. You owe me two now, Niisan,’ he added, slight smugness barely threading through
ongoing terror and amazement that had really been him. Ahn pressed comfortingy into his neck as
Totty faded back among the rubble of the … rubble. However long he’d been out was enough for
Kikuukyou to throw a massive tantrum. The sports sheds were in ruins, soccer goal posts trampled to
sticks. Most of the windows on the first and second storeys were busted in … shit, where was the
puppet?

‘She’s with me,’ Totty let him know as Osomatsu’s eyes dashed from where he’d left her lying by
the building. ‘Still out of it …’

‘She might have been crushed,’ Ahn added, voice ringing with pride. ‘Matsuno Todomatsu secured
her safety.’

‘They’re not about to crush their own slave.’ Consumed by a moment of muddied relief and less-
than-charitable thoughts for their mentor—Ahn had just let Totty stroll through the middle of a fight
and sweep an unpredictable puppet off her feet, Kikuukyou might have seen, she might have woken
up …—Osomatsu centred himself. Strangely calm, his entire being overflowed with rippling energy.

Snagging a broken pole from the goal posts, he flitted unseen as Kikuukyou skittered tirelessly from
the desperately-axed Wyvern’s bolts. Frighteningly quick, their hand flashed to intercept.
Choromatsu tripped mid-air to avoid their thick fingers. Seizing the brief distraction, Osomatsu
brandished his pole and thrust it straight through the top of the monster’s warped foot. Kicking into
the air as they screamed, Osomatsu took the geyser straight to the face and burst fire like he escaped
orbit, driving the impromptu lance deep into hard-packed earth. Fully expecting his lungs to murder
him, he was elated when they only prickled.

Kikuukyou’s anguish battered his ears, beast scrabbling to yank the pole free. Almost forgotten what
it felt to fight with a clear head, Osomatsu carreeaned into their right elbow. Smashing it soundly, he
darted beneath them—now whose chest was heaving? Not even bothering to avoid the freely-
flooding gas, Osomatsu chased down the beast’s still-functional arm, burning as he went.

‘Go, you’re clear!’ he shouted, brutally beating another boulder-sized elbow into submission.
Choromatsu plunged instantly for their crystal. Pinned and crippled, Kikuukyou twisted wildly, spine
creaking as it stretched past their limits. Choromatsu wove through the monster’s increasingly-
desperate attempts to ward him off, less cocky now they smelt death’s approach. For a fleeting
moment Osomatsu almost felt sorry for them—a last-ditch champ of vicious teeth cleared that up,
Choromatsu barely swerving from their jaws. Osomatsu shuddered, so glad this monster hadn’t tried
to eat him.

But at last Choromatsu shoved the barrel of a pistol to their crystal. Anchored by a harness of air as
Kikuukyou whipped like a frenzied bull, he fired three rounds point blank.

‘Yeah!’ Osomatsu shoved a blazing gauntlet skyward. ‘About fucking …’ Triumphant for two
seconds, Osomatsu suddenly spiked with terror, realising what his brother somehow didn’t. ‘Get out
of the way!’ he shouted over Kikuukyou’s shivering whine of defeat. Shit, he had to move, move, *move*! Osomatsu put on a final spurt as they disintegrated, crashing into Choromatsu with all the style of an anvil.

‘Osomatsu, what the hell!’ Choromatsu shouted angrily, tumbling arse over head halfway across the field. No time to escape or even protect himself, all the poison left within the beast erupted beneath Osomatsu. He clutched his chest, wheezing—buffered or not, it was too much. Immersed like he crawled through thickened mud, it drowned his lungs before he could even blink. Suddenly caught in the eye of a tornado, the whirlwind whipped the yellowed haze high into the stratosphere. The air was clear. But the fumes had already done their work.

Mind voided, Osomatsu plummeted. He appreciated his dull impact long after the fact. The young warrior gasped, eyes glazed as he clawed to catch his breath, gauntlets groping pointlessly at his throat. But he couldn’t even expand his lungs. Osomatsu’s world shifted to shades of fading grey.

The mumbles that laced his ears meant nothing. Osomatsu whimpered, skirting the edge of death as his body hunched and hacked, the Unicorn’s lingering effect worn away and fighting pointlessly to rid itself of poison. Wracked by pain, Osomatsu felt arms around him, easing him upright. Then a hand pressed to his cheek. For the longest time that was all he knew—was something meant to be happening? He hoped dimly whatever it was would happen soon. He was … suffocating … down here …

Suddenly his lungs squeezed. Gasp catching in his throat, Osomatsu’s eyes shot wide as what felt like an entire storm cloud of toxic vapour squashed through his respiratory system swirled into streamers drawn up and out, evaporating through the infinitesimal pores of his mask. Osomatsu gagged like an endless length of knotted rope was dragged up his throat. The arms around him—green, he noted hazily—held him steady, gently stroking his back as coughs tore through him.

‘Slowly, slowly,’ Choromatsu’s voice sounded right by his ear as he heaved, triggering fresh tirades of hacking convulsions. Trying to obey, his shuddering exhale morphed into a drawn-out moan, collapsing limp in his brother’s arms. He’d never felt sicker in his life. But air still existed. Faint and shivering, Osomatsu could breathe again. They were alive—god, he was alive.

Eventually able to notice more than Choromatsu’s even breathing instructions and his own sorry state, Osomatsu felt something pressed to his rapidly rising and falling chest—the business end of the Unicorn’s sceptre. A moment later, Totty wavered into being. He knelt before Osomatsu in the dirt, cradling his cheek with one gloved hand. Still gasping, Osomatsu gazed on his youngest brother. He shone, a pure beacon of light.

‘Is it really so hard to stay in one piece?’ Totty asked shakily, voice unnaturally high. ‘How have you lasted so long without … a Unicorn?’

With a gentle word from Ahn, Todomatsu hesitated like any movement would cost Osomatsu’s life. Then he lifted his sceptre away. Connection broken, his glow slowly dimmed, the odd tingle through Osomatsu’s entire body with it. Totty immediately slumped, chin dropping to his ruffled chest.

‘Totty!’ Osomatsu exclaimed, frantic to know he was okay. But Choromatsu wouldn’t let him move.

‘Give him a moment,’ Ahn said softly as Totty trembled, burying his face in his palm. Utterly drained, his sceptre fell limply to hang by his boots. Osomatsu barely heard his whisper:

‘That’s three, Osomatsu-niisan.’

Neither the Salamander nor the trainee Unicorn in any condition to fly, they gave Totty another
moment to recover—there weren’t enough moments left in the afternoon to give Osomatsu the same—and the three brothers phased back to themselves—“My service this hour is complete.” As horrified as the looks on his brothers’ faces, Osomatsu immediately buckled, hitting the ground on all fours and dragging Choromatsu with him. Coughs shredding and violently throwing up stomach acid, he felt like he’d been flattened by a stampede. A pickaxe lodged in the back of his head where he’d struck … he still didn’t know what.

‘Careful now,’ Ahn said, nervous as Osomatsu sagged heavily against Choromatsu, Totty silently bringing up the rear as they stumbled and tripped to the far edge of her attention-diverting shield. Only then did she reduce it to a good-sized umbrella, just covering herself and the three brothers.

‘What the …’

On the opposite side of the field, the no longer perfectly-heedless students and faculty began to shout out, seeing the destruction unleashed on their school. Osomatsu just saw a few phones whipped out, capturing the dirt disturbed by monstrous hand and foot prints. At least they’d gotten Kikuukyou off the roof. It’d be a lot worse if the building had collapsed.

‘So that … was horrifying,’ Osomatsu understated, pulling off a wry grin as Ahn lifted her barrier a safe distance away.

‘We need to get you to a hospital,’ Choromatsu said, urgently badgering a near-vacant Todomatsu to look up directions. ‘Take my phone, here …’

‘And just what … are we supposed to say?’ Choromatsu scowled through rapidly-diminishing concern, Osomatsu putting on a high, childish voice. ‘Excuse me, my brother was just beaten up by a Titan, would you mind taking a look? No hospitals,’ he maintained. He’d been hurt almost as badly as this. A few of Ichimatsu’s super-powered painkillers down the hatch and he’d be fine.

‘So,’ he said. He couldn’t see, but felt the light drag of Todomatsu’s hand locked to the back of his hoodie. ‘How about it? Are you in?’

Osomatsu had been cursing, that something like this was Totty’s first taste of their world. Now he was almost grateful. He had to know what he was getting into. That right there? That was it. It plagued him, that he had no say. But now it all came down to Totty.

‘No pressure,’ he added when Totty’s grip tightened. ‘Remember, we can always … get someone else. And even if we put you in charge,’ he teased, shaking so badly; Osomatsu barely held himself together. ‘Don’t expect us to listen—right, Choromatsu?’

Beneath his draped slump, Choromatsu gave a noncommittal hum, frown so grave as he towed his brothers home. There was a long pause, vocally and telepathically. Sirens soon screamed past them, washing the waning afternoon red and blue as they raced to tape off the crime scene. Their street was in sight before Todomatsu finally spoke.

‘Could I … think about it?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ Osomatsu butted in as Ahn tried to impress urgency without coming across too heartless. ‘How about … a week?’ he coughed out. Choromatsu paused, moving with him as Osomatsu hunched and cleared his muck-clogged throat. Not what she wanted to hear, Ahn began to protest. But looking between her weary warriors she fell silent. So reluctant, she agreed to give him until the 23rd. ‘Next Friday. But if you decide before then …’

Next Friday,’ Osomatsu repeated, as firm as a man could be while choking on his lungs.
Osomatsu kept a close eye on Totty over the next few days. It wasn’t hard, given he was “on sick leave”. ‘I should keep training, it’s not a big deal,’ he pretended to be serious from his bedrest—he’d just been pulverised, inside and out. Who could blame him, wanting his money’s worth of sympathy? Shamelessly basking in attention as he pulled sadder and more pained expressions, Choromatsu quickly got suspicious. But Totty lay the concern on even thicker, skipping shifts to sit with him as he coughed and groaned, making him swear to stay put. Grounded until Ahn assessed him fit, Osomatsu tossed and turned every time his scroll burned, knowing Choromatsu faced some concoction of sinew and nightmare alone. But as sure as the sun rose and set, the Wyvern returned unharmed.

‘I sneaked up on most of them,’ he summarised his recent string of solo victories; Osomatsu hung on every word. ‘One saw me and mutated before I could shoot, but they were vulnerable to electricity.’

‘What, you can make lightning now?’ Osomatsu cut in, propped against a pile of his brothers’ pillows. Choromatsu shook his head, bent over his tablet as he industriously typed his reports.

‘Not yet. But there were a lot of power lines … it caused a lot of damage,’ he said self-reproachfully as Osomatsu gaped at the unreported cause of a ward-wide blackout and electrocution of a Liberation Force fiend.

‘Damn … you really are something else,’ Osomatsu said in admiration. Choromatsu coloured magnificently, giving the eldest something welcome to grin about.

With Choromatsu and Ahn safeguarding the city, Osomatsu found himself fielding most of Todomatsu’s guardian-related concerns. Much more appreciative of the weight of his pending decision, Osomatsu tried to be patient as Totty’s questions grew steadily more flippant.

‘Do you really not drink at all now?’ he asked one morning, the two of them taken over the lounge room while Ichimatsu went on sleeping upstairs. Every now and then Osomatsu heard a dull crash of Jyushimatsu knocking around outside. ‘But I have friends, Niisan. They expect me to go out with them and have a few drinks, what am I supposed to do? Can I maybe do this part time, a casual hero?’ Todomatsu wondered vaguely a few days later. Sequestered in their bedroom, Ichimatsu dozed downstairs and Karamatsu strummed quietly on the roof. The second born checked Osomatsu rested appropriately at every chance, freshly returned from an impromptu care package run. Totty’s apparent disinterest had Ahn fidgeting, curled worriedly on the couch. Osomatsu cracked open a tea from his selection, not buying it for a second.

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Totty grinned soon after Choromatsu flew in late that night, finding out exactly why the newest unit of spectrum guardians was so well paid. ‘I should have known, you’re such an entrepreneur!’

‘I would’ve done it without the paycheck,’ Osomatsu said, grinning devilishly when Ahn gave a squawk of pure indignation. ‘But, you know, fair is fair …’

‘You shouldn’t be encouraging this,’ Choromatsu said sternly as the youngest joined in Osomatsu’s telepathic sniggers. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be our light?’

‘Our brother, the very embodiment of “pure of deed and heart”,’ Osomatsu declared, coughing tiredly. Nestled between him and Choromatsu, the tips of Ahn’s ears twitched at his fond sarcasm. ‘Still glad you picked him?’

Osomatsu’s joke snapped the silently-giggling Totty to attention. ‘I’m going to sleep,’ he announced.
rather abruptly. Rolling onto his side, he put his curled back to Osomatsu. At a loss, the eldest felt very hard done by when both Choromatsu and Ahn were inexplicably cross with him.

‘Do you think you’re the right person to be the Salamander, or the Wyvern?’ was Totty’s first real question in days. “Hell, yes” was Osomatsu emphatic answer. “Probably not. But maybe … I’m working hard to be” was Choromatsu’s less secure one.

‘Is there another spectrum guardian I might be?’ the youngest asked out of nowhere later in the bathhouse. Osomatsu had arrived early and hung back in the water so his non-magical brothers wouldn’t see his trainwreck of a body. ‘Aren’t there five? Maybe I’m a different one, how do you know I’m the Unicorn?’

‘You have light!’ was all Ahn could say when she heard, dark eyes starred with alarm. Osomatsu caught Choromatsu’s worried glance and shrugged. It wasn’t like there was anything they could add. A light inclination, however unconventional, equalled Unicorn. They’d work on the Kraken and Sphinx as soon as the supposedly gaping hole of their leadership was filled.

It took four days for the worst of Osomatsu’s cough to subside. Though his head still felt like a dozen hammers cracked their way out, he insisted he was well enough, and was thrilled when annoying Ahn paid off. At last allowed to ease back into training, Totty came along a few times, stocking the warehouse with comforts and sitting with Ahn, watching his older brothers transform and work their magic. A personal shield in place and Ahn back on his shoulder, he twice sneaked to watch when Takuu’s lackeys attacked nearby. Neither fight was anywhere near as terrifying as his first real dose of the Liberation Force. Osomatsu felt terrible after both, but stopped drawing attention to the fact when Ahn suggested he take a few more days. What the hell had happened to him, Osomatsu wondered drearily. He was itching to go back to work.

Then it was Thursday. The 23rd a day away, Totty had given absolutely zero hint whether he planned to sign. ‘Ahn’s gotten the shortlist out again. She’s really worried, I think she …’

‘If you must think,’ Osomatsu cut across the third born, slipping backwards on the treacherously-slick fish market street. Throwing up his hands as he hit the bitumen, he locked gauntlets between a furious set of pincers as they slashed for his throat; the heavily-armoured beast looked glued together from the rejects of a seafood smorgasbord. ‘Could you maybe think about about making a little room in your fucking schedule to give me some support?’

‘You need support? I believe in you, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu returned without missing a beat. ‘Go for it!’

‘Fuck you,’ Osomatsu shot back, hurling Kuubikani off him and glaring up at Choromatsu, crouched atop the nearest telegraph pole. Not appreciating his brother’s support as much as usual, Osomatsu flipped the beast into a mountain of stinking crates. Marooned on their back and pincers flailing madly, he found their crystal on their slimy underside and smashed it soundly.

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu ventured back at the warehouse. Collapsed on his cushion-bedecked crate, Osomatsu curled in a ball like that could physically restrain his pain, eyes leaking with frustration and head splitting along fused fracture lines. That round with Kuubikani had wrecked him—it wasn’t even that hard, damn it! Why did he have to feel like he’d climbed a mountain only to trip off the peak like a idiot?

‘Osomatsu-niisan? Totty bought these the other day.’ Choromatsu’s voice was right behind him. Osomatsu childish stuffed his face in a cushion. He stayed there until Choromatsu’s footsteps faded to the other side of the warehouse. Hearing him transform, Osomatsu peeked from his refuge and saw he’d left a bottle of water and strip of over-the-counter painkillers.
Grateful Choromatsu hadn’t made him show his tearstreaked face, Osomatsu wasn’t about to turn down even painfully-mild relief. Popping and swallowing, he huddled beneath a blanket. This shit must be what Ichimatsu felt like all the time. At least Osomatsu would soon be up and kicking.

Thinking of his poor brother, he felt a little less pathetic. But as the starkly-contrasting dilemmas of Ichimatsu and Todomatsu kicked his own cares into submission, Osomatsu inexplicably smiled. It was something he never thought he’d think. But now he’d thought it, he was truly relieved that the fate of the universes rested on sly Todomatsu, and not Ichimatsu. If Totty was a stretch, Ichimatsu was … well, Ichimatsu. Beside, Osomatsu thought, tugging his comforting blanket close. Their gloomiest brother had more than enough to cope with right now.

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Fuck, his chest hurt. But whatever inflamed his lungs, he just wasn’t coughing the shit up. He wasn’t going to cough it up, why wouldn’t his body just … stop … trying?

His brothers were avoiding him. Did they think he hadn’t noticed, Ichimatsu wondered listlessly, pounding head heavy in his arms. Osomatsu, Todomatsu, Choromatsu … He might barely crest consciousness some days, but he wasn’t fucking dense.

Ichimatsu’s stomach pinched cruelly. Between their work and his state, he hardly saw them—except when they were all fucking over him. Ichimatsu growled with residual spite from the last time they’d cornered him. Try to make him be a good little patient? One who quietly takes his meds, doesn’t leave his sickbed without say so and doesn’t verbally abuse his shit-for-brains doctors? Fat fucking chance. But he’d been too hammered to argue, a sullen lump through their infuriating dressing-down.

But Osomatsu had blown off work to coddle a cold; he’d been home four—or was it three? Five? Shit, he had no goddamn clue—days straight earlier in the week. Ichimatsu had wanted … he’d thought, so long as Osomatsu was trapped, too … he knew better than anyone he was god-awful to put up with. He couldn’t blame them for not wanting to stick around, not now he was half dead and double the angst. But he’d been fucked up since September. And his brothers had never actively avoided him before, not even when he deserved it. And when the fuck didn’t he?

Ichimatsu’s eyes welled up. Noticing, he ground them angrily into his sleeve. He didn’t need those bastards. He didn’t care. Ichimatsu swore it viciously, glaring wetly into soft blackness. But it was shrapnel. And those tiny barbs burrowed deep inside him, whatever lies he fed himself.

Rugged up beneath what looked like every coat in the house, Jyushimatsu napped beside him. ‘Tch,’ Ichimatsu huffed at his excessive bundling, almost sweating. Someone—no points for guessing who, he scowled, practically seeing the dopey smile plastered across his brother’s happily-snoozing face—had cranked the kotatsu and kerosene heater to full blast.

It was almost Christmas, but it wasn’t that cold, not even for a wimp like Jyushimatsu. Why was he napping, anyway? He couldn’t actually be tired. Not unless hanging around Ichimatsu had started siphoning away his boundless energy … fuck. Ichimatsu didn’t know it was possible to feel any worse. But somehow he managed.

‘Jyushimatsu.’ With a slow gathering of effort, Ichimatsu tilted his head so his face peeked over his elbow. He didn’t bother trying to open his eyes, gummed by exhaustion. Nested close between all their combined layers, he felt Jyushimatsu shift at the sound of his name, like he coiled just waiting to spring. ‘Jyushimatsu!’

‘BWEH!’
Snapped brightly awake and almost into the air, the fifth born’s lungs blew up to support a full and flying response. ‘ICHIMATSU-NIISAN.’

Remembering a second too late for Ichimatsu’s ringing ears and redoubled headache, Jyushimatsu dropped his normal shout to an energetic whisper. ‘You’re awake, Ichimatsu-niisan! Are you hungry? Are you cold?’

‘I want to be alone,’ Ichimatsu mumbled as Jyushimatsu started messing industriously with his blankets, guilt and anger butting heads. ‘Go outside or something, go away.’

Enough clogging shit in his eyes cleared for him to see Jyushimatsu light up at the suggestion. Ichimatsu could have gutted himself when his brother’s broad grin shrank a millimetre. ‘That’s okay, Niisan. I’m playing with you today.’

‘We’re not playing,’ Ichimatsu dredged up heat. It wasn’t hard—he was turning Jyushimatsu into a shut in, he was completely fucking ruining his life. ‘I don’t want you in here, leave me alone!’

‘You don’t mean that, Ichimatsu-niisan.’

‘I fucking said it, I mean it,’ Ichimatsu swallowed through his burning throat. How did Jyushimatsu always see straight through him? Smiling through his frail demands, Jyushimatsu hefted him off the table. Ichimatsu seethed with the gentle manhandling. But he’d barely dragged himself downstairs—he could hardly lift his head. Fuck, he was pathetic. He had no choice but to let Jyushimatsu guide his limp weight. ‘Go back to sleep, Niisan.’

Aching body rested against Jyushimatsu’s healthy heartbeat and his brother’s flopping sleeves clasped loosely around him, Ichimatsu squeezed his eyes shut. His sigh dropped to a helpless moan, approaching socks on floorboards a tack between his eyes.

‘Ichimatsu?’ Ichimatsu’s head lolled, glaring through slitted eyelids as Karamatsu paused by the entrance. ‘Brother, are you all right?’

‘Sure,’ Ichimatsu slurred sarcastically. ‘Never better—what do you fucking think?’

Full of concern and one foot over threshold, Karamatsu made to sit across from them. Ichimatsu made sure the second born thought better of it. ‘Keep fucking moving, Shittymatsu.’

Ignoring as Jyushimatsu tensed behind him, Ichimatsu glowered blackly. Karamatsu hesitated, but backed compliantly out of the lounge. ‘I hope you feel better soon, brother.’

Abruptly deciding he’d had enough of this shit and unwilling to wait for his shitty brain to shut down, Ichimatsu crept a hand from his blankets, blindly fumbling across the kotatsu. Sweet fuck all, where the hell were his meds? Hating so much, Ichimatsu mumbled for Jyushimatsu to grab them from the kitchen—‘Just … all of them’. Barely looking at what he painfully swigged down, he quit being conscious. Letting darkness fold him close, Ichimatsu didn’t notice when some presence brushed past him, ascending to light as fast as his retreat.

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It took the husk long enough to tire of his pathetic moping and drug himself to sleep. With a satisfied smirk, the Doll of Darkness stole behind the controls. He didn’t intend to take horrendous advantage of them. But he’d yet to make himself comfortable there. And sitting idle wasn’t exactly his strongest suit—as if he could sit any more idle than this. The Doll of Darkness jeered down at the pathetic husk, draped across his gormless sibling.
'Leave him be,' his master had instructed firmly. 'Every time you come out to play, he will sicken. His strength is limited; do not squander it. I require him a long time yet before you may remain in your true form—you require him,’ he’d added at the doll’s irreverent sneer. Though he reprimanded, the Doll of Darkness grinned to see Lord Takuu revelled in all he was, dark, glib and uncontrolled. He even let it go, that his master only humoured him. Lord Takuu would see as they all would, his Doll of Darkness and his husk shared nothing more than skin. ‘You already please me, but you are far from powerful yet, my doll. You will be summoned when I have need of you,’ his master had dismissed, bidding he shed his true form, returned to a sly soul in the shell. ‘Otherwise, let him rest.’

Let him rest, the doll thought mockingly. He wretched counterpart needed it—he’d hardly reared his head and the early blush of fever fluttered to take hold. For once looking forward to the husk swimming back to awareness—starved for entertainment, his shivering incoherence was always a show—the doll savoured the stifling warmth as their body twitched in discomfort.

The Doll of Darkness knew full well the power that channelled through this pitiful young man. He knew too, he would be nothing without him—forgive him, if he forgot to bow. Without the husk, Lord Takuu and his Liberation Force would still be rotting in some forsaken wasteland dimension. The doll supposed it only expected, that they placed Matsuno Ichimatsu on as high a pedestal as his own.

But he was too much fun to fuck with. The doll had stolen a delicious hit of satisfaction, abandoning the husk on return from his master’s stronghold. Completely lost and so confused, watching his frantic attempts at reason had been well worth the admonishment—when was it not? Matsuno Ichimatsu had better start coming up with some good excuses. The Doll of Darkness was just getting started.

On the topic of getting started … peering from behind heavily-lidded eyes, he feigned the restless sleep his counterpart endured and watched Matsuno Karamatsu. Returned now the husk slept, he conversed quietly with the young fool, all smiles behind dark lenses. The rousing self-assurance he projected was a total sham. Beneath was passion, desperation—such enticing suffering. The alluring young man was so lost he’d have fostered a formidable Doll himself. But that was not to be. He was Lord Takuu’s blood servant. And this one was his.

The fingers the Doll of Darkness claimed itched with want. Among slaves, Matsuno Karamatsu would be second only to himself. And he wouldn’t be hard to acquire. The husk already treated him as dirt. All he need do was get a little creative. If he had one strong point—and he had so many—the Doll of Darkness was a splash of pure chaotic creativity.

The supremacy of Matsuno blood ended with Matsuno Karamatsu—and the husk, the Doll included without much regard. Lord Takuu had had some hopes the remainder of the brood would also be of superior slave quality. Within days of waking, the doll had ended those contemplations: worthless, inconsequential, moronic and weak. But the smiling moron did have his intrigue. Matsuno Jyushimatsu might have no more potential than cannon fodder. But a remnant of darkness already latched to his soul—the doll could claim him here and now. But he might still prove useful, right where he was.

As would the weakling.

Reflecting on Matsuno Todomatsu, the husk’s lips tweaked with their controller’s distaste. He was far too treasured. Worse, he knew it. Adored by his family, his friends—the Liberation Force had no use for one as healthy and happy as he.

At least, they had no use for him alone.
The Doll wore Matsuno Ichimatsu’s loose grimace as a grin. He’d been good until now. Kept his
nose clean, remained spotlessly clear of every abduction, every spat with the spectrum guardians,
obedient his master’s word. But obedience was another of his very limited weak points. And his
burseoning powers roiled. The Doll of Darkness thought it high time for a little test of his own.

This was going to be too much fun.
I had just decided to try owning the length of my chapters. Then this happened. And... yeah. Suppose I could have chopped it in the middle, but I liked having it all together. Hope you enjoy it, we're getting near the end of this Unicorn arc now - thanks for waiting for me! If it's any consolation whatsoever, the last two magical boys are not recruited in the manner that the Unicorn is, so they will not take nearly as long ... and honestly, I am a little relieved - I love Totty, but this has been a bit of a slog :) As always, would love so much to hear what you think, thank you so much for reading!

Also, original character alert for story purposes! Basically, I had to give at least one of Totty's friends a name for ease of writing :) Hope she's all good.

Just another second and he’d have this. Todomatsu resettled his grip and firmed his stance, the refined implement he held now an extension of his hand, of his very self. Adjusting his angles, he seized up his target. Lined straight and true in his sights, Todomatsu lifted his chin and raised an unflagging arm before him. The boy released a forgotten breath, eyes turned forward meeting his adversary’s dead on.

Then he smiled.

‘Cheese!’

Cycling through poses, he snapped a catalogue of selfies as he tried on hats and rose-tinted sunglasses; his friends’ exclamations and compliments pleasantly filled his ears amid the public holiday bustle. Todomatsu laughed as they all squashed into a few frames. Jostled as they piled in, the trendy hat he modelled swept off his head. He made an awkward grab for it, but was hemmed in by smiles and shoulders: the unpaid-for accessory sailed to touch the floor. ‘Whoa, watch out.’

Atsushi stretched out a hand and snagged the hat neatly a palm’s span from the well-trodden linoleum. Todomatsu smiled thanks with a sweet “oops”. The corners of his mouth tweaked dimples into his cheeks when Atsushi flashed his suave smirk, returning the hat safely to its display shelf. ‘I take it you didn’t want that.’

‘I do so want it,’ Todomatsu pouted, pinking slightly with Atsushi’s arched brow, a significant glance toward the assortment of shop bags clustered about his ankles. In only a few hours Todomatsu had spent most of his last few paycheques. He’d barely noticed larger and larger sums leaving his hands, gleefully hefting bags until he finally noticed the weight and wondered exactly how much lighter his wallet was. He sighed a little with his friends’ teasing. He was usually so meticulous with his precious income. But then, this was retail therapy. Stewing over all he spent kind of defeated the purpose. Weaving through happy arms slung about his shoulders, Todomatsu checked his hair wasn’t tousled past cutely dishevelled and locked his phone with a flick.

‘Hurry up, Atsushi, I want a new scarf—buy me a Christmas present?’

‘No fair! If you get a present, so do I!’
‘Come on, Totty,’ Kaho offered a lace-swathed arm and a hand with his many bags. ‘Let’s go!’

He linked his elbow through Kaho’s as their friends descended upon Atsushi, squabbling to claim an arm each. Sauntering among the intense array of scarves, Todomatsu browsed with interest barely dampened with lack of yen. But his bundles of swag bumped against his knee, a reminder with every step. When was the last time he’d gone so overboard? Todomatsu strolled through absent memory as he gabbed with Kaho—that was it, definitely his last shopping excursion with Karamatsu.

The boy’s lip twisted slightly. Todomatsu always made out it was a chore, taking his most painful sibling out in public—it was a chore. But somehow he always forgot just how much fun shopping with Karamatsu could be. He constantly prayed no one he knew spotted them. And he had to drag him from the most embarrassing apparel, Karamatsu drawn to sequins and skulls like a moth to the flames of social pariahdom. But it couldn’t be helped. Todomatsu had to at least try to look out for him, even if it was as much for his own sake.

Maybe he should ask him shopping for the post-holiday sales, Todomatsu pondered, fingertips trailing over sleek cashmere and cotton, selecting a peppy scarf perfect for his friend’s favoured makeup shades. Knotting it stylishly, he dished out flirty admiration and thought of the second eldest with a brush of regret.

Jyushimatsu and Ichimatsu were embarrassingly inseparable for adults, and Todomatsu’s heart ticked ominously against his ribs, knowing full well the catalyst for Osomatsu and Choromatsu’s renewed closeness. When they’d been young, it had been he and Karamatsu. They still shared more in common than he’d dare admit aloud. But now Todomatsu had Atsushi and Kaho, all his friends. Who did Karamatsu have?

Not that he seemed lonely, reason cleared the youngest’s doubt as they meandered through the brightly-lit department store. But the second born never missed a chance to dote on him. And it went far beyond the pampering Todomatsu collected. The youngest squirmed; he almost crept his overloaded hand to settle his stomach. He always felt shame like he’d swallowed it. But for once it had nothing to do with sympathetic embarrassment. Karamatsu always took such good care of him. When was the last time Todomatsu had returned a fraction of the same? He was supposed to be the paragon of goodness.

‘Totty, are you doing okay?’

‘Am I … of course, I’m fine,’ Todomatsu recovered and spun lies like the natural he was, smiling for his friend. Kaho’s brow furrowed beneath her beret.

‘It’s just … you don’t normally go on sprees like this, you know? Not unless something’s bothering you.’

A few paces ahead, Atsushi turned his head slightly, listening in.

‘No, no, I’m fine. I … hold on, sorry.’ Todomatsu made an easy distraction of his phone, replying to a few Line messages and avoiding their eyes. For once in his life he didn’t want any excess attention. Thankfully, Kaho dropped the subject. But Atsushi’s eyes flicked repeatedly over his shoulder as they left the department store, stepping into icy bedlam.

Shibuya was wild at any time of year. In late December, the special ward outdid itself with light and life. As the dirty orange sun melted below the skyline, illumination of every colour flared up and down skyscrapers, morphing grungy street level into something almost ethereal. Towering Christmas trees by the swamped station and tamer versions inside glowing shop windows shone with fairy lights and fake icicles. On every corner, lush wreaths were strung with more electrical twinkles over
the heads of carollers and spirited musicians. Multiplying the noise and natural confusion, hordes of shoppers shoved this way and that through the vibrant streets, serenaded by a rousing rendition of “Good King Wenceslas”.

Though his breath rose white before him—it was the coldest day of the year, according to the weather report broadcast high over them as they tramped through the scramble crossing—the atmosphere was so festive and lively; Todomatsu eagerly let himself be swept up in it. There hadn’t been nearly this much a deal made out of Christmas when he’d been small. But the Western holiday was too good a chance to make money. Barely a shop shunned opening its doors over the Emperor's Birthday holiday, some staying open right through the night into Christmas Eve.

He was going to score a date this year—a real date. Not that he’d actually done the all-important asking yet. He’d meant to work up the nerve all week. But Todomatsu had a lot on his mind, what with …

Snipping that train of thought, the youngest Matsuno avoided the reason he probably should have cancelled with his friends and re-immersed in the comfortable Shibuya chaos. He chattered animatedly as they pushed through another clump of youths. Arm-in-arm with Kaho, her cool breath kissed his ear and sparked tingles down Todomatsu’s body. Then Atsushi fell back a step. Stride so easy at his side, his sideways glance was so intense the boy was suddenly hazy as to which of them set off said tingles.

Todomatsu’s toes shuffled inside his shoes, flustered to realise until a few seconds ago he’d been appreciating his friend at arse level—again. Just great. God knew Kaho was the simpler attraction—he was attracted to her. But he had no clue what to do if it hit him for sure, that he really wanted to spend the most romantic evening of the year with Atsushi. Todomatsu was even a little frightened, what with the conservative state of Japanese society. But that dilemma took an uncharacteristic backseat to …

Todomatsu strained to empty his head. Sure, he was cutting it a teensy bit fine. But he still had a few hours left. So he went on parrying relentless rumination with materialism and company. But as an automatic door festooned with blinking Merry Christmases spat them back onto the footpath—a fresh bag with a secret little gift for his brothers’ present exchange joined the bouncing weight against his calf—Todomatsu ducked sideways as freezing wind whipped into them. Narrowing watery eyes as a few squealed with the unexpected gale, his attention was snatched by the massive screen mounted on the building diagonal. Christmas-coloured figures blown well past life size flashed across its silvered surface.

‘Look, it’s them!’ Kaho exclaimed, tugging Todomatsu’s sleeve and grinning up at the screen. ‘They’re so cool, I can’t believe people think they’re with the cultists!’

‘I know, right?’ Todomatsu feigned enthusiasm, watching as his brothers bounded out of the amaetuer footage, the sad remnants of a food court in their wake. It must have been a big one …

One reflexive chuckle, that anyone included the word “cool” in the same thought as Osomatsu and Choromatsu, was all he got. Was it so much to ask, for one last carefree day before he made the biggest mistake of his life? Whatever that turned out to be.

Joining in his friends’ theorising about the cultists’ coloured shadows, Todomatsu was forcibly hauled back into the mess he’d skirted since Kaho’s message reminded of their plans.

To sign or not to sign.

‘Who was this written for, a sixth grader?’ he’d scoffed at Choromatsu’s offered translation over the
weekend. He and Ahn had sat the prospective Unicorn down to pick through his power contract one improbable clause at a time.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Choromatsu had deadpanned, all-too-obviously surveying the eldest. Starfished across their futon, Osomatsu’s snores were wheezy, his lungs prickled by the aftereffects of poison vapour. By unspoken consensus, they’d left him to sleep. Todomatsu doubted he’d be much help, but Ahn had been downright determined to push through all administration while their Salamander drooled, unconscious and out of action.

Choromatsu checked against his impeccable zero-attention-span version while Todomatsu held his scroll, smoothing the contract—delicate as rose petals, it was deceptively durable—across his lap for Ahn to read. It hadn’t taken the three long to traverse the details. ‘How exactly are you planning to do all that?’ Todomatsu had asked in a small voice, filled in on their extraterrestrial employers’ heavy expectations.

‘We’re, ah, not thinking about it much right now,’ Choromatsu was a bit nervous to admit. ‘We were going to wait until there’s the five of us. Maybe then, after we’ve upgraded and we’ve got enough experience, we’ll … you know,’ he said, not portraying nearly enough confidence for Todomatsu. ‘We’ll just know. I know how that sounds,’ he’d shrugged with Todomatsu’s nasal little burst of scepticism. ‘But once you’ve done this a little longer—if you do, it might not sound so farfetched.’

As easily as he put one foot before the other, Todomatsu’s keen social radar kept track as conversation merged from the bejeweled vigilantes to commandeering a photo booth for a few rounds of purikura. Tramping en masse for the nearest arcade, Todomatsu fell quiet. Catching Atsushi’s eye on him—did he have to be so damn observant, he huffed through a warm thrill—the boy realigned his features to fit the scene. But beneath his surface he wasn’t nearly so polished.

Ahn expected an answer tonight. And he didn’t have one. God, why had he been given a choice at all? If he was their chosen light, why hadn’t the Spectrum Alliance just made him do it? Sure, he might have been resentful for a while. But he would have been magical. And he’d have everyone but himself to blame if he screwed it up. Todomatsu cursed free will, he cursed asking for time to think—the biggest decision of his life, and he wished he’d made it as recklessly as Osomatsu. A week to fret, usually so tidy and certain, Todomatsu’s happily-chugging mental processes scraped and screeched, overwhelmed. He desperately sought some sign, a revelation—anything that would tell him what to do.

‘Totty, I know you,’ Atsushi spoke up, soft enough only he heard over the Christmas clamour. ‘It’s pretty obvious something’s on your mind. Stop being all cute, out with it.’

Not magic or monsters could quash that rush, being called cute by a crush. Getting hold of himself, Todomatsu tuned down any rogue “I’m so completely lost help me” that seeped through his show. But his chirpy excuses didn’t fool his friend; artful Todomatsu had trouble even tweaking the truth with Atsushi, let alone all-out lying. Seeing he wouldn’t leave it alone, pleasure and annoyance melded and Todomatsu came to the abrupt decision that yes, he could confide in his friend. He trusted Atsushi’s opinion every bit as much as his own. And what harm could it do, really? As long as he kept it very, very vague. ‘Atsushi, I need to make a decision. It’s pretty important … maybe even life-defining. That sort of thing.’

‘Life defining, huh? You don’t know who to ask out for Christmas Eve?’ Atsushi made a guess.

‘This is serious, don’t tease me,’ Todomatsu pouted blushingly, thumping Atsushi in the thigh with his multitude of bags.

‘What’s this about, then? Okay,’ Atsushi said, smile fading when Todomatsu only hummed, not
elaborating further. ‘I make lists when I have to make a decision—for and against, then see what they add up to. Have you tried that?’

‘I don’t want to think about it,’ Todomatsu complained, already feeling a bit better now Atsushi knew there was reason behind any less-than-social-butterfly behaviour. ‘I came out for the express purpose of not thinking about it.’

‘And how’s that working for you?’ Atsushi said, knowing the answer before Todomatsu’s light scowl. ‘Just get it done. Then maybe you’ll be able to actually enjoy yourself.’

‘I was enjoying myself,’ Todomatsu huffed, blaming the news. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped to get out of Atsushi with zero detail given. But he wasn’t sold on summing for and against. How was he supposed to—actually, it wasn’t a bad idea. Todomatsu flipped from dismissive to some mindset with hope of actually getting something done. It was worth a try, at least. A chance to step back and look at this thing as objectively as possible.

There was the first “against”. An army to defeat and space to stitch up, the spectrum guardians’ future was far more daunting than Todomatsu had thought. And it was already pretty daunting.

Second “against”, the Unicorn’s one and only weapon. Adorable, check. Proud staple of the magical genre, triple check. Todomatsu was thrilled with the sceptre in almost every way. But now a few stars had been removed from his eyes, he couldn’t help but imagine who would come off worse if he was ever forced into confrontation more dangerous than braining a zombified teen. Magic spells were all well and good—god, Todomatsu couldn’t believe he’d actually just thought that. Straightaway he marked another column in his mind, scribing “magic” in bold at the very top. And underlining. Multiple times.

But Todomatsu relived Kikuukyou’s horror so vividly the crooked beast might have cast all of shimmering Shibuya in shadow. Nausea scraped through his stomach lining like he hadn’t agonised a hundred times already. Third “against”, Todomatsu was petrified. But he backtracked before he got too hung up on that point. Against a monster, the Unicorn sceptre was nothing but a strip of scrap metal.

Silding around the issue, Ahn had leapt to fortify her chosen light against every conceivable smidgen of doubt. Todomatsu appreciated it, really he did. But her failure to address his creeping dread outright was all too noticeable. ‘Matsuno Todomatsu, you will not find yourself in such a situation.’

‘But what if?’

‘You won’t,’ Ahn maintained. ‘Combat is the role of the Salamander, Kraken and Sphinx. The Unicorn is a healer, an enhancer.’

‘I know, Ahn-chan,’ Todomatsu had dragged out his vowels, whingeing.

‘Your place is to provide support with the Wyvern; neither of you is designed for close-quarters combat. With any luck, between you, you and Matsuno Choromatsu will keep the spark alive … The Unicorn may employ their own light as a weapon.’

Pleased to fill out his sadly sparse “for” column, Todomatsu marked a counter argument for lack of weaponry. Ahn had finally made good on her (it had seemed to an increasingly-dejected Todomatsu—at least the Wyvern got a gun) forgotten promise that the Unicorn wasn’t helpless. Describing a longbow like a refracted sunbeam and exploding shells of starlight, even Osomatsu was rapt. ‘The weapon differs depending on the Unicorn at its heart.’
‘Hold up,’ Osomatsu had interrupted. The eldest so drugged up, Ahn had let it slide with a single “humph”. ‘It’s different with every Unicorn? How many are there?’

‘Right now? Only Matsuno Todomatsu—prospective Unicorn, of course,’ she’d added with a bit of bluster.

‘But the ones who took out Takuu last time, weren’t they the only guardians before us?’ Osomatsu had wondered, confused like this was something he should know. How much spectrum guardian lore had he missed with his embarrassingly-low boredom threshold … another “for”. Todomatsu had been chosen, singled out to be part of something important, something exclusive and special. Even if it was hard, even if he was scared … no. Todomatsu threw the brakes on with a squeal. Not what he was thinking about right now. Keep it objective, keep it structured.

A chance like this would never crop up again. Todomatsu wanted this. And, as depressingly like a washed-up motivation coach as it sounded, he knew he’d have to live with it for the rest of his life if he didn’t step up and take this chance.

‘There is far more evil in the universes than Lord Takuu,’ Ahn had answered Osomatsu quietly. ‘Many hundreds have been called upon, and every iteration is now a part of you. Should you sign a permanent contract,’ Ahn rested her gaze on Todomatsu, ‘you will find your light’s true form in time. But you cannot rely on that should you place yourself in harm’s way,’ she’d explained her hesitance to mention this enticing development. ‘Most Unicorns take many of your years to harness their light so. It is better you focus on your spells and leave the fighting to your brothers.’

Todomatsu scoffed a little, transforming his curled lip into something sweeter. All seven of them squished into one booth—the entire level was crowded with varieties offering different photographic quirks of cute, widening eyes and lengthening lashes—they hugged and threw up peace from every direction. He hardly planned to throw himself into the thick of a fight. But accidents could happen. Most of his concerns about his far-from-intimidating sceptre were met by the promise of an unlockable light weapon. But as he and Kaho decorated purikura with hearts and bubbles—Atsushi stole Todomatsu’s pen and added the date when the boy was too slow to choose a design, timer ticking down to zero—Todomatsu couldn’t help but worry—another “against”—whether Ahn glossed over a few nasty unknowns to trick him into signing.

He felt ridiculous before the thought even fully formed, needing to explain away the sudden tinge in his cheeks. He’d seen a seven-eyed giant shatter a magical Osomatsu against a wall. What detail could Ahn possibly gloss over? More importantly, Todomatsu knew Ahn would never do that. However eager she was to recruit him, she wanted him convinced, not coerced.

Adorable talking space kitten. Todomatsu smiled, adding another “for”. But he couldn’t avoid the terror factor anymore.

Todomatsu was finely balanced between a nervous wreck and “stop the ride, I want to get off right freaking now”. There was a lot he was afraid of; he’d put up with his brothers’ merciless teasing most of his life. But while horror films and cockroaches were one thing, when it came to honest-to-god monsters his every fear was totally justified. And it wasn’t that he didn’t trust his brothers to look after him, even without his oddly-liberating faith under the influence of transformation. Even if Todomatsu commanded his own endless army of guardians, he got the strong sense his fear levels would remain unaffected.

The youngest Matsuno bristled defensively as his somewhat-tidied thoughts swept up his more experienced brothers. He was nearly incapable of accepting it. But as his friends’ chatter washed over him amid the flashing lights and sirens and “insert coin to continue” of intense gaming, Todomatsu felt almost inferior to his brothers. When he transformed Osomatsu became a force
practically unstoppable, Choromatsu so cool and graceful Todomatsu could barely reconcile the Wyvern with his gawky brother. Despite his own fledgling display of power, not to mention Ahn’s ego-boosting praise, Todomatsu couldn’t help but feel outperformed. Hardly on good terms with humility, he was eager to throw this short-lived inadequacy complex in their faces—showing up his brothers, another pro to look forward to.

But his blood ran cold only thinking it: not only was he meant to fight this impossible war. He was meant to lead it. And now the true gravity sank in, that duty was every bit as terrifying as the monsters—this was more than important, it was huge! The most responsibility Todomatsu had ever shouldered was remembering to add low fat, not full cream milk to a coffee order. The weight of the world was a big step up. Another “against”, Todomatsu marked with a twinge of despair. How was anyone supposed to deal with becoming an evil warlord’s nemesis? How was he supposed to agree to it? Todomatsu felt so small, warped from cute and confident Matsuno Todomatsu to nothing but a tiny speck among specks, no more significant than stardust floating through space. Magical or not, how could anyone expect him to do this?

But it wasn’t just anyone, he countered with another “for” before his shoulders drooped too low. It was himself. He expected it. They’d find a way to mend space, and he’d find a way to undo Lord Takuu. And if he needed more reason, all his initial wants had been outstripped barely a day after his brothers’ tilt with the comic book-esque Titan. Osomatsu had filled him in, enthusiastically spilling what had really happened the night of his first transformation. Todomatsu remembered his painful crash into the pachinko parlour’s back wall as Jyushimatsu spared him so much more than he’d known, saving the youngest’s soul while his brave brother’s was ripped away. The revelation had shaken Todomatsu straight to his core. Now it fuelled his resolve.

The boy’s manicured fingers curled viciously around his bag handles, a white-hot flutter in his gut. How dare the Liberation Force attack Jyushimatsu. How dare they hurt Osomatsu and Choromatsu … how dare they make hell for him! These were the true artists of Todomatsu’s happy life’s upheaval, the reason terror had lurked only a phone notification away for months. They were the brainwashers, the kidnappers. And if Lord Takuu thought he could keep on screwing with his city … if Todomatsu had the power to make it safe again, the Liberation Force had another thing coming.

“Wow, Totty …” Todomatsu smugly imagined Osomatsu’s reaction. His vigor almost surprised himself. He didn’t like being labelled heartless, but Todomatsu knew himself. He wasn’t exactly the type selfless enough—or stupid enough—to risk himself for the lives of others as distant as stars, people he’d never know. At least, he thought he’d known himself. But with all he’d seen, with all he now knew. It was like the fundamental essence of himself stirred. More than power, more than prestige. His proud answer was yes. Todomatsu might just be selfless enough. He might just be stupid enough—though somewhat less eager to proclaim that from the rooftops. Who hadn’t dreamed of being a hero? He could save his brothers, his city, his world. Whatever his fears, he wanted that more. And if he was the best person for the job …

He was going to get himself killed. Crushed or gassed or eaten and picked out of monstrous teeth with his own femur, if he signed that contract Todomatsu was going to die.

He shrank within the energetic flurry of his friends. Every damn time he let himself get excited he cycled back to imminent death, brain hopelessly wired on repeat. Whatever Ahn’s reassurances, whatever his brothers’ support, he couldn’t get past that one overarching “against”.

The only living beings with any chance of knowing what he went through, Todomatsu had turned to his magical brothers for “guidance”. Choromatsu wouldn’t say much, whether he thought Todomatsu should sign or not. He didn’t want to influence the youngest’s decision, and burst with exasperation trying to keep Osomatsu from doing exactly that. Not that he needed to hear the eldest’s
thoughts; Todomatsu’s saw it all over his face. Touched though he was, both “yes” and “no” wasn’t exactly helpful counsel to work with.

But how could he say no? It was hard to remember he was under no obligation, all the horrors that might come to pass if he refused. Unbidden, an image of a blank Jyushimatsu wearing cold dead eyes seared into his brain. Todomatsu’s throat constricted, squeezing his sociable laugh into a squeak. And imagining someone else donning the white hood and circlet messed with him nearly as badly as a brother possessed—he wanted this! Now he’d tasted this wonder, how could he ever give it up?

Todomatsu shifted restlessly beneath his warm layers; he felt Atsushi’s light gaze focus on him like an X-ray. That was what it came down to. Whatever his wants, whatever his fears. Did he want this more than he was afraid?

He barely repressed a sob. God, he didn’t know, he didn’t know …

Maybe that was his answer.

And it wasn’t like he actually was the best person for the job, Todomatsu reasoned over a storm of emotion as he slowly wilted within. Even if he could pull off the Unicorn, his personality hardly meshed with all the rubbish Ahn gushed about the diamond-encrusted warrior. Osomatsu was a fighter, Choromatsu a thinker. Accidents or not, his brothers embodied their magical counterparts. Todomatsu shrugged like it didn’t matter. But he didn’t exactly feel like a paragon of goodness. And what if he got scared and screwed everything up, Todomatsu justified even further; his “against” column now overflowed. He liked to think he could be brave like Osomatsu and Choromatsu—like Jyushimatsu. He wanted to show Takuu what for for all he’d done. But if he froze in terror mid-battle, he would die. Worse, he might not heal his brothers in time. As much as it hurt—and it did; he felt devastatingly like he abandoned his brothers in their greatest hour of need, how was he going to tell them?—Todomatsu just couldn’t take that risk. He just … couldn’t. The Spectrum Alliance needed … someone else. Someone braver. Someone … better.

And … he was even a little relieved.

‘Did you make up your mind?’ Atsushi asked quietly, seeing change settle sadly over his young friend.

‘I … think I did,’ Todomatsu said, every syllable more despondent. Eyes on the crowded footpath, he looked up when he felt Atsushi’s arm sling around him. He navigated through all their obstructive shop bags and close-packed shoulders, pulling Todomatsu in a short, one-armed hug. ‘I’m sure you’re doing the right thing.’

‘I hope so,’ Todomatsu whispered, all pretence falling briefly away. Atsushi would never know the full force of the choice he’d just made—he’d never see how adorable he looked in that Unicorn hoodie, he twinged with more welcome, light-hearted regret. But he did know that all Todomatsu wanted in that moment was to be taken care of. Signalling Kaho, the two rose to the occasion magnificently. Surrounded by laughter and avid protest as Kaho cheerfully insulted one of their friend’s idolised pop groups, Todomatsu’s practiced smile soon melted into something more real.

The night air only grew colder. Seeing Kaho shivered in her lace, Todomatsu unwound his scarf and draped it around her shoulders. ‘No, no, I’m fine—I can’t bear to see you cold!’ she exclaimed, looping it snugly back around his throat. He enjoyed the attention immensely and wrapped his arm around her instead. Kaho cuddled against him, leaning into his warmth. Todomatsu sparkled. God, she smelt amazing … but Atsushi stood so close on his other side. He pouted inside and out—back
to this confusion, then. He never thought he’d be grateful.

‘How about we go warm up in Starbucks?’ Todomatsu offered, his own teeth chattering. His friends leapt on the suggestion, fully aware their friendship with him came with additional perks in the form of delicious staff discounts. He led their meandering pack towards the second nearest store. The nearest claimed the title of “Busiest Starbucks in the World”. Even with staff benefits, Todomatsu doubted he could get them in the night before Christmas Eve.

A corner away, one of his friends shouted out. Todomatsu nearly hit the starred sky—so his jacked-up startle reflex wasn’t relaxing any time soon. ‘What is it?’ Atsushi asked as Todomatsu’s heart slowly remembered this wasn’t a race. Far from frightened, she grinned hugely and pointed at a massive poster: Keystones of Japanese Horror in the Late 20th Century.

Todomatsu froze. It took a few embarrassing splutters for him to get back on speaking terms with his tongue and vocal cords. By then his friends had enthusiastically pushed into the exhibit.

‘Look at the queue!’ he tried, scurrying behind on legs turned wooden. ‘It’ll take forever to get in. And we’ve been walking for ages. I’m thirsty, aren’t you thirsty?’

But he was backed in a corner. The others barely pausing for a resounding “yes” consensus, Todomatsu fidgeted nervously as they stood in line.

‘There’s only a few more days left, I’ve been wanting to go for ages!’

‘What’s wrong?’ Kaho asked over their friends’ jabbering, lowering her bright voice when Todomatsu flinched, tensed as though for sneak attack. ‘You like horror, don’t you?’

No, Todomatsu did not like horror. But he meticulously pruned the facade that he did—how was it all his friends were buffs? ‘It’s all right, I guess,’ he shrugged, still a convincing liar under pressure. ‘But I’m tired. And don’t you think this looks … I don’t know—’

Todomatsu smoothed a gulp, eyes flickering towards an enormous wall scroll of a beautiful young girl with a mole beneath her eye smiling creepily over the queue. Another hanging massed under a dark infection of spirals.

‘—a bit t-tedious?’

He’d be a lot more convincing under pressure if he loosened the vice-like grip he’d somehow got around her arm. Noticing, Todomatsu hurriedly let go. The queue moving far too quickly, his calculated attempts to interest his friends in a sale he’d heard about and karaoke—“Karaoke sounds fun, let’s eat there afterwards!”—grew more and more frantic. Through gnawing fear, he was almost offended—after all he’d seen, how could spooky folklore and special effects still frighten him so badly? He was only thankful he hadn’t come across the exhibit with his brothers. They would have personally towed him to the head of the line, grinning through all his babbling escape attempts.

‘It’s just a bunch of movie stuff,’ Atsushi assured when their friends smothered giggles, finally catching on that Todomatsu wanted nothing more than to turn tail and bolt. Todomatsu’s gaze brushed his shoes. This wasn’t the sort of funny he strove to come across as. ‘But if you really don’t want to go in … you’ll be fine,’ he promised when Todomatsu shook his head hard, refusing to step out of line. ‘It’s just an exhibit anyway, like a museum. How scary could it be?’

As it turned out, the curators were creative. And the late 20th century had been a good time for horror in Japan.

In the (blessedly) brightly-lit main hall, Todomatsu hovered near the least terrifying displays as long
as he could. But his friends were all over him, teasing and squealing how adorable he was—he didn’t mind that part, but was all too aware that his fears had the tendency to blow out well past endearing—and hauling him all over the exhibit. He tried to distract himself with his phone, but that only had him dragged between photo opportunities, his friends begging him to take pictures of them posing with grotesque life-sized models and clambering out of a large hollowed-out television. Their ecstatic smiles didn’t do much for the horror effect; only Kaho did it “right”. Todomatsu wished she wouldn’t, letting her hair down and glaring coldly as she contorted through the false screen.

When the lights went down and the entrance to a “skin-crawling horror experience” loomed, Todomatsu tried to put his foot down. And miserably failed. It was better than his brothers giving him hell, he tried to tell himself, clutching his bags as he was semi-manhandled into the dimmed labyrinth, cringing at recorded dripping faucets and eerie children’s laughter. He almost wet himself when the first actor crawled towards them. At least no one had stolen his phone to capture the moment … but at least he could cling to his brothers. So heightened, Todomatsu still tried to downplay his fear and gradually fell back from the group. He didn’t want to be alone. But most of the scares were ahead. Darting eyes furiously seeking out threats, he struggled to keep them down, the delighted shrieks of his friends serving as some warning for …

Todomatsu screamed and flew sideways into the wall; the temporary structure almost buckled. Blubbering, he threw up his arms, warding off the blood-robed actor who’d silently placed a hand on his shoulder.

‘Totty, I’m sorry, I didn’t think … we’re almost through, come on.’

Atsushi and Kaho helped the pathetically-whimpering boy stagger upright, cocooning him from terrors until they stepped safely into the gift shop. Todomatsu was still shaking when they took over a large karaoke booth. He busied himself with the fried feast and colourful drinks they ordered, occasionally shaking a maraca as his friends’ solos grew more tipsy. ‘Come on, Totty,’ Kaho stole a microphone and rolled it towards him after an hour or so. ‘It’s my turn to rescue you with a duet.’ Singing with once performance-shy Kaho, he felt a little better. But it didn’t last long, his friends high on horror and wanting more.

‘Hey, Totty, you know that building you used to live in? The really creepy old one? It’s been condemned, it’s coming down!’

‘We should totally go there! Like a test of courage, you know? You can get us in, right, Totty?’

‘Come on, Totty!’ they wheedled, another tiny trickle of sweat worming down his back for every eye that lit up. Atsushi didn’t seem to think much of this turn of events.

‘You don’t have to do anything,’ he said in undertone to a cornered Todomatsu. The boy gripped his quivering lip hard between his teeth. That was one of the last places he wanted to go after the evening of dread he’d endured already. ‘It’s not a good idea,’ Atsushi tried to dissuade when Todomatsu said nothing. ‘It’s getting late, and there were cultists out earlier.’

But even Atsushi’s effect failed to quell the scare seeking, and with Todomatsu itching with need to redeem himself, he fast caved to peer pressure. From the nearest station, Todomatsu reluctantly led his friends to the hulking apartment that had been his home for a few weeks earlier that year. So tense already, he stopped short halfway, every hair that fleeced the back of his neck ascending sharply. His churning stomach dropped. God, we’re being followed. I can feel it …

‘Totty?’ Kaho asked, shaking him lightly. Todomatsu wore his friends’ chuckles as he whipped his head over his shoulder, screening every darkened direction. But for them, the streets were deserted. Swallowing thickly, he began to walk again. But he couldn’t shake the awful sense that unseen eyes
spied in multiples of seven.

‘Wow …’ The friends craned their necks, appreciating the intimidating architecture up close. Dark and moldering, the building oozed menace, every window boarded shut. The entrance was bolted. ‘There’s another way in, right?’ Apprehensively, Todomatsu showed them the back entrance. Pulling at the knob, he sagged in relief when it wouldn’t turn. But he hadn’t counted on his keys being pinched from his pocket.

‘Hey! Give those back, come on, guys …’

Gleefully, his friends tried every one until they were rewarded by a soft snick. Todomatsu groaned—why hadn’t he gotten rid of that damn key?

‘W-we’re really not supposed to go in …’

‘Guys, come on,’ Atsushi tried, smoothing over his own alarm. Apparently, he hadn’t thought they’d actually go through with breaking in. Looking between a rigid Todomatsu and Kaho as she shrugged and followed their friends inside, Atsushi was torn. But:

‘We can’t let them go in alone. In and out, I promise. You can wait here if you …’

But Todomatsu steeled himself and hurried inside before he thought better of it. He’d seen the films, he wasn’t about to separate from the group. But he jumped as Atsushi closed the door, quiet sound ricocheting through cobwebs

It was pitch dark, but the back room illuminated as one by one they lit their phones. At his friends’ insistence, Todomatsu showed them where he’d stayed upstairs. It was dismal and dusty, fulfilling all-important creepy criteria. But it still only a room. ‘Come on, where’s the creepiest place in here?’ This was probably the wildest thing they’d done all their sheltered lives; his friends wanted their money’s worth. Todomatsu’s dim hopes of quick escape shattered, he tentatively pointed out the entrance to the basement. Moaning as all his friends streamed down the concrete stairs, he spared one fearful glance back down the blackened hallway before skittering after them.

Social concerns frightened away, he crept nearer to Atsushi than his own shadow. His friend didn’t seem to mind, but his head snapped up at their friend’s call from ahead. ‘Hey, look at this! It keeps going!’

‘What do you mean, it keeps going?’

Skipping to keep up as Atsushi sped into the lower basement, Todomatsu skidded to an abrupt halt, blanching white. ‘Th-th-that’s n-not supposed to …’

A gaping hole swallowed the middle of the floor. Bored straight through the foundations, earthen staircases continued down. Someone or something had excavated a descent into the bowels of the earth. ‘This is a bad idea,’ Atsushi vocalised what Todomatsu couldn’t, a few paces behind as the others charged ahead. ‘Come on, be careful! What the hell’s going on …’

‘Maybe the demolition company found something they’re trying to dig up,’ they guessed, heeding Atsushi’s call to step cautiously but with no intention of reining in their alcohol-fuelled curiosity. Todomatsu choked on whimpers, crowding to the hewn wall. There was no handrail over a drop god knew how deep.

‘It’s so dark,’ he moaned, the lonely lights of their phones like distant stars in endless space. God, why couldn’t he handle the dark, why … this was such a bad idea.
Deeper and deeper the stairs circled down. Trembling on the edge of a total collapse, Todomatsu gasped when when the first gleam emerged from shadow, streaking the cavern wall like precious gems. ‘Pretty,’ Kaho sighed, swinging Todomatsu’s hand.

‘Don’t,’ he groaned, pulling her further from the edge. Pressing into the wall, he shivered. He felt the icy earth like it laid direct to his skin. It was far too cold, weirdly cold. ‘W-we should go back, w-what if this is an alien … a cult hideout?’ he squeaked, just as someone echoed from below:

‘We’ve found the bottom! Come on, Atsushi!’

‘Let’s get this over with,’ Atsushi sighed as they trudged down the last of the stairs. The seven pooled into open space, earth packed hard beneath their feet. Todomatsu could see only his friends’ shining faces. It seemed empty, silent but for their enthralled chatter.

‘Are we done now?’ he trembled as the others investigated a few steps forward, taking photos of everything their phones could make out. ‘Can we go, please? I …’

Todomatsu’s jaw dropped in a soundless scream. Illuminating out of darkness, a large rock imbued with the same purpled glow of the walls suddenly bathed the chamber. But that wasn’t what nailed the boy to the spot. Eight abnormally tall figures congregated around the beacon. With a lurch, fear he knew too well crystallised sickly in his stomach.

‘No,’ he whispered, seeing the familiar pencil-pointed chins and garish wraps beneath flowing black cloaks. ‘No, no, no …’

‘What’s going on?’ Atsushi demanded. His voice betrayed the barest shake, but he stepped forward, motioning the others behind him. Todomatsu stumbled into Kaho’s arms, gagging on his heart. ‘Who are you, what do you want?’

‘You,’ a voice rang out mockingly. A dark man lounged against the stone, half-hidden by his straw-thin companions—a human! ‘I want you, Atsushi. The rest of you won’t get the same special treatment, sorry about that. But, you know. The more the merrier.’

Todomatsu trembled. Ahn hadn’t said anything about people willingly working for the Liberation Force. Was he a slave? He sure didn’t look like the dead-eyed teenager Todomatsu had helped save. Black as coals, the young man’s eyes burnt cold as though set alight.

‘Inferior humans, your future as a people indentured begins,’ one soldier spoke in a ghostly whisper, waxen skin washed by the glow. Masked, their seven eyes gleamed as they settled on Atsushi. ‘You are a pack. This is your alpha. Surrender yourselves to our dark might without resistance.’

‘No!’ Todomatsu shrieked as seven of the beings aimed massive claws dead at their chests. Darkness whorling sickly into existence and knowing exactly what was coming, suddenly Todomatsu’s knees decided they were knees again. ‘Get down!’

As the foul substance shot to steal their souls, he threw himself sideways, tackling Kaho to the ground. The darkness meant for them surged overhead with the force of a low-flying aircraft.

‘Come on!’ he screamed as their friends … as Atsushi, oh god, Atsushi! … hit the earth and began to thrash. Dragging Kaho upright and losing their shopping, they bolted back up the stairs.

‘Just what … is happening?!’ Kaho hissed between harsh breaths as they spiralled upward at a sprint. Todomatsu fought off dizzy spells and sick disbelief.

‘C-C-Cultists,’ he panted, trying not to look back, not wanting to see Atsushi drained from his own
face. ‘I-I’ve seen them before. They’re possessed, we have to get out of here!’

‘Like on the news? But what about the others?’ Kaho never faltered in their punishing pace, but couldn’t tear her eyes from their convulsing friends. ‘What do we …’

‘Do your Liberation Force’s bidding,’ the soldier’s command coiled hauntingly from below. ‘Capture them.’

Driving their feet into the steps as their friends pelted after them, Todomatsu was nimble and Kaho had done track in high school; they ran almost stride for stride. ‘Not much further,’ she breathed, the hole in the earthen ceiling leading back into the concrete basement only a few circuits higher. Throwing themselves through, the two heaved broken shelves and rubbish to barricade the opening. They’d barely made it to the first floor before a grating crash told them their hijacked friends burst through. They weren’t that fast, how were they that fast?

Todomatsu bolted for the back entrance and threw himself against it. ‘No, no, no!’ he wept. The door didn’t budge, blocked from the outside.

‘Totty!’ Kaho dragged him away from the useless exit before they were cornered. The front door bolted shut and the windows barred, the pair raced up the stairs. ‘Slow down, shush!’

Shoving Todomatsu into shadow, their slapping footsteps echoed into nothingness. The two crouched, hearts thumping and ears strained for any movement.

‘Kaho … Todomatsu …’

Todomatsu mashed his face in his hands, smothering his moan. Kaho gritted her teeth as their friends’ calls spiralled spookily, nothing like the vibrant voices they knew.

‘Come out now, you belong with us … We’re a pack … We will find you …’

‘Come on,’ Kaho barely moved her lips, motioning the terrified Todomatsu to lead the way. Barely keeping it together, he recall as much of the layout as he could remember, trying to pinpoint a secluded nook to bury themselves in. Edging forward on their toes, they barely made a sound. Hardly breathing, they crept up another flight, and halfway down the corridor Todomatsu chose a door.

‘In here,’ he whispered. Taking painstakingly seconds to turn the knob, Todomatsu tentatively nudged. The creak split the night like lightning.

‘Go!’ Kaho shouted as crashing footsteps resounded madly towards them. ‘I’ll call the police!’ she bellowed over her shoulder. Todomatsu heaved, breath shortened by prolonged exertion and fear.

‘She’ll call the police,’ their zombified friends mocked, but their calls grew more distant, falling back. Todomatsu almost sobbed in relief. But they didn’t slow, surging up the next staircase to hide until …

‘Argh!’ Todomatsu shrieked. A blank grin appeared at the top of the flight—appeared! Momentum driving them like a train and too close to stop, the pair collided the zombie. Arms flailing as he wept out denial, Todomatsu whacked them with a few shop bags he’d forgotten he still carried. But the puppet’s arms locked tight around him.

‘Let him go!’ Kaho roared. Hesitating barely a second, she drove a weighted punch to the back of their head. She did kung fu in middle school, Todomatsu remembered through his shock, numbly aware as his friend threw the puppet off him, her screams hazy in his ears. ‘Snap out of it, Totty!’
The situation smacking back into him, he found his feet and ran. But they couldn’t keep going like this. And they were running out of building. ‘Here …’ Todomatsu breathed shakily through tears, badly winded. ‘T-try here …’

His limbs flopped like deboned fish, but on his second flail he caught hold of the doorknob. Praying for silence, he pushed. The sound of nothing had never been so sweet.

‘Totty, look out!’

So focussed on listening, he’d forgotten to look. His confused vision barely had a chance to process the pale creature towering over them before Kaho barged him out of the way. ‘Kaho, no!’

But his friend had taken the hit. She’d taken it … for him. The alien’s maw stretched in terrible satisfaction as Todomatsu hyperventilated, clutching his mouth as Kaho writhed. ‘I hate you, I hate you …’ he wheezed at the alien, no overt interest in him bar amusement now they’d claimed their victim. Tears streaming as pursuit thumped ever nearer, Todomatsu’s entire body shuddered. Leaning over, he grasped his knees, sure he was about to be sick. But he had no choice. He left Kaho twitching on the ground, hurtling around the darkened bend ahead. On automatic, he raised his hand to light the way. It was empty.

Grabbing desperately at his clothes, Todomatsu searched for his phone. When had he put it away, he can’t have dropped it! Barrelling into an upper room, Todomatsu fled for the safety of the futon cupboard, sliding the door shut behind him. He hunkered in the corner, cowering. ‘Todomatsu …’ he heard a new call and trembled down to his bones. Kaho …

Finally he found his phone’s smooth contours deep in his coat pocket. Pulling it free, he almost dropped it. But the universe took pity on him. Quick reflexes combined with frantic need, he somehow got his fingertips around its edge and snapped them closed in an awkward grip before it thudded to the ground.

Todomatsu pulled the screen close to his chest, hiding its light. His immediate need to call the police died before he’d begun to dial 110. The Liberation Force wouldn’t be stopped by Tokyo law enforcement. But they didn’t know Todomatsu had even higher connections.

Sweaty fingers barely activating his screen, Todomatsu swiped open his contacts.

***

The 23rd dawned beyond freezing. Two signed and sealed guardians, plus their unsigned recruit—two and a half guardians?—ran through the iced morning long before that sunlight touched the slanted roof tiles of urban houses that streamed past. Osomatsu had impatiently counted down to the date, and was quick to jump in. ‘So have you made up your mind?’

‘What?’ Startled breath fogging the air, Todomatsu’s eyes widened through the gloom. ‘Really, Osomatsu-niisan? You’re not even going to let me … I thought I had till the end of the day!’

Suckered in by the youngest’s apparent upset, Osomatsu dropped the subject with a grumble. He had a feeling Todomatsu had long made up his mind and was pulling some crafty move, trying to get a sweeter deal from Ahn when he fully intended to sign. But that sense was short-lived, leaving Osomatsu as unsure of the youngest’s intentions as ever. His sibling instinct thrummed every time he laid eyes on Totty. Whatever his outward disinterest, the youngest was in turmoil.

‘Where are you going?’ Osomatsu pestered when Totty announced mid-breakfast he was meeting some friends after he’d earned some time and a half. ‘Is it a date? Let me come too, I’ve got the day
off … why not?’ Already annoyed he avoided giving his answer, Osomatsu was even more disgruntled when Totty refused to say, only that no, he couldn’t come.

‘Quit it,’ Choromatsu interfered before the eldest could aggrivate further. He didn’t invite Totty to join the telepathic exchange. Just as well. The kid didn’t need anyone in his head right now, it was crowded enough in there as it was.

‘I’m just trying to be here for him,’ Osomatsu protested. ‘He needs us! And we need an answer, Ahn’s freaking out!’

‘I know, but he’ll tell us …’

‘Ah!’ Karamatsu strode in last, scooping the delectable air towards his nose and kissing his fingertips in overdone delight. ‘There’s no better thing for a man to wake up to than the homemade love of his mother!’

‘You could be waking up to the homemade love of your wife, if you got out there and made yourself a catch,’ dad said over the brothers’ groans as Karamatsu settled in his empty space. ‘How long are you going to let your poor mother spoil you?’

While Mum beamed on the sly with Karamatsu’s heartfelt appreciation, as far as Dad was concerned it was a nagging day. He switched fluidly from pushing Karamatsu to take job hunting seriously —“Father, I still have no plans!”—to asking his three “employed” sons if they’d met any nice girls he should know about.

‘A few,’ Totty said with an elusive smirk.

‘It’s, ah, maybe a bit early to start thinking about getting married … Totty will tell us tonight.’ Embarrassed by dad’s probing questions, Choromatsu picked up from the prolonged interruption through a fluffy mouthful of hotcakes and strawberries. The holiday treat from their mother had been torn through by the salivating sextuplets like a particularly ravenous typhoon; the smell had even convinced Ichimatsu to crawl out from under the covers. ‘Give him a break.’

‘But he’s avoiding us!’ Osomatsu complained, slurping syrup from his fingers.

‘And that surprises you how? It’s probably the most normal he’s felt all week,’ Choromatsu pointed out dryly, but spluttered in disgust when maple syrup splattered. His fresh top the sticky victim, he berated indignantly as Jyushimatsu “helped” Ichimatsu slather his hotcake with sweetness.

It was the emperor’s birthday, but heroes didn’t get days off—not after their last disastrous attempt at taking it easy. The magical brothers spent a short time training in the warehouse before splitting up, Choromatsu striking out for Akihabara (Osomatsu teased him all the way to the train station, asking if he’d challenged his favourite gun-toting maid to a shoot-out yet) and Osomatsu for the outskirts of Ikebukuro for a few harmless fistfights. By the time he was done, he was sweaty and sported a few bloodied knuckles, but felt energised like he hadn’t for days.

Osomatsu used Ahn’s rampant preoccupation to score them the afternoon to laze—“It’s not like we’re actually slacking off, right? We are on permanent standby”. He thought they were entitled to a few hours’ off, run down and into the ground by high work volume. And even pretending to be on holiday was a treat. Congregating in the living room, the young heroes enjoyed their brothers’ company, chatting absently while they all comfortably did their own thing. It struck a chord in Osomatsu how much like home this felt; he was disappointed that Totty wasn’t there to share it. Even Ichimatsu was joining in. He made it through three rounds of Street Fighter before dropping his controller and slumping over the kotatsu. Osomatsu gleefully pounced on it. ‘Brothers,’ Karamatsu
soon said as the eldest whooped, strategically bashing buttons to trounce an ecstatic-in-defeat
Jyushimatsu. ‘Maybe turn the volume down, Ichimatsu needs his rest.’

‘For the last fucking time … I’m fine,’ Ichimatsu mumbled blackly into his arms. But Choromatsu
yanked the console cord from the wall midway through the next round, their virtual combat
surpassing rowdy and approaching something more like minor structural damage. Tetchily planning
payback—how could Choromatsu just kill the best string of combos ever?—Osomatsu kicked his
feet under the kotatsu and lounged with a short stack of manga. A calico-splattered regular kneaded
into the warmth with them. But the furball couldn’t settle down. Osomatsu’s eyes wandered over his
pages, watching as they altered between cuddling an Ichimatsu in need and investigating their
curiously-disinterested not-kitten kin. Ahn sat as far from Ichimatsu as she could pull off, across the
room and tucked beside Karamatsu—right beside Karamatsu, Osomatsu observed with an upward
tweak of his lips. Just cold, was she?

‘You’re scooching a bit close there,’ he baited for a bit of fun. ‘What, you sweet on my brother?
Better get in quick,’ he teased as Ahn denied it a little too defensively. ‘He’s popular with the girls. I
know, he told me himself.’

Osomatsu grinned as a very pink-eared Ahn abruptly shifted, putting her back to him and curling in a
ball so tight even the Salamander’s strength wouldn’t prise her out of it. Catching the eldest’s
expression from behind his mirror, Karamatsu looked a little surprised, unsure where it came from.
But he smiled jovially back, Ahn blushing beneath silvered fur while Osomatsu sniggered on. ‘We
might just have the world’s first genuine Karamatsu girl.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, what if he says no?’

Osomatsu was deeply immersed—or about as deeply immersed as he was capable of being—in his
second volume when Choromatsu knocked on his mind. ‘If he says no he says no,’ Osomatsu
shrugged far more casually than he felt. ‘We find another Unicorn.’

‘That’s not what I meant,’ Choromatsu said, turning a page though his eyes no longer traversed text.
‘What happens to Totty if he says no? Ahn?’ he asked as Osomatsu caught on—he hadn’t thought of
that. But as he’d come to expect in the last three seconds, Ahn confirmed: Totty couldn’t know about
their magical world if he didn’t sign.

‘It’s not safe for him or you. If Matsuno Todomatsu does not become the Unicorn, it is unfortunate,
but we must repress his memory. I’m taught it is similar to taking repellant hold of an area, but more
intricate. If the need arises,’ she said, finally emerging from her curl. So plainly praying the need
would not arise, Osomatsu stretched until his bones cracked to tickle her shoulder. ‘I will contact the
Spectrum Alliance for assistance. I may also require Matsuno Choromatsu’s aid,’ she added.

Choromatsu immediately stiffened. ‘You have a stronger bond with him than myself. This will
require precision.’

Osomatsu could tell Choromatsu was nervous at the thought of invoking any magical technology
more advanced than barriers. But mostly he didn’t like the idea of wiping anything from their
brother’s head. Osomatsu didn’t like it either. He had trouble relaxing again, fiddling with trash in his
pockets as Jyushimatsu balanced precariously on his bright ball—“Watch me! Watch me, Niisan!”
As he spilled in a guffawing tangle, Osomatsu’s fingers nudged the tiny pouch containing their most
recent pay. He had to get on Tanaka for his next trade …

‘Hey,’ Osomatsu said suddenly, features lit with wily realisation. ‘If we can wipe Totty’s memory,
we can wipe everyone I owe money, right?’

‘You haven’t paid your debts yet?’ Choromatsu exclaimed. ‘You make a small fortune, how can you
‘It’s not like any of them are big-time mobsters,’ Osomatsu played off his brother and mentor’s incensed concerns—‘Not big-time mobsters? What is wrong with you?!’—‘And it’s not like they can hurt me, not now I’m superhero magical …’

‘Just pay them back!’

‘Okay, okay … ouch,’ Osomatsu added, his scroll glowing ember hot—nice timing, enemy attack! Escaping Choromatsu and Ahn’s twin tongue lashings, he jumped up with a breezy excuse for their brothers.

The offending soldier mutated into a beast that bulged like a steer on a pharmacy’s worth of growth hormones. Though its forehead was (mercifully) empty of horns, bony protuberances bumped in tough patterns over a natural helm that meant serious battering-ram business, and with the fanned crest on its head Gyuutsuchi was probably the closest thing to a dinosaur they’d ever meet—unless some intelligent lizard race from out among the stars came to pay homage once they took out Takuu. One test shot and one more to confirm, Choromatsu lasers pinged pointlessly off the monster’s thickened bone-white armour. ‘It’s okay,’ Osomatsu said, eyeballing the beast as he swerved from rampaging, monologuing death. ‘My first monster was something like this. I took them out easy.’

‘You did not,’ Ahn retorted from her hiding place behind a curry stall’s massive rice cooker. ‘Your friend crushed your elbow with a street sign. You nearly died.’

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu grinned with raging adrenaline. ‘But I didn’t, did I?’

They were like Kuurazu tactic-wise—lots of unwieldy acceleration and head-on collisions; at least their fry cook puppet was busy being stunned and couldn’t take them out with any of the unsettling plethora of weaponry the food court offered. But for all the weight they carried, Gyuutsuchi was a lot more intimidating when it came to turning circles. ‘Must you let them hit everything?’ Ahn demanded as Gyuutsuchi took out half the court in one ram. Busted tables and chairs scraped and clanked noisily through the air—it was lucky this went down between rush hours. Only a few off-peak diners had been sent packing by Ahn’s repellant shield.

‘What else am I supposed to do? I’m open to suggestions,’ Osomatsu twanged with sarcasm, pumping the wall of rampaging alien meat with a few futile potshots. But he wasn’t particularly worried—he could handle this, no problem. His only real concern was the treachery underfoot; upended furniture and dining debris scattered everywhere. He could use that.

One eye on his unduly chipper lens—apparently, it was just glad to be included—Osomatsu counted down as the beast closed in. Hood rippling with their breakneck approach, he saved his last second and rolled left. Never slowing, Osomatsu sprang to his feet, almost skidding on an upended tray. He swiftly kicked it aside, clearing space—it would take a lot more to piss them off enough so blind rage set in. Then he could slide beneath their next mindless headbutt, just like he’d taken out Kuurazu.

‘Don’t,’ Choromatsu advised from where he anchored overhead, one pistol trained pre-emptively below and his every sense everywhere. ‘They’ll see that coming a mile away. Takuu has to know what happens here,’ he explained as Gyuutsuchi tore up the linoleum with bull-like scrapes, wanting nothing more than to slam crimson Osomatsu into the wall solar plexus first. ‘He’s watching somehow.’

Osomatsu supposed that made sense, but he was far from happy about it. What was that even about? Was the evil lord of the universes really so hard up for entertainment he indulged in magical reality
TV? And there wasn’t even a juicy prize waiting to make it worth their while—unless he counted survival. And he didn’t. Osomatsu felt suddenly cheated, and helped Gyuutsuchi crash over a pile of wreckage a bit more savagely than planned.

Beset by glancing blows and tumbling feats which carried the guardian dangerously underfoot, it didn’t take long for Osomatsu’s cocky antics to convince the beast that any blunder into their kicking range really was as stupid as it looked. The warrior far too close, Gyuutsuchi reared suddenly, forelegs lashing out. Boots planted, Osomatsu arched back. The monster roared in triumph, hammering all their kinetic energy into the vulnerable guardian. At least, they meant to.

Gyuutsuchi’s seven eyes popped in shock, nailed mid-motion. Choromatsu landed quietly, manipulating the beast’s airspace for all the endless treasures he was worth.

‘Wow …’ Osomatsu whistled long and low. He knew it was coming. But he was still floored. It wasn’t like the Wyvern had pulled this off with anything bulkier than his Salamander test subject. Straightening, Osomatsu grinned at their enemy’s flailing humiliation. ‘That is some serious skill, how do you …’

‘Come on!’ Choromatsu burst. He strained to hold the monster off the ground, element-contorting arms trembling with effort as Gyuutsuchi struggled riotously. His steadying counter gusts stirred a storm of whitened flakes from their toughened skin.

‘Eww, alien dandruff … on it,’ Osomatsu said. Almost lazily, he delivered the final blow to the crystal lodged in their exposed navel. With a trailing wail, the beast reduced to a mound of dust at his feet.

‘I know you’re tired,’ Ahn ventured, surprising Osomatsu with her hesitancy as they regrouped on the shopping centre roof. ‘But I would like to check in with our … our other candidates. Not that I think Matsuno Todomatsu will decline,’ she said in a rush.

Osomatsu was tired. His goddamn lungs were tight with exertion and his head prickled on the cusp of another unforgiving migraine session. But he bit back the brunt of his complaints. All things considered, he actually felt pretty solid. That was combat. All-out, in-your-face, minimal humiliation, opposite of boredom combat. And he’d done good. More and more it seemed Choromatsu was the overachiever among them—when had the magical boy industry turned into high school all over again? Osomatsu never failed to be thrilled for his self-doubting brother’s achievements. But the occasional boost never hurt—that’s right, the Salamander was awesome, too.

Ahn promised the Unicorn flybys wouldn’t take long. Somewhat predictably, their mentor’s interpretation of “not long” was very different to Osomatsu’s; the sun had sunk by the time they made it home. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, how are you feeling? You look much better!’ Jyushimatsu said cheerfully as the sextuplets, minus Totty, walked to Chibita’s at an Ichimatsu-friendly shamble. ‘Congratulations, you beat your curse! Maybe Ichimatsu-niisan will beat his next!’

‘Jyushimatsu, he’s sick,’ Choromatsu made the practical correction as the fifth born capered ahead. ‘He’s not cursed.’

‘Eh?’ Jyushimatsu swung around to traipse backwards, comically bewildered. ‘He’s not?’

‘If this isn’t cursed, I don’t know what the fuck is,’ Ichimatsu muttered with eternal gloom.

‘You’ll beat it, Ichimatsu-niisan—go for it! But are you still tired, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu peered up at the eldest puppy-like. ‘You look tired. Don’t overdo it!’
Osomatsu matched his grin, boasting that his brief stint totally stuffed was history and lurching at his little brother to prove it. Ichimatsu watched their playful wrestle with shadowed eyes. Slumping along with hands stuffed deep in his pockets, he radiated envy. According to Karamatsu’s report, the fourth born had managed some comparatively peaceful sleep, harbouring energy all afternoon. But his sallow skin tight over unsettlingly-prominent cheekbones, it was a special occasion Ichimatsu was even on his feet. Feeling a massive insensitive jerk, Osomatsu eased up on his proud show of stamina.

It was a little sad, only five clustered around Chibita’s counter. ‘Everyone loves Totty! Isn’t it nice he has so many friends,’ Jyushimatsu shouted across three wincing brothers when Osomatsu sighed moodily. ‘Don’t be sad, Osomatsu-niisan! Maybe you shouldn’t, Ichimatsu-niisan,’ he added, brightly coming between Ichimatsu and the beer Chibita plonked before him.

‘My throat hurts, give that back! Jyushimatsu!’ he exclaimed hoarsely as the fifth born threw his head back and chugged the stolen alcohol out of the picture. Mutinous, he tried to re-order, but slammed his mouth shut when Choromatsu got in his way. Chibita looked between them, nonplussed as the third born passed the second bottle down to Karamatsu.

‘Don’t give him anything, Chibita,’ he instructed their bare-headed friend, outline slightly distorted behind his steaming oden.

‘What in the hell’s up with you idjits?’ Chibita asked, slopping out five servings and starting a sixth before remembering Todomatsu was absent. ‘Two of you quit booze, another can’t handle it anymore—’

‘Be kind, Chibita. It’s not that he can’t handle it. But …’ Karamatsu paused to swig his misappropriated beer. ‘Alcohol and Ichimatsu must not mix again until …’

‘Karamatsu, shut up,’ Osomatsu told off, roused from his self-indulgent wallow—Ichimatsu was steaming at the ears. The second born’s thick brow furrowed—what was wrong? He was right, wasn’t he? Osomatsu gritted his teeth, pained. How could Karamatsu be so understanding and not get it? But he wouldn’t back down, not with Ichimatsu’s best interests so close to heart.

‘But it isn’t good for him, he’s far too ill to …’

‘He can’t drink with the medications he’s taking,’ Choromatsu interrupted, rescuing Karamatsu as Ichimatsu’s dulled eyes threatened to erupt.

‘Whatever you say,’ Chibita shrugged, eyeing Ichimatsu with shifty suspicion—Choromatsu reassured that he wasn’t infectious, his oden was safe. ‘But if you idjits actually paid your tab, your sobering up’d be putting me out of business. Who is paying?’ he asked, pinning Osomatsu and Choromatsu with a glare—he’d been on them the instant word of their employment reached his stand. The two exchanged a glance, Osomatsu all ready to weasel his way out of coughing up. But:

‘Thanks for the meal, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Ichimatsu mumbled tiredly. The barest flash of dark mischief played in his eye.

‘Hey!’ Osomatsu exclaimed. But he gave up the cash—less grudgingly and more irately as Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu failed to take the hint and drank themselves under the table—when he was smugly reminded of the monetary consequence of his “misunderstanding” with Totty in the bathhouse. Was that seriously only a week and a day ago? Osomatsu couldn’t believe how much longer it felt.

Starving from battle and gradual recovery, Osomatsu wolfed down overflowing dishes in quick
succession. ‘This is really good, Chibita—how’re you supposed to get better if you don’t eat?’ he badgered through mouthfuls, seeing Ichimatsu push his barely-touched dinner away. He gesticulated pointedly with his chopsticks, flicking soup through the air. ‘We talked about this.’

‘You gotta eat, Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu urged, tipsily waggling a fishcake under his nose.

‘Don’t wanna,’ Ichimatsu murmured, face already buried in the counter. After a few fruitless attempts to tempt another bite from him, Jyushimatsu concernedly shovelled the rest into his own face. Osomatsu and Choromatsu levered their half-unconscious brother home—how could Ichimatsu be so light?—rejecting an unsteady Karamatsu’s repeated offers to take over. When Osomatsu raised interest in pachinko, Jyushimatsu volunteered to stay behind, burrowing beside him once they settled Ichimatsu to sleep, the limp young man about as helpful as a toddler. Karamatsu grandly suggesting he forego pachinko to keep them company, Osomatsu and Choromatsu shared an exasperated sigh. Each taking an arm, they towed their drunken brother to the entrance.

‘So you are aware, the stench in here is foul,’ Ahn ran up and jumped into his hoodie pocket as Osomatsu stamped into his sneakers. ‘Have you washed this once since I met you?’

The kitten hated pachinko—“a den of depravity only the dregs of Earthen society could derive pleasure from” was her most venomous description to date. That she willingly joined them, Osomatsu guessed she couldn’t stand waiting around any more than he could. Hopefully by the time they returned, Totty would be home and this agony of not knowing would end. One way or the other.

Still actively avoiding the parlour of the first attack—they’d probably never shake the association, never feel safe there again—Osomatsu followed his feet to their usual place. The deafening throb of their eardrums a magnetic “welcome back” as balls crashed in waves and flashing lights spiralled, the two eldest loitered, waiting for Choromatsu to check stats and dropping down at machines by his careful choice. Reprimanded within minutes for wedging his trusty coin to secure his sweet spot, Osomatsu bitched good-naturedly but otherwise didn’t contribute much to conversation. Karamatsu, however, was perfectly happy to carry it himself. He was exponentially more long-winded soaked with alcohol, voice lifting easily over the parlour’s dissonance. Eyes on his screen of cascading silver, Osomatsu nodded and slotted in the occasional “right” and “uh-huh”. His eyes jumped machines as Karamatsu’s spun into lucky mode. Any jealousy he felt as his brother’s machine vomited countless balls into his tray freeze dried as his attention snapped to a certain silhouette through the smoke. ‘Oh, shit!’

Osomatsu ducked and yanked his hood up. He knew those eyebrows anywhere. Twice as irascible as Fedora and Accent, Osomatsu owed the shady customer about three times as much.

‘We did tell you,’ Ahn scolded, poking her nose from his stuffy pocket and immediately wrinkling as smoke funnelled up her nostrils. ‘You have only yourself to blame.’

‘Osomatsu?’ Karamatsu said as the eldest eyed his bad-tempered debtee, flanked by a bevy of thick-muscled cronies stuffed into suits. He really didn’t feel like a confrontation, and he didn’t have nearly enough cash on him to avoid one. ‘What are you …’

‘This machine’s a piece of shit,’ Osomatsu announced. ‘We gotta change, let’s go.’

‘What? Osomatsu, come on!’ Drunken Karamatsu put up rare resistance, but Osomatsu rushed him into losing and stole his tray, relocating himself and his inconveniently-identical brothers several aisles over. By the time he fed a third note into his fresh machine, his tense shoulders had loosened—that was a bullet he’d dodged. Re-immersed in his hobby—his only response to Choromatsu’s mutter of “it’s called a habit” was to crack a wry grin—and stimulated heart rate returned to its regular
steady beat after his first winning REACH, Osomatsu announced almost before he consciously thought it:

‘I bet he says no.’

Choromatsu was silent. Straightaway Osomatsu wished he could take it back. ‘You bet he does?’ the third born said before the eldest could yank his foot out of his mouth. Choromatsu’s telepathic tones were strangely hard to read. ‘Or you hope he does?’

Not wanting a repeat of their argument, Osomatsu shrugged. ‘Kinda both, I guess. Shit,’ he swore, twisting too far right. Choromatsu’s frown deepened sharply.

‘Osomatsu-niisan, it’s not your …’

‘I know, I know,’ Osomatsu interrupted. Where the hell were his compartmentalising skills? Since when couldn’t he wall off worry enough to have a bit of fun? Goddamn it, Totty. Goddamn it, Choromatsu, he added somewhat ruefully, sure his brother was about to lay into him again.

‘Bet how much?’ Choromatsu surprised him. Osomatsu shrugged, humour creeping into his cheeks.

‘I dunno, 100 yen?’

‘You’re literally paid in treasure and you’re betting a measly 100 yen?’

‘So now you’re trying to make me gamble my life away?’

The brothers laughed a little, a welcome reprieve. ‘You are both hopeless,’ Ahn sighed, exasperation eclipsed by such gentle fondness that Osomatsu made a note to pick up a mega crap tonne of her favourite fish snacks.

‘How about it?’ he asked, yawning widely as his next REACH spun into depressing failure. ‘100 yen?’

Again, silence ensued. But then:

‘Sure,’ Choromatsu expectedly took the bet. His fleeting little smile was stuffed with confidence Osomatsu fully expected of himself, but never of his bundle-of-frayed-nerves brother. ‘You’re on. 100 yen he signs.’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu, your phone.’ Ahn dragged it halfway out of his pocket; he hadn’t even felt the vibration through the warm thrum of the atmosphere. Osomatsu flipped the crappy model open—since when did Todomatsu call them?

‘Hey, Totty? We were just talking about you. How’s your date going—hello?’ he said more loudly, sticking a finger in his other ear to dampen the metallic torrents. ‘I can’t hear, I’m at pachinko. I … can’t … hear … you!’ he enunciated at the top of his lungs, any response from Totty drowned at Osomatsu’s end. ‘Totty, I’ll hang up if you don’t …’

‘Osomatsu-niisan …’ His muffled senses finally attuned, catching his brother’s petrified whisper. Osomatsu iced. He jammed his phone hard against his ear, almost yelling for the whole world to shut the fuck up.

‘Totty, what’s wrong? Talk to me!’

‘P-please help. It’s them, I can’t … they’ll hear. Please come …’
Osomatsu’s sweaty grip threatened to crush his phone, hearing a terrible scuffle down the line. Static a stomach-punching herald, his scroll burned through his winter layers. He threw a look of pure horror at Choromatsu. ‘Totty! We’re coming, okay? We’re …’

But he’d already disconnected.

Osomatsu rocketed to his feet. Choromatsu almost stacked it over his stool, half a heartbeat behind. But the pair skidded to a frenzied halt after two steps. Karamatsu. The second born beamed obliviously at his rejoicing screen; he’d picked another winner. Osomatsu’s immediate thought was to leave him tipsily feeding machines, but violent recollection of the beach slammed that from a viable option to “no fucking way” quicksmart. They couldn’t just run off and leave him with nothing, he’d follow them. Deadly claws raked across Karamatsu’s pulsing throat splashed his vision. Some unadulterated instinct jerked Osomatsu’s gut in response. He couldn’t let that happen again! Shit, shit, they had to get the hell out of there right fucking now … screw it, the truth it was. Almost truth, anyway.

‘Karamatsu, listen.’ Osomatsu grabbed his brother’s shoulder. ‘There’s some cult thing going on. Totty’s scared, we’re going to pick him up.’

Stricken, Karamatsu immediately lumbered to his feet. No time for nobility, Osomatsu pushed him down. ‘No way, you’re drunk, man. Stay here, okay?’

‘But Totty …’ Karamatsu protested as Osomatsu shoved a fistful of notes at him, barely looking at the sum he surrendered.

‘You’ll just slow us down. Go home when you’re done, all right? And watch yourself, there’s too many sickos in this city.’

Karamatsu was desperately torn. But finally he nodded. ‘Okay. But Osomatsu …’

His words lost to their retreating backs, Osomatsu and Choromatsu sprinted outside and down the side of the building to transform. Looking up as Ahn leapt free, Osomatsu drove his soles into the bitumen, rubber practically catching fire with friction. The alley wasn’t empty. ‘What the hell?’

‘Look, it’s Matsuno!’

Eyebrows lorded over a shrinking debtor backed into a trash-strewn corner. On sight of him, the loan shark scowled. Two of his men detached from their intimidation, sauntering menacingly forward and cracking their bolt-thick knuckles. ‘Been a while, Matsuno—finally ready to cough up? Who’s your little friend?’

They paused, eyes flickering between their acquaintance and his companion. Even in the dark, the resemblance was unmistakable. Stabbed by fresh panic that they’d seen Choromatsu, Osomatsu raised his palms and backed up, thinking rapidly how to reason with them. Then he noticed his hands. Far from presented in surrender, his fists knotted rockhard. Any intention of talking himself out forcible debt extraction by beatdown was lost in translation, emerging a dark growl. First Karamatsu, now his debt collectors … Osomatsu breathed out a hard hiss. Get …the fuck … out of his way.

Eyes flaring, he hurled himself at his would-be assailants. He repelled between grunts like he whipped on a bungee cord, hard elbows flying for pressure points. He took down the last full-throttle into the brick wall before turning his fists on Eyebrows. All his protection slumped out cold, his jaw slackened at the speed and ferocity of Osomatsu’s attack. The small-time mobster's hands slowly inched into the air—now who was fucking trying to reason with who?
‘Get out of here,’ Osomatsu snarled. ‘And you.’ He jerked his chin toward the alley mouth. No longer sandwiched between the wall and a hard grip at his collar, his fellow debtor scrambled past Eyebrows’s calculating retreat.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu …’ Ahn released a long breath. Echoes of dashing footfalls fading, the fire of Osomatsu’s wild assault quenched.

‘They saw you,’ he said, feeling sickly detached. What the hell had he done? Totty was in trouble—shit, they had to move!—but this was still one of the stupidest mistakes he’d ever made. ‘I let him walk out of here, and he saw you!’

‘He didn’t get a good look,’ Choromatsu said, regarding the eldest with an expression almost awe—through all his mess of emotion, Osomatsu still managed to be pleased. ‘And you knocked out the two who did,’ he added, nudging one with his toe. ‘No one will believe them—they’ll just think they were just seeing double. Come on, we’ve got to go.’

Choromatsu gripped Osomatsu’s elbow. Shaken from near stupor, Osomatsu seized his scroll. Shedding their regular selves, the guardians were off like a shot. Moving far too slow even as Tokyo blurred beneath them, Osomatsu’s heart thudded in his throat by the time Choromatsu directed them down.

‘Hey, isn’t this the building he stayed that time I was …’

Osomatsu finished in his own head—that time he was being the world’s biggest ass—as they abseiled from the building opposite, landing just in front of the derelict apartment block. After recognising the building, the first thing Osomatsu noticed was the bolted entrance. Not wasting time, he smashed it inward with one hard kick. Inside it was dark, and very still. His throat tickled, the air thick with old building must. Tilting his head back, Osomatsu heard distant calls and muffled footsteps. ‘Those aren’t soldier voices.’

Nodding, Choromatsu nudged his lens. The moment it glowed emerald, a dark shape burst through the gloom. ‘Fuck!’ Ahn spilling to the floor as Osomatsu sprawled sideways, he yelled for her to find cover as the puppet struck with the purpose of a contract killer, wielding something silvery before her. It caught the scant moonlight filtered through the busted doorway—a nail file. It would take days to dig through the forged stitches of their hoodies with that. But their eyes were tempting targets. Choromatsu flew backwards as though reeled in, lining up his shot and squeezing the trigger. Target caught in the chest, she stumbled. But she didn’t fall.

‘What the hell are you doing, stun her!’ Osomatsu shouted as the door camper’s blank grin stretched horribly, decidedly conscious.

‘I am!’ Choromatsu fired off a volley to illustrate that alarming point. The puppet barely flinched. ‘It’s not working!’

‘This is a designer slave,’ Ahn realised, hidden Osomatsu didn’t know where and he wasn’t about to ask—designer slave? As if all this wasn’t twisted enough without designer slaves. ‘The Wyvern’s stunning weaponry has been rendered ineffective!’

‘You think?’ Osomatsu demanded as the puppet threw herself directly at him, as though wired to know he wouldn’t hurt her. Pivoting, he seized the back of her coat and tossed her halfway up the corridor. ‘Well, I can’t hit her!’

‘You have to,’ Ahn snapped.
'I’ll punch a hole straight through her!’ Fleetingly, Osomatsu recalled his first fight as a spectrum guardian, faced by eleven slaves and their puppet master. He’d pulled every punch, and Jyushimatsu had still been sore for days after. His sunny little brother was the sturdiest person he knew. And the Salamander was much more powerful now. Shit, he’d better remember how to hold back.

Swearing profusely, Osomatsu engaged—very carefully. Barely powering his hits and evading as she lashed out with her file, he realised this must be a friend of Totty’s. If he’d needed any more reason not to hurt here, there it was—that would crush him! After a short, reasonably one-sided clash—for a designer slave, she wasn’t exactly a fighting machine—Osomatsu disarmed the puppet and pinned her firmly to the wall. She jerked her head forward, teeth bared and snarling wolf-like. ‘You will never keep us from our own,’ she hissed a low threat.

‘What the fuck …’

Not waiting around to hear more, Osomatsu gingerly sideswiped her jaw. The puppet’s head snapped to the side, brain bouncing into blackout. ‘There’s more, right? How many?’

‘Eight soldiers, five more puppets,’ Choromatsu arrayed targets across both their lenses as Ahn peeked from a shadowed corner, eyes shining with dismay.

‘Eight?!”

Choromatsu nodded grimly as Osomatsu’s jaw dropped behind his mask. ‘This has to be some sort of test, like the beach. This is something different.’

That was a fucking understatement—what the hell was going on? Why were Totty and his friends even here, singled out by an entire squadron of soldiers? Osomatsu’s mouth went dry—Takuu hadn’t found out Todomatsu was a Unicorn candidate, had he?

Shaking off far more than unease, Osomatsu shoved all else from his mind and locked on to Totty above them. He blackened the floorboards in his rush to bolt up the crumbling staircases. Whipping even faster, Choromatsu seized his elbow.

‘Get the fuck off me, what are you doing?!” Osomatsu shoved him hard. Determined, Choromatsu hung on, dragging his stronger brother back.

‘I’m going after Totty, I’ll protect him until you take out the soldiers.’

‘But there’s slaves up there!’ Osomatsu exploded, frantically following their progress on his lens. They moved deliberately, almost in formation. Searching … they were fucking looking for him!

‘Your stunners aren’t …’

Choromatsu shut up his protests, eyes hard and focussed despite the pressure. ‘I can still hold them off. And I stand a better chance with puppets than soldiers. They’ll know we’re here by now, who knows if they’ll mutate?’

Osomatsu quit straining against his brother—he was right, he was always fucking right. Confronted with the prospect of facing eight monsters simultaneously, Osomatsu numbed from waist to toes. But he felt even sicker when his mind cruelly replaced himself in that extreme scenario with Choromatsu. Instinct screamed for him to find Totty and never, ever let him out of his sight again. But he couldn’t risk Choromatsu so stupidly. The Wyvern was every bit as capable of protecting Todomatsu as the Salamander. And if he had to shoot … he had to shoot. But he seethed with frustration; all the sense in the world couldn’t stop that. ‘Fine, but be fucking careful.’

‘Same to you. I’ll let you know when I’ve found him. Come on, Ahn.’
Choromatsu flew upward, Ahn fleet at his heels. Relieved that Ahn too would be sufficiently distant from potential monster hell, Osomatsu rapidly followed the floorplan on his lens, superimposed guide lights leading him down into the sublevels. Halfway down a second set of concrete steps, the congregation of soldiers below suddenly reduced. ‘What the hell …’ In the space of a blink, six had vanished from the tech’s senses—probably portalled back to their dimension-distant base. This had to be part of the test, slaves designed to work autonomously, or something. Osomatsu ground his teeth. How could he sever their strings if he couldn’t bust their masters’ crystals?

Trying not to dwell on it—or think how easy it would be to send totally controlled puppets to blend in with the public—Osomatsu focussed on one bright plus: he’d take a gamble on two monsters over eight any day. Leaping down the rest of the flight, he kept a close watch on all movement above. It wasn’t hard. ‘How do you shut this thing up?’ he asked, humour foaming incessantly as his lens fretfully tried to point him back the way he’d come.

‘I’m trying to concentrate,’ Choromatsu’s mental voice was low, barely a figurative breath. Osomatsu snorted lightly—who was going to overhear? ‘Don’t talk to me unless it’s an emergency.’

‘Fine, whatever,’ Osomatsu cut the connection, disregarding as his lens highlighted alternative routes, convinced he should be dealing with the more imminent threat back upstairs. It wasn’t often he agreed with the highly-strung tech—there had to be a way to tweak its settings to something a little calmer. But the sooner he removed the remaining soldiers from the equation, the sooner he could help Choromatsu.

He noticed soon enough what had his lens so agitated. There was a massive hole right in the middle of the basement floor, a jumble of oversized trash nearby. ‘Well, that’s not normal.’

Peering over the lip, Osomatsu slowly proceeded down, concrete replaced by hollowed earth. There was no electricity, no light. And if he wanted to retain any element of surprise, he couldn’t ignite yet. Osomatsu’s heightened vision and the stealthily-softened glow of his lens led him deep under earth. Stone or something like it glimmered dark and strange, veining the walls nearest. The void on his right as he circled hinted at space far too cavernous for subsurface Tokyo. Osomatsu’s stomach rolled forbiddingly. Somehow he didn’t think this gaping hollow was part of the building’s original design.

‘I’m with Totty, he’s fine,’ Choromatsu reported briefly from far above. Releasing a heavy gust of air like he’d held it since they’d separated, eventually Osomatsu spied even footing below. Skidding down the last of the stairs like a jagged slide, he pumped up his fire, blazing brightly. The broad space was thrown into blinding relief. Dead ahead, a black-cloaked soldier towered by a huge pulsating stone—the lieutenant from the beach! He’d know that fucker anywhere!

Osomatsu’s chest boiled with something far more deadly than fire. Totally blind to their companion, the Salamander brought his gauntlets together with a jarring clash, charging enough power to vaporise a small town; Osomatsu barely remembered to brace for recoil. Wildfire cannonballs blazing across the short distance, the temperature jumped dozens of degrees as they shrieked to reduce the lieutenant to ashes. But darkness rippled and snapped at their sharp gesture. Fuck.

‘Really?’ they drawled as their shield absorbed Osomatsu’s flames. ‘We’re going to do this again?

Osomatsu growled, retinas spattered with crimson. The lieutenant had almost slit Karamatsu’s throat, now they were pulling shit with Totty … He didn’t know how or when. But as soon as he figured how to get through that goddamn shield, Osomatsu was going to take them the fuck down.

‘Good decision,’ the lieutenant said softly, letting his shield dissolve when Osomatsu powered down his gauntlets. ‘So the Salamander is capable of learning after all.’
Fists cocked and practically spitting with the insult, Osomatsu conveyed every pip of provocation that frothed behind his mask, just daring them to set him off.

‘Settle down, we have absolutely no intention of fighting you,’ the lieutenant said, their shivering timbre hanging unsettlingly between them. ‘You don’t look as hale as when last we met,’ they added, maw sliding into amusement. ‘I have heard tell of your hard experience with Soldier Kikuukyou.’

‘Am I seriously the only thing you bastards have to gossip about?’ Osomatsu demanded tightly.

‘Such a raw masterpiece,’ the lieutenant went on, noting Osomatsu’s ire and harbouring no qualms whatsoever that they were its cause. ‘That young slave’s soul is truly a delight to twist.’

‘In case you didn’t notice,’ Osomatsu heaved unheard. ‘We kicked that Titan’s ass. The kid’s not a slave anymore. We got her back, we’re getting them all back!’

‘I will tell you what is going to happen now, Salamander,’ the lieutenant segued smoothly, as though their brief clash and one-sided exchange were necessary pleasantries now complete. ‘You are going to fall back. You will allow us to collect our slaves, including the boy your ally now defends. You will allow us to leave with them.’

‘Like hell,’ Osomatsu growled low at the farcical imitation of negotiation. Shifting his stance, he blocked the base of the stairs.

‘You always were a stubborn fool,’ the lieutenant commented nonchalantly. ‘Again and again, you prove it. But I will give you another chance. For your own sake, I recommend you fall back immediately.’

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu challenged. ‘Give me one good …’

A soul-splitting scream slashed his mind. Gauntlets ripped from his protective guard to clasp his assaulted head, Osomatsu gasped as though the foreign agony burnt through his own body.

‘That did not take long,’ the lieutenant said. Osomatsu numbly noted it was more to their silent companion than to him. But their next comment was meant for no one else.

‘It seems the Liberation Force’s favoured slave is slaughtering his first guardian.’
Finally the Unicorn's introduction arc comes full circle! Hallelujah, praise the lord and pass the peanuts :) Hope so much that you enjoy it, had much of this in mind from all the way back to chapter 10, so it's been stewing and developing for a long time - probably part of why it took so long to finish :) As always, thank you so much for reading, it makes my every day to hear from you, I treasure every view, every like and every comment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The confines of the condemned tower shivered with numbing cold, like the depths of an industrial freezer. Unaffected, Choromatsu moved silently through levels shrouded by boarded windows. Perfectly synchronised with his lens, he followed the most direct path to Todomatsu, swooping him around the five remaining puppets’ projected search patterns. If he could avoid them long enough, he wouldn’t need to shoot … but his lasers would do serious harm if he did. How could he neutralise them without his stunners?

Through quiet apprehension, Choromatsu centred on reaching his brother. Once he stood between Totty and his soulless designer hunters, then he could dissect the crap out of them.

‘How do you shut this thing up?’ Osomatsu’s joking voice intruded his realms of focus. Topic unnamed, his brother’s mind left the distinct imprint of his fussing lens. Choromatsu didn’t have much sympathy. Not for his brother, anyway—what did he expect? He either ignored the glass completely, or checked its advice and ignored it anyway, usually getting himself three-quarters killed in the process. Choromatsu would be on permanent brink of breakdown, too.

Unruffled or not, he needed as few distractions as possible. ‘I’m trying to concentrate,’ Choromatsu murmured, shutting Osomatsu up. ‘Don’t talk to me unless it’s an emergency.’

‘Fine, whatever,’ Osomatsu said, a bit too lightly. Choromatsu took the hint—exactly who was going to overhear a telepathic conversation? He felt a cringe of embarrassment. Untransformed, he would have reddened. But the Wyvern wouldn’t be sidetracked by any shame.

He hadn’t lied—Osomatsu would have known in an instant. The Salamander was better equipped to handle a deluge of monsters, if it came to that. But that wasn’t why Choromatsu had sent his brother in the opposite direction, taking on responsibility for Todomatsu’s soul himself. He might be unexpectedly reliable. But the third born knew if Osomatsu saw anything happen to their baby brother he’d go berserk. That might get them them all killed.

Hovering on his toes, Choromatsu was a shadow flitting between pools of darkness. Ahn bounded just as silently, her shivering paws barely disturbing dust. Halfway up the next flight Choromatsu guardedly surveyed his lens, timing his movements as the slave he skirted followed their predicted pathway. Angling, he poised to fly. Another second, and he’d …

His heartbeat quickened. ‘Ahn, stay back,’ he breathed, the puppet strayed off course. The kitten immediately wedged herself out of sight. Their schematic-defying enemy would emerge from the above corridor at any moment. Hearing their wafting call—“Todomatsu … Where are you …”—
Choromatsu staved off a lone shudder and drew a pistol, banishing uncertainty. There wasn’t time to hide. Totty needed him now.

He had seconds. Slinking up the rest of the flight, Choromatsu slid low across the floor and faded into the wall. He wouldn’t shoot. Even if his lasers didn’t permanently maim the puppet, they would attract the rest in a swarm. This had to be up close and personal.

‘You should avoid close combat, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn voiced fearfully as his glass took mental input and spiralled out options. ‘You are not your brother.’

Choromatsu’s response was flat as a board. ‘Ahn, I’m acutely aware of that fact.’

Heated breath disturbed his element. Osomatsu’s constant warnings to keep his distance multiplying in his ears atop their mentor’s, Choromatsu steeled himself. Taking a last instant to double-check the stalking puppet’s position, the warrior sprang from concealment. He caught the slave with his whiplash momentum, one hand cutting off her screech as he snapped her in a disorienting pivot. The slight girl thrashed against him. Choromatsu gritted his teeth against her strength, enhanced beyond her stature. But not by much. Swiftly, he struck with the handle of his pistol, aiming precisely where his glass lay crosshairs to the side of her jaw. No equation greater for efficiency and safety, Choromatsu severed her strings with unconsciousness.

He’d done it. He’d actually done it. Even expecting to come out on top, Choromatsu was still almost surprised. His heart swelled behind his ribs, achievement ever a drug. But he knew whatever the others said, taking out an unprepared puppet should be a stroll in the park for anyone who claimed they were a hero.

The way ahead clear, Ahn darted to join him and the two sped into the heights of the building. ‘Why are they hunting him?’ Choromatsu asked, quiet fury and fears measured as they evaded the final slave’s searching circuit. Apparently, he was right to use the term “hunt”.

‘I believe we are dealing with a pack,’ Ahn said, fur rippling over Choromatsu’s secure elbow as he leaped the remaining staircases. ‘Individuals with an existing bond are targeted and developed into slaves suited to independent teamwork—particularly the abduction of more slaves. They are designed to rally around a pre-established alpha figure.’

‘That’s probably Atsushi,’ Choromatsu said. He didn’t know his brother’s friends well, but the few times he’d been permitted within the same 100-metre radius he’d seen how Totty gravitated to the man.

‘This alpha answers to the soldier who takes command of the pack, freeing others to liberate more souls.’

‘How exactly are they designer slaves?’ Choromatsu gathered information to later compile. But Ahn wasn’t the Wyvern: she couldn’t focus on in-depth discussion in a crisis.

‘Precisely how it sounds. But this pack appears experimental; it is probably their first attempt,’ she threw out a few fleeting thoughts for him. ‘I believe it unlikely they have applied any specific design to these slaves—besides rendering them immune to your stun setting.’

Choromatsu nodded, every bit as unhappy as Ahn—what if this become a staple feature of all slaves? ‘They hunt Matsuno Todomatsu to complete their pack. While they may operate without him, their energy is only complete as a full unit.’

‘Lord Takuu wants the set,’ Choromatsu murmured with distaste. ‘No chance they’ll cut their losses
Not surprisingly, Ahn’s grave silence was anything but supportive of that half-hearted hope. Landing silently, Choromatsu proceeded to a door among undistinguished doors. ‘Totty?’ Choromatsu cautiously opened a telepathic link. His brother’s fear raked viscerally through the connection. Unprepared, Choromatsu’s thoughts scattered. ‘I-I’m coming in, okay?’

Quick as a shattered vase played in reverse, Choromatsu got himself in order and pushed carefully on the door. A pistol raised in healthy caution, he peered inside. The dark space was empty. ‘Totty? Where …’

His eyes fell on the futon cupboard across. Choromatsu’s lens glowed, putting Totty inside. Crossing the small apartment, he laid one gloved hand to the door. ‘Totty? It’s Choromatsu. Stay quiet, okay?’

Slow and soundless, Choromatsu slid the cupboard open. His strangled sob an explosion, Todomatsu burst out. ‘Totty, for god’s sake!’ Choromatsu exclaimed as the youngest hurled himself at him, clutching him around the waist.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu, you must be quiet!’ Ahn pleaded, clamouring onto the boy’s shoulder to reassure with her warmth, if not her words. ‘The enemy is still out there!'

She sank her claws into his coat, trying to get through to him. Totty buried his face in Choromatsu’s chest, smothering his cries. The third born’s heart compressed. Murmuring soothingly, he rested his cheek on Todomatsu’s sweat-stiffened hair. Deep within his calm, a surging undercurrent of tension released. Totty was safe.

Rubbing his back comfortably, Choromatsu tried to steer him towards the door. But Totty flat-out refused to let him go, feet glued to the spot. As he’d done so many times through their lives, Choromatsu patiently peeled Totty’s clinging fingers away.

‘You’ve done so well, getting away from them,’ he praised, Totty’s lips fighting a fresh whimper. ‘I know you’re scared, but we won’t let anything happen to you.’

‘P-promise?’ Todomatsu timbre quavered high. Choromatsu nodded, conviction sure as sunrise. ‘I promise. I’m with Totty, he’s fine,’ he directed at Osomatsu. His lens put the Salamander deep underground. Noting only two soldiers remained, Choromatsu exhaled more blessed relief. But when he willed his reckless brother be safe it was a lot more than habit—If I wasn’t the Wyvern right now, I’d be a lot more nervous that I’m not there to watch your back.

‘Stay close to me,’ Choromatsu said, casting his lens for a more secure hidey-hole to batton down until Osomatsu finished doing his thing. Immediately Totty edged even closer, one hand locked to his sleeve. Unable to step without tangling in his brother’s ankles, Choromatsu gently pushed him back. ‘Keep behind, okay? We’ll …’

One boot out the door, his senses snapped violently left. But not before the off-route puppet emerged at the top of the stairs. Choromatsu shot backwards, his lens lighting up—it was the alpha. And they’d seen him, they must have—how could he not have seen them coming? Choromatsu washed with dread and gut-wrenching failure. He’d been careless. They were right there, how could he just trust an enemy wouldn’t deviate from his predictions, he was so stupid …

Catching himself and rapidly separating out attention—his lens as it spiralled apology for not stressing the danger, their approaching enemy, Totty’s wide-eyed dismay as Choromatsu hauled him into the far corner, and every last thing he now had to work with—the Wyvern kept his head. With a
whirling sweep of his arms he hurled the room into disarray. Nothing to gain from keeping quiet now, Choromatsu gestured rapidly, floorboards scraping as he propelled abandoned shelves, a table and mouldering couch into an impromptu barricade. Ducking behind it, he pulled Todomatsu down with him.

‘Everything will be fine,’ he emphasised so Totty might believe it. His brother could only moan, curled almost foetal. As Choromatsu peered over their defences, Ahn pressed briefly to his shin, attempting some grounding reassurance of her own.

‘Even if they are strong, this is still a puppet. You have destroyed soldiers on your own, you can defeat them. I believe in you, Matsuno Choromatsu.’

‘Thanks, Ahn,’ Choromatsu murmured. Was it pathetic, that he still craved to hear that from anyone who offered? Don’t worry, he practically heard Osomatsu say, bolstered by his brother’s unshakable confidence. You’ve got this.

‘P-Please,’ Todomatsu choked through tears. ‘D-don’t hurt them, Niisan …’

Footsteps echoed up the corridor. Choromatsu turned his pistols on the open door. A laser to the kneecap would hurt. A lot. But it was better than the alternative.

Suddenly, a deliberate tap of heeled boots punctuated the growing soft tread. Choromatsu’s stomach swirled, checking twice to be sure. His lens swore there was only one. But those were new footsteps. What was …

Choromatsu’s lens scrambled. ‘No, no …’ His information all but severed, the magical analyst hurried to restore it. His lens had never gone on the fritz. Had he tweaked it by accident, stressed out the sensitive tech or … no, the realisation crept cold beneath Choromatsu’s skin. It wasn’t him. Some unknown jammed his tech.

With another mental prod, the interference lessened. But his readouts still blinked with static. Perturbed, Choromatsu had no more time to wonder, attention locked front and centre as the soft footsteps stilled. The doorway framed a familiar young man, his every skerrick of menace born of relentless intent. He’d barely confirmed Atsushi was the pack’s alpha before another strolled into view. Choromatsu’s treacherous airways tightened. To the guardian’s sputtering lens, the newcomer wasn’t even there, totally undetected.

The second young man lounged against the doorframe, a stark contrast to Atsushi’s upright attention. Swathed head to foot in close-fitted military black, the peaked cap on his head tilted with embodied arrogance equalled by the smirk on his sallow face. About his throat looped a skintight band. It was set with one round stone, so black and dense it might have been their entire universe compressed to a single focal point. Short cape whipping behind him, the dark stranger strode inside. ‘Surprise, we’ve found you. Time to come out and play, Wyvern.’

Heart unsteady, Choromatsu knew this was no ordinary slave. Atsushi’s eyes were empty without his soul. But the dark stranger’s were so alive Choromatsu shivered. ‘Can you hide yourself and Totty?’ he asked, telepathic tones low and eyes fixed on the unknown equation.

‘They already know we’re here,’ Ahn whispered. ‘I … I cannot hold a barrier that would affect them.’

‘Wyyyyvvern,’ the dark stranger drawled, curling an index finger to show himself. Choromatsu swallowed through a desert. He had no idea who this man was. But the vibe he projected was chilling. Testing his patience would be the exact opposite of wise.
‘Both of you, stay down.’

‘No, Niisan …’ Todomatsu made a grab for his gakuran. But Choromatsu rose in one fluid motion. One pistol aimed at the dark stranger, he squared the other at Totty’s hijacked friend.

‘I haven’t met a guardian before,’ the young man sank in a sarcastic bow, sweeping out his cape. ‘Such a pleasure.’ The pure cold thrill of his voice put Choromatsu so on edge he teetered over freefall. Straightening his spine, the stranger indicated Atsushi with an irreverent wave. ‘A good find, isn’t he? Born leaders always are.’

The stranger snapped his fingers; Choromatsu felt Totty flinch. Like a dog, Atsushi obediently joined him. Choromatsu’s grip tightened as the dark young man curled a possessive arm around his waist. Blank and staring, puppet Atsushi was entirely unfazed, pulled against the other.

‘He’s hardly the slave I’m looking for,’ the stranger continued, fingering the curve of the other’s jawline like he critiqued a product, prodding for blemishes. ‘But he will lead a strong pack for my master—why don’t you return its final member? He wants to be with his friends.’

The dark stranger grinned when Choromatsu didn’t move, Totty shrinking by his shins. Aim unwavering, he couldn’t fire. Whoever this was, he was warped, twisted into service; Choromatsu couldn’t let himself believe otherwise. He couldn’t destroy him. Not if he could avoid it. ‘He is nothing without them, the boy belongs with his Liberation Force. What, he doesn’t?’

The stranger feigned surprise, slathered with disdain. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be the smart one?’ he jibed. ‘The spectrum guardians’ lonely voice of reason … not that you have a voice,’ he sneered at Choromatsu’s muteness. ‘Come on, let’s have a reaction from the famous Wyvern.’

He planted one hand low on his hip in a blatant “I’m waiting”. Keeping eye contact, Choromatsu angled his chin edgily, questioning gaze past intense. The stranger’s pale lip twitched upward. He had no issues interpreting.

‘Really? Who am I?’ he sighed extravagantly as though Choromatsu let him down. His snide grin said otherwise. Choromatsu didn’t budge, hypervigilant and element at the ready. He had no issues interpreting.

‘Really? Who am I?’ he sighed extravagantly as though Choromatsu let him down. His snide grin said otherwise. Choromatsu didn’t budge, hypervigilant and element at the ready. ‘Honestly, I expected something a little less clichéd from you. But if that’s all it takes to please you …’

His black eyes glittered glib menace.

‘ … let’s find out.’

The stranger pounced. Choromatsu reacted faster than sound, knocking him sideways with a practiced gust. ‘Lasers,’ he set his weaponry no higher, unnamed enemy snapped to his feet in an instant. Choromatsu loosed a flurry, driving him back from the barricade. Dodging, the stranger shot forward like a loosed arrow. Crouching below their barricade, Choromatsu sprayed bolts in defensive sweeps, protecting their small corner. Sharp eye catching movement, he sent a ribbon of attention streaking Atsushi’s way, the alpha slinking forward to reclaim his wayward subordinate. With a whistle of wind and a hard gesture, Choromatsu flipped him across the room.

Enemies coordinating to break his guard, Choromatsu split his focus between the two. Between slinging abandoned chairs and making his enemies skip backwards to avoid the peppering spray at their feet, he salvaged every split second to study. But his lens crackled unreliably, the dark stranger still invisible to its duped sensors. Choromatsu knew he was at a disadvantage. He couldn’t monitor their health, scan for weaknesses, predict movement—he was an analyst blinded! But though his scant nerves hiked, he tried not to overthink the minimal impact—it was minimal, it was—on his reaction time. His glass was a tool, not a crutch. Osomatsu never used his … but Osomatsu’s job
wasn’t picking their enemies apart!

*And that’s not your job now,* he reminded himself. Leaning protectively over his little brother, Choromatsu blasted the floorboards a hair’s breadth from Atsushi’s toes.

‘What’s with all this shooting to miss?’ the stranger called out, not a breath lost to his quickstep through pinging laser fire. ‘No stomach for slave slaughter? I like you, Wyvern, so I’ll—’

Choromatsu adjusted his aim, landing a searing graze to the stranger’s calf without a crosshair to guide him. The stranger faltered, one hand strayed to the hurt. But he already straightened, grimace twisted into a harsh grin. ‘I’ll let you in on a little secret; you should *definitely* be trying to kill me.’

‘What do you intend to do, Matsuno Choromatsu?’ Ahn’s voice was very high. Cuddled close, she was squashed deeper into Todomatsu’s chest with his every cringe at laserfire. It was hardly a dignified position for the proud creature. But she didn’t complain, ears laid flat to her skull with tension.

‘Hold them off,’ Choromatsu replied shortly, skimming tiny whirlwinds through his enemies’ feet to trip them. ‘Until Osomatsu gets here.’

‘Call him now!’ Ahn exclaimed. Choromatsu clenched his jaw. Osomatsu had his own battle. He could manage here. ‘But we don’t know what this slave is capable of—for all we know he’s toying with you! You need help!’ The kitten unintentionally battered Choromatsu’s fragile confidence that he could handle it. But the Wyvern’s sense already won out.

‘Seems I can’t win playing your game,’ the dark stranger announced. Choromatsu’s attempted telepathic link to his brother dissolved, sensing anything but good. ‘That’s no fun. Do you mind if I … bend a few rules?’

With no more warning, he threw himself in Choromatsu’s line of fire. The Wyvern jerked his aim sideways in horror, but not before a dozen rounds drilled into the stranger’s chest. Mouth falling open behind his mask, Choromatsu stared as his enemy slumped forward, panting.

‘Just … great. I just got this uniform,’ he breathed, straightening disjointedly like each vertebrae clicked slowly into place. His buttoned jacket smoked. But it seemed the spectrum guardians weren’t the only ones with tailored armour.

Leering at the stunned Wyvern, the stranger raised one hand and drew a narrow sword—drew it *straight out of his chest.* Choromatsu almost choked before realising there was no gaping wound, no blood—the stranger must use subspace, too. Plain and razorsharp, the wakizashi rippled with concentrated darkness. Eyes fastened to the short blade as the stranger brandished it almost lazily, Choromatsu swallowed hard.

‘This is my game, now. And I want to see you move.’

Crouching and shoving off the burn-riddled floorboards, the dark stranger rocketed at Choromatsu, blade poised to slice. Wreathing his enemy’s rapidly-approaching airspace in a death grip, Choromatsu tried to sweep him off course. But the stranger was ready this time. Coasting low, he swivelled out and sped on, grinning wildly. Dropping a pistol—they were next to useless now—Choromatsu flared one hand and summoned all his breath. Bracing, he shoved outwards. The burst of wind tore through the apartment’s stagnant air. Directly in its path, the dark stranger sprang and corkscrewed; the attack hurtled beneath him, blasting a hole in the wall behind. Powdered plaster adrift and enemy landing low, Choromatsu’s mind raced. The stranger’s eyes burnt cold bonfires, fixated on the guardian as they streaked forward to … fixated on *him.* Not on getting around him.
Choromatsu hated taking the gamble. But the stranger was almost on top of them. Sweeping a foot sideways, he kicked his discarded pistol towards his petrified brother—“I’m not leaving you, use it if you have to”—the Wyvern spun an impeding twister in front of him and leapt the low blockade. As predicted, the stranger changed course, veering away from Totty and his meagre protection to follow. Winds whipping, Choromatsu threw his opponent again. Far from crashing, the stranger twisted and met the wall with the soles of his boots, pushing off hard; Choromatsu barely slid past, blade flicking backwards to nick his sleeve. It sliced with a hiss of black smoke. Darkness tainting the air, nausea squeezed through his stomach.

‘Very nice,’ the stranger appreciated, eyes sliding along Choromatsu’s lithe form as he vaulted, turning gracefully mid-air to avoid the lashing viper of his blade. ‘You’re wasted behind barricades.’

Choromatsu broke away before he was boxed in, every calculated manoeuvre and soaring tumble fighting to put distance between them. But he was hampered by the cramped room, ceiling so low and air far too still. And the dark stranger was fast. Not as fast as him, but so unpredictable and relentless in pursuit. Without his lens to compensate and so far out of his comfort zone, Choromatsu knew he was in trouble—he’d never fought like this before. He was an analyst, not a brawler—useless! Totty’s soul was going to be stolen and it was all his fault …

Choromatsu shook the spiral before it swamped him—he could still do this. But the forced confrontation fast descended from defence into blunt survival. ‘This is fun, isn’t this fun?’ The dark stranger grinned, blade curving from his side to impale Choromatsu’s. Cartwheeling away, Choromatsu’s attention whipped an instant before Totty screamed. The boy struggling and slapping desperately, Atsushi hauled him from behind the up-ended table. Withering that he’d neglected Totty’s cover even an instant, the Wyvern fired. Bolt searing through scant metres between them, it bit deep into the puppet’s hand. Atsushi released his bawling brother with a hiss. Seizing the air around the soulless man, Choromatsu hurled him straight out the door. But in that instant the dark stranger was all over him.

Choromatsu sprang backwards. Unfiltered instinct shooting from his gut into his hands, he caught his opponent’s dive as the wakizashi snaked for his throat.

‘Now, just where did you see this going?’ the stranger asked conversationally, hanging unsupported and entirely unconcerned in mid-air as Choromatsu’s element-contorting arms began to shake. Fighting gravity and draining far too fast, it took all his focus, all his power just to hold him there. ‘You’re much more my style, don’t get me wrong. But you’re not nearly as strong as the Salamander, are you?’ he said, hair and uniform ruffled as Choromatsu wavered, crushed like he hefted a whale dropped from the stratosphere. ‘You’re not as experienced—air doesn’t come easily to you, does it? Tell me honestly, Wyvern. How long can you keep this up?’

‘What are you doing, get back!’ Ahn screamed, leapt atop the barrier.

‘I … can’t,’ he heaved, cemented still as the dark stranger he barely restrained.

‘Choromatsu-niisan!’ Totty wept soundlessly. So afraid, Choromatsu’s head remained totally clear. He couldn’t let his opponent go. He just had to hold him … until Osomatsu …

Choromatsu buckled. In an instant, the dark stranger dropped cat-like, blade slashing down. Stumbling back and throwing his arm up, Choromatsu just caught it on his pistol. The raw screech of magic on metal grated, his entire body jarred. Opponent’s lower face eaten by his grin, he bore down on him heavily as Choromatsu gulped, sweating and straining to hold as sick palpitations shot through him. His oesophagus flexing ominously, he almost vomited.

Tainted by darkness, before he could fully grasp what was happening the stranger disengaged.
Choromatsu staggered backwards, just seeing his enemy slant his blade and lunge. He tried to react. But his reeling brain fired a fraction of a second too slow.

Choromatsu’s mask swallowed his scream as the wakizashi plunged into him. Reversing the blade, the dark stranger opened him from collarbone to waist in a deep diagonal slash.

‘No!’ Todomatsu’s scream clashed with Ahn’s shriek of denial. Choromatsu choked in anguish. Blood bloomed down his gakuran, reinforced fibres cleanly separated and staining red. Seconds dulled and blurred as his muscles locked rigid in shock. He saw through glared film as the dark stranger reached out his fingertips. So lightly, he brushed Choromatsu’s throbbing throat. He shuddered from the caress, the stranger’s touch impossibly hot.

Time finally getting on with its job, his weakened knees caved. Fleeting pressure on his throat, he realised his enemy shoved him down a few seconds after he sprawled on his back.

It’s okay, he thought through haze, throat scraping as his unheard screams died away, starved of stamina to fuel them. I’ll heal. We always heal …

He felt his body struggle to comply, tissues straining to knit. Clawing at his chest, half in agony, half as even then sense urged he apply pressure, Choromatsu’s world dimmed as they just didn’t. Sapped of energy, his floundering arms slapped to the ground. Cold consumed him, plunging through his draining circulatory system. Choromatsu gurgled pathetically, tortured as acid rotted his wound, the dark infection eating outwards.

Todomatsu’s raucous tears barely breached his surface. Choromatsu was dying. He twitched frailly, not wanting Totty to see. He shouldn’t have to … watch his brother die … like this …

His brother …

Body shutting down and barely able to think, Choromatsu reached out a quivering link. ‘O-Osomatsu-n-n-niisan …’

‘I’m coming!’ Osomatsu sounded so far away, even in his mind. ‘Hold on!’

Choromatsu struggled like he smacked his deadened lips, needing to say it as guilt threatened to overwhelm what might be his last thoughts. ‘I-I’m s-sorry … N-Niisan. I-I c-c-couldn’t …’

Mind blanking unhelpfully, he tried again. But he couldn’t sputter any more, rasping and feeling a familiar creep of panic, shallow breath unable to inflate his lungs. So slowly, Choromatsu realised the dark stranger leaned over him, blotting out his greyed surrounds. Some desperate force rallied through his haze, screaming for him to move, that he had to do something!

He knew that—Choromatsu was dying, not dense. He wanted to obey—he couldn’t abandon his brothers like this! Not when they needed him … he really … was needed … But it hurt … he whimpered, the corrosive sting unbearable. And he was so heavy, so … tired. Choromatsu could only gaze glassily as the tainted blade angled to end his suffering.

No! I … h-have … to …

Wresting every last reserve of strength and defiance that remained to him, Choromatsu massed a typhoon in one sluggish heartbeat. The force of the storm slammed the stranger halfway through the wall. Choromatsu barrelled backwards with inertia. Smashing into his rough fortifications, the force of nature blew out as he crumpled amid the debris.

Warmth pressed to his iced cheek—fur?—and Choromatsu felt shaking arms around him. A sob
dribbled with the jostle, wracked by torment. But it mercifully began to die with the rest of him as his enemy’s elated laughter ricocheted through his murky ears. ‘The Wyvern has spunk! I like it!’

‘S-s-stay behind me,’ Choromatsu gulped thickly, as though he could still shield his brother. Totty’s sobbing eyes swam over him as he coughed revoltingly; beneath his mask, he felt blood trickle over his lips.

‘… assist the esteemed lieutenant to collect your pack.’

Pulse slowed to barely life-supporting, Choromatsu processed bits and broken pieces of the scene, streaming by like scenery. ‘Hurts like a bitch, doesn’t it? Don’t worry … much longer.’

As though in response, his eyelids fluttered shut. But a sliver of attention determinedly followed even steps towards him. It took many muddled moments to realise the stranger spoke to Totty. ‘Poor scared little boy …’

Somewhere near his ear, someone … Ahn, it must be Ahn … growled. Suddenly, his cheek lost her soft warmth. Choromatsu wrenched his weighted eyes open as the tiny kitten put herself between her downed warrior and his murderer, spine arched and hissing shrilly. His stomach stabbed with her squeal, kicked brutally aside. ‘Are … y-you okay?’ he asked, shivering.

‘Please!’ Ahn begged unseen. ‘Your brother is coming! Choromatsu, you must hold on!’

Choromatsu tried, god he tried. But he spasmed violently, coherent thought taken out by an alarmed surge of electricity trying to zap basic human functions back to life.

‘Why don’t you put that down and come with me? Give me your soul, Todomatsu. You won’t need to be afraid ever again … cute,’ the stranger’s voice came low and condescending with a sudden barrage of laserfire. Grasping as the thought flitted from reach, Choromatsu knew it was Totty. His little brother tried to hold the stranger off. He tried to save him. Not that it mattered now … But Choromatsu’s withering heart flared. Whatever his ambition, however he shunned or disregarded them. When it was important, Todomatsu always came through.

‘So there is some fight in the weakling. Maybe you won’t be completely useless.’ A cry and a clatter sounded close by, Todomatsu disarmed. Choromatsu more felt than saw the stranger loom over him. But he did see his blade catch the gleam of his own lens. The emerald light played there, sparkling brightly. ‘… more for me? No, I didn’t think so.’

Totty’s pleas for him drowned as his ears roared with white noise. Choromatsu didn’t plead. The fact that he couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t even raise his head, barely diminished that final iota of pride. For the second time in his life, as death bowed in solemn greeting he felt almost at peace. Somehow, the Wyvern remained … composed to the end …

Choromatsu finally lapsed from all realms of consciousness. The last he knew was his world erupting with fire.

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Osomatsu hurled a right hook that would have vaporised a brick wall. The collared slave threw up his arms, just blocking the strike. Slightly surprised by the appearance of the garnet-encrusted warrior, dark glee fast scrawled his face. ‘Get the fuck away from them,’ Osomatsu snarled as the puppet dipped beneath his scorching axe kick, wakizashi licking to pierce his cartilage. Twisting away and abandoning his usual flamethrowers, Osomatsu bellowed fire like a cyclone-filled banner, coiling it around his enemy. The slave caged by flame, Osomatsu lurched straight through them.
Fisting the front of his jacket, he slammed him into a patch of previously-undamaged wall.

One gauntlet locked to the wrist of his blade hand and forearm digging into his windpipe, Osomatsu crushed his flaming weight against the Liberation Force’s so-called favoured slave. Beyond fury, he breathed volcanic temperatures directly in his face, shoulders heaving and the acrid scorch of blistering beneath his gauntlets thick in his nostrils.

‘Easy, firecracker,’ the dark slave taunted through restricted airways. ‘You got me. But it seems the obvious fails to penetrate your thick skull: your Wyvern is in trouble. Maybe you …’

His voice tightened, Osomatsu viciously increasing pressure on his airways. ‘You … should see … to the imminent death issue. You’re setting the room … on fire,’ he panted when the enraged Osomatsu didn’t budge. ‘A bit early for a cremation, isn’t it? The Wyvern still has … a breath or two left in him.’

His very essence on fire, the Salamander roared and lobbed the slave across the ruined apartment. Rolling neatly and picking himself up, he brushed away plaster dust that settled on his uniform. At his total unconcern, Osomatsu’s dangerously-pressured anger valves screamed. Seeing red and about to launch a shattering blow—the stone at his throat didn’t look like other crystals, but the guardian hungered to find out if it smashing it smashed him—Osomatsu forcibly stopped himself. This was a slave—a new brand of deadly, highly articulate slave. But still a person. It was a hard enough conscience hit to destroy aliens, but Osomatsu knew he’d never forgive himself if he stooped to killing a manipulated puppet.

Even if that puppet had killed …

‘Matsuno Osomatsu!’ Ahn screamed. With a jolt, Osomatsu realised why his ears pierced with Totty’s shrieks: his flames licked up the blackened wall, burning dangerously near the low ceiling; far too hot, the entire room was going up. Brutally snapping his priorities in order, he siphoned the fire back to himself and shut off his gauntlets. Casting him a final murderous glare, Osomatsu scorned the slave and rushed to his brother’s side.

‘I’ll leave you to it, then,’ the slave swept his singed cloak and jumped backwards, vanishing without even tearing a portal through space. Osomatsu’s care for new-fangled enemy transportation, however, was at an all-time low.

‘Choromatsu!’ Flinging himself by his fallen brother, Osomatsu dragged his lolling head and shoulders into his arms. ‘No, no, no … god, Choromatsu, please …’

Osomatsu’s helpless gaze twitched between his brother’s ashen face and the horrific wound that carved his torso in two. Raw and ragged, the thickened injury festered with darkness, bubbling and spitting like it drowned Choromatsu’s organs in tar. Dark spindles projected beneath his pasty skin, radiating from the damage. Jerked from mindless oblivion by Osomatsu’s unintentionally-rough handling, Choromatsu twitched and gasped thinly, hoarse choking horrible in their minds. He couldn’t scream anymore, eyes glazed and totally washed of recognition by pain. ‘Choromatsu, it’s okay, man … it’s okay, I know it hurts …’

An irrepressible rush of dread branched sick and slow from Osomatsu’s every pounding pulse. ‘Is he dying?’ he asked the darkness as much as Ahn, or Totty kneeling stricken beside him. His trembling hands tightened on Choromatsu, like his never letting go would anchor him from any evil. ‘God, he is dying, he’s dying … what do we do? What do we do?!’ he screamed, cradling his brother and breaking down as his vision streaked. He buried his burning tears in Choromatsu’s brilliant green hood with a moan. ‘Choromatsu … please, we need you … god, I should never have dragged you into this,’ Osomatsu’s smothered murmuring choked into sudden-onset, intense self-loathing. ‘You
save me god knows how many fucking times, and the one time you need me … I’m so sorry, I’m so fucking sorry …’

‘You didn’t do this, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn said, young voice hollow as Osomatsu heaved with denial. How could this be happening … how could this be happening?! Fuck this shit, he wasn’t about to just fucking sit here and let Choromatsu die!

‘There has … to be something we can do!’ Osomatsu hissed disjointedly, wet glare nailing poor Ahn to the spot. Tears beaded the corners of her nebulous eyes.

‘Such a wound as this may have been treatable with access to Spectrum Alliance facilities, but this infection … I know of only one cure that may …’

‘What?’ Osomatsu interrupted, no time to wait for inbred eloquent phrasing. ‘Just tell me, I will do fucking anything, just tell me it’s something I can do!’

Osomatsu’s heart split as Ahn shook her head forlornly. ‘There is nothing you can do, nothing the Salamander can do. Only …’

Slowly, Ahn’s aching gaze shifted to Todomatsu.

‘Todomatsu!’ Osomatsu’s heart slammed into his ribcage—he was fucking witless, of course Todomatsu! Totty flinched as the eldest wildly snatched his hand, heedless as his gauntlet heated in frenzy. ‘Totty, please, we need the Unicorn! You have to transform, you can save him!’

‘B-But …’ Todomatsu stammered. ‘But I …’

The youngest Matsuno’s eyes were scarlet from prolonged sobbing, face whiter than pre-trodden snow. Frightened gaze pulled unwillingly from Osomatsu’s desperation, he couldn’t stop staring at the grisly remains of Choromatsu’s upper body, tried and tested armour destroyed by a single swipe. ‘Totty, please!’ Osomatsu groaned, the third born convulsing weakly in his arms. He hid his face in Choromatsu’s freezing cheek, he couldn’t deal with this, he couldn’t cope. But he clung desperately to Totty’s stilted words above them.

‘If … if I transform now … w-will I …’

‘There is no more time, Matsuno Todomatsu,’ Ahn said, forced composure finally starting to splinter. ‘It must be your choice to sign a permanent power contract. But if you do not …’

‘It’s okay, man.’ Osomatsu found himself struggling to comfort, wiping icy sweat from Choromatsu’s brow as he gasped haggardly, eyes rolling back in his head. ‘Everything’s fine, you hear? Don’t get me wrong, you’ve looked better, but … I’ve got you, we’ve got you … god, Todomatsu, please!’ he tried not to scream, Totty shaking like storm-tossed leaf as Ahn flicked out his transformation scroll and placed silently it before him. ‘I never wanted you involved, okay? I wanted you safe! I know it’s not my decision, but please … please …’

Pulling Choromatsu’s limp form close, Osomatsu wept helplessly. What was he going to tell everyone—their brothers, their parents? He’d thought that before, he recalled through grief. About himself, how Choromatsu would have to explain how he had expired. He’d had no fucking idea, never imagined he would be the one left behind.

Unable to watch Totty’s agonising hesitation, Osomatsu bargained with whatever deities might take pity and deal with such a cheap fucker. Chancing a peek beneath his eyelids, he just saw his brother’s lips move, perfect fingernails inched to brush his silvered scroll. On its latch, a perfect rosy diamond phased beautifully into existence.
The burnt scene of disaster illuminated with starlight. Osomatsu squinted through the brilliance, heart exploding with hope only to violently stall—how much longer would Choromatsu last? The Unicorn’s gilded transformation, however, seemed mercifully shorter, Todomatsu rushing through. Within seconds, the leader of the spectrum guardians knelt by the blood-splattered Wyvern. Not wasting a moment, Totty cupped one hand to Choromatsu’s blanched cheek. Osomatsu holding him as Ahn shakily instructed, Todomatsu pressed the business end of his sceptre deep within the infected mess. Both Totty and sceptre began to gleam.

‘Carefully, now,’ Ahn said as Todomatsu breathed deep and even, pumping him full of light and encouraging Choromatsu’s failing lungs to keep time. ‘The taint has spread through his body. You must draw it out, just as you drew poison from the Salamander. This spell will take a great deal of power; you must believe you can do it. We know you can.’

‘You can do it, Totty,’ Osomatsu swallowed as his brother nodded bravely, like he needed nothing but their trust. All his tears evaporated with transformation, Todomatsu angled his sceptre and probed delicately, like he searched for some sweet spot. Ten seconds later, triumph flashed through his eyes. Pulled incessantly towards the sceptre, darkness siphoned from the tracks it spread through Choromatsu, black rays retracting. Todomatsu’s smooth brow creased in supreme concentration, the rookie Unicorn somehow weaving powerful spells with only Ahn and his light to guide. Within a minute he’d purged Choromatsu of the gunk. The wound itself was now rife with it. Not quite plasma or gas, it clustered around the intricate head of Totty’s sceptre.

‘Wow …’ Osomatsu whispered as his brother paused, visibly drained. Surveying his work, it took barely a second for the healer to gather himself and plunge back in.

‘Come on,’ Todomatsu murmured, prising toxic tendrils from the gore. Unwilling to relinquish its victim, the darkness glugged sickly, straining to escape his coaxing pull. Todomatsu tightened his grip on his sceptre, tugging harder.

Choromatsu jerked abruptly conscious—and, apparently, he wasn’t happy about it. ‘Hold him still,’ Todomatsu’s breath came harsh, sweating beneath his glow. Osomatsu held their brother tighter as he groaned telepathic garble, body starting to shudder and arch as the Unicorn fought to uproot the tenacious infection. Todomatsu grunted, spare muscles straining and sceptre vibrating hard. Osomatsu watched in amazement as Choromatsu’s body began to mend itself. Encouraged by light, broken seams of slashed organs and skin sluggishly stitched, courtesy of his inbuilt magical boy healing system.

Finally, Totty yanked his sceptre away hard, like it almost fused with their brother’s chest. With a wet slap, the darkness dislodged in one revolting smack. ‘That … is disgusting,’ Osomatsu felt queasy as the glob dissolved into smog. Thick over their heads, Todomatsu swished his sceptre. Light rayed out, piercing and dissolving the airborne taint.

Choromatsu slumped against Osomatsu, the last of his wound sewn over with a light-boosted flourish. ‘Choromatsu?’ The pre-heated Salamander practically felt life-giving warmth flowing back into his brother, the faintest tinge reappeared in his cheeks. But the third born was so completely still. Barely chancing optimism, Osomatsu anxiously sought some sign that was a good thing. ‘Choromatsu? Are you …’

His heart catapulted when the quietest groan nudged his mind. Painfully slowly, Choromatsu’s lashes fluttered apart. ‘N-Niisan …’

‘Choromatsu!’ the eldest shouted. Already subpar, any bedside manner was out the window as he set
upon his barely-revived brother. ‘You’re all right! You’re all right, you’re … It’s okay,’ Osomatsu struggled to moderate his ecstatic almighty relief. ‘Totty patched you up—he’s a smart kid, you know? Just keep still, it’s okay …’

‘Osomatsu-niisan … y-you’re hurting me,’ Choromatsu mumbled, squirming a little trying to escape Osomatsu’s brutal squeeze. Savouring just the sound of his voice, the eldest sniffed and swiped at a fresh onslaught of tears with his gauntlet.

‘Thank you. Totty, thank you, thank you …’ Osomatsu spewed gratitude on repeat. Clearly worn out, Todomatsu smiled.

‘He’s my brother, too,’ he shrugged like it was something anyone could and should do. Then his soft smile descended to devilish. ‘You honestly thought I wouldn’t save him? You are so hurtful, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘That was astounding!’ Ahn’s fawning over her signed and sealed Unicorn was only slightly forced as Osomatsu eased Choromatsu upright—faint and infirm, he was absolutely, incredibly alive. ‘But I’m afraid you are only half done. Even without the taint, Matsuno Choromatsu has suffered serious damage. Once he returns to his own form, the remnants of the injury may potentially be dangerous.’

Osomatsu’s thoughts fell on the bountiful bruises he put up with after his magical self got knocked around too hard. He tensed, imagination more than a twinge overactive—Choromatsu had been practically sawed in half!—and clutched his feebly protesting brother. ‘This will not take the same degree of power, but non-enhanced beings are more complicated to heal than guardians.’

Ahn retreated to the other side of the room—pressing fondly against Choromatsu’s calf on the way—to contact the Spectrum Alliance for advice. The three brothers sat through the minutes, sharing silence and comfort. Choromatsu leaned heavily against the eldest, dropping into a heavy doze.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu,’ Ahn soon returned. ‘I will connect you with the Unicorn expert on call in just a moment. They will guide you through …’

‘Ahn!’ Osomatsu exclaimed. Their tiny mentor walked gingerly, doing all she could to not draw attention to it. But Osomatsu wasn’t fooled. ‘You’re limping, what happened?’

‘A mere scratch,’ Ahn said, excessively lofty as she lifted her little noise in the air. It was a bad move—at the slight rearrangement of posture the kitten quailed. A miniscule mewl wrested from her, Ahn huddled to relieve plainly tender ribs. ‘This is … ’ she breathed, convincing no one, ’… of no concern.’

Osomatsu filled their heads with abuse, almost punching a hole through the floorboards when Totty spilled that Choromatsu’s murder-happy assailant had kicked her—that brainwashed piece of shit! Ahn was microscopic, a kid! What possible threat was she? Controlled or not, Osomatsu growled dangerously. Whoever Lord Takuu’s newest henchman was, he was too big a threat to play off. And Osomatsu had the sneaking suspicion they’d just seen the beginning of him. They had to figure how to tear his soul from Takuu’s clutches, and fast. Before Osomatsu was forced to tear him apart.

Any hopes Ahn had of portraying stoicism trickled away; she mumbled something about they had more important things to worry about. ‘What piece of trash ever said you weren’t important? I’ll turn them inside-out!’ Thoroughly embarrassed by the fuss, the kitten didn’t refuse when a concerned Totty guided her into his lap.

‘You need the practice,’ she said, making out that surrendering her body for healing was more for the fledgling Unicorn’s benefit than her own. Todomatsu readily indulged her, letting Ahn salvage a few points of dignity. The two suffused in his soft gleam and ever-tensed Ahn sagging in relief,
Osomatsu shifted against Choromatsu. The third born was skinny, but right now he was a skinny deadweight. Weighing up insensitivity and getting them all out of that damn cursed apartment block as soon as possible, he shook his brother awake.

‘Hey, Choromatsu? You with us, man?’

‘Mmm,’ Choromatsu mumbled groggily, giving no sign he meant to give consciousness a go any time soon. But with Osomatsu’s persistent prodding he grudgingly peered from sleep, eyes bleary.

‘Choromatsu? Hey, what’s wrong?’ Reflexes as quick as his instinct, Osomatsu stopped his incoherent brother from toppling. Unable to even support himself, Choromatsu’s hands flopped, trying to scoop his fallen pistols towards them. The tiny wisps he conjured barely whisked the ash on the ground. ‘You think you should be armed right now? Not your best idea—Totty, can you grab those?’

Ahn stretching experimentally, Todomatsu tied up his spell—“That feels better? You’re such a good patient, Ahn-chan”—and collected the Wyvern’s elegant pistols.

‘Let’s put these away—come on, man, help me out.’ Osomatsu sidestepped slim aggravation as Choromatsu refused to let the eldest access his sheathing subspace, flailing frailly to seize his weapons. His lens spat data out of control—what had him so agitated?

‘Is it really so hard to guess, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu said shrewdly. ‘It hasn’t been the easiest night for him.’

Osomatsu released a gusty breath, all of his unwarranted irritation stoked by severe emotional upheaval. ‘Well, he’s just going to have to …’

The tiny creak was a gunshot to his stressed senses. Osomatsu whipped his head over his shoulder—but was that for vigilance, the genius Salamander put his back to the one and only entrance—and saw exactly what had Choromatsu so agitated.

The towering shadow stooped in the doorway stared, a snapshot of total surprise. Osomatsu gazed back, just as frozen, like they’d blundered in on each other busy down below. The ceasefire of shock lasted several seconds. As they ticked, three dozen thoughts scrambled through Osomatsu’s head. Enemy of unknown threat, they’d resolved to three by the time he thought maybe he should extract himself from his ailing sibling and get the hell up.

We’re exposed. Make a fireball and blast them to fucking kingdom come.

‘Unicorn,’ the soldier at last uttered. All seven of their beady eyes were rooted to an unmoving Todomatsu. ‘How did you …’

Their enemy slapped an attempt at composure over their masked dismay. ‘So the leader of the spectrum guardians has finally decided to grace us with their presence. I haven’t the ability to defeat you and your allies without a soul to command. Destroy me if you must; I am Sasaguu, and it is my greatest pleasure to perish for my Lord Takuu. But know this: our power only grows. Nothing will deter the Liberation Force from …’

Osomatsu scowled over their spiel. Totty was magical all of two minutes and already the Salamander was demoted to the Unicorn’s ally? Grumbling, but almost feeling a little bad—the grunt was practically surrendering—he called his spark, zeroing in on their black crystal.

But Totty was already on his feet.

Eyes flashing and Osomatsu too astounded to intervene, the Unicorn whipped his sceptre towards
the entrance with a terrible cry. Chains of light burst from its end. Snaking through the short distance, the brilliant links clamped around the flabbergasted soldier’s scrawny arms and boots, dragging them to the ground. With a violent flick, Todomatsu detached and drove his chains’ trailing ends deep into the floorboards, lashing them there.

Clacking heels shaking Osomatsu’s eardrums through the chilling still, Todomatsu strolled menacingly up to their restrained enemy. Stopping directly over them, the Unicorn smacked his sceptre lightly into his palm. ‘So you think you can just take over the Earth, use us to take over the universe? You think you can just fuck with me?’

‘They can’t hear you,’ Osomatsu said, mouth on automatic. ‘And it’s not like they actually …’

Ahn shushed him in near frenzy. ‘We are witnessing spectrum guardian history!’

Osomatsu shut up. Overwhelmed, he was still distantly annoyed. How was it a magical Todomatsu was history making when this was all in a day’s work for … wait, how long was it supposed to take a Unicorn to harness their light weapon again? ‘Oh …’

‘You think you can just fuck with my friends? With my brothers?’

Looking down his nose at the helpless soldier, Todomatsu wielded his sceptre like a sword, viciously tightening their bonds. ‘No one,’ he breathed as they gasped, all silk and milk smooth. Radiating with imminent threat, whatever their apparent self-sacrifice the sweating being began to strain for escape.

‘No one fucks with my brothers but me.’

Todomatsu slammed his boot down hard. With a sick crunch, the crystal embedded in the chained soldier’s chest crushed beneath his heel. Trailing shriek hair-raising, they fell into dust at his feet.

‘I’ll make sure they win,’ Osomatsu just heard his brother whisper, swearing to everything the silvered dust stood for as he shook it off his boots. ‘No matter what.’

Goosebumps prickled along Osomatsu’s arms. There was something about that promise. Maybe the atmosphere kicked it up a notch. But for a moment the eldest looked up at his brother from some distance far below his kneel on floor. For a moment, little Todomatsu had become a giant.

‘Wow,’ Osomatsu recovered first, breaking the ringing silence. ‘Cold as fucking ice. I’d say that’s a solid enough Unicorn unveiling—couldn’t have planned it better ourselves. That surprise the evil warlord enough for you?’ he grinned at Ahn’s ongoing amazement, quite impressed by how ruthless Totty was. And now the wave had crashed through them, Osomatsu wasn’t surprised at all. After all, the Unicorn was two-faced, benevolent healer cum vengeful general. And no one pulled off two-faced like their Todomatsu.

Ahn spoke slowly and clearly, trying to coax Choromatsu to phase back to himself; Totty’s expert was ready to instruct, turning cartwheels in their neck of the universes—that was some show they’d just had the pleasure to witness. But even a disoriented Choromatsu was sharp enough to realise exactly how much this was going to hurt. Osomatsu ached for him—he’d suffered more in the last ten minutes than most lucky bastards endured in a lifetime. ‘I know this is going to suck,’ he tried, foiling the third born’s woozy escape attempts. ‘Believe me, I know …’

It took a while, but eventually the three of them cajoled Choromatsu into phasing. ‘M-My service this hour is … is complete.’ Just barely braced for his scream finally given voice, Osomatsu pulled up his shirts to expose the damage. The eldest held his younger brother fast, fighting to distract while Totty
painstakingly stitched him together a second time. But Choromatsu’s hoodie had soaked crimson in
seconds. No inbuilt regeneration to speed the process, the ugly gash oozed relentlessly, blood
trickling steadily to the floor. He was losing so much … was it too much? Osomatsu almost panicked
when he passed out. But finally Totty was done. Shifting his grip on his sceptre, he released a warm
pulse through Choromatsu on his instructor’s earnest prompt.

‘A restorative spell,’ Ahn explained as Totty blinked tiredly. ‘And it will help with the pain.’

Phasing briefly to himself, Osomatsu shrugged off his coat and pulled his hoodie over his head,
replacing Choromatsu’s upper layers with one that was actually supposed to be red. ‘Don’t expect
any hero worship out of this gig,’ he couldn’t keep his mouth shut as they leapt home, Choromatsu
scooped like a child in his arms. He rambled more for himself than Totty or Ahn, hyped and drained
like he couldn’t believe. ‘I did, and it still pisses me off.’

‘You’ve got the entire Spectrum Alliance at your back,’ Ahn grumbled from Totty’s arms. ‘What
more do you want?’

‘I dunno, a fanclub? A girlfriend? A space girlfriend, that’d be a good start,’ Osomatsu teased as their
tiny mentor spluttered indignation. ‘Is there anyone less furry available? And less of a pretentious
teenage … we’ll save them,’ he promised, sobering when Totty was very quiet. ‘We’ll save your
friends.’

‘ … I know.’

Totty’s flying jumps didn’t carry him nearly as far as Osomatsu’s; the eldest fired his boots and
hovered, waiting for him to catch up. More than downcast, his little brother had spent a huge amount
of energy. But he was stronger than any of them had known. Still, Osomatsu had to wonder if he
could’ve pulled off such a massive healing without any experience. The thought pinned in his mind;
that shit would keep him up at night for days. For the first time, Osomatsu was intensely grateful he’d
gotten the complete shit beaten out of him the week before.

‘Well,’ he managed a shade of his usual grin as they landed a few corners from home. ‘Welcome
aboard, Totty. I guess I owe you now,’ he directed at Choromatsu, draping his unconscious form
over his unenhanced back. ‘What was it, 100 yen?’

‘What!’ Todomatsu squawked. ‘You actually 

bet

I wouldn’t sign? When Choromatsu-niisan was going to die?’

‘Of course not,’ Osomatsu was quick to correct. ‘Obviously we made the bet before that little detail
came into play.’

‘Fuck you, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Totty groused, kicking him hard in the shin. Osomatsu’s grin went
wry, already feeling more normal and grateful for it. But:

‘You were going to sign anyway, weren’t you?’ Osomatsu asked, uncharacteristically hesitant.
Totty’s hot pique morphed into the sweet smile the eldest needed to see.

‘Of course, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘Have you …’ A step away from the front door, it flew open. ‘Osomatsu? What’s wrong, brother?’

Osomatsu stared, his brother haloed by the light of the entrance. What was wrong with him? What
the hell was wrong with Karamatsu? Osomatsu wasn’t the one regenerating half his blood supply
conked out over … he identified by colour, he realised belatedly as Karamatsu rushed to pose
worriedly by Choromatsu. It was too dark to pick their faces reliably. And he was still drunk. Totty
wadded up Choromatsu’s bloodied clothes, trying to stuff them out of sight.

‘I’m fine,’ Osomatsu identified himself shortly, pushing past Karamatsu’s concern. ‘Choromatsu had an accident. He just collapsed, okay?’ he lied through gritted teeth when Karamatsu wouldn’t back off.

‘Like Ichimatsu? He’s not sick too, is he?’ Karamatsu made the leap of logic, aghast.

‘I don’t know, okay? Just help me with him … get those out of here,’ Osomatsu added silently to Totty, hoping Karamatsu was too tipsy to notice the bloodstains. Karamatsu only too eager to aid, they carried Choromatsu upstairs. Tramping back down, Osomatsu saw Jyushimatsu happily passed out under the kotatsu. He smiled a little through Karamatsu’s ceaseless banter—even in drunken stupor the fifth born gave off good vibes. But where …

The eldest’s stomach knotted. Where was Ichimatsu? He wasn’t with Jyushimatsu, he hadn’t been asleep upstairs. ‘Karamatsu, where’s … will you shut up?! Where’s Ichimatsu?’ he demanded.

Karamatsu switched gears at once. ‘That’s what I was going to ask—have you seen him?’

‘You lost him?!’ Osomatsu exploded.

‘I-I just got home,’ Karamatsu said, the barest bit defensive. Digging through his jeans pocket, he pulled out his sunglasses. ‘He was gone when I got here. I’m … I’m sorry, Osomatsu.’

Goddamn it, Ichimatsu! What the hell was he thinking, wandering off again? Osomatsu groaned. All he wanted was lie down beside Choromatsu and sleep forever. ‘Do mum and dad know?’

‘They got back before me,’ Karamatsu said, fiddling with his glasses. Dad had been out for semi-mandatory partying with work colleagues while mum spent the public holiday with friends. ‘They thought Ichimatsu was with us. But after I explained that we’d already brought him home, and … they’re looking,’ he got to the point with Osomatsu’s impatient prompt. ‘Dad’s looking around the neighbourhood. Mum’s gone to the police box to talk to …’

‘Right, fine,’ Osomatsu interrupted, shifting his eyes to Totty. Once a giant, now he looked so small. ‘Are you all right? Ichimatsu will be fine, okay?’ he said when the youngest nodded. ‘Go up to bed.’ For once not challenging a big brother ordering him around like a child, Todomatsu obeyed without a word.

‘Be kind to him, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn said quietly, eyes lingering on Karamatsu as Totty carried her out of sight.

‘Yeah, sure.’ Halfway to the entrance, Osomatsu shimmied into his recovered hoodie. He’d had a few misunderstandings—and a few closer shaves—with local officers over the years. He would give the police box a miss, comb the streets with their father. Wrenching his arm through his sleeve, he almost hit Karamatsu in the face. Osomatsu hadn’t noticed him right behind him. ‘What do you think you’re doing?’

‘You’re looking for Ichimatsu?’ Karamatsu said. ‘I’m coming with you.’

‘Oh no you’re not.’ Osomatsu caught him across the chest with his forearm, steering him backwards to the stairs—what part of “you’ll slow us down” didn’t he get? ‘In case you haven’t noticed, you’re still drunk. Wait here in case he comes back—isn’t that what you’re supposed to be doing already?’ he said a bit harshly, shaking his head as Karamatsu’s features slackened. ‘Seriously, man. I’ve already got to find Ichimatsu. The last thing I need is to be looking after you, too. Choromatsu and Totty had a hard night,’ he added more gently when Karamatsu’s eyes tightened slightly. ‘Look after
them. Okay?"

He shoved his brother lightly up the stairs. Unprepared, Karamatsu stumbled, heels shunted against the first step. Osomatsu’s imposing eye on him, the second born relented. ‘If my brother thinks that’s best.’

Osomatsu rushed back to the entrance, not hanging out in case Karamatsu looked over his shoulder. He couldn’t blame him for this. But it wasn’t like anyone could blame Osomatsu for being frustrated to hell and back, either. Uneasy, he walled off Karamatsu’s feelings for the time being. The second born knew not to take anything he said too seriously. And he’d apologise, Osomatsu made himself swear. He’d get on in quick, before things got weird and strained again. But first he had to find Ichimatsu.

**

Penned in their corrals, a hundred slaves jerked rigidly with the deluge of darkness. It was quite economical, if Lord Takuu’s most trusted paused to consider it. Doubtless an ingenious play on his lord’s part. The power nourished their minions as surely as it carried soldiers through every day and revenge-fuelled night. When their lord displayed his wrath, he only strengthened their army.

The corals were packed to the bursting. Lord Takuu’s trusted had already ordered the hollowing of multiple compounds to house their growing ranks. Once the cannon fodder had been herded out, those that remained in their lord’s presence would only be those that pleased him, subjects that the arcanists enhanced, souls passed from slave keeper to spellworker and returned, held in ready for their soldier masters. These subjects, and the favoured. The potent leader of the Liberation Force’s first pack was a glowing example of the latter. As was the Doll of Darkness.

The trusted lieutenant's slashed maw curled, imaging the young man caged. Lord Takuu vehemently decreed that his blood servant required no more restraint than his collaring. After his most recent atrocities, however, it seemed their lord’s unquestionable stance on the matter may be somewhat different.

Incensed, Lord Takuu’s stripped-bone shoulders heaved once more, hurling pulsating power into the midst of his squashed slaves. Cloak whipping as he spun on his boot heel, he rounded on his human servant, looming menacingly over him. The doll flicked a fleck of ash from his sleeve, only moderately interested in his lord’s anger.

‘I believe I instructed that you weren’t ready for missions. You disobeyed your lord and master.’

‘I did,’ the doll agreed as though the reprimand was highest praise. ‘As I’m sure you can imagine, sitting around in that lump does grow tiring. So I thought I’d tag along. When someone fucked up, I stepped in—it’s not as though the esteemed Lieutenant Souudai could stop me.’

Three of the most trusted lieutenant’s eyes swivelled to take in their fellow lieutenant. They bowed low like they were carved in veneration, flanked by their team of soldiers. For the most part, the mission had been a rousing success. Souudai wouldn’t be punished, not this time. It was well known that the Doll of Darkness answered only to Lord Takuu.

‘It just looked like too much fun,’ the doll concluded with a flourish and a grin. ‘And it was.’

‘That may be,’ Lord Takuu continued, tones creeping low and dangerous. ‘However, you also transported Soldier Sasaguu to the final target’s last known location, well aware the boy was to be temporarily abandoned.’
'They were a fool not to realise the spectrum guardians may still be present,’ the Doll of Darkness shrugged unconcernedly. ‘The Wyvern was as good as dead, the Salamander grieving. I offered Sasaguu a chance to redeem themselves. Should they have expected any more mercy from my lord and master than the guardians, for failing to liberate the boy’s soul?’

‘Furthermore,’ Lord Takuu’s voice rose pitch by pitch toward earth-shaking thunder. ‘When you stepped in, as you describe, not only did you yourself fail to retrieve the boy, but you also failed to destroy the Wyvern.’

‘I as good as,’ the doll said delicately, a smile playing across his pale lips. ‘What can I say? They have more spunk than I expected. And the Salamander …’

‘You have barely power yet to face the Wyvern, let alone the Salamander,’ Lord Takuu seethed, darkness swirling at his savage claw tips as he thrust one in his doll’s face. ‘I specifically instructed that you hadn’t the strength. I said to let your husk rest—you have squandered an unacceptable amount of his energy. That irresponsibility may set back your development weeks.

‘Finally,’ Lord Takuu’s rage grew terrifyingly quiet. The entire chamber shrinking with devotion, utterly seduced by his might and calamitous cause, he rested his claws heavily on the doll’s shoulders. The lord’s trusted signalled a physician to ready healing powders. Irreverent or not, no lasting harm could come to the channel of all their power. ‘The injury you inflicted upon the Wyvern summoned the Unicorn to their side. Now my greatest enemy, the one individual who might unite all five spectrum guardians against the Liberation Force—the one warrior with any hope of defeating me—has returned.’

The ramifications of Lord Takuu’s deadly whisper resounded through the cavernous chamber, mutters rising to angry shouts and even the veined walls pulsing visceral repugnance of the diamond-encrusted warrior. While the lord’s most trusted maintained their neutral mask, even their innards went taut. The Doll of Darkness was the only soul unaffected; he had even the audacity to hide a yawn behind sleekly-gloved fingers.

‘The Unicorn was bound to return sooner or later. This hardly spells the end of your conquest. And I have heard much of the previous Unicorn in rumour,’ the doll added, far too flippant. Lord Takuu’s eyes smouldered behind his carved mask, pits of black fire. ‘This version? Honestly, all those ruffles? They look like a pushover—a pushover with a kink.’

The doll laughed and mimed lassoing the nearest soldier with a chain. Without a roar, without even a word, Lord Takuu backed his doll against the wall just beyond his throne. Complacent, he let himself be pushed. Claws digging into his shoulders, the lord blasted twin craters into the rock directly behind him. The destructive din exploded through the every ears canal and echoed long moments after, the force jolting his blood servant’s very bones. ‘Okay, I get it,’ the Doll of Darkness intoned, shrapnel lacerated his exposed skin and rolling his shoulders loose once Lord Takuu released him. Darkness already oozed to fill the fresh hollows in the rippling chamber wall. ‘I’ve been a very bad doll.’

Calmed with the show of force, Lord Takuu gestured for his most trusted. ‘I did not dismiss you, my doll,’ he uttered when the young man swept a bow and made to vacate the platform. Only thirsting more to serve, the lord’s trusted stepped to join him. ‘Why was it we lost the scry of the boy?’

Already thoroughly investigated, the lieutenant gave their report, spine curved in reverence. ‘It seems there is occasionally interference encountered when scrying the family of the doll … the doll’s husk,’ they said, irritation the tickle of a multi-legged infestation through skin when the doll tsked from his place a step behind his master. ‘I have consulted with our best, and they believe this interference may be due to … your blood servant, whatever his form,’ the lieutenant said. ‘Such close proximity to
your growing powers of the void may distort the use of the same against them. I have assembled a
team to further investigate, particularly given another of your blood servant’s siblings is to become a
slave of such importance. We will not allow our scry on him to become compromised.’

Lord Takuu inclined his head in acknowledgement. ‘I am most displeased, my doll,’ he returned
attention to his disobedient servant, alight on mention of his favourite subject.

‘I’m not sure what gave it away,’ the doll returned. Lord Takuu laughed, as delighted by his
capriciousness as enraged by the Unicorn’s return. He only needed to harness the Doll of Darkness’s
every chaotic ability and render it firmly under his control. And no mind greater than Lord Takuu’s
had revealed itself in all the aeons he’d been shut away. He would find a way.

‘All you are pleases me, bar this disobedience, my doll. But you require more time to grow, to
strengthen. Let the husk rest now. Let him channel our power undisturbed, and do not test yours. Not
until I command it. Then, should the day ever come when I command you personally destroy the
grandurers, you will walk away victorious. You are not unaffected by the Salamander’s attack,’ he
said, brushing his servant’s throat just above the collar. Mostly healed, it remained raw and red from
the garnet warrior’s livid fires. ‘We will have this attended to. But first you must learn: there must be
consequences for any who defy me. You may be my doll. But you are not immune to deserved
punishment.’

‘Really? We’re doing it that way?’ The doll looked between his lord and the lieutenant. They barely
reigned in a twist of pleasure, cementing his spare features at Lord Takuu’s barely-perceptible nod.
He couldn’t let such emotion affect his most solemn purpose. ‘Fine then, if we must. You’re
enjoying this, aren’t you?’ the doll grinned as the lieutenant walked him through the retreating
crowd. Murmuring at the spectacle, they formed a wide ring, encircling the narrow stone pillar.

‘Were you anyone else, my lord would order your skin peeled off layer by layer for such disrespect.’

‘But I’m not anyone else, am I?’

The doll removed his pitch jacket and dress shirt beneath, stepping up onto the tiny outcropping
without a prompt. ‘You know,’ he said, letting his wrists be chained above his head and pale back
exposed as the lieutenant uncoiled his whip. Looping the stock expertly through their claws, they
flogged it against the flagstones. Sparks flying, the air cracked as they fell into practiced rhythm,
ready to serve with all their strength and passion. ‘I think I might actually enjoy this. But I’m sure the
same won’t go for my poor host.’

***

Just … a little further …

Rasping air rapidly down his ravaged throat, Ichimatsu released the telegraph pole he clung to and
shuffled into the narrow street. Teetering and dragging feet snagging, he almost tripped over the lip
of the gutter. But with mammoth effort he remained upright a few more ungainly steps, falling into
the stone wall he aimed for. Ichimatsu panted hard, dazed with the flames of fever stoked through
him. Again. Fuck this, he was too fucking tired for this shit.

Ichimatsu knew tired. Intimately. Tired was a fucking understatement. The moment the iced stone
captured him he crumpled, body refusing to support him an instant longer. He’d recognised where he
was, coming to confused and alone only a few streets from home. But it took a minute to stumble a
metre, he couldn’t keep going like this.

Ichimatsu moaned and cursed as he slipped down the wall. But there was no one here to see how
pathetic he was. So Ichimatsu didn’t struggle against collapse long, backside bumping heavily into cold cement. Anvil-weighted eyelids falling shut, he clunked his head against the wall. He shivered there, chills biting deep. But he had to rest. Just … for a minute …

‘Ichimatsu … Hey, Ichimatsu!’

‘Huh …’ he slurred, almost sobbing into the darkness. He wanted to stay—it’d be better if he stayed. But he could do nothing to prevent it, unwillingly drawn back to shitty reality by the presence crouched before him. The slowly-defining figure went on saying his name—he fucking heard already, would he be groaning like this if he hadn’t?—and annoyingly shaking his shoulder. ‘O-Osomatsu-niisan,’ he finally recognised him and croaked, tongue thick and revolting.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing, little brother?’ Osomatsu’s voice distorted through ears stuffed with cotton. Ichimatsu blinked languidly, brother’s face easing into higher quality. ‘Where’s your coat, it’s freezing. Where the hell have you been?’

Ichimatsu managed a dull “out” that only made Osomatsu’s scowl deepen. The fourth born dropped into stupor as the eldest pulled out his phone. ‘I’ve got him, okay? Yeah he’s …’

Ichimatsu felt the back of Osomatsu’s hand press to his forehead.

‘He’s burning up pretty bad. I don’t know. We can get him to hospital if …’

‘Fuck … off,’ Ichimatsu breathed disjointedly, yanked rudely into more reliable lucidity.

‘Yeah, that’s pretty much what he said. But I’ll take it as a good sign, that he’s actually kinda coherent. Right. Get home, Mum. We’ll see you soon.’

Osomatsu hanging up, Ichimatsu stared back sullenly as his brother eyed him. ‘Can you walk?’

‘I … don’t need your help,’ he uttered, not about to give him another reason to pity him. Osomatsu huffed disbelief. But he didn’t haul Ichimatsu over his back, instead clamping a hand around his bony wrist. Ichimatsu growled as his brother pulled him upright, entire body and throbbing head shrieking at him with the sudden movement. Suddenly, he hated being humoured every bit as much as being coddled.

Ichimatsu suffered being practically dragged, as though Osomatsu had to cart him home himself just to be sure he got there and stayed put. ‘We talked about this,’ he was saying, loud voice nailing through Ichimatsu’s migraine. ‘This needs to stop, you’re worrying mum and dad sick. And you couldn’t have picked a worse night,’ he said, Ichimatsu glaring through the guilt trip. ‘First Totty was in trouble, and then Choromatsu … he …’

Osomatsu broke off. Ichimatsu’s stomach flipped unpleasantly. What happened to Choromatsu?

‘I don’t care if you’re bored or rebelling or what,’ Osomatsu swallowed hard and went on. ‘If you don’t start … what?’ he said, Ichimatsu’s mumble jumbled through his stupid lips.

Almost lulled into it, Ichimatsu’s protective barriers sharpened through his stumbling haze and slammed in place. What was he supposed to say? That the last thing he remembered was moping around, how the sweet white kitten avoided him like he sprayed plague, all the while getting all cosy with Shittymatsu? That he’d woken up with no memory why he was sprawled beside those trash cages? That this wasn’t the first time it had happened?

Ichimatsu squirmed. He couldn’t just snort and dismiss it as “not fucking likely”. Not anymore.
He was already more scared than he’d admit, simultaneously furious with the ongoing inability to classify his disease and slinking unease of what that meant. He was afraid that once he finally had a diagnosis it would be something too hard to hear, too hard to come to terms with … or if he even had much time left to come to terms with it. The first time this happened he’d convinced himself it wasn’t a big deal. Frantic, Ichimatsu struggled to deafen himself to alarm bells yet again—it wasn’t like he’d wound up anywhere dangerous, it wasn’t serious. And what would happen if he told Osomatsu he was losing time? They already dragged him to the hospital constantly. If his family knew the unsettling turn his symptoms had taken, they’d have him fucking admitted—for his own safety, of course. To keep him from wandering off … He already felt like a prisoner without being watched every minute of every fucking day, his safety could shove it!

‘Ichimatsu? I’m listening. Nice and slow, spit it out.’

Suppressed sense whispered he had to speak up eventually. But he was too scared—too scared to admit he was getting sicker and too fucking scared not to. There was no middle ground. No relief. But at the prospect of injections, locked wards and security guards becoming his daily reality, immediate gnawing need kept his trap shut.

‘I … I’m sorry. For … causing you all trouble.’

Osomatsu’s blatant surprise knee-jerked into deep concern, like an apology was a worse symptom than fever. Ichimatsu glowered. He knew he only fucked shit up, before he got sick and a million times over now. That Osomatsu made out he wasn’t even sorry for it … Ichimatsu knew he didn’t mean it. But somehow that made it even worse.

You could hurt him for that … You should, doesn’t he deserve it, the tactless moron …

Too quick to follow, the fourth born twisted from Osomatsu’s grip. Planting his hand to his brother’s face, Ichimatsu drove him into the nearest garden wall. Cracking his skull into stone, he ground deeper, harder until bone splintered, shards burying deep in Osomatsu’s brain …

Ichimatsu gasped, almost falling flat on his face. ‘Come on, stop torturing yourself,’ Osomatsu grumbled, hauling his arm over his shoulder. A cry burst from Ichimatsu before he could stop it. ‘What? What’s wrong?’ the eldest exclaimed.

‘N-nothing,’ Ichimatsu stammered. Swallowing down something thick and slimy with dread, he made an angry excuse. ‘I … I just fucking ache everywhere, okay?’

Already sweating, his skin now drowned. What the fuck had he just thought? And why …

Why was his back stinging?

***

Five of the Matsuno sextuplets slept. Deeply or restlessly. With grunting snores or without a sound. They must count the minutes each day until they escaped into dreams. The moment their eyelids fluttered shut, they were free. Free of the trouble he caused them, however he strove to bestow the exact opposite. Free to forget about him for a few painless hours. Free of him.

Karamatsu moaned. He really was as self-centred as his brothers scorned.

The second born scrubbed his face with his pajama sleeve, sticky with tears. He was being an idiot. Osomatsu had been worried for him, that’s all. He’d been drunk, they were picking Totty up from a cultist attack. And they all knew he had a history with … god, who was he trying to kid? Karamatsu swallowed, throat squeezed tight and burning as tears slid relentlessly down his cheeks. He just
wanted him the hell out of the way. Karamatsu couldn’t be trusted. Not to to take care of their precious youngest. Not to look after Ichimatsu.

It had taken him a long time to bring it up, listening at the kitchen table with Jyushimatsu, roused and subdued, while their parents and Osomatsu convened. Ichimatsu had been medicated and tucked upstairs with an unmoving Choromatsu and an awake, but totally silent Todomatsu. He’d finally spoken as the serious conversation began to wind up, Osomatsu’s jaw cracking as he yawned, plainly exhausted. The last thing Karamatsu wanted was to cause him any more trouble. But Ichimatsu had to come first.

‘I don’t think he’s wandering away on his own,’ he’d smoothed his voice so his rush to get it out sounded only in earnest. ‘He’s too fragile. He knows what acting out does to him, and he never enjoys when we make a fuss. I think he must be raving,’ he’d decided, Jyushimatsu’s eyes as wide as his dismayed smile. ‘He was badly ill last time and tonight, he can’t stop it from happening.’

‘You think?’ Osomatsu’s comment emerged a sneer. Projecting every shred of self-possession he could, Karamatsu staved off his quail. Mum had taken dad’s hand on the tabletop, squeezing in worry.

‘But he’ll never admit that.’

‘He doesn’t have to admit it.’ Osomatsu shut down the topic, saying they’d mention it to Ichimatsu’s doctors. ‘Let them deal with it, that’s their job. Do you have to upset them like that?’ he’d demanded in undertone, yanking Karamatsu close once their parents left the table, shrouded by the diminishing health of their darkest son. ‘We’ve all figured it out already, don’t make it worse.’

Karamatsu moaned again, far too loudly. Scandalised, he squeezed his lips shut and desperately listened for any sign he’d disturbed his brothers. No matter how hard he tried, it wasn’t enough—he wasn’t enough. He only ever made things worse.

He didn’t even think to blame the eldest for acting like it. Anyone would be stressed, sent out in the cold after wayward siblings not once, but twice. But he felt so horribly distant from Osomatsu, the rift between them after the beach somewhat patched, but far from forgotten. And it wasn’t Karamatsu’s fault that Ichimatsu had vanished—how could it be? He hadn’t even been home, Jyushimatsu was the one who …

Really? He was blaming Jyushimatsu? Sweet Jyushimatsu? He was the elder brother, he was supposed to be responsible—god, he’d had to be a drunken mess right when his brothers might actually rely on him …

Karamatsu wrung his dampened pajama sleeves in wrinkled knots. Jyushimatsu was one person he knew actually liked him … Jyushimatsu did still like him, didn’t he?

It was a cruel punch to the gut that left him gasping, just the thought that he might not. Jyushimatsu was his one ray of sunshine left, his last hope that everything might not be as hopeless as he felt. Karamatsu felt like a criminal, that he even occurred to him to doubt him. And if he let that doubt take hold, he knew all his carefully-crafted composure would fall apart. But though he burrowed beneath the warmed futon blanket, face crushed in his pillow, it bubbled incessantly, twisting and wringing through him. He didn’t deserve them, didn’t deserve what he wanted!

Karamatsu clamped his hands to his face, almost smashing his nose. Afraid his wet sniff had ruined Ichimatsu’s fitful sleep, he painstakingly extracted himself from between his ill brother and Todomatsu. Creeping downstairs, he hid himself where no brother would see, had he selfishly roused them. Karamatsu slumped in the freezing living room, meaning to sit with mindless TV until
his miserable mind emptied enough to sleep—it was already Christmas Eve, the time in the corner of the screen informed.

But his thoughts circled nonstop, alighting on every failure, every sad attempt to be better—god, why couldn’t he be better—and hollowing within as he drove the wedge between himself and his precious brothers ever deeper. After 10 minutes of distress he squeezed his fist around his sunglasses and shut off the TV. Needing some other distraction, Karamatsu immediately thought of his guitar. But it was two in the morning; he couldn’t even play on the roof. Instead, he settled on laundry. He didn’t like to burden his mother with favourite items that required separate washing and particular care. The sound of the machine didn’t bother anyone upstairs; he’d washed at night enough to know.

Crouching in the laundry to retrieve his spangled trousers, a flash of green caught his eye. Choromatsu’s hoodie? What was that doing stuffed behind his laundry? Karamatsu reached deeper into the cupboard, pulling it out.

Disbelief rammed through him, like he’d blundered into the middle of a highway. Hands shaking, Karamatsu clutched his brother’s hoodie, knuckles gone white. It was covered in blood.

Chapter End Notes

I kind of finished this just in the nick of time - it's a week or so until NaNoWriMo starts, and I'm planning on attacking an original novel. I've been putting off doing much planning until I finished up this arc, so it's time to go into original overdrive! As such, I will be absent from Magical Osomatsu-san for the month of November, and probably into December too, as it may take a while to get the next chapter flowing once NaNoWriMo is complete.

Now I think about it, as there are usually such long gaps between updating here, you probably wouldn't have even noticed I was gone ... but thought I should mention it, just in case :)  

Also, I'm planning on doing a re-read and checking for typo demons, consistency and any holes I might have dug myself into over the months so I can figure out how to get out of them - that might take a while. Also, need to organise my ridiculous notes document ... so a few more chores I should probably get done before starting chapter 15 - I'm planning another anime special, a New Year's chapter! So hopefully that will come together ... before New Year? Oh well, if it doesn't :)  

So shall see all you lovely people back here soon! Also, if anyone is doing NaNoWriMo, original stuff or lovely-lovely fics, would love to share oomph and support with you. If you'd like to be awesome WriMo buddies with me, send me a message on Tumblr (narwhalsonnets.tumblr.com) and we can exchange usernames :)
Another Year, Another Promise

Chapter Notes

So NaNoWriMi got the best of me this year. On advice of and with support of my awesome sister and mum, I called it quits a little over a week into it - was really stressing me out :( November's never done that to me before, so this more than threw me a bit. Will hopefully get back to that story when the stars are appropriately aligned :) This means, however, that I did indeed spend much of the month picking at this little chapter. Another bit of a staple anime episode for you here, hope you have some fun with it!

As always, love so much to hear your thoughts of these magical boys' adventures and ponderings of what the future might hold for them. Thanks so much for always reading, it means all of the things to me :) Currently got a plan in my head to try to finish an original short story before starting the next chapter here, but, as always, can only see how things turn out :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Osomatsu had been dreaming. It'd been a good one, all his brothers were there—a slight shift from all the menacing apparitions that sidled sideways into his shuteye. But he wasn’t about to complain. At least, not about that. But there was no mistaking that insensitive, near negligible weight daintily balanced atop his—much toned, he pulled off an unconscious gloat—stomach.

‘ … get up? Will you … ’

Weighted and woozy, Osomatsu flat-out refused to open his eyes. But he couldn’t stop his reflexive attempt to string together the syllables that disturbed his sleep—for fuck’s sake! Common sense wasn’t his worst enemy, but right now it was so unwelcome. It should’ve gone without saying, right? With the cataclysmic events of the night before and the late hours he’d held council with his fretful parents, Osomatsu hadn’t counted on guardian business resuming before sunrise.

It was Christmas Eve, he recalled blearily. And it was a Saturday, he never got up this early on Saturdays—hadn’t he earned a decent century’s sleep already? The young guardian illustrated his less-than-impressed opinion of Ahn’s wakeup call, mumbles mutinous through the sludge of creeping consciousness.

‘For someone barely functioning, you’re surprisingly articulate. Come on,’ Ahn urged. When Osomatsu showed no intention of passing for vertical in the near future, she unsheathed the tips of her claws, digging straight through the futon blanket.

‘Ow, come on …’

Ahn ignored him, kneading increasingly-sharp encouragement. Osomatsu stuffed his face in his pillow. Rolling over, his escape attempt sent Ahn tumbling. ‘Watch what you’re doing,’ she exclaimed, scrambling from the narrow blanket canyon separating Osomatsu and a quietly-groaning Choromatsu. ‘I know you’re tired,’ her shrill timbre softened a few shades as Osomatsu moaned like a broken man, misery leaking past his rest-deprived guard. ‘You can go back to sleep soon—you deserve as much as need it.’
'She said it,' Osomatsu murmured, hunching where he lay for a bracing moment and already dreaming of that future rest foretold. ‘I heard her, she promised …’

‘But there’s a few things we must take care of as soon as possible.’

Choromatsu was out of action. Osomatsu didn’t know for how long—how long did it take to recover from being split open and subsequent magical reassembly? Todomatsu was badly shaken. And however he partitioned the fact, Osomatsu’s fortitude bore deep scars. But somehow, little Ahn just kept on pulling her not-insignificant shit together. Weathering only another minute of her coaxing, Osomatsu was soon on his feet. Checking first on Choromatsu—he stirred in fitful sleep, pallor so unwell it was no wonder Karamatsu and their parents were convinced he’d fallen prey to the same nameless sickness as Ichimatsu—Osomatsu stumbled gracelessly into his jumpsuit. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, you’re awake … Where are you going?’

‘Just out for a quick run,’ Osomatsu covered with relative truth, Totty’s slowly-blinking eyes huge through their shadowed world. ‘Did you sleep at all, you look like crap.’

‘Do I really, Osomatsu-niisan? I didn’t realise I was looking in the mirror,’ Todomatsu shot back. But his backtalk was joyless, and the instant Ahn revealed their task the youngest slid from beneath the futon blanket. ‘I’m coming, too. I’m the leader here,’ he said, the statement oddly listless from a youngest sibling exerting long lusted for authority over an eldest. Alert enough to twinge with concern, Osomatsu tried to talk him out of it.

‘Go back to bed. Seriously, kid—you don’t need to put yourself through this.’

‘You don’t decide what I need,’ Totty said, unbuttoning his pajamas. Huffing out aggravation that ebbed to sore sympathy, Osomatsu tossed over his fairy floss jumpsuit from the cupboard. ‘And I’m no more kid than you are.’

If he’d gone the rest of his life without winding up back at that godforsaken apartment block, Osomatsu wouldn’t have complained. So where exactly where they headed? Osomatsu bitched the entire jog, Ahn’s replies waspish and Todomatsu barely acknowledging him at all. He hated being ignored, and somehow it always hurt most from Totty. But though he prickled with his brother’s every failure to respond, Osomatsu kept these gripes quiet. If ever Todomatsu had an excuse to keep to himself, this was it.

The morning nudged arctic, temperature in contest to scrape rock bottom, and the urban suburbs were littered with impromptu wind tunnels, whistling and whipping at the brothers’ jumpsuits every few turns. Internally heated, even Osomatsu had a goosebump or two; he itched to huddle into his fiery form. Ahn pulled them up about two hundred metres from their looming destination. ‘We shouldn’t go nearer in your present forms, anyone might see.’

Eyes sweeping the desolate street, Osomatsu expelled a light snort. There was no one to see. Just the cats that conversed ahead of them, tails raised in friendship. The sight was so natural it packed the punch of an insult—terrible things had happened last night, so nearby. But only metres away life remained obliviously normal. Usually Osomatsu lorded over that fact. In that moment, however, he was rocked to realise he was almost envious.

Osomatsu shook the thought away and ducked out of street view, motioning Todomatsu take a head start. Shielding his eyes from the Unicorn brightness overload, Osomatsu cracked his neck and stretched his weary arms over his head so hard a concerto of joints popped over the almost orchestral assonance of sparkling transformation. Spinning his scroll, Osomatsu added his own inferno sounds to the mix. Toes touching down, the garnet and diamond-encrusted warriors zipped back to the scene of the Liberation Force’s most recent kidnappings.
It was somewhat less intimidating with dawn peeking through the splintered entrance. But Osomatsu kept a protective step ahead of the others, flaming guard raised—personal experience would never let these condemned halls be anything less than threatening. Not wanting to linger any longer than necessary, the eldest led the way straight to the basement. ‘You can wait up here,’ he said when Totty froze at the precipice of the gaping opening to—what other explanation was there?—the Liberation Force’s local spawn point. He was having a hard enough time as it was, Totty didn’t have to force himself to revisit this trauma. ‘We said you didn’t have to …’

Osomatsu almost stumbled over the edge, a quick balancing blast from his gauntlet sparing him as Todomatsu pushed past, beating the Salamander to the earthen stairs. Raising his sceptre, it gathered brilliance in a pulse before radiating to illuminate the entire cavern. Their darkness stolen, the sickly purple incandescence of the walls seemed to diminish, shrinking from the purity. Nervous with the sheer drop, Ahn rode Osomatsu’s shoulder as he descended, the somewhat stilted clack of his brother’s heels a few steps ahead. Evidence of the mass abduction was scattered below: a multitude of handbags, shop bags, hats and accessories whipped free by speed and madness. Inspecting a few paper bags, Todomatsu pounced on a cluster near the base of the stairs—his own?—and began to rip through their contents.

‘You wanted your shopping? That’s why you came?’ Osomatsu scoffed, picking up the abandoned property his brother bypassed. Any follow-up comments dissolved when Totty extracted a few strips of purikura. Sceptre lowering as though to better see—as though it didn’t already shine like day—Todomatsu drank in the tiny photographs. Seven friends captured in shared happiness, he clutched them to his chest. Totty had come for this keepsake. ‘We’ll find them.’ Feeling the insensitive asshole he so often was and not proud of it, Osomatsu repeated yesterday’s promise. A visceral ache for the youngest’s loss ruled his gut.

‘I know,’ Todomatsu gave the same answer, hefting an imposing bundle of bags in his free hand; Osomatsu knew he couldn’t have managed the weight so easily untransformed. He may have come for the photographs. But Totty was still taking his shopping.

The illustrious Unicorn indicating his hands were full, Osomatsu grumbled and gathered up the remaining belongings himself. Back outside and beneath one of Ahn’s repellent barriers, he dumped the evidence nearby. ‘They won’t be able to pin this on me?’ Osomatsu displayed an example hand, fingertips peeking from glove and gauntlet.

‘Whatever investigations your law enforcement may attempt,’ Ahn said confidently, ‘they will find no trace of Matsuno Osomatsu.’

Osomatsu flexed his fingers, hoping she was right. He hadn’t exactly been pleased by the need to stretch out his minor criminal leanings—not that he’d ever stretched them too far. Tampering with an alien crime scene definitely counted as criminal. But this was a dishonest practicality. It wasn’t like the police could help them. By intergalactic mandate—a slightly higher authority than Tokyo police—they had to keep the Liberation Force lair from human discovery. And the guardians couldn’t let any officers near somewhere so dangerous, it was for their own good. What to do with about said dangerous somewhere, however, was somewhat less obvious than dressing up a fake abduction scene.

‘If the Sphinx were here, they could cave it in,’ Ahn said unhappily as the brothers blocked the entrance to the cavern with the flimsy trash available. ‘We can’t be sure they won’t keep using this entry point.’ In the end, Ahn laid a weak, but long-lasting aversion over the yawning hole, just enough to keep anyone from tripping inside. ‘I’ll have to strengthen it often,’ she said, the tiny ball of fluff anxiety epitomised.
'Soon there’ll be the five of us,' Osomatsu tried to cheer them up as Totty buried his face in Ahn’s furry neck. Seeing just how little effect his optimism he had on the despondent pair, the Salamander dimmed. Just one short moment. Then he bounced back—he made himself—faking bright tones until they rang true. ‘We’ll find the Sphinx and the Kraken. Then we’ll be unbeatable. We’ll beat Takuu. We’ll save everyone, you’ll see.’

Far too few hours later—painfully fewer still spent in promised comfortable collapse back on their futon—Osomatsu sat in the ward police station. It was hardly by choice. There was nothing for him there but unpleasant history, lengthy talking to’s by stern officers and the anger of his father, the harsh disappointment of his mother. He practically heard aged reprimands floating through the crowded reception area. They’d nailed the teenaged eldest clean through pride and heart—“Tell us where we went wrong, Osomatsu—for the life of me, I don’t know. We don’t have problems like this from your brothers. Are you happy, that you’re setting such a terrible example for them?”

‘I set a good example,’ Osomatsu mumbled defensively all those years later, rubbing at his nose. ‘I’m saving the world, how’s that not …’

‘What’s that, my sweet Osomatsu?’

‘Nothing, Mum.’

Usually buried in paperwork on Saturdays, dad had cashed in some sympathy points for time off and whisked both his ailing sons to the hospital. The others awake by the time Osomatsu and Totty called out they were home, Dad had soon eased Choromatsu into one taxi while Karamatsu and a steadfastly-cheerful Jyushimatsu wrestled Ichimatsu into another. In that stiff plastic chair, Osomatsu was more uptight than he was used to and loads more than he liked, worrying what any test might reveal of Choromatsu’s magical trauma. He’d wanted to go with him; someone had to “explain” what had happened. But Mum had taken him aside before he could insist. ‘This is going to be so hard for Todomatsu, he needs you.’

Osomatsu toyed with his phone in one hand, ready for dad’s call in case the doctors needed a firsthand account of the “accident”. He’d lost possession of his other hand, held tight by his mother. A downright excessive degree of teenage angst still governed Osomatsu’s actions, especially in public. But he couldn’t bring himself to pull away, even as his palm and the divots between his fingers sweated, gone clammy and disgusting. Mum wore a stoic face. But one of her sons grew ever sicker, and she was petrified the health of another had just collapsed. More, as far as she knew—and she could never know otherwise—Jyushimatsu had been attacked by the cultists, and then Karamatsu on the beach. Now Todomatsu had miraculously escaped being snatched. They waited for him, the youngest no doubt trembling in an interview room as the police recorded his heavily-edited account of his friends’ abduction. ‘My Todomatsu … my boys …’

‘It’s just unlucky, Mum,’ Osomatsu tried unsuccessfully to placate. He wondered how much more difficult keeping their secrets would become as their parents grew more watchful in care and distress —of their sons, only he remained unscathed. On cue, Osomatsu’s knuckles squeezed together, like mum believed letting him go would condemn him to the same strife.

Too late, Mum, he thought sadly. Osomatsu had inherited his fearlessness from his mother, and most his breezy confidence. But as surely as his own, her brave front had begun to fracture.

Totty was interviewed for almost three hours. Osomatsu prevented from sending any telepathic encouragement by Ahn—“Don’t distract him, just look after your mother”—he was dragged to his feet the instant the youngest reappeared. A police officer’s hand rested on Totty’s shoulder, mum frantic as his cheeks glistened with tears.
The others didn't return from hospital until early evening. ‘Choromatsu’s badly anemic, and … what did they say?’ Dad blinked tiredly, trying to remember medical terms as mum clung to his words like she swung over a bottomless pit. ‘It’s like his body’s kicked into overdrive or something, it usually happen after an injury.’

‘Hypermetabolism,’ Jyushimatsu supplied unexpectedly. He provided exuberant comfort to Totty, endeavouring to interest him in games and entertaining with endless chaotic hospital adventures.

‘They think it’s due to stress,’ dad went on. Osomatsu’s supreme tension at last lessened, letting Karamatsu take over his distracted stir of miso soup on the stove. ‘The collapse, the fatigue. He just had a major life change, from one of our NEETs to working so hard, so fast. They don’t think he has what Ichimatsu does,’ he said. Mum sank into a chair at the table, breathing relief long and slow. ‘He’s on some supplements, and he needs rest. I’ll call, try to get him off work …’

‘I’ll do it,’ Osomatsu volunteered swiftly.

‘Thanks, son. And the doctors want to see him in a week, check how he’s doing. You look so tired,’ dad said to Osomatsu later, the two rousing Choromatsu and Ichimatsu to eat and propping them up, hovering nearby to help if required. His hand twitched, almost reaching to brush his eldest’s wan face. ‘I know what I always say about … but you’re working too hard. Look after yourself,’ he instructed, so like a plea Osomatsu stared. ‘Take it easy for a while. I don’t know what we’d do if …’

‘Sure thing, Dad.’ He tried to grin as his father broke off, gruff voice gone croaky. ‘Taking it easy, that’s my specialty. Don’t worry about me, okay?’

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Every single one of them distinctly dateless, the Matsuno sextuplets spent Christmas in their usual way. The one difference was Totoko graced them with her presence instead of viceversa, arriving with her parents and a massive KFC feast in place of their usual gift of fish. ‘Ichimatsu-kun was too sick to visit, and now Choromatsu-kun, too,’ Totoko said, an oddly-playful skip to her step for one lamenting her friends’ poor health. ‘It wouldn’t be any fun without them.’

Too adorable in her woollen winter fins, for tradition’s sake their friend staunchly denied being on a date with any of them and refused to pose for any pictures for the first hour or so. Then, increasingly inebriated with their parents and Jyushimatsu her drinking buddies—for some reason, Karamatsu wasn’t touching the abundant alcohol supplied—Totoko’s care for such principle lapsed, her phone out and keeping time with Totty’s as they captured the holiday. Totoko so joyous, Todomatsu had a hard time keeping up, masking his heartbreak and trying so hard to pretend nothing was wrong.

Through the days leading up to New Year, Osomatsu worked alone. Choromatsu showed little sign of improvement, barely surfacing long enough to eat before being sucked back into recovery mode. And though he took Totty along once or twice when their scrolls burnt—their Unicorn had to start training if he was ever going to lead them against a single soldier, let alone an army—neither his head or his heart were in the fight. Osomatsu gave his patience a gruelling workout, trying to maintain sensitivity. He knew what Todomatsu had been through, what he wouldn’t stop going through until they rescued his friends. But facing down an enemy with that level of apathy was downright dangerous.

‘He needs to pull himself together,’ Osomatsu snapped at Ahn after a close call, the eldest barely getting between Todomatsu and the glinting stinger of a scorpion the size of a garbage truck, its venomous reek three times as bad. ‘Don’t you dare say I’m overreacting.’
‘I wasn’t going to,’ Ahn said levelly as Osomatsu scowled. In his frustrated ears, their mentor was going completely out of her way to make Todomatsu’s excuses. ‘Give him more time, he’s being counselled by Spectrum Alliance experts.’

‘Counselled? What’s that about?’ Osomatsu asked, rubbing at the painful welts beneath his hoodie.

‘Your wellbeing is our primary concern,’ Ahn said in earnest. ‘It’s our duty to assist you in facing the challenges and stress of being a spectrum guardian. Matsuno Chromatsu has spoken with Alliance counsellors several times, once I convinced him it was to his benefit.’

‘You mean when you wouldn’t shut up … why haven’t you told me this before?’ Osomatsu said.

‘Well,’ Ahn turned a touch tentative. ‘Matsuno Osomatsu, you might be temperamental, but you always seem … fine.’

‘I am fine,’ Osomatsu said on automatic. Still, he wasn’t sure how to take this new information—angry, that Ahn again had left him out of the loop? Annoyed? Frightened, even? Was he unwilling to admit that maybe—just maybe—he wasn’t as fine as he claimed? There was that time after the beach when he’d been low, had Ahn just put that down to weary frustration? Should she have offered him this kind of help then … should he have asked for it?

‘Is there anything you need to talk out?’ Ahn asked when Osomatsu was quiet a few seconds—far too long for fine. ‘I can put you in contact with …’

‘Nah, I’m good,’ Osomatsu said carelessly, pretending to be interested in a display of punching bags in an sports shop window as Ahn’s concern expanded alarmingly.

‘If you ever need to talk to someone,’ she said, tiptoeing as though Osomatsu might flare at her. He wished she wouldn’t. But first he had to give her reason not to. ‘You will tell me, won’t you? … Matsuno Osomatsu?’

‘Sure,’ Osomatsu shrugged. Buying the heaviest bag on display, he transformed and lugged it back to the warehouse. Ahn supplied an obscuring barrier without a word.

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He’d not deigned to utter a word for days. Seven flinty eyes fixed on a scry of his soldier as they fell to ashes beneath his glittering nemesis’s heel, Lord Takuu silently seethed.

How had the Unicorn come to be here? How had any of them, the guardians or their stunted tutor? This was a nothing planet—less than nothing! Humans were barely more advanced than the moulds that sucked meaningless existence from the stone of his looming halls. There would be no Alliance delegation already present, and his vast army’s escape had ravaged space itself; Lord Takuu had been more than pleased, all semblance of dimensional stability torn asunder, the gateways impassable. For any but himself and those few in whom he vested the power, travel should be impossible—travel was impossible! The notion he’d been followed there was laughable.

Lord Takuu was not laughing.

Seen enough and conveying so only too clearly, the scryer severed hold on their work, claws lowering and uttering respect as the hateful apparitions of the past dissolved into base atoms and ether. Turning about abruptly, the Supreme Lord of the Liberation Force stalked through his forces, scryers and arcanists at frenzied work to meet their lord’s towering expectations; stimulated by his dark proximity, all they were was ensnared by his might. But even the greatest breakthrough might not temper Lord Takuu’s foul mood now.
He had all but suspended their activity on earth since the Unicorn’s untimely arrival. In all their meticulous planning, not one mind had fathomed a re-emergence of the spectrum guardians. They had not factored their enemy of old into each careful calculation of conquest, not conceived that the Spectrum Alliance might have any influence in the doll’s distant, primitive world. The lord would be a fool not to acknowledge this failure. And Lord Takuu was anything but. It was not until recently, however, that he’d even entertained the notion that this one small oversight might truly matter.

He had hardly been pleased by the Salamander and the Wyvern’s respective arrivals. The garnet and emerald warriors were elemental thorns in his side, impeding his plans, destroying his lesser soldiers. But they’d been an aggravation at best. Lord Takuu had trusted those lieutenants given charge of locating and destroying the pair would do their duty, swiftly and brutally. But they were no nearer to pinpointing the guardians’ whereabouts. And now the diamond warrior had joined them. As such, the spectrum guardians had graduated from troublesome. Now they were an unacceptable risk.

Masked, Lord Takuu anger roiled invisibly. His failed lieutenants had allowed the guardians to assemble through their blatant incompetence; he had ordered every one flogged to the limits of survival. Several had fallen at the post. Snapped limbs unsalvageable, his most trusted had slaughtered them with an efficient slash of claws. Lord Takuu had no use for the weak. Not when he was so close. It was as it had been aeons ago: once again Lord Takuu had everything—he might even have more.

He had an impregnable base of operations, a weak civilisation at his feet crying out to be overrun. He had an enemy crippled in space and time, a desire for power magnified by consuming want of revenge. He had his army, beyond loyal and swollen, magnified with every slave taken. And Lord Takuu had his blood servant. All he needed now was time. And if the spectrum guardians would steal that from him … He gripped hard the depthless opal in his claws. Lord Takuu had not spent an eternity tortured and desecrated only to be foiled once again by these mute, multicoloured fools!

Rage writhing along his claws, Lord Takuu swiftly stoppered his rippling darkness. Everything was just as before; the similarities surpassed ominous, given the disastrous outcome of his last attempt at pandimensional domination. But Lord Takuu was far more patient for his tormented exile. He would not allow the guardians to destroy his supreme focus and resolve. Rather, he must let them spur it. Closely studying scrys of guardian encounters and Lieutenant Souudai’s reports, teams hand-selected by his most trusted maintained detailed profiles of their enemy. The Salamander and the Wyvern, for the most part, resembled their past selves. There were a few differences of note, besides their obvious youth and inexperience: this Salamander was far more impulsive, relying less on technique and more on brazen mettle. It was not inconceivable that this proclivity might see them killed through some fortuitous mistake of their own. Such a gratifying end to the guardian who had begun this infuriating struggle, however, had not yet been Lord Takuu’s pleasure to witness.

The Wyvern, by contrast, remained rational and was admittedly clever—for a Spectrum Alliance fool. But they were unusually insecure for a warrior. This might be exploited easily. Still, Lord Takuu could not discount their unexpected display on that storm-washed beach. Should the Wyvern continue to develop so they easily turned such a force as the unbridled weather against his soldiers, that was something he could not ignore. And, whatever the circumstances, the Wyvern had faced the Doll of Darkness in open combat and lived. Weaker than the Salamander, the rising tempest of wisdom hid disturbing potential.

Should these trends continue, the Liberation Force could predict the Kraken would be selfless and skillful, the Sphinx possessed of stamina without bounds. They could, to some extent, prepare for a future that contained the reviled enemy unit fully assembled. But the Unicorn! A spurt of frustrated darkness surged against his guard; he directed it forcibly into a subject slave as he strode past. This
being was no more akin to the Unicorn of old than Lord Takuu! His new nemesis was dangerously unpredictable, one moment a waif, only to deliver a death strike the next. And to have already developed their fabled weaponry … why in all the dimensions would the Spectrum Alliance risk contracting with a light so cold? It wasn’t their style at all. Lord Takuu didn’t know what to make of it. And little infuriated him more than ignorance.

Even with all their efforts dedicated to uncovering the spectrum guardians’ secrets, they were no nearer to undoing the warriors. And every moment spent funnelling resources into their enemy was stolen from the gathering and refining of his army. Lord Takuu had promised reward unfathomable to any who brought down a guardian. But the chances they would be bested by a lesser soldier were low at best. And he could not risk wasting his strongest on attempted guardian slaughter, particularly now. Cold or not, the arrival of their leader must have rallied confidence in the Salamander and Wyvern the like of which …

Lord Takuu paused. Unnumbered followers imitated him, their many eyes drawn from tasks to worship the formidable sight he made, an imposing lord of shadow. Perhaps, he mused deeply. Perhaps he was going about this the wrong way. As much pleasure as it would bring him, he had no need to destroy the guardians. Not yet. He need only rattle their courage. Hope had no greater enemy than doubt.

The lord cast his eyes upon the reaches of his throne room with independent purpose. One fell on an arcanist spelling nearby; the remainder followed, focussing all his great consideration. The arcanist was one of his best, experimenting on and enhancing this slave since her liberation. The slave had been targeted for her physical strength and dark appeal, mind a malleable mess.

The guardians knew this slave, Lord Takuu recalled. She was one of only two they’d let slip away. … Perhaps it was time to send out one of his strongest, after all.

His brilliance delivered, the unconscious firing of his superior neurons conceiving a perfectly-crafted play against the gem-encrusted knights and the Spectrum Alliance they served. As naturally as he commanded legions, the scheme unfolded and augmented. Lieutenant Souudai was the best choice to act as his mouthpiece; he was an intelligent speaker and had vital experience with the guardians. And there was small chance of subverting the ensorcelled technology of the Spectrum Alliance from so great a distance. But his arts arcane would be more than enough to impart a message.

‘My doll,’ uttered Lord Takuu, turning his perfect stone between his claws. Its reflective depths began to throb and shiver with the dark force that bound servant to master. ‘I have need of you.’

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Neither Choromatsu nor Ichimatsu made it all the way through that year’s Red and White Song Battle; Karamatsu had to rescue Ichimatsu from a steaming face plant into his barely-touched soba. Humming along to a traditional artist’s shamisen, the second born made sure they were comfortable, the middle siblings dozing until temple bells struck on TV, heralding the arrival of the new year. Once the sun rose, the family went all out dressing for their first shrine attendance of the year—all but Ichimatsu. Even Choromatsu struggled into his deep green kimono—mum had industriously sewn her sons’ formal gear in muted shades of their favoured colours. But even with Jyushimatsu’s help—or maybe because of it—Ichimatsu fast grew angry with his weighted clumsiness, unable to manoeuvre into the complicated plum-coloured kimono. It took only one glare for Osomatsu to quit pestering him, and Ichimatsu left the house wrapped in layers of his usual grotty purple, a fresh face mask, and Jyushimatsu’s supportive arm.

Swept along by the streams of shrine and temple goers, Ahn stalked behind them like a sentinel, ears
erect and whiskers attuned for any dark ripple in the festive atmosphere. She’d been on tenterhooks since learning of the biggest celebration in Japan, convinced the Liberation Force would take advantage of the massive turnouts and attempt a mass infection. ‘They’re itching to take over—if they could do that they’d have tried already,’ Osomatsu countered as they joined the throngs queuing at their ward’s largest shrine; lanterns and rooster motifs were strung everywhere he looked. ‘Nothing terrible’s going to happen, all right? Totty, help me out here.’

‘I don’t think they’ll try to abduct anyone.’ When Todomatsu only shrugged, Choromatsu took a turn trying to calm the highly-strung kitten. This was his first non-medical-related venture since his near-death experience; Osomatsu steadied the third born on the broad stone steps. ‘There’s police everywhere. And it’s too crowded. It’s too hard for a soldier to blend in long enough to find their target, let alone infect anyone.’

All with a few coins from their parents and turned loose on the shrine grounds like the children they remained, the brothers crowded around the fortune stall. Ichimatsu drew the worst possible number, his fortune predicting nothing but suffering. ‘Figures,’ he snorted glumly, crunching the paper in his hand. Jyushimatsu tugged it away before he could scrunch it up, knotting it on a paper-bedecked tree to ward off the bad luck. Realising this was a solid opportunity to stock up on much-needed good luck, Osomatsu dug into his own funds, buying a large signal arrow to ward off evil—every little bit helped. He couldn’t choose between a charm for success in his chosen endeavours and good health. They both seemed so suddenly necessary; Osomatsu forked over the coins for both. Not quite a second thought, he threw in a second good health charm with Ichimatsu in mind. He saw Choromatsu and Todomatsu tuck a few charms in their pockets, too, Karamatsu with an eye for the more lurid zodiac rooster tokens.

Lined up before the shrine, Osomatsu found himself wondering what to pray for. His go-to prayer was to win big at pachinko—basically to get filthy rich in whatever way required the least effort. Prayers for girlfriends were right up there, too. But his priorities had been majorly shaken up, far more important things at the forefront of his mind. He wanted to save the earth, all the universes he fought to protect. He wanted to survive. He wanted his brothers to survive.

Good thing he had plenty of coins. This was no time to be cheap.

Osomatsu threw a heavy fistful of change chattering into the offertory box and rang the bell. Bowing deeply once, then twice, the eldest Matsuno made his wishes in the deep recesses of his heart and clapped twice, bowing a final time.

‘Osomatsu, what’s wrong?’ Karamatsu asked quietly from behind him as he faltered, about to vacate so the second born could make his prayers. Aware he was holding up the line and not really caring, he wondered if he was pushing his luck—the deities had a lot of prayers to sieve through. But Osomatsu still dug around in his pockets for anything more to offer. Empty of coins, his fingers closed around a few tiny nuggets of gold slipped from his most recent bundle of treasure. Barely hesitating, he scattered the intergalactic offering into the box for good measure—or was it a celestial bribe? Whatever, so long as it got their attention. Gold bouncing through openings in the box, he prayed again, as fervent a wish he’d ever made: Keep Karamatsu, Ichimatsu, and Jyushimatsu out of this. Keep them safe. Please, he added, deciding politeness would score him a few much-needed extra points.

‘Ichimatsu,’ Osomatsu dropped beside the fourth born once they’d all made their prayers. Ichimatsu flushed furiously dark, slumped in the seat a pregnant woman had offered when she saw his trembling collapse, Jyushimatsu supporting him to the vacated bench. ‘I got you this.’ Osomatsu placed a good health charm in his lap, golden thread alive in the sparkling morning.
'Niisan, me too!' Jyushimatsu exclaimed, throwing another charm Ichimatsu’s way; flicking out his hand, Osomatsu caught it before it landed in the dirt. Karamatsu laughed stridently, pulling a third charm from his pocket. Soon Ichimatsu’s lap was crowded with seven amulets for good health. Somehow he pulled off an even darker flush. Jerking his face away, he refused to look at any of his family surrounding him, supporting him. But Osomatsu saw his deep humiliation was shot with a few shy, shining strands of thanks.

‘You bought something too,’ Choromatsu noted Ichimatsu clutching an unseen amulet tight in his fist, its cord looped securely around his finger. ‘Show us, Ichimatsu.’

He didn’t want to, hunching deep and stuffing his hand in his pocket. But with Osomatsu’s expert annoying and their mother’s gentle wheedling as she rubbed his shoulders, Ichimatsu slowly raised and opened his fist. Dangling there, slightly buffeted in the breeze, was a charm for deliverance from evil.

The remainder of the first day of the New Year passed without anything remotely alien-like occurring. The second day passed just as uneventfully. ‘First you’re panicking there’s going to be all these attacks, and now you’re freaking out that there’s not,’ Osomatsu teased lazily on the morning of the final day of New Year, poking Ahn with one of Ichimatsu’s reed cat toys. Batting it away, Ahn fixed him with a hard stare.

‘You don’t find it unusual that enemy activity has ceased without warning?’

Osomatsu shrugged where he sprawled. Sure, it was weird. Their scrolls hadn’t gone three days without burning since … ever. But Osomatsu was more grateful than weirded out, and with Totty barely making eye contact and Choromatsu still too occupied with healing to waste energy being paranoid, Ahn was alone in her worry.

Enjoying the unexpected time off, Osomatsu needed a moment to process when the brothers’ plans to round off the holiday by seeing a light up were met with parental intervention: Ichimatsu wasn’t allowed to go. Not “it’s better that you don’t” or “why don’t you stay home and rest”. He wasn’t allowed. ‘What?!’ Ichimatsu exclaimed hoarsely. Their parents tag-teamed his anger, saying they’d had serious discussions with his doctors. And with his habit of getting confused when his fevers spiked and wandering off, he could no longer leave the house without supervision.

‘Our supervision,’ dad amended when Karamatsu swooped in an attempted rescue, trying to convince their parents that with all five of them keeping an eye on him nothing could happen.

‘I’m … an adult,’ Ichimatsu fumed, so furious he could barely spit the words out. Legs vibrating hard—they barely supported his horribly-diminished weight—Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu guided him into a chair at the table. The fourth born aghast at the ever-increasing obstructions to his freedom, Osomatsu couldn’t ease that now-familiar creep of dread. Ichimatsu’s anger thinly coated a worsening infection of helplessness. Too much experience in exactly how shit helplessness felt, Osomatsu made to ruffle his brother’s hair, scratching how he sometimes liked. Ichimatsu wrenched away violently, almost overturning his chair. ‘Don’t … touch me! Don’t …’

‘Yes, you’re an adult. But you live under our roof,’ dad said with extra force, gripping Ichimatsu’s wrist on the table. He easily held on when Ichimatsu struggled to pull away. ‘You’re still our child. And we need to do what’s best for you. We expect all of your help,’ he added, gaze lifting to settle in turn on each of his subdued sons. ‘You can take him to the hospital—at least two of you—and to the bath house. That’s it.’

When Ichimatsu refused to relinquish his keys, Osomatsu reluctantly re-directed their father’s instruction to Jyushimatsu. It wasn’t fair to put this on the fifth born. But Ichimatsu could hold a
heavy grudge; only Jyushimatsu was relatively immune. And it wasn’t like any of this was fair. But if this kept him safe ... The brothers watched without a word against it as Jyushimatsu clamped Ichimatsu’s weak flails in a restraining hug, plucking keys from his track pants pocket.

‘I’m sorry you can’t come,’ Choromatsu said very quietly a few minutes later, the five of them readied to leave. Osomatsu elbowed Karamatsu hard in the ribs, shutting the other up before he voiced his own flowery regret.

‘We’ll take photos for you! Okay, Ichimatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu shouted from the entrance, jumping into his winter slippers.

‘Tch,’ Ichimatsu’s apparent indifference was muffled, face buried in his arms and shaking shoulders betraying him. ‘Who wants to go … to a stupid light up anyway?’

Half the city, apparently. About that many were squashed onto the subway. The five alighted at Akasaka, threading their way to the park and the famous Starlight Gardens. Totty noticeably twitchy amid the thick crowds, Karamatsu wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Renewed moments after being shrugged off, Todomatsu unexpectedly burrowed into the second born’s offered comfort.

‘WOW!’ Jyushimatsu’s cried out, barrelling ahead and clearing a path for the rest of them, skidding to an exuberant halt as the gardens came into glittering view. ‘Niisan, look at that! Wow, it’s pretty, wow wow wow …’

The fifth born’s overwhelmed delight was barely contained by his entire dynamic body. An ocean of blue and white light swept across the expanse of the park. Every winter-stripped tree was strung so full of tiny bulbs not a centimetre failed to twinkle, and the Midtown Tower beyond shone up and down, a virtual pillar of light.

Osomatsu found himself sighing, immersed in the brilliant glowing landscape as they leisurely strolled the winding paths. They’d come a few times as children, but it had to have been almost ten years since they’d been to a light up. Together, at least—Osomatsu suspected Totty had been a few times with friends. Feeling a little guilty, applying the term “together” when Ichimatsu’s absence hung over them, negativity had a hard time holding sway when he wandered a galaxy descended to earth. Jyushimatsu gambolling with wide-eyed wonder, Osomatsu kept close to Choromatsu, ready to support if he ran into trouble. ‘I’m fine,’ he said, everlasting frown tweaked in a little soft peace as Choromatsu sank, lost in the light gardens.

‘Ahn, come out,’ Osomatsu encouraged the tiny bump in his hoodie pocket. ‘It’s pretty, you’ll like it. There’s a lot of people, but no one’s going to step on you—why don’t you ride on my shoulder? I won’t tease you, I promise. Bet you don’t have anything like this back at the Spectrum Alliance …’

‘Can’t you tell I’m working?’ Ahn snapped. Osomatsu felt her twitch in irritation. ‘No,’ he returned easily, all his temper mellowed. ‘Who works at a light up? Why’d you bother coming, if you’re not even going to …’

Osomatsu’s gut plummeted. Choromatsu almost lost his footing. Totty actually gasped, prompting a tirade of concern from Karamatsu. These were all perfectly understandable reactions, given Ahn had just uttered a curse so foul, until that moment they’d been convinced her sweet, proper little mind was incapable of producing it.

‘Ahn, what is it? What’s wrong?’ demanded Osomatsu.

‘I was advised not to say anything,’ Ahn spoke very quickly, any embarrassment that she’d stooped to something so coarse as swearing swept away with the need to inform, and fast. ‘Not until we were
sure what was going on. Spectrum Alliance technology was infiltrated several of your days ago,’ she revealed the true cause of her recent excess anxiety. ‘A brutish attempt, arcane in nature. Our experts were quick to isolate the issue and shift the linchpins of our security ciphers. But the Alliance did not believe the breach was an attempt to obtain information, or even to disrupt our systems. So they kept the channel of infiltration open to examine. It was broken into thousands of segments, but … Lord Takuu had his arcaniests send a message. It’s for you.’ Ahn’s nose poked from Osomatsu’s hoodie in a trembling Todomatsu’s direction.

‘What does it say?’ Osomatsu asked, heart squeezed behind tightened ribs. So tense, Ahn didn’t even think to reprimand—of course she was getting to that.

‘To the Unicorn, pure paladin of liberation, signed and sealed leader of the spectrum guardians,’ Ahn recited, striving to steady every shaking syllable. ‘It is my wish that we speak. I have sent an envoy to meet with you. They will wait atop this city’s tallest tower until 2300 hours on the third day of your celebrations. The Salamander and Wyvern are encouraged to join you. Know I have instructed my envoy not to attack you, or to liberate any slaves. Should you refuse to attend, however, these instructions will be revoked and a fresh directive issued. I look forward to discussing our future together through my envoy,’ Ahn finished with a gulp. ‘Signed Takuu, Supreme Lord of the Liberation Force.’

‘That …’ Osomatsu gaped, the wonderland of light no longer so wondrous. ‘That’s a trap, it has to be!’

‘But if I don’t go …’ Totty whispered, twin grip locked to a concerned, but oblivious Karamatsu’s outer coat. ‘He said he would … what’s he going to … Choromatsu-niisan!’ he exclaimed aloud. Choromatsu wheezed hard, doubled over and windpipe constricted. His bulging eyes glassed with sudden, intense panic.

‘Choromatsu!’ No ominous invitation to muddy his reaction time, Karamatsu moved the fastest. ‘Brother, it’s okay,’ he spoke slowly and clearly, stroking his back as Choromatsu heaved shallowly, throat rattleing down all the air he could cling to. ‘Listen to me. Just breathe … nice and slow … that’s it,’ he encouraged as Choromatsu gasped a little more to tickle his lungs. ‘You can do it, you’re doing great. It’s all right … just breathe easy … Osomatsu, should we go?’ Karamatsu said once Choromatsu regained rudimentary control of his lungs. He handled it like a pro, but the second born was plainly shaken. Spluttering and choking on tea, sure. But Osomatsu didn’t think Karamatsu had ever seen the third born in trouble like this. ‘We should get him home, if he’s … what upset him? I don’t …’

‘Choromatsu-niisan?!” Jyushimatsu noticed his plight and capered back through illumination. Moving reflexively, Osomatsu and Todomatsu kept Jyushimatsu’s concern from smothering the third born. ‘But you’re doing so much better! What’s wrong, Niisan?!”

‘Don’t worry, buddy, he’ll be fine. Sure, let’s go,’ Osomatsu said distractedly, letting Karamatsu herd them to the station. Fumbling in his pocket amid the deep press of bodies, he flipped out his phone. It was a little after eight. They had three hours …

‘He’s gotta mean the Skytree,’ he said later in the bathhouse. ‘What’s he trying to do, trick us into a ceasefire and get rid of Totty before the Unicorn can piss him off? That piece of shit …’

‘That is a possibility,’ Ahn said, somewhere out of sight. Osomatsu bet she was prowling the bathhouse perimeter, a bundle of furry nerves. He wasn’t doing much better—they’d be completely exposed up there! And it wasn’t exactly a simple matter of retreating if things went south. There’d be a few hundred metres directly down to deal with first. Something told Osomatsu even a guardian wouldn’t walk away from that kind of fall.
'So how's this going to work, are we doing this?'

'I'm sure he will listen to your counsel,' Ahn said quietly. 'But it’s Matsuno Todomatsu’s decision.'

'I-I have to,' Totty’s said. His mental tones quavered high—god, this was so unfair! How could they just expect him to confront Takuu like this—his envoy, anyway—after barely a week in the job? 'He’ll do something awful if I don’t. And he said he just wants to talk …'

'You don’t know these guys like we do,' Osomatsu cut across. 'They always talk—at great length, whether you want them to or not …'

'I can’t imagine what that’s like.' From where he rested in hot water, Choromatsu’s telepathy was a dry rasp, breathing mostly evened.

'... but they always attack, too. If you're going, I’m going with you. But Choromatsu …'

'I … I’m coming. I, ah … I know I broke down,' Choromatsu’s stammers descended into mumbles when Osomatsu pointed out he hadn’t fully recovered. Dizzy and ashamed—what in hell did he have to be ashamed about?—under Karamatsu’s attentive care through the journey home, Choromatsu fought to meet Osomatsu’s eyes through the condensation. ‘But I … what if you need … I can do this, you know I can. Don’t … don’t make me sit this out.’

Osomatsu spent the rest of his soak trying to convince him to do just that without splintering Choromatsu’s fragile pride. He didn’t like the idea of facing any Liberation Force representative without the Wyvern as back up, but that was a serious attack he’d just pushed through. It wasn’t like Osomatsu expected his brother to be unaffected by all he’d been through—of course he was scared to fight again. But that Choromatsu reacted that badly to only the mention of their enemy was not a good sign. ‘I don’t think you’re up to it, it’s not a good idea.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, I … Todomatsu.’ Towelling off, Choromatsu turned desperately to their new leader for his verdict. Osomatsu was luridly pissed when Totty straightaway descended into pleas just as desperate—“Please come with me, don’t leave me, Niisan!” How could he blame the youngest? The kid needed all the support he could get. But shit. This was already a mess.

Back at home, Osomatsu soon yawned and announced he was going to bed early, ‘I’ve got work tomorrow.’ As hoped, this had their parents encouraging the others to do the same. Their three non-magical brothers in varying states of sleep soon after ten, the three magical Matsunos crept from the house and transformed the safety of a few streets away. Soon they bounded over skyscrapers, approaching the Sumida ward and its iconic Skytree.

Standing on the edge of the Skytree East Tower, the trio stared up at all 634 metres of the tallest tower in the world. ‘We have to climb that?’ Todomatsu gulped, even his effervescent Unicorn sensibilities unable to quash that natural fear. Compartmentalising the same trepidation—they were magical boys, damn it; they could handle a little height—Osomatsu checked the time in his lens. Ten thirty.

Sweeping the surrounding air into supportive currents and spiralling them around the massive steel structure, Choromatsu jumped first, riding his updrafts in a sail beyond graceful. ‘He’s practically flying,’ Todomatsu said quietly, watching the speck of their brother weightlessly ascend.

‘I’m in position,’ Choromatsu reported a few minutes later, anchored somewhere unseen on the antennae tower. ‘They’re not here yet.’

‘They not even there?’ Osomatsu exclaimed. Rude—didn’t waiting until 2300 entail showing up
beforehand? ‘I say we’re setting the meeting place, then.’ The eldest buckled on confidence like a worn piece of armour that had saved him countless times. ‘How about on top of the second observation deck? Watch your fucking step,’ he instructed Totty forcefully. ‘And stay right by me. And you stay in there,’ he directed at Ahn, huddled in his battle hoodie.

‘Nothing in the Alliance could convince me to come out,’ Ahn breathed, petrified. Pushing away the sudden thought that bringing their mentor had been a very bad idea, Osomatsu gave her a reassuring pat through the steel-hard stitching of his hoodie.

‘Ready, oh mighty Unicorn?’

Todomatsu gulped again. But he nodded, sparkling features set and full of trust: his brother would see him scale this challenge. Fierce protectiveness surged through Osomatsu in response. What exactly did the Unicorn bring to the team, he wondered. The Salamander was powerful, the Wyvern composed. ‘Weren’t you listening when we recruited him? The Unicorn inspires,’ Ahn filled in as the brothers backed up, rooftop an open runway before them. ‘They inspire loyalty, enrich their allies with the same desire to strive for justice that drives them.’

Osomatsu groaned. ‘You mean he’s making me want to protect him more?’

‘It’s a useful trait for any leader,’ Ahn agreed tightly, braced for the jump. Osomatsu huffed. That was it? But they were brothers, he already wanted to protect him.

‘It’s a good thing you’re a mean healer. Let’s go.’

Not giving doubt a second chance to shake him, Osomatsu pelted for the edge of the building. Arms pumping and Totty in his powerful slipstream, he shoved every iota of his hard strength into his leg muscles and launched cleanly over the stretch of empty air that separated the East Tower and the Skytree. Soaring high and fast, Osomatsu realised with a jolt he’d slightly misjudged, massive arc already reached its peak. But his worry ebbed as fast as it rose—he crashed heavily into the tower’s latticed exterior only twenty metres lower than he’d aimed. A light thump told him Todomatsu landed just below.

Digging his boots into the gaps, Ahn wailed from within his hoodie. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve got this,’ Osomatsu murmured. Hanging off the edge of the tower, he craned his neck. His lens dashed off overlaying schematics, advising of the safest and fastest routes upward. God, it was way too high to fall if they fucked this up. Why couldn’t they have just used the elevator? Unwelcome anxiety pounded through Osomatsu’s nerves. Staunchly, he sat on it. ‘Follow me, come on.’

Mostly following his lens’ advice, the crimson warrior led his brother in white and rose in a slowly-rising twist around the tower, never jumping too high or too far from the lattice. ‘Get ahead of me,’ Osomatsu said tensely, waiting for Totty to scramble a few metres higher. ‘I can’t catch you if you’re trailing behind.’

‘I can see you,’ Choromatsu said from somewhere overhead. Osomatsu felt the dangerous winds of altitude lessen, encircling them protectively. Both the Salamander and the Unicorn far calmer in the formless harnesses the Wyvern provided, they finished their ascent swiftly, flitting shadows against the soft violet illumination nothing but a trick of the eye to any reveller enjoying New Year’s end below.

The instant their boots touched level footing, some 450 metres in the air, the night unfolded bare steps away. ‘Shit!’ Osomatsu flung out a gauntlet, shielding his brother. Without even a slash of claws across reality, two soldiers stepped from the portal, cloaks billowing and a compliant slave in their wake. In a flash, Osomatsu ignited.
‘Hold, Salamander.’ The lieutenant from the beach—god, this bastard again?—raised a razor claw in pointed reminder: to date, none of the guardians’ power had succeeded in breaking their dark defences.

‘Don’t do anything, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu whispered, stepping to stand beside him.

‘Down, firecracker. Not a bright spark, are you?’

A pale young man joined the soldiers, dark eyes dancing. Osomatsu’s spine stiffened. The military finery, the mocking drawl. There was no mistake, and he felt it the instant Choromatsu recognised him. His brother’s raw terror raked the eldest’s insides, leaving him bloody. That murderous puppet bastard, how dare he …

‘The spectrum guardians’ attack animal grows more civilised every time we meet,’ the lieutenant noted as, shaking with rage, Osomatsu dosed himself. ‘Though it seems your primary custody has passed to the Unicorn. How is our friend the Wyvern?’

‘Yes, how is the Wyvern?’ the puppet feigned innocent curiosity. A growl rumbled low in Osomatsu’s throat. Before he even realised he moved, the Salamander coiled to spring.

‘No!’ Todomatsu and Choromatsu’s twin exclamations clashed in his mind. The Unicorn placed a restraining hand on Osomatsu’s elbow. Tokyo sprawling half a kilometre below without a guardrail and the enemy five metres away, Todomatsu barely trembled.

‘Please … don’t …’ Ahn whispered. Remembering she was lodged in his hoodie for so-called safety, the Salamander let loose a fluid trail of curses—if he’d charged in, he could have killed her! Tail low and trying not to pay attention to just how high they were, tiny Ahn sneaked from concealment up onto Totty’s shoulder.

‘A wise decision,’ the lieutenant said as Osomatsu courted nuclear meltdown. Savagely controlling himself, the Salamander kept his molten gaze locked on the dark puppet. “Peaceful” talks or not, if he so much as sneezed Osomatsu would pin the dangerous youth flat on his back.

‘So the mighty Unicorn has arrived.’ The lieutenant and his fellow soldier inclined their heads, long necks curved. The puppet bowed deeply with a sarcastic twirl of his arms.

‘They think we owe them any respect? Don’t look away for a second,’ muttered Osomatsu, gauntlets locked in unyielding guard and refusing to bow. Todomatsu offered the slightest bend of his spine in return, never lowering his eyes from the lieutenant’s.

‘My Lord Takuu sends his most cordial greetings …’

‘I bet he does,’ Osomatsu sneered unheard.

‘… and congratulates you on rising to such an elevated position as his adversary. I am Lieutenant Souudai,’ they named themselves for the first time, two eyes swivelling in brief search for Choromatsu’s hidden perch. ‘My Lord Takuu sends me in his stead due to the … rapport I have developed with your Salamander and Wyvern—I will assume you considered the possibility this meeting may be an ambush, and the Wyvern roosts nearby in watch. It seems all guardians are not as asinine as the Salamander would have us believe. As indicated in my lord’s message, however,’ Souudai continued as Osomatsu glowered, the lesser-ranked soldier—he could tell by the scrawnier arms—a silent presence on their left. The dark puppet stood back a casual step, elbow resting idly on the silent slave’s shoulder.

Wait, wasn’t that … with a nasty scrape of surprise, Osomatsu recognised her. It was the women
they’d been forced to abandon on the beach. In a foaming torrent, his catastrophic failures of that night collided with his confidence, leaving the Salamander to flounder.

‘We do not intend to challenge you to any pointless displays of power this night. Our only purpose is to impart a warning.

‘I witnessed the power of your past selves firsthand,’ Souudai said. ‘Though no less foolish than yourselves, the spectrum guardians of old possessed a power even my Lord Takuu, in all his unending wisdom, could not anticipate. Their skill in combat and control of their elements was beyond comprehension, their synergy utterly faultless. It is true, we revile everything they were and everything they stood for. However, it cannot be said we had no respect for our enemy.’

‘What is this?’ Osomatsu tried to pull himself together. Where was all the scorn? There was at least one insult thrown in there, but hearing anything but how pathetic they were from an enemy soldier totally threw him. Where was Souudai going with this?

‘You, Unicorn, and your current crop of guardians,’ the lieutenant continued, the same distrust that swarmed Osomatsu radiating from his brothers; Todomatsu paid close attention while the eldest practically felt poor Choromatsu salvage his supreme attention above them, analysing the hell out of every word that left Souudai’s slashed maw. ‘You are young. You are inexperienced. You barely scrape the surface of your respective abilities. You are also exceedingly lucky,’ they said, Osomatsu bristling with every undeniable truth. ‘We can … admire that. My Lord Takuu cannot deny that you perform well, despite your many obvious shortcomings. And you are growing, slowly. But your predecessors were champions. You remain novices at best. Unicorn,’ Souudai spelt it out in his unearthly carrying whisper. ‘No matter how your Spectrum Alliance has attempted to prepare you, you have no idea what you are dealing with.

‘In a gesture of good will, my Lord Takuu wishes to remedy your unenviable position.’ The lieutenant motioned to his subordinate. The soldier immediately contorted, cloak wrapping and hardening into a pulsating cocoon that hovered off the imposingly-elevated platform. ‘Now, don’t get excited,’ Souudai intervened, shield-summoning claws at the ready as Osomatsu squared his stance for combat, fists gritted hard. What was that about not attacking them? They were goddamn liars, he fucking knew it! ‘I will repeat for the Salamander’s benefit. By decree of our Lord Takuu, Soldier Tobuukoke will do nothing to harm you. This is simply a demonstration.’

‘Demonstration?’ Osomatsu repeated in synchrony with his brothers, frown biting deep into his brow. He hadn’t thought it was possible to like this situation less. ‘Ahn, what …’

‘By the Alliance,’ she breathed, huddling into Todomatsu’s neck as the entire tower seemed to rumble beneath them. They flung out their arms for balance, cocoon already gushing glutinous fluid as it fissured, massive cracks going off like gunshots.

‘Until now,’ Souudai was saying as Osomatsu fought the primordial instinct to back the hell up, ‘you have faced only the raw forms born of our lowliest soldiers through souls freshly liberated. My Lord Takuu wishes to show you a final product, if you will. This is what results when a powerful soldier owns the soul of a powerful slave warped by darkness arcane.’

The lieutenant took an almost delicate step back, joining the dark puppet. A split second later, the cocoon exploded with the force of a bomb blast. Thrown backwards, Osomatsu ground his boots into cement as he skidded, catching himself. A glimmer of white snagging his peripherals, he snapped left in a hurry, catching Todomatsu and Ahn before they were propelled clean off the Skytree. ‘You right?’ he said roughly, setting his brother on his feet as black shadow slowly unfurled across the stars. Caught in cruel slow motion, Osomatsu’s gaze turned from his wide-eyed brother, to the calm lieutenant and smirking puppet, to the slave’s silent stare towards sky before he at last tilted
head back.

A monstrous wyrm at least a hundred metres long loomed by the antennae tower, reptilian wings like ghost ship sails powering twin gales with every low, heart-seizing pump to hold its monstrous bulk aloft. Pale as a phantom, its horned snout was bigger than a bus and overloaded with curved, ripping teeth. The dark puppet grinned up at the beast as screams sounded far below. Osomatsu didn’t need Ahn’s gasp to know she had no hope of containing this. Clinging to distant wild hopes that everyone at ground level took the beast for some kind of light projection, the Salamander’s stomach stabbed—Choromatsu was up there! ‘Shit! Get the hell out of there right fucking now!’

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu breathed, daunted but in control as an understandably-distracted Choromatsu started at the eldest’s scream. ‘Don’t do anything. It’s not going to …’

Osomatsu ignored him. He didn’t know how he could fight this this. He was smaller than a fly to it, his lens spiralling into scarlet frantics of highlighting and erasing trying to figure how to bring it down, let alone how to get Osomatsu up there. But what fucking choice did he have? The lieutenant made a sweeping gesture with their claw, an invitation: “If you want to fight, be my guest.”

‘Don’t,’ Todomatsu repeated, voice strained and forceful. But Osomatsu went on ignoring his leader. Charging up his spirit took a few desperate beats longer than normal, but with a burst he slammed hesitation aside.

‘Choromatsu, I’m coming! We can do this, you hear?’ Bending his knees low, Osomatsu rocketed to engage. ‘My lens is freaking out, what have you …’

Barely a metre airborne, Osomatsu jerked violently downward. ‘What the fuck?!’ Chains of light fastened to each of his gauntlets. Shot from Todomatsu’s sceptre, the Unicorn grimly dragged him back. ‘What the hell are you doing?!’

Osomatsu put on a fiery burst, trying to jerk free. But Todomatsu held him fast; the bindings snaked tighter, yanking him down. The Salamander smacked jarringly back into the platform. ‘We can’t fight it,’ Todomatsu said—probably. Osomatsu’s ears pounded with blood, drowning out telepathy. ‘It’s too big, we won’t even scratch it.’

The eldest heaved, rearing to prove otherwise—he’d beaten big before. But Todomatsu wouldn’t budge. ‘It’ll annihilate us! We can’t win … Choromatsu-niisan, get away from it! Get down here!’

‘Not if we don’t try, we can’t!’ Osomatsu exploded, sight hazed and ripping furiously at the links holding him prisoner as Choromatsu skydived to join them; he skimmed straight past one of the beast’s gargantuan slitted pupils.

‘We don’t need to,’ Todomatsu reminded. ‘Not yet. They said …’

‘We can’t trust anything they say!’ Osomatsu spat. ‘That thing could destroy the whole city, are we going to just let them?!”

‘What good would it do them to destroy the city?’ Todomatsu shot back as Choromatsu landed lightly beside them. The dark puppet waved to him, a saucy waggle of fingers. Choromatsu froze. Scowling, Osomatsu put himself between his frightened brother and the Liberation Force delegation. ‘They want puppets, not corpses.’

‘And you’re gonna bet lives on that?’

‘We have to!’ snapped Todomatsu. Osomatsu ground his teeth. There were a lot of people in the world. How many shits would Takuu give if he lost a few thousand? What the fuck was Todomatsu
doing, wasn't he supposed to be inspiring them to fight?

‘Not if it’ll just get us killed for no reason!’

‘Matsuno Todomatsu is right,’ Ahn said shakily. ‘It appears they are simply trying to scare us.’

‘Yeah? Well, it’s working. Get these the fuck off me,’ Osomatsu snapped, thrusting his secured wrists in the youngest’s face.

‘You look good leashed, firecracker!’ the dark puppet crowed, laughter ringing through empty space as Todomatsu retracted his chains. Osomatsu ripped his gauntlets free and rounded again on the Unicorn.

‘Don’t you dare do that to me again,’ he hissed, teeth gritted so hard his jaw grated.

‘Don’t give me a reason to,’ Todomatsu returned, eyes alight. Osomatsu growled, resisting the temptation to thump him. Did the little shit really think whipping out his chain of command would make the Salamander follow orders? At the very least, Totty finally seemed to have overcome his shakes and stepped up to the leadership plate. Whoop-di-fucking-do.

‘How you do it is your choice, Unicorn,’ Lieutenant Souudai’s eerie voice crept through their ears. ‘But a good leader keeps their ranks under control.’

‘Guys, are you really going to fight now?’ Choromatsu said urgently. ‘Quit it, the moment they think we’re less than totally united they’ll jump on it.’

‘We are totally united. Aren’t we, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Totty raised one perfectly-plucked eyebrow. Osomatsu raised one right back, storing his ongoing gripes. For now.

‘Don’t humiliate me in front of the enemy, and we’re united to the ends of the earth … or not, hopefully.’

It just slipped out; the attempt at a joke fell flat as a grand piano from a jumbo jet. Osomatsu almost cursed his humour reflex. But it had protected him too many times.

‘This is one small sample of the army you will face,’ Lieutenant Souudai said, masked features streaked with satisfaction as Tobuukoke overshadowed them. ‘Thousands upon thousands, every last soldier and slave designed with precision for the express purpose of wiping the Spectrum Alliance and its guardians from all existence. And the strength of my lord’s blood servant ever advances, surpassing even his expectations. I promise you: before long, the Liberation Force will surpass ourselves of aeons past. We will have these humans’ souls. Your pathetic crusade to spare them will be crushed. It seems you have been given the benefit of these warnings many times.’

‘You don’t fucking say,’ Osomatsu scorned. Everything about the knife’s-edge atmosphere screamed that he fight—just let him at them already! Choromatsu horribly tensed, he brushed the eldest’s arm in warning, ready to haul him back. Todomatsu’s hard eyes locked to the lieutenant’s as his statement hung heavy in silence.

‘Soldier Tobuukoke, if you could leave the spectrum guardians something to remind them: they should not take a warning from the Liberation Force lightly.’

Stomach plummeting the height of the Skytree, Osomatsu could only watch as the wyrm drew back its lipless maw. With a spine-tingling hum of static waves and a guttural roar, a razor-thin beam issued from deep within Tobuukoke’s throat. Slicing the night sky, the black beam sizzled straight for—Osomatsu’s stomach hit street level and liquefied—Tokyo Tower. With a clash of steel and
darkness, the monument to modern Japan erupted with flames and black smoke.

‘NO!’ Todomatsu shrieked; now it was the others holding him back. ‘You monsters! I came, didn't I? Why would you … you said you wouldn’t do anything!’

‘I told you.’ In very un-Osomatsu fashion, he wasn’t pleased at all that he proved the youngest wrong. ‘I told you …’

The Unicorn’s mask scream-proof, Lieutenant Souudai interpreted without difficulty. ‘It was our instruction not to attack you or to take any slaves. We have done neither; do not look so wronged. We have delivered our warning,’ they said, Osomatsu feeling strangely detached as he gripped the ruffles of Todomatsu’s hooded tunic. It was like a typhoon had barrelled through him in seconds, stripping him bare. The lieutenant's words an instruction, Tobuukoke seemed to melt through air, disintegrating and descending like a swarm of locusts, warping and disgustingly rearranging their atoms until they stood again by their superior, the same alien being they were before their mutation, minus their dark cloak. Watching, Osomatsu felt a little sick. But it barely registered. Where had all his fight gone? Forget his fight, where had all his everything gone?

‘Let this be the last time you fail to take our words to heart. Return to your doomed Alliance by whatever means you came here,’ Souudai recommended over the distant whir of emergency sirens. ‘Fortify your defences. Your people need all the help they can get.’

Like he watched from his own shoulder, Osomatsu punched a fistful of flames. But there was nothing behind it; the lieutenant blocked it easily. Finally he felt something, pride stinging as Souudai shook a reprimanding claw. ‘Let us leave here, and you can do as you see fit.’

The alien indicated the distant burning carnage. Every gleaming tooth on display as he grinned with the chaos across the city, the dark puppet singled Osomatsu out with a mocking salute. Then, with an extravagant spin on his heel, he swept himself, the soldiers and the slave, whose soul had birthed a sea snake and now oversized destruction on wings, into nothingness. Enemy envoy somehow vanished by the puppet’s hand, the brothers and their tiny, shivering mentor were left alone with the best view in the city. Together, they stared as Tokyo Tower burnt like a torch.

Chapter End Notes

Drew on a little personal experience for this one - I've spent two New Years in Japan, one while I was living there and one when I came back a couple of years later with my sister, visiting my Japanese home town and such. I double-checked the proper way to pray at shrines - it seems I've been doing it wrong :( At least I'm ready for next time now :) Also, when I was living there I had no clue that KFC Christmas was a thing, or else I'd have been all over that :D
Hi lovelies! Will definitely have to give this another check over in the next few days for little niggling things - wound up writing a whole heap at the end uber fast and being quite pleased with it, and that's just not like me :)

Bit of an info dump here, sorry. A lot of what pops up are things I've wanted to mention to for a while, but there hasn't been quite the right moment. Other exciting new pieces of magical information divulged will be important in future chapters, so I'm pretty much covering it now so things make sense then :) All of the planning in advance! Hope it's a reasonably engaging chapter anyway, and that there's enough lovely brother moments and such to make up for it if it's not! Also tucked a few new tags in there - tagging as we go!

I'll be on a fairly long break over New Year, and I'm planning to try to make up for my NaNoWriMo faceplant by having another crack at that novel, and maybe pick at another project that's been three quarters complete for about a year. Magical Oso will therefore be on another attempt at hiatus for a bit - I still haven't figured out how to work on two projects at once and actually be productive, so that's a challenge for next year. Given things I've got planned in a few aspects of my life, next year shall indeed be a busy one, but hopefully a good one :)

Thanks always so much for reading and for all your amazing comments, it's so ridiculously motivating to see what you think and how you like it :) And thanks so much for sticking with me this year. Starting my first and what has turned out to be a ridiculously-massive undertaking of a fic was something I definitely didn't expect at the beginning of the year, but it has become so uber important to me - really hope it means something for you, too :) All of the love to you all, and so much more to my incredible sis for all of the everything :D

I hope you have wonderful, restful and safe holidays through the end of the year and an amazing start to the next!

Internal reminder clicking with enough time to whip his whoop into an euphoric whisper, Jyushimatsu wobbled comically. His elastic knees sprouted akimbo from rolling rubber. ‘Ichimatsu-niisan! Karamatsu-niisan, look, look!’

His bright balancing ball teetered madly beneath him. Features squishing in his most concentrated of concentrated faces and every muscle taut, the fifth born Matsuno went on wobbling. He’d be more off kilter if he didn’t. Jyushimatsu existed in a constant state of flux; he was never still. Not really. It shouldn’t be physically possible to balance, virtually vibrating from toes to teeth. But:

‘Amazing, brother!’ Karamatsu applauded as Jyushimatsu held perfect wavering equilibrium. It was a super cool trick, he’d been practicing whenever he thought of it for ages. A fun fact had wiggled into his brain once, that this was good for his core. Jyushimatsu’s grin rammed into inverted rainbow realms—it sure felt good for him. And he thrived on the healthy push on his strong body. But mostly he balanced for the same reason he did most everything: it was fun.
Admiring the younger’s skill, Karamatsu went on heaping praise. ‘My sweet Jyushimatsu, the scope of your talent soars to heights beyond compare! I’m speechless! Words utterly fail me!’

‘Thank god, finally.’ Lost somewhere beneath his matted shock of hair, Ichimatsu mumbled his first words since picking through a bite of breakfast.

‘My little Jyushimatsu, your future gleams as a jewel without price. When I look on you—’

‘What happened to fucking speechless?’ Ichimatsu grumped, slouching deeper into his familiar slump at the kotatsu. Outwardly unaffected, Karamatsu swept a dramatic hand to encompass all Jyushimatsu was. The gesture burst with the promise of fame, fortune and all things shiny.

‘—I see nothing short of a star!’

‘Really, Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, ecstatic. ‘You mean it?! You think … WOAH!’

Rocking wildly all over horizontal, his attention tangled between his indulgent brother and his elevated centre of gravity. That microsecond was all the ball needed to rocket from under his knees, pitching him skyward. Unexpectedly unsupported, Jyushimatsu twisted through his minimal air time. Just as unexpectedly, his saving corkscrew decided not to save him at all. Instead of meeting the living room floor on his hands and knees, Jyushimatsu found himself torpedoed headfirst into it.

‘Jyushimatsu! Brother, are you all right?’

For a moment Jyushimatsu lay there, suspended in blank surprise. Then:

‘You seeing stars too?’ Ichimatsu’s faint voice swam into his ears.

‘Yeeeaaah!’ Jyushimatsu laughed dazedly, blinking them out of his eyes. Rebounding from the shock and the knock on his reinforced noggin, he righted himself with a lurch—“Take it slowly, brother … Jyushimatsu, slowly!” Jyushimatsu’s brain buoyed inside his skull. But with Karamatsu’s pitying care and the sorely-missed dark fun tracing Ichimatsu’s mutter, he barely noticed everything still reel’d. It wasn’t all that different from how he usually took in the world.

Satisfied that Jyushimatsu hustled just as healthily as he claimed, Karamatsu’s fingers returned to his six strings—six strings, six siblings! Almost struck by lightning, Jyushimatsu immediately got busy arraying himself and his brothers up and down the scale, sonorous low to Karamatsu and singing high to Totty. That vital task taken care of, he settled down a speck—Karamatsu was playing! Beside him, Ichimatsu almost relaxed. So gradually, his patchy breath evened, falling into unconscious strummed time.

How did Karamatsu play so quietly? His music blanket-soft in their ears, Jyushimatsu beamed. This was exactly what Ichimatsu needed right now. Jyushimatsu tried as hard as he could to control his volume when keeping his sick brother entertained. Karamatsu didn’t even need to try. He just was. And if chords as sweet and smooth as chocolate weren’t enough, the kitchen gave off a smell like all the best holidays fused together.

‘Are they done yet, Karamatsu-niisan? Niisan?’ Jyushimatsu drooled every other second, tongue dancing and the tingle of treats through his nose hair reaching new heights of sugary heaven. ‘Are they ready? Niiiiiiisaaaannn?’

A light bulb exploded over his head. ‘They’ll cook faster if you turn up the heat!’

‘Non non, Jyushimatsu,’ Karamatsu raised a kindly-chiding finger from his fretboard, Jyushimatsu stopped in his tracks as he barreled to crank the oven all the way to volcanic. The clawed grip Ichimatsu had somehow latched to drag him back fell from his baggy sleeve the moment the fifth
born pulled up.

‘Eh? They won’t?’

Nowhere near disappointed when Karamatsu promised they’d taste better with time, Jyushimatsu floated on the chocolatey-thick air. The second born had been feeding them sweets for four days straight. Jyushimatsu was light years from sick of them. So was Osomatsu—the eldest descended on every fresh batch the moment he kicked off his shoes. Yesterday had been a massive slab of matcha cheesecake. Jyushimatsu had already licked clean today’s bowl and spoon, two trays buckling under double choc cookies in the oven, beautifully sculpted as lovehearts, shooting stars and their own special matsu crest.

‘So good!’ Osomatsu had exclaimed through mouthfuls, spraying crumbs and punching his immediate junior in the arm. ‘What the hell, Karamatsu, you’ve been holding out on us!’ Remembering how Karamatsu’s face had lit up and knowing he’d soon see that joy in his brother again, the same warmth zipped lickety-split through Jyushimatsu. No one had better brothers than him. No one was luckier than Jyushimatsu.

If only he could share some of that luck with Ichimatsu. Jyushimatsu cuddled into his brother’s hunched form as a miserable groan slipped from his lips. Immediately Karamatsu softened his playing to a decibel from inaudible. Rounding up the tune, he set his guitar aside. ‘You … don’t have to do that,’ Ichimatsu murmured unexpectedly.

‘But brother, I know how your head hurts you.’

‘It’s not … so bad,’ Ichimatsu breathed out. Jyushimatsu pulled a face—the tattered lie exploded like Ichimatsu screamed it. His brother hurt so badly. Jyushimatsu was lost for ideas to pep him up, especially now he was all but confined to the house. When he’d started marshalling in armies of comfort cats mum had pleaded that he ease up his efforts—‘I know he appreciates it, but Ichimatsu needs to rest. He—Jyushimatsu? Are you listening? My sweet boy, please try to listen. Just let him rest’.

Karamatsu pursed his lips in doubt, emanating compassion. ‘I can’t abide even the thought of causing you pain …’

‘Shut the fuck up, then,’ Ichimatsu shot back. ‘Shittymatsu, why in hell do you … you don’t … have to … you always fucking …’

He shook his head agonisingly slowly, fumbling for words like he’d lost them in the back of a cupboard. Jyushimatsu broke through his brother’s limp protests, checking his head for heat. The fourth born never started conversations, let alone tried so hard to carry them. Sure enough, Ichimatsu baked. ‘It really … pisses me off,’ he garbled, almost oblivious as the brothers fed him drugs and water, glassy glare fastened to Karamatsu. ‘Everything you do … can’t you do anything for yourself? I’m … so fucking tired,’ he mumbled, awareness distanced further by medication and sinking fast.

‘Sleep for a few hours, Niisan—you’ll feel better!’ Jyushimatsu held unwavering belief in that as he shifted Ichimatsu from beneath the warm kotatsu; he already sweated. Ichimatsu stirred off and on but definitely out for the count, Karamatsu sighed deeply. Muting the TV, he flicked it on to keep Jyushimatsu amused while he checked his baking. It didn’t last long. The fifth born was already antsy, wriggling with pent-up energy that bellowed for him to sproing upright and run—but he couldn’t, he wanted to stay with Ichimatsu!

‘Jyushimatsu,’ Karamatsu returned not a moment too soon, Jyushimatsu about to sprout thrusters and
blast through the ceiling. ‘Brother, I’m so sorry to ask, but … you don’t think something’s going on with Osomatsu and Choromatsu, do you?’

‘Something going on?’ Jyushimatsu repeated to show that he understood the slightly-hesitant question. Karamatsu nodded, tilting sunglasses already cunningly-slanted on his nose.

‘I think Totty might be acting strangely, too.’

‘All of his friends were kidnapped,’ Jyushimatsu agreed solemnly. Their youngest hadn’t been the same since losing them. Karamatsu shook his head, looking strained.

‘I don’t mean that—not only that,’ he amended in a hurry, like Jyushimatsu might call him out for insensitivity. ‘But … you notice things. Have you noticed anything about the others lately?’

‘Of course, Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu nodded vigorously, so keen to help. Karamatsu’s spine shot straight.

‘What, what is it?’

‘Their secret,’ he reminded his brother animatedly. Far from charging heedless through life, Jyushimatsu saw a lot more than most people thought him capable. But it took Karamatsu’s lost confusion to remind him that, apparently, he saw more than others saw, too. Jyushimatsu paddled through that squeeze of discomfort and snapped back to the conversation at hand. ‘Remember, Niisan? Osomatsu-niisan had a secret, then he told Choromatsu-niisan. Maybe Totty knows now!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, pleased that Osomatsu was sharing like he needed.

‘But what secret, what do you mean?’ Karamatsu pressed urgently. ‘What aren’t they telling us? Why aren’t they telling us?’

‘That’s not how secrets work, Niisan!’

Tickled, Jyushimatsu’s mirth burst free and bounced through the room. Spotting Ichimatsu shift, he crammed his fists into his mouth, holding his joy in for his brother’s sake. But his gleeful guffaws petered out when he realised Karamatsu hadn’t gotten the meaning of secret backwards. He was looking at it from a sad angle. Jyushimatsu wished he knew why.

He knew his brothers were in trouble. He was elated that Choromatsu was doing better—mostly, he recalled the third born’s New Year anxiety attack with a worried scrape through his ribs—but, whatever fronts they put up, Karamatsu and Ichimatsu just weren’t. Jyushimatsu wasn’t sure. But both of them might be falling apart. Slowly. And without a word. Jyushimatsu didn’t know how to fix that. Drooping looser than his oversized sleeves, he remembered how he’d hurt Karamatsu without even realising, the first time Ichimatsu had disappeared. Jyushimatsu had found him, but completely failed to let the frantically-searching second born know. It had been an accident. But he’d still made things worse.

‘But you don’t think it’s strange?’ Karamatsu was saying, reeling in Jyushimatsu’s wandering focus. ‘They’re never here, and when they are, it’s almost like they … I don’t know,’ Karamatsu’s sighs grew more frustrated, one hand smoothing his styled hair over and over. ‘And Osomatsu … he says he’s getting hurt at work—and I believe him, I do. But I’m not … you said he’s been beaten up over money?’

‘He used to be,’ Jyushimatsu clarified, stretching out his fidgets. ‘But he’s gotten strong working, hasn’t he, Niisan? He’s a lot stronger than them now.’

‘And I’m sure they’re all sneaking out at night. And I found … Jyushimatsu, I found something in
the laundry,’ Karamatsu spouted in a rush, like he’d been holding back for weeks. ‘Last month, the
night Totty’s friends were taken. I … I found blood on Choromatsu’s hoodie.’

‘Blood?’ Jyushimatsu’s eyes rounded in alarm before he remembered. ‘But he fell over, didn’t he,
Niisan?’

‘That’s what Osomatsu says happened,’ Karamatsu fretted, twining his fingers together hard. He
only seemed to notice when Jyushimatsu shuffled through his sleeves, freeing his own hands to take
his brother’s and ease them from vicious twisting. ‘And I want to believe him, but you don’t get a
stain like that from a scrape! And Choromatsu wasn’t even … it’s just … it’s only that I’m worried …’

‘Sure it is.’

On the other side of the kotatsu, Ichimatsu slowly sat up. Immediately Jyushimatsu scuttled to help.
‘Ichimatsu-niisan, did I wake you up?! I’m really sorry! Try to go back to…’

But Ichimatsu ignored him. Dismissively flicking aside the fifth born’s assistance, he drew himself
almost straight; only his shoulders carelessly slouched. ‘They’re employed, dumbass,’ he leered
crookedly, planting his hands on the kotatsu and bearing down on Karamatsu. Jyushimatsu’s smile
tweaked uneasily. He often had trouble handling tension between Ichimatsu and Karamatsu on bad
days. But this was different. This was something else. This was … it was …

Jyushimatsu froze. Not a twitch or squirm. Not one dynamic blink. He completely froze.

‘They’re bettering themselves, earning their keep—more than what could be said of certain other
useless brothers I know.’ Ichimatsu’s eyes glinted blackly. ‘Trust you to be suspicious of that,
Shittymatsu.’

‘B-b-but brother!’ Completely flabbergasted, Karamatsu strove for cool. ‘B-believe me, I’m not …
suspicion is the very last thing …’

‘That’s not it? Then let’s see … how about this,’ Ichimatsu paused nastily, smothering a cough and
counting on his fingers. ‘They’re getting along together better, without you. They’re hanging out
more, without you. They’re worth something now, and you’re not. Do I win? Do I get a prize?’

The fourth born’s waxen face burned with every nail he hammered into the second born. All
Jyushimatsu could do was stare, mouth hanging wide open as Karamatsu composed himself with
unbelievable strength. ‘Ichimatsu, I … I honestly think they might be in trouble. Don’t … please
don’t make fun of that.’

‘Even if they were in trouble,’ Ichimatsu returned, almost delicately cruel. ‘The last fucking person’s
help they’d want is yours.’

His words slammed into Jyushimatsu. But not nearly as hard as they hit Karamatsu. Before either
could react, however, Ichimatsu seemed to lose focus, face slackening—he looked almost confused.
A moment later, he crumpled. Reduced to a convulsing heap by crippling coughs that ripped through
his entire torso, Ichimatsu clawed at his throat, fighting for breath. With a violent heave, he began to
throw up. Karamatsu lost all colour. ‘Oh god … Jyushimatsu, help me!’

Shaken from his vacant shock, Jyushimatsu helped Karamatsu calm their distressed brother, holding
him as he hacked up acidic bile, nothing else in his stomach. Raucous coughs descended to pitiable,
Ichimatsu gurgled brokenly as the brothers cleaned his face of sweat and sick and agonised tears.
‘God, he’s burning up. But he’s just had his meds, what can we … Jyushimatsu? Jyushimatsu? ’
Karamatsu secured his attention with difficulty; the fifth born couldn’t stop staring at the fourth. ‘I have to call mum, he needs his doctors. Take care of him for me, won’t you, sweet Jyushimatsu?’

Smiling shakily, Karamatsu lay Ichimatsu tenderly on his side and retreated to the kitchen. Jyushimatsu noticed vaguely that the air didn’t smell much like a dessert buffet anymore, gone slightly smokey. But he couldn’t lament the singed cookies, he needed all his thought here and now. ‘You …’ Ichimatsu rasped, dazed with sickness and floating in no way Jyushimatsu envied. ‘You okay?’

He couldn’t even think of answering. Jyushimatsu was on red alert, zeroed in like a bloodhound. Crawling right up close to Ichimatsu, the fifth born planted his nose to his brother’s shoulder, sniffing deeply. He then began to systematically poke and prod, examining his brother from all possible angles so he’d miss nothing. With a disorderly concoction of wariness and deep concern, a dash of a scientist’s curiosity thrown in, Jyushimatsu took Ichimatsu by the face with both sweaty palms and leaned in close. ‘W-what are …’ Ichimatsu blinked heavy eyelids; Jyushimatsu stared into his brother’s soul beyond. ‘What are … you doing?’

‘Checking you’re still here,’ Jyushimatsu said, not about to let himself be distracted. Not expecting that, Ichimatsu almost chuckled. ‘You’re so … fucking weird. Don’t worry, I’m … still here,’ he sighed, triggering another round of painful coughs. But Jyushimatsu knew every square centimetre of his brother, inside and out. And that … Jyushimatsu shivered. That hadn’t been him. Where had Ichimatsu gone? He snuggled into his brother’s sad scarecrow frame, so grateful he was back.

Before long Karamatsu stuck his head in, saying mum was wrapping up her errands early. ‘We’ll get a taxi to the hospital when she’s home.’

‘You don’t … have to come,’ Ichimatsu managed between shallow breaths once Karamatsu left them alone; he’d quickly scrubbed away the mess Ichimatsu had vomited up. ‘Why don’t … you go out and play, or … something? J-Jyushimatsu?’

‘Later, Niisan.’ Jyushimatsu wasn’t about to let his brother go now. Ichimatsu sighed again. From his odd slant, Jyushimatsu just saw his brother’s hand creep to his throat. Rubbing at it gingerly, Ichimatsu gave a thin gasp—it must hurt him so much. Jyushimatsu’s empathic chest flooded. Then he saw the glint. ‘Ichimatsu-niisan, what’s that? What are you wearing?’

Jyushimatsu had only ever seen Karamatsu wear necklaces—had Ichimatsu borrowed one? Almost captivated, he reached to investigate the metallic gleam about his brother’s neck. Then he blinked. ‘Huh?’ On closer inspection, Ichimatsu no longer wore anything shiny. But he had been, Jyushimatsu was sure. Where had it gone? Jyushimatsu cocked his head, unblinking and pulled into sharp focus. Usually he backflipped from such little hits of confusion. But beneath his ongoing exuberance Jyushimatsu tuned like an antennae.

Nonplussed one moment, the next Ichimatsu reared away from him, toppling and almost whacking his head against the kotatsu. ‘Woah! Careful, Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, sleeves rippling to scoop him from danger. Ichimatsu flinched, scrambling back. ‘Ichimatsu-niisan, what … Niisan, you’re shaking!’

‘I-I’m not!’ Ichimatsu weakly clenched his fists, trying to hide it. ‘D-don’t … g-g-get away from me!’

Struggling to escape his arms and whitewashed by a horror unknown, Jyushimatsu’s swollen heart trembled. But he hugged his brother fast—“Don’t be upset, Niisan! I won’t hurt you. It’s okay,
okay?”—until he heard the front door hurriedly slide open, announcing their mother’s return moments before her caring call.

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Sprinting out of a shadowed alley, Osomatsu notched his speed up, fleeing through a maze of tight corners and back streets. He was much more spry than he used to be. By the time the thump of pursuit against asphalt faded, the stitch needling his side was barely a pinch. No longer being followed, Osomatsu slowed to a more unobtrusive fast-paced walk, weaving through the pedestrian public of late-morning Akatsuka until he spotted a brightly-branded convenience store.

He ducked inside, hiding between aisles to catch his breath. Puffing lightly, he pulled off his heavy outer layer and fanned himself with the sleeve before mopping his sweat-streaked face. He checked his coat pockets as he went. They were crammed with little rooster-bedecked envelopes, every one stuffed full of yen. Osomatsu couldn’t be bothered counting them, but hadn’t noticed any lost during his escape. None but the pair he’d hurled at the feet of twin debtees out for blood before flipping a saucy “go to hell” and hightailing it out of there.

Osomatsu winced—that had probably been a bad move. But it wasn’t like he had any plans to deal with loan sharks again. From now on, the only crooks he’d give the time of day were ones that lined his pockets with yen, rather than turned him upside by the ankles and shook every last note out of him. At least that had only ever happened once.

Osomatsu had finally been spurred to actually make an effort to pay his debts. That confrontation with Eyebrows and his crew had seriously held them up back when they were trying to rescue Totty. He walled off most of the guilt, thinking they might have arrived in time to save the youngest’s friends if he weren’t such a cheap debt-dodging fucker. It was highly unlikely; Ahn repeated that fact broken-record style the few times she’d caught him wallowing. But Osomatsu would be damned if he ever let it happen again.

The envelopes had been Totty’s cheeky idea. Doing everything up cute and tidy like New Year’s pocket money might throw the mobsters enough not to pulverise Osomatsu—it might even appeal to a few warped senses of humour. Plus it was now late January—he’d gotten the envelopes cheap. Invading his magical brothers’ minds non-stop to bitch about it, last night Osomatsu had divided the remainder of his last paycheque into all the debts he could remember—it wasn’t like he kept an annotated checklist—plus what he decided was fair interest.

He had to admit, it’d be nice to finally lead a debt-free existence—the guardian made good money, he could afford to fund his own irresponsible gambling. But so far he’d located only a small fraction of his debtors. Osomatsu didn’t relish looking for the shifty customers any harder than hanging around their pachinko haunts. But it was called organised crime for a reason. Word would get around soon enough that Matsuno was coughing up. Then they’d come looking for him. Funnily enough, Osomatsu relished that even less. And it wasn’t like he could just demolish an entire mob of crowbar-wielding muscle if any back and forth with slighted mobsters took a turn for the worse—well, he could. He’d already bested one attack-happy thug and skipped through a few tussles when fast talking had failed him. But Osomatsu had decided it might be smart not to make himself any more of a target than he’d already managed.

Buying a tea to rehydrate, Osomatsu chugged it down outside the store. Tossing the bottle into recycling, he rolled his shoulders, stretching and yawning widely before meandering down the bustling footpath. He should probably set up shop outside another parlour for a while, he thought reluctantly. Now he was doing it, best just get this shit done. Trudging with lack of more enticing motivation, he groaned and bullied himself into jogging. Bright and clear, the temperature was just
starting to pick up from previous frigid months. His breath misting slightly, Osomatsu angled for a
place he hadn’t shown his face since last summer. There were a few long debts tightened around his
neck in the surrounding shadows.

Halfway there, Osomatsu had to stop. Pulling up in the middle of the path, he curled over, feeling a
bit queasy. And annoyed. Come on, he wasn’t out of breath—his heart barely pumped over a casual
stroll. And he sure as hell wasn’t scared to face his debtees. So why should he … Osomatsu hissed
through his teeth, one hand at his unhappy middle. Had his eggs given him food poisoning at
breakfast?

Gingerly rubbing his stomach, Osomatsu saw he stood outside the employment office they’d
frequented as NEETs—Choromatsu had frequented, anyway. A rare client or not, Osomatsu had still
wasted more than enough of his life behind those judgemental doors. Anything but disappointed he’d
never have to see inside again, he gave his stomach a last settling knead and went on his way.

Barely ten metres onwards, Osomatsu’s nausea had entirely evaporated. Relieved the eggs weren’t
the culprit and he wouldn’t return that night to a house brimming with miserably ill brothers instead
of just one, some odd sense made him turn around. Walking slowly back toward the employment
office, he grew more squeamish with every step. Frowning, Osomatsu changed direction and walked
backwards. The foot traffic shooting him funny looks and bifurcating to step around him,
Osomatsu’s innards calmed the further he retreated from the office. Weird. What was that …

‘Shit!’ he started when his phone toned. Digging through his layers, he found it beside his
transformation scroll—stone cold all day—and flipped it open. The message from Totty was
punctuated with hearts and kissy-face emojis: *I’m waiting with Ahn, are you almost here?
Choromatsu will be late. See you soon!*

‘Shit,’ Osomatsu swore again, stuffing the crappy device away. So would he. Distracted by his new
career in facilitating debt collection, he’d totally forgotten about the meeting. It seemed kind of
ridiculous to schedule meetings—they lived together, it wasn’t like they were short on time to talk.
But they hadn’t seriously discussed guardian business since Totty had come on board. And some
topics just didn’t crop up in everyday conversation, even among magical boys.

Abandoning the employment office and in no great hurry—if Choromatsu could be late, so could he
—Osomatsu ambled for the nearest station. Hopping on the loop, he snagged a fleeting empty seat
among the noontime commuters. His city streaming by in the window, Osomatsu found himself
staring at the undulating skyline. It wouldn’t be quite the same again. Not for a long time.

By the time they’d reached Tokyo Tower, the steel monolith had burned out of control. ‘Try to put it
out!’ Todomatsu had shouted, angling to spring into the flames. ‘I need to help …’

The observation deck had been crowded with panicked people shoving and screaming to escape the
rippling heat that ate the structure. Narrowing his enhanced vision to slits, Osomatsu had seen the
emergency stairs were yet untouched by fire. They weren’t trapped up there. Yet.

‘Totty, wait!’ he’d shouted. But Todomatsu already bounced nimbly between steel struts, vanishing
into the smoke. So this was what the Unicorn really brought to the team: pure unadulterated selfless
fucking bravery. Who’d have thought it, from skittish little Todomatsu? Gnawing apart the inside of
his mouth from all sorts of stress, Osomatsu hadn’t followed, letting the youngest calm and lead the
people to safety before fire blocked their path. Cannily angling her repellent barriers, Ahn got to
work encouraging those trapped by terror to inch toward escape.

Very much appreciating the full height of the licking flames, Osomatsu throat had dried out. He’d
never pulled so much fire into himself before. But he could handle it. Gulping and shunting aside
anything less than fearless, Osomatsu had swept his gauntlets wide to summon the fire.

‘Don’t,’ Choromatsu had warned, head tilted back and blaze reflected emerald in his lens. ‘That’s not normal fire. It’ll burn you from inside-out, you have to neutralise it first.’

‘And how exactly do I do that?’ Osomatsu had demanded, telling himself he trembled from adrenaline, not sick horror that he’d almost roasted himself alive. He was the Salamander, damn it! Fire was supposed to be his thing, what was this shit? ‘Come on, at this rate it’s gonna kill someone! We have to put it out, what are we gonna do?!’

Thankfully, the reliable Wyvern had kept his head. Consulting his lens, in seconds Choromatsu had had Osomatsu sparking with spirit renewed: ‘How about a firestorm?’

‘Yeah, combo attack!’ The Salamander blasting his own fires high and wreathing them through the foreign flames, together he and Choromatsu had whipped the disaster into a roiling tempest and lifted it clear of the smouldering structure. ‘Can you handle it?’ Choromatsu had left Osomatsu to manage the ominous cyclone of fire and smog churning low over the tower’s heat-twisted spire. The Wyvern swooping to help the coughing escapees, the Salamander had tugged a narrow ribbon from the storm. As cautiously as he was capable, Osomatsu had slowly siphoned up the flames—what else was he meant to do with them? His lens gave him workable two in three odds that he’d completely neutralised the Liberation Force fires with his own, and they’d no longer slap his guts on hell’s own hotplate. But the moment he absorbed the first flames Osomatsu had shuddered hard. It wasn’t exactly painful. But if he was a school blackboard, these flames were a malicious onslaught of sharpened fingernails. Osomatsu had twitched badly by the time he’d pulled the entire storm from the sky. Infested by prickling tingles, he’d stumbled to find the others.

Lens locking on through the crowds of rescued and astonished bystanders, Osomatsu had found them as Choromatsu cleared a lightly-coughing Todomatsu’s airways, piping tainted smoke to dissipate through his mask. ‘Thank you, thank you!’ Fawning gratitude had almost eclipsed the two. Osomatsu had been royally pissed, until he’d found himself ushered to join them, hundreds of eyes regarding him with outright awe. The surrounding streets were crammed with police cars and firetrucks unused. A barrage of flashes had lit the scene like a strobe-washed nightclub, phones and cameras whipped out to capture the hooded heroes.

They’d had no barriers. The entire magical show had been free for all to see. Including the police. ‘Back up, clear the way! You three, stay where you are!’

‘Really?’ Osomatsu had arched a ticcing eyebrow as firearms raised in their direction. ‘You’re taking us in?’ Todomatsu had actually laughed, shining through his fatigue and ongoing cold fury that Takuu had rescinded his promise to do no harm.

‘We have you surrounded! Drop your weapons and put your hands on your head, now!’

‘They’re attached, can’t drop them.’ Osomatsu had displayed his gauntlets as non-threateningly as he could while staring down a few dozen gun barrels. A storm of bullets would bounce off their battle hoodies. But said bulletstorm wouldn’t have been a tea party. Their new horde of fans protesting animatedly on their behalf, with the smoking wreck their backdrop the guardians had leaped from attempted arrest to rousing cheers.

‘The police are going to be all over us now,’ Choromatsu had forecast grimly from a skyscraper’s flat pinnacle a few wards over. Blackened and skeletal, a dark cloud had wafted over distant Tokyo Tower, smoke still rising from ravaged steel. ‘They already thought we were connected to cult activity. This practically confirms it for them.’
'Yeah … At least we got a little love,' Osomatsu smiled crookedly, trying out a joke. He’d had about as much luck coaxing a smile out of the Wyvern as he did holding still, Todomatsu’s sceptre tracing his twitching torso.

‘They’re not burnt,’ the Unicorn had examined his organs after their unpleasant trial by fire. ‘But you’ve stressed them out something awful. They’ll hurt once you change back,’ he’d warned, washing Osomatsu with the warmth of gentle healing encouragement.

‘Good,’ Osomatsu had breathed, slow and deep, as his spasming cells finally relaxed. ‘I don’t know what I’d do if I wasn’t in hideous pain every day.’

Osomatsu hadn’t been worried. He’d be fine, he always was. But Choromatsu …

‘Don’t look at me like that,’ Choromatsu had said, ongoing predictions stilled as both Osomatsu and Todomatsu’s eyes settled cautiously on him. Osomatsu tried not to. But he’d almost measured the seconds until his brother’s composure splintered. ‘I’m fine.’

His Wyvern persona had somehow held together all through the Skytree confrontation, the horrific wyrm’s one-shot attack, and then Tokyo Tower aflame. But Choromatsu had far from recovered. Osomatsu and Todomatsu were ready the instant they phased, catching him when he buckled in nervous collapse. ‘It was … th-that big,’ he’d moaned disjointedly, huddled on the ground with his head between his knees. ‘And it flew … only I c-c-an … if all th-the big ones fly … I c-c-an’t fight them alone!’ Choromatsu’s wheeze caught in his throat, terrified.

‘You won’t fight them alone, Matsuno Choromatsu. Your brothers would never abandon you,’ Ahn pressed deep care into his shin. ‘Should that come to pass, they will find a way.’

‘But s-s-so many p-people … could have died … and he was there …’

A steadying constant as Choromatsu’s belated distress unfolded—“You were amazing, okay? I never would have thought of a firestorm, you just saved fucking Tokyo Tower! Sort of …”—Osomatsu had soon left the comforting to Totty. The eldest barely come to grips that the past half hour of his life had actually happened, he could have used a little more of their sweet brother’s attention himself.

‘Shh now, you’re all right,’ Todomatsu had soothed, arms linked around their brother wracked by post-traumatic stress. ‘Choromatsu-niisan, listen to me. Do you trust me? Everything will be fine.’

Train cruising into the platform, Osomatsu let the heavy current of passengers do the work for him, sweeping him out the doors and all the way to the station exit. Their carefully-chosen meeting place was just hop, skip and a jump away.

There were only so many establishments Ahn could enter without attracting undue attention. Thanks to their inclinations, Choromatsu was now almost immune to cold, and Osomatsu was very smug that he’d evolved into an organic radiator. But Ahn’s alabaster coat was so fine her pointed teeth chattered in the warehouse even when Osomatsu filled the air with fire. While winter went on coldly flourishing, they’d decided to relocate more in-depth chats to locations less hazardous to their mentor’s health. It just happened to be a bonus, that said locations did a serious number on her ego.

‘You’re late. Honestly, have any of you even tried to find an alternative?’ Ahn said by way of greeting as Osomatsu threw himself into a chair at their cosy corner table.

‘An alternative!’ he exclaimed, pretending he was affronted and sneaking a grin at Totty. ‘I’ll have you know this is the best place in Shinjuku! And we do come here for your sake. Want to try blending in a bit more?’
Ahn growled. Tail twitching irritably, she maintained her stately posture as cats of every colour twined past on narrow walkways. Ladders hung horizontal from the ceiling for them to explore, and a massive cat tree spread its limbs by an array of wooden platforms fixed to the warm cafe walls. Osomatsu pestered Ahn with a strip of chicken, grinning widely when she turned up her nose, refusing to be enticed. The intergalactic not-kitten was such an easy target.

Totty had come straight from a morning shift at Starbucks. With his hero’s income, logic said he should quit his part-time work. But for reasons Osomatsu couldn’t comprehend, the youngest hadn’t wanted to give it up completely, appealing to his sympathetic manager to decrease his hours. Conversely, he’d told their parents he needed distraction and had requested more shifts to explain his increased absence from the house. Osomatsu couldn’t have kept so many stories straight, but Todomatsu was a smooth expert in that field.

Nibbling through a pastry, the youngest arranged a few tasty meat morsels on a napkin so Ahn could indulge without losing face in her dignified little mind. ‘Choromatsu-niisan I get,’ he said idly as they waited for the third born to show up. ‘He has no friends to blab to anyway.’

‘Hey,’ Osomatsu heated in their awkward brother’s defence. ‘There’s a few other otaku he talks to, they’re friends.’

Totty shrugged, expression daubing charm over a pixie-sized smirk. He’d meant nothing by it—did he have to say it, then? ‘If you say so, Osomatsu-niisan. But that you’ve kept all this a secret for so long, that’s a real miracle.’

Osomatsu scowled. It hadn’t been that hard. He’d never liked it, but the necessary concealment had gotten a lot easier with first Choromatsu and now Todomatsu on his side. Was it his fault, that his montage of colourful boo-boos weren’t the best props to bolster his average working-class dude facade? But he couldn’t only blame physical evidence. Osomatsu’s own nature remained his greatest obstacle.

Though confident his non-magical family remained none the wiser of his superhero status, Osomatsu’s big mouth had almost blown his fake job cover only that morning. Halfway out the door, he’d weighed his outs at breakneck speed, his parents radiating confusion. He hoped his slapdash offer to start paying into the household accounts threw them off his scent. Osomatsu in turn had been thrown when his father remarked that Choromatsu already contributed 40,000 a month. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ he’d accosted his brother telepathically.

‘I thought I had,’ Choromatsu had replied from a few blocks ahead, sounding far too innocent. ‘You weren’t helping out already, Osomatsu-niisan?’

Another careless misstep, Osomatsu had spotted Totoko shopping the other week, a spring to her step and overloaded with post-holiday bargains. Good sense bulldozed by the chance to catch the siren of their dreams in a good mood, Choromatsu had barely smothered the eldest’s holler in time. ‘What are you doing, we’re supposed to be at work!’

Dragged protesting a safe distance away, Osomatsu had shoved his brother off him. But he knew if Totoko saw them near Harajuku Strip during work hours, word would invariable circle back home. ‘Be more careful,’ Ahn had reprimanded, Osomatsu stooping to placate her with a fishy snack stolen from Ichimatsu’s stash. ‘Are you capable,’ she wouldn’t let it go, nabbing the peace offering before Osomatsu playfully held it out of reach, ‘of excluding your barely-repressed lust from your thought processes for one moment?’

‘Why so sulky, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Totty gave an impish smile as Osomatsu sullenly crammed his mouth full of curry bread. He got it already, he had to watch himself. ‘Still not over losing spectrum
guardian leadership? Is that really why you didn’t want me in?’

‘That’s not true and you know it,’ Osomatsu growled, swallowing far more aggressively than necessary.

Todomatsu blinked, all wide-eyed innocence, his lower lip puffed and quivering exaggeratedly. His coy mocking hooked straight through the heart of Osomatsu’s deepest needs and insecurities, shamelessly riling him up. ‘That’s so mean, Niisan. Didn’t you want to protect me at all?’

‘Matsuno Todomatsu,’ Ahn intervened, planting her paws for traction as the eldest pounded the table, fists clenched and teacups clattering as they spilt. ‘Don’t antagonise the spark. We attract enough attention without him causing more of a scene.’

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu challenged, too worked up to enjoy Ahn’s priceless displeasure, a persistent tabby trying to sniff her into acquaintanceship. About to exactly prove Ahn’s point, Osomatsu noticed a trio of young women flick eyes his way. Far from checking him out, the cats curled in their laps were all but forgotten in alarm. Realising how the completely silent, but intense spat between twins must look, he had to laugh. Humour chasing away most of his foul mood, and Totty apparently satisfied with the rise he’d gotten out of him, Osomatsu fast mellowed, the youngest all over him with semi-apologetic sweetness—damn him.

‘What’s taking him so long?’ the eldest asked after Choromatsu.

‘Target practice,’ Totty supplied, taking a dainty sip from what hadn’t sloshed over the brim of his teacup. ‘He held himself up reading over reports.’

Impatience born more of worry than irritation, Osomatsu did what he did best when faced with emotional upheaval. ‘He’s a bit beyond casual gunslinger now, isn’t he?’ he ribbed, grin stretching out his cheeks. ‘No gold star for guessing why he’s still hanging around the kink cafe.’

‘Matsuno Choromatsu is doing the right thing,’ Ahn berated so swiftly she could have been on standby, just waiting for him to say something stupid. ‘Your performance as guardians is heavily affected by efforts expended untransformed; it is essential that you remain toned and sharp. It would do you well to follow your brother’s example,’ their mentor sniffed down her nose at him.

‘Hey!’ Osomatsu complained, Ahn sticking sharp little pins in his training regimen. ‘Get off my case, I’ve been fending off grunts all morning! But seriously,’ his breezy tone dropped low, mock offence provoked into something more real. ‘Get off my case. I beat up punching bags and spar for hours every day.’

*If you were actually around anymore, you’d know that,* Osomatsu barely bit his last comment off before it blurted out unchecked. However Totty chafed, the eldest had almost carpeted over his ongoing “I’m not in charge anymore” complex—so long as no one brought it up. But a new brand of resentment tightened coils around his needy heart. Todomatsu liked to carry Ahn around everywhere with him, taking her shopping and lavishing his newfound wealth on cute ribbons and collars glittering with costume gems. ‘You’re only using her as an accessory,’ Osomatsu had already accused.

‘Niisan, how could you say that?’ he’d gasped in faux disbelief. Osomatsu had wanted to smack the smirk clean off the youngest’s face. ‘She’s not *only* an accessory.’

Their admittedly-adorable mentor had been delighted, that her Unicorn was so eager to spend time with her. But though she’d flushed and scolded when she eventually figured out it wasn’t only so he could focus on their mission, that delight had barely diminished. ‘Of course she gives him special
attention,’ Choromatsu had noticed Osomatsu’s hurt—it was impossible not to, the eldest moping around the empty warehouse like an abandoned puppy. ‘He’s the Unicorn, and he’s new at this. She needs to get him up to speed. And he just lost all his friends,’ the third born added quietly. ‘So did Ahn, remember? I think they might need each other.’

‘*All* their friends? What are we, chopped fucking liver?’ Osomatsu felt even worse that he couldn’t suppress his jealousy, that Totty and Ahn had grown so close. But he hadn’t been forgotten; a small, sensible part of him knew that. Things were just different.

‘And we have our Wyvern,’ the eldest spotted a slightly-sweaty Choromatsu as he paid admission; he’d run from the station. With the arrival of their unofficial secretary, the spectrum guardians got down to business. In a manner of speaking. ‘What? No one said I needed one,’ Osomatsu countered Ahn’s huff when Choromatsu and Todomatsu opened a thick bundle of shared files on their tech. On gleefully snatching his first magical paycheque, Totty had immediately acquired the next model up of Choromatsu’s coveted tablet. ‘What’s the problem, I’ll look on with Totty.’

‘I’m sharing with Ahn,’ Todomatsu slid his tablet down the table so Osomatsu couldn’t see.

‘Then lend me your smartphone.’

‘Get your own!’ Todomatsu squawked, swatting his arm away as Osomatsu tried to steal it from the table.

‘Could we focus please?’ Choromatsu said, just in time for a fluffy ginger to sit on his menu. Chuckling as his brother frowned, but obediently scratched the ginger’s ears, Osomatsu borrowed Choromatsu’s device to skim the agenda. With frequent interjections from Ahn, the Wyvern led them in a long-overdue debrief of their chilling Skytree encounter and debut as hooded firefighting idols. ‘I’ve gone over the footage a few times …’

‘Or a million,’ Osomatsu interjected, elbowing him affably in the side. ‘Seriously man, you work too hard.’

‘… and I think, ah, maybe they didn’t attack us or cause any more damage because … Takuu might think we were actually capable of beating Tobuukoke.’

‘That’s kinda encouraging, I guess,’ Osomatsu shrugged as Totty nodded slowly. He didn’t feel overly encouraged. In hindsight, he was only too aware that wyrm would have swallowed them whole. In his wariness, Takuu gave the guardians too much credit; Osomatsu’s swollen self-belief had been unceremoniously deflated. And that, Choromatsu summarised, was exactly the point.

‘And they didn’t attack Tokyo Tower by accident,’ Todomatsu added softly, swirling his tea. ‘They’re screwing with us,’ Osomatsu agreed tightly. Tokyo was already a city on edge, teetering on the very brink of its limits. Now one of its most beloved symbols had been all but destroyed. As a collective, the morale of the capital’s millions of citizens had been effectively squashed. Ahn was taking it hard, too, but for an entirely different reason.

‘No one could’ve hidden that shit. What were you meant to do, wipe the whole city’s memory?’ Osomatsu said bracingly as Ahn lowered her face, convinced she’d failed her Alliance, her guardians and herself. The dark events that marred January 3 had dominated all news sources since Near Year. Grim mood be damned, Osomatsu grinned a little, that they trended nationwide—hashtag spectrum guardians, anyone? The cultists were blamed for Tokyo Tower’s apparent spontaneous combustion, an easy and appropriate scapegoat. Less appropriately, clips and articles directly linking the hooded so-called vigilantes to the decline of Japan’s sense of security had increased, far outnumbering the
comments of gushing supporters.

‘Enemy activity is still relatively low,’ Choromatsu moved on, Osomatsu making himself feel better remembering a fan theory he’d spotted stickybeaking Totty’s social networking feeds the last time he’d pinched his smartphone—that they were the young protégés of a reclusive billionaire inventor, sworn to bring the kidnapping fanatics to justice.

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu nodded to prove he was listening, albeit distractedly. Set alongside his and Choromatsu’s early days, hurled headlong into monster mayhem and worked to the bone, Todomatsu’s first month as a spectrum guardian had been practically tame. No way would it last, but there was no harm in taking advantage while the soldiers were quiet. On top of salvaging a few hits of confidence, Osomatsu soundly kicking a few ugly monsters’ arses, the Liberation Force virtually offered the opportunity to train their lord’s reviled nemesis on a silver platter. The kid already had a few stand-out performances. Choromatsu’s personal favourite was a sneaky ploy he’d coordinated with Osomatsu, tripping a bloodsucking mothman into a suspended net of flashing chains. But still:

‘Brace yourself, little brother,’ he made sure Todomatsu knew just how much easier he had it, much to Totty’s huffy annoyance. ‘This is nothing.’

‘Which means they’re probably working on something new,’ Choromatsu said, subdued behind his tablet and the plump ginger now rumbling purrs in his lap. ‘We need to be on guard, keep an eye out for anything that might give them away.’

Topic switching neatly to the Unicorn’s development, Osomatsu rolled his eyes as the youngest ate up Ahn’s praise. ‘Light is at once the simplest element and the most difficult to master. Not many novice Unicorns could perform a spell such as you did, healing Matsuno Choromatsu from the verge of death, without dangerously draining their own health and power.’

‘I was in danger?’ Totty asked suddenly, startled and eyes starting to narrow.

‘Come on, you’re fine,’ Osomatsu butted in when Ahn fumbled, ears pinking as Choromatsu greyed. ‘And in case you’ve forgotten, Choromatsu wouldn’t be if you hadn’t taken that risk.’

‘I’d prefer to know what risks I’m taking,’ Todomatsu grouched petulantly. Osomatsu kicked him playfully under the table.

‘No you don’t, trust me. Relax, okay—you’re a great healer. Work more on that enhancing shit.’

Osomatsu felt a buzz down his nerves like his body charged, viscerally recalling the rush as the Unicorn buffered him past overpowered, rendering him able to at last end their exhausting tilt with the gas-spewing Titan. ‘A wave of your little magic wand, and I bet I could pull off my death ray without burning out. I would have cooked the oversized flying worm with that,’ Osomatsu decided, comfortably feeling a whole lot better about himself.

They progressed quickly through Choromatsu’s reports, the third born ever taking into account the eldest’s stunted attention span. ‘We’d never get anything done otherwise,’ he said dryly when Todomatsu commented, giggling. Ahn took over when it came to recruiting; she and Totty were already talking strategies to pinpoint their Kraken and Sphinx. ‘Kaho would have been the perfect Sphinx,’ Totty tearfully named a friend.

‘And the odds she’s even got an inclination? Pretty goddamn low,’ Osomatsu said. But he scraped his chair over to pull Todomatsu in a rough hug. Beyond showing solidarity, however, he wasn’t that interested. It felt like they’d only just wrapped up finding their Unicorn, and that had been a pain and half—to say nothing of the pain and a half who now bore the pink diamond. It wasn’t like he was
against recruiting—filling vacant guardian positions could only be a good thing. But he was counting on Ahn dragging the others on all the boring stakeouts this time around, leaving Osomatsu free to skive.

‘Not interested in your teammates, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Totty soon asked with a drip of derision. Osomatsu shrugged where he rested lazily on his folded arms.

‘So long as they look good in a combat skirt, I’m good. And have a mean right hook,’ he added, actually pretty invested in their future recruits now he thought about it. ‘They have to be tough. I’m feeling a bit exposed here, you know? Don’t bite my head off,’ Osomatsu raised his hands when Choromatsu startled a dozen cats with his strangled indignation. The previously-content ginger leapt from his lap with a miffed yowl. ‘Nothing against you guys, you’re great backup. But I could really use a bit more help up front.’

Littered with ever-updated stats, Choromatsu’s careful maps of enemy activity were pockmarked by hotspots. One sat squarely over Todomatsu’s old apartment building. ‘We can assume they conserve their allocated power by using these hubs for entry,’ Ahn said, face close to Todomatsu’s tablet. She let the finicky Unicorn wipe her nose with a napkin before she scrolled over terrain. ‘And cleave their own exits wherever appropriate.’

‘Doesn’t anyone else think it’s weird?’ Choromatsu interrupted his own report to be paranoid. ‘That there’s a transport hub below the building Totty used to live, and he and his friends just happened to go there the exact same night the Liberation Force planned to abduct them? There’s something going on here!’ he insisted when his brothers weren’t overly interested. Choromatsu was reading way too much into this, they had more pressing things to panic about. When Ahn promised the Spectrum Alliance was looking into it, he nodded jerkily and opened his next file—seriously, how much work did he do?

‘At first, ah, most of the slave taking seemed random, probably opportunistic,’ Choromatsu said, only one more stutter over the pattern of coincidence that seemed to plague them. ‘That’s still happening. But it seems like they’re targeting specific people, as well—Lieutenant Souudai mentioned they need powerful slaves, and the … th-the …’ Choromatsu gulped, but pushed on. ‘Th-the puppet who attacked me said Atsushi was a born leader, a good find.’

‘In the past, Lord Takuu relied primarily on numbers,’ Ahn informed, gnawing through the last of her chicken. ‘But as he bides his time gathering strength for mass infection, it seems he is sculpting the upper ranks of his army through slaves who best complement his dark use of the void.’

‘I’ve been researching targets we’ve rescued,’ Choromatsu said hesitantly. ‘All of them, ah …’

The damning dot point was stark on his tablet. The Liberation Force abducted people in pain. Osomatsu swallowed, feeling sick. Why was he fucking surprised? ‘Wh-what about Atsushi?’ Todomatsu strove to keep the tremble from his voice. ‘He w-wasn’t …’

‘Sometimes it may be hidden from us,’ Ahn said gently, child’s voice so wise as she sprang to nestle comfortingly on his shoulder. ‘Sometimes we may be blind. But we cannot always see sadness, even in even those we’re closest to.’

But they couldn’t protect every miserable person in the city! Osomatsu growled, grinding his fist into the underside of their table. What fucking good was it to pick apart enemy tactics when they couldn’t use that information to help anyone?

‘Why didn’t that soldier realise Totty was the Unicorn?’ Choromatsu asked, sufficiently distracting Osomatsu from his churning anger. The friendly furballs fawning all over them helped, too.
Aggressively scratching the scruff of a calico’s neck, it twisted languidly, enjoying the attention. ‘There was no one else there, he was one of their targets … how hasn’t Takuu made the connection? I’ve been wondering …’

‘I haven’t,’ Osomatsu interrupted, startled—he probably should have, their youngest’s secret identity at stake. Taking rare pity on his confusion, Ahn streamlined the new information, breaking it into easy-to-follow segments. Apparently, Lord Takuu was under the impression they were somehow travelling from the Spectrum Alliance.

‘Didn’t you hear the lieutenant say, that you should return there? And the first soldier you faced was horrified to see you; they were convinced it was impossible to follow them here. And for all intents and purposes,’ Ahn added quietly, ‘it was.’

‘How do you remember this shit?’ Osomatsu’s general annoyance mingled with something more impressed. There was a reason Ahn was the mentor and he was the dumb fire-powered bruiser.

‘The Lord of the Liberation Force could never believe the Spectrum Alliance would entrust the salvation of the universes to individuals as underdeveloped as humans.’

‘Ouch. Okay, so the aliens think we’re aliens, got it.’ Osomatsu clapped his hands, another new unlikely factoid easily re-shelved as normal. ‘What’s next on the agenda, are we done? We’d better be, I’m out of tea.’

‘I, ah, don’t have a report,’ Choromatsu only spoke up once Totty and Ahn indicated there was nothing they had to mention. ‘And I’m probably wrong. But I … I think the puppet who attacked me might be the Doll of Darkness. They’re always talking about it,’ he stumbled, clearly a difficult topic and undoubtedly worsened by the endless hours he must have agonised over it. ‘Bragging about how strong it’ll make them. Look at the way the Liberation Force is organised, it’s clearly ranked—lieutenants, soldiers, slaves. Then this slave shows up, and he’s like nothing we’ve ever seen before. And the way he talks … why would Takuu send a slave with his envoy unless he was important? And since when is a slave ever important? They aren’t, not liked that. When he’s nearby, our lenses glitch,’ Choromatsu said a little hectically when no one said nothing. ‘That might mean something. If the doll is directly related to their power, m-maybe he …’

Osomatsu’s lens had freaked out on New Year. And the dark puppet had been close. But he was pretty sure it had just short-circuited itself over the massive fucking monster. He couldn’t remember if it had malfunctioned, and he stopped trying when Ahn addressed Choromatsu, so calm and patient. It was a losing battle, trying to relax him when his naturally-hiked anxieties ratcheted. Osomatsu was glad—and more than a little relieved—that he had help in that department.

‘This is not something you should trouble yourself over, Matsuno Choromatsu; it’s not good for you. I promise you, our experts are working around the clock—’

‘Our clock or Alliance clocks?’ Osomatsu had to say. Ahn spared him her swiftest “By the Alliance, if I have to silence you myself I will” glower.

‘—to determine exactly who or what this Doll of Darkness is. Our extensive searches have found no records; we can assume this is no tactic Lord Takuu has employed in the past. What we cannot assume is anything about its ultimate purpose, or the form this so-called doll might take. It may be that puppet,’ Ahn allowed, indicating the Alliance already pored over every scrap of data they’d collated on the dangerous slave. ‘It remains unknown by what dark means the Force managed to escape their prison, and we cannot pretend to understand the full extent of a mind so depraved as Lord Takuu. But it is unlikely they would hinge all their strength on a single soul, least of all a human slave. Is there something else?’ Ahn said, a fraction hesitant as she looked between the
brothers. Her deep eyes lingered longest on her green magical boy.

‘Actually, yeah. Are you okay?’ Osomatsu crashed through all resolve to leave Choromatsu in peace, needing to hear it from him.

‘I’m, ah … I … that’s not on the agenda,’ Choromatsu finished lamely, reddening furiously.

‘Like I give two shits about the agenda,’ said Osomatsu, short with concern. ‘Are you fucking okay or what?’

Between them, the spectrum guardians shared countless legitimate concerns. But the third born always managed to go overboard. Last night it had been his scar. His spluttered apprehensions briefly infecting the eldest, when Choromatsu showed him Osomatsu had scoffed. ‘There’s nothing there.’ Tilting his head for another angle when Choromatsu insisted, he just saw a silvered slash, uneven where infection had eaten into him. Despite its size, it was barely noticeable. So were the worst of Osomatsu’s hurts now, thanks to the Unicorn, though it was usually a tossup whether Totty would actually deign to heal him—“Do I have to? You’re barely bleeding, Osomatsu-niisan, don’t you want me to save my strength?”

Osomatsu had talked his brother through the lengthy worry session, promising if anyone noticed they’d put it down to a trick of the light. But the third born’s surge in general anxiety went hand in hand with the severe stress he’d suffered since his ill-fated bout with the dark puppet. Osomatsu had already pestered Ahn into spilling that his counselling had tripled at the request of his experts. Choromatsu clearly didn’t want to talk about it. But when Osomatsu went on pushing, he eventually stuttered, ‘It’s, ah, not a big deal. I’ll be fine soon. I’m sorry I … I … ’ He gulped, touchy airways ever unhelpful. ‘I won’t be … a burden to you for long, I … I swear, okay?’

‘Choromatsu-niisan, you’re not a burden,’ Todomatsu promised as Ahn almost squeaked in her hurry to deny it.

‘How could you even think that? You’ve never been a burden on us, what’ll it take to get it through …’ Osomatsu blew out a heavy whoosh of air as Choromatsu stiffened, eyes on the shined table surface. ‘We couldn’t ask for a better Wyvern, okay? You’ve never, ever failed us. And don’t worry,’ he added, swapping from supplying ever-deserved, ever-needed praise for a little something for his own satisfaction. ‘If that bastard ever comes near you again, slave or not, I’m crushing him. He’s not so tough, one punch and I bet I’ll …’

He trailed off, realising too late that he definitely wasn’t making Choromatsu feel any better. His brother had nearly had life cut clean out of him. Now Osomatsu was carelessly implying he was even more of a pushover. ‘That’s not what I … I mean … he’s not so tough to me, you know? We’re totally different, you’re … you’re support, not …’

Osomatsu shut up his attempts to tunnel from the grave he’d dug himself, Totty’s scowl entirely authentic as he reached across the table to place his hand on Choromatsu’s arm. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I’m a moron, I’ve got the world’s fattest mouth, and I … hey,’ he said, keen to change up the subject as Choromatsu nodded haltingly. ‘Something weird happened earlier, listen to this.’

In a few brief words, Osomatsu described the sickness that had struck by the employment office. It was barely a shade by comparison, but the last time his digestive system had protested like that he’d been bouncing off Lieutenant Souudai’s tainted shield. His body had known something was just wrong. All Ahn’s disgust with him seemed to dissolve, and she exclaimed excitedly that Osomatsu had sensed darkness. ‘Past guardians have occasionally attuned to the powers of their enemy. I had thought Matsuno Choromatsu would be the first,’ she added after a deliberate pause.
‘Hey,’ Osomatsu complained, earning a giggle from Totty and a weak smile from Choromatsu. ‘I’ve been doing this longest, haven’t I? But my scroll didn’t burn, there were no soldiers.’

‘There don’t need to be.’ Ahn harked back to Choromatsu’s observation that fewer attacks may mean an encroaching switch up of tactics. ‘And you may have just stumbled on one.’

‘We should check it out then, right?’ Shoving his chair under the table, Osomatsu was three parts annoyed and one part amused when both Choromatsu and Ahn paused for their precocious leader’s say so. Totty looking just so smug, the eldest rolled his eyes and left the others to smuggle Ahn out of the cafe.

Choromatsu balked at the prospect of entering the employment office. ‘You guys go, I’ll investigate the area … hey, quit it!’ he exclaimed nervously, Osomatsu planted a hand on each shoulder and steering him stumbling towards the automatic doors. ‘I don’t want … why do I …’

‘It’s good for your confidence!’

‘What kind of reason is that!’ Choromatsu exclaimed. ‘How’s that helping the investigation?’

‘It’s not all about the investigation,’ Osomatsu cheerfully, but forcefully goaded him into it. ‘They treated you like trash, and you got a job without them. Get in there and shove their goddamn faces in it!’

Osomatsu smacked him encouragingly between the shoulder blades. Feet tripping up in his reluctance to face his former employment agents, Todomatsu rescued the third born with a tsk at the eldest. Slipping away as his brothers went inside, Choromatsu to “thank” the agents for all their help over the years, Totty posing as an inspired brother keen to rekindle his full-time work search, Osomatsu quickly transformed and followed, hidden under a form-fitting barrier. Watching with supreme satisfaction as the dirty look on an agent’s face melted in disbelief when Choromatsu awkwardly informed that no, he hadn’t “given up” the past few months, he’d been working full time, Osomatsu started poking around.

‘I really don’t feel great,’ he moaned to Ahn as Totty played his part flawlessly, eager questions masking a dogged intent to undercover anything related to their enemy.

‘You will get used to it,’ Ahn said, bundled in his hoodie pocket. ‘What do you see?’

‘There’s definitely some weird shit going on here,’ Osomatsu muttered, the only evidence his spooked lens as the entire office seemed to shiver darkly from the foundations. After a moment, his tech slapped pulsing red dots over half the agents on duty. Not one had batted an eye to hear their hopeless Matsuno case wasn’t so hopeless after all. ‘Most of them are puppets—probably a pack.’

‘What are they doing?’ Ahn murmured. But they already knew: scoping out slaves.

‘Can we free them, stop this here and now?’ Osomatsu asked, sickened stomach slinking worse when Ahn said it was impossible.

‘Not without destroying the soldier who controls their souls. In time Matsuno Todomatsu will develop the ability to purge those infected by darkness, but at present there is nothing you can …’

‘What?’ Osomatsu interrupted, frowning. ‘Like a holy enema, or something?’

Deep in conversation with a charmed agent, Todomatsu almost collapsed into snorting giggles. ‘H-h-holy enema?’ he gasped telepathically, like it was the greatest thing he’d ever heard. Ahn’s furry frown severe, she directed her uncontrollably-laughing Unicorn to collect as many recruitment fliers
as he could carry.

‘We may find something hidden in them.’

‘All this job talk reminds me,’ Totty recovered enough to say as, arms loaded with paper and
Choromatsu badly flushed, they bid the staff farewell. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, where’s our pay?’

Well, shit. Treasure heavy in an inner pocket of his currently-substanceless civvies, he’d meant to
meet Tanaka an hour ago. ‘You said you didn’t have anything else to do,’ Choromatsu testily
reminded why they’d scheduled the meeting for that day.

‘Yeah, nothing important.’

‘What’s not important about our pay?!’

‘I forgot, okay?’ Osomatsu threw up his hands unseen, seeing no problem. ‘I’ll get it now, I’m
going.’

Tanaka would scowl blackly with the time Osomatsu made him waste. But he could smooth this
over, he was always fashionably late. ‘You’d think, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu said as they
fronted the doors. ‘That with all this paying money you’re doing, you’d remember to collect more.’

‘Yeah, you’d think … fuck,’ he breathed, dragging them away from the ad-bedecked glass.
Surprised, Choromatsu and Todomatsu tried to make the jerky movement look less weird.

‘What the hell …’

‘My contact is out there,’ Osomatsu said, low and fast. ‘And a bunch of others. Stay here until
they’re gone, okay? I’ve got this, I’ll take care of it.’

Praying none of Tanaka’s oily crew had seen them, Osomatsu sneaked outside when the doors next
opened. Hiding to phase, he left Ahn with firm instructions to keep out of sight. Hearing the stained
note of his voice, she didn’t argue. Osomatsu sneaked his way back, almost ignoring the ominous
thump of his heart—he was only an hour late, why the hell were they following him? God, had they
figured out there was more than one Matsuno? Pasting on a winning smile, he approached them
openly from behind. ‘Where the hell were you, I was looking …’

The tacky-suited gang surprised to a man—but not too surprised, Osomatsu decided with relief that,
if they’d spotted any Matsuno in the office, they’d only seen one—he let himself be hustled away
from the main street. Taking some heart that he wasn’t promptly shoved against a wall, Osomatsu
faced down Tanaka. He’d brought with him five minor mobsters maybe a rung above thug level,
three thick-muscled and two rake-thin and wily. ‘Well?’ Osomatsu broke the hanging silence, pulling
out his tiny sack of gold and dangling it before them. ‘This is what you’re after, right? You don’t
have to abduct me to get it, we have a deal …’

‘Matsuno, shut up.’ Beneath his hatband, Tanaka was as greasy as ever. But at least he produced a
thick wad of notes. Wanting this done a lot faster than he usually did, Osomatsu made to make the
exchange. Only one step forward, a meaty arm shoved him back, half-winding him. ‘We want to
talk.’

‘Really? You want to talk? In case you haven’t noticed,’ Osomatsu tossed out, refusing to give
ground as Tanaka returned the money to his pocket, ‘it’s hard to talk and shut up at the same time.’

‘We want you to come with us, meet a few people. We need to talk about what we both want out of
this little deal.’ Somehow Osomatsu knew “we both” didn’t refer to himself and Tanaka. ‘Plenty of
people higher up are very curious about exactly how you’re getting hold of this kind of …’

‘My source won’t go through anyone but me,’ Osomatsu said quickly. A few of the crooks snickered. The eldest Matsuno abruptly realised they didn’t think he had a willing source at all. ‘What, you actually think I’m stealing …’

‘However you’re getting it,’ Tanaka smoothly cut in as Osomatsu bristled beyond indignant. ‘I’m sure we can come to a more profitable arrangement for everyone involved. And we’ve been watching you,’ he added. That was bad news, whoever you were. But criminals taking excess interest when he had family and an identity to protect? Osomatsu barely contained his dismay. ‘We’ve seen you in action. You’ve caused more than a few headaches for our organisation—literally,’ he clarified unnecessarily. ‘And you’ve bruised a lot of egos. These egos answer to them,’ he indicated his entourage, ‘and, believe it or not, they’re not happy. You’re an annoying little shit, Matsuno, and a pain in our ass. But we could use someone like you. We’ve mentioned you to a few superiors, they want to talk about bringing you on board …’

Osomatsu stared. He knew it was a fine line he was treading, making dealings with the linings of Tokyo’s underbelly, supplying gems and gold for fistfuls of cash. But he had no intention of winding up a petty thug for some local mob lord. Osomatsu gave his customary cheek as Tanaka went on wheedling in his low slimy voice—‘We’ll make the career change more than worth your while.’ When Osomatsu went right on sidling out of “joining the family”, the minor criminal’s companions started to crack their knuckles. Some place uncomfortable between snorting at the threat and actually kind of nervous, Osomatsu’s pulse spiked at the flash when a blade was casually flicked out. His immediate, very sensible burst of nerves was fast overtaken by anger. Really? They’d sunk to blatant intimidation already? They were even worse at recruiting than the spectrum guardians were!

Spelling it out with no more glib sidestepping that they had to fucking learn to take no for an answer, two sets of muscles tensed beneath too-tight jackets, fingers flexing to grab him. Osomatsu slithered from the first’s arms and swivelled defensively, about to take the next down nose-first into the concrete. Thrashing his fence’s companions/goons wasn’t his best idea, but he couldn’t exactly think through any other options right now. He just had to get out of there, he’d figure everything else out as it came.

But Osomatsu warily drew his lashing kick back into his pivot, leaving his assailant untouched when Tanaka raised a languid hand, motioning his fellows to back off. ‘I’d rather not add to your list of casualties. It’s your choice,’ he shrugged sloping shoulders, Osomatsu very much getting the impression that it wasn’t. ‘You and I can still do business, right?’

Tanaka held up Osomatsu’s money. Not lowering his guard, Osomatsu cautiously approached. Quickly flinging over his end of the bargain, Tanaka snatched his wrist before he could snag the yen. Tensed horribly, Osomatsu made himself not react as the mobster leaned in way too close. ‘But I’m a nice guy,’ he breathed sleaze directly into Osomatsu’s ear canal. ‘Understanding. My superiors, well … they’ll be less happy about this. They aren’t used to being told no. Watch your back, Matsuno,’ he recommended, pinching with sharp nails.

The threat done its job, Osomatsu wrenched away and backed up in a rush, not once breaking eye contact with Tanaka and instinctively steering clear of the five he’d almost been forced to fight. Retreating into blessed sunlight and skin still crawling, he pelted away.

‘What happened?’ Ahn demanded, calling for the others as he collapsed beside her back near the employment office. Osomatsu shook his head wordlessly. He couldn’t tell them. Not with Choromatsu how he was. And Totty and Ahn had more than enough on their minds. This was
nothing. They were better not knowing, he would handle it.

Needing something, anything else to combat the fresh filth that bogged him down, Osomatsu found himself fantasising about the sweets Karamatsu had been baking. He had flair in the kitchen, and it was such an awesome thing to come home to—a world of Karamatsu girls were depriving themselves of a perfectly decent house husband here. Screw them, Osomatsu thought harshly. If they didn't want him, they could bloody well miss out.

Breezily rebuffing his brothers’ persistent attempts to make him talk like there was nothing in the world on his mind—“I got us paid, that’s what happened—who wants pocket money from Niichan?”—Osomatsu was intimately fucking aware he was getting a lot more out of this deal than he’d signed up for. And as he hurled himself between swinging punch bags all afternoon, the brutal training a pointless exercise in distraction, he knew he couldn’t put off dealing with this for long. Maybe not even until he was ready.

But one thing he knew more than anything else. Matsuno Osomatsu had to watch it.

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He’d gone upstairs alone, under the pretence of catching up on his perfect fashion. He hadn’t been able to hold his smile any longer. Every dear voice lifted in spirited disagreement, every peal of precious laughter that wafted up the stairs stabbed mercilessly through Karamatsu’s shrinking heart. He couldn’t do this, he couldn’t keep this up. He was going to lose everything … or he would have.

But Karamatsu had nothing left to lose.

He couldn’t remember when the tearing had begun. He’d ripped through a year’s worth of painstakingly-tabbed magazines before the idea he could actually stop had even occurred to him. Stilling his savage hands, sliced by countless tiny papercuts, took another six or so months of glossy pages turned to dead confetti. All his time and effort spent poring through those pages bloomed as one more knife wound to his chest. Then all his care was gone. All that remained belonged to his family. They were everything.

Karamatsu gathered the scattered scraps of magazine, movements first almost drunken fast staggering into hectic speed, needing to hide the destruction before anyone saw. His brothers …

He’d seen the looks. For months now, Osomatsu and Choromatsu had shared something, some deep understanding they didn’t even need words to convey. Their secret, Jyushimatsu said. Jyushimatsu … his sunny little brother had to still like him, didn’t he? He had to, he was all …

Karamatsu shook himself so violently he almost gave himself whiplash.

Whatever it was, Todomatsu had now been inducted into this new circle of closeness where Karamatsu was not welcome, their precious youngest distraught from the loss of those most dear to him. Karamatsu could never make up for that, never hope to be good enough to call himself Todomatsu’s friend …

For god’s sake, he had to stop, this was driving him insane! He hated it! Everything he thought, everything he was, everything was so fucking painful! It shredded him, mirroring the massacre he’d … but he couldn’t, he couldn’t stop.

There was something behind all this, something deep and dire. The blood, the secrets. Osomatsu’s apparent history of violence with local moneylenders. Karamatsu’s only older brother would never lead his siblings into that kind of trouble, not on purpose. But maybe it had been an accident …
It was like a film had been lifted from his eyes. He’d noticed more and more all month. Everything pointed to one undeniable truth: his brothers needed him. They actually, finally needed him.

Or he was as desperate as he was goddamn stupid. Of course they didn’t need him, they couldn’t stand him, he didn’t deserve them! Karamatsu was idiotically creating situations to try to salvage their tattered relationships, savaged far beyond repair by his countless failures. How had he failed them, what had he done? Why wasn’t he good enough for them to love …

For god’s sake, he thought with such loathing. Kneeling amid the storm of stripped paper, Karamatsu gritted his fists so hard his nails opened eight bloody slits in his palms. He knew why! Ichimatsu was right, he was jealous! He was so jealous, that his brothers were so much better than him. Better people, better sons. Better brothers. Karamatsu could never hope to be enough, not in his wildest dreams.

Mind replaying word-for-word everything Ichimatsu had laid out ugly and true, he couldn’t suppress a sob. He knew no one would hear from downstairs, and let the tears fall. He might even go down once he was done, and had seen to his blotchy face, right down to his confident farce of a smile. It was easier to glue in place after release.

Aching chest mostly finished its heaves, he drew the last few shreds toward him, a few drifted into corners and under the couch. Karamatsu tucked the corpses of his once passion into the pages of a few survivor magazines and hid them back on the bookshelf. Straightening, a small stack of papers caught his eye, tossed carelessly atop the low shelf. The print was bold, art bright and appealing. The photographed smiles were accomplished. Happy. Satisfied with their lives and themselves. Worthy of any love they desired. Karamatsu groaned in longing, scrunching the topmost sheet in his shaking hand. Something—god, he didn’t know what—compelled him to smooth it out, and Karamatsu read through his glare of burning tears.

It was a job advertisement.
The Train Job

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies! Decided to work on a bit of Magical Oso during my last week on break - back to work tomorrow *weep*. Hope you enjoy it, getting into some serious stuff here. Kinda blitzed happily through the first half or so of the chapter, then spent the remainder of the week in a sweaty, swelter-induced haze of nothingness - going through a bit of a heat wave down here. Probably shouldn't ride my bike anywhere until it's over ... but that means getting up extra-extra early ... blarg :) A point of interest to no one but myself (and my awesome sister) at this point, I've included something small here from an an original story that I haven't finished yet. Assuming it never gets published, no one will ever know what it is ... :D Thank you so very much for reading, and for all your likes, comments and support - love you all, you're awesome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aglow with eminence, the power of darkness only grew. The raw essence of void was all but alive, throbbing through the cavern stronghold as lifeblood. The catalyst of that dark energy, the Doll of Darkness lounged against the raised stone of his master’s throne. The air before him shimmered. He had commandeered his favourite scryer; their masked features bowed to the flagstones, they hastened to weave hundreds of arcane threads, their claws capturing the scene the doll had so idly requested. A slave to none but the Lord of the Liberation Force, it might well have been a command from Lord Takuu himself.

Blurred at the inconsequential edges and honed to razorsharp focus, the Doll of Darkness watched as his chosen blood servant conversed animatedly with an employment agent. Across the counter, the pack slave was smartly suited and made up to perfection so as to continue their earthly profession, a profession too easily subverted to the Liberation Force’s cause. Matsuno Karamatsu paraded his most overblown confidence and dramatic appeal as the young man ineptly attempted to sell himself. ‘No need for stress, don’t try so hard,’ the Doll of Darkness spoke to the scry, no care for who heard. A smile played across his lips. The mocking tweak of his features was softer than usual. Softer, and more sinister.

‘You sold yourself to me long ago.’

The pack slave acted impressed, even beguiled by Matsuno Karamatsu’s dire efforts, commenting on his snappy presentation, his would-be daring and drive. The young man was elated, every positive remark swelling his chest. The next agent across was captured by the hazy edge of the scry. Not yet surrendered her soul to the Liberation Force, beneath thick lashes the woman’s eyes flickered towards her once-colleague’s current client. She grimaced, the ugly expression pained and souring with every pose Matsuno Karamatsu struck. The Doll of Darkness’ smile stretched at the woman’s blatant scorn, splitting his face in half when Matsuno Karamatsu eventually noticed. Beneath all his unravelling fronts, his helpless bewilderment and despair was scintillating—what was he doing wrong? Why wasn’t this working? Why couldn’t he just be better? Why did the world he so loved despise him? The doll read every thought that savaged the young man’s mind like he screamed it into the void.

This was too fucking perfect.
This hadn’t been in his original plans. But the mark of true ingenuity was simplicity. Shrewd calculation didn’t hurt either. Keeping a broad mind and a sharpened eye, the doll had seized upon the opportunity the instant it presented itself. Pure chance had seen a pamphlet delivered to the husk’s doorstep, carried in by the youngest sibling. No doubt he required something more to take his mind off his friends’ abduction. If this was anything more than flighty whim and Matsuno Todomatsu actually followed through with his apparent intentions, they may yet collect the errant final member of their top slave pack, barely lifting a finger of excess effort.

But the pampered weakling would be a fortuitous bonus. The priority was to ensnare as many desperate and downtrodden souls as possible, attracting them with promises of support, security and steady pay—no previous experience required. Conceived by a sly lesser lieutenant and one of many schemes proffered to up their premium slave pool, it had been fast-tracked the instant the doll saw its potential. He might not have cooked up a more devious ruse himself. Designed to assess pre-selected targets the employment office slaves knew how to manipulate, they had already amassed a full troupe of potent slaves. All that was left to do was spirit them away. No one—not loved ones, not Tokyo’s gormless law enforcement—would ever know they were missing. At least, not for a week or so. And that was more than they needed.

Lord Takuu was intrigued by the plan’s merits and awaited the commencement of its second phase with great expectation. The Doll of Darkness was at his master’s command to assist when and where instructed. He resettled his slouch against his master’s throne, chuckling darkly. His obedience issues really were heinous; more time chained to the whipping post might be unavoidable. Funny, how that didn’t deter him in the least. But with or without his lord’s permission, he was making Matsuno Karamatsu his own unequivocal priority.

He might have been disappointed. The doll had a few ingenious plans in the making, all crafted with the express purpose of permanently tethering his chosen slave to his side. But he’d had the chance to flex his talents, taking control of the husk’s tongue to sculpt his chosen, teasing him to better serve their Liberation Force. The doll grinned harshly. He had Matsuno Karamatsu a heartbeat from total emotional collapse. And that was if he was lucky. He had to hand it to the husk—if Matsuno Ichimatsu didn’t grind his sibling heart-first into cement every time he laid eyes on him, the doll might have been forced to do all the damage from scratch. All blunt instrument and no finesse was hardly a role to stretch his wings and thrive in, however enjoyable.

In fact, he allowed without a shred of true gratitude—that was one thing, to his great pleasure, the Doll of Darkness was incapable of experiencing—without the husk and the oblivious siblings Matsuno Karamatsu loved so deeply, the miserable young man might never have ripened so, rich and prime for the taking. His gaze unbroken on the scry as the massive throne room buzzed with ceaseless activity, all the focus and industry of a hive mindlessly devoted to its monarch, the Doll of Darkness mused a moment over his fixation. Their initial proximity might have captured his attention, the young man’s sheer levels of repressed angst cementing it. Already serving out of heedless instinct, escorting the husk to escalate the experiments that had resulted in the doll’s awakening, it was as though Matsuno Karamatsu was a gift from the void itself. And the Doll of Darkness wasn’t one to refuse so delectable an offering.

And he hungered for the challenge. He wouldn’t just take him. Matsuno Karamatsu wasn’t any pathetic slave. One gloved hand tightened into a fist, like he barely constrained his slow-mounting anticipation. The Doll of Darkness wanted him to say yes. He wanted Matsuno Karamatsu to know who he was, to know the might of their lord and the imminence of his victorious conquest, and say yes. The doll wanted his chosen to come to him. He wanted him to come willingly. And Matsuno Karamatsu was such a good child. The Doll of Darkness coursed with lust to corrupt him.

And if he needed any other reason—as if he needed to explain himself to anyone—the husk didn’t
like this sibling. The doll’s lip curled. The failure of the Liberation Force, even his own master, to
differentiate between himself as Lord Takuu’s blood servant and the worthless shell he wore was the
only irritant that truly chafed his dark persona. But it didn’t matter, he didn’t care why. The Doll of
Darkness wanted him. So he’d make Matsuno Karamatsu his.

‘That’s right,’ he said, voice low and chilling as Matsuno Karamatsu shook the pack slave’s
perfectly-manicured hand. ‘This is what worth feels like, you can have it too. Just come to me …’

Hearing the slightest of movements, the Doll of Darkness casually glanced over his shoulder. Lord
Takuu’s favoured lieutenant stood nearby, making no effort to hide their intentions. They watched
him, closely. The doll laughed outright, ever loving that they had no idea how to handle him—slave
or saviour, icon or unburnable trash. But the Liberation Force would be thrown into chaos without
him. Tickled by irony, the doll’s laughter echoed to the ceiling’s towering heights. His every spark of
thought was for chaos. But he was still tied to his lord’s dark whim, seething to fulfil it. And he
would serve all the better when the gift promised him by his master was at last delivered.

‘Congratulations again, Matsuno-san,’ the agent was saying, placing a thick envelope on the counter.
‘Call me if you have any questions, but this contains all the information about the company and
position, and your ticket for the orientation retreat.’

‘Two o’clock, Tuesday the 14th. Valentine’s Day,’ Karamatsu said, brushing the agent’s fingers
with his own as he took the envelope. That contact was far too long to be accidental. But the agent
blushed like it had been something other than an unintentionally awkward attempt at flirting, reeling
him in with a coy:

‘I look forward to seeing you there.’

Cutting off the scryer with a flick of his fingers, the Doll of Darkness slowly pushed himself off the
throne. The stone colder than bone, his entire being being burnt.

So did he.

***

‘Argh! Watch it, would you?’

‘Is the enemy going to watch it?’ Osomatsu quipped, his offending elbow strike expertly pulled. Any
damage done was only to his brother’s pride; caught off guard, he’d stumbled backwards and gone
sprawling. ‘Come on, you’re not hurt.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, I … I’m not ready for this.’

‘Yes, you are,’ said Osomatsu. ‘Get up and guard.’

Stripped to his sweaty singlet and short a few breaths, Choromatsu muttered something about finding
an instructor who was actually qualified. But he shoved himself upright and raised his fists, taking a
defensive stance Osomatsu had hammered into him over the past few weeks. The day after their
combined defenders of the universes slash feline appreciation meeting, Osomatsu had announced
he’d signed both Choromatsu and Todomatsu up for an intensive course in close combat. Guess who
was playing teacher. ‘Come on,’ Osomatsu couldn’t help grinning as he squared off against the third
born, bouncing lightly on his bare feet. ‘Let’s see you hit Niichan.’

He had no intention of letting either Wyvern or Unicorn within a hundred metres of anything
resembling close combat if he could help it—no one was fighting that dark bastard but him. But
experience was a cruel mistress. And they had learnt. It was far better to be safe than sorry. And who
knew how long it would take to find the final two guardians? If push came to shove, however he
denied it, Osomatsu knew he may need help a few steps nearer the frontline before then. An
additional plus, knowing he’d stand a fighting chance if history ever repeated itself could only boost
Choromatsu’s shaken morale.

‘As unexpected as it is, Matsuno Osomatsu has a point,’ Ahn had spoken up after Osomatsu had
tried persuading, annoying, then bullying a reluctant Choromatsu into sparring with him. Their
mentor’s admission pleased Osomatsu almost as much as her reluctance to say it needled. ‘Your
primary role may be support, but you are all warriors. I know it’s difficult,’ she’d said to Choromatsu
in particular, his eyes lowered and spine rigid as a steel flagpole. ‘But any combat training can only
be good for you.’

Choromatsu might have faltered with fear and bad memories, but Totty had been flat-out offended by
Osomatsu’s unilateral decision to buff them up—‘I’m supposed to be in charge, you can’t just
decide things like that!’ But with Ahn on board as well, he’d shut up his whinier bickering and
gotten on with it. And Osomatsu had been just short of stunned when the youngest got the hang of
basic street fighting within a few sessions. Crafty and quick as a fox, Todomatsu could easily dupe
an unwary attacker, putting on the vulnerable act then hitting where it hurt. His tactics were hardly a
challenge for an old hand like Osomatsu—not yet. Still, he couldn’t pretend it wasn’t nice to finally
have a willing sparring buddy, whatever their level.

But Choromatsu was still having issues. Of course Osomatsu hadn’t expected him to throw himself
into training from day one, with so many demons on his back. But he’d hoped the regular,
increasingly strenuous workouts were imprinting on his mind and muscle memory—they
were
imprinting. Choromatsu had always been the honour student, he knew what he was doing by now.
But, weeks into the training, he was still only going through the motions.

‘Put something behind it,’ Osomatsu pushed as his brother blocked and evaded, technique top-notch
but completely spiritless. ‘Come on, you’re faster than this. You’re faster than Todomatsu, you’re
faster than me,’ he tried to provoke, slipping through Choromatsu’s weak defences to pound him
lightly in the chest. ‘Where’s some of that boundless straightman rage? I know it’s in there, use it!’

‘Spectrum guardians do not draw on rage to fuel their spirits,’ Ahn piped up, sounding like she’d
swallowed a textbook, along with a healthy shot of snooty. ‘They draw on righteous passion and
their hunger to defend all …’

‘Sure, that,’ Osomatsu interrupted. ‘So long as it comes from somewhere.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu said, lowering his guard and looking pained. ‘I can’t do this, I’m not
…’

Osomatsu flew at him; Choromatsu barely threw up his hands in time to hurl the onslaught aside.
‘I’m through going easy on you,’ Osomatsu grunted, spinning with an unforgiving back kick,
nothing Choromatsu couldn’t handle. And he handled it, even gaining ground as he remembered to
let Osomatsu’s momentum carry him off balance—or it would have unbalanced him, if he’d been
any less of a badass. Osomatsu had been trying to ease him into this; the eldest’s patience had held
out far longer than usual. But the spur of the moment spoke to him. And it said Choromatsu had been
well and truly eased in. ‘You know the moves,’ Osomatsu let his brother know he meant business.
‘Now I want a real fight out of you.’

Getting forceful when Choromatsu gaped, Osomatsu changed up his patterns, making his brother
think on his feet. Just veering from a glancing hook to his ear, finally Choromatsu responded with a
hint of aggression. Grinning in satisfaction and hurling the same basic attacks at him, but faster and
notching up the power almost to what he’d throw at an equal, Choromatsu countered every clash
before leaping, slithering or twisting away. ‘You’re doing great, Choromatsu-niisan!’ Totty cheered from where he swept up grime to lay out a few tasteful, inexpensive rugs. They spent so much time in the warehouse, the youngest had made it a priority to make it not only more habitable, but somewhere they could relax in real style.

‘Good,’ Osomatsu said, gone on the defensive to let a heavily-sweating Choromatsu string together some of the mixed bag of hits and kicks they’d been drilling. ‘Now watch this, maybe you’ll pick something up.’

‘If I wanted to brawl,’ Choromatsu panted, avoiding Osomatsu’s tricky tackle and knocking his technique in the process. ‘I’d charge headlong into a bar fight, it doesn’t take any skill.’

‘Yeah? I could take you down two dozen ways into the dirt before you could blink,’ Osomatsu tossed out cheerfully, just glad Choromatsu was finally starting to get into it. Nonetheless, he proceeded to demonstrate. Just to make sure he knew it. Moving with Choromatsu’s emboldened assault, the third born seizing his wrist to crumple him with a side stamp to the knee, Osomatsu curved away and forced him face first into the wall. Twisting his arm behind him, he broke Choromatsu’s grip easily.

‘Still doing great, Choromatsu-niisan!’

‘Shut up,’ he shot at the giggling youngest, trying to wrench away and shoulder Osomatsu off him. Grinning, the eldest let him struggle a moment before letting go, shoving him kindly.

‘He’s right, though. That was awesome. You’re a long way from beating the likes of me, but you’re doing fine—more than fine. Right,’ Osomatsu mopped his dripping face with the hand towel Todomatsu passed him. ‘Transformation time. Keep your guns out,’ he said as, his brother’s transformative storm dissolved a few moments after Osomatsu’s inferno, Choromatsu sheathed his pistols and gritted his fists. ‘They’re not exactly fire-powered gauntlets, but you can still whack things with them—you have, haven’t you?’

‘Just sneaking up on puppets,’ Choromatsu said, drawing his weapons. ‘Not in an actual fight.’

‘Well, you don’t want to be throwing them away the moment things get up close and personal, learn to use what you’ve … what?’ he asked, annoyed when Choromatsu didn’t hang on his every word. Frown deepening behind his mask, Choromatsu turned his pistols over, examining them.

‘Choromatsu? What’s up?’

‘They’re different, look.’ Choromatsu offered Osomatsu a pistol, handle first. Nonplussed, Osomatsu took it. Sure enough, an elongated sweep of silver double the length of the barrel now curved down and inwards from its business end. Almost an elegant crowbar, its tip curled in a vicious-looking fishhook. ‘Ahn, what is this?’

‘Nothing unexpected from you, Matsuno Choromatsu. Your armour, your weapons,’ their small mentor said as, interested, Todomatsu wandered over from his tidying. ‘They’re made through you, who you are and who you need to be.’

‘And right now you need a little something extra to hit with. That’s awesome,’ Osomatsu admired the steely addition, waving the gun teasingly over his head before letting Totty swipe it for a better look. ‘How’d you do it?’

‘I dunno,’ Choromatsu murmured, taking his weapon back and testing the new weight. Perfectly balanced, he spun them easily and left twin smoking divots in a swinging target he’d strung from the cavernous ceiling.
‘The Wyvern has always been adept at adapting to their present circumstances,’ Ahn said. Suddenly all sorts of eager for bigger and badder gauntlets—not that his gauntlets weren’t beyond awesome, but there was always room for improvement—Osomatsu immediately gave it a try. Screwing up his face, he directed all his concentration on deckimg himself out, Salamander 2.0 style. All he succeeded in doing was singeing his magical eyebrows, gauntlets flaring in protest.

‘Well,’ he shrugged, smiling as Totty bent over double, assailed by uncontrollable mirth. Aiming for disapproval, Ahn’s whiskers twitched in amusement. ‘Guess I can’t be a natural at everything.’

After a lightning-fast, no holds back (Osomatsu held back a little) battle royal, gauntlets versus combat-ready pistols, Choromatsu phased to pay a visit to his kinky gun cafe. ‘What’s that?’ Osomatsu asked as the third born buttoned his shirt, spotting an odd band around his wrist. Simple and flesh toned, it almost tricked his eyes, next to invisible against Choromatsu’s skin. Jerking away as, curious, Osomatsu made a grab for it, Choromatsu flushed furiously. He refused to say, yanking on his hoodie and outer coat and stalking stiffly out the hidden exit they’d cleared. Osomatsu immediately beset Ahn with questions. ‘It’s a monitor, if you must know,’ she finally caved to his ceaseless pestering, yowling out annoyance. ‘A monitor, and a dispenser.’

‘What do you mean, what does it dispense?’

‘Medicine,’ Todomatsu supplied, swinging his legs from his perch on his own luxury-bedecked container, now almost a trendy couch. ‘Sort of. It releases some electromagnetic thing, I think it affects brain activity … I don’t know, it’s Alliance tech.’

A slow unease squeezed through Osomatsu’s stomach. ‘He’s medicated?’

‘Matsumo Osomatsu, your brother isn’t well,’ Ahn said softly. ‘His counsellors and experts agreed that further intervention was appropriate. They sent the device by freight with your most recent pay. It’s nothing the Alliance hasn’t seen before,’ she tried to assure as Osomatsu stared. ‘Many guardians through the millennia have received such assistance, and few have faced such a dire situation as you and your brothers—it is a heavy burden you shoulder. And particularly given Matsumo Choromatsu’s preexisting condition …’

His rude shock evaporating, Osomatsu was furious this had taken place behind his back. ‘Todomatsu knew, why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I’m the Unicorn,’ Todomatsu reminded.

‘So?! I’m his big brother!’

‘He was uncomfortable about it, Matsumo Choromatsu didn’t want anyone else to know.’

‘Since when am I anyone?’

Osomatsu hadn’t felt hurt quite like this before. Not only was he Choromatsu’s big brother, but the two of them had been in this together long before Totty showed up and took over. He felt even more a scumbag, that he had to go and make this about himself—he wasn’t the one with Spectrum Alliance medical tech strapped to his wrist. But though he loved all his siblings, Choromatsu was his best friend. Osomatsu knew he was suffering. But if he couldn’t confide something like this in him …

Swallowing hard, Osomatsu held his temper and got over himself. ‘Fine, okay. Whatever. Now, oh mighty Unicorn,’ he raised his voice over Todomatsu’s pouting protests, jerking a finger for the youngest to get the hell off his comfy couch. ‘You’re up.’
A slave to low mood and twitchier than a rodent easing the crumb that would spare it starvation from a mousetrap guillotine, he felt about the same as he had since Christmas. Choromatsu slumped in his seat on the subway, staring listlessly out the window. All his counsellors on his back, he sighed heavily and tried to use the downtime for positive thought and visualisation exercises. They were supposed to help. Aeons of Spectrum Alliance research said they helped. But no matter how he tried, Choromatsu saw nothing but failure, agony unfathomable. Death …

He gasped, airways constricting savagely as his mind hurled him backwards through time. He lay on his back, chest split open while the dark puppet leered down at him. Almost choking, he barely restrained his scream. Knuckles white on the bar of the seat in front, Choromatsu trembled through the vivid flashback, shallow breath too quick and heart pounding in his ears.

‘Hey, kid? Are you okay?’

He couldn’t see, couldn’t direct his lie to the unknown owner of the question, nodding again and again, unable to stop. *Don’t waste your time, just leave me alone, leave me alone …* 

‘Kid, calm down, it’s okay … Listen to me. It’s okay, you’re okay …’

*Please … don’t tell me … to calm down …* Body totally rigid and shaking like a fragile leaf in a windstorm, he couldn’t move. But, through the onslaught, Choromatsu sensed a body lean over him. ‘Are you sick? Do you want me to call someone? Do you want me to stay with you?’

He couldn’t answer, underrun of embarrassment nothing to the ongoing horror he relived. But he felt the person settle beside him. He didn’t know whether to be grateful or mortified. ‘This is my stop,’ they soon said. ‘Go home, kid. You shouldn’t be out alone like this.’

The worst finally over, Choromatsu moaned, burying his face in his hands so he didn’t have to suffer the stares of judgemental commuters. He was going to die. He was going to freak out and screw something up and get himself obliterated. Worse, he could get his brothers killed. God, this was so fucking stupid, the exercises weren’t helping, therapy wasn’t helping, why were they making him do this? Why were they even trying to help him, didn’t they get it? He was a lost cause, he was broken, he couldn’t be helped. They should just rip up his contract now, spare the universes the aggravation …

Choromatsu brutally derailed that out-of-control thought train before he completely crashed. He could so be helped, what made him different from anyone else? Besides the alien monsters and grinning, wakizashi-wielding puppets … it was shit, nothing but shit. But he was overreacting. He had to get a grip. Like that was anything new.

Manhandling his breaths in and out, deep and slow, gradually Choromatsu emerged from his clammy palms. The bare plastic sheen of his skin-toned dispenser caught the train’s internal lights, bright in the tunnel’s blackness. It was set on the lowest possible dose; he was the Alliance’s first human test subject. He felt no better, but the tech monitored his bodily functions and brain activity constantly. His dose would probably be upped soon. Choromatsu had been reassured on repeat that the pulses discharged were harmless. The Spectrum Alliance had made close study of their quaint race ever since Osomatsu had signed his contract, they were well informed of human physiology.

Informed enough to prescribe a long-distance neuronal massage? Choromatsu shook his head bleakly. At least it spared him therapy on Earth. The third born Matsuno was highly aware he probably should’ve sought some kind of help years ago, maybe even as far back as the end of high school. But he’d always talked himself out of it, convinced himself there was nothing wrong. Just
him, making life difficult for himself. But now … he didn’t know what to do. Petrified of facing the enemy, Choromatsu was every bit as afraid of not fighting.

‘If it becomes too much for you,’ one of his more emphatic Wyvern experts had mentioned. ‘Or we decide you need further time to recuperate, your mentor may appoint a temporary replacement.’

He felt terrible, pasty and still visibly quaking. But visualising all too clearly his being replaced, Choromatsu could have thrown up. God … if a temporary Wyvern was brought on board, he gave it five minutes before the Spectrum Alliance decided they were a much better choice. They would sign a permanent contract, and Choromatsu would be out. And they’d all be better off. It was amazing their intergalactic employers had put up with him this long … god, he couldn’t stand thinking like this, he was supposed to be past this!

This was the longest he’d stayed in a job, he’d been doing well! He was integral to something vitally important—being the Wyvern fed almost every one of his pressing self-esteem needs. But his tidy, if cluttered, thought processes had met a hurricane the night Totty became the Unicorn. And his emotional baggage weighed down the team, he’d never be more than a lead weight …

But he’d never lost his cool as the Wyvern, he tried to remind himself. He’d improved, he’d saved a lot of people—he’d saved Todomatsu. And Osomatsu. Multiple times. There was no reason the Spectrum Alliance would prefer any replacement. Was there?

But he was affected so badly. If it wasn’t flashbacks, it was crippling attacks of anxiety, many times worse than those he’d endured the years before he became a guardian. It was only a matter of time before panic wormed its relentless way into the Wyvern. And when it did … Choromatsu clutched at his scar beneath his layers. God, the entire human race was going to be enslaved just because he couldn’t handle the pressure!

He moaned, massaging his temples as the train rumbled around him, losing speed as it pulled in at Tokyo Station. But his head pounded with stress. He wasn’t coping, everyone knew it. And they were all going out of their way, bending over backwards for him. He huddled his narrow frame small, not wanting to tell them their efforts were wasted. Osomatsu was just trying to help, but combat training made it a million times worse, Choromatsu unable to get it out of his head that some day he’d have to face the dark puppet again. And next time he’d make sure the Wyvern didn’t walk away.

But just as horrifying was the thought that, if all this kept up, Choromatsu would be put back on the bench. And this time it could be permanent.

Trying not to think about it and failing miserably, Choromatsu disembarked to change trains, headed for Akihabara. His unique shooting alley wasn’t exactly calming, but it usually perked him up for a while. He chased that high, something akin to his idolising Nyaa-chan. But this was different. The maids actually paid attention to him. He knew they were paid to please with all their cute and cool, but Choromatsu was almost sure he was getting special treatment. He even dared imagine they might think he was interesting, someone worth knowing. One or two almost fawned over him—he’d been an idol otaku long enough to know fawning when he saw it. It was strange, a little unnerving. He wasn’t used to it. But it was … nice.

Choromatsu felt something adjacent to guilt (though it wasn’t a bad feeling at all) that he’d very purposely not shared this with Osomatsu. It wasn’t like they’d give his brother the attention he craved, Choromatsu reasoned as he let himself be swept through the station, deep in the river of commuter traffic. The maids were gun nuts. Osomatsu couldn’t shoot a fish in a barrel if it was stuffed so full the rings burst.
He caught himself in a weak chuckle. Choromatsu almost looked forward to his quick lunch and hour in the shooting gallery—maybe the gun-toting maids would argue over who would take him up. Maybe he’d finally accept an adorable offer of a shootout …

A light moan startled from him, Choromatsu came to a sudden halt, his stomach punched by nausea. Speared by a moment of pure despair—of course he had to get sick now, just when he might almost be feeling better—he realised just as fast this wasn’t an upset stomach. He shivered, knowing the touch of darkness all too well. This was the same thing Osomatsu had attuned to at the employment office, it had to be.

Liberation Force activity in a train station at exactly the moment a guardian was passing through? Come on! This was beyond messed up, there was such thing as too fucking convenient. They’d exploded past that line months ago—what the shit?

Caught by the sensation as though on the end of a line, Choromatsu swallowed his flagrant disbelief and glanced towards the stairs leading to the loop platform. His train was pulling in …

Was he a goddamn guardian or not? If he wanted to show everyone, once and for all, that he belonged here, that he wanted to be here … well, avoiding enemy activity was a crap way to start.

Gulping, Choromatsu quit holding up foot traffic and broke from the crowd. His unhappy innards a geiger counter for darkness, he grew more squamish with every step as the sickening sensation pointed his way. It didn’t quite lay direction beneath his feet, but his mind supplied compass points to the more visceral instruction. Anxious the enemy may have eyes on the area, Choromatsu tried to be inconspicuous. But his sidling step and loitering behind vending machines earned a few disparaging looks, like he was some idiot imitating a spy movie. Or worse, that he actually was spying on someone. Not unaffected, Choromatsu’s face didn’t burn too hot. He had more immediate matters to occupy him.

Led down stairs and along a passage to an underground platform, dim and out-of-the-way, Choromatsu came across an old-fashioned electric train with its doors open. In contrast to the slightly neglected vibes of the dingy little platform, a lot of people were climbing aboard. Hiding out of sight, Choromatsu peeked around the pillar and analysed the crowd. They were mostly young, maybe early twenties to mid-thirties. Chatting animatedly, they were all smartly dressed for business, most with suitcases large enough for a short trip away. Salary people, by the look. Was this a private train? Were they on a company retreat, maybe?

Given how squarely the pull of darkness centred on the platform, Choromatsu doubted any innocent explanation. He was debating whether or not to get on board when a cheerful melody toned. Getting their acts together, the final few passengers hurried aboard just as the doors closed. Slowly, the train began to pull away.

Then Choromatsu saw him. Once perpetually weary and humouring, now alight with dark vigor no one but he could see, behind the glass of a carriage window and growing smaller with distance was the same employment agent trotted out to get rid of Choromatsu last Halloween, the day he’d become a guardian.

Choromatsu froze. They’d uncovered nothing imminent from their investigations. There’d been no suspicious disappearances they could link to the agency, nothing to give away what the agent puppets had planned. Choromatsu was halfway through compiling a report that outlined possible uses of an employment agency besides slave taking. Apparently, he’d been wasting his time.

Heart battering his ribs, Choromatsu fumbled his phone from his pocket. Promptly, he lost it. Dropping to his knees, he scrabbled on the grubby tiles, the device slid just out of reach—’Piece of
shit, don’t break on me now …’

There was no need for worry. The prehistoric model scraped and beaten to a pulp, it was utterly indestructible. Finally getting his sweaty fingers on it, he called Osomatsu. ‘Come on, come on,’ he muttered from his heap on the ground. But it just went on ringing—damn it, he must still be transformed. He’d scrolled rapidly to Totty’s details—the youngest hadn’t taken long to trust transforming with his smartphone on him, after seeing their devices emerge unharmed—and had already jammed his thumb to call when he remembered. Choromatsu was telepathic.

Right. That.

Feeling a complete idiot and flushing like the entire station pointed and laughed, he realised he’d never contacted his brothers mind-to-mind from this kind of distance—why hadn’t they experimented more? He knew how to get hold of Ahn, was it any different? He didn’t know …for god’s sake! How much time had he wasted now, fuss-arsing about telepathy?

Choromatsu left a fast voice mail—just in case—when Totty didn’t answer and scrambled to his feet. What was he going to do? That train was full of victims about to lose their souls. But how could he transform here—this was Tokyo Station! More than 3000 trains a day went through here, it was impossible to transform without being caught on camera, whether CCTV or smartphone. But if he went above ground first he’d never find the train again. Were bathroom cubicles big enough to transform in …

Shit, the tail lights were fading, the rush of kinetic energy receding. He was going to lose it if he didn’t do something!

Frantic and crowded by colliding thoughts, with no little effort Choromatsu made himself stop. Calm. Focus. He could do this.

Mind ordered as best he could, he ducked behind more viable cover, looking out for security cameras. He hoped this little corner of the station was as little used as he thought. Transforming with a gale and burst of electricity that made the fluorescent tubes flicker and dim, Choromatsu immediately engaged his lens, slapping a tracer on the disappearing train. Hearing a few voices shout out and the echoing smack of soles against the tiles, he fast took hold of his surroundings, masking himself in a close-fitted barrier. Holding still like he defused a bomb, Choromatsu waited until the curious encroachers slowed in confusion—“Where did they … no, I’m not making it up! I saw the green one, I saw them …”—before sneaking past with plenty of room to spare.

Flying through the station, keeping above the ocean of dark heads and repelling between flashing advertisements and train timetables, Choromatsu only dimly appreciated the odd effect his passing had on the people below. Glancing up as they felt the rush of wind overhead, their eyes slid in any direction but his the instant they bumped into his barrier; with a surge of useful inspiration, he’d grounded it on the ceiling.

Soaring up the last stairwell and into sunlight, Choromatsu latched onto the train’s blinking tracer. With an urgent bleep, his lens highlighted the most direct path to catch up. Agile as he wove through crowds, he fast took to the rooftops, only leaping a few low buildings before his glass directed him to train tracks. Not inappropriately, he was a little concerned any miscalculation here would splatter him. But Choromatsu skated light and speedy over the rails, boots just skimming steel as he easily skipped between tracks. Working in perfect tandem with his lens as he faced down the criss-crossing highway of rails, the Wyvern dodged and vaulted trains that roared too close, alternately anchoring his barrier on the nearest solid surface that presented itself.

The late winter wind whipped cold through his hair as he raced the trains, hood somehow unaffected
by its haphazard pull. This was something else. After months he still could barely believe he could do anything as wild as this.

Why couldn’t his shitty self be as levelheaded as his Wyvern self, he bemoaned for the hundredth time as he helixed through a narrow passage dividing two locomotives thundering side by side. Barely a scrap of attention spared to lament, he soon closed in on the old-fashioned engine the Liberation Force had commandeered. Keeping close behind, Choromatsu sneaked aboard at the next station.

Pausing to replenish breath barely lost and essence tingling with measured exhilaration, Choromatsu checked his barrier was locked in place and proceeded carefully up the carriage aisle. ‘Ahn,’ he reached out silently as he did. Unlike their next-to-useless phones, telepathy yielded immediate results.

‘Matsuno Choromatsu? What is it, are you all right?’

Swiftly, he explained as much as he knew. ‘I’m on the train now.’

‘I’m sending your brothers, they’ll be along shortly. Be careful,’ she added. ‘Do nothing foolish, don’t confront any enemy until the others arrive.’

‘Do nothing foolish?’ Choromatsu repeated, a shadow of dry wit revived. ‘You can tell us apart, right? I’m the Wyvern, not the Salamander.’

‘Hey!’ the Salamander in question protested, Ahn making sure he heard. Sharing a short, rejuvenating laugh at Osomatsu’s expense, Choromatsu disconnected to better focus on his surrounds. His concentration was formidable, but so was his sense. And unnecessary distraction was a definite no.

The platform had been bustling with talk, but this carriage was quiet, occupants with their noses buried in paperback books and smartphones, or else they stared out their windows, contemplative with the train’s momentum as scenery phased from inner city to suburbs. The train angled north for some destination known only to the Liberation Force. But wherever it was headed, it was somewhere far from Tokyo’s city centre. That was odd. Enemy activity centred almost exclusively on the city. But Choromatsu supposed they hadn’t been safe a hundred kilometres away at the beach. This was rare, but not improbable.

The next carriage was much the same, though a few pairs conversed quietly in their seats. Listening in, Choromatsu learnt that they were all newly hired, on their way to an orientation retreat. ‘I’d never even heard of Dark Industries,’ gushed a young woman from beneath many hours’ effort of makeup. Dark Industries … where had he heard that before? ‘Is it foreign, do you know?’

‘Isn’t the agency great?’ another agreed, looking almost worshipful with gratitude towards a woman Choromatsu recognised as another soulless employment agent. ‘I’d completely given up finding anything.’

Choromatsu burst with sympathy, all sorts of aggression restrained beneath. Lord Takuu was preying on people like him—what bait lured the desperate more reliably than hope? Perfectly serene through righteous crackling vehemence, the Wyvern continued his path through the jostling carriages, eyes sharpened for some sign of the enemy’s intentions—where was the train going? When were they going to steal these people’s souls and how? And how was the Wyvern going to make the Liberation Force regret it?

The slave pack was spread out, one per carriage. Choromatsu was calculating how they’d intervene
if the hundred plus victims—his lens totalled a hundred and seven so far, and he’d reached the third last carriage—were attacked in transit when he saw someone who brought him to a total standstill.

*Karamatsu*

Alarmed, Choromatsu shrank back, triple-checking his barrier remained sturdy. What was Karamatsu doing here? What was he … he’d found a job, Choromatsu remembered with an internal groan. Dark Industries … That’s where he’d heard the name before.

Halfway down the carriage, the second born Matsuno had no godly idea how much trouble he was in, tangled in this dark Liberation Force net; Choromatsu endured all that dismay for him. His thick brows knitted hard, but features otherwise disguised by his dark glasses—why did he have to wear them inside?—Karamatsu seemed totally absorbed in whatever the man beside him was saying—wait, the man was holding him, gloved fingers creeping to entwine with Karamatsu’s. Choromatsu blinked, surprised and as embarrassed as the Wyvern could be, wondering if he’d blundered in on an intimate moment.

Then his veins iced. Seeing his billed cap and jet black suit against his brother’s blue, he suffered a sinking feeling that plummeted the depths of the world’s deepest ocean trench, his entire body spiking with survival instinct.

Choromatsu didn’t need the splutter of interference through his lens, readouts riddled by green static. He knew exactly who held his brother’s hand.

***

Mum was beside herself, eyes glittering with joyful tears when Karamatsu theatrically revealed he’d begun to job hunt in secret and had found the perfect position straightaway. Osomatsu thumped him hard on the back with a rousing “That’s awesome, good on you!” A second later, Karamatsu crashed to the kitchen linoleum; a happy victim of enthusiasm, Jyushimatsu rammed him with an explosive blur of pure sunshine. ‘Niisaaaan! We’re so proud of you!’ Dad was gruffly thrilled, and gave one of his speeches about hard work and perseverance always paying off. Karamatsu had never thought he’d be the honoured topic of any paternal spiel.

‘Son, there’s no denying it’s been a challenge. But you’re everything we ever expected of you and more. That’s four out of six,’ he finished with pride. So completely chuffed, he beamed around at his gainfully-employed offspring. Eyes falling on the unconscious slump Ichimatsu made and Jyushimatsu’s vibrantly vacant smile as his attention was grabbed by a fat snail oozing silvered trails over the kitchen window, their father cleared his throat loudly and made no further comment.

Karamatsu could barely believe it. His grand announcement made, he hadn’t known what to expect. He’d imagined over and over as he’d nervously waited to speak up, praying that this moment would prove him wrong in every way, that his clinging on beyond hope hadn’t been in vain. By that point, it had been no more likely in his fractured mind than a chance to brush shoulders with stars. But this … this …

All his frail hopes seeming to come true around him, none of it felt quite real. The whole scene seemed surreal, and Karamatsu was more than a little fazed, congratulations lavished from all directions—lavished on *him*. All he could do was sit there, exposed and smiling uncertainly down at his hands. But, firmly at the centre of attention, Karamatsu soon glowed. It was a small happiness and tentative—fragile, like candlelight harboured through a storm. But, awash with his parents’ pride, his brothers’ support, and with so much potential to grow into much, much more, that happiness strengthened in steady leaps and bounds.

He’d been such an idiot—how could he ever have doubted them? Karamatsu couldn’t stop smiling,
that he’d been so completely and gloriously wrong. His brothers didn’t hate him. He hadn’t lost them. It was as though he rode a gentle wave of earth, cresting to bridge the gaping fissure that had fallen away between them, depositing him safe and secure in his brothers’ company. Karamatsu delighted in every one of their reactions to his good news, even Ichimatsu’s listless shrug—especially his shrug! Poor ill Ichimatsu—that he’d raised his head long enough to acknowledge Karamatsu’s success, offering so much of his limited strength for Karamatsu’s sake, sang choruses of solidarity.

One successful interview was all it had taken. Now he was well on the way to deserving everything. Karamatsu would finally deserve everything he wanted. And he wasn’t about to mess it up.

For the first time in what felt like a very, very long time, he truly believed with all his heart. Things were really going to get better.

Flying high on success and the boundless rewards it showered on him, Karamatsu splashed out, spending most of his remaining small savings on some hot office fashion. He couldn’t wait to break in the snazzy ensembles at orientation—what the hell had he been thinking, ripping up all his magazines? Idiot. His passions rekindled and feeling no little regret over their loss, Karamatsu bought the February editions of three glossy men’s fashion magazines at the tail end of his shopping spree. Within hours he had them tabbed to the teeth, the bottom corners of every page creased and smudged from non-stop thumbing.

On the 13th, the day before his long-awaited employment debut, Karamatsu spent the afternoon at Chibita’s. Boisterous and bawdy, it had the poetic whiff of irony, that Chibita was the only person with whom Karamatsu felt able to even hint at his obscene truths, that he wasn’t the cool knight errant he so desperately portrayed. Churning with anticipation as a few more nerves kicked in—he was really doing it, he was finally going to make something of himself—Karamatsu twisted his fingers unconsciously on the counter. ‘Chibita, do you think I’ve got this?’

Even to Chibita, he wouldn’t say how nervous he was. His friend slammed a beer in front of him by way of reply. ‘Don’t get bloody used to it.’ Behind the thick steam of his oden, Chibita swore and flashed an encouraging thumbs up, indicating the celebratory drink was on the house. ‘You’ve got this—go for it, you idjit!’

Karamatsu spent the night ironing his suit; he steamed through most of mum’s to-be-ironed basket once it hung straight and creaseless as though fresh off the factory loom. Choromatsu edged tentatively down the stairs just after midnight and sat with him a long while, his brother’s rest stolen by medically-diagnosed stress. That, or some unspoken terror of the night. ‘I’m not having nightmares,’ Choromatsu said defensively when Karamatsu concernedly probed, promising to make no more sound than a whisper of wind if he thought he might sleep better in the living room. ‘You should go to bed,’ the third born said after a long time quiet, glancing over the book he toyed with at the kitchen table. He hadn’t turned a page in at least 20 minutes. ‘You’ve got a big day tomorrow.’

‘That’s precisely why I can’t sleep!’ Karamatsu exclaimed softly, setting the iron down with a puff of steam to emphasise. ‘How can I think of rest when tomorrow marks the first day of the rest of my life!’

‘Doesn’t every day?’ Choromatsu said flatly. But the corners of his brother’s natural frown slowly coaxed upward. Karamatsu treasured the third born’s smile, it happened so rarely. In that moment, only the oven browning his latest batch of treats could generate more warmth.

Shining his shoes and styling his hair took until lunchtime; he’d already packed for the week away, borrowing dad’s clunky suitcase. After rescuing the washing up from Jyushimatsu, Karamatsu hung up his tea towel and donned his suit. Then, with mum’s soft peck on his cheek, Jyushimatsu’s grin and Ichimatsu’s unintelligible grumble fresh in his mind, Karamatsu took his suitcase, shouldered his
man bag, and worked the trains to Tokyo Station.

It was a small platform his envelope of instructions directed him to wait by. Karamatsu arrived early, but soon the place swarmed with freshly-hired inductees. He remembered from his interview that Dark Industries had just launched a brand-new subsidiary, and wanted a brand-new staff to match. Young, fit and cool, the employment agent had said, eyeing him up beneath fluttering lashes.

Gratified all over again, Karamatsu’s shoulders pushed back of their own accord. He tried—all he did was try. He wasn’t deluded enough to believe his act had become his reality. Not yet. But he was definitely one of the youngest here. And no suit hid a healthier body than his, the stand-out result of lone wolf workouts and the steep value he assigned body image. Two out of three wasn’t bad. And three was just around the corner, how could it not be?

Feeling pretty good about himself and liking it, Karamatsu angled into a nearby conversation, aiming for appealing pizzazz. Not giving up when he was flatly edged out, he soon fell into talk with a thin-moustached man a few years older than most of the crowd; he loudly introduced himself as Saito. Saito modelled a fine tie slashed with lightning bolts, used big hand gestures, and seemed determined to one-up everything Karamatsu said. ‘Your first job? And you’re how old? I’m thirty-seven, and this is my first job offer in eleven years! I’ve been to hundreds of interviews, hundreds! You still live at home? At your age? Luxury! I’m been in and out of motels since I was fourteen! You have five brothers? Just five? Twelve boys and a girl my mum pushed out, one after the other, before her poor heart gave up—I raised every one of them!’

Not sure when life had become a competition, but feeling a scoundrel for even suspecting his new friend might exaggerate his misfortune, Karamatsu gave him an attentive audience, humming compassionately through the tiny gaps Saito left for comment.

Once the train pulled in—a retro engine, painted black and bursting with nostalgia for a time long since vanished over the horizon—Karamatsu and Saito sat in the very last carriage—“I was in a trainwreck once, collided head-on with a half-constructed tunnel! Every passenger on crutches for months! I was the only one in the back carriage, the only one to walk away on my own two legs!” Not wanting to disturb the man, he carefully got up and tiptoed away.

Making his way through the rattling carriages, striding past dozens of new workmates with whom he couldn’t wait to foster a sense of belonging, Karamatsu still sought a moment of solitude. This was the first, long-overdue turning point in his life. He’d been cruising by that crossroads for years, the ongoing NEET lifestyle indulged by his parents with no apparent expiry date. But no more. Osomatsu and Choromatsu had both graduated from NEEThood. Totty had semi-graduated long ago. Karamatsu was ready and raring to join their ranks. He held himself to that, with all internal pomp and ceremony. When asked what the future had in store for him, he would never again respond with a jaunty “I have no plans”.

The second carriage from the front was mostly empty. Tucking his suitcase into the baggage rack, Karamatsu chose a long side bench and sat heavily. The distant, introspective pose he settled into, chin rested on his thumb and forefinger, was as automatic as checking for hurtling dangers when crossing the road. Of his six other carriage compatriots, he saw from the corner of his eye that four were women. Every one gorgeous, sleek-haired and long-legged, he couldn’t help but look.

It was Valentine’s Day. Karamatsu had loquaciously envisioned a flood of sweetly edible affection from a bevy of secret admirers—“Never fear! I’ll wait for you until the stars turn cold, Karamatsu girls!” Earnestly playing up his persona even as his heart strings trembled, he’d declared his undying love for almost every girl who’d captured his eye and heart. The number of relationships he’d shared
as a result of his outward daring was exactly zero. As such, whatever his grandiosity—that his “admiring” must be too shy, too overwhelmed to make their confectionary deliveries—Karamatsu had had no unrealistic expectations: he’d expected exactly zero chocolates. And he wasn’t alone. Even Totty had expected nothing this year, what with all his friends missing—Karamatsu’s soft heart ached eternal for their youngest’s terrible loss.

Mum, however, had spoilt the seven men in her life with a massive box stuffed with strawberry mousse truffles. A sleepless Choromatsu lending a hand, Karamatsu had decorated his sugar cookies early that morning, an inspired endeavor to encapsulate only his most heartfelt of brotherly affection. Tracing beautiful swirls of liquid chocolate, he’d savoured their imminent delight. All the more glorious had been Osomatsu and Jyushimatsu’s faces when he’d whipped the mysteriously-draped tea towel to reveal the sugary fruit of his labours. The big surprise, though, had been Totoko dropping by, a little package for each of them.

‘It’s just friend chocolate,’ she’d insisted when Osomatsu declared he’d known it all along: she wanted him. Punching him squarely—‘What’s happening to me?!’ she’d wailed when, jarred on the receiving end of her famous body blow, Osomatsu barely flinched—Totoko had helpfully unwrapped Ichimatsu’s gift, trying to tempt him into showing his buried face. She hadn’t sent them chocolate since middle school. So volatile, Karamatsu was touched by her surge of sweet compassion, that she’d noticed his poor brothers were having such a tough time. With so much competition and no guarantee any would be left if they waited to finish their miso soup, every last confection had been promptly gobbled down with near indecent enthusiasm.

He expected nothing. An odd, distant yearning remained to him, but Karamatsu had been all but drained of passion for girlfriends and social acceptance long ago—god, what was wrong with him? Nothing, he thought. Nothing besides the obvious, anyway. He just knew, some things were more important than others. But all his stars were changing—if his family weren’t lost to him, the sky was no limit. Maybe the complex twists of fate had a steamy office romance in store for him, as well.

‘Mind if I join you?’

‘Please do.’ Sacrificing his seclusion, Karamatsu swept a gallant hand for the stranger to be his guest, standing to help him with his small suitcase. The man smiled thanks, the essence of sauve. Stretching with a light groan as Karamatsu sank back into his seat, the stranger sat with a casual elegance the second born Matsuno envied, crossing one leg over his knee.

He managed not to stare, but Karamatsu favoured the man with several long sidelong looks, impressed. Not just anyone could pull off a suit like that, let alone that hat—straightaway, he decided to acquire one like it and experiment with similar dashing angles to tilt it. The dark military ensemble was from another era yet ultra modern; he was surprised that he hadn’t seen anything like it in his magazines. This man was probably ahead of the trend, it would be all over the fashion world in a few months.

Getting his first good look at his face, Karamatsu blinked. The resemblance was striking. About their age, the stranger looked quite like his brothers, like Karamatsu. More than enough to notice. But not enough that someone might mistakenly think there were seven of them, not six.

Realising he might have looked too long—though the man didn’t seem uncomfortable; every outward sign hinted he actually enjoyed obvious admiration from randoms—Karamatsu thought introductions might be appropriate. ‘Sorry to stare, I’m a fan of your suit. I’m Matsuno Karamatsu, it’s good to meet you.’

‘Likewise,’ the man said, taking Karamatsu’s offered hand. Karamatsu started slightly: his gloved fingers were so warm. He was rake-thin, too. Karamatsu hoped he wasn’t ill, that was an awful way
to start a new career. But he had a firm grip, and it was many friendly seconds before he let go. ‘I’m Kuro.’

‘Kuro-san,’ Karamatsu tested out the name, unusual for folk with two legs. ‘It suits you.’

‘Yeah, I think so,’ Kuro grinned, gesturing broadly at his suit. Clearly keen to talk, Karamatsu soon found himself deep in conversation with his black-clad soon-to-be colleague—an actual two-way, active exchange. Kuro directed the conversation—this was real confidence, Karamatsu found much more to admire in him. He’d never chatted so freely with anyone he’d just met—he barely chatted so freely with anyone, full stop, trapped in a frenzy of deception and saving face. It was as though they somehow knew each other already. And they looked so alike—maybe they’d been brothers in a past life. ‘Maybe,’ Kuro delighted Karamatsu when he didn’t dismiss the whimsy out of hand.

Cruising through icebreaker topics—how they’d spent their New Year and how long they’d lived in the capital (“Your whole life? Aren’t you the city slicker. I moved here a few months ago”)—it wasn’t long before they started to talk more about themselves.

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A touch more secure now he was shrouded by dark glass, Kuro seemed to sense something was wrong. Karamatsu’s tension mounted to dizzying heights. But rather than abort the fledgling friendship, Kuro retracted his open-ended question and got specific. And superficial. Karamatsu was relieved—this he knew how to deal with. How long he’d stayed in school, what club activities he’d done, and whether he had siblings revealed nothing of the vagrant emptiness inside him.

‘So a high school graduate. And drama? Yeah, you’re wasted in an office, I can tell—you belong on the stage. Six is a lot of young men under one roof,’ Kuro noted as Karamatsu glowed with pleasure. ‘That must be hard, sometimes. Do they treat you well, your brothers?’

‘Of course!’ Karamatsu gushed. Pleased to have reached a topic he had absolutely no issues expounding on, he descended into anecdote mode, beginning to share some of just what made his brothers so dear to him in resplendent detail. However:

‘Nah,’ Kuro drawled, cutting off Karamatsu’s flow of fondness mid-story. ‘I don’t think so. In fact, I don’t think they treat you that well at all.’

‘They do,’ Karamatsu said at once. ‘My brothers are beyond compare! No man on this blue Earth was ever blessed by such caring, considerate …’

‘Bullshit. You treat them like your weak little sun shines out their collective arse,’ Kuro said. His words expressive and deliberate, he slowed right down as though Karamatsu needed the extra time to
process—and he was having sudden difficulties in that department. ‘Am I wrong? I don’t think I am. They treat you like shit, don’t they?’

Shittymatsu, the whisper echoed through Karamatsu’s mind unbidden.

‘Drama taught you how to wear all sorts of faces—don’t get me wrong, you’re a good actor. But I’m better. Let me guess,’ said Kuro, swivelling in his seat to look Karamatsu right in the eye. Mouth opening and closing like a stunned fish out of water, Karamatsu couldn’t look away, his gaze a prisoner and his ears despairing as Kuro’s tongue lashed unchecked. ‘They mock you. They disregard you, they ignore you.’

‘No, th-they don’t,’ Karamatsu tried to insist, frantic.

‘If you say so. But how about this: they shunt you aside, they shut you down—you can hardly say a word in group conversations, can you? Any of that ringing any bells?’

‘I … I …’

‘You’re constantly seeking their approval, aren’t you? They walk all over you. And you let them, because you love them.’

Karamatsu couldn’t move, trembling inside his perfectly-ironed suit. Where had this come from? Why was Kuro saying such horrible things? He didn’t know him, he didn’t know anything about his family … was it because of him? Had Karamatsu somehow insinuated his brothers were anything less than the gift they were? How could he? God, how could he …

‘Th-they do tease me,’ Karamatsu managed to say, sickened as Kuro’s words resonated through his core. It wasn’t true, he didn’t think that. His brothers were the world to him. But if they couldn’t stand him …

At once Karamatsu felt filthy, like his entire soul was defiled and required an all-out bleach job to attain a state even resembling purity. How could he think that of them! They didn’t hate him, they didn’t! Karamatsu clung to that frail hope barely restored, all that kept him upright as all existence tremored around him.

‘Of course they tease, we wouldn’t be true brothers if we didn’t! Every quip is in fun. I rejoice every day, that we can laugh together, and I can …’

‘Trust me, they’re not laughing with you,’ Kuro said as though a expert on the matter—he sounded strange. The man had a strange voice, low and icy, but vibrant. If Karamatsu could spare the thought from his current crisis, he’d swear Kuro was enjoying himself. Thrilled to be stripping him down to nothing, shred by ragged shred. ‘Who you are and what you want means zilch to them. I bet if you were ever kidnapped, they wouldn’t lift a finger to save you. They might not even notice …’

No, no, no! It wasn’t true! Even if they couldn’t stand him, if they loathed everything about him down the very oxygen he breathed, it didn’t matter! It didn’t matter, because a good brother wouldn’t care! And if he was a good brother, they wouldn’t loathe him! God why did he have to care, why did it have to hurt so goddamn much … Karamatsu barely choked off a sob, throat burning and unable to break his sunglass-shielded gaze from Kuro’s; the man had him in a metaphorical bear trap. He couldn’t say anything. Unlike with Saito, where he’d had plenty to say but no space to fill, Kuro had ruthlessly removed his tongue with verbal shears.

‘It seems we’ve touched on a tender subject,’ Kuro observed. He gestured with one hand, indicating Karamatsu might want to wipe his face. Feeling as hot tears pricked the apex of his eyes, Karamatsu
flew to erase the damning moisture, a handkerchief dug from his suit pocket. Scrubbing his face and feeling the cloth fibres scrape at his skin, raw and reddened, he prayed for Kuro to drop the subject, that noticing he’d upset Karamatsu was enough to halt the conversation in its tracks.

‘It’s worst with your brothers. But it’s not only them, is it?’ Kuro ground Karamatsu’s desperate prayers into the dirt. ‘It’s your parents, too. Don’t tell me you don’t feel overlooked, taken for granted.’

‘There’s six of us,’ Karamatsu said, voice stilted like he knew that obvious fact was no answer. There were six of them; overlooked went without saying. But it wasn’t intentional. Mum and dad gave him everything, they’d carried him through childhood and all the way through his NEET years. And they were proud of him! Dad said, they were proud of him …

‘Did you give your brothers a Valentine’s gift?’ Kuro suddenly changed gears.

‘Ye-yes,’ Karamatsu said, startled. ‘But I just … it’s not traditional, I only wanted to …’

‘Show them you cared. That’s all you ever do, am I right? That’s all you ever think about. And what have they ever done for you in return?’

‘So much! My dear brother Ichimatsu …’

Ichimatsu.

The bottom of Karamatsu’s stomach dropped into darkness. Ichimatsu despised him. He loved Ichimatsu down to every last matted, greasy hair on his head. And Ichimatsu despised him.

No! Everything about Karamatsu rubbed his poor sullen brother the wrong way. He knew that. It hurt, a permanent shard of glass wedged in his heart … but he’d come to terms with it long ago, it’s just how Ichimatsu was! That didn’t mean Karamatsu should love him any less! The fourth born might scorn him, call him names. But Ichimatsu was so intensely shy. He was so lonely, so troubled —he was just lashing out! It was Karamatsu’s fault, he smothered him! He was too persistent when all Ichimatsu wanted was to be left alone—that’s what Osomatsu said, wasn’t it? And Ichimatsu was antisocial with everyone, not only him! What’s more, their personalities clashed worse than a colourblind kindergartner in the throes of a finger painting temper tantrum. And he was so unwell—how would Karamatsu feel, under health-related house arrest, in unbearable pain with no recovery in sight? But Ichimatsu didn’t hate him. He didn’t …

Even if they were in trouble, the last fucking person’s help they’d want is yours …

‘I … I … maybe it does get to me. Now and then,’ Karamatsu felt like he condemned everyone he loved to slow and torturous death by his betrayal. ‘If I get on their nerves and they … when they … but I love my brothers. How could one such as I ever deserve …’

‘You honestly believe you don’t deserve them?’ Kuro questioned, one eyebrow quirked in malicious doubt. ‘Because I’m telling you now: they don’t deserve you.’

No, he didn’t deserve them! He didn’t deserve them, he was the worst, how could he just sit here and listen to this, why wasn’t he defending them?!

‘You’re a sick young man, Matsuno Karamatsu,’ said Kuro, sounding nothing less than enraptured. His eyes burnt like bonfires on a frozen night. ‘And I like it. Sad, twisted—every smile you give, I can hear you screaming behind it. Everyone you meet thinks you’re trash, they can’t stand to be near you—but not me,’ Kuro said suddenly. ‘Don’t worry your little head about that. I get you,’ he promised as Karamatsu quaked in his plush seat. ‘And I think—and my intuition is second to none, if
I do say so myself—that you’re someone quite unique.

‘This is a dire situation you’re in, Matsuno Karamatsu,’ he went on, taking Karamatsu’s wrist in a firm grip; if anything, his fingers felt even hotter. Karamatsu shuddered involuntarily. ‘Getting a job won’t save you. If you believe you’re worthless unless and until you secure the love of your piece of shit brothers, you’ll always be worthless. Whatever you say, whatever you do, at this rate nothing will ever change. You’ll be miserable forever. … But it doesn’t have to be like this.’

‘Wh-who are you?’ Karamatsu gulped, barely a weak blubber. This, whatever this was … it couldn’t just be a random encounter. Who was Kuro? ‘Why are you telling me this, I don’t understand. H-Have you been watching me, or …’

‘For months on end,’ Kuro agreed unexpectedly. ‘Believe me when I say, no person on your Earth, not your parents, not your brothers, know you like I do.’

Karamatsu gaped. ‘Wh-wh-what …’

‘What would you do,’ Kuro said, all pretence of casual conversation obliterated by the revelation he’d been conducting surveillance on him—who the hell would want to spy on him? What was going on? ‘If someone gave you the chance to become more powerful than you could possibly imagine? If someone trusted you with the strength to shape worlds, to have a hand in scripting the future itself? You would never be trash again. Nothing you did would be painful. People would hunger to grovel in your shadow. And when they look on you, you would see in their eyes nothing but the awe, the love and the fear that you truly deserve.’

‘F-fear?’ Karamatsu stammered. Kuro’s grip tightened around his wrist.

‘What would you say, if you could have all this and more, the universes laid out at your feet? What would you say, if the one person who gets you, who actually wants you, stood by your side forever? Would you say yes? Don’t be afraid of me,’ his voice dropped to a murmur. He stroked Karamatsu’s shaking wrist with one thumb, slowly lacing their fingers together. So afraid, his mind screamed to escape. But he was glued to his seat; the urgent nerve impulses jammed before they even reached his arm. ‘I want to give you everything. I want you to … ‘

Kuro interrupted himself with jarring silence. Languidly, his eyes slipped from where they held Karamatsu’s hostage to an empty patch of air just in front of the passage dividing the back of their carriage and the front of the next. Unsecured, it had slid open with the train’s jouncing momentum. ‘I don’t usually tolerate being interrupted like this. But since we’re all such good friends … why don’t you join us, Wyvern? Wyyyvern,’ Kuro intoned, like he tempted a contrary cat to come inside from a rainstorm. At a complete loss, Karamatsu stared around the empty space. There was no one there. God, what was happening? He couldn’t take much more of this before he went completely to pieces.

‘Don’t play hard to get, Wyvern—I know you’re here.’

Closing his eyes, Kuro flared his nostrils. His nose tilted skyward, he sniffed the air—deep, slow and disturbing. Why the hell had Karamatsu welcomed him, he helped him with his luggage, he’d let him trash talk the only people in the world that mattered to him!

‘There you are,’ Kuro opened his eyes and smiled, like he caught one elusive drop of fragrance distilled through the entire train. ‘Trust me, the sweet scent of your first mortal wounding isn’t something you forget.’

‘K-Kuro-san?’ Karamatsu swallowed out apprehension, wishing he’d never answered that damn job advertisement. ‘Wh-what are you …’
‘Shh, now. Let me talk to the Wyvern—I didn’t expect to be entertaining two,’ he said by strange way of apology, giving Karamatsu’s hand a hard squeeze. Shuddering, his mind was overrun by images of superheated steel traps. ‘And so you know, Wyvern, this is a private little rendezvous you’re trespassing on. But don’t worry, we can finish our chat soon—I’m so looking forward to it. Here they are!’

‘What the …’

Gibbering, Karamatsu watched as a person stepped from nowhere. Lithe and hooded, the emerald-swathed stranger aimed twin pistols directly at them. ‘Wh-what is this? Kuro-san, you’re …’

Recognising the green vigilante and every one of the implications that came with them, Karamatsu felt as though his entire world had been whipped from beneath him. Straightforward and horrified, what could only be truth blurted through his stupid lips before he could stop it.

‘You’re a cultist?!’

Kuro nodded smartly. ‘That’s what you call us.’

‘But y-you …’ Karamatsu gasped. With the appearance of the vigilante, the other occupants of the carriage were now paying very close attention, frozen in their seats and breaths shallow, quickening with the same fear that drenched Karamatsu. ‘You’re not … I saw cultists in the …’

‘Yeah,’ Kuro shrugged carelessly, still not letting him go—he wasn’t going to let him go, Kuro was abducting him! God, how could he be so fucking stupid! The job advertisement, the week away at orientation—it was all a scam! And Karamatsu had fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. ‘I know, it's shocking. But not all of us wear the full getup.’

Trapped in Kuro’s clutches and a so-called vigilante training serious-looking weaponry on them, beneath mounting panic Karamatsu had the strong sense that the “so-called” aspect all over the internet was a grave error of ignorance. The masked heroes of mystery were very much opposed to the kidnapping cultists, and Karamatsu threw every iota of his support behind them. ‘What’s going on?’ a girl in a grey suit and soft yellow scarf—she couldn’t be older than seventeen—demanded, the first able to shove courage past chattering teeth. ‘If you seriously think you can just make an entire train full of people disappear, you’ve got another thing …’

The rest of her brave statement dissolved in a gasping shriek. The woman two seats ahead of her thinned, losing fat and tone as she narrowed, limbs and neck elongating impossibly and complexion plunged from pleasantly pink to white and waxy. Swathed in darkness and gaudy colours beneath, they wore a rough mask exactly like the cultist who had caused the pachinko riot back in September. Karamatsu stared. Were their toxins already at work, muddling their minds, rendering them helpless? He didn’t feel ill … no, he felt he might violently lose everything he’d consumed that day at any moment. But he didn’t feel dazed the way he had after his cultist encounter on the beach … supposed encounter, an overshadowed part of him piped up. He wasn’t confused. If anything, he understood the situation way too well.

But there’d been no murky projectile like they’d seen at pachinko. If they hadn’t yet been infected, made to hallucinate … then they’d really just seen … that was no costume! This wasn’t just smoke and mirrors, that woman had turned into … something. Some terrifying being for which the world yet had no name … what in hell were these cultists?

‘Well,’ Kuro dragged out, grinning at his fellow, far more visually-disturbing cultist. ‘Go ahead, pick one you like. Can’t you see we have company?’
The green vigilante fast angled a pistol to cover the second cultist. Not much of their face was visible, their hood so deep and nose to throat completely obscured by what looked like moulded steel. But what little Karamatsu could see snarled a message blunt and deadly: don’t even think about it.

‘Why don’t you shoot us?’ Kuro grinned at the vigilante. ‘How much collateral are you willing to risk? You know how I love our little games …’

‘Look out!’ Karamatsu screamed. But the third cultist already loomed in the doorway. And the vigilante had no more pistols. Shooting out an arm became three claws, long and lethal, as they transformed from a mild-looking man with neat facial hair, they dug the points of their inbuilt weapons between the surrounded vigilante’s shoulder blades.

‘Why must you hurt me?’ Kuro tsked, shaking a reprimanding finger at Karamatsu. But he didn’t seem angry, energised by the growing panic around them. At the front of the carriage, another cultist appeared, cutting off all escape short of leaping out the windows at 150 kilometres per hour.

‘Save us!’ the young girl screamed, trembling knees somehow holding her weight as she appealed to the frozen vigilante. ‘Please, you have to help us, do something!’

‘Of course they can’t, silly darling—can’t you see? The poor Wyvern is terrified. Come on,’ Kuro said with the barest hint of impatience—more avid anticipation—as the green vigilante gave the barest twitch in response, the tip of one pistol barrel wavering a centimetre. Come up right behind him, the third cultist poked their claws harder against their spine. The vigilante’s dark eyes blinked in surprise, glassed and wide. They really were scared. For a heartbeat Karamatsu’s own tenuous position was utterly forgotten, overcome by sympathy. Hero work couldn’t be easy.

‘Pick one, pick one.’

The green vigilante—the Wyvern, Karamatsu distantly appreciated the coolness of their name—at the mercy of unnatural knives, they could only watch in helpless ferocity as the second cultist’s seven eyes roved the carriage, taking their time to size up candidates for whatever imminent horrifying future the cult had in store for them. Karamatsu could barely breathe when two eyes circled independently to settle on him. Within seconds, all seven had joined them, nailing him in place. The cultist’s voice came, a ghostly hiss of possession. ‘Him.’

‘No, not him.’

Karamatsu’s heart jammed in his throat. Forgotten in the terror of that particular moment, the grip on his hand tightened past unbearable; his knuckles crushed together, painful cracks going off like gunshots. So casually, Kuro slid a glittering blade against his throat. Above his mask, the Wyvern’s eyes exploded in alarm.

‘Can’t you see I’m using this one?’

Chapter End Notes

As a random point of interest, this has been (as far as I can remember) sweet Kara's longest consecutive stint as POV protagonist to date. And he was absolutely exhausting to write ... poor boy :(
Empty Threat

Chapter Notes

So this story line has maybe gotten a little away from me. There's an awful lot going on here, in a few locations and with more POVs than I usually manage in a single contained-ish event. Hopefully I can catch everything and tie up all loose ends in The Train Job III ... 

Yes, I did the thing again, trying to squish waaaayyy too much into one chapter. Chose an all right spot today to snip off part 2. This does mean I now have roughly eight pages of part 3 already written, though somehow I've wound up with a bit of a social week ahead (I swear, this never happens) so I'm not sure how much I'll be able to get done after work. Nonetheless, hopefully this means I'll be able to post the next chapter some time before my usual month between updates ... really hopefully :) It's Valentine's Day on Tuesday, and I don't want time getting too ahead of the story. I know it doesn't really matter, I should probably just give in. Even if I was free to write without silly things like employment getting in the way, I probably couldn't keep up :) 

On another note, you may remember my going on a bit about a song called Empty Threat by CHVRCHES before a much earlier chapter. It's sort of my unofficial anthem for these magical boys. Surprise and joy, it gets its own chapter name! RWBY and Lindsey Stirling music has mostly overtaken it as the story soundtrack, but this song remains a vital musical influence for Magical Osomatsu-san :) 

Again, hopefully shall finish the chapter in better time than I usually do. Thank you so much for reading, likes and comments are a constant source of encouragement, happiness and inspiration, you're all so completely wonderful :) I hope you enjoy this chapter!

‘I’m just going to come out and say it—we have to stop meeting like this. People will talk.’

His pistol barrels quavered. Choromatsu struggled to steady them. His very breath arrested, he fought just as hard not to succumb as his every mental process stalled, leaving him exposed, afraid and alone. It was happening again. He’d let it happen. God, it was happening again, how was this happening again?! 

Like he watched from some perch outside himself, Choromatsu was numbly grateful his mask disguised any rogue whimper. But dark memory lashed him, freezing his blood as once again past became present and he crumpled at the treacherous slave’s boots. Thank god, the flashback was distant and blurred, as though transmitted through a poorly-tuned frequency. But even his Wyvern persona wasn’t immune to the consequences of such trauma.

‘So, Wyvern. Why don’t you drop your weapons?’

He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t fight him, not again. He wouldn’t survive. Ahn had told him, she’d told him not to do anything foolish. Dissolving his barrier breached entirely new realms of stupid … but the puppet had Karamatsu—he had him! And he’d known the Wyvern was there, somehow he knew. Choromatsu had every gut-wrenching reason to believe that the Liberation Force’s favoured
Get it together, he told himself on repeat, as bracing or harsh or compelling as each changing moment required. There was no getting around it. This was bad—this was very bad. But he wouldn’t break. Choromatsu was still the Wyvern—he was the Wyvern. Breathing deeply, he neutralised the worst of the senseless maelstrom that tossed his soul and sought to unravel him. The ongoing iced touch of fear and failure that he’d gotten them in this mess could wait until he got them out of it. He could get them out of it … assuming the dark puppet didn’t launch at him again.

‘Really, nothing? No comment? That’s tight-lipped, even for you.’

The dark puppet’s eyes danced, delighted as Choromatsu quietly fumed. He’d lost focus only a few moments, all his scoping tendrils of attention seized by his brother in distress. But it was enough to let himself be flanked—stupid, he was so stupid. Choromatsu had no choice but to move at the soldier’s sharpened insistence against his backbone, forced further into the carriage. But he refused to obey the dark puppet’s idle suggestion he drop his pistols. Instead, his aim whipped in precision readjustment as the first soldier resentfully gave up claim to a trembling Karamatsu and instead fastened the teenaged girl vice-like in their claws. A whimper crept from her lips, petrified. Choromatsu’s grip on his pistols tightened.

‘I wouldn’t,’ the puppet recommended, toying with his wakizashi where it caressed Karamatsu’s throat. The shallowest of cuts splitting his skin, he swallowed hard against the blade. His pupils exploded and far too scared to resist, the puppet released his crushing grip on Karamatsu’s hand only to snake his arm around his shoulders, holding him fast. ‘See, I’ve got this lovely young man at my mercy here—looks familiar, doesn’t he? I think you’ve met before—you’ve saved him before. We all know how spectrum guardians feel about the unnecessary suffering of innocents,’ the dark puppet grinned, intoning the same veiled threat Lieutenant Souudai had uttered on the beach. That storm-drenched night kept coming back to haunt them. But in that instant, its memory saved Choromatsu’s heart a second before it imploded. ‘Funny, isn’t it? How history repeats itself … still not willing to sacrifice one man to save a few others? Come on, Wyvern.’

The puppet snapped his fingers by Karamatsu cheek, making him flinch and indicating in no uncertain terms that Choromatsu drop his weapons. Choromatsu didn’t move. The spectrum guardians knew Karamatsu from the beach, he reminded himself as the seconds stretched deadly thin, panic reigned in long before it had the chance to solidify. That’s all the puppet knew. He didn’t know they were brothers, he couldn’t use that against Choromatsu. He didn’t know exactly whose life he dangled before the green magical boy.

But would the puppet really hurt Karamatsu … of course he would! He was ruthless, he was merciless! No one knew that better than Choromatsu. But he quietened his inner screams to hear out dispassionate logic. Karamatsu was a passenger on this train. That meant only one thing: he was a target. Setting aside the unsettling matter of why Choromatsu’s upbeat big brother was a Liberation Force target, he knew their enemy wouldn’t willingly destroy a chosen slave. And removing “willingly” from the equation, it probably depended on just how important was the target in question.

The dark puppet had been all over Karamatsu before Choromatsu even set foot in that carriage …

He stiffened, discerning thought put on hold as the soldier behind him hissed, shoving their claws into Choromatsu’s back. Curved and sharp as blades, the Wyvern’s impossible composure staved off a wakizashi-infested flashback as his sputtering lens threw up urgent schematics of his armour. Such stabs wouldn’t do much damage alone. But the concentrated razor pressure abraded his gakuran’s steel-like threads. If Choromatsu did anything to anger his guard, his tech gave less than friendly
probability those claws would pierce its worn defences, putting his magical spine at risk. He knew the time it would take to heal from such an injury was more than he could afford.

‘No need for that,’ the puppet said carelessly. ‘They know what’ll happen if they don’t do what they’re told—you know I love your spunk, Wyvern.’ His eyes flicked from the soldier to burn again into the young guardian. ‘But I’ll love doing something about it even more. You couldn’t defeat me before. What makes you think you have a chance in hell of … oh, I see,’ he broke off softly, his slow stretching of lips riddled with satisfaction. The carriage was silent but for the snuffles and soft cries of frightened targets. The puppet’s derision rang through that stillness.

‘You know you can’t win. But you’re trying to think your way out of this, aren’t you?’ The puppet cocked his head, as though he intercepted the Wyvern’s mental waves and was mildly impressed. ‘And you know what? On any other day, I’d put good money on you pulling off just that. But today …’

The dark puppet sighed in grand mockery of apology. ‘Sorry, Wyvern, but I’m holding every single card. One more chance,’ he said, voice lowering as he rose with slow purpose, hoisting Karamatsu upright and blade angled at his throat. ‘All ridicule aside, I know you’re no fool. Weapons down now, or our friend here …’

His fingertips brushed Karamatsu’s jawline. Karamatsu croaked something between a blubber and a strangled moan. Choromatsu’s stomach clenched.

‘What’s the phrase? Or our friend here … gets it, that’s the one.’

Shit, he didn’t have enough time. Whether the threat was real or ruse, Choromatsu couldn’t make that call when Karamatsu might suffer the consequences. He had no choice, he had to play along. Just until he figured this out. Or until his brothers arrived. Whichever came first.

‘Osomatsu-niisan?’ he reached out. ‘Todomatsu, where are you?’

‘We’re coming, Niisan!’ Totty cried out, not sounding woefully distant. They’d either reached normal ranges of telepathic contact, or reaching his brothers from afar was a lot easier than he’d worried. Assuming he had the chance, Choromatsu would be very annoyed if it wasn’t the former.

‘I don’t like to rush you,’ he said, the puppet’s eyes alight with menace. He was waiting. Gazes locked in unbreaking contact, Choromatsu set his pistols to stun and flipped them, holding them by the barrels. Slowly, he lowered them to the floor. The soldier stooped with him, keeping the clawed threat very real at his back. ‘But could you rush a little? We’re in trouble here.’

‘We?’ Osomatsu exclaimed at the collective pronoun. But Choromatsu already severed their link, needing all his focus front and centre. Setting his pistols on the lightly-jostling ground and raising his palms, the soldier guarding him pounced on one silvered gun, getting their monstrous claws around the trigger with ease. Jamming the barrel hard against Choromatsu’s skull, the soldier whipped his claws from his spine to clamp on his upper arm—not a soldier, he noted, hoarding every scrap of information whether it might help or not. A lieutenant. Their arms were muscled within their cloak, fastening him in an unyielding hold.

‘There we go—was that so hard?’

As though in reciprocation, the puppet withdrew the blade a centimetre from Karamatsu’s pulsing throat. ‘See, I can play nice … and when I say weapons down, naturally I include your element,’ he added unnecessarily, knowing full well it made no difference. Choromatsu wasn’t talented enough to subdue four enemies with air alone. Not without a powerful boost. And the air in the carriage wasn’t
doing him any favours. Completely stagnant, every window was shut up tight—first Totty’s crumbling apartment block, now this. How did the air elementalist keep being dumped in these claustrophobic conditions? Choromatsu’s eyes narrowed, almost daring the Liberation Force to take him on in the open air now he could use it.

Relishing the guardian’s subdued angst as all control was wrenched away, the dark puppet made a short scooping motion. At once, the remaining pistol vanished from the floor. Half an instant later it appeared in his free hand with a fluid fold through space. Choromatsu blinked, surprised in spite of his history fighting monster-morphing aliens. Teleporting wasn’t a new and exciting development—he remembered it had been the dark puppet who’d ferried Takuu’s envoy to and from their elevated New Year’s meeting. But as his enemy admired the sleek Alliance weaponry, arm now slung casually around Karamatsu’s shaking shoulders, Choromatsu realised for sure and certain: the rules did not apply to him. The deadly slave could portal anything in an instant, no need to waste time cleaving dimensions when he could just distort straight through. How could a slave have so much power?

All but convinced his attacker was their enemy’s fabled Doll of Darkness, Choromatsu stood rigid, unable to intervene as the first soldier rammed a trio of overpowered bolts into the terrified teenager’s chest. Suspended in their claws, she swung loose like a rag doll as she spasmed. When the girl next raised her head, her youthful features were scrawled over with empty rage.

Her master ready to morph at any moment, the soldier blocking escape at the front of the carriage advanced to liberate the souls remaining. Swirling dense masses of filth at the tip of their claws, their dark projectiles zapped into four hapless targets. Ten seconds of shaking in their seats and each rose, wiped of all sense of self and programmed to obey.

Stalking down the aisle with puppets in tow, their gashed maw dividing features rife with skin-crawling satisfaction, the soldier paused by Karamatsu. Choromatsu stormed silent, no outward sign but the tightness of his muscles. He hated being helpless. But he’d never hated it more than that instant.

But surprise tripped him up again. The alien lingered, raking Karamatsu with all seven of its beady orbs. But after several tense moments and a wary glance toward the favoured slave, they bypassed him, leaving him in the puppet’s dark clutches.

Choromatsu’s intense relief didn’t last. Why hadn’t they claimed Karamatsu’s soul? A hostage was solid incentive for any guardian not to try anything stupid whether their soul remained intact or not. Certainly a soulless hostage would be easier to control. Whether common sense or fear (or any plethora of blends in between) Karamatsu didn’t struggle, letting himself be draped over as the puppet flagrantly denied him all personal space. Choromatsu felt sick, witnessing the unwanted intimacy. But Karamatsu’s complacency was no reason to spare his soul. It was almost like he was being given some kind of special treatment.

Was that the confirmation he’d been scavenging for? If he was getting special treatment, whatever the reason, Choromatsu’s loose cannon enemy wouldn’t—or shouldn’t; the Wyvern cursed within, unable to take that any higher—slash Karamatsu’s jugular the moment the guardian stepped out of line. But was that enough to call his bluff?

Threads of the Wyvern’s attention trailed the soldier as they herded their party of slaves into the next carriage. More settled on his poor lens, coughing and spluttering data with proximity to the dark puppet. Soldiers appeared up and down the train. Disguised as fresh-faced inductees, they’d completely tricked not only his eyes, but his tech and his scroll-turned-brooch; it seemed Takuu’s forces were now far more adept at blending in. On the off chance he got out of this, Choromatsu had
to determine some way to offset this surge in ability, or the guardians would never reach an abduction in time again. But for now, all he could do was breathe out animosity as the train was enslaved in waves until the only human remaining was Karamatsu. The only human … exactly who was driving this train? In any other situation, that dire little issue would have warranted a great deal of immediate attention. As it was, Choromatsu could barely spare a passing thought.

The carriage emptied, all but for six—guardian and lieutenant, slave and soldier, hostage and dark puppet, who grinned broadly. ‘Wyvern, you are so much easier to deal with than certain other guardians who shall remain nameless. How are you, by the way?’ he said, flinging himself carelessly into his seat. Yanked beside him, Karamatsu’s breath came harsh, the rise and fall of his smartly-suited chest rapid as the wakizashi nicked his throat. Barely a drop of blood oozed. Beneath all his glib show, the puppet handled his captive with all care and attention.

‘Come on, who says no to a little friendly banter when hijacking a train? How have you been?’ the dark slave pressed, face smeared with counterfeit concern. Jerked forward by the lieutenant, Choromatsu turned a stumble into a graceful glide. ‘How’s your chest? I did some serious damage there, didn’t I? Fatal, even … But honestly, Wyvern, you don’t look so good—you’re kinda pale.’

The puppet indicated his own ashen face with the barrel of Choromatsu’s pistol. A slither of attention drawn at its mention, Choromatsu realised his scar prickled. Like an aged sailor’s arthritic knees foretold the coming of a storm, the irritation intensified to an ache bone deep as the lieutenant thrust him nearer puppet and hostage.

‘Take it easy now. Relax, don’t stress over what happens next. So long as you’re a good little Wyvern, there’s no way the esteemed lieutenant will crash this train into the next station … not even a flinch,’ the puppet observed as Choromatsu arched one sharp eyebrow so high it vanished into his hood. ‘Yeah, you know us. Wasting so many promising slaves is a huge, resounding no—even to fuck with a guardian. But that little poke would’ve sent the Salamander into burning frenzy, and who knows what your quirky little Unicorn would …’

‘Enough talk.’ The words scratched by Choromatsu’s ear. The lieutenant’s grip on his arm tightened. Apparently, they were far from happy their best-laid plans had been interrupted, however downhill said interruption had since tumbled. ‘I don’t know how you found yourself on this train, Wyvern …’

‘It’s not as though you’ve infiltrated any of our other devious schemes,’ the puppet piped up blithely.

‘But once more you find yourself beyond help.’ The lieutenant jammed the pistol barrel squarely against his temple. Choromatsu held steady. That was a point blank shot. But he wasn’t going to die. He wasn’t. ‘You are alone. Your so-called allies have abandoned you. Your precious Unicorn has left you to suffer alone. And I, Lieutenant Uuen, am not about to risk your besting Soldier Kouusokudo when I can destroy you myself, right here and now. Despair, doomed guardian, and know …’

‘Uh-uh, I wouldn’t,’ the puppet interrupted. Choromatsu couldn’t see, but from the sheer gleam of a grin the doll flashed he was sure the lieutenant glared daggers.

‘And why not, slave? From this range there is no chance they will survive.’

Choromatsu set his teeth, ready as the magic-infused steel jarred against his hood.

‘Do you really think so?’ the puppet said with delicate nonchalance, inspecting Karamatsu’s greyed face far too closely. Choromatsu was unpleasantly reminded of how the dark young man had handled Atsushi, as though he examined a product. But this felt different. The puppet had singled
Karamatsu out from over 100 targets on board. Was it chance? Was it only their shared history on the beach that made him stand out? Maybe. But the magical boy got the distinct, unnerving impression the dark puppet admired an item he’d obtained for his own use.

‘No one has come close to killing them before—well, I have,’ the puppet drawled. ‘But they’re hardly going to let themselves be liquified by their own lasers—this is the Wyvern we’re talking about. They’re slick, they probably set it to stun—did I miss the refresher course? How to fiddle with Spectrum Alliance tech?’

‘Then we stun them and throw them at my Lord Takuu’s feet,’ Lieutenant Uuen growled. ‘He has expressed interest in this guardian, has he not?’

Choromatsu’s stomach dropped—Lord Takuu was interested in the Wyvern? As in, interest that went beyond his imminent death?

‘Hmm, he has, hasn’t he?’ the puppet hummed, eyes sliding from poor Karamatsu—his lips slightly parted in soundless hysterics, Choromatsu knew his poor brother’s grip on what unfolded around him was tenuous at best—to leer at the Wyvern. ‘My master would love to give his favourite arcansists a shiny new toy to play with.’

‘Then let us fulfil our Supreme Lord’s desires and …’

‘Really?’ The puppet interrupted like he hadn’t just agreed, much to the lieutenant’s displeasure. ‘You really think a little stun will drop them? It might make them dizzy, if you’re lucky. I love the way your sly little mind works, Lieutenant Uuen, but if you don’t mind my saying, you’re falling down just a tad when it comes to thinking on your feet.’

Why didn’t the lieutenant just destroy him? Choromatsu’s thoughts whirled as his captor bristled. Didn’t the lieutenant outrank the slave?

A slave, yes. Maybe not their Doll of Darkness.

Testing the lieutenant’s grip with a few minute twitches of his muscles, Choromatsu realised with a cautious bound that, in the heat of argument, their crushing hold on his humerus had loosened.

And the hostage situation was a sham. He might have a sword to his throat, the same sword that had all but ended Choromatsu’s life. But any danger Karamatsu was in was not imminent. Choromatsu was sure.

He had to get them out of this, he had do something. Before the favoured slave provoked the lieutenant into hurling away the pistol and returning to plan A—namely, skewering him.

But the microsecond he moved the black-suited source of all his waking nightmares would run him through without a second thought!

You’re faster than this, Osomatsu’s words barely an hour past surged to flood Choromatsu with support. You’re faster than Todomatsu, you’re faster than me.

He couldn’t do this, he …

Oh yes, you fucking can.

He’d never live it down if he admitted it. Particularly if Totty lurked anywhere within a 100 kilometre radius. But Choromatsu knew he’d be nowhere without his stupid big brother to believe in him.
Choromatsu set his jaw. He couldn’t rely on his glitching lens. He held his breath, waiting on controlled tenterhooks for that crucial moment of distraction. With a quiet surge of triumph, he felt as the lieutenant’s claws shifted, breaking firm contact for the barest of instants. Without even a muscle contraction in warning, Choromatsu’s sleek boots left the ground. Coiled mid-spring around his enemy and gracefully treading air, too fast to follow, he slipped his imprisoned arm from between pincers that could nip a solid child in two. Time barely oozing around him, Choromatsu slithered at fluid speed, taking another calculated fraction of a second to disarm his opponent, reclaiming his pistol and setting it to full power. Landing lightly and pivoting, he dropped to one knee and hurled the lieutenant over his shoulder with a bolstering blast of wind.

Hearing their flailing crash into the far door with muted satisfaction, Choromatsu went on rotating, gathering much-needed power in wind with his momentum. His enemies’ positions superimposed on his mind where his tech failed, he needed only a split-second to aim. Confirming his rapid prediction, the flabbergasted Kouusokudo wasn’t quick enough to convert his slave into a human shield. But the dark puppet snapped across the narrow aisle, shielding their crystal with his laser-resistant suit. Trapped by his incessant grip, Karamatsu staggered behind him, all but attached at the hip. But Choromatsu had already stopped firing.

‘Ow … ’ The favoured slave stumbled back a step, hunching against what Choromatsu hoped was a lot more than discomfort. His suit front trailing acrid smoke, Karamatsu gaped in unadulterated horror. The spared soldier could only look on, masked features slack with just how close they’d come to disintegrating. ‘Come on! What exactly have you got against my fashion sense?’

Not otherwise responding, Choromatsu seized that brief moment of recovery, whipping his second pistol straight out of the puppet’s hand with one precise gust. Re-armed and back in control, he faced down his enemy, aim unwavering.

‘Well,’ the puppet said after a few pressured moments. In their crumpled heap, the lieutenant stirred, in no state to find their digitigrade toes. ‘That I didn’t expect. Even the Salamander wouldn’t be stupid enough to take that risk. But you might just be smart enough … you’re that convinced I won’t slit his throat? How about we test that little theory?’

His grin broad and lazy, the puppet clamped Karamatsu so close he must feel him tremble. Easing his wakizashi teasingly along the base of his neck and murmuring words even Choromatsu’s sharpened hearing couldn’t distinguish, he shot the slave an iced glare.

‘All right, all right,’ he relented, eyes gleaming with sick fun. ‘Don’t bite my head off.’

Tossing his darkness-infused blade smartly in the air, he caught it and thrust it directly into his own chest. Choromatsu expected this, and didn’t flinch. Karamatsu didn’t and did, shouting out in ragged alarm.

‘No, no, dear Karamatsu. It’s just a flesh wound—see? No harm done.’

The puppet swept a hand in proud display of his less-than-conventional sheath before returning attention to the Wyvern. ‘So you’ve done some training since last we met. Very nice, you never cease to impress me … I don’t blame you for the esteemed lieutenant, by the way,’ he added, as though this would lift some great weight off Choromatsu’s chest. ‘They were really starting to bore me—I was considering embedding them in a wall myself. But what exactly are you planning to do now? I’m just dying to know.’

‘Choromatsu?’ Osomatsu’s slapdash link carried his mental shout with rapidly-closing proximity. ‘Hold on, man, we’re almost there!’
Choromatsu breathed steadily, every demon held at bay. Outside, air rushed in powerful currents with the streamlined engine’s kinetic energy. With one deliberate, encompassing flick of his element, he unlatched every window in the carriage and threw them open.

***

Ahn half-watching from the sidelines as she brooded over Todomatsu’s tablet, Osomatsu ran his youngest brother through a few more advanced fundamentals of his crash course before they launched into some back-and-forth combat exercises. Totty was far fresher, given all the bouts Osomatsu had fought with the third born. But once the eldest stepped it up to all-out sparring, one round and finicky Todomatsu was every bit as sweaty as he was.

‘You run every morning, you sweat,’ Osomatsu pointed out, hurling his right hook and throwing in a stomp to mix things up. Totty avoided the instructive onslaught with a wince.

‘I don’t sweat like this, this is disgusting. Give me a second, I’m just … Hey, quit it!’ he squawked when Osomatsu stepped all over his time out, driving a knife hand to his collarbone as Totty tried to mop his face with the fluffy hand towel stuffed in his shorts pocket. ‘Are you actually trying to maim me? Watch it, Niisan!’

‘Will the enemy watch it?’ Osomatsu demanded for what felt like the ten thousandth time. Never letting up, he kept the youngest on his toes with a steady stream of strikes. With a hot little huff, Totty sneaked through an opening and retaliated. ‘There you go,’ Osomatsu swung into defence mode. ‘Took you long enough. Now, how about you waste a little less breath on your bitching and actually try to hit me, that might …’

Swearing, Osomatsu pulled up quicksmart. ‘Who says I’m not trying to hit you?’ Totty panted, almost scoring a jab to his would-be master’s throat with a technique Osomatsu knew only as “the peck”. Fingers curved into sharp beaks and suited for such soft and sneaky targets as eyes and nerve clusters, it wasn’t one of Osomatsu’s go-to moves—he’d barely thought to throw it into his brothers’ repertoire. But it came as no surprise whatsoever that it had become a fast favourite of their illustrious leader.

They didn’t train for long once they transformed, Osomatsu fast cornered by his baby brother’s big brown eyes—‘I’m so tired, Osomatsu-niisan. I don’t want to do this anymore, can’t we take a break? Pleeeeeease?’

Almost eye to eye, Todomatsu angled so he blinked up at him appealingly. The eldest knew every pouting ploy; ruffled leader of the magical boys or not, Totty’s number one specialty remained exploiting his brothers’ feathery-soft spots for his own benefit. Osomatsu wasn’t an idiot—he wasn’t idiot of the year, anyway. As often as not, he was very aware he was being played, twirled around that shrewd little finger. But what was he supposed to do? This was Totty, for god’s sake. The little shit.

Nailed by that imploring gaze, Osomatsu straightaway eased up on him. His reinforced skull suffered the consequences barely 10 seconds later. ‘Oww, fuck! Come on, you’ve gotta be kidding me!’ Tingling with the clunk from his brother’s gilded sceptre, Osomatsu only held out a few more minutes before dropping his gauntlets. ‘Fine, that’s enough. Happy now?’

Smiling with an extra pinch of sugar, Totty flicked his glistening chains away. Towelling off and pulling on a fresh undershirt, he tossed the eldest a bottled water they’d picked up that morning. ‘Thirsty, Niisan?’
Like he’d swallowed a desert. Osomatsu caught it mid-phase and threw his head back. He’d swigged down the water and half a bottle of Pocari Sweat before Ahn started nagging he take it easy on the speed hydration. ‘At this rate, you’ll give yourself cramps.’

Gulping one more mouthful just to annoy her, Osomatsu wiped his mouth on his hoodie sleeve. He didn’t even come close to hiding his smirk. ‘Whatever you say, mum.’

Ahn’s ears glowed scarlet. Totty took pity on their flustered mentor, scolding Osomatsu as he filled a pretty porcelain bowl from his own water bottle. With Todomatsu’s input and encouragement, Ahn had shyly picked the design herself on one of their unnumbered retail adventures. Its rim laced with delicate rosebuds, the little dish was cute and sweet. Just like them, Totty had declared on showing off their latest haul, Ahn pink and pleased on his shoulder. Maybe true. But it wasn’t Ahn’s sweetness that had whipped Osomatsu into the awesome Salamander he was. And, however his hooded tunic sparkled, cute wasn’t what had signed Todomatsu’s contract.

‘Ahn-chan, you need a break, too. What are we going to do in summer?’ the youngest said, glancing around their warehouse as Ahn lapped self-consciously. As good as an industrial freezer in the winter, in a few months their all-important refreshments would need some serious chilling.

‘Invest in a cooler box?’ Osomatsu shrugged. He’d never considered the logistics of fighting evil through the seasons. ‘I dunno, make Choromatsu figure it out. Keeping shit on ice isn’t exactly my department.’

Totty grimaced like the warehouse already sweltered. ‘It’s so gross in here when we’re training. How hot is it going to get in July?’

‘Do you think we’ll still be doing this in July?’

Wow … where had that come from? The question out well before he’d finished thinking it, Osomatsu sank slowly onto his container. He felt suddenly very strange, unprepared and confronted by the fact that one day, one way or another, their crusade would be over.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu … We can only hope you will defeat Lord Takuu so soon, before he wrecks havoc that cannot be reversed.’ As Totty buttoned his stylish civvies, Ahn padded lightly between containers to sit by Osomatsu. ‘Of course it’s important to look to the future. But better you don’t stray too far ahead,’ she said, placing one oversized paw on his knee. ‘You have more than enough to trouble you here and now.’

Osomatsu soaked up her comfort, his need sudden and strong. They’d been mis-matched comrades for half a year now. Ahn knew Osomatsu as well as anyone, as well as his brothers. In some ways special and unspoken, she knew him better. And his fluffy childlike mentor—his ally. His friend. She knew this had nothing to do with their looming impossible tasks, conquering and sealing away the greatest threat ever known to the universes. Letting Osomatsu tickle her neck like she hadn’t snapped at him every time he’d tried last week, Ahn sighed.

‘By the Alliance, you must be the most temperamental spark in all history … Come now,’ she went all out to encourage when he didn’t even protest. ‘We haven’t even united all five guardians yet. Speaking of which,’ she said, extracting herself from Osomatsu’s absent-stroking fingers—not without twining through in an unexpected show of strong affection. Totty’s tablet overloaded with profiles, leader and mentor settled in for an afternoon of industrious bickering, chewing over their top-ranked Kraken and Sphinx candidates.

Osomatsu left them to it. Shunting his shadows aside, straightaway he felt better—that’s right, future Osomatsu could deal with that shit. Stretched out on his stomach with a manga he’d left on his
container, the on-call Salamander idled through some much-deserved relaxation. He’d barely leafed through three pages before Totty’s animated timbre changed. ‘Ahn-chan? What’s wrong?’

Only moments ago defending her favoured Sphinx—an athletics star cum kindergarten teacher with four on them in years and height in heads; Totty insisted they’d look ridiculous next to her, but Osomatsu had no issues, already asking when the knockout could sign up—Ahn’s lofty posture stiffened, the tuft of her tail puffed dandelion-like in surprise. ‘It’s Matsuno Choromatsu.’

‘Choromatsu?’ Osomatsu threw down his manga and swivelled upright so fast he almost toppled. ‘What, is something up, did he call? Why aren’t you putting him on speaker?’ he demanded.

Ahn’s eyes flashed. ‘Will you be quiet?!’ Harried on multiple fronts, she kept the exchange with Choromatsu private. Osomatsu tried to nudge his mental way into the conversation. But Ahn was too good, defenses knocking him flat on his metaphorical arse. Grouching at the exclusion, Osomatsu prickled with unease as Totty hurriedly produced his smartphone. Sure enough, Choromatsu had left a voicemail.

‘Totty, are you there? Pick up, pick up … I guess you’re, ah, busy right now. Look, I’ve got to fly, but if you get this before I can, ah, call again, come find me, okay? There’s, ah, stuff going on … I could use some help …’

He’d disconnected abruptly. The message halting and not overly helpful—their scrolls hadn’t flared, what the hell was going on?—Osomatsu flipped open his phone and saw he too had missed a call. Todomatsu stared at his empty smartphone screen in disbelief. ‘I … didn’t check my phone. After we phased. Why didn’t I check my phone, I always check it!’

The smartphone remained a permanent fixture, safe in his pocket or clutched in his hand like some final link to a lost world. But Todomatsu’s obsessive use of the device had slipped, thumbs no longer flying to tap flashing alerts or immersed in unending back-and-forth on Line. ‘What’s so weird about that? There’s no point, right? Any notification you get, you know it’s not them … sorry.’

Osomatsu condemned his fat mouth to a slow and painful death. Abandoning words and throwing an arm around Totty instead, a few half-hearted squirms beneath his brother’s apology were all the youngest managed before huddling into him like a lost child.

‘It’s shit, I know it’s all shit … come on, fearless leader,’ Osomatsu smacked him gently on the back as Ahn cut her link, looking worried. ‘Looks like we’re being deployed.’

‘The enemy has a train full of targets,’ Ahn briefed them as the two transformed with a roar of flames and a silvered glisten. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu has managed to sneak on board, he’s monitoring the situation until you arrive.’

‘That’s lucky,’ Todomatsu observed, sweeping his sceptre from his effervescent pose. ‘We never would have known if he hadn’t stumbled on them.’

‘No soldiers,’ Ahn agreed their scrolls couldn’t have burnt. ‘Slaves, the pack from the employment office. Lock onto your brother’s location, we can track him straight to the train …’

‘Hold up,’ Osomatsu interrupted as Ahn dove to nestle in his battle hoodie. ‘What do you think you’re doing, you’re not coming.’ Dragging the indignant kitten out by the scruff of her neck, he dumped her unceremoniously on a container. ‘Stay here, okay?’

‘It might be for the best,’ Todomatsu unexpectedly agreed, stroking Ahn’s silken ears as their tips drooped. ‘It’s a train, there won’t be much room to move. What if we get there and everyone’s
soulless? They might swarm us. And we don’t want some clumsy old puppet crushing your sweet little paws. Do we, Ahn-chan?’

‘But there are no soldiers …’

‘But the slaves are getting pretty damn scary—who says the powerful ones can’t steal souls? You can still boss us around,’ Osomatsu reminded when Ahn couldn’t deny the possibility, charging his boots and stamping into the air with a lick of flames to cement. ‘And you can get visuals from the Spectrum Alliance, right?’ Intermittently pestering Ahn and Choromatsu over time, Osomatsu had decided their mentor’s entire little body was infused with magical technology.

‘Of course,’ the highly-strung kitten fretted. ‘But what if you need me to …’

‘Nah, we’ll be fine. Don’t worry,’ Osomatsu eased her anxiety as much as her pride. ‘We can handle this, we’ll be back before you …’

‘Wait!’ she exclaimed as the Salamander and Unicorn jumped through the highly-convenient hole in the roof. ‘You need me to hold a barrier, everyone will see you!’

Osomatsu pulled up short on the rusted roofing. She was right. That obvious little detail had totally slipped his mind. ‘Can’t you teach us?’ Totty asked, exchanging a worried glance with the eldest. A tiny cotton-ball speck below, Ahn shook her head incessantly.

‘It took Matsuno Choromatsu weeks to learn, and he actually has the aptitude … just what are you grinning about?’ she demanded, somehow knowing as Osomatsu’s distant hidden face plastered over with some kind of supreme shit-stirring resignation. ‘What exactly about this situation does the spark find so … don’t even think about it,’ she growled. It was amazing how dangerous her lilting teenage voice could drop.

‘What?’ Osomatsu threw his gauntlets wide, putting himself on display. ‘Everyone already knows about us, why the hell not?’

‘If any of your law enforcement sees you …’

‘Then we’d better do this quickly.’

Signalling Totty to take flight before Ahn could harangue them any further, the guardians leapt unshielded into the Tokyo haze. ‘We’ve never had to save so many people at once before,’ Todomatsu voiced as they hopscotched over hulking industrial frameworks before their lenses directed them to train tracks, tracing the way to Choromatsu’s blinking green dot.

‘This may be a new method of abduction,’ Ahn said stiffly from the warehouse. Osomatsu would be spoiling her with treats and compliments for a month before she forgave him. ‘But it could also be preparation for another experiment. He has been hoarding power for months. It’s only a matter of time before Lord Takuu attempts a mass turning. He will want to test his abilities. Either way, you must prevent the employment office slaves from delivering him the passengers.’

‘Stop that train,’ Osomatsu summarised, thrills shooting up and down his nerves. Who didn’t want the chance to say something so badass, this shit was straight out of a movie. ‘Got it.’

The youngest’s heels gliding as easily against the steel rails as Osomatsu’s running boots, Todomatsu beamed. ‘This is incredible!’ he bubbled as they outran a passenger train, the Unicorn taking a slightly more conservative route to avoid an oncoming engine while Osomatsu barged straight over the top. ‘This is much faster than jumping everywhere, why haven’t we tried this before?’
'Because you’ll cause an accident!' Ahn exclaimed shrilly. ‘If you’re trying to attract attention, you’re doing a brilliant job. Just catch up with that train, move it!' 

‘Sorry, Ahn-chan,’ Totty offered sweet apology, eyes sparkling with much more than his light. Glad he was smiling again, Osomatsu picked up the pace something fierce. Arms pumping and hair whipping beneath his hood, he cawed in glee when his lens clocked him at almost 200 kilometres per hour. ‘Keep up, little brother!’ he shouted, hearing as Totty’s heels scraped steel, a few skating strides behind. The train had a massive head start, but it was no match for a guardian on mission.

His jittery lens learnt its lesson, it guided Osomatsu with plenty of time to spare the few times a nearby train shared his rails. To keep both tech and Ahn off his back, Osomatsu pulled no more stunts, keeping well out of the way. Searing through Tokyo’s northern suburbs, Osomatsu’s lens placed their brother’s ever-shifting location 30 kilometres ahead. And they gained ground steadily—25 kilometres ahead. Then 20. Fifteen.

‘Osomatsu-niisan? Todomatsu, where are you?’ Just over 10 kilometres ahead, Choromatsu latched onto their minds, his mental tones pressured.

‘We’re coming, Niisan!’ cried Totty.

I don’t like to rush you,’ he said, Osomatsu’s stomach clenching as he did exactly that, straining his enhanced muscles beyond any exertion they’d known. ‘But could you rush a little? We’re in trouble here.’

‘We?’ Osomatsu demanded. Who the hell was “we”? But their brother had already disconnected—goddammit, Choromatsu! ‘What the hell is he doing? He’s meant to be keeping watch, not taking on the pack alone!’

‘He didn’t have a choice,’ Todomatsu surmised grimly, pushing himself even harder, become a streak of glittering starlight. No more bantering the trip away, the guardians directed all they were to speed. Osomatsu praised the slip of the rails like a deity. They were fast, but no way could the Salamander and Unicorn catch up without the extra help.

Osomatsu’s garnet-adorned zip suddenly throbbed, pulsing hot against his chest. ‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Totty cried out; the Unicorn’s circlet burnt with the same warning.

‘Oh, that’s just great!’ Osomatsu burst with pissed hyperbole. ‘We’re sprinting a marathon at lightspeed, and now we’re supposed to fight a monster too? I’m fucking tired, damn it! You said there weren’t any soldiers!’ he hurled at Ahn.

‘There weren’t!’ she hissed back. ‘I don’t know how they … but they can’t have torn a portal, it’s impossible! They’d have to be travelling at the exact speed as the train, overlaying its position precisely from their dimension … just get there!’ Ahn broke off her theorising with the shrill order. ‘Hurry!’

Osomatsu growled, choosing not to voice his fervent gratitude that they’d left Ahn safely behind. Not from aggravation with their mentor. But if Choromatsu was fighting a monster alone … no, fuck that, he wouldn’t abandon him. Not again. Swearing at the distance that still stood in his way, Osomatsu charged headlong through it, lungs sucking oxygen overtime.

Finally an old-fashioned caboose curved into view. ‘That’s it, that’s the one!’ Todomatsu exclaimed, his heaving chest betraying the immense strain on his magical body. What if he collapsed the instant they jumped aboard—what if Osomatsu collapsed? They’d never begun a battle so drained. His muscles wailed in protest, air as hot to breathe as fire. Not letting himself think about it, Osomatsu
made a beeline for the train.

‘Choromatsu? Hold on, man, we’re almost there!’

Silence.

‘Choromatsu-niisan? What’s going on, what’s happening? Are you …’

Totty blanched. No reply, nothing. Choromatsu wouldn’t ignore him like this, not unless …

Osomatsu’s insides turned to sick lead, haunted by the visceral ghost of Choromatsu’s screams as the dark puppet made mincemeat of his torso.

‘Don’t fuck with us, Choromatsu!’ he yelled, slamming aside visions of his brother bleeding out.

‘What the fuck’s going on, talk to me!’

‘Matsuno Choromatsu?’ Ahn tried to no avail.

‘Choromatsu-niisan? No, no, no …’ Todomatsu trembled with dread. Missing a slight bend in the rails, the youngest faltered and almost lost his footing. Snarling as his brother fell behind, Osomatsu put on a final spurt, roaring with propellant fire from his gauntlets. Somewhere behind him, Totty’s ramble had become almost a prayer.

‘Not again, Niisan … not again, please not again, not … Choromatsu-niisan!’

An explosion of glass smashed through his scream. Streaming with speed, Osomatsu’s eyes shot wide—something hurled out of a front carriage at breakneck speed, busting out a row of windows. A second later, Choromatsu swung outside, the Wyvern flipping agilely atop the speeding locomotive.

‘Choromatsu!’ Osomatsu blasted off the rails. His boots hitting the train roof, the Salamander flung out a gauntlet, his senses dealt a swift and dizzying reversal—the world now raced beneath him, his body comparatively still. And fatigue didn’t exactly help. Unsettlingly sluggish, Osomatsu almost staggered straight over the edge. Ordering his sapped strength to get with the program and restore itself, Osomatsu shook it off and powered the length of the train. So relieved to see his brother, he drove a fake punch glancing off Choromatsu’s shoulder. ‘Asshole! Don’t scare me like that, why didn’t you … what the fuck is that?!’

Whatever Choromatsu had punted out of the train rebounded off a concrete retaining wall like a bomb went off. From the devastating blast of dust and crumbling rubble, it shot towards them at blistering speed, outstripping the train like it lapped a weary snail. Sweeping instantly into the air, Choromatsu’s boots skimmed over it. Osomatsu barely skittered from its rampage, nowhere to run—the train was no more than three metres wide. Rocketing past them, it hurtled the length of the locomotive. His snug hoodie rippled with its fatal speed. ‘Look out!’

‘What the …’

Sparks flew up. With a grating screech that carved a deep fissure in the train’s steel, the beast slingshot itself in a blinding change of direction; it was on top of them in a fractured heartbeat.

He couldn’t move in time. Cementing his stance and squeezing his eyes all but shut, Osomatsu threw up his gauntlets and braced for impact. But the fast-thinking Wyvern saved him, shunting the Salamander clean off the edge of the train and anchoring him with the same breath. The beast roared past, warping sound. Finding even footing, Osomatsu’s mind reeled. This thing moved so fast, his senses were shot. Klaxons rattled his ears, his vision fuzzed at the edges. Even the atmosphere touched his skin all wrong, his face cold and fingers tingling in their gauntlets. ‘Choromatsu, what is this?’
‘Kouusokudo,’ Choromatsu replied, rapidly flicking him from harm’s way again as Kouusokudo shrieked in a seamless 180, never slowing.

‘Oh, great, now we know their name.’ Tossed around like a broken marionette, however he appreciated the rescue Osomatsu had to scoff. ‘Really fucking useful … where’s their crystal?’

‘No idea.’

‘No idea?!’ Osomatsu exclaimed over the rumble of pure locomotive power and buffeting wind. ‘You didn’t think to analyse it before you blasted it off the train?’

‘It’s moving too fast, I can’t get any reliable readings.’

Osomatsu gaped in disbelief, pulling an evasive tumble out of his arse as the monster hurtled from a new angle, just a streak against sun and city. Squinting after it the split-second it took to ricochet off the ground, scattering gravel in a hailstorm that battered the suburb like bullets, he clenched his jaw hard. He could barely see what the beast looked like, a compact ball of speeding energy … god help them. This was a Smash Brothers brawl, and their opponent was fucking speed-of-sound Sonic. And from the savage scratches ripped in the train roof, this scaled speed demon used something goddamn sharp to turn around. ‘What happens if it hits us?’

‘No idea … want to stand still and find out?’ Choromatsu asked, battle humour totally flat. ‘For science?’

‘Oh yeah,’ Osomatsu drawled sarcastically, darting right as far as he dared and swinging around to glare as his brother sailed over the conflict. ‘I was just about to volunteer, who doesn’t want to be a test subject for …’

‘How did the soldiers get on board?’ Ahn cut in urgently. ‘How many are there?’

‘Are we expecting any more monsters?’ Osomatsu added darkly, scorching the train’s scratched-up paint job as Kouusokudo streaked by—forget mystery talons or teeth, the impact alone would be enough to smash the life out of him. Twisting up and out of range, he landed heavily a few carriages back. Crouched low, he rammed one gauntlet downward, denting the roof for balance as the train tilted beneath him. Osomatsu breathed hard. Choromatsu might be sitting pretty on updrafts, but he couldn’t avoid this thing forever.

Rattling through bends and surging up and down inclines at a moment’s notice, their narrow battle arena played havoc with evasive action, Osomatsu sloping precariously near enemy collision or a lurch into an unforgiving 150 kilometre per hour slipstream—at least Choromatsu rallied the vicious winds in their favour. No help whatsoever with the speedster beast, the magical boy made his lens focus on the unpredictable surrounds as the Wyvern summarised the situation in a few succinct words. By his lens, the soldiers had their victims grouped in the back carriage, employment office pack included. ‘They were disguised all through the train, seventeen of them, not including … this guy,’ he continued, catching the fleet monster in an air current and pivoting, swerving them in an off-kilter orbit around himself and the winded Salamander. ‘Or the lieutenant. But the others are collectors.’

‘Like Juuku.’ Osomatsu remembered his first taste of their enemy couldn’t mutate, claws full with a dozen-odd souls.

‘I’ve got the best chance of taking them out,’ Choromatsu said, words flying faster than his feet with repressed urgency. ‘I’ll need that many clear shots, you have to keep this monster off me.’
For what might be the first time, Ahn was deadset against the Wyvern’s tactics. ‘Your brothers need your help here, you’re the only one who can keep up with this beast.’ But her attempts to explain Alliance physics, that the Liberation Force couldn’t teleport their slave haul at speed, fell on deaf ears as, in another first, Choromatsu disagreed with Ahn. Vehemently.

‘Even if they can’t transport them now,’ he grunted, heaving a ferocious torrent of wind like he threw a hammer—Osomatsu blasted the hell out of the way, crash-landing two carriages back—and managing to sweep the accelerating monster off the train and into the battering zephyr alongside, flinging them in the dirt and buying the eldest a chance to get reaquainted with his lungs. ‘Who knows where they’ll stop the train? If we haven’t beaten this thing by then, we’re going to lose them—100 people! They’ll be taken, and it’ll be our fault.’

‘Right,’ Osomatsu jumped on board before Ahn could argue. ‘Help us figure how to hit it, and then … wait.’

Skidding low to avoid the organic rolling missile, he glanced around wildly as he snapped upright. ‘Where’s Totty?’

‘On my way, Osomatsu-niisan!’ Totty’s voice chirped in their minds, cheerful and lively. His stamina dragging dangerously—alongside muscles wasted from his extended marathon and ongoing acrobatic display—Osomatsu seethed, realising exactly why the Unicorn was so delayed.

‘Were you taking a fucking break?’

His shiny presence now noticeably gaining on them, Totty emanated mock dismay. ‘Are you angry with me, Niisan? But I asked the boss! They said it was fine.’

‘Ahn?’ Osomatsu swelled like a wronged amphibian. ‘Are you kidding me?! All the shopping and hanging out without us is one thing, but this is a whole new goddamn level of special treatment!’

‘Not Ahn,’ Todomatsu cut in as poor Ahn spluttered her innocence. ‘Me—I’m the boss, remember? I needed to recharge,’ he shrugged as Osomatsu let loose a tirade of colourful abuse. ‘I’m no good to you worn out.’

‘What about me, I’m being steamrolled here! Want to give me a goddamn hand with that or what?’

‘Sorry?’ Totty asked innocently. ‘What was that, Niisan?’

‘A boost!’ Osomatsu bellowed himself telepathically hoarse. Feeling as his haggard body struggled to bounce back, he was forced again to deny it the chance, tucking and rolling as Kouusokudo exploded back into their midst. ‘Get your arse up here and give me a goddamn energy spike right fucking now!’

‘Osomatsu-niisan! That’s so rude, what do you say when …’

‘You’re being cute now?!’ Choromatsu almost yelled at Todomatsu’s coy admonishment for a “please”. ‘Hurry up and give him a damn boost! We have a job to do!’

‘All right,’ Todomatsu backed down, taken aback he’d provoked the wrong brother. ‘I’ll be there in a minute, hold on.’

While he appreciated the solidarity, ganging up on their little brother’s bullshit, Osomatsu shot Choromatsu a funny look. Sure, things were tense—they were cartwheeling on top of a speeding train for one thing, that couldn’t help anyone’s calm. But this was the Wyvern, Choromatsu was unshakable transformed. What had him so agitated?
‘Osomatsu-niisan, come on!’

‘Right,’ Osomatsu scraped together some semblance of concentration and pumped up his fire. ‘Defend the Wyvern, I can do that.’

But the Salamander could barely punch a fistfull of flames before the beast was running him down, almost bouncing up and down the train, pelting in jagged paths that changed course in nanoseconds. Fed up, Osomatsu exhaled in frustration and jammed his gauntlets together. ‘Get out of the way, I’m gonna try this thing!’

Choromatsu sailed immediately in a high arch. The Salamander braced and fired. Risking his deathray, paint bubbled and melted, metal distorting as he flared out the beam, engulfing the train’s entire jostling width. Drenched in sweat and the surrounding suburbs bathed in waves of summer heat, Osomatsu grinned harshly, stoked by power. But his triumph crashed hard, a black shadow springing against the flames. ‘Piece of shit! Just … hold still!’

Pouring his spark into it, Osomatsu swung the destructive ray upward, following the speeding shadow overhead, trying to catch it in the burning beam like an ant in a magnifying glass. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, that’s enough!’

Running out of already-depleted puff, Osomatsu swore and doused himself before he burnt out. And before Kouusokudo’s speed decapitated him. ‘Crap, crap, crap!’ Flinging himself face-first as the beast tore through the spot his head had just occupied, the agonising scrape of their landing lifted every hair on his neck. Barely a metre away and no spare second to think it through, Osomatsu fired his boots, blasting clear as the beast exploded into him.

‘Argh, fuck!’ Caught by Choromatsu’s quick tug on his airspace before he plunged overboard, Osomatsu hissed as blood dripped from a savage gash to his calf. Already clotting beneath his ruined combat pants, the swipe stung like a son of a bitch. ‘How’d it cut me, did you see? Where the hell is Totty?’

Wariness hoisted to stratospheric levels, Osomatsu’s innards chafed with frustration. How was he supposed to play the bait long enough for Choromatsu to save the train when his brother was forced to save his arse every other second?

All he could think of, Osomatsu tried to provoke it from the train, blasting a short way out and hovering, pummelling it with potshots. But within seconds he aborted the plan in heart-stopping rush. There was nowhere safe to lead it—however far they’d come from the city centre, this was still Tokyo. There were buildings and people everywhere … there were people watching, gazes pulled from everyday afternoon tasks to stare as the train sped by, bearing the magical battle onward.

‘They wouldn’t follow you anyway,’ Ahn piped up from home as Osomatsu scrambled back aboard, so tired he needed two tries to flip to his feet. ‘They will destroy you if they can, but their primary purpose is to protect their cargo.’

The word “cargo” tasting so revolting he spat it out in disgust, Osomatsu put his rattled brain to work as Choromatsu harried the beast with wind, whipping twisters and blow them off course. ‘Could you catch them like you did in the food court? Hold them still long enough for me to take them out?’

‘Maybe I can catch them! Here you are, Osomatsu-niisan—one Unicorn boost with the works, just for you!’

An invigorating warmth struck Osomatsu between the shoulder blades. Todomatsu’s spell radiated to the very tips of his woreied fingers, spurring every individual cell of his muscles to contract harder.
More light played around his cut leg, extra oomph to the healing process icing on the cake. Crackling with power far beyond his own, Osomatsu shuddered with the intensity, hard breaths nothing to do with exhaustion as every shred swept away. The added boost wouldn’t last long. But god, it felt good to be invincible. He could destroy the entire goddamn Liberation Force on this high.

Wind whipping his face raw, Osomatsu swung his head over his shoulder with an adrenaline-rushed whoop just in time to see Totty spring lightly atop the very back carriage. The youngest immediately lassoed a quartet of snaking chains, weaving and knotting the links to catch Kouusokudo in a shimmering net. But they were much smaller and a hundred times faster than any beast the Unicorn had restrained before. Hurdling through every loop before Totty could yank them shut, Kouusokudo shot directly at the new threat.

‘Hey!’ Osomatsu yelled, pelting in futile pursuit as Choromatsu swooped from overhead. Shining face washed with sudden fright and nowhere to go, Totty gripped his sceptre hard with both hands, locked shield-like before him. ‘He’s just a frilly little Unicorn! I’m the guardian on fire here, you want me, come after me!’

Seizing his spark for all it was worth, Osomatsu blasted a roaring volley of fire. Lens struggling to put his blazing barrage ahead of their quicksilver enemy, metres from monster-Unicorn impact he finally landed a direct hit. With a spine-shivering shriek, they were engulfed in super-enhanced flames. The beast screeched to a halt. Their standstill lasted barely a second. But it was enough.

‘They’re armoured, rolled up like a hedgehog,’ Choromatsu seized data, analysing on air as the beast, sufficiently incensed, blasted towards Osomatsu like a cannonball—no, like a bullet from a high-precision sniper rifle. ‘But no spines—they’ve got some kind of blade sticking out either side. Crystal’s under their chin.’

‘So we are fighting Sonic … fuck,’ Osomatsu grunted, skipping over their rapidly-rotating blades and finally timing a hit, almost spun into oblivion by the opposing force. The high-powered punch pummelled Kouusokudo straight into the earth rushing away below. Too much to hope they’d be caught up beneath the train, Osomatsu already felt the extra energy Totty had gifted beginning to deplete to his own not-insignificant reserves. He needed everything extra he could cling to—apparently, this beast held a grudge.

‘I shall shred your skin from your bones, Salamander …’ they hissed, already oriented and blasted back atop the train, cutting Choromatsu off before he reached the back carriage; the Wyvern barely somersaulted from danger. ‘I shall savour every scream …”

‘Any weak points?’ Osomatsu demanded, more nervous than he’d like.

‘Their chin.’

‘Great,’ he muttered, sprawling aside and rolling upright in a flash. For god’s sake, he was sick to death of all this dodging! Even the brief satisfaction of scoring a hit did little to rally his spirits. They were no nearer to finishing them off—scratch that, they hadn’t even started finishing them off. Kouusokudo had kept them on the ropes this entire fight, it was humiliating! They were doing a pretty damn good job holding them off—Choromatsu was right, how long would it be before they were too late?

‘If we don’t smash their crystal soon, I’m gonna … shit!’ he gasped as the train pitched unexpectedly. Even with his enhanced balance he almost lost his footing. A flash in his peripherals, Osomatsu flung himself on his back, kicking out with both boots as Kouusokudo blurred overhead. Landing twin sizzling welts in their reinforced hide, the beast screamed. So did Osomatsu.
‘What the fuck! This driving me insane, there is nowhere to move!’

‘Hey, you think dodging up here is hard?’ Choromatsu challenged, relatively calm as Osomatsu fumed, almost throwing a flaming tantrum. ‘I was stuck in a box with that thing.’ He indicated the carriage beneath them as he worked the wind, sculpting a vicious tornado and thrusting it in Kouusokudo’s path. Caught briefly in its gyrating power, the beast whipped themselves free. ‘That wasn’t fun.’

‘Stuck in a box …’ Todomatsu repeated, mind tones trailing in sudden thought. Ducked out of sight, he balanced on a narrow window ledge, relatively safe as he clung on through the buffeting wind. ‘Stuck in a … Choromatsu-niisan!’ he cried out; Osomatsu saw from his latest skirting pivot as their leader hoisted himself back into the fight, eyes gleaming with resolve. ‘Go for the soldiers, I’m going to try something! Osomatsu-niisan, stay right where you are!’

‘There’s a small … problem with that!’ Osomatsu grunted, spinning in fire-powered back kick that cracked Kouusokudo like a billiard ball. One spinning blade clipping his shoulder as he contorted out of the way, the Salamander swore foully, gauntlet clapping to the sting. Ignoring him, Totty flung out a myriad of chains, criss-crossing overhead. Enclosing the fight, the gleaming links hastened to snap to the edges of several carriages. Dropping to one knee, the Unicorn planted the butt of his sceptre before him. An ethereal chime engulfed every ear in a five-kilometre radius, a single, shivering ring like the battle cry of an angelic spirit.

‘Choromatsu-niisan, move!’

Todomatsu already casting, Choromatsu raced the silvery-pink substance that flowed to fill the gaps between chains. Osomatsu’s immediate, insensible thought was it was some kind of magical bubble mixture, glistening with refracted sunlight as it rippled its way upward. Swooping up and out, Choromatsu burst free of the cage as the substance cemented in a seamless dome. Kouusokudo slammed directly into it. The entire structure shivered, magicals chains clinking ominously as the substance seemed to stretch and moan with the recoil. But it held.

‘Brilliant, Matsuno Todomatsu!’ Ahn cheered. Todomatsu reeled like he’d been struck over the head. But he set his jaw and steadied, grip on his sceptre tightened like he held a metal bar electrified, hands seized to its surface and shaking.

Giddy or not, the Unicorn was safely outside his magical cage. So was the Wyvern, streaking for the rear of the train.

So where exactly was the Salamander?

‘Todomatsu, you … what the fuck?! Y-you just sealed me in here with the spiked fucker!’
Chapter Notes

So posting slightly earlier than normal - that's something, I guess. This is a bit of a monster chapter with regards to length however, to round up the train job arc - so many points of view, so much going on. Would love so much to hear what you think, I hope you enjoy it!

I'm feeling maybe I should put the reminder out there in advance, though: the Doll of Darkness is not Ichimatsu. The Doll of Darkness is a creep who uses Ichimatsu for his own ends and just happens to wear him like a suit. Any questionable actions the Doll of Darkness takes have nothing to do with Ichimatsu and should not reflect on him in the slightest.

So that's done :) ALSO I'm sure some of you have noticed I have a habit of including a plethora of random references from various awesome sources. There are a few favourites scattered through here, I hope you have fun with them if you know them!

Again, thank you so much for reading - I know it's taken a long time, but we're only a couple of chapters away from magical team mate number 4! Balloons, confetti, marching bands - all the good stuff :)

The storm of shattering receded. Idly, Kuro slid back the door separating the first carriage from the second. Congealed mucus spattered the glass, globs stringing with gravity to coat the floor beneath. With a smart skip, Kuro circumvented the mess. Pinned to his side, Karamatsu’s leaden legs stumbled straight through, ruining his one nice pair of employment-appropriate shoes.

They stepped into an abandoned warzone. A gaping void where windows had existed only seconds before sparkled with their fragmented remains. Karamatsu’s hair tousled with the exposed roar of wind, he gazed limply on the destruction. Violently dented floor to ceiling, the carriage was sheared through, as though ambushed by monstrous sentient scissors, deep slashes mangling steel and seat cushions alike. Support bars bent at odd angles, the entire scene was slathered by a few dozen buckets’ worth of slime, exploded from that … that thing …

Karamatsu stared, sick with all he’d seen. His breath stilted, the immobilising assault on all his reason saturated with shock. It was real. It was impossible … but it was real. No tricks, no costumes, no hallucinations—nothing! The grotesque transmutations he’d witnessed, humans into stick-thin phantoms whose sinuous forms scraped the ceiling, and then that … that monster … Karamatsu shuddered. Kuro had plunged a sword into his chest … God, what was this cult? Karamatsu’s mind skipped over variations on that theme, stuck on panicked repeat—what were they, what the hell was happening?!

‘Would you look at that,’ Kuro observed, eyes flicking downward to take in—what had the cultist called him … her … god, he had no idea. A lieutenant? Numb brain muddling through cult terminology, Karamatsu could only succumb as the other tugged him around the spindled heap of limbs. With the side of his pointed boot, Kuro gave the being a casual nudge. ‘They survived. I suppose that’s good … No, no, darling,’ he said, words coiling to leash the zombified girl as she shoved past Karamatsu, dead eyes fixed on the broken windows. ‘I realise the call of your master is
hard to ignore, but take my word for it: climbing onto a speeding train’s not the best idea. Kouusokudo needs your soul alive and kicking more than they need assistance taking on the guardian … guardians,’ he amended with a wicked quirk of lips; the pounding of what could only be footsteps raced over their heads. ‘Our favourite firecracker’s just joined the party … stick with me, dearie—I’ve got a much more important job for you.’

Asking that she mind Karamatsu for him—Karamatsu’s innards wrung tight; mind him?—he gasped as her slender fingers crushed down on his wrist bones like jaws of professional torture. ‘Gently,’ Kuro stressed; Karamatsu washed with knee-jerk gratitude, her agonising grip letting up a smidgen. ‘I’ll have something unfriendly to say about it, if you damage him … We get a lot of teenagers,’ he directed at Karamatsu, squatting by the fallen lieutenant. Unconcerned and conversational, his unsettling demeanour clashed with the dread that enslaved the second born Matsuno balls to bone. ‘As you can probably imagine, the young and oh-so-misunderstood tend to suit our target requirements to a T—don’t get me wrong, kids make good slaves. But most just don’t hold up when it comes to flexing ingenuity. You and me, on the other hand …’

Leaving his words suspended, Kuro tilted his chin over his shoulder, nailing Karamatsu with a wolf’s grin. Karamatsu shivered, feeling the lingering ghost of the young cultist’s touch latched around his waist. One glove caressing his face while the other slanted a knife to his throat … a blubbering sob trickled through his lips. Every day he’d imagined bathing in the attentions of a lover yet unknown. This wasn’t how he’d pictured his first such tender treatment. Who was Kuro? Why had he been watching him, how did he know so much? And who was Karamatsu … no. The young man’s windpipe shuddered, swallowing hard. What was Karamatsu to him?

Recoiling as sounds of struggle erupted overhead, Karamatsu caught sight of himself in a pane of miraculously-undamaged glass. Something pulled in his chest. His flawless style was in disarray, hair a helpless victim of wind and fear in sweat. Karamatsu’s fingers twitched, itching to forcibly correct every last lock misplaced in the chaos. But twitch was all he did. All but imprisoned, he drowned in need far more urgent.

From the instant Kuro had taken hold of him, Karamatsu had been paralysed by some force malign and unnamable—from before then even, the moment his genial companion had turned sinister. He’d said such horrible things … but what if it was true? Lodged in his pocket, Karamatsu clutched his sunglasses like a talisman. Too hard; with a tiny snap, its cheap arm broke.

What if his brothers truly despised him like Kuro taunted? Like Karamatsu had crept so close to believing for so long … And anything he did … however hard he tried, he’d never … his brothers didn’t … they would always …

God, he thought desolately, his contempt visceral and head strangely clear; the illness that swelled in response to his impulsive self-destruction was all too familiar. Kuro had hit the nail right on the head in this department. Karamatsu was sick.

Never before allowed it as a possibility, Karamatsu squeezed his eyes shut. He was sick, diseased psyche warping love and reality beyond recognition, petrified his beloved brothers saw him exactly how he saw himself. But he couldn’t … he couldn’t think about that. Not now. He’d crumble—he couldn’t crumble! However he’d ruined his chances. However he’d destroyed all they shared, time after fucking time. If Karamatsu didn’t keep it together now he might lose his family forever. And they … they’d lose him.

If they even cared.

God, please … He was so afraid of losing them. But in that sad moment, all he wanted was for someone to be afraid of losing him. Even if all he owned was one tiny scrap of their hearts. If the
cultist kidnapped him, they had to care. His parents. His brothers … please, god, let him matter to someone …

Wrenching himself back to horrific here and now, Karamatsu took shaky stock of his crisis—freed of Kuro’s burning touch, it was a little easier to force one thought before the last. But they still only led him to the barest of conclusions: he had to run. He had to get out of here.

Pressed against his thigh, Karamatsu’s phone almost burned in his pocket. He might be trapped on the train, but if he could shake Kuro and company long enough to call for help … he couldn’t just expect the poor Wyvern to swoop in and save him. By the sounds—by the violent, terrifying sounds—the green vigilante and whoever had joined them—the red one?—were pretty occupied up there. He couldn’t just stand there, he had to do something! There had to be some passengers still in their right minds, not yet overwhelmed by toxin—or however the cultists really overwhelmed their victims. From what Karamatsu had seen, Tokyo’s menacing enemy had tools at their disposal far beyond poison.

Gingerly, Karamatsu jiggled his wrist, trying to gauge if he could break free. He wouldn’t have stood a chance with Kuro, muscles seized with one cruel smile. But the cultist still crouched by the lieutenant’s head, carrying on smooth one-sided conversation—he had a habit of that. Skin prickling, Karamatsu nervously remembered the strange confrontation Kuro had grinned through, saucy replies at stark odds with the mute Wyvern’s cool displeasure. But the teen who secured him now, however strong her grip, her bones were thinner, more brittle than Kuro’s. She should be a little easier to escape.

Thumping heart in his throat, he tensed to wrench away and run. But his escape plans didn’t even skid into the next carriage. Instantly, Karamatsu found himself tripping over his feet, swivelled in a tight circle. Arm twisted behind his back and fingers knotted painfully in his hair, the girl drove his head straight into the nearest window. Karamatsu’s forehead cracked hard against the reinforced glass. Already fractured, hairline fissures radiated outward from impact.

Head spinning, for a few rattled moments Karamatsu saw the world only as fractured reflection. The girl pressed in at his back, her breath hot on his neck. Increasing her hard pressure against the back of his head, a few more ominous cracks raced across the window’s surface. The entire pane could shatter at any moment. Absolutely nothing about this situation said she wouldn’t thrust him straight out and under the train. Karamatsu choked as tiny splinters buried in his skin. Kidnapped was better than dead … wasn’t it?

‘O-Okay,’ he breathed jaggedly. ‘Okay. I won’t … I’m not g-going to …’

Not expecting it, the teen’s nails retracted from Karamatsu’s scalp before he’d even finished stammering. ‘That hurt, didn’t it?’

The nonchalant observation came from behind him; he hadn’t heard Kuro rise. Extracting Karamatsu from both window and teenager, the cultist examined his hurts. Closely. Intimidated, Karamatsu stood completely still. ‘A word of advice, my pet: don’t piss off a soldier’s slave. They’ll never understand any situation that doesn’t call for brute strength. Don’t stress, we’ll have these looked at just as soon as we get home.’

Home …

All words fled him, Karamatsu could only stare. A few drops of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. Plucking a crisp handkerchief from thin air like the trick might delight him, Kuro dabbed the droplets away, giving the nasty graze on his forehead the same tender treatment—god, he couldn’t take this any more, whatever the fuck this was, he’d had it! The cultist smiled like he didn’t notice
Karamatsu’s renewed struggle to disengage—or, rather, like he had. He’d definitely noticed. And he liked it.

Linking a secure arm around him, Kuro turned all attention to the girl. ‘Now, what did I just say? Darling,’ he said, sliding his free hand down the girl’s slim waist before tugging her forward, angling so his whisper kissed the line of her jaw. A surge of revulsion crashed through Karamatsu, far more than any shame for himself. She was barely out of school. She was a teenager, she was a child! What was wrong with with this creep? ‘I’ll put this simply. Just so there can be no mistake. See him?’

Snaked around his waist, Kuro’s arm squeezed Karamatsu breathless.

‘This one’s mine. Break him again, and I break your face. Got it? There you are, Lieutenant Uuen,’ he drawled suddenly, tremors creeping up Karamatsu’s hypersensitive spine as a groan scraped across his eardrums. ‘We wondered where you’d gone.’

With an airy wave of his hand, Kuro motioned the girl help the lieutenant to their feet—Karamatsu’s stomach rolled, seeing their knees bent backwards. The burst of flame outside didn’t help, either; he almost jumped out of his skin. It was definitely the red one.

Feet barely remembering their function, the cultist directed Karamatsu through debris. ‘Not exactly the best setting for a heart-to-heart, is it. But we’ll make do. So,’ he said, leading the strange party through the next carriage as though on a leisurely stroll. But his pale face burned with expectation, hotter than any flames the red vigilante could conjure.

‘Where were we?’

***

Choromatsu was right. This wasn’t fun.

‘You shut me in!’ Osomatsu rocketed in haphazard spurts beneath the misshapen dome his brother had conjured. Boots roaring, he risked life and limb just to shake the bladed speed demon, yelling at Todomatsu all the while. ‘You trapped me like a fucking fly, you sadistic little shit! What are you trying to do, kill …’

Swearing, he inverted in a fire-powered nosedive. Kouusokudo repelled off the curved cage, hurtling towards him. A dull flash in his peripheries, Osomatsu swivelled away, one inbuilt sword lancing for his kidney. Stomach plummeting skyward, he righted himself with just enough time to hit the train in a heavy crouch. The beast was on him in a microsecond, searing from behind to scalp him—no fucking thanks. The Salamander sprawled, hitting the dome and bouncing back; the blaring shriek of sharpened wind fluttered his hood way too close.

Shit. This was the opposite of his comfort zone. Spitting curses, Osomatsu had no time to swipe away the dangerous sweat dribbling for his eyes. Extended exertion aside, apparently Salamander heat wasn’t meant to be bottled. If his own element turned around and bit him in the arse … shit, he hated this, he hated it! Already barred from getting in their face in solid Salamander style, unwilling incarceration didn’t exactly improve his mood. ‘Fuck you, Todomatsu—you hear me? Fuck … you!’

‘They were all over you,’ the Unicorn finally got a word in. ‘You pissed them off.’

‘I’m the Salamander, it’s in the job description! That doesn’t mean …’

‘Choromatsu-niisan had to get out before I closed the dome,’ Totty said, sounding far less up-in-arms and more Unicorn fearless. ‘They were focussed on you. I took advantage of that—it’s called strategy, Niisan,’ he added tartly. ‘Maybe you’ve heard of it.’
‘Strategy?’ Osomatsu spluttered with the literal insult added to injury, wrenching his spine through his most dramatic acrobatics to date—it was definitely preferable to disembowelment. ‘So what exactly is your game plan, how’d you see this playing out? You didn’t consider trapping them without, I don’t know … catching me, too?’

‘No,’ Todomatsu lilted without hesitation. Osomatsu flared.

‘Well, you’re a shit strategist!’

‘He couldn’t take the risk,’ Ahn refereed as Osomatsu smoked at the nostrils. ‘You are spectrum guardians, it’s your duty to save everyone aboard that train.’

‘Yeah?’ he exclaimed—just what was she implying? This was the righteous Salamander she was talking to. ‘But that doesn’t mean …’

‘Additionally,’ Ahn pushed on, Osomatsu mutinous that she stood by their leader’s dubious decision. ‘Matsuno Todomatsu has never created a containment zone before. He may not be able to …’

‘Just hold them off!’ Todomatsu cried. ‘Don’t let them get out and hurt Choromatsu!’

A resounding “or hurt me” was heavily implied. The Salamander hissed out frustration. Kouusokudo uttered a shriek of similar sentiment. Every scrap was directed squarely at the only remaining guardian in reach.

‘When I get out of this,’ Osomatsu growled insubordination at his leader and mentor. ‘I’m going to kill both of you. Slowly.’

‘You’ll be fine, Niisan!’

‘Sure, whatever,’ Osomatsu muttered. ‘Is it too much to ask for a little fucking warning?’

Trapped in a cage fight with a blade-wielding ball of pure energy, somewhat understandably, Osomatsu’s lens languished in the throes of a near-death experience. ‘Come on, don’t flake out on me now,’ he forced through gritted teeth, careening in insane paths vertical, sideways, and slantways, ricocheting through the shimmering fishbowl Totty had dumped over him. Kouusokudo tore on his heels—Osomatsu couldn’t stay ahead. Shredding with every spinning slice, his faithful armour was no more magical than tissue paper against those blades. Shit … how much longer did Choromatsu …

‘Fuck,’ he choked, boots snuffed out with shock. The tip of a blade eating through his tattered armour, the spinning force ripped him open ribs to waist. Tumbling, Osomatsu hit the train in a splay of limbs and anguish. Fighting to orient himself and scrabbling at the gaping wound, he gasped as Kouusokudo flashed past, delivering twin treatment to his other side.

Well, shit. That hadn’t lasted long. Fumbling and vision hammered by pain, he could barely see, the world reduced to shivering grey on grey. Thoughts disconnected and sparkling like snipped wires, they somehow fixed on Choromatsu—he’d better have held the monster off long enough for the Wyvern to take his shots. He’d disintegrate every one of those soldier bastards, no way would he miss.

From his broken heap, Osomatsu felt the beast zoom far too close. He tensed, a sitting duck. But a final deathstrike didn’t come.

His breathing shallow, Osomatsu lay completely still, dazed behind his eyelids. Unconsciousness crept up on him. Determinedly, he staved it off. He had to get up, he had to …
His hearing soaked through with white noise cotton balls. But Osomatsu slowly grew aware as a strange, almost rhythmic clanging played through his fuzzed ears canals. Around him, Totty’s cage vibrated hard. What was …

The realisation smashed through pain and disorientation. Gripped by urgency, Osomatsu forced one eye open and, with an agonised moan, rolled onto his back. The Salamander dismissed as out for the count, Kouusokudo had abandoned him—until he could take the time and pleasure to personally remove his skin, Osomatsu thought crookedly—to ram the magical chained structure. They hurled all their concentrated weight into it on heavy repeat, getting up speed in rising spirals and barrelling at lightning speed.

Insulted the beast disregarded him so easily, Osomatsu squinted and saw Kouusokudo focussed the brunt of their attack on a single chosen target: Todomatsu. His eyes squeezed shut, the Unicorn shivered on his knees. The dome mirrored his distress, rippling like disturbed shallows with the force of the barrage, devouring all Todomatsu’s light just to hold its shape. Osomatsu’s gut clenched. If the beast shattered the spell, they’d pulverise him!

‘Come on, heal,’ Osomatsu breathed harshly. His wounds followed the order sluggishly, skin prickling as it knitted … so apparently he wasn’t going to wait for his hammered body. Almost beyond conscious control, Osomatsu staggered to his knees. Dripping blood and seeping strength, the Salamander locked his muscles around his backbone, barely holding his own kneel.

‘Get the fuck away … from my baby brother!’

Osomatsu detonated. Volcanic temperatures surged outward from his molten core, tossing the beast in fire. Kouusokudo screamed, armour hissing, flecked with burns as they scalded. Whipping around and around to put themselves out, the wildfire died as Osomatsu slumped, burnt out. Flinging out a gauntlet, he scrabbled at Totty’s chains, struggling to haul himself upright. If he was going down today … he was going down fighting.

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu cried, voice distorted through his struggling spell. ‘Cover your eyes!’

Intensifying starlight beamed from every angle, lining the dome silver.

Oh. Okay …

Thankfully, his lens pulled itself together enough to cover his arse—or, rather, his eyes. Glass extending so it shielded both his vulnerable orbs, the lens became a pair of glowing scarlet sunglasses. Muddled, his mind settled on thinking just how jealous Karamatsu would be if he could only see just as the enclosed arena exploded with the pure light of heaven. Kouusokudo’s screech grated Osomatsu’s bones—so it did have eyes somewhere on the outside. The beast plummeted, crashing into the train with a tremor that shook the rails beneath. ‘Get them, Niisan!’

His lacerated skin stitched with an refreshing nudge of healing ribboned from the dome. Back in one piece and loving it, Osomatsu surged to bust open the monster’s armoured curl. But they were already back on their feet—in a manner of speaking. Inundated with light that refused to fade, Kouusokudo couldn’t see a thing; they flew seemingly at random. Osomatsu grinned harshly, giving chase. Todomatsu’s cage suffused with the properties of an Olympic-class trampoline, Osomatsu kicked off with the burst of a cannon. Knees tucked to his chest to reduce resistance, he pinballed through the arena, mirroring every angle Kouusokudo slanted. But he still wasn’t fast enough.

‘Come on, slow down so I can hit you … can’t you do something about this?’ he demanded of the
youngest, stuck half a second behind his quarry—he had to surprise them before their white-wiped retinas adjusted. The instant they could see again, trapped and tired, the Salamander may as well offer himself up silver-platter style

‘I’m an enhancer!’ Todomatsu cried, greyed and swaying with effort. ‘Not a saboteur … but maybe I can speed you up!’

‘Whatever you’re going to do, do it fast!’

The Unicorn rapidly consulting with Ahn and his vigilant on-call experts, half a minute later he shouted out brave and bright. ‘All right, Niisan: get ready to be fast!’

The spell hit Osomatsu like a bullet to the chest. Unprepared, all breath puffed from his lips with a surprised whoosh. The Salamander keeled over mid-bounce, again smacking into the train. About to shout angrily at Totty, any urge to rip him a new one disintegrated as haste hyped in his chest. Three blinks later, the world slowed to a drag around him. Scenery all but suspended, the train crawled under his feet and his enemy become nothing but a pointy bouncing ball. High on an entirely new and insane elation, Osomatsu waved his hand slowly in front of his face—leisurely to his eye, he saw the blur of impossible speed radiating around his fingers. The Salamander had entered a psychedelic, caffeine-induced dream state. Hard drugs had nothing on this shit.

Moving fast—every pun intended—Osomatsu got his first good look at his enemy. Thin blades of toughened cartilage and bone honed sharp enough to slice hair sticking out either side, Kouusokudo curled tight in their heavily-armoured skin. Their seven eyes lining their flexible spine, they blinked shut in turn as the beast rolled. Losing their limited cool with the Salamander’s sudden impossible haste, Kouusokudo erupted in a flurry, exploding every which direction. Osomatsu didn’t exactly stroll up to them. But they were sure as hell easier to catch.

Skirting the spinning blades, Osomatsu shot behind the beast and seized them hard. Every one of their muscles clenched tight in defence. But with a heavy grunt of effort he wrenched their coil open, revealing a soft belly and even weaker chin, face flat and featureless but for a slashed mouth. The monster bucking violently, Osomatsu wrapped his legs hard around their body and locked his gauntlets beneath their chin, dragging their head back. Their crystal glittered darkly, exposed.

‘What was that about shredding skin from my bones?’ Osomatsu taunted, telepathy warped long and low. ‘How’s that working out for you … Totty!’

The cage was enough of a strain on his developing powers. But his drastically-overdone haste spell had done Todomatsu in. Utterly wiped, he dissolved the cage with a tired swish of his sceptre, chains whipping home. Teetering and captured slow motion in Osomatsu’s eyes, Totty somehow kept his feet, planting his heels directly in front of the grappling monster. Hefting his sceptre, he smashed it soundly into Kouusokudo’s throat with a swing that would make Jyushimatsu proud. The resultant crunch reverberating on in his mind, the monster disintegrated in Osomatsu’s arms.

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Anchored just below a window, Choromatsu pressed to the side of the train. The seventeen soldiers would be scattered among their hundred prey, squashed into this single narrow carriage. The slaves no doubt instructed to throw themselves in any line of fire, he’d have to be more than quick. Choromatsu had to be speed itself.

The Wyvern measured his breaths to his heart rate. Osomatsu and Todomatsu were locked in combat only a few carriages ahead. Karamatsu was trapped in the dark puppet’s custody. If he missed even one shot, a hundred people might be snatched from right under his nose.
Choromatsu was acutely aware of this, any one point enough to incite a panic all its own. But he didn’t shut it out, he didn’t try not to think about it—Choromatsu knew himself, that would only make things worse. Rather, he breathed it in. He assimilated all the fear, every prospect of failure. And he remained calm in spite of it. That was the Wyvern’s gift.

Fuelled rather than frozen, Choromatsu sneaked a peek inside, lens barely flashing over the ledge. The entire scene captured by his eye and tech, the snapshot lit emerald crosshairs on seventeen crystals. No dark puppet. And no Karamatsu. His brother was as safe as he could be, an unwitting player embroiled in this battle.

He’d be totally exposed. But it couldn’t be helped. The Wyvern gathered all his patience, all his focus, and all the quiet spunk his enemy admired. Ripped from him weeks ago and replaced by waking nightmares, piece by piece Choromatsu reclaimed his sorely-battered self-confidence.

Harnessed by a current looped about his waist, Choromatsu double-checked its integrity and unsheathed his pistols. Whatever whirling doubt conspired to pin him down, he couldn’t let it prevail. He was the best person for the job—he was the only person, the only one who could do this. No one dark and grinning waited to stab and split him apart. And even if the dark puppet had slouched just behind glass, Choromatsu had already faced him down. Even if it took years to recover—even if he never did, and shivered in the grips of immobilising stress whenever he phased—the Wyvern could let nothing stand in his way. He wouldn’t.

With a mental flick, Choromatsu locked on, mind merging with his tech in calculation, factoring in the jostle of the train, the rails ahead, and the predicted movement of every slave squashed around his targets. He took one more stabilising breath. Then he slung himself upright, planting his boots on the window ledge and pistols at the ready. An almighty blast of wind kicked the windowpane in, and Choromatsu was firing, pistols angled in supreme configuration. Lens counting down as crystals exploded, he was a magical machine, every precision shot cutting the atmosphere and sizzling lasers seeming to weave around the press of victims programmed to protect. But they were packed too tightly; they could barely move. On whoever’s questionable orders, the enemy had literally boxed themselves in.

Seventeen shots fired, Choromatsu blinked, the entire onslaught captured by one prolonged heartbeat. His lens spiralled with jubilant success—he’d done it. Mildly surprised—that was one insecurity he might never shake—Choromatsu didn’t move, unable to lower his barrels until seventeen pillars of silvered dust began to crumble.

***

Remains scattered to the winds, halfway through their unhurried stroll towards the caboose Kousokudo’s teenaged slave collapsed, stringless.

‘No!’ Lieutenant Uuen uttered, waxen maw contorted in fury.

‘Yeah, kinda.’ Her soul restored, the Doll of Darkness prodded the teenager with the toe of his boot. Karamatsu’s gasp was ragged.

‘Is … is she …’

Somehow still intact despite his own predicament, the young man’s urge to ensure she was all right was restrained only by the doll’s tightened grip around his waist. ‘Don’t fret my pet, she’s absolutely fine. Well,’ he amended. ‘True, she’s not exactly providing optimum service down there, but these little things can be … ah,’ he broke off, interrupted by a chorus of hair-raising shrieks that tapered into eerie nothingness beneath the train’s rumble. Karamatsu shuddered. The doll squeezed him,
savouring it.

‘No!’ Lieutenant Uuen roared as the lifeforce of their entire unit dissipated. Charged by a maelstrom of rage, the lieutenant surged with darkness. Directed down their talons like lightning, they lashed out at the nearest target.

‘Excuse me.’

Unsheathing his wakizashi in one smooth motion, the Doll of Darkness angled a cowering Karamatsu behind him and caught the bolt on his blade. The air sizzled black with the arcane impact. Absorbed, the attack ripped down the sword in branching veins. Karamatsu’s mouth fallen open in a silent scream, the doll turned all consoling attention to him. ‘It’s all right,’ he crooned, flicking his blade outward to stroke his prize slave’s cheek with one thumb. ‘I won’t let the nasty lieutenant harm one hair on your lovely head … Someone’s picked up a few bad habits,’ he observed, arching an eyebrow at the lieutenant over his shoulder. Uuen’s pointed shoulders heaved, eyes glinting with malice. ‘I get maybe you’re a little frustrated. But there’s an important lesson to be had here.’

Lieutenant Uuen seething silence before a storm, the Doll of Darkness fluttered his wakizashi, a chiding finger as he counted down to imminent explosion. ‘I’m sorry, Lieutenant, but some things just aren’t yours to fuck with.’

‘This is your fault!’ the lieutenant’s rage broke over him. Cracking a grin, the doll basked in the other’s wrath. Beside him, Karamatsu cringed.

‘My fault?’ he repeated with blatantly faux disbelief. ‘Are you really in the position to bandy about blame when …’

‘This is your fault!’ Lieutenant Uuen spat again, thrusting a claw in the doll’s face. ‘You defied me when the Wyvern was at our mercy! It is you who let them escape! It is you who allowed the Salamander and Unicorn the opportunity to locate us!’

‘I wasted more time reviving you,’ the doll pointed out delicately. ‘I’m sure you understand, healing does not come naturally to me. Come now, Lieutenant. Sure, you lost your entire unit, a hundred-odd slaves.’ The Doll of Darkness paraded these overt failures before the slowly-greying lieutenant. ‘Weeks of preparation you’ve let slip wasted through your claws. If it’s any consolation, I remain an avid fan of your scheme—clever, crafty … somewhat lacking in execution. Maybe work on that for next time. This was just an opportunity—a good one. But there will be others … not that that helps you now,’ he added, black eyes agleam.

The many losses were an inconvenience, less than nothing in the long term. But as someone whose short term was about to become most unpleasant, the lieutenant descended into denial. ‘No, I cannot … I will not return to my lord with nothing!’

‘We will never reach rendezvous,’ the Doll of Darkness spoke very slowly, as though reasoning with a tantruming child. ‘Your soldiers are destroyed. It’s only a matter of time before the guardians are upon us—I’m not going to fight them, are you? It is my most humble recommendation that you cut your losses, suck it up, and face our lord without excuses.’

‘An easy thing for the favoured slave to say.’ The lieutenant glared poison at Karamatsu. ‘At least you achieved your objective. No,’ they repeated, claws clacking as they wrung. ‘No, we haven’t lost the slaves—you transport them! Go!’ they shouted at the Doll of Darkness, scratch of a voice hitching between forceful and feeble. ‘Do it now! You are slave to the Liberation Force,’ they blathered when the doll didn’t move. ‘I am ordering you to deliver our cargo to my Lord Takuu!’
The Doll of Darkness was quiet, milking the dramatic effect for all it was worth. About halfway through the pregnant pause, the lieutenant seemed to realise their dire mistake.

‘If I were in any position to do that,’ he said, ‘don’t you think I would have done so already? You flatter me, Lieutenant—a mass teleportation at this speed? Really? I might miss,’ he said, as dainty as lace. ‘That may prove … messy.’

‘Why didn’t you send another to fight?’ the lieutenant almost whined, a horrible grating pitch that set the doll’s teeth deliciously on edge.

‘How many more of your soldiers were certified to mutate? That’s right,’ the Doll of Darkness feigned sudden realisation, the number a big fat zero. ‘Who was it again, who insisted even one was unnecessary, just a precaution? And since when did I have the authority to send anyone anywhere? Aren’t I—how did you put it? Just a slave?’

That shut them up. A stammering wreck, the lesser lieutenant lost what little backbone Lord Takuu’s brief favour had fed his snivelling ego. The doll smiled darkly as they bent in submission. But who was he to judge? He was the one who’d slipped up with the Wyvern, over reliant on their insecurities and the trauma he’d bestowed. The young guardian was coping far better than expected. No doubt Lord Takuu had witnessed their encounter. He would be very interested by these developments.

But it was Lieutenant Uuen who had underestimated the emerald guardian’s shot. They’d practically gift-wrapped their forces for the guardians to dispose, pushing on as planned while their enemies duked it out with their lone combat-ready soldier. It was the lieutenant, not the doll, who was guilty of total tactical incompetence. So yeah. Maybe he could judge a little.

‘This operation was under your command, Lieutenant. I was only present to support the mission. The mission is now unsalvageable. That’s on you. And by the way,’ he added, almost tender tones encapsulating the cowering lieutenant in ice. ‘Try to command this “slave” again, and I’ll lodge your claws so far down your throat you’ll be shitting them out for a week.’

The offhand threat would be nothing from anyone else. But the Doll of Darkness wasn’t just anyone. He chuckled as the lieutenant’s many pupils dilated. A reputation for violating orders and mostly getting away with it, the Liberation Force’s enslaved saviour was dangerously erratic. And it was the best laugh he’d had all week, that Lieutenant Uuen was truly afraid he might make good that gruesome promise.

… Goddamn right he should be afraid.

The doll twirled his wakizashi idly. ‘Stop the train, Lieutenant. We’re done here.’

The lieutenant slowly unfurled from their cowering. Whatever their disgrace, they stiffened with the instruction from a slave. But knowing there was no more to be done, they raised their claws and began to weave. Straightaway, the train began to lose speed.

No care for the lieutenant’s superiority complex, the Doll of Darkness had his own dilemma to attend to. Sheathing his blade, he maneuvered Karamatsu so he stood before him. One hand still at his waist, the doll gripped his shoulder with his other, like he was about to sweep the overwhelmed and overwrought young man in dance.

For the first time since the mission had been foiled, the doll spiked with irritation. That’s twice now the guardians had interrupted their scintillating chat. But he had Matsuno Karamatsu in his grasp. He could claim him now and corrupt him later. That would be its own great pleasure, slow and so satisfying. But it would take time and effort, effort the Doll of Darkness brimmed with want to
expend. His lord, however, would be somewhat less willing.

The Doll of Darkness’s nails bit into his promised servant’s suit and skin beneath. He boiled, the want consuming. He had Karamatsu. But he wanted him to want him. Whatever the circumstances. Matsuno Karamatsu had to want him, too.

Movements slow and deliberate, the doll pushed him into a seat and released him. Immediately Karamatsu slumped sideways. Smoothly, the Doll of Darkness caught him, propping him against the wall. ‘What are you doing?’ the lieutenant exclaimed.

‘Think of it as an act of solidarity—now you won’t be chained to the whipping post alone.’

The doll scooped the stirring teenager from the floor—of course he hadn’t forgotten her, how could he forsake such a charming consolation prize?—and laid one palm flat to her collar bones, infusing her with fresh darkness. She jerked once in his arms, then lay still. Her pale yellow scarf come undone, it drifted to his feet.

‘You belong with me, Matsuno Karamatsu—you will come to realise soon enough. I’ll be back for you,’ he promised his chosen. The train had decelerated to an easy speed, more than workable. From somewhere near the engine room, he sensed the Salamander and kinky little Unicorn’s approach. Time to disappear.

With a swirl of darkness and fold through dimensions, the Doll of Darkness grabbed the lieutenant's arm and yanked them backwards, straight into their lord’s throne room.

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Kicking in the front window with a satisfying smash, Osomatsu swung into the cabin. Nothing like the direct approach. ‘Don’t you think the train’s wrecked enough already, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu chided, vaulting in on the eldest’s heels. Glass showered all over the control panel, the Unicorn made to brush the sparkling fragments away. ‘Oh …’

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu said grimly. The control panel surged with energy in undulating purple and shadow, impulses sparking across switches and fizzling in industrious puffs of byproduct taint. With a brisk jab of his sceptre, Todomatsu dealt with the smog before it had the chance to test their masks. Wired by fading haste, Osomatsu’s eyes flashed from the corrupted console, to the city at speed outside, to his brother, resplendent in his jewel-encrusted battle shorts. Only half a face at his disposal, the look Todomatsu returned was exquisite. The Liberation Force was in the driver’s seat. What the hell were they supposed to do?

‘Can’t you figure it out?’ Choromatsu demanded when the eldest reached out for ideas. Apparently, the Wyvern was very occupied at the back end of the train. Osomatsu scoffed.

‘Yeah, I’m sure adoration is really exhausting for you.’

‘Less adoration, more trying to avert mass panic in a really tight space,’ Choromatsu returned, tones somewhat strained. You’re a hero, aren’t you? Osomatsu caught the impressions of mounting screams and desperation that hemmed his brother in, an undercurrent to conscious telepathy a train length away. Please, you have to help us! Get us out of here, save us!

Shit … ‘Choromatsu, you’re okay down there, right?’

‘Fine, fine … what’s wrong with you? You’re talking even faster than usual …’

‘Calming people down is more my skillset,’ Todomatsu jumped at the chance to escape helping
Osomatsu stop the train, much to Osomatsu’s disgust. ‘How about I take care of that for you, Choromatsu-niisan, and you …’

But Choromatsu was a testy wrench in Totty’s plans. ‘I’ve got this,’ he said shortly. ‘But if you two can’t figure out how to …’

‘We can do it,’ Osomatsu cut in, decidedly less envious now he knew Choromatsu didn’t fend off admirers. In fact, resentful their brother implied otherwise, the Salamander confronted their task with far more gusto, all set to prove the Wyvern wrong. Leaving Choromatsu less than impressed with his suggestion to try communicating via baseball hand signals, Osomatsu commandeered the other half of the spectrum guardian think tank—safely back in the warehouse, Ahn anxiously watched over them, their own personal guardian angel. ‘This is why you wanted to come, right? Get us out of this already!’

‘Exactly which of us is the spectrum guardian here?’

Pooling their mental reserves, the three rapidly devised a train-halting plot involving a dramatic test of their superhuman strength—not to mention the strength of Todomatsu’s chains. But Osomatsu wouldn’t pretend he wasn’t relieved when the train began to slow of its own accord. ‘Whoa, get back,’ he warned, nudging Todomatsu against the wall with one outstretched gauntlet as the darkness playing through the console withdrew from the hijacked electronics. Peeling away in tar-like tendrils to tangle through the air in a rush of power returned to base form, the darkness smooshed out of the cabin through the narrow gaps around the door.

‘Okay,’ Osomatsu said after a moment, the console inexplicably freed from Liberation Force control. ‘Hey, Choromatsu—we stopped the train. You’re welcome.’

‘Already?’

‘Of course, Niisan!’ Todomatsu piped up, compelling an indignant Ahn into silence. ‘You didn’t expect any less of us, did you?’

Lapping up the undeserved (if highly suspicious) acknowledgement from Choromatsu, Osomatsu cracked a conspiratorial grin with their devious little Unicorn. ‘Right, we’re on our way.’

‘Take your time,’ Choromatsu said, sounding considerably less harassed—apparently he’d gotten a handle on the situation in the caboose. ‘Police are still a few minutes away, and there aren’t any enemies left on board—just the employment agents, and there’s not much we can do about them. Not until Todomatsu can cleanse them.’

‘Holy enema … Do you think another train could hit us?’ Dissolved briefly into tired sniggers, Todomatsu sobered with that very legitimate concern as the pair picked through a disaster zone of a carriage. Trudging the length of the train, they cooled off after their prolonged excitement. His little brother swaying on his clacking heels, Osomatsu supported Totty’s weariest form and pretended not to be worried they were a literal trainwreck waiting to happen until Ahn spoke up. Then he didn’t have to pretend anymore.

‘If your civilisation does one thing well, it’s trains. I’m sure they have the situation well in hand. And who in Tokyo didn’t see your ill-advised train-top encounter?’ she added with almost equal measures exasperation and admiration. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu is right, your law enforcement is not far away … who is that? Oh, no …’

‘Ahn? What’s wrong?’ Osomatsu asked, shunting back the door into the next carriage with a bang and frowning as telepathically all blood seemed to drain from Ahn’s ears.
‘I … nothing, nothing’s wrong, nothing at all. But …’

Ahn ventured like she stepped into an active minefield.

‘Now, Matsuno Osomatsu, there’s … there’s no need to cause a scene. Just stay calm …’

‘Why would I …’

Eyes automatically encompassing the way ahead, Osomatsu stopped dead in his tracks.

‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu cried. Pushing off from Osomatsu’s support, he quickened to their brother’s side. Completely grey and hunched alone in a side seat, Karamatsu stared at nothing. It was as though he didn’t even see them. ‘Karamatsu-niisan,’ Totty tried again, like their brother might somehow hear or even recognise them, magically masked and hooded. Crouching before him, the Unicorn took him by the wrists, giving the shellshocked second born something to focus on. At his soft touch, Karamatsu jolted like electricity crackled down his spinal cord. Grappling wildly, he shoved away from the youngest, dark eyes stretched wide. Osomatsu dry-swallowed something rock-hard as Karamatsu’s lips pulled in half a gasp, half croaking cry of terror.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn repeated warningly. Osomatsu didn’t move, staring at his stricken brother. What … the fuck … was Karamatsu doing here? Had he been here … the whole time … and Choromatsu didn’t … he never … he must have seen him, he must have fucking known!

‘Choromatsu, get … get in here now,’ Osomatsu breathed, barely holding off explosion as Todomatsu tensed in his trying to get through to their brother, reaching out his Unicorn aura to ease him. Some small sense remaining, Osomatsu struggled to calm himself. But he was that close to vomiting up magma. What had happened to Karamatsu to make him react like that? What the hell had been going on in here while … shit, he’d needed them, Karamatsu had needed their help! And where’d they been? Wasting time fucking around on the roof with the goddamn monster! Osomatsu was gripped by the violent urge to grind Kouusokudo into bone powder all over again. And he was having serious thoughts about doing the same to Choromatsu.

‘Choromatsu, get in here right now!’

‘I’m coming! Don’t rush me, the police aren’t here yet. Everyone back here’s okay,’ Choromatsu informed, updating them on the move. ‘Some have worse side effects from the soullessness, and a few were hurt in the panic as they were waking up. But they’re all right. I think I convinced them to spread out, they need more space to breathe until …’

‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ Totty exclaimed, high and shrill as the instant Choromatsu slid back the door Osomatsu was on him. Grabbing the green magical boy by the shoulder, his red counterpart spun him around and forced him into the wall.

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Totty exclaimed, high and shrill as the instant Choromatsu slid back the door Osomatsu was on him. Grabbing the green magical boy by the shoulder, his red counterpart spun him around and forced him into the wall.

‘Osomatsu! What the hell … ah,’ Choromatsu caught sight of Karamatsu, now very reluctantly letting the white-hooded warrior from TV and internet clips comfort him. On noticing the Wyvern’s arrival, Karamatsu immediately relaxed—he stopped edging from Totty’s consoling efforts, anyway. Osomatsu’s temper spiked—so Choromatsu had known.

‘Is that all you’ve got to say?’ he hissed, putting his face right in Choromatsu’s.

‘You’re heating up,’ Choromatsu noted as Osomatsu’s gauntlets soared in degrees with gut emotion, the Wyvern quite calm now he knew the reason he was pinned. ‘I know you’re upset …’

‘Upset?’ Osomatsu snarled with the understatement. In real danger of catching fire if Osomatsu flared by accident—he wouldn’t, Osomatsu assured himself beneath potent layers of anger;
Osomatsu was his fire’s master, not the other way around, he wouldn’t lose control like that—Choromatsu didn’t bat an eye.

‘I made a call—apparently it was the right one,’ he added a little coolly. ‘If you’d known Karamatsu and the dark puppet were here …’

‘What?’

Osomatsu’s gauntlet dropped. Freed, Choromatsu rolled his shoulder as the eldest fell back a horrified step. ‘That … that bastard was here … with Karamatsu?! And you … he … he could have killed you! Fuck!’

‘He … he said Lork Takuu didn’t want us fighting again,’ Choromatsu said, far from unaffected by his attempted murderer. ‘Not yet … I knew you’d react like this,’ he asserted, Osomatsu’s fists gritted and trembling at his sides. ‘You wouldn’t have been able to concentrate—don’t argue, you know I’m right. And you would’ve tried something really stupid.’

‘You’re too volatile, you might have gotten yourself killed,’ Ahn agreed. Badly shaken by the revelations, she still had Choromatsu’s back. Osomatsu scalded with the betrayal—like hell he would have done something stupid! He’d have finished the fight there and fucking then, he’d have found a way to stop that speeding piece of shit in their tracks!

‘Why …’ he uttered, palpitations invading his chest as he was inundated by visions of Choromatsu face-to-face with his nightmares while the murderous slave terrorised Karamatsu … shit, why hadn’t they gotten there faster? Why hadn’t Choromatsu fucking said anything, didn’t he trust them? Didn’t he trust Osomatsu to save them? To save him? ‘How could you not tell us, you can’t leave us in the dark about this shit!’

‘He just told you why,’ Todomatsu spoke up as Osomatsu jabbed accusation directly at Choromatsu’s chest. Hardly happy himself, their leader incensed the Salamander further by siding with Choromatsu, declaring it the right decision in a difficult situation. ‘Maybe if you didn’t fly off the handle at the slightest provocation we wouldn’t have to make the decision to hold you back.’

‘Slightest provocation …’ Batting aside the added humiliation of Totty’s reprimand, Osomatsu blazed on. ‘What if that bastard had still been here, what if we’d run into him?’

‘You’re better equipped to handle him than me,’ Choromatsu said without shame. It was just truth. But Osomatsu saw nothing but red.

‘What if he had attacked you—he’s not exactly the type to follow orders! What if he’d killed you, what if he’d killed him?’

Osomatsu flung one gauntlet at a flinching Karamatsu. So small beside their magical might, seeing his brother shrink, every horror Karamatsu had suffered that afternoon multiplied in the eldest’s mind, consuming him in haze. By the time he could see again, he’d punched five molten holes straight through the wall.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu!’ Ahn exclaimed as Osomatsu poised to strike again. ‘By the Alliance, control yourself!’

‘See, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu chided, tucking a gloved arm around poor Karamatsu’s shoulders. ‘Volatile. Stop it, you’re scaring Karamatsu-niisan.’

‘I’m scaring him?’
'E-excuse me …'

To all of their surprise, Karamatsu gulped and tried to intervene. Osomatsu was amazed he could string three words together, let alone attempt communication with the masked vigilantes. ‘Th-thank you,’ he said, pulling himself together with the same soft strength Osomatsu had always admired in his brother, a firm foundation to his more frivolous and fun embellishments. ‘For helping me. She … he … you’re so brave,’ he directed at a slightly-taken-aback Choromatsu; Todomatsu was the only one able to be tickled, that their mysteriousness encompassed gender. ‘Please … don’t be angry,’ he said, eyes flicking hesitantly to where Osomatsu seethed. ‘I … I’m sorry, if I’ve caused you any trouble.’

Unable to meet his eyes, Karamatsu lowered his gaze to his shoes, stiffened like he expected a world of anger to erupt. Words and abject body language unwittingly fanning Osomatsu’s flames, the eldest exploded. ‘What have you got to be sorry for, what did you do? They did this, and you think you’re causing us … Come on, you’re tougher than this!’

What the fuck, Karamatsu? They’d just saved his arse, and now he had to go and make Osomatsu feel even worse? How did he keep landing himself in the shit? Was it a fucking gift? Was it his calling in life, to play the spectrum guardians’ goddamn damsel in distress?

Karamatsu wasn’t responsible for how pissed he was. Osomatsu tried like hell to remember that. But Todomatsu noted the eldest’s shift back into angry pummelling stance. ‘Not finished your tantrum yet, Osomatsu-niisan?’

‘Don’t give me that sass!’ Osomatsu bellowed, stamping like an anvil and leaving a blackened scorch on the linoleum. Todomatsu blinked innocence, too wrapped up in tending a frightened Karamatsu to again rebuke his soldier. Only enraged further, Osomatsu’s powerful body curved to drive his temper again into the wall. But suddenly, he felt Ahn’s presence shy from his wrath-fuelled mind. Her apprehension seized him mid-motion. Locked in that inflamed pose, a step away he saw Choromatsu looked on, quiet and wary.

What the hell was he doing? Good fucking display of self-control from the Salamander, right there—how old was he, 12? Grinding his teeth, Osomatsu forcibly reigned himself in.

‘Want to back off a bit?’ he shot at Totty instead, crossing his gauntlets hard over his chest. Repressed outrage twitching through his muscles, he didn’t trust himself not to lash out again. Osomatsu glared over the youngest’s highly-attentive care of their brother. Well beyond a good hero’s concern, it bordered on clingy. ‘He doesn’t know who you are, you’re freaking him out. What are you doing?’ he added roughly as Todomatsu motioned to borrow Karamatsu’s phone. Managing a hint of incredulity—why did a mute hero need a phone?—Karamatsu passed it over.

‘Don’t pay attention to the silly Salamander’,” Todomatsu read as he tapped into an empty note and showed it to Karamatsu. ‘He’s not angry with you.’”

‘The W-Wyvern, the Salamander,’ Karamatsu named them with a shaky smile attempt. ‘And I … I don’t believe I’ve had the p-pleasure of making your charming acquaintance?’

Osomatsu groaned. Goddamn it, Karamatsu. Eyes shining briefly with a hidden smirk, Todomatsu flipped the phone, typing out a final introduction.

‘If he’d attacked me,’ Choromatsu said quietly as Osomatsu muttered strings of curses their mother would wallop him with a rolled up newspaper for. ‘I would have said something.’

‘Yeah, whatever.’ Agitated but diffusing fast, Osomatsu made a valiant attempt at his easygoing self.
‘Look, I’m sorry I’m such a moody shit, but this …’

He waved an indiscriminate gauntlet, encompassing the carriage and the entire afternoon.

‘Can you blame me? And my sides are killing me. That fucker got me good … really,’ he insisted when Choromatsu sidestepped his friendly shove of apology. The Wyvern’s light gaze fixed on him like an X-ray. That his brother couldn’t be sure Osomatsu wasn’t going hit him was crushing. ‘Choromatsu, I … I’m sorry, man. I get why you didn’t say anything, okay? Sorry, Ahn,’ he added, mind tones softening to coax her back, already uneasy with her absence. Listing a few tasty tokens and gestures he might dish out over the next few days to claw his way back into her good graces, Osomatsu indicated their non-magical brother with—he thought—admirable self-control. ‘Why isn’t he back there with everyone else—no, scratch that. Why is he even here?’

‘His job,’ Todomatsu breathed, Choromatsu nodding grave affirmation. ‘Karamatsu-niisan’s job!’

The same evil employment agency they were supposed to be keeping an eye on had ensnared their brother. The answer was so obvious Osomatsu smacked himself upside the head for not realising sooner. ‘So Karamatsu-niisan … he’s a target?’

‘What? Nah,’ Osomatsu brushed over Todomatsu’s gasp. Of everything that had happened since September, Karamatsu being targeted by the Liberation Force was the most unlikely of the lot. ‘No way. Come on, this is Matsuno “my dear brothers” Karamatsu we’re talking about.’

Choromatsu seemed less convinced as the eldest insisted their unlucky brother was just collateral. ‘They printed pamphlets, right? They were casting an net for easy targets. Ahn’s right, this had to be for mass infection practice or something.’

‘I don’t know,’ Choromatsu murmured. ‘The dark puppet … he was kind of all over him. It was creepy …’

All over him? A fresh wave of loathing for their twisted enemy tumbled through Osomatsu. He’d kill him, if he had to, he realised. He shuffled his boots, uncomfortable as he realised just how serious he was. It was hard to remember, but this was still someone. A young man about their age. An unwilling slave. A victim. But that status couldn’t protect him forever. He was dangerous. He had to be stopped. Whatever the means.

‘The dark puppet is important,’ Choromatsu was saying. ‘The hierarchy, the rules—none of it applies to him. It makes me wonder if he might have his own plans for Karamatsu. You didn’t see what I did,’ Choromatsu countered as Osomatsu shook his head, unable to believe it for a second.

‘You’re kidding, right? Come on, he was just fucking with you … Totty, come on, he’s not going anywhere.’

Osomatsu scoffed and immediately despised himself for it as Totty paled, as though Lord Takuu already sank his slimy claws into Karamatsu. He shivered himself, just thinking how close they’d come again to losing a brother to the Liberation Force—again. But Karamatsu was a rock, he’d be okay. He always was.

‘Look, forget that for now,’ Osomatsu said, keen to rid himself of mental images featuring the dark puppet “all over” Karamatsu. ‘What do we do with him?’

The three guardians and their mentor didn’t say a word for at least a minute. ‘Soldiers are one thing,’ Choromatsu soon said, very reluctantly. ‘But he heard the dark puppet talking to me, he knows there’s more to this than some cult. And he saw Kouusokudo mutate.’
‘We can’t just leave him to explain that to the police,’ Todomatsu murmured.

‘That would be cruel,’ Ahn agreed quietly.

‘Won’t they think he was drugged like everyone else?’ Osomatsu didn’t like where this was going. Neither did Choromatsu, only duty bound to raise it as an option. But Todomatsu was in charge. He made the call.

‘It is kinder he forget.’ As regretful as any of them, Ahn offered the only consolation she could. Regardless, Choromatsu tensed so tight any added pressure might snap him. He was the one who had to do the deed.

‘Todomatsu, I really don’t want to do this.’

‘I know, Choromatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu trod lightly, for once not wanting to take that step into command. ‘But …’

‘You don’t know,’ Choromatsu retorted. A request or coaxing suggestion wasn’t going to cut it. If he wanted Karamatsu’s memory erased, the Unicorn was going to have to flat-out order him to do it. ‘You weren’t there—Osomatsu-niisan, you remember? I hurt him! When I screwed up on the beach, you remember what my barrier did to him! And I’ve never done this before,’ he added, scared at the prospect of sieving through Karamatsu’s memory. ‘I don’t want to mess with his head! What if I screw that up, too?’

‘I don’t think anyone would notice,’ Osomatsu jumped on any chance to lighten the mood and earned himself two sharp snaps and a scathing “You’re not funny, Osomatsu-niisan” from Totty. ‘I know, I know …’

‘Choromatsu-niisan, I’m sorry, but you’re doing it. Everything will be okay,’ he added more gently as Choromatsu’s eyes tightened—it hurt, seeing the Wyvern so cornered. ‘I know you won’t hurt him.’

Ahn lamenting the distance that prevented her lifting this burden from Choromatsu, she connected him with a bevy of eager experts to talk him through. Osomatsu stood unhappily off to the side as the third born blanched steadily.

‘Your tech will handle the majority,’ Osomatsu snagged a few instructions from the exchange, Todomatsu doing his best to distract Karamatsu from the increasingly-despairing looks Choromatsu cast him. ‘You’re only guiding, no different to when you lay a barrier. No one is more suited to adjust the mind of another than one who knows them so well. And the memory is recent,’ an expert added. ‘It will be near the surface, there is no need to venture further.’

But they could say nothing to steady his hands. Earthen law enforcement an ever-nearing inconvenience, the Wyvern experts summoned Choromatsu’s counsellors. After a brief discussion, they delivered a booster strong enough to affect the Wyvern’s enhanced systems; the dispenser at his wrist apparently hadn’t vanished with his hoodie. Choromatsu’s breath hitched in his chest in surprise. But then his eyes closed, breathing out slow and easy. Every taut muscle loosened, the pressured lines splitting his forehead smoothed. It was an instant hit of pure relief.

‘Wow,’ Osomatsu trailed, impressed. His brother looked like he’d just sunk into a rejuvenating hot spring. ‘I’ll have what he’s having.’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu? I know we’ve talked about this, but if you’re feeling …’

‘It was a joke,’ Osomatsu hastily interrupted Ahn. ‘I’m fine. I’m fine,’ he repeated, reddening when
he realised one of Choromatsu’s experts had overheard. Not caring how rude he sounded—Ahn stammered apologies enough for the both of them—he flat-out refused their offer to contact a colleague with years of experience dealing with “the surprisingly complex dynamics of Salamanders”.

‘Okay, let’s get this over with.’ Choromatsu sighed—feeling better didn’t change how he felt about this—and fronted their brother, placing his index and middle fingers to Karamatsu’s temples.

‘Wh-what are you doing?’ Karamatsu whispered. Totty hushed him, conveying that everything was fine for all he was worth.

‘This may be more comfortable for him if he sleeps,’ Ahn put forward considerately. Osomatsu ached with affection for the kitten. She’d bend over backwards to make anything and everything as easy as possible for all of them.

Todomatsu bit his lip. His energy stores were sorely depleted. ‘That may be so, but sleep is a particularly easy state to generate, as it is something the body does so naturally. You won’t even need your sceptre.’

Totty looked uncertain, but dipped his chin in a resolute nod and tentatively stroked Karamatsu’s mussed hair. ‘Rest now, Karamatsu-niisan. We’ll look after you, I promise. Rest now …’

Osomatsu caught himself swallowing thickly. Karamatsu had comforted Totty unnumbered times. Seeing their positions reversed hit him harder than he’d thought.

Get a grip, he thought, boxing away the errant emotion. Karamatsu’s eyelids fluttering as easily as Ahn promised, Choromatsu helped lower him to the floor. ‘Wait,’ Karamatsu protested, slurring through encroaching sleep. ‘We need to call help … the people on the train …’

“‘We’ll take care of it,’” Osomatsu read over Choromatsu’s shoulder as he took over Karamatsu’s phone, holding it for their brother to read as his muscles lost tension, mental processes claimed by deep rest. But a frank confusion wandered over Karamatsu’s slackening face.

‘W-why are you …’ he tried to say. But it was a question never finished, Karamatsu’s grip on the past few seconds tripping over sleep, and he mumbled. ‘I’m just … so tired …’

Their brother asleep—it’d better be a good sleep, Osomatsu thought heatedly—Choromatsu knelt and placed a hand either side of his head. Forehead scrawled across with fresh lines of concentration, Choromatsu’s lens spiralled patterns of magic-laced technology as the Wyvern worked to uplift the memory hidden beneath his hands. After twenty seconds of not very much at all, Choromatsu’s frown deepened, something not as expected. Adjusting the light splay of his fingers, the third born delved back in. A second later, Karamatsu groaned. Facial muscles starting to tic in discomfort—please, let it only be discomfort—Karamatsu released another moan, a drawn-out whimper that clutched Osomatsu’s heart.

‘He really doesn’t like that,’ the eldest murmured, not blaming him—this sucked. For everyone involved. No other choice, Choromatsu pushed on, Totty kneeling by them and holding Karamatsu’s hand with both of his until it was over.

‘He’ll be addled when he wakes,’ Ahn said as Choromatsu lifted his hands away and peered critically down at his work, his lens running some final checks. ‘He may not feel well for some days. At least he’ll be just as confused as everyone else,’ their mentor found maybe the only reason to be glad in all this, besides the fact they were all alive and well. ‘That may make things easier with your law enforcement.’
Todomatsu wanted to stay with their unconscious brother. ‘You’re still a target yourself,’ Choromatsu reminded as the young Unicorn fought tears, his brothers’ and mentor’s verdict a resounding, if reluctant no. ‘They know you weren’t on board, they’ll wonder how you got here. They might connect you to the guardians—how they haven’t already is …’

‘Guys, I hate to be the voice of reason …’ interrupted Osomatsu.

‘When have you ever had the opportunity?’ Choromatsu cracked drily.

‘Right … but we need to move. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve called in the goddamn Self-Defence Force. And if she’s figured out Karamatsu’s on this train,’ he added, thinking guiltily of all the frantic calls he might have already missed, ‘Mum’ll be calling like crazy.’

Todomatsu finally relinquished their brother’s limp hand. Feeling highly culpable, the three reluctantly left Karamatsu lying there. But there was still a task or two left before they could retreat. ‘How do we let everyone know help is …’

‘Did it,’ Choromatsu said, eyes on the ticker over the nearest door. Following his gaze, Osomatsu saw his tech-savvy brother had already hacked into the train, displaying a succinct message from Tokyo’s friendly neighbourhood superheros:


‘And now they have a name to put to our gorgeous faces. Nice,’ Osomatsu approved. ‘Seriously, is there anything you can’t do?’

Choromatsu gathered a slight tinge above his mask. Grinning beneath his, Osomatsu smacked him in the shoulder. ‘If it never sticks, I’m just gonna keep on saying it—you’re amazing. So,’ he said, taking natural charge while Totty glanced over his shoulder, his immediate thoughts still kneeling beside Karamatsu. ‘Who’s getting off “work” first and going with mum … wherever Karamatsu’s taken?’

Todomatsu immediately volunteered. Approaching sirens rising in shrill chorus, the others talked him down. ‘You’ve had trouble getting time off before,’ Choromatsu pointed out. ‘They already know my office is flexible, they won’t wonder how I got time off so easily.’

Boots planted to heave open the stuck doors, Osomatsu shared a look with Totty. ‘I don’t know,’ Todomatsu mused worriedly. ‘You’ve had a rough day, Choromatsu-niisan.’

‘Will you be okay?’ Osomatsu asked more bluntly.

‘I’ll be fine.’

A few dozen rooftops from home, Osomatsu hit his knees the moment he phased. ‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu cried out, flinging down by his side. ‘Show me, Niisan, it’s okay …’

Osomatsu hunched and hissed air as deep and even as he could against the pain cascading down his torso. With all that had happened since, he’d completely forgotten the lasting evidence of the day’s skirmish he had to look forward to. Totty gingerly pulled up his layers of coat and hoodie to reveal the damage. Osomatsu groaned and crammed his chin in his chest, not game to look. But he heard Totty’s sharp intake of breath. So definitely as hideous as they felt. ‘I’ll transform again, I’ll heal you, Niisan.’

‘Nah, I’m … good,’ Osomatsu breathed raggedly, trying to shoo Totty away. Grinding his knuckles
into the grit beneath him in combined distraction and springboard, he made to shove himself upright. But his rip-off-the-bandaid attempt at standing only saw him crash back into concrete. Osomatsu was usually the first to jump at a little pampering and pain negation from the youngest. But Totty’s light was sapped. He hadn’t a spell left that wouldn’t knock him out for a week, let alone the vigor to repair Osomatsu’s flimsy human flesh. Clenching his teeth and the stained knees of his jeans, he struggled to rally against the pain—stamina, positive thinking. Anything that might help, because holy fucking shit—Osomatsu gasped thinly as Totty gently probed the hurts.

‘No, don’t waste your … fine, later,’ Osomatsu gave in as Todomatsu’s brow pinched. He didn't like to leave his brother to suffer. Not when it was serious. ‘Later, okay? I can handle it … until tomorrow, or even … Choromatsu!’

‘Choromatsu-niisan!’

The Unicorn torn between brothers, Osomatsu set his jaw against the anguish and shoved Todomatsu towards the third born. Crouched a dozen steps away, his arms wrapped tight around his knees, Choromatsu wheezed hard. ‘It’s okay, Choromatsu-niisan, you’re safe now. Take it easy …’

But Choromatsu stayed huddled barely a minute. ‘See?’ he swallowed, shrugging from Totty’s arms woven around him. It was probably some trick of circumstances and angles, Osomatsu confined to his knees by his wrecked body. But Choromatsu succeeded in finding his feet first try, desperately-ringing phone already in hand. And, looking up at his brother, Osomatsu couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen him stand so tall.

‘I’m fine.’

***

Nestled in the middle of the futon, Ichimatsu shuffled from his full-body imprint. The drowsy impulse to impress a new one was his most ambitious future plan to date.

… So just as fucking useless as ever. But he felt better than the last few times he’d roused and almost enjoyed the novelty. It wouldn’t last. But it’d been so long since his last good day … what day was it? The curtains were drawn, the room mercifully dim. He might have slept a week and had no idea—the same old shit did that to you. Trying a little harder for the hell of it, Ichimatsu figured it wasn’t too long since burnable trash day. Jyushimatsu had stunk up the entire house, spilling the lot racing it to the rubbish cage down the street. Head on the table, he’d watched dully as mum and Karamatsu picked up and scrubbed down, cleaning around Jyushimatsu’s exuberant apology. But a faint, pungent linger remained …

And, speaking of lingering sensations, what was that? Ichimatsu gathered spit and sucked, tasting chocolate between his teeth … Valentine's Day, he remembered with triumph that was just fucking embarrassing. Osomatsu and Jyushimatsu had helped—when it came to Ichimatsu, “helped” now had the more concrete meaning of “dragged/carried”—him downstairs for breakfast. He’d only managed the few spoonfuls mum had hovered over him for—he couldn’t even use chopsticks, his hands bumbling like he wore every pair of gloves in the house. But Totoko had given him chocolate. She’d attached a tag and everything. Written his name in pretty calligraphy. With a good ink pen. That was … nice.

Able to number recent good memory on one hand, Ichimatsu relived that one—Totoko patting his shoulder, waving a truffle under his nose when he finally raised his disgusting face, unwashed and ashen. She was too fucking cute … why did she even bother?

The streetwise softie he’d fallen asleep beside pressed her forehead to his with a sleepy yowl.
Ichimatsu sighed, falling soft and smooth and slow back into darkness. He held Totoko’s memory close, a souvenir in case he never emerged again. He could rest there, cocooned in comfort. Nothing hurt. He could let go … would it be so bad if he stayed? Jyushimatsu would have his life back, no more Ichimatsu to insist on sticking to. Dad and his brothers should come home to someone who actually looked up when they called out their return. Maybe a few of the extra lines that crowded mum’s face might fade. He should stay, it was better for everyone …

The pit of his stomach contracted. But he ignored it. So long as the cats were looked after, there was no other reason for him …

‘Ichimatsu-niiisaaaaannn!’

*Shut up, shut up, fucking shut up, please god, just … don’t make me … leave here …*

His dopey brain speared by the shout and ensuing commotion stampeding upstairs, Ichimatsu was dragged glumly upward and … met resistance. Confused, he pressed against it, substanceless and invisible and hot. Distant awareness twinkled above him, out of reach as he dangled helplessly far below. He should be waking up, he felt the pull of consciousness. But suddenly he had to cling on for all he was worth just to keep from tumbling back into his abyss.

Wasn’t this what he wanted, part of him thought evilly as alarm reared. He wanted to stay in the dark, didn’t he? It was quiet down here. Safe. He should be singing praises to whatever kept him shut away—it was too hard to hang on, wasn’t it? He should let go …

Not yet come to terms with an end in any shape or form, Ichimatsu clawed for purchase. But his efforts flopped weakly. He was too tired, he couldn’t …

Like a taut rope lopped, Ichimatsu whipped up and out. Floundering through the futon blanket, his limp arms had barely worked their way to freedom when Jyushimatsu threw open the door. Remembering too late for any normal human being, he shot with the reflexes of god knew what to grab it before it slammed.

Wasting way too much effort, Ichimatsu wormed onto his stomach and buried his face in his pillow, wiped like he’d been forced through a marathon at gunpoint. His head reignited with a vengeance, pain burrowed through every fold of his brain. Feeling the whip and rush of his brother, Ichimatsu whimpered—god, he was so fucking pathetic—as Jyushimatsu’s sleeves brushed his cheeks, gently popping free the fingers he’d clawed to clog his ear canals. ‘Wh-what …’

Lost in helpless bewilderment and barely able to fit sounds into something resembling language, Ichimatsu couldn’t recognise his own voice, a rasp worn thin and ragged peeling from his chapped lips.

‘Don’t worry, Ichimatsu-niisan!’ Jyushimatsu overdid his whisper, all but a spoonful of capacity glued to not overlooking Ichimatsu’s torturous noise sensitivity. ‘You’re still you!’

No less buoyant for low volume, the fifth born seemed almost obscenely overjoyed by that fact.

Face crammed in soft nothingness, Ichimatsu greeted that statement with somewhat less enthusiasm. Ichimatsu was still Ichimatsu. Great. If Ichimatsu could just maybe *stop* being Ichimatsu? Even just for an hour—or a minute, he’d take a fucking minute and whoever gave it to him could have his goddamn soul, for all he cared.

Wracked by snap cravings to be someone else, anyone else; even his trump card of “at least I’m not Shittymatsu” offered no comfort—amazingly, Ichimatsu coughed out a flimsy chuckle—*You’re still*
you, Niisan … Even sitting in the dark with him, all day every day, hadn’t drained Jyushimatsu’s cheer. Or his weird. And Ichimatsu was short of shit to celebrate.

Sensory input jacked to an agonising 11, Ichimatsu heard the pressure of their mother’s hand rest on the doorframe. ‘Ichimatsu, I need to go out for a while. How are you feeling?’

His sullen mumble apparently not enough, Ichimatsu protested as a second weight knelt beside him. ‘Just … leave me alone,’ Ichimatsu cringed away frailly. ‘I feel like shit, okay? Everything fucking … shit!’ he screamed as his mother’s gentle hands eased him onto his back.

‘Ichimatsu-niisan? What’s wrong?’

No, no … it had happened again. Bleached a disturbing shade of paste, Ichimatsu locked his jaw against the sting, spasming as new and agonising reasons to smash down his panic button lanced across his back. Whatever the fuck this was, it had happened again … how? He hadn’t hurt his back, he’d never … had he?

‘It’s nothing,’ Ichimatsu hissed, tender skin aflame and as much failing to convince himself as a frantic Jyushimatsu. Their mother, however, had twenty-plus years of experience in handling the bizarre. One howl wouldn’t startle the likes of Matsuno Matsuyo.

‘Was that your headache talking? My poor Ichimatsu … you don’t look so well at all.’

Ichimatsu breathed haltingly. ‘Big … fucking … surprise.’

‘You should eat, I’ll fix you something—what would you like? Toast? Rice balls?’

‘Nice hot soup!’ Jyushimatsu reinflated his vibrant bubble punctured by Ichimatsu’s cry.

‘Perfect, I can heat up a pot before I leave.’

Ichimatsu growled—he wasn’t hungry. Mum wheedled that he’d barely eaten—he couldn’t stand it, seeing his strong mother reduced to grovelling just to keep him well. But it wasn’t until Jyushimatsu reminded of his doctors’ stern reprimand that he’d lost too much weight that he lost his temper.

‘They don’t know shit! Get the fuck off my back!’ he bellowed at his brother, Jyushimatsu’s mouth flapping that he had to eat to get healthy.

‘Ichimatsu,’ their mother intervened. ‘He only wants you to …’

‘You think I don’t?’ he spat hoarsely in her face. ‘Look at me! I’m a fucking sea cucumber! I’m too … fucking tired … to eat! Okay?!’

Something was wrong. Mum looked even more strained than usual … of course there was something fucking wrong! Ichimatsu’s guilt ravaged, that he was always the cause of her stress—before he was sick too, he only ever fucked shit up. Mum should be settling in for the easy life! Any wrong she’d done, she’d done her penance six times over raising them. His brothers had finally gotten serious about growing up, and now even Shittymatsu was jumping the NEET ship … why was he even still here? Totty said hordes of girls were hot for losers, they ate that shit up. Karamatsu came fully packaged with pathetic, he should be composing sonnets for a blushing bride by now. He had the world waiting, if he’d quit trying so fucking hard …

Ichimatsu’s anger slammed sideways—who was going to help mum around the house now? Jyushimatsu didn’t exactly have Shittymatsu’s domestic flair and care … but no one could look into the fifth born’s big eyes and feel anything but valued. Anyone would give their favourite kidney just
to be with him forever. Ichimatsu, on the other hand …

Mum waited patiently until Ichimatsu, hating everything, had yelled himself out. It didn’t take long. ‘You’re getting another fever,’ she murmured, the back of her hand passing across his sweaty forehead.

‘S-stop treating me …’ he barely mouthed as she fussed with the bedclothes, ‘ … like a f-fucking kid.’

‘Then stop acting like one. I know you’re frustrated,’ she said more gently when, even as he faded with exhaustion, Ichimatsu was brought up short. ‘But this won’t last forever.’

‘You … d-don’t know that …’

‘Remember, you’ve got a doctors’ appointment tomorrow. Doctors’ tomorrow,’ she repeated firmly when Ichimatsu mumbled what was the point—they still didn’t know what was wrong with him. Making herself sound upbeat, Mum wouldn’t let herself be anything but optimistic. Why did she waste her fucking time? Wishing she’d just give it up, Ichimatsu despised himself, unable to silence his buried prayer that she never would. Flinching from the lingering cradle of her palm to his cheek, Ichimatsu squinted and saw their mother gesture Jyushimatsu outside, sliding the door all but closed. Their voices too low to hear, Ichimatsu couldn’t comprehend or even bring himself to care, surrendering to the weight of gravity.

Suffering Jyushimatsu’s overbearing care on his return, juggling medicine and a small bowl of soup, Ichimatsu started when he dumped a solid body of fluff beside him. ‘It’s okay!’ Jyushimatsu compelled, prodding the cat’s hanging belly. ‘Look, it’s Ichimatsu-niisan!’

Eyeing Ichimatsu, the cat looked suspicious, even frightened—how had he upset her? What had he done? His eyes hot, her aversion ate through his heart like a chainsaw. But after a minute she nosed at him, investigating. Apparently satisfied, she turned in a few kneading circles and settled behind his head. ‘Are you okay, Niisan?’

Ichimatsu mumbled, too wasted for sarcasm. ‘No more shit than usual … I guess.’

‘Did you go for a walk, Niisan?’

Trepidation iced his stomach on impact. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s great if you’re feeling better, but you shouldn’t go by yourself—you’ll get in trouble! Let me come next time, okay?’

Okay, now he was shit scared. Every door was locked. His keys had been confiscated. Where the fuck had he gone? Jyushimatsu bobbed beside him, knees pulled to his chin. He was so sure Ichimatsu had just misplaced the memory. Ichimatsu wasn’t about to admit otherwise. He already had one foot in the hospital doors. Jyushimatsu wouldn’t blab on purpose, but if the sinister severity of Ichimatsu’s growing memory lapses got out …

‘I’m fine,’ he whispered, like he could keep ignoring this frightening dimension of his disease. It was just one more symptom to remind him he was sick … he could deal with it, he couldn’t lose his head …

Easing him onto his side, Jyushimatsu scratched his nails through Ichimatsu’s matted mane. ‘It’s okay, Niisan.’ Coughing hard, Ichimatsu curled away, really starting to feel the heat. Jyushimatsu’s gentle hand followed him, rubbing between Ichimatsu’s knobbled shoulder blades with firm, repetitive strokes. Ichimatsu moaned, his back tight like a bloated sausage about to burst its skin—
fuck, it hurt. ‘Niisan?’

‘I’m fine … it’s nothing … no!’ he cried as Jyushimatsu tried to pull up his hoodie and stinking pajama top to investigate.

_He’s going to find out … You’re losing it, you’re unhinged, you’re hurting yourself and can’t even remember … You’ll be on hospital lockdown … They’ll pump you so high you can’t even think … And it’ll be his fault, the fucking moron …_

With a snap of impossible speed, Ichimatsu grabbed his brother by the shoulders. Driving his knees into Jyushimatsu stomach, Ichimatsu rolled on top of him. Hands tight around his throat, he squeezed harder and harder, Jyushimatsu convulsing violently beneath him …

‘Niisan, what’s wrong?’ Jyushimatsu shook him gently, all attempts to check beneath his pajamas forgotten. ‘You can tell me, Niisan—do you need more medicine? Are you thirsty, do you need some water? Ichimatsu-niisan, do you need a hug?’

Ichimatsu trembled. He was losing his mind … but he’d never hurt Jyushimatsu! He couldn’t! He was falling apart in every sense of the phrase. Jyushimatsu brimmed with the health and strength of a young god! Even if—Ichimatsu gulped wetly, so scared—he really attacked his brother, Jyushimatsu could pick him up by the scruff of his neck and dangle him at arm’s length. He clung to that, grappling for whatever reassurance his increasingly-dire circumstances offered. But:

_He can see it, he knows what you’re thinking, he knows what you’re capable of …_

‘No,’ Ichimatsu breathed, the image of Jyushimatsu dead by his hands burnt forever in his memory.

_All that missing time … Who knows what you get up to …_

Jyushimatsu ploughed headlong into remediying exactly what had the fourth born shaking, bit by bit manoeuvring his heavy limbs into a workable horizontal hug stance. Ichimatsu let loose all the nasty he could muster, desperate to kick him out—how could he let Jyushimatsu be anywhere near him? Unable to banish the sight of his hands around his brother’s throat, Ichimatsu shivered, loathing how comforting his brother’s arms were.

‘I’m staying with you, Ichimatsu-niisan.’

Drained half-dead by frenzy and fever’s telltale warmth rising in gloating response, Ichimatsu’s awareness wavered. A band encircled his throat, cold and metallic. He felt it, contracting tight and seamless against the incessant burn … Ichimatsu dragged at his hoodie, hiding it. Just in case it wasn’t a fever dream, or his own burgeoning madness … Just in case it was real …

‘Jyushimatsu, I …’ he mumbled, drowning in heat and digestive system starting to kick with the little soup he’d consumed. Sweat trickled, dripping off his nose. ‘I d-don’t … feel so good …’

Tokyo emptied under skies thick with leathered wings and clashes of lightning. Ranks upon ranks marched to glorious destruction, an endless army of empty faces. He recognised them, features lit by the storm—his parents. His brothers. Totoko. All the classmates who’d used to snigger and stare, the doctors who employed him as their personal pin cushion. And amid their regimented lines roamed pale beasts of nightmare, each more monstrous than the last. The acrid stench of blood and fire swamped the chilling atmosphere as battle cries razed the heavens. His vantage point retracted, seeing as Osaka emptied, and then Sapporo. The plague spread beyond Japan, descending on a world abandoned in an impossible heartbeat, leaving behind a silent, empty shell. Beyond trembled the vast expanse of space, where stars were sheep for the slaughter.
Vaguely aware Jyushimatsu held him as he vomited, Ichimatsu convulsed uncontrollably. And his
own voice—but colder, electrified by the visions that left Ichimatsu stunned—rose from deep within,
like a whisper heralding the death rattle of a last lonely being, left alive only to watch the world fall.

_He is right, I can admit it—we couldn’t do it without you …_

***

Voices. Karamatsu came awake with them, gradually. His eyes gumming together, he blinked
groggily into the room. Soft colours blurred, whites and greys on wafting curtains. It was all
unfamiliar. But his more pressing concern was his mouth—it felt like he’d been swilling mould.
Hacking, Karamatsu tried to scour his tastebuds clean. Acid … had he thrown up? Where was …

‘He’s with us.’

Voices again. Less whispery teases through air and gaining substance in ears he still couldn’t trust,
Karamatsu tried to sit up. Struck by waves of unease, he groaned—he’d definitely thrown up. His
oesophagus an ominous roll of motion, he felt as steady arms eased him down, adjusting the bed
beneath him so he reclined nearer to sitting than lying.

He was in hospital, came dizzy reason. _What are you, an idiot?_ Sharp denial shot him down. _What
would you be doing in …_

Confirmation arrived promptly in form of a bright penlight torch shone in his eyes. Startled,
Karamatsu blinked rapidly. ‘Wh-what …’

Something cool and circular pressed to his chest. ‘Take a deep breath for me now, Matsuno-san.’

Confusedly obeying, Karamatsu amassed the basics from the nurse, assisting as a young doctor—he
couldn’t be more than a year older than him, Karamatsu suffered a pang of inadequacy through
nausea—gave him a thorough examination. No more than a calm sentence of explanation, it was still
much more than he wanted to know. ‘The police found you alone, separate from the others. You
don’t remember anything?’

Scared, Karamatsu shook his head and immediately regretted it. Not game to try again when his skull
pounded so badly, he licked his lips to croak, ‘I … I can’t …’

‘Here you are, dear.’ Taking pity, the nurse helped him drink water from a plastic cup.

‘The last thing I remember,’ he said, straining for more and coming up with nothing but misted
mirage, ‘is waiting on the platform …’

Karamatsu trailed off, nervous as he noticed a police officer standing back near the door.

‘They’ll want to talk to you,’ the doctor confirmed, a needle pricking his arm without warning.
Karamatsu’s breath stuck halfway up his pipes, pupils dilating like he faced down an oncoming
truck. _What’s wrong with you?_ he heckled as the doctor warned him to keep still, drawing tubes of
blood. No one liked needles, but he’d never had a problem with them—not like Ichimatsu did. So
why did his chest cave like a shadow descended on him, the glint of a knife in hand …

Karamatsu tried. But the whimper was out before he could choke it down. Thinking it was the
jarring realisation of what had happened to him or fear of facing the police with nothing to offer
them, the nurse was swift to soothe.
'They’ll wait until you feel a little better,’ she promised with more bedside manner than her younger colleague. ‘We’ve called your mother, she’s on her way.’

She’d meant to be reassuring. But by the time they awaited test results Karamatsu was in a state. He should just be grateful to be alive, that he wasn’t hurt—his only injuries, a few cuts on his face and neck, had been cleaned and patched. He should be relieved that he hadn’t been whisked to the mountains of Mongolia … he bet the kidnappers were grateful they’d lost him—twice now.

Karamatsu cringed, remembering how he’d doubted Osomatsu’s story, how cultists had ensnared him on the beach. How could he have doubted his only older brother … god, even a fanatical cult wouldn’t want the likes of him.

He should be grateful—god, he really was the worst. How could he not appreciate everything that had been done to rescue him? But Karamatsu realised like a combat boot to the stomach: he’d lost his job. There’d never been a job, part of him clicked together jigsaw pieces. But every time he tried to step back and view the full picture, he fell flat on his face. He’d lost his job, he hadn’t broken the NEET cycle after all … His brothers had been so happy for him, what was he going to tell them? His parents would be so disappointed …

Who fell for a hoax like that? Karamatsu ridiculed himself, throat burning with shame he couldn’t gulp away. He should have known it was too good to be true. The agent who’d interviewed him had liked him. She’d smiled at his pathetic attempts to charm her. That alone should have set off alarm bells, what was wrong with him? But he’d been so desperate. Desperate and stupid …

Karamatsu jumped. His phone rang within a plastic bag, too piercing for the room’s calm quiet. ‘I … I’m sorry,’ he said, looking guiltily at the nurse.

‘It’s probably someone checking up on you,’ she said. Slightly less revolting than it had been, Karamatsu’s mouth dried out. It could only be his family—he’d never successfully given his number to anyone else. But the urge to answer was every bit as violent as the urge not to. The nurse looked on his stacking turmoil with sympathy—a good show of it, at least. Karamatsu tightened against the farce. She only pushed off inherent dislike because it was her job. She wouldn’t smile at him if he weren’t tucked up and attached to a heart rate monitor.

His phone had stopped ringing by the time she’d rifled it from his suit pocket—where was his manbag? Where was his suitcase? God, he’d lost his father’s suitcase … Karamatsu scrunched up the edge of his sheet in sweaty fists. Toning again within seconds, the nurse offered him his phone. Letting go of his bedclothes, Karamatsu reluctantly answered.

‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu fluttered with worry on the other end. ‘We saw the news, are you okay? Niisan, are you hurt?’

‘I’m fine, brother,’ Karamatsu said, feeling oddly dissociated from the lie. But for a moment he did feel better, Totty showering support and sweet reassurance. His beloved youngest brother … then he remembered all the times Todomatsu had scorned him, belittled the devotion Karamatsu rightly lavished. All the times he’d laughed at him … at him, not with him. All the times Karamatsu had felt so visible in his presence—so painfully visible, and so completely ignored. Karamatsu’s heart squelched. God it hurt, why did it have to hurt … it wouldn’t hurt if he didn’t deserve it! There’d be no reason to hurt … God, why did he have to be like this, why?!

Totty offered to stay on the phone with him until their mother arrived. Karamatsu wanted to, so much his poor heart bounded that his brother had even offered. But a vicious hook jerked him back. ‘I … haven’t talk to the police yet. Don’t worry yourself, dear brother. Tell the others I’m fine?’ he said, the futility seeping like poison as he disconnected. Why ask if they didn’t care?
If his brothers didn’t need him … he should back off. He should have backed off Ichimatsu years ago. It was the graceful thing to do, the gallant thing. Maybe he’d actually be cool for the first time in his life, finally bending to the wishes of those he loved. If that’s what they wanted, Karamatsu should give it without a second thought. If that’s what ensured their happiness, why hadn’t he done it already? He was so damn selfish. They deserved everything, who cared if he needed otherwise? It didn’t matter what he wanted, he knew that. So why couldn’t he make them happy?

Appalled, Karamatsu realised he bawled, nails digging into his face. The nurse had taken his wrists, about to lever them away. But Karamatsu had already let go. ‘That’s it, good. It’s all right, Matsuno-san.’

The tinny beeps of his heart raced, Karamatsu heaving to catch his breath through wracking sobs. He was barely aware as the nurse tried to calm him, her every kind word condescending—he was only causing her trouble, why couldn’t he just shut up …

Peripherally aware as the young doctor summoned, Karamatsu wasted himself trying to control his tears. There were probably dozens weeping in every hospital through Tokyo’s northern suburbs, more victims of the cultists’ train job. But sense did nothing for desperation—they couldn’t see him crying. Mum and dad couldn’t see him, his brothers couldn’t see …

An odd feeling sank through him. Numbly surprised, Karamatsu’s tears stemmed like his inner faucet was gradually winched off. Nothing else rose to fill the hole inside him, leaving him with a still, empty clarity. Whether it was drugs or the cold hard hand of truth, he couldn’t tell.

But he was completely and utterly loathed.

It was his fault. He was pathetic. Painful … Karamatsu didn’t flinch, it didn’t hurt how it used to. Just the numb ache of acceptance. He was a failure of a person, cowering behind the proud persona meant to salvage him, a task he made so completely impossible. Everything he did, he did for them. And the few times he did anything right … was he just in it for the validation? Did he not mean any of it, when Osomatsu came home hurt or Jyushimatsu took a tumble? Was he only sympathetic to get something out of it? To con from them a love he didn’t deserve?

Semiconscious, something cried out deep within—something was wrong. This wasn’t healthy, he needed help …

No, what he needed was to quit whining and get his fucking act together. If obtaining employment was an inch forward, this was a hundred leaps back. Karamatsu had no idea how to make up for this. Groping blindly, he at last latched to something vitally important—how could he have forgotten? Distracted by his own apparent success, he was a self-absorbed piece of shit. His brothers were in trouble, he was sure—Osomatsu, Choromatsu, Todomatsu. Hauled a little ways from the mud that sucked him down, Karamatsu struggled to concentrate. He had to know what kind of trouble Osomatsu had accidentally landed them in. He might be the last person’s help they’d want, but if he somehow got them out of it—he barely dared entertain that sparkle of agonising hope—he might actually start to deserve them. Finally.

This was his last chance. His final chance to fix everything. Then … he’d back off. He’d surrender. Swallowing hard, Karamatsu swore it. After this, no more. He was finished. The end.

God, he was so weak, he’d probably break his promise the instant he failed … but he was so tired. He couldn’t do this anymore. He just … couldn’t.

By the time his mother arrived, Karamatsu was ready. Choromatsu an anxious step behind her, he greeted them with the troubled smile someone cool would wrap themselves in in the aftermath of
attack by cultists. When his mother threw her arms around him he stiffened, mask unable to conceal all his shock. ‘My sweet Karamatsu … What does this cult have against my children?!’

‘We’re all so worried about you,’ Choromatsu said quietly as their mother blew her nose, the opposite of quiet.

*Please don’t lie to me,* Karamatsu begged silently. He couldn’t handle it, he’d collapse in a pile of jointed limbs and puppet string before their eyes. Their mother’s tears, knowing he didn’t deserve them … knowing Choromatsu knew he didn’t deserve them. *I understand, I get it. But please … don’t lie to me.*
So I entirely blame Oso for the fact that Links II is required to be split - was not meant to be so Salamander heavy, just kinda happened. But I suppose all of his stuff does relate and act as herald to pretty much everyone else's. Going odds/evens here, so I hope you're ready for some time with Oso, Choro, and sweet sunshine Jyushi. Kara, Ichi, and Totty will be coming up very soon. Evens is, in fact, two-thirds written (two highly uneven thirds). Though the others still require some editing, only Totty is left to write, and he's not even giving me much trouble - just waiting patiently while I attend to all his dear older brothers.

I'm really quite happy with how the odds boys have turned out - kinda wish I'd contained Oso a bit better, but what're you gonna do? Choro and Jyushi, at least, seem to be kind of exactly what I'm going for with these Links chapters. I do like how the odds/evens split works - maybe I'll try more exciting trio splits should there be more Links chapters later on! Hopefully it feels like the alternating POVs all fit together okay - it was originally written to be read Oso through Totty, like the Chapter 9 Links. Chapter 9 Links was probably a bit more elegant and clever about weaving the POVs together. Links II, however, tackles some pretty important plot stuff. So less elegance, more splat.

I hope so much that you enjoy the odds boys of Links II, and I am so sorry that it wasn't possible to stick it all up in one hit. But yes, assuming Totty doesn't start sassing me, it shouldn't be long until the evens boys are up, too. So much thanks for always waiting so patiently for chapters, for all your kudos, and for your wonderful comments and insights into the story - they're not only absolutely amazing to read, but it's often very helpful and inspiring, too :) Thank you so much again for all your awesomeness, see you soon with the evens boys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The capital’s once-dynamic pulse had stalled. But in the weeks that followed the cult’s most brazen attack to date, ever darker shadows eclipsed the besieged city. True, the fiends had been intercepted; forced to abandon the train they’d hijacked, they’d up and vanished with just one unwilling inductee. It might have ended so much worse, total disaster barely averted. But the failure of Tokyo’s intense surveillance and constant vigilance to detect the treacherous organisation’s plans, needless to say, did not go down well. Most fingers of blame jabbed squarely at Tokyo Police—they had no idea what they were dealing with. Forever three steps behind, they were no closer to apprehending even one cultist, let alone infiltrating and ending their reign of terror. Confidence in their ability to serve and protect shot, Tokyo’s finest were reduced to mopping up each new aftermath, issuing endless warnings, and struggling to maintain calm as rumour and tensions spiralled out of control.

Palpable fear crept from the bowels of the capital, infecting surrounding prefectures. Alongside coverage of the latest attacks (and the sustained bafflement of the nation’s greatest minds; around-the-clock research and they still hadn’t isolated the compounds which caused victims to blindly obey) reports of the rest of the country battening down the hatches dominated mass media—who knew when the costumed fanatics would advance? Unnumbered officers bristled with batons at every
public event. Citizens organised neighbourhood patrols, emergency contacts at the ready. City Hall contemplated Tokyo-wide curfews. The vibrant nightlife of Roppongi and Shibuya flatlined. Tourism dried up as the distant world looked on in dread. Every second TV commercial encouraged citizens to take all safety precautions and to stay strong. And, amid the rushing undercurrent of panic, people struggled to stay afloat, and get on with their lives.

Only the spectrum guardians gave much cause to prolong a positive feeling. Victims of the locomotive foray joined the championing voices of those rescued from Tokyo Tower, support for the recently-named vigilantes skyrocketed; the gem-encrusted heroes trended into online royalty. But while belief they were in on the attacks waned, law enforcement remained unimpressed.

‘Vigilantism is extremely dangerous, not to mention illegal. We do not condone the actions of these so-called guardians,’ a decorated senior sergeant downplayed their heroism, insisting if they truly cared for the city they’d come out of hiding. ‘I find it disturbing they are unprepared to share their technology and aid in neutralising this threat within the proper bounds of the law.’

‘And I’m sure you have absolutely zero intention of locking us up if we did,’ Osomatsu sneered over his supermarket sushi. Pinching Choromatsu’s tablet, he’d shut the third-born’s unfinished documents—‘Oh, come on …Osomatsu-niisan!’—and, finished heckling the clip, braved the comments section as he scarfed his lunch.

‘Trying to lock us up,’ Choromatsu corrected absentmindedly, perched on the edge of the bench while Totty daintily finished his sandwiches. ‘They know the instant they go for handcuffs we’ll …’

‘Ouch!’ Todomatsu peeped, startled hand flying to his pocket. Osomatsu’s scroll scalded, stuffed somewhere within his reduced layers. Winter was over. Timid spring warmth began to permeate a March keen to deny that fact. And they had another monster to thrash. Hurriedly, Ahn swallowed the sashimi she’d snatched from Osomatsu’s teasing hand.

‘Go, Matsuno brothers—transform!’

But Choromatsu had barely taken two bites, mentally engrossed even as his brothers dumped lunch in his lap. ‘We’ll go ahead,’ Totty said as he shovelled rice at frenzied speed. ‘See you there, Niisan—don’t choke,’ he added, Choromatsu spraying grains as he coughed. Slapping the third born on the back with a not-quite-sympathetic grin, Osomatsu tossed his packaging and jogged after Totty’s speedy skip, leaving their brother outside the library they’d been holed up in all morning—or would have been, if the Liberation Force would give them a goddamn break.

Apparently the Supreme Lord of the Liberation Force wasn’t pleased they’d infiltrated one of his more cunning schemes. Takuu had returned to shoving the young guardians’ noses to the grindstone. Inundating them with random attacks, they had little chance to poke said noses in anything more cryptic. He griped less than expected, but Todomatsu had lost a few hits of his healthy glow—he’d never been so overworked. It was an unwelcome return to normality for Osomatsu and Choromatsu. Karamatsu had commented on all their tired eyes that morning, topping up their tea with concern. Osomatsu had laughed it off, twinging after letting loose with a tactless “apparently that’s supposed to happen when you’re employed”.

This was their fourth alert today—the fourth they’d reach in time, anyway. Osomatsu had already incinerated a swarm of moon-pale hornets blebbed off a fleshy hive bigger than a toilet block (his shoulder spasmed, swollen from the paralysing sting he’d received), been stalked by a slippery humanoid chameleon (Choromatsu had barely locked onto their crystal before they closed quadruple-jointed fingers around Totty’s neck), and been kicked in the stomach by something resembling a boar crossed with a particularly ill-humoured pogostick.
‘Osomatsu-niiisaaaan … we’re here.’

‘Huh?’

Transformed and hurdled over surrounding buildings, they’d touched down over the nearby shopping arcade. Osomatsu had barely registered the trip, on automatic as his mind wandered. ‘Niisan, you aren’t bored, are you?’ Todomatsu layered an infuriating blend of curious and condescending. ‘Are these monsters not challenging enough for you? Lost interest in saving the world?’

Osomatsu blinked. Sure, Takuu’s monstrous offerings of late weren’t pushovers, but they weren’t exactly … wait, since when did spacing out equal bored?

‘Since always. He held out longer than expected,’ said Choromatsu, fast caught them up. He landed so lightly he almost suspended in air, boots barely brushing the rooftop. Osomatsu bristled.

‘I’m not bored,’ he retorted as Ahn summoned an attention-diverting shield. Jumping off the roof, they landed just outside the ostentatious arch of an entrance. ‘I’m just …’

‘Not paying attention,’ Todomatsu scolded, equal dashes sugar and spice. ‘I’ll need 500 push ups for that, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘He’s not serious,’ Choromatsu said as the eldest’s eyes flashed, alert for disturbance through the others’ bickering.

‘Aren’t I?’ Todomatsu fluttered soft lashes as they wove unseen through the arcade.

‘It’ll be good for you,’ Ahn butted in, Osomatsu stating in no uncertain terms where Todomatsu could stick his 500 push ups. ‘Or did you think I hadn’t noticed you’ve been slacking off?’

‘I’ve missed a grand total of three runs!’ exclaimed Osomatsu. ‘And I only napped through punchbag training that one time … I’m tired, okay?’

‘We’re all tired, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn said. Faced with the Salamander’s wounded outburst, the kitten’s inherent smugness drained into something more understanding.

‘So?’ he grumped as a shopper’s bags clipped his gauntlet. They jumped a solid foot in the air. The shopper glanced around for the unseen impediment, eyes sliding around the obscuring barrier. ‘I’m still tired. I spaced out for a second, okay? Get off my back, at least it didn’t happen in the middle of …’

He cut off, oriented ahead by something centred deep in his essence. Seconds later, a screech rose to the glittering glass roof. Osomatsu’s heart rammed in his throat. ‘No way …’

Ahn mushroomed repellence. Shops emptied, every soul caught within flocking to escape without a care in the world. The way ahead clear, the kitten cantered on the Salamander and Unicorn’s heels as they pelted up the shopping strip. The Wyvern took off, sweeping a current to alight atop an appropriate vantage point.

They skidded to a halt outside the cinema. Totty gasped. Coursing with all kinds of fire, Osomatsu charged his gauntlets, goaded and ready to go.

The area cleared like a bomb ticked, two had missed the evacuation memo. A young woman and man sprawled outside a designer fan store. Osomatsu edged the youngest behind him. But they didn’t shake, in the throes of zombification. They didn’t move at all … their souls were intact, his
lens confirmed. But that meant what wiped Todomatsu’s features white was true, in all its appalling glory.

The Liberation Force had snatched a baby.

A lone silhouette on the deserted strip, the offending alien stuck up like a nail—Osomatsu fully intended to hammer them straight into the ground. They thinned and sprouted from human disguise, infant cradled precariously in razor claws. The wheels of an upended stroller spun forlornly, tossed aside. The soldier trilling a beastly echoing coo, one eye flicked to glint at the guardians. Smile gaping, they shifted the shrieking baby in vile imitation of parental instinct, settling him (fine, Osomatsu knew blue didn’t equal boy, but the stereotype was so damn convenient in a pinch) against their narrow chest, blocking their crystal.

Blood pounded in Osomatsu’s ears. ‘That’s sick. That’s just … sick.’

‘Why a baby?’ Todomatsu was horrified. At his sparkling heels, Ahn’s dark eyes expanded to dismayed dinner plates. ‘It doesn’t make sense!’

‘They’re just trying to mess with our heads,’ Choromatsu’s voice sounded low in their minds. The Salamander’s lens helpfully pinpointed the Wyvern atop a nearby electronics store. He crouched behind an air-conditioning unit, out of sight. ‘Keep it together, Osomatsu-niisan. They know you by now. They want you to go berserk, make yourself an easy target.’

‘Tremble before me, Kaeruugoe, and the might of my Lord Takuu, whose universal reign shall stretch eternal. Know this, guardians: however stunted, human souls shall be reaped by the Liberation Force, ancestor to spawn, for time without end. Your pitiful struggle to preserve …’

His calm dangerously pressured and close to granting their enemy’s wish, Osomatsu clenched his fists as the soldier gloated, spiel returned to the pathetic and predictable. ‘I might be able to shoot out their crystal from here,’ Choromatsu was saying. ‘But it’s too much of a risk, I could hurt the baby.’

Risk? What risk? ‘Bullshit, you could thread a needle with that thing.’

‘Not from this angle,’ Choromatsu returned tersely.

‘And the fragments,’ Ahn added, chest tight with tension. ‘They might damage a child so small.’

Todomatsu eyes flickered ever so slightly to where the Wyvern took aim. ‘Choromatsu-niisan, don’t …’

He barely got three words out, the Unicorn’s suggestion, instruction—whatever—rudely interrupted by the soldier. Finished their speech with a flourish, they pounded darkness into the tiny epitome of defenceless they cradled. The baby’s entire little body twitched, like they hiccuped in reverse. Cloak immediately hardening into a transformative shell, the soldier’s claws retracted, abandoning the baby to empty space and bitumen. He dropped like a stone.

‘I’ve got him!’ Choromatsu whipped a speeding spiral of wind as Osomatsu’s heart clenched, catching him before he hit the ground. Bumping down gently, the hovering cocoon glistened darkly overhead. Osomatsu caught a glimpse of Todomatsu, frozen with one hand clapped pointlessly to his mask. Shaken up himself—would their enemy ever stop raising their arsehole game?—Osomatsu managed a snort.

‘Come on, quit posing,’ he said, pushing Totty lightly. The youngest tilted like a hero already immortalised in stone before saving himself. ‘Where’s our badass, ice-cold Unicorn? We’re gonna need him—I’ll do it,’ he intervened when Todomatsu angled to scoot towards the baby. For once not
arguing, Totty nodded, lighting in a brief, heart-blooming smile as he trotted instead to relocate the unconscious parents. The strip was about to become an impromptu urban battlefield.

Osomatsu glanced down at his bulky gauntlets. Inferno-powered knuckledusters, they weren’t designed with children in mind. Second thoughts starting to get the better of him, Todomatsu lilited to reassure. ‘You won’t burn him, Niisan.’

Already hoisted and hidden the woman deep in the cinema, he draped the man just as easily over his shoulders and spirited him to relative safety. Ahn capered at his ankles. Osomatsu gnawed on his cheek—she was far too close, she should have taken elevated cover with Choromatsu.

‘Remember, infant or not, they are still a puppet,’ their mentor warned, taking shelter before Osomatsu worried too much. He eyed the child. Not a gurgle, not a cry—his tiny fists occasionally beat at the air, but the soulless boy didn’t make a sound. Given the volume of his previous squalls, that he didn’t even fuss grew more unnerving the more Osomatsu thought about it, thoughts invaded by movie-style horror, creepy-crawly children with dead staring eyes. He shivered. Stealing a look at Totty as he barricaded the cinema entrance with vending machines, he hoped the youngest didn’t see the same.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Choromatsu demanded from his balcony view, slashing through Osomatsu’s tangent. ‘Get him out of there!’

‘All right!’

Cautiously, Osomatsu moved forward. The uncharacteristic wary tread of his boots punctured the eerie silence. Then a crack fractured it. The pulsating cocoon already split, jagged fissures racing across its surface, marking it for destruction as it began to glop mutation fluids, deluging the baby beneath. Crap—what the hell was coming out? Osomatsu wasted half a second annoyed with Choromatsu—did he have to always be right?—the rest weighing up whether he’d make it in time … fuck it.

The Salamander put on a spurt he’d never match. Rushing in with gauntlets outstretched, he aimed to stoop and scoop in one fluid motion. Two flying strides away, the force of the explosion blasted him backwards. Recovered from the shock before he hit the ground, Osomatsu rolled and shot to his feet. Congealed muck sliding off his face, with a surge of revulsion he almost forgot his aborted rescue. Lukewarm like a stagnant swamp, he scrubbed at his face only to find his sleeve just as disgusting.

‘Ergh, this shit is nasty!’

‘Eww!’ Todomatsu squealed, dancing back like Osomatsu’s gut reflex would be to smear it on him. ‘Don’t come near me, Niisan!’

‘Nice,’ was Choromatsu’s one “I told you so” comment as Osomatsu held his breath, expecting a stench as foul as the viscous texture to swamp him. Then he tentatively sniffed—the gunk was odourless. His mask filtered out the worst of bad smells, but not like this. For something this disgusting to not reek was creepy.

Blinking through slime, their opponent swam into view. Osomatsu tensed, raising his dripping gauntlets. But the monster just sat there. About as high as his waist, the beast had a vaguely frog-like look to them. If a crocodile had been crushed into the shape of a frog. By an artist who only had the barest idea what a frog was. Their seven eyes bulged over a long, drooping mouth. ‘There it is,’ Osomatsu spied their crystal, poking out of their rounded stomach.

Kaeruugoe blinked stupidly, unmoving but for their smacking lips—okay, this one looked like a pushover. But the mucus worked negative wonders on Osomatsu’s morale. Kindling his spark
against the sinking feeling, he lit his gauntlets, blazing like torches. His scummy coating evaporated. Inspired, he ran a ripple down his body, coursing like blue flame on gasoline. Steaming, but mucus-free, it was his turn to prod Choromatsu. ‘What are you waiting for? Shoot it, it’s a lump.’

But the Wyvern refused—the baby was still too close. ‘Well, someone has to do something.’

Not waiting for the beast to make the first move, Osomatsu lurched forward, swerving to ram it from the side. ‘This is what you get for picking on someone who can’t fight back, you piece of …’

The blue bundle began to wail. Osomatsu stalled, insensibly flustered. A baby was crying. What was he supposed to do?

The monster stretched its mouth open, as though to join in their tiny slave’s grievance. And just kept stretching. Leaning backwards, their lips pulled impossibly, gaping in a cave physically impossible, wide enough to swallow Osomatsu and all five of his siblings whole.

Then they began to shriek.

Not yet recovered from the slap to mother nature’s face—nothing alive should stretch like that, nothing—Osomatsu yelled, clapping his gauntlets over his ears. Sound poured out of Kaeruugoe, no sound human ears were designed to endure. Crouched in a ball, Osomatsu could barely think. The monster’s pitch jumped, scraping down his twitching backbone. His measly magical defences were overwhelmed, eardrums and sanity shuddering on the brink of implosion. I have … to get up …

Noting his struggle to creep forward, Kaeruugoe tilted their aural arsenal in his direction. The assault intensified, Osomatsu’s scream was subsumed. A second lasted a lifetime in agony, and at least 10 passed before the beast finally stopped. Dazed, Osomatsu managed to pick himself up. Feeling drunk—not in a good way, his body numb and head spinning—he saw windows smashed up and down the arcade. Through the misted unfocus of the barrier, people milled by the destruction on the other side, bewildered and rubbing unconsciously at their ears.

‘Are you okay?’ Todomatsu found his voice first.

‘Yeah …’ Osomatsu wasn’t sure he could ever articulate exactly how he felt then. Not good. Choromatsu took a little longer to reply. Lucky bastard, Osomatsu thought resentfully. There was good distance between Choromatsu and the music box from hell, he didn’t get the full blast.

‘As soon as we move, they’ll scream,’ Choromatsu quickly surmised the situation. Osomatsu gritted his teeth. Unpleasantly imagining every one shattered in his mouth with their enemy’s sound bomb, he quickly slackened. But how was he supposed to get close enough to crush them?

‘They don’t know you’re here,’ Todomatsu mused at Choromatsu. ‘Maybe you can …’

‘They don’t know where I am,’ Choromatsu corrected grimly. Behind their languid eyelids, Osomatsu saw Kaeruugoe’s outermost eyes scanned, seeking out the third guardian. ‘But if you keep them busy, I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Can you do something about this?’ Osomatsu asked of their Unicorn, indicating the questionable integrity of his hearing. If they weren’t telepathic, no way would they be talking now. Painful echoes catapulted through his ear canals; besides, he heard only a high-pitched whine. Ahn instructing from her cover, Todomatsu laid a fleeting protective spell on their senses.

‘I can’t reach you, Choromatsu-niisan,’ he said, concerned his light might betray their brother’s position. ‘And Osomatsu-niisan, this is a new spell, I’m not sure …’
‘Better than nothing, let’s go.’

The pit of his stomach squirming as the rest of him braced steel-hard, Osomatsu shot forward. Assault of sound renewed, Kaeruugoe drove the Salamander to his knees. Body thumping as vibrations pummelled him, the barrage might have tossed him arse over head if he didn’t grind his gauntlets into the strip, impromptu anchor dredging up gravel and dust. Todomatsu’s small protections in place, Osomatsu could focus beyond the pain—sort of. All six Matsuno brothers had grown intimately familiar with the acute ache of ear infections growing up. But Osomatsu’s had never hurt quite so exquisitely.

Flicking his sceptre as though the noise was more irritating than gut-busting, Todomatsu tried to snake a chain and smash the beast’s blatantly-displayed source of power. But the baby had rolled onto his stomach. Crawling—was he old enough to crawl?—he latched around the beast’s bloated middle, gumming their crystal. Shit, that was disturbing. Quicksmart, Totty yanked his chain, just weaving it around them before he pierced straight through the baby’s tiny back.

‘I can’t get any closer!’ Osomatsu raged once Kaeruugoe’s second scream subsided.

‘Choromatsu-niisan, can you shift them?’ Todomatsu asked suddenly. ‘Push them away from the baby?’

Choromatsu said nothing.

‘Choromatsu-niisan? Can you move them or not?’

‘Hey, Choromatsu!’ Osomatsu gave their brother the telepathic equivalent of a slap on the cheek. ‘What the hell, man? You okay?’

‘I … I’m sorry.’ Even more dazed than Osomatsu, Choromatsu got his shit together. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘You’ve suspended a rearing bull in mid-air,’ Osomatsu reminded. ‘You can’t kick an oversized toad?’

Still rattled, Choromatsu took a moment to compile his readings. ‘They’ve got a lot of power concentrated in a very small space—that thing is dense.’

‘No need to be delicate, just blast them.’

‘What part of “dense” don’t you understand? … But maybe I can shift the baby.’

‘Matsuno Choromatsu, it’s your element that Kaeruugoe distorts,’ Ahn stewed out of sight. ‘Their attack affects you more than your brothers.’

Osomatsu hissed inward—Choromatsu felt it worse? But, with no other plan, the Wyvern insisted he could do it. ‘No need to get defensive,’ Todomatsu chided, the third born’s snark nothing to what he’d cop if they wore their own worn hoodies. At their leader’s insistence, Choromatsu testily calculated the odds.

‘Up to 39 per cent worse than they’ve screamed so far, I can handle it.’

‘All right,’ Todomatsu nodded resolutely. ‘And I’ll be ready if it’s more than 39—be careful, Choromatsu-niisan. Osomatsu-niisan, we’ll leave the monster to you.’

‘Sure,’ Osomatsu drawled sarcastically. ‘Thanks, loads.’
Every muscle coiled to spring, the eldest Matsuno tried not to clench his jaw as Choromatsu carefully aligned his breath. Taking delicate hold of the child’s airspace, he drew them upward, popping them from Kaeruugoe’s crystal a good 20 metres into the air. The monster shrieking like an amphibious banshee, Choromatsu soared from hiding, swooping to intercept the fragile bundle. Osomatsu fired his flamethrowers, fighting every instinct not to protect his ears. Gulping down his fire—come on, really?—three globular eyes zoned in on the Wyvern as he corkscrewed, catching the baby in a shielding spin and immediately sailing upwards. Tilting their bottomless pit like they could swallow worlds, Kaeruugoe caught the Wyvern in a savage burst of vibration.

‘No!’ Osomatsu cried. But Choromatsu was knocked senseless. The Wyvern plummeting like a plane in a tailspin, the baby fell from arms gone totally limp. But, with a courageous bound, Todoromatsu leaped Osomatsu’s fire, shooting to snatch the tiny boy from his tumble. Rolling mid-air, he landed painfully on his back, protecting the child.

‘All yours, Niisan!’ he panted, lassoing their unconscious brother and dragging him from harm’s way.

Apparently, fire wouldn’t cut it. He had to end this the old-fashioned way. But he fought against a horizontal noisestorm. With each shuffling step in the beast’s direction the pain surmounted itself, over and over. Crouching against the onslaught, Osomatsu forced himself on. Kaeruugoe’s pitch pounced feverishly high, the Salamander sweating and shivering, reduced to crawling on his belly. If I can just ... get one finger on it ...

When had he curled foetal? Pushing himself out of the humiliating position, Osomatsu squinted through the soundwaves—he could practically see them, reminded of the time he and his brothers had given their father’s new speakers a trial by fire, playing a particularly noisy DVD at top volume. One highly-inaccurate space explosion had blasted a speaker clean off the top of the TV, dangling on its narrow cord.

Half a metre away. Osomatsu groaned. Frequency climbing well past twisted realms of insane, half a metre was a pilgrimage. Taunts croaked from Kaeruugoe’s cavernous maw, tumbled amid their phonic bombardment—he could practically see them, reminded of the time he and his brothers had given their father’s new speakers a trial by fire, playing a particularly noisy DVD at top volume. One highly-inaccurate space explosion had blasted a speaker clean off the top of the TV, dangling on its narrow cord.

Their shriek pierced a ungodly pitch that could not exist. Osomatsu’s gauntlet dropped, smacking into the ground. Overhead, the glass ceiling lost to pressure and shattered.

Struck by exploded fragments and raining glass bouncing off his armour, Osomatsu blinked. His head roared deafeningly. But he just caught Kaeruugoe’s look of priceless surprise before they disintegrated. ‘Well,’ he said to no one in particular, barely noticing as the countless cuts on his face healed over. ‘They didn’t think that one through, did they?’

Revived, Choromatsu bled from his ears, his nose—even his eyes. Trying unsuccessfully to stem the profuse flows with his sleeve, his shame was very quiet. ‘I almost got him killed,’ he said, blinking through blood at the baby, already babbling with the return of his soul. ‘I screwed up again. I … I’m sorry.’

‘You did not “screw up”, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn promised softly.
‘We were kinda stuck for ideas,’ Osomatsu pointed out. What was there to be sorry for? Choromatsu had gone all out to do his job. And he was pretty sure the baby didn’t mind—he’d been rescued, hadn’t he?

‘We’ve got your back, Niisan,’ Todomatsu said, white glove unflinching to Choromatsu’s bloodied cheek as he encouraged ruptured vessels to mend. ‘That’s why we’re here.’

Choromatsu recovered enough to erase the recent memory of the unconscious couple—this was something they’d really rather forget—Todomatsu settled the baby between them. Back out on the strip, it was clear Tokyo was getting better at noticing when something was going down. And the shattered ceiling didn’t help. Red and blue blurred beyond the barrier, police cars cruised right up into the arcade, as far as they could without being repelled.

Ahn retracted her dome of misdirection. The arcade erupted. An ocean of shouting and surging toward the cinema ensued. Osomatsu and Todomatsu gleefully waved and posed for their adoring fans and phones like the magical boys they were. Choromatsu didn’t. ‘Do you have to?’ he demanded in a pained voice, finally convincing Totty to blow a final kiss, uniformed officers fighting their way to the front. ‘We’re supposed to be keeping a low profile,’ he said, snippy as they jumped up and out through the conveniently-busted ceiling.

‘Someone’s not over their magical embarrassment,’ Osomatsu teased. Even Ahn had loosened up—the Unicorn’s mellowing influence, maybe? It’d take that or a sledgehammer to the head to make their little mentor drop protocol.

‘It is your mission we must protect,’ she said, poking her nose from Osomatsu’s pocket to enjoy the warming breeze. ‘And the truths of the universe your people must discover for themselves. No one knows in whose service you fight. But the guardians are decidedly no longer a secret. So …’

‘So there’s no harm in enjoying a little love. Come on, lighten up, you deserve … shit.’ Osomatsu spied the time on a digital clock fixed to a nearby building. He’d arranged to meet Tanaka half an hour ago.

‘We’ll wait for you,’ Todomatsu said when the eldest told them to head home. Osomatsu was grateful he insisted. Phasing by a pair of shadowed trash cages—all glamour, the superhero life—Osomatsu rocked with pain. Sitting him and Choromatsu on the grimy ground, Todomatsu attended their perforated eardrums and splitting headaches.

‘How come your ears aren’t ripped open?’ Osomatsu complained, Totty’s headache only mild.

‘Isn’t it obvious, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu smiled, every speck of modesty a scam. ‘The Spectrum Alliance loves me the most.’

Scowling, Osomatsu muttered he’d be back soon. ‘If you’re not?’ Choromatsu voiced unexpectedly. In the alley entrance, Osomatsu paused.

‘Give it day,’ he pursed his lips, not liking his options. ‘Then call the police.’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu?’ Ahn ventured hesitantly. ‘We should really investigate other ways to …’

‘I’ll be back soon,’ he repeated, cutting short his friend’s concerns and striding to meet his middleman. As predicted, Tanaka was less than impressed with his rampant tardiness.

‘Late again, Matsuno,’ he made a drama of it, consulting an expensive watch. ‘You shouldn’t be so eager to piss us off, given our recent … disagreements.’ The oily mobster chose his words deliberately for maximum impact. ‘And our offer still stands, in case you’re interested. Even though
you're a …'

‘I’m a pain in your arse, I know.’

Osomatsu was less glib than he used to be, his dealings with gangsters now somewhat less casual. And Tanaka flaunted a lot more muscle than usual. The grunts leered at him, muscles squeezed into suits. But he still flashed a fleeting grin. Plucking a pouch heavy with gold from his hoodie, he dangled it before them. ‘Do you want it or not?’

The swap made, Osomatsu returned to his brothers, careful he wasn’t followed. The three of them dead tired, they meandered home at a snail’s pace. Trudging past the local theatre, posters of a fresh-faced, cat-eared idol beamed down at them. Osomatsu sneaked a wearied grin behind their brother’s back at Totty—the place was wallpapered with Choromatsu’s girl. The date bulged in bright yellow bubble writing at the bottom of every poster. ‘Looks like there’s a show tonight.’

‘Yeah …’ Choromatsu trailed wistfully before realising his mistake. ‘That … that is,’ he stammered, totally failing to make out that he didn’t care. But Osomatsu grin rivalled the devil’s.

‘Aww, poor Niichan,’ Todomatsu overdid his sympathy as Osomatsu slung an around around the third born’s stiff shoulders. ‘You don’t have to hide it—the otaku inside you is pining, isn’t he?’

Blushing furiously and yelling his embarrassment, Choromatsu shoved the eldest off him and charged ahead. ‘You shouldn’t make fun of him so,’ Ahn reprimanded as Todomatsu doubled over laughing.

‘But it is fun,’ Osomatsu stressed. ‘That’s the point.’

But he shared a secret smile with Totty as the youngest massaged his aching cheeks.

Choromatsu refused to speak to either of them until mellowed by hot water and steam in the bath house. Ichimatsu didn’t join them. He’d been going through a bad patch the last few weeks. The fourth born had kicked up a torpid stink that he couldn’t make the short trip without being carried. Now he bathed at home—occasionally. When the entire household got down on their knees and begged. Furious and ashamed that he needed it, he flat-out refused to let Karamatsu help him. And though he meant all the goodness in his heart, Jyushimatsu’s keen assistance was usually counterproductive. Osomatsu, Choromatsu and Todomatsu had taken to trading off just to get the job done. It was easier than helping Ichimatsu to the bathroom.

‘Osomatsu, that bruise,’ Karamatsu ventured hesitantly as they were getting dressed. Osomatsu cursed inwardly. He’d completely forgotten about that winding kick before Kaeruugoe’s operatic debut. Sure enough, it bloomed like a sunset over his flattened stomach, memorial to his long-gone burgeoning beer gut.

‘It’s nothing,’ Osomatsu brushed him off, tugging his T-shirt down and flashing telepathic irritation Totty’s way—he’d healed everything else. Was one bruise really going to make a difference? ‘Occupational hazard. My job sucks, that’s all.’

‘… Did you get beaten up for not paying a debt?’ Karamatsu blurted unexpectedly. Osomatsu froze, one leg in his jeans and all but shock shovelled out of him. Not just that the second born hadn’t taken his word as gospel. Not just at the blunt question out of the blue. Karamatsu, his most considerate sibling, hadn’t drawn him aside to ask quietly. What was with that?

Making out they hadn’t heard, their brothers pretended to be engrossed with their clothes. At least, Choromatsu and Todomatsu did. Jyushimatsu gazed as his two eldest brothers seemed to almost face
off, his eternal grin a little spooked. ‘What? Why would you … which one of you arseholes said that?’ Osomatsu said, forcing casual as he zipped his jeans. He’d never said a word about that. Not to Karamatsu. And he trusted his magical brothers to keep their mouths shut.

Osomatsu bitched inwardly. He’d been so careful to keep his brothers out of his borderline mob involvement. How much did Karamatsu know? What if—Osomatsu got unreasonably ahead of himself, gut suddenly tangling in knots—he’d bumped into one of the eldest’s lowbrow associates? What if he’d been mistaken for Osomatsu … goddamn it! He had to stamp this out right now.

‘Come on, you seriously believe that?’ he drawled. The second born made a noncommittal hum through his nose, clearly worried. Shit, this was the last thing Osomatsu needed.

‘He’s being a good guy,’ Choromatsu edged into Osomatsu’s mind to warn. ‘Don’t be an arsehole.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Aiming to nip this in the bud with a little brotherly ribbing, he sneaked Karamatsu’s sunglasses from his jeans pocket like there was nothing wrong.

‘Hey! What are you …’

‘These are even more painful than the last pair,’ Osomatsu commented.

‘I … got them cheap,’ Karamatsu said. Something strained in his voice set off Osomatsu’s brother instinct something fierce. But he paid it no notice. This was too important, Karamatsu was trashing his efforts to keep him under mob radar!

‘But there’s gotta be some cheap knockoffs out there actually worth buying, right? Why would I have any debts?’ he said breezily, still playing with his brother’s glasses. ‘I make good money, I don’t need to borrow.’

‘But were you beaten up over debts before you started working? All I want is the truth,’ Karamatsu wouldn’t relent, voice starting to rise. Forced into lies and feeling uncharitably let down by his trusting brother, Osomatsu flatly denied it. ‘Of … of course. Forgive me brother, I’d never trouble you if … it’s only your safety that I … but … could I …’

Cutting off his prattle with a swallow, Karamatsu got a hold of himself. With a deep breath, he found his smile and made a valiant attempt at smooth. ‘Brother, if you could please return those, I’d very much appreciate it.’

Karamatsu stuck out his hand. Osomatsu stared. Trying to shrug off the fact he’d somehow pissed off his brother—since when did Karamatsu get pissed off, how was he supposed to predict that?—Osomatsu threw him the horrible shades. ‘Okay, okay.’

Immediately putting them on under the bright lights, the second born tripped over himself to apologise, heaping any and all blame on his own shoulders. ‘I’m sorry, Osomatsu. I’m just a little … tense these days.’

‘I see that,’ said Osomatsu. ‘It’s no big deal, it’s fine … come on, man. Let’s do something.’

Karamatsu had every right to be tense. The second born was a topic of ongoing debate among his magical brothers. ‘It’s not like he’s actually been trying to get work, he just picked up one of the fliers we left lying around,’ Osomatsu had backed up his assertion Karamatsu wasn’t a target as he and Choromatsu experimented with their firestorm, heating the entire warehouse while Totty looked on jealously. ‘We were stupid not to get rid of them, that’s on us.’

But Todomatsu remained unsure. ‘He doesn’t have many friends, does he?’
'You mean girlfriends? God, no—he’s related to us. But friends? Sure he does.’ Osomatsu had counted on his flaming fingers. ‘There’s Totoko and Chibita and … and us.’

‘The dark puppet stopped a soldier from taking his soul,’ Choromatsu revealed, Osomatsu aggravated that the obvious somehow eluded his brothers. Weren’t they supposed to be the smart ones? ‘He kept Karamatsu with him—he was holding his hand.’

‘The puppet’s a creepy bastard,’ Osomatsu deflected. ‘He was fucking with you, that’s what he does.

‘And, ah …’ Clearly not wanting to say, Choromatsu had got it out in an awkward rush. ‘There’s a lot locked away in Karamatsu's mind, I saw when I erased his … There’s, ah … a lot he’s not telling us.’

‘How many minds have you gotten up close and personal with? Everyone keeps secrets,’ Osomatsu had said as Choromatsu turned rosy. But the third born’s eyes were a book: “Not secrets like this”.

‘He doesn’t seem happy,’ Ahn had said, very quiet through the brothers’ discussion.

‘This is Karamatsu,’ Osomatsu stressed, like they could have forgotten. ‘The guy’s untouchable. He’s too full of hot air, there’s no room for misery.’

‘Did you see how he looked at us, when I was helping him sleep?’ Todomatsu directed at the third born, Osomatsu spiking that they’d ignored him.

‘“Why are you being nice to me”’, murmured Choromatsu. ‘Like he didn’t expect it. I don’t know,’ he’d said, reduced to mumbles when Osomatsu demanded if he was serious. ‘I never told anyone when I was … you know. Having problems.’

‘But Karamatsu’s strong, he’s … that’s not what I meant,’ Osomatsu said when Choromatsu wilted, hand strayed to the dispenser at his wrist. Losing power in wind gusts, their firestorm died.

‘Perhaps you should try harder to match your words and meaning,’ Ahn had said, a little coolly.

‘I’ll get on that … Look, Karamatsu’s fine, he doesn’t let anything get to him. And even if he was a target,’ Osomatsu said, not buying it for a second, ‘Takuu would notice the second we tried to do anything. So what are we supposed to do?’

‘Isn’t it obvious, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu had said a little contemptuously. ‘We be nice to him.’

Osomatsu had blinked, dumbfounded. ‘We are nice to him, he’s our brother.’

‘But we’ve done some not-so-nice things,’ Todomatsu had said. Osomatsu thought it was a bit rich, the prince of pulling heartstrings for pleasure and profit lecturing him on how to play nice. ‘We’ve left him out, we’re always making fun of him.’

‘We make fun of each other.’ Osomatsu couldn’t believe he was hearing this. ‘We all do shitty things—it’s, like, ancient brother law. Karamatsu likes getting a reaction out of us, it’s funny.’

‘Whatever, Niisan,’ Todomatsu had yawned, heralding an abrupt end of conversation by Unicorn decree. ‘But assuming he is a target, we have to make sure Takuu doesn’t want him anymore.’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu, you’re his only older brother,’ Ahn had said, hesitant to involve herself any further. But she continued all the same. ‘He looks up to you. And he has borne the brunt of your frustrations—your understandable frustrations,’ she’d amended when Osomatsu opened his mouth
furiously. ‘You’ve been short with him many times.’

‘You’re making me the bad guy?!’

Karamatsu was one of the last dependable things left in his life. Just the idea that things Osomatsu said in fun might bore deep inside him, his brother smiling through heart-rending hurt … he’d slammed the brakes on that. But he accepted Karamatsu might feel a little left out, even overshadowed. The second born was very quiet when they were together—had he always been? Osomatsu was startled to realise he’d never noticed. Karamatsu had such a loud personality. But Osomatsu was a brash bigmouth, Todomatsu was eager and chatty, and Choromatsu was quick and argumentative. They all talked, often and over the top of each other. Did they never let Karamatsu get a word in? Did they really ignore him?

The brothers had decided it wouldn’t hurt to make a conscious effort, especially while the second born recovered from the train incident. Making good on that promise, Osomatsu broke out the PlayStation after dinner, tossing Karamatsu a controller. ‘A hundred yen says I knock you out in two rounds.’

Winning and losing enough increasingly-ridiculous bets to even out as they passed the controllers around, Jiushimatsu twanged to his feet after Karamatsu won from behind, legs bending more like rubber than at the knee. ‘NOOOOOOO! One strike, two strikes, three strikes, I’m out! Congratulations, thanks for playing, I’m ouuuuuutttt! Now I’m going out! Look after Ichimatsu-niisan for me!’

‘Of course, sweet Jiushimatsu,’ Karamatsu promised gaily. Dynamic body rapidly unwinding, the fifth born loped from the lounge to … wherever he was going. ‘We should go, too,’ Todomatsu said telepathically as they heard the front door skid open and shut, almost flying off its runners. ‘I want you to see a few candidates … remember, Osomatsu-niisan?’ he tacked on with a figurative wink.

Osomatsu complained as expected, lazing back on the floor. Propped on his elbow, he had an uninterrupted view of Karamatsu’s over-the-top game technique, wielding the controller with all the swagger and chivalry of a duelling knight. Watching the second born concede a defeat just as striking as his victories, Osomatsu’s stomach gave a squirm. They’d be leaving any minute. How exactly did they plan to pull that off? They might have an oh-so-innocent-and-secret reason to get Choromatsu out of the house, but Todomatsu and Ahn had already cornered the eldest over his lackluster recruitment efforts. Karamatsu couldn’t tag along Kraken hunting. And Osomatsu was at a loss for any viable excuse to ditch him … except maybe Ichimatsu. And Ichimatsu was a stretch. Dead to the world, he was even less starved for company than usual. That went double for Karamatsu’s company.

His good time out the window, Osomatsu suddenly regretted their good intentions … well, he didn’t regret them. But Todomatsu wasn’t worried. ‘I’ll take care of it, Niisan,’ he said, abandoning misleading button bashing to unleash a string of combos that annihilated Osomatsu’s hapless avatar. ‘Just say we’re thinking about pachinko.’

The moment Osomatsu dropped paying the machines a visit into conversation, Todomatsu stretched and hopped to his feet. ‘Tea, anyone?’ Ten seconds later, an almighty crash resounded from the kitchen. A high-pitched wail lifted over the commotion.

‘Totty?’ Throwing down his controller, Karamatsu hastened to the next room. Exchanging a glance, Osomatsu and Choromatsu followed. The entire contents of the dish drainer was smashed, shards of previously-drying bowls and glasses turning the kitchen floor into an sadistic torture chamber. Already given Mum a hand to hop over the mess in her thin slippers, Karamatsu cleared a path for the youngest with a careful sweep of his foot. ‘Brother, are you all right?’
‘I’m s-so sorry!’ Todomatsu cried, burying his face in Mum’s shoulder. ‘I th-thought I saw something outside … I thought it w-was … them …’

The youngest’s tears dripping as Mum gently rocked him, Karamatsu went very still, just for a moment. Then, in a flurry, he assembled the dustpan, an old newspaper, and a garbage bag. ‘Don’t worry yourself for a moment, dear Todomatsu,’ he declared as he busied himself, starting to clean up. ‘I’ll take care of everything. Brothers, I entrust our youngest to you,’ Karamatsu said, looking grandly to Osomatsu and Choromatsu from where he knelt, sweeping on a small patch of cleared linoleum. ‘Go, play to your hearts’ content. Just knowing he will be in your care is all the happiness my soul needs!’

‘Ah, sure,’ Choromatsu stuttered, giving Osomatsu a look of pure astonishment it had been that easy. Well, destructive. And conniving. But easy. Circumventing Mum’s wondering how a noisy, smoky pachinko parlour could possibly put her traumatised son at ease, Todomatsu met them in the entrance in minutes. His every tear had miraculously vanished. ‘Right, let’s go.

‘Couldn’t we just tell him?’ the youngest broached as they jogged back two minutes later, tugging on their outer coats as they remembered, okay, March nights were still freaking cold. They could hear the rustle of plastic and tinkle of broken glass as Karamatsu returned the kitchen to pristine condition, humming industriously. ‘He’d never give us away. And he’s onto you, Osomatsu-niisan,’ he said, Osomatsu grumping as he shut the door with more force than needed. ‘He might already be suspicious. And he’s already … you know. Involved.’

Osomatsu kicked moodily at the ground, Totty’s suggestion less than helpful—did he want to protect their family or not? ‘It’s not safe,’ Ahn reminded.

‘And you’re the one who thinks he’s a target—that doesn’t strike you as a bad idea? I don’t know how Karamatsu figured me out,’ Osomatsu admitted. ‘But I’ve set him straight, he’ll back off now.’

As always, Choromatsu was eternally unconvinced. ‘If he thinks you’re in trouble he won’t back down that easily.’

‘Your brother is capable of formidable purpose,’ Ahn spoke up from Totty’s shoulder, wrapped in her own tiny coat trimmed with ribbons and fluffy pink pompoms. ‘He proved that when he penetrated Matsuno Choromatsu’s barrier on the beach. He did it to reach you, his brothers.’

Osomatsu huffed a sigh. Goddamn it, Karamatsu. What were they going to do with him?

‘Wait, what are you doing?’ His attention snapped from one brother to another, Choromatsu gravitating towards one of their usual alleys.

‘Ah … transforming?’

‘Nah, it’s the nicest night we’ve had in ages. We’re in no hurry. Let’s walk a bit.’

Osomatsu dragged Choromatsu back beneath the overlapping glow of streetlights. A lifetime of cause for concern, the third born was immediately suspicious. And Osomatsu’s irrepressible grin damned him; gleeful anticipation hijacked his face ear to ear. Karamatsu might be the number one sextuplet on their current agenda, but Osomatsu had four more younger brothers. And one of them—not naming names; Osomatsu dug his elbow into a belligerent Choromatsu’s ribs as they herded him down the street, Todomatsu closed in from the left so escape wasn’t an option—was working way too hard.

‘Seriously, what’s going on?’ Choromatsu demanded, Osomatsu and Totty ploughing him through
the first cluster of people they’d come across. No one strayed alone. The group huddled for security —two glanced sharply over their shoulders as the brothers passed, watching until they’d tramped a safe distance down the path. But the strong aura of caution they radiated was all but neutralised by something far more welcome: excitement. They passed several more tight knots before vigilance began to loosen with growing safety in numbers, people spilling into the street. Friends meeting, chatting, laughing—this was Tokyo reborn. Even just for one night.

‘I haven’t seen so many people out for ages,’ Todomatsu said, sharing sweet words with few admirers struck by the sight of his playing perch to a tiny fluffball dressed to match. Osomatsu made a few sounds of agreement, enjoying as Ahn suffered chin scratches with rapidly-declining patience. But Choromatsu was having none of it.

‘What are we doing here?’ he exclaimed, yanked to an abrupt halt directly outside the theatre. Papered by his cute idol and lit by dancing spotlights, Choromatsu’s total despondence was almost as priceless as his total failure to hide just how much he wanted to ditch them and sprint inside. ‘What are you doing, what the hell!’

Totty’s phone in his face, Choromatsu grabbed at the device, coursing with embarrassment and repressed desire. Totty held it out of reach, giggling. Shoving his hand in his pocket, Osomatsu withdrew their secret and waved it in Choromatsu’s face. ‘Look what I’ve got,’ he sang teasingly. Choromatsu abruptly stopped trying to get out of frame.

‘Wh-what … that’s … that’s a special VIP ticket!’

Choromatsu’s voice strangled, snatching it away and holding it right under his nose in case the dozen times his eyes had already feverishly scanned the details had been a total mind blank. ‘This … this is …’

‘You deserve it. No catch,’ Osomatsu insisted when Choromatsu’s eyes narrowed. ‘I promise.’

It took a minute to convince the third born both his concert and 10-minute one-on-one with his idol were completely sacred: no Osomatsus allowed. The eldest shrugged when Choromatsu, reduced to breathless stammers, asked why. ‘Why not?’

Transcending his own personal pop-idol-themed heaven, the third born stumbled jarringly back to earth. ‘I can’t go!’

‘Why not?’ Todomatsu asked, peeking over his phone.

‘It’ll be dark, crowded—if there’s an attack I might not make it in time. You’re not okay with this, are you?’ he blustered at Ahn. Their kitten-adjacent mentor curled her little tail around herself, not sure what to make of Choromatsu’s hush-hush hobby. But heroes needed down time as much as the next person—scratch that, they needed it a million times more. Who was she to judge how her Wyvern spent his? ‘But if something happens …’

‘Come on, relax! You held down the fort when I was busy hacking up poison,’ Osomatsu reminded as Choromatsu’s eyes relit with tentative hope, clutching the precious ticket. Osomatsu had the feeling it was going to wind up in an expensive frame. His dwindling protests countered, Choromatsu didn’t take much convincing. Good thing, too. Osomatsu had only ever had bad luck the few times he’d tried his hand at scalping tickets. ‘Totty and I can handle it for one night.’

‘We’ve got your back, Niisan,’ Todomatsu smiled, giving the third born a quick hug. Somewhat dazed, Choromatsu accepted the rare public affection wordlessly. ‘That’s why we’re here.’
Still not quite believing what was happening, Osomatsu had to physically spin and point Choromatsu in the direction of the doors when they burst open, fans shouting and scuffling to shove inside. ‘Did you see the look on his face?’ Todomatsu sighed happily as the eldest gave the third born a push to get him moving.

‘I didn’t think you’d be so into the idea,’ Osomatsu said as they backed the hell up, making way for the horde. ‘There’s nothing in it for you.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu exclaimed, slathering the mock hurt on thick. ‘How could you say that about your Unicorn? I’m a paragon of goodness, remember? Besides,’ he added slyly, burying his phone in his trouser pocket. It was jam-packed with the full spectrum of Matsuno Choromatsu emotion. ‘There’s plenty in it for me.’

Ahn shook her little head despairingly. ‘You’re as bad as Matsuno Osomatsu.’

‘Worse,’ Osomatsu grinned, miming a punch to Totty’s arm as they sidestepped the remaining fan traffic. ‘I did warn you. I was right, wasn’t I? Come on, admit it.’

Ahn gave a haughty sniff. She’d admit Osomatsu was right the day hell froze. ‘Well, come on.’ Ahn alighted from her unconventional Unicorn’s shoulder when they moved too slowly for her schedule. Dragging out complaints, Osomatsu had already resigned himself to being dragged recruiting. Totty hopping to catch up as Ahn bounded ahead, Osomatsu cast about for a likely place to transform. ‘No one’s down here,’ he announced confidently—without looking—and motioned them around a poorly-lit corner.

Straight into Karamatsu.

***

So he’d let himself be talked into it. Very easily.

So much for being the voice of reason. But he’d been a fish on a hook from the moment Osomatsu dangled the ticket in his face. Choromatsu fumbled his wallet at a merch table. If Todomatsu had caught that unbridled whimper of delight on video, retribution would be swift. Retribution would be painful. It would be … windy.

Choromatsu thought of the practically non-existent protests he’d made a little sheepishly. But, his pockets loaded with penlights and atmosphere brewing excitement, he queued among his kind, practically skipping. As embarrassing as it was to admit outside his happy idol bubble, Todomatsu was right. The closet fan in Choromatsu was sorely deprived.

It was the third born’s own personal paradox. Choromatsu used to have all the time in the world and zero funds to pursue his passion. Now he was a highly paid professional hero. But he was also on permanent standby. And he couldn’t think of a more obstructive locale to escape in an emergency than a popular concert venue. Permanently sandwiched between principle and want as he was, Choromatsu had snagged himself in a new spiral, denying himself basic rights due to any and all who earned their own living: the right to spend their paycheques how they chose. Without judgement breathing down their necks.

He hadn’t gone cold turkey. Every new single, every photo book, every piece of Nyaa-chan paraphernalia he could get his hands on, down to the latest series of bell-bedecked phone charms, were stuffed in paper bags hidden through the house. Choromatsu as good as taunted himself, every time he stole to the theatre to load up on merch. His brothers had ambushed him trying to sneak out more than once. ‘Thought we’d find you here,’ Osomatsu had grinned on the last occasion.
Choromatsu had ripened like a sunburnt tomato.

‘It’s, ah, not like I can actually … you know. Go to a concert …’

Looking back, he couldn’t have been more obvious if he’d tried. But it had been getting him down. The moment it had clicked, that Osomatsu and Todomatsu had arranged this surprise for him … Choromatsu’s cheeks ached from prolonged smiling, his straight face wasn’t used to it. His brothers really were capable of being pretty cool. When it suited them.

A peppy voice blared over the intercom, announcing to the army of fans just five minutes remained until the inner doors opened. The already frenzied flipping out went rabid with anticipation. Choromatsu wouldn’t be outdone, joining in chants and stretching out his vocal cords—they were in for a glorious night of punishment.

The pleasant hysteria swelled. Two more minutes … Choromatsu cursed humankind’s collective stupidity. Why hadn’t they discovered the rest of the universe yet, what was taking so long? Nyaa-chan would be completely into him now, if she could only know what he did for a living. But, remembering the attention heaped on him by career gun maids, Choromatsu’s chest inflated with a shot of confidence. Maybe he wasn’t so hopeless untransformed, either.

He promptly ruined his not-hopeful streak, stacking it over the lip of the entrance. Come on! he exploded silently, staggering upright with a helpful hand from an unseen fan-in-arms. What was that, you’re supposed to be the graceful one! Choromatsu redeemed himself by threading to the front of the packed-in crowd without pissing anyone off—idol fanatics were notoriously aggressive. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu! Long time no see!’

Surprised, Choromatsu returned a few avid waves, faces he knew from fan clubs and forums fighting to reach the enviable position he’d snapped, an arm’s length from the stage. Inked on countless paper fans, the sweltering theatre was alive with Nyaa-chan’s fluttering face. His own fan tucked in the waistband of his jeans, Choromatsu bounced on his toes, craning his neck trying to spot her waiting in the wings. She’d be onstage any second, she’d be right in front of him …

He had a VIP encounter straight after the show. 10 minutes. Just him and Nyaa-chan.

A bead of sweat tickled, rolling between his shoulder blades. It wasn’t only the body heat. But, fully expecting to landslide in doubt, agonising over every possible scenario that ended in him screwing this up … again … Choromatsu felt almost liberated. The concert was about to start, the place was buzzing—he was buzzing. His brothers’ surprise had been a gift in more ways than one. He didn’t have time to overthink anything. He wouldn’t melt down over another ridiculous point-by-point agenda weeks in the making, desperate to appeal to his idol on any level. Already immersed in happy fandom, Choromatsu’s anxieties squashed almost flat. Sure, a few awkward starstruck stumbles were inevitable. But his rampant insecurities had fizzled to a whisper. Choromatsu actually felt pretty good about himself. He might get through this without making a complete arse of himself. He might even enjoy himself … she might even enjoy herself … maybe.

Amazed at his own daring, Choromatsu tugged his shirt collar open, the heat overwhelming—in a good way. But if he kept going at this rate, he’d actually believe he was capable of asking someone out … not Nyaa-chan. Choromatsu was unnecessarily flustered, no one to hear his dreams but him. Someone like his idol was light years out of his league.

Don’t give me that shit—you’re a hero, you’re good enough for anyone.

When the lights went down and the opening bars of her latest hit cranked to top volume, Choromatsu released all his repressed otaku euphoria. And, if he hadn’t already, he lost it when Nyaa-chan
frisked on stage. ‘Nyaa-chan! You’re too cute! Nyaaaaaa-chaaannn!’

Coloured lights flashing in vibrant patterns behind her, every time she whisked energetically by Choromatsu felt the wind ruffling her skirt. He swore he smelt her shampoo over the sweat and body odour, she smelt amazing.

Choromatsu made it halfway through the fifth song before he started to think this was too good to be true. With their impossible luck, there would be a Liberation Force attack tonight. Right here, in the middle of Nyaa-chan’s concert. Well, he imagined Osomatsu’s shrug, Choromatsu’s neurotic predictions practically a non-event. If it happens, you’ll be there to take care of it, won’t you.

It didn’t happen. That wasn’t enough to convince him the blatant coincidence collection they’d racked up was no more than that. But his brothers were right, Choromatsu had to learn to relax. They could handle one night without the Wyvern.

Accomplishment. Contributing to society. Being useful. The Wyvern fed all these desires and more, reinforcing his pride. Complications aside, Choromatsu had job satisfaction to spare. But he couldn’t pretend it wasn’t a nice change, his heart hammering with something other than life-or-death adrenaline.

Sometime after the interval (Choromatsu had raced back to a merch table, buying a second copy of this month’s photo book for Nyaa-chan to sign) the emerald-adorned scroll in his pocket began to burn. Jumping up and down and shouting adoration, Choromatsu didn’t notice—it was too warm, too loud and bright and vibrant.

It was better, that he didn’t. He’d have forsaken his vow to entrust the night to his brothers in an instant. But he never would have made it in time.

Even had he somehow crushed his way to the exit. Even had he flown with all the power of a fully-evolved Wyvern.

It wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

***


He tramped around their street and pottered through the little backyard every day; Jyushimatsu knew every patch by heart. He didn’t wander much further, though. Not for days and days—weeks, even! He still got in good batting practice—it was no fun without Ichimatsu! Jyushimatsu marvelled at how long he’d gone without racing a day away. But he liked to stay close to home. That was more important.

The diagnosis, however, was in: he’d been struck down by a terminal case of antsy.

‘We know you mean well, son. But how about giving Ichimatsu a break?’ Dad had urged a few nights ago as he rustled his evening paper, eyes flicking to follow as Jyushimatsu bounced down the stairs and off the walls. ‘Just for a couple of hours. Go outside and … careful son! Don’t break it … We’ll keep him company for a while,’ Dad had promised, reassembling his scattered paper as Jyushimatsu dipped the teetering TV, a victim of his rampant restlessness.

Jyushimatsu knew they would. They’d probably do a better job keeping Ichimatsu company every day—even Osomatsu was better at keeping his voice down. Jyushimatsu acknowledged this reality matter-of-factly—reality did play funny games, sometimes. But he’d stayed put, doggedly trying to excite Ichimatsu into sitting up. ‘ Doesn’t that feel so much better, Niisan?’ he’d exclaimed under his
breath, stuffing more pillows to prop him up and easing a moaning Ichimatsu through stretches.

‘We’ll be out walking again in no time! But take it slow, okay?’

Too much amazing crammed into his life to run short of things to jabber about (he’d unearthed some daikon in his oden the other day shaped exactly like their head!) Jyushimatsu kept his bedridden brother overstocked with tales from all over the neighbourhood. Sometimes it helped, just having something else to think about. Even when Ichimatsu was too down to even grumble. Even when he burnt up energy he didn’t have shouting—‘Just shut up, fucking shut up! Get out of here! Why won’t you just … fuck … off?!’—Jyushimatsu kept at it. He knew Ichimatsu appreciated it, more than he could say. Maybe that’s why he didn’t.

But pent-up energy steamed from his pores. The fifth born couldn’t take it anymore. And that was okay—Ichimatsu said it was okay. Ichimatsu said a lot of things he didn’t mean. But this wasn’t one of them. And he was totally, completely right. Jyushimatsu couldn’t keep suggesting Ichimatsu look after himself without setting an example—Jyushimatsu needed to move. He needed fresh air, sun on his face, and the touch of earth. And Ichimatsu was dead set that he get it. His big brother took such good care of him.

One burst of exercise elation would be enough; Jyushimatsu would make it last. He didn’t like to leave Ichimatsu alone. If his unspoken plea wasn’t enough—which it was. ‘It’s okay, Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu kept on promising, Ichimatsu curled in the very corner of the futon. ‘I won’t ever leave you. I’ll always come back!’ But he’d been cursed for so long. No wonder Ichimatsu was acting all funny. He kept wandering off. Sometimes even when he was here, he wasn’t.

Jyushimatsu didn’t like who took his place. He spoke so nastily to Karamatsu—so did Ichimatsu, the fifth born supposed. But it was different. Poor Ichimatsu sometimes said nasty things, but he never felt happy afterwards. The other one did. Jyushimatsu never knew what to do when the pretender took his brother outside—he’d already hurt Ichimatsu’s back. Twice. But Jyushimatsu was too scared to confront him. None of his brothers had ever had a wicked double before. His instinct was to investigate. But when Jyushimatsu saw Ichimatsu was even more frightened than him, he’d clamped his mouth shut. For now, all he could do was keep an eye on them—both of them.

And he was having trouble handling the mood at home. Mum and Dad were superpowered players of the century—thanks so much, we couldn’t do this without you! But Karamatsu was still stressed after losing his job with the cultists. His sad brother was … why was Karamatsu so sad? He didn’t understand. He wanted to understand, Jyushimatsu would do anything if it could make Karamatsu feel the same kind of happy that Karamatsu gave him. But he hadn’t forgotten the first time Ichimatsu had disappeared. The memory of obliviously making the second born worse froze Jyushimatsu like the fool he was christened.

The others were trying, too. But the secrets Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu kept wore them down something awful. At least it was a load they shared. Jyushimatsu was so grateful every day that they had each other. But the fifth born’s fidgets had the jitters. His jitters had the fidgets. He had to get out. Just for a little while.

Zigzagging through the streets, he’d felt like a hundred million yen in seconds. And he’d been at it full-pelt for hours. His pumping lungs overeager bellows, Jyushimatsu’s hyped body zipped with energy that redoubled with every skittering step. Hurting around corners at the drop of a hat, he caught a blast of exhaust with his face, traffic crawling by—Jyushimatsu was the fastest. There were a lot of cars jamming up the streets, weren’t there? At least the trains weren’t so crowded anymore. Whooping joyously and spluttering through soot, the few people out and about swivelled to gawk. Jyushimatsu rollicked happily through their stares.
Not looking where he was going, Jyushimatsu just kept going, shouting out all his twitches, pounding his cares into the concrete. Mid-holler, an unsuspecting insect flew straight into his wide-open mouth. Jyushimatsu came to a screeching halt before he realised he’d accidentally swallowed it. He must have swallowed a million bugs in his life. For Totty, that realisation would be nauseating. For Jyushimatsu, it just was. He felt sorry for the bug, though.

Funneling massive bursts of replenishing air through his nostrils, Jyushimatsu leaned on his bobbing knees. His socks were filthy, holes run straight through the reinforced, once-white … he’d run out of the house without jumping into his outside slippers. ‘Oops …’

He forgot things, sometimes. But that was okay. Everything happened. Bending at his stretchy waist, Jyushimatsu pulled his socks off at the toe, exposing his equally-filthy feet to the elements. Soles toughened like leather and feeling zero effect from their hours-long pounding, not even a slipper to protect them, Jyushimatsu scampered onwards.

Smell and sense and something led him like an excitable pup at the end of the world’s longest leash. Jyushimatsu soon dropped behind the pitcher’s mound in a nearby park, tuckered out. His heart pumping heartily, his extremities tingled in the best way—tired today, strong tomorrow! Jyushimatsu wriggled contentedly, burrowing deeper into the dirt. He liked it down here. It smelt good.

Jyushimatsu breathed deep, getting a good whiff of spring. The cherry blossoms would bloom soon. ‘Hi!’ he exclaimed. Streaked with dirt, he rolled onto his front, beaming. A bevy of cats crept to sniff at him. His hoodie and shorts pockets overloaded with fish snacks, he sprang upright and grabbed crummy handfuls. ‘Fish for everyone! Thank you, Ichimatsu-niisan!’

He scattered the treats high and wide like he sowed a fish field—that’d be the best! Ichimatsu would be the farmer, he’d be the farm dog … or a tractor, Jyushimatsu would be a great tractor … and all the cats in the world would come purring! A few of the world’s cats startled by his noisy imagination, their furry ears twitched, cocking their colourful heads at him. Jyushimatsu crouched so they were eye-to-eye, matching their intense stares. Though far more adept, the cats tired of their staring contest first, more interested in the free meal. ‘Help yourselves!’

Squatting on his haunches among the grazing felines, Jyushimatsu scratched the scruff of a scrawny black kitty’s neck. When she got sick of the attention and wandered off, he jumped straight into the fun, joining in as the streetcats, tatty and standoffish, pounced and batted around the last few treats, as playful as kittens.

Mid-gambol, Jyushimatsu stalled. What was that? On all fours and too riveted to break his lively pose, his ears zeroed in.

Voices.

Head tilting to cover all angles, he swept the night-doused park, his every sense a scanner. No one but Jyushimatsu. And the cats. Lamp eyes wide and ears flattening, every feasting feline had snapped alert.

The breeze picked up. Still chilled like a frosted fridge, leaves rustled as the wind lifted Jyushimatsu’s sweaty hair and hanging sleeves. It swept with it a strange sense. Strange, but familiar. Already tense, every cat went rigid. An alarm bell heard only by furry pointed ears, as one they scattered.

‘Who are you? Wh-what do you … Stay back! No …’

A still, small thump rattled his wired eardrums. Jyushimatsu’s pulse thudded in response. Body taut
and his whole being drawn in complete and utter focus, he homed in on the public toilets. Behind there.

Holding his breath—he was a mouth breather, and a loud one—he crept toward the low tiled block, every tread on pins and pointy needles. Apprehension strong, his curiosity outmatched it; Jyushimatsu gamely swung out his bat. Sliding his back along the side of the building—see how quiet he could be?!—Jyushimatsu was about to spy around the edge when the best idea ploughed into him. Slowly reaching one sleeve, he pulled up his hood.

Face shadowed from whatever waited around the corner, straightaway Jyushimatsu felt braver. Definitely cooler—he was just like a spectrum guardian! They were so cool, he got super excited whenever they were on TV. His brothers liked them too, especially Osomatsu. ‘Which one’s your favourite?’ he’d asked last Sunday, finding Jyushimatsu up close and glued to the screen. The snippets that enthralled him were from a few dozen contributors’ phone footage, an incredible minute of the guardians’ fight on the train cut together to an upbeat action soundtrack.

‘The red one!’ he’d blurted eagerly, to Osomatsu’s raucous approval. ‘But the pinky-white one’s super cute, and the green one can fly!’

‘Yeah, they’re pretty cool, I guess …’

Jyushimatsu’s feelings lived in his chest. Now thriving with fully-charged valour, he poked his head around the building. ‘What are you doing?’ he asked loudly.

The cultist jumped—it was a cultist! He was right, he won, gold star for Jyushimatsu. Twanging back to focus, Jyushimatsu took in the salaryman twitching at their feet. That’s what they were doing. The same thing they’d done to him. ‘That’s not very nice.’

Tall, thin, and pale, the cultist gaped. With all seven of their eyes. Bad guys or not, cultists sure had the best costumes. Jyushimatsu’s halloween masks weren’t nearly that realistic. ‘I like your costume,’ he informed the flabbergasted person inside it.

‘You …’ Their voice edged high, all echoey and shivery. Just like the cultist at pachinko. Jyushimatsu foiled a shiver of his own, hefting his bat. He’d seen the cultists pitch before. He wouldn’t strike out again. ‘Sphinx? Can it be … no.’

Eyeballing his dirty feet, his cautious grin, and the matsu motif sewn on his bright yellow hoodie, the cultist swapped disbelief for somewhat discombobulated disdain. ‘Do not think to defy me, puny human. These are the end days of your civilisation, and you will …’

‘You’re a cultist, right?’ The billowy black cloak and bright colours beneath matched his patchy memory. But Jyushimatsu wanted to be triply sure.

‘You’re a cultist, right?’ The billowy black cloak and bright colours beneath matched his patchy memory. But Jyushimatsu wanted to be triply sure.

‘Do not interrupt me, human! I am Yakyuu, and it is only a matter of time before your soul is …’

‘Baseball?!’

‘Base … ball …? Leave now, human,’ the cultist tried again through ramping confusion. Thrilled by their name, Jyushimatsu honed his bull’s eye focus. He wasn’t going anywhere. ‘Or you will be made to regret interfering in the grand conquests of my lord …’

‘Is he okay?’ Jyushimatsu asked. The salaryman had stopped shaking. Lost their thready patience with his interruptions, their gashed mouth pulled in satisfaction. The cultist thrust three curved claws, pointing smack bang centre of Jyushimatsu’s chest—were they made of plastic? They looked really sharp. Just like real claws.
‘Show your loyalty to your master! Capture him!’

The salaryman’s vacant eyes exploded open. Skittering upright, he charged at Jyushimatsu. ‘Wow, you’re fast! You’re strong, too!’

Jyushimatsu caught him by the shirtfront. The office worker’s rampage had a lot more meat behind it than his narrow frame suggested. But Jyushimatsu was Jyushimatsu. Leaning back and pivoting, he bowled the poisoned man—it was some kind of poison, right? The black stuff?—past the toilet block and halfway to the pitcher’s mound, skimming him across dirt like a pebble on a pond. ‘Sorry! Don’t worry, you’ll be better soon! You shouldn’t do that to people,’ Jyushimatsu added, tilting his head over his shoulder so he regarded the cultist at a topsy-turvy angle. ‘The black stuff makes you do stuff you don’t want.’

Not that he remembered being under the cultists’ control. It had jumbled up his noggin, he’d been unsteady for days. That wasn’t anything new and unusual for Jyushimatsu. But his family had never worried like that before. He hadn’t liked that. They’d thought he was sick, wanted to take him to the doctor. He liked doctors a lot, but Jyushimatsu had never been sick in his life. Except for all those times he’d been sick.

Apparently unprepared for any kind of resistance, the cultist was doubly rocked by Jyushimatsu’s out-of-proportion strength. ‘Wh-who is this human… no, no matter.’

They got a hold of themselves, many eyes glinting with spite. ‘I don’t have much strength left, but a drop of darkness shall secure your soul. Submit yourself,’ they said, a marble of smog spinning on the tip of one claw like magic … the black stuff. ‘Surrender your strength to the Liberation Force and …’

Jyushimatsu swung. The cultist barely ducked in time. Jyushimatsu drove them towards the toilets, his bat a blur. ‘How about you leave now, okay? Leave him alone,’ he added, easily skirting the blank-eyed salaryman’s renewed attack. ‘Don’t take him to Mongolia—it’s cold in the mountains. He doesn’t have an outer coat.’

Drawing back and cheerfully tossing the zombified salaryman a safe distance away, Jyushimatsu gripped his bat in both hands. ‘Are you leaving?’

Pinned against the tiles and clearly nervous, the cultist pulled off a sneer. ‘No human can hope to harm me. I am loyal vassal to …’

‘Okay!’

Jyushimatsu swung as hard as he could, drawn to the dark sparkle on their chest. His bat cracked into the crystal at over 40 metres per second—yeah, super mega home run!

The crystal chipped, hairline fissures raying from point of impact. The cultist screamed. Jets of blackened gas escaping, they coiled their long form over, claws grappling at their chest. ‘How about now?’

Jyushimatsu stepped up to the plate to bat again. The cultist recoiled, pressing into the tiles. Then he heard another groan. It was deeper, fainter than the costumed cultist’s defeat. The salaryman had woken up!

Abandoning the cultist, Jyushimatsu trotted to pick the man up. ‘Are you okay?’ he asked, industriously beating dirt off the man’s jacket before remembering to actually make sure he was in one piece. ‘Sorry for throwing you around! There was a cultist!’ he exclaimed in apology, more
excited than scared now he’d come off on top—one to one, the series was tied!

‘Wh-what?’ the poor man croaked. Hoping to make things a little easier for him, Jyushimatsu spoke exaggeratedly slowly, breaking things down.

‘You got hit with the black stuff—how’s your chest, okay? You tried to kidnap me!’

‘I … I tried to …’

‘Yeah! Don’t worry, I know you didn’t mean it. Then the cultist—you know, the ones in the scary-cool costumes?’

Jyushimatsu swung around to point them out, only to find the cultist had vanished. But someone else had appeared. Jyushimatsu’s face lit like the sunrise. The sparkling starlight that beamed to illuminate behind the toilets was pretty bright, too.

‘It’s you!’ he shouted. The salaryman winced against his ecstatic volume and the sudden spotlight, dragged along as Jyushimatsu scarpered to meet them. ‘It’s really you!’

The red and white spectrum guardians had arrived. Within deep hoods, their twin gazes hitched slowly between Jyushimatsu, the victim he towed over his shoulder, and a single splinter of fallen crystal as it flickered out into dust. The heroes looked like “up” had unexpectedly announced it had actually been “down” all along.

Jyushimatsu’s elated grin shrunk a notch. The guardians, too? Why was everyone so surprised when he did something right? He might not be as clever as his brothers. Concentrating was hard, there was always so much going on, so much to see. But this was important. Why wouldn’t he come through? And he could throw a baseball 80 metres. It made absolute sense, that he could beat a cultist, too.

Jyushimatsu was the strongest.

Chapter End Notes

That actually happened, you know - the noisy movie blasting a speaker off the top of the TV. Only it was actually one of the Lord of the Rings films. I maintain it was The Two Towers, the blast at Minas Morgul. My sister maintains it was the blast of Sauron's semi-destruction right at the beginning of The Fellowship of the Ring. We have not sought confirmation from a third party, so at present have agreed to disagree (sort of) :)

Also, given this fic is chokablock with funfun references, I wanted to flag I sort of stealthily referenced my sister's very first fic "Stunt Double" in there somewhere. Just something small, but it's important to me :) Couldn't let it pass without saying something.

A bit of pre-warning for the evens boys, too. Kara's stuff is getting (if it wasn't already) a bit heavy and a little distressing, so apologies in advance if he causes anyone ... distress. Again, shall see you soon!
Here's the rest of Links II for you :) I'm still a bit unsure about some of Kara and Totty's stuff, but I'll keep picking at it forever if I don't post it. It's kinda late, so I haven't given it my usual last pass edit - please be forgiving of any mistakes still littered through there!! I'll hopefully give it a good edit (and probably beg my poor sister to do the same ...) in the next few days and make any necessary corrections. Feel free to point out anything glaring that I've missed!

Fair warning - not many laughs this chapter. As mentioned in last chapter's notes, Kara is reaching his worst place, so his section may be distressing, depressing, and many other sad words.

And cue the drum roll ... ... ... NEXT MAGICAL TEAMMATE REVEAL NEXT CHAPTER HOORAY!!!!!!!

‘You want to talk? Then talk.’

Why hadn’t he delved deeper the moment he’d suspected? Instead of wasting time worrying. He was such an idiot! He was an idiot, his poor brothers … his poor, dear, troubled big brother! What had driven Osomatsu down this harrowing path? How had he gotten Choromatsu and Todomatsu in so deep … no, no, he’d already squandered too many costly weeks. The tragic medley of hows and whats and whys had to come second. His brothers needed him. So Karamatsu wouldn’t fail. He couldn’t. Their very future depended on it. Together and apart.

The instant he was discharged, Karamatsu opened his personal investigations. Desperate as he was, the romanticism of the whole thing didn’t completely elude him—a lone private eye, seeking truth for the sake of those he valued above all else. Then he caught himself red handed, promenading Sherlock-reminiscent hats in discount department stores. What the hell was he doing? He already tormented everyone he passed in the street by just existing, he had to go and make it worse. And they weren’t even in his pitiful price range, what was wrong with him?

For the first time in months it was a blessing: Karamatsu had no employment, no thriving social life to distract him. He started out by researching Osomatsu and Choromatsu’s employers. He was both unsurprised and shocked beyond belief to find no record of either company. ‘Father, can you spare a moment?’ Disguising it as passing interest, he held their father up in the entrance and asked about the occasions he’d contacted their managers.

‘I never wound up calling,’ Dad confirmed, saying it had always been Osomatsu or Choromatsu who’d called when the other was ill.

Next, Karamatsu paid their bustling local Starbucks a visit. ‘I was hoping to speak with my brother. He’s on shift now, no?’

Contrary to the stories the youngest spoonfed his family, Totty’s manager shook his head behind the gleaming counter he wiped, saying Todomatsu worked one or two shifts a week at most. ‘And he doesn’t finish his hours,’ the manager added, compassion for his young employee tussling with clear
frustration. ‘No warning, he just up and leaves. I know it’s terrible, what he’s been through. I don’t want to let him go. But we can’t cover for him forever.’

‘I’ll … let him know,’ Karamatsu promised, stunned as evidence avalanched.

Ridiculing himself when he hesitated, Karamatsu started following his brothers every morning, anonymous in his old trench coat. Trying every trick he’d seen on TV to stay close without looking suspect, he tailed his brothers all over the city. Often together in public spaces, sometimes they went their separate ways. Choromatsu frequented an artillery-themed cafe in Akihabara. It was common knowledge the third born had taken up shooting, but on realising the genesis of his “hobby” lay not with gunslinger colleagues, Karamatsu’s heart compressed.

Todomatsu shopped in swanky boutiques and gleaming department stores. Ann usually travelled with him. He’d thought she belonged to Choromatsu, but Karamatsu rarely saw the youngest now without the tiny kitten adorning his shoulder, expression so intelligent the two might have shared in-depth conversation as much as warmth and company. The youngest forked over such exorbitant amounts of money Karamatsu felt almost faint. No one earned that kind of cash working a shift a week serving coffee.

One afternoon, Karamatsu followed Osomatsu to the backstreets of Ikebukuro, sliding precariously through the closing doors when he spotted a flash of red, his brother detraining from the carriage ahead. Nervously trying not to draw attention to himself—this was deep gang territory—and shadowed by looming skyscrapers, Karamatsu shrank back, hearing violence down the next lane. Creeping forward, he fished his mirror from his pocket. He expected the very worst, his brother beaten to a bloody pulp. But he made himself angle the glass so it captured the view around the corner, bouncing back into his eyes.

Just in time to see Osomatsu throw the final punch. Karamatsu nearly dropped his mirror. ‘Nice doing business with you,’ his brother said cheerfully, hopping over a mound of groaning tough guys—seven of them!—and casually strolling away, hands in his pockets. Osomatsu headed his way, Karamatsu dashed off, retreating to a friendlier street to catch his breath. One hand clamped to his chest over his tank top, like he could catch his racing heart. His brother had just wiped out an entire gang. Osomatsu had always been the fighter, but this … this was something else.

Osomatsu looking for fights—and calling it business—was distressing enough. But even worse, half the time he trailed them his brothers up and vanished, leaving no trace behind. Karamatsu couldn’t get it out of his head, tormented by dark visions of his brothers forced into the back of nondescript vans the scant minute they evaded his view.

Karamatsu lost his brothers within 10 minutes, that bright spring morning. But his intuition paid off. He spied Osomatsu’s comfortable stride through sliding glass late in the afternoon, Karamatsu skulking between pachinko machines and embraced by their drowning cacophony. Immediately, he abandoned his small tray of winnings, slipping out to follow.

Devastated he’d been so right—why was this the one time he had to be right?—Karamatsu witnessed the exchange in his faithful mirror, Osomatsu giving an unfriendly-looking crew lip as he supplied their leader—so obviously a mobster he might as well have it tattooed on his forehead—with a heavy-looking jewellery pouch.

What nefarious criminal power plays were his brothers enmeshed in? Witnessed hard confirmation with his own eyes, somehow Karamatsu held himself together. But he cracked in the bath house—he couldn’t help it, that bruise was hideous! Osomatsu wouldn’t get hurt like that, not in a punch up—he was too good! Was it punishment? Was he rebelling, defying his gangster overlords? Was he taking hits for Choromatsu and Todomatsu, their little brothers unable to fulfil their end of whatever
Not brave enough to reveal just how much he knew—god, Jyushimatsu had been right all along. But Karamatsu finally forced out the barefaced question. ‘…Did you get beaten up for not paying a debt?’

‘What? Why would you … which one of you arseholes said that?’

Karamatsu couldn’t sell Jyushimatsu out; any backlash he would weather alone. But Osomatsu slid past the thinly-veiled interrogation, instead snatching Karamatsu’s shades.

Karamatsu’s muscles locked rigid. His brothers lifted his glasses all the time for laughs. But need broke foaming over his head, tossing Karamatsu in disarray—he needed to hide, he needed them back right … fucking … now!

‘Of … of course,’ Karamatsu had to give in as Osomatsu insisted he’d been caught between a literal rock and a hard place through the course of his “employment”. ‘Forgive me brother, I’d never trouble you if … it’s only your safety that I … but … could I … Brother, if you could please return those,’ he managed, pulling up the corners of his mouth and stapling them in place. ‘I’d very much appreciate it.’

‘Okay, okay.’

Scrambling to catch the tossed accessory, he crammed them on his face. God, he’d seen, Osomatsu had seen straight through him, his brother knew how empty he was … Karamatsu hid himself in pulling on his socks, apologising without end. ‘I’m sorry, Osomatsu. I’m just a little … tense these days.’

Karamatsu pathetically perked up when Osomatsu insisted it wasn’t a big deal. Bathing in unexpected attention and freely-offered company, he got a hold of himself halfway through their Street Fighter playoffs.

Loathing his suspicion—his brothers would never act like this, not if they had a choice—when Todomatsu smashed half the crockery in the house Karamatsu volunteered himself to tidy up, making it easy for his brothers to ditch him. As soon as he’d taken out the trash he was after them, following from a few blocks behind to the local theatre. Some kind of event must be starting soon. Peering through the rare crowds, he couldn’t see his brothers anywhere. Karamatsu sidled down the next street, waiting. A chorus of voices soaring in excitement, he guessed the theatre doors had just opened. Not liking his chances, Karamatsu loitered another few minutes. If his brothers had vanished again, he had to know.

He didn’t expect to run straight into them.

‘Karamatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu cried. The kitten on his shoulder blinked massively dark eyes wide, hair slightly on end.

‘Brothers!’ Karamatsu exclaimed. ‘Wh-what a surprise!’

‘What are you doing here?’ demanded Osomatsu. Karamatsu tried to moisten his mouth, gone bone dry.

‘I … I finished cleaning, and I … I thought I might enjoy a stroll. The evening air b-beckoned me to know its caress, to ponder beneath stars the …’

‘Cut the crap,’ Osomatsu snapped, severing Karamatsu’s babbling explanations. ‘You’re totally
following us, aren’t you?’

Karamatsu gulped. He’d already given himself away, moronically revealing he was onto them in the bath house—stupid, stupid! But there was no point tiptoeing around on tongue and teeth, he’d lost any chance of handling this with kid gloves.

He wasn’t ready. He might never be ready. But this was it.

Squaring his shoulders, the second born made himself confront the eldest’s darkened expression. ‘Brother, we have to talk. I know you’re …’

Hand clamping on his upper arm, Osomatsu hauled him away from the bright lights of the theatre. ‘Osomatsu!’ Karamatsu gasped, getting his feet beneath him before he tripped, Todomatsu scurrying along behind. Osomatsu’s grip was a vice. ‘Wh-what are you …’

‘You want to talk?’ Osomatsu didn’t let go, dragging him out of sight behind the theatre. Karamatsu almost felt his arm flower in a ring of bruises. Yanking him so hard he stumbled, the eldest spun him roughly, pushing him against the wall. ‘Then talk.’

Facing his brothers through the dim, Totty—sweet Todomatsu, their only youngest—moved to cover Osomatsu from the right … or to prevent escape from the right. Far from any witnesses, Karamatsu’s pulse quickened. The way they moved, coordinating without a word. Like pack animals … like hunters. Somehow, Karamatsu knew they’d done this before. God, how had this happened … how had he let this happen?!

Back to the wall and clutching at his sunglasses, Karamatsu did his best to not look cornered. ‘I … I know everything.’

‘Do you? What’s there to know?’ Osomatsu’s voice rang carelessly. It was stupefying, how intimidating such a light tone could be.

‘Y-your manager hardly sees you,’ Karamatsu said to Totty, the youngest’s mouth fallen slightly open. ‘You and Choromatsu don’t even have managers,’ he directed at Osomatsu, stomach clenching when he realised Choromatsu hadn’t joined them. ‘Wh-where is Choromatsu?’

‘Where do you think?’

‘Inside, Niisan,’ Todomatsu spoke tentatively, offering Karamatsu his smartphone. ‘At the concert.’

Karamatsu skimmed the electronic receipt, dazzled by the smartphone’s brilliant backlight. This … this didn’t mean anything, it put Choromatsu in the theatre for one night.

‘He’s been working hard, we got him something. Is that a crime?’ Osomatsu drawled. Apprehension crawled down Karamatsu’s spine. Only a fool would miss that challenge. He’d almost forgotten just how frightening his older brother became when provoked. This was the part where Karamatsu weaseled out, let himself be walked all over. Believed every word that exited his precious brothers’ mouths. Before it was too late.

But he had to hold fast. For them. He had to put his brothers first. For once in their lives, Karamatsu had to grit his teeth and sprout a goddamn spine.

‘Working hard? He doesn’t have a job, Osomatsu! Neither of you do—don't try to deny it. I know! I saw you!’

‘Doing what, exactly?’ Osomatsu’s would-be casual was anything but, the cool ambient temperature
seeming to drop while the eldest’s rose red hot. Karamatsu steeled himself. Then he charged in headlong.

‘What was in that pouch, Osomatsu? What exactly are you dealing for the mob?’

‘You are fucking spying on us!’ Osomatsu squawked, outraged. Todomatsu shot the eldest a look of pure derision—“Now you’ve done it. Thanks for nothing, Osomatsu-niisan”.

‘I knew it,’ Karamatsu breathed, tidal waves of vindication and horror smashing through him.

‘Osomatsu, no … How could you get our brothers into trouble like this?’

‘How could I …’

Totty’s eyes snagged Osomatsu’s. Karamatsu’s heart fractured. There it was, they didn’t even need words. The same relationship shared by Osomatsu and Choromatsu had flourished between the eldest and youngest. To be that close with his family was everything Karamatsu had ever wanted. It might be nourished by horrific shared experience, trapped in a vicious criminal cycle. But Karamatsu couldn’t care. If that’s what it took … But he’d just stood there! He’d watched as the ravine between them yawned, earth crumbling beneath his feet and brothers now so distant he couldn’t even call their names without the wind whipping his cries back in his face.

‘I saw you demolish seven guys twice your size,’ he pushed on when Osomatsu fell furiously silent.

‘Someone’s making you to do that, right? Why else would Choromatsu be learning to shoot? You’re debt collectors, hired muscle—you’re felons! What did that gangster mean, “the offer still stands”? ’

‘Karamatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu ventured. Osomatsu right in Karamatsu’s face, Totty had taken over as mouthpiece. ‘Niisan, listen to me. I promise, we’re not felons. Please, just …’

But Karamatsu was too far gone. ‘I knew something was going on! The getting in shape, the secrets. Sneaking out at night …’

‘We yelled goodbye! How’s that sneaking?’

Todomatsu’s warnings ignored, Osomatsu scrambled to cover his blurted mistake. But alarm tolled through his denial—angry and abashed, he knew the jig was up. Karamatsu was almost relieved. Osomatsu was far too indignant, nothing he’d expect from someone embroiled in willing illegal activity—he knew it, he knew his poor brothers would never sink so low by choice. Awakened with true daring, Karamatsu detached from the wall, no longer so trapped.

‘Is this what you do every morning?’ He encompassed his own example scene with one emphatic gesture; Osomatsu fell back half a step as Karamatsu’s arm swept wide. ‘Ambush people in alleys for your mob bosses?’

‘Seriously, what the fuck … I’m not a crook!’

‘I saw the blood!’ Karamatsu shouted. Todomatsu’s eyes danced towards the street, sure they’d be heard. But any who’d ventured from their homes that night were now safe and happy in the theatre. Even if they weren’t, Karamatsu couldn’t care. Neither could Osomatsu. ‘It was all over Choromatsu’s hoodie!’

‘He collapsed!’ Osomatsu yelled back. ‘He’s fucking anemic, remember?’

‘He didn’t have a scratch on him—not one scratch! His hoodie was drenched! Was that even his blood? Did you think I wouldn’t notice?’ Karamatsu demanded, staving off tears. ‘That I wouldn’t figure it out? You’re my brothers! You’re barely home, when you are you don’t talk …’
‘We talk, Niisan,’ Todomatsu said, all his wheedling skill at play.

‘Not about anything important,’ Karamatsu maintained, the youngest tugging hard his heart. ‘Not about your work—now I know why! God, what else are they making you do?!”

The silence was suffocating. Osomatsu’s muscled shoulders worked up and down. Todomatsu touched him lightly on the elbow. The youngest would handle this.

‘I know this looks bad,’ he said, the glare he flashed Osomatsu scathing—he blamed the eldest for that, 100 per cent. ‘I know you’re worried—we’re lucky to have you. But think about this, Niisan. Think about exactly what you’re accusing us of. I promise,’ Totty said, so compellingly. ‘This isn’t what you think. Do you trust me?’

Karamatsu’s throat burned. He’d betray their beloved youngest, if he didn’t trust him now. But he’d betray him if he did, too. ‘Oh, Todomatsu … how did you and Choromatsu get caught up in all this? Did you figure him out, too? Did you …’

‘What, so I don’t even get a trial?’ Osomatsu said loudly, not bothering to deny it any longer. ‘You just assume this is on me?’

‘This all began with you!’ Karamatsu exclaimed, despairing as his big brother glared, mad as hell. ‘You’ve been acting up for months! And I’m not the only one,’ he added, confidence bolstered as he evened the teams. ‘Jyushimatsu noticed, too. He told me you got …’

‘You’re accusing us of being gangsters because of something Jyushimatsu said?!”

‘Don’t talk about him like that!’ Karamatsu shouted. Pissed off or not, Osomatsu had no right. Jyushimatsu was no fool. He saw so much, he’d known weeks before Karamatsu nutted it out. ‘That’s what this all comes down to—am I wrong?’ he demanded, flinging a finger at Osomatsu’s chest. ‘You have a gambling problem, you couldn’t pay your debts. Now they’re making you earn it, one beatdown at a time. I know you think you don’t have a choice,’ he said more softly, pleading. ‘But you’re our eldest brother. You’re supposed to protect us—protect them!’

‘You want to talk about protecting brothers?’ Osomatsu hissed, fists wrecking balls in miniature trembling at his sides. ‘What do you think I’m trying to do? If … anyone … had any idea … that you know anything …’

Karamatsu had never seen him so furious. But that didn’t matter: the second born floated. Osomatsu wanted to protect him! His only big brother would spare Karamatsu the grim fate he suffered—how could he despise him? How could Karamatsu have ever doubted him?

How many times had he thought that before …

‘What about you?’ Osomatsu flared suddenly. ‘Ichimatsu’s fucking scared! He’s sick, he’s not getting any better. What if he thinks he’s dying?’

The world dropped away beneath Karamatsu’s boots. ‘Ichimatsu … isn’t dying. I … Brother, I don’t know what you’re talking about! What does that have to do with …’

‘You promised you’d look out for him!’ Osomatsu exploded, powerful body barely restrained from slamming Karamatsu into the wall. Karamatsu held his ground, courage drawn from his brother’s own care for him. ‘What’ll it take to get through your thick skull, a fucking ice pick? Or isn’t babysitting Ichimatsu enough to feed your massive shitty ego?’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, shut up!’ Todomatsu cried.
‘He abandoned him and followed us like a goddamn dog,’ snarled Osomatsu. ‘What, hoping we’ll throw you a bone?’

‘How can you say that?’ Karamatsu almost roared, reeling with emotional vertigo. How was he supposed to take that? Every time he tried to do anything for Ichimatsu, Osomatsu made him think better of it. But Karamatsu should have known to stay with him? When Osomatsu never had—not once had the eldest been there to console their fourth born through puking collapse. And, as it turned out, he didn’t have gainful employment as an excuse. What was with his double standards, it wasn’t fair … it was infuriating!

Shrill sirens whirred—no, no, no, this wasn’t what he wanted, this wouldn’t make his brothers love him again! But somehow that dire warning didn’t thwart his standing up for himself, fuelled by far more than need to please. Dauntless, Karamatsu loosened his crushing grip on his glasses. Tonight he would show his love by gifting his brothers exactly what they needed. Finally he was the brother his siblings deserved. Finally, he would deserve them.

‘Don’t try to palm your anger off on me, Osomatsu. You need help, admit it!’

‘Karamatsu-niisan, no,’ Todomatsu stepped in when Osomatsu stiffened, radiating a fearsome array of dangerous. ‘Not at all, we’re not …’

So appealing, Karamatsu almost fell victim again. But Totty was just as trapped by evidence.

‘Then explain this to me! What is going on? Osomatsu?’

Karamatsu returned to the eldest. Osomatsu was the root of it all, the brother who’d spurred him on this turbulent journey of truth. His watershed eyes met replicas that burned. ‘I know you want to go it alone, take care of your own problems. But this … this is just wrong. You don’t want to live like this. Please, brothers,’ he included Totty, the youngest’s soft eyes somehow as hard as diamond. ‘Come clean. We can get you out of this, I can help you.’

‘What can you possibly do to help?’

Karamatsu staggered backwards, as though struck around the face. ‘Brother, I … I’ll always be there to stand beside you. I’ll do everything in my power to … and I … I’ll get another job,’ he flailed to answer, unprepared. He’d been rushed into this, only just assembled his proof. Karamatsu hadn’t had the chance to tackle that most dire of responsibilities he’d taken on. ‘I can help pay what you owe, and …’

‘Yeah, I didn’t think so.’ Osomatsu sneered, arms crossed hard over his chest. ‘It’s all talk with you. Well, guess what? We don’t need you. We don’t need your help.’

Osomatsu tweaked his “help” cruelly, illustrating exactly how useless Karamatsu’s offer was.

‘And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay out and keep your trap shut.’

Karamatsu stared, dumbstruck. His resolve wavered, splintered heart squashed beneath Osomatsu’s heel. ‘Osomatsu … brother, please, I only want to help. All I want …’

You’re a liar, you’re a goddamn liar …

‘… is to know that my brothers are safe, and …’

‘Forget it,’ snapped Osomatsu. ‘Stay out.’
Karamatsu’s beaten spirits shifted into violent tailspin. He swung between dizzying heights and depths every day as shreds of hope slipped through his fingers, barely supporting his dangling weight. But he couldn’t handle this kind of upheaval, he couldn’t! He’d crash, he knew he’d crash. He couldn’t crash …

‘Brother,’ Karamatsu embarked again as all his fixated hopes hurtled towards wreckage. If he couldn’t help them, then he’d … he’d promised that he’d … ‘I know now, I can’t do that …’

Growling, Osomatsu feinted aggressively. Todomatsu grabbed one of his arms; jolted, Ann dug her tiny claws into his coat for traction, feline balance faultless. Karamatsu hastily ducked, forearms crossing to defend—why did he bother? He should let Osomatsu hit him, he deserved it. But Osomatsu just glared him down … god, at this rate the air would never clear between they eldest again. And it’d be his fault, it was all his fault. He had to do something …

‘Then let me join you.’ Erratic, Karamatsu left reason far behind as his desperate heart took control, prepared to offer anything and everything to remain by his brothers’ sides. He lifted his chin in a show of defiance to any who’d oppose him. ‘Sign me up.’

‘Niisan, no! Please trust me, we’re …’

‘Don’t you trust me?’ Karamatsu flung Todomatsu’s question back at him.

‘It’s … it’s not that at all.’

The youngest couldn’t answer immediately. Karamatsu’s shoulders sank, crestfallen. ‘Then what?’

‘It’s not that we don’t trust you,’ Todomatsu chose his words so delicately he wove verbal lace. But there was no way to soften this blow. ‘It’s just … we can’t. I’m sorry.’

His forsaken slump a trigger, Karamatsu emptied of the little strength he’d been idiot enough to believe might be his, streaming back to the souls he’d stolen it from. But his mouth went on running, heedless as the rest of him screamed—stop, he had to stop! ‘I said I want in! If you don’t let me, I’ll … I’ll …’

‘You’ll what? Turn us in?’ Osomatsu said, a big fat “I’d like to see you try” all over his face as he shook Totty off him. Karamatsu breath raced from lips to lungs, suspended between fight and flight like he faced down a beast, not his brother.

‘And if I did?’

*No, no, no, shut up, shut up, he’ll never forgive you! Why won’t you just …*

‘Your sketchy history wouldn’t exactly do you any favours, would it, Osoma-’

*Whack.*

Arms half-raised, he still wasn’t quick enough. No longer his match in strength—his lean muscle was almost scrawny beside his brother's brawn—Karamatsu wore Osomatsu's punch on the jaw. His head snapped sideways, lights bursting before his eyes. Whipped lightning fast from standstill, Karamatsu felt as his brother pulled at the last microsecond.

‘Osomatsu-nee-san, no!’ Todomatsu screeched. Ann cowered on his shoulder. The sensitive pet’s enormous eyes flickered fretfully between the eldest Matsuno brothers.

Time slowed. Karamatsu's hand hovered to graze his assaulted jaw. He’d considered this from his
brothers’ perspective—of course he had, brooding miserably late into the nights. It was pure luck they hadn’t caught him at it, creeping out as he huddled awake, choking back sobs. He knew they might not be as pleased with his meddling as he’d so hopelessly hoped. But Karamatsu had believed with all he was that Osomatsu wanted out. Freedom from life at some crime lord’s pleasure.

And he did. He just didn’t want Karamatsu. He had Choromatsu and Todomatsu at his back—he’d want Ichimatsu and Jyushimatsu too, if they ever confronted him. But not Karamatsu. Karamatsu was a coward. He was dishonest, a fraud. He couldn’t be trusted with anything, least of all his brothers’ lives.

They hated him. They hated him …

Wavering on the spot, he felt finality descend like the judging hand of god. After all this time, all his toil … god, in what reality had he ever thought he might … someday … Karamatsu knew nothing. He’d never own the cool persona he’d impersonated for so long. He could offer nothing, he deserved nothing.

Karamatsu … was nothing.

And he’d failed.

All this snaking spine-tipped tendrils to ensnare Karamatsu’s soul, he saw Osomatsu stood so still he might have been frozen by some spell. ‘Karamatsu-niisan? Are you …’

Todomatsu was speaking to him. But Karamatsu barely heard, language taken on an oppressive humming quality. His failure condemned his brothers—how could he? His essence churned, a whirlpool. How could he, how could … He’d never redeem himself, never become who he wanted. He saw that now, scripted across the heavens. He’d never know his brothers’ love again. But he was so tired, worn down to the nub. Maybe—Karamatsu was perverse, he was sick for even thinking it. But it might be easier, knowing what he’d wanted had been beyond his power all along, doomed from the start.

And his brothers—his dear brothers. At last Karamatsu would bestow on them what they truly wanted from him.

Absolutely nothing.

‘Ouch,’ Karamatsu winced extra for show, laying a fingertip to the rising welt. It ached infinitely less than the darkness that consumed him, every last star blinking out. ‘I suppose I deserved that. But to cause you distress was far from my intent. Osomatsu, dearest brother: will you accept an apology straight from the bottom of this humble heart? Never fear,’ he went on, answerless. Eyes streaming hot, Karamatsu brushed one wayward hair savagely back and whipped his sunglasses out. ‘Your secret’s safe with me, I won’t tell the cops. And I … won’t mention it again.’

Even hidden behind black glass, Karamatsu couldn’t hold his brothers’ gaze. God, he was a spineless fuck.

‘I’d best leave you be, then,’ he said, eyes slipping unseen to the asphalt. ‘I … I’ll see you when you get home. G-Bye, brothers.’

‘Karamatsu-niisan, wait …’

Wait, wait, god, please wait …

A smile hiding everything and signals barely making it down his leaden legs, Karamatsu walked
away. He felt his brothers’ eyes boring into his back the entire way.

Blinded by tears, he managed to shuffle home without lurching into traffic or getting himself abducted. Head down and gait halting, he practically invited attack, according to the PSA announcements. Who cared, he thought, following the canal’s curve by muscle memory, repulsed that he might catch sight of his watery reflection should he glance into its depths.

Let the cult take him, already.

He stumbled to a halt just just beyond the warmly-lit house. There, Karamatsu finished weeping alone. He cried out what felt like the sorry end of an eternal excruciating era. Feeling somewhere deep that he might never cry again, his raw eyes scrunched hideously, chest heaving as it painfully laboured to gird his basic human function against hysteria. Too late, he was over, he was done. Sagging against the wall of the darkened cafe, he groaned brokenly. No one could see, no one would ever know. But Matsuno Karamatsu had finally broken.

Eyes squeezed shut to all reality, a high-pitched mew startled them open. Looking up and scrubbing self-consciously at his face, Karamatsu squinted. His vision was grimy, like a neglected windscreen. But on that field of night and grey, he saw it. A blip of white barrelled straight for him. What was that …

Sprinting on delicate little legs, Ann tumbled in pile at his ankles. ‘W-were you following me?’ Crouching, Karamatsu reached out a quivering finger. Hoping he wasn’t pushing it. Praying she wouldn’t run away.

Booping her button nose to his fingertip, Ann puffed, mouth wide for air and little chest rising and falling rapidly. ‘I’m sorry, little kitty. I didn’t know.’

Seeming to wave away his apology with a flick of her tail, Ann placed her front paws on his buckled boot. Never one to deny a lady any desire, Karamatsu immediately obeyed. Picking her up, he cradled her briefly to his chest. ‘Sweet girl,’ he sighed into her silk-spun fur, so warm and soft. Ann was so small, she could sit in his broad palm with room to spare. Come to think of it, she’d lived with them for some time now. Karamatsu had never noticed her grow.

‘I’m sorry, but there are others infinitely more deserving of your sweet affections than I. Go back to Todomatsu,’ he said, setting her down gently. The moment her outsized paws touched down she bounded, clambering to alight on a surprised Karamatsu’s shoulder. Her eyes were so huge. So dark. The kitten stared intently, straight into his reddened eyes. Karamatsu tried to turn away, feeling ridiculous. But he didn’t want her to see through him, gaze penetrating his sham to rest upon the nothing he hid within.

Karamatsu had thought he was done crying. But so weary and wise beyond her sprightly visage, the kitten spilt forth such impossible understanding—she knew, she felt all his pain. ‘Please,’ he mumbled through lips that couldn’t stop quivering. ‘I … I can’t …’

But he hadn’t the heart to shoo her away. ‘I promised you,’ Karamatsu remembered their meeting on the roof. ‘That th-things would get better. I’m so sorry, but it looks like … I was wrong. Don’t you give up now, sweet lady,’ he hastened to assure not all souls were lost. ‘There’s all the hope in heaven for you. But I …’

His ravaged throat stuck. ‘I … I supposed I’ll just …’

‘Karamatsu? Son, what are you doing out here?’
Held up for hours at work, Dad had at last arrived home. Karamatsu’s stomach somersaulted. ‘Father, I … I didn’t hear you. I was … just out for a stroll.’

He regurgitated the same lies his brothers hadn’t swallowed. Sure his father didn’t believe him either, Karamatsu was numbly grateful he didn’t call him out. ‘Get over here, into the light. It’s not safe out, you should know that by …’

Unable to refuse his father’s request, Karamatsu reluctantly stepped from shadow. Caught by the glow of the house, he knew he looked a mess, bruised face reddened with weeping and depthless shame. ‘Son?’

Hesitating a moment, Dad closed the short distance between them. ‘What happened? Who … Get inside,’ he thought better of his questions, putting a heavy hand on Karamatsu’s shoulder. Please … don’t … ‘Let’s get some ice on that.’

‘Of … of course.’ Karamatsu slapped on a farce of gallant, gesturing his father should enter first. ‘Wh-why don’t you go see mother? I’ll heat your dinner.’

Soup on the stove and rice warming, Karamatsu knew his father hadn’t expected him to offer. But he hadn’t expected any less, either. That was the role he’d played. A good son. A good brother. He’d failed at both. But he just couldn’t drop the act, twined through every thread of his being. But he wouldn’t go back on his oath—he wouldn’t! But just one more night pretending he might someday be enough … just one … god, how had it come to this? It was all his fault, how could he just let them go?

His father’s dinner heating, Karamatsu filled a shallow dish at the sink. He sank onto the floor beside Ann as she lapped thirstily, mum come to sit with dad at the table. Their quiet voices floating over him, Karamatsu pressed a cold compress to his jaw and drifted aimlessly.

‘Karamatsu?’ Mum soon called softly. He hadn’t noticed them get up, her voice coming from the living room. ‘Come sit with us, sweet boy. Where were you tonight?’ she said as he listlessly complied. Ann hopped to curl on his knee when he sat across from his parents. Bundled by the kerosene heater, Ichimatsu was fast asleep. ‘Were you out meeting friends?’

‘Sure,’ Karamatsu shrugged. Reaching to tickle Ann under the chin, he pulled up short, recalling she hadn’t liked that. He saw the flickering glance between his parents. Too clearly, he was the topic of their silent discussion. For maybe the first time in his life, he didn’t care. Almost.

‘Isn’t this nice?’ Mum soon said, smiling around at her husband, Karamatsu, and Ichimatsu just come blearily awake. Dad helped him slump at the kotatsu, packing in cushions to support him. ‘It’s been awhile since it’s been just the four of us.’

When they’d been children, Mum and Dad had tried to spend time with each of their sons alone and in rotating pairs, making sure they felt special. Karamatsu remembered seven-year-old Ichimatsu had gone gooey-eyed over every cat on a shared pet store adventure, assuring them they were perfect and their owners couldn’t wait to meet them. How could his wracked body hold any more feelings? Karamatsu paid the scruff of Ahn’s neck special attention, scratching hard and letting a few out.

‘What happened … to your face?’ Ichimatsu slurred, dull eyes latching to the flowering bruise on Karamatsu’s jaw. Karamatsu hitched up his best smile.
'What, this?' he indicated beneath his chin with flair and his dripping compress. ‘Fear not, dearest brother!’

‘I wasn’t …’

‘Your care is heaven and earth to me, but this is naught but a flesh wound. My body is hale and whole, my soul lighter than …’

‘Forget I asked,’ Ichimatsu growled. Again, their parents’ eyes met over the kotatsu.

‘Karamatsu?’ Dad soon spoke over the TV drama set to low volume, beckoning him to the entrance. Mum took her second born’s hand as he passed, holding it briefly to her cheek and smiling up at him. Why …

Their father had gotten his thoughts in order since the shock of seeing Karamatsu outside. ‘I know you’ve had it rough,’ he said gruffly, never one for open affection. But he needed his son to know he was there. ‘You’ve been through something no one should, and you’ve done it twice.’

‘I don’t remember anything,’ Karamatsu said dully. ‘Todomatsu has it worse.’

‘It doesn’t matter who “has it worse”, it happened to you. But you can’t let this derail you. I don’t know what happened tonight, but …’

Karamatsu heard, but didn’t listen to much of his father’s valiant attempt at a man-to-man talk—he’d been taking good steps, he’d get another job, he had a bright future ahead, take all the time he needed. At least he seemed to think this was all about Karamatsu’s employment debacle.

Not feeling the talk when yesterday he would have preened with the attention, Karamatsu didn’t say much, nodding occasionally with a few “yeahs” and “uh-huhs”. Dad grew perturbed behind his moustache, pauses left for Karamatsu’s flowery bullshit echoing empty. Their father’s concern hurt so much—he’d caused it, he’d done this, why did he care?—Karamatsu managed a smile. Somewhat reassured, dad gave him a light clap on the back.

‘That’s it, son. Why don’t you play for a bit?’ he said unexpectedly. ‘Your mother loves to listen.’

Karamatsu seized the suggestion like a lifeline. Even as he’d slowly lost everything, music had remained the final buttress of his soul. He still had his guitar, he still had music. He hadn’t lost that last joy yet … had he?

Heart squeezing, Karamatsu took the stairs three at a time, nabbing his guitar by the fretboard. Dropped back on the living room floor and strumming, he was rendered awestruck. Music truly was magical. Already feeling a little better, Karamatsu played through all the songs he knew mum liked best, the volume of her hums through the years a sure measure. She hummed now, murmuring nonsense around half-known lyrics as she rested her head on dad’s shoulder, her lingering smile somewhere far away. So relieved he still had something to offer, Karamatsu poured everything into those simple tunes, calloused fingertips shaping chords like every memory he’d leave in this world depended on their soulful perfection.

Ann crept to settle by his crossed legs, casting deep dislike Ichimatsu’s way. ‘Don’t hold anything against him,’ he murmured, too soft to hear as he picked through a new melody. Just as softly, the kitten grumbled back, resting her chin on his ankle and closing her eyes. Karamatsu played on, hoping his music soothed her as much as its creation consoled him. But when Ichimatsu’s moans grew agonised, he softened his rendition of Yutaka Ozaki’s “Oh My Little Girl”, tempo tapering to its end before setting his instrument aside. Silence but for the TV’s quiet blare, dad announced he
and mum might get an early night.

‘Don’t stay up too late. Wake us if you need help with Ichimatsu,’ he added in undertone, Ichimatsu scowling that he heard every word.

‘Of course,’ Karamatsu nodded. They both knew he’d never do such a thing, unless Ichimatsu’s life was in danger.

‘Maybe see if he wants something to eat,’ mum added, giving Karamatsu a peck on the cheek. ‘Ichimatsu? Just a little rice?’

‘Don’t wanna … fuck off,’ he mumbled when Karamatsu tentatively assured it was no problem to fetch him a bowl. How long could Ichimatsu last, so deprived of nourishment?

Left together alone, the temporary salvation bestowed on Karamatsu by his steadfast guitar strings began to dissolve. All he wanted was to disappear on the roof—Ann could come too, if she’d do him the honour of remaining by his side this worst night of his life. Ichimatsu didn’t want him. But he couldn’t abandon him. A scapegoat or not, Osomatsu was right—he had promised Jyushimatsu.

‘Brother, how are you feeling tonight? Any improvement?’

Ichimatsu’s hiss was disjointed, forced through gritted teeth. ‘What … do you fucking think?’

God, why had he asked, what did he expect? But he couldn’t help it. He had to back the fuck off … but the pangs infecting his chest ached unbearably with his brother’s suffering. God, he was the worst, why couldn’t he just leave Ichimatsu be?

One more night, Karamatsu gave himself undeserved leeway. Just one more night …

‘Wh-where’s … Jyushimatsu?’ Ichimatsu was barely coherent, head buried in his arms.

‘Why, he’s gone out to play—isn’t that wonderful?’ Karamatsu tried, striking up strained conversation with the top of his brother’s matted head. ‘He’s been cooped up for so long, like some poor chained …’


Tearing himself a new one for his insensitivity—he knew Ichimatsu felt so culpable, as though he himself chained Jyushimatsu from sunlight—Karamatsu retreated into the kitchen. Giving himself flimsy purpose, he stored Ichimatsu’s untouched dinner in the fridge. Ann hopped on a chair, gorgeous eyes tracing his every move like she’d been sent from above to watch over him.

His heart had cruelly bounded, thinking of Jyushimatsu—sweet Jyushimatsu. Kind Jyushimatsu. Jyushimatsu, who was incapable of hate. Whatever Karamatsu had done, however he’d failed. Even if he didn’t love him, Jyushimatsu couldn’t hate him … but he’d thought the same of Osomatsu. Of all his brothers. Jyushimatsu was an exception to so many rules. But this wasn’t one of them. He’d had enough chances. If his brothers didn’t want him, Karamatsu wouldn’t force them anymore.

Palms flat, he rested his weight heavily on the table. God, he’d already decided, why did he have to keep rehashing this? Why did he have to keep caring, why did it hurt so …

‘Hey, Shittymatsu!’

Ahn’s growl vibrated low in her throat. Aching to his core, the second born glanced over his shoulder.
Ichimatsu had shed his cocoon of blankets. Karamatsu’s eyes widened. Too weak to roll over for days, Ichimatsu was on his feet.

In his hands, he held Karamatsu’s guitar.

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He hadn’t said a word, so afraid the first few times it happened—he was still fucking afraid. So when Ichimatsu whited out again, the fact was unknown to all but him. Abruptly lost all input as he dropped off the planet mid-moan, he glumly waited to come back online.

This wasn’t passing out—he knew what that fucking felt like by now. He was still awake … kind of. He felt about as awake as he ever did. Maybe sort of distant. Unreachable. Like a TV signal, lost to interference … fuck, he didn’t know.

Shittymatsu had been talking at him, hadn’t he?

Senses finally registering something was up and holding a fucking conclave before electing to do something about it, Ichimatsu squelched through bogland thick with mind-addling fumes. Out of haze, his world finally started to knit itself together, one random chunk at a time.

He blinked against his fogged vision, sure he was wrong.

The sting of his arm said otherwise.

A tiny kitten latched to his forearm, sharp little teeth and claws tearing for all they were worth. His disbelief meandered to meet him, unable to dredge up more in his half-aware state. When was the last time a cat had scratched him? But this one had always hated his guts. She liked Shittymatsu better …

Ichimatsu blinked again, confused as he felt muscles contract without any cue from him—no cue he had any say in, anyway. That was new. Fuck. One more exciting symptom to keep his gob glued shut about.

‘Ichimatsu, stop! Please, stop … please …’

Ichimatsu blinked a third time. Nails rammed through his skull—that’s what he fucking got for coming to. Moaning wretchedly, he shoved his face into clammy palms.

A clatter ransacked his makeshift flesh and bone refuge. His arm stung, scratches ripped through his pyjama sleeve. But the tiny extra weight had dropped off.

He didn’t want to. But Ichimatsu’s manual control was faulty, automatic driving him to emerge from the dark, peering between his fingers.

The remains of Karamatsu’s guitar lay smashed at his feet.

Ichimatsu froze. ‘Wh-what …’

Strings coiled like sad springs amid the wood splinters, bobbing with residual momentum. That thing had been swung hard. Over and over and over and over …

‘I-Ichimatsu? B-brother …’

Karamatsu voice came from somewhere in front of him, tainted by shock.

_Dear me, what have you done …_
All breath punched from him, slowly he pulled his shaking hands from his face. His palms were reddened, patterned by train tracks of angry grooves. He’d clutched the instrument so hard all six strings had cut into him. He stared in mute disbelief. Blood trickled sluggishly down his wrists.

*What the fuck had he done?*

‘Ichimatsu … are y-you all right?’

Ichimatsu gasped rattling breaths, dizzy as his stream of consciousness erupted in a bloody warzone. Karamatsu had saved so long to buy that thing. He’d slogged for years, struggling to pick it up—fuck, he’d been born without rhythm! Ichimatsu almost respected the shit he’d pulled off, making them suffer through his subzero natural talent to emerge not completely terrible on the other side. That guitar was his fucking pride and joy. It was Karamatsu in a nutshell, even more than those shitty sunglasses.

Ichimatsu … he’d destroyed it. He’d fucking demolished it all. And Karamatsu … had the fucking gall … to ask if he was all right?! What the fuck?! What was with his fucking kindness?!

‘Okay,’ Karamatsu raised his palms as Ichimatsu heaved fury. They were shaking. Very slowly, he edged forward, like he approached a wounded wild animal, shuffling feet snagging debris. ‘It’s okay. Ichimatsu … it’s okay …’

It was not okay, this was not okay, he was out of his fucking mind!

‘It’s not your fault, brother. I know you didn’t mean it.’

Was it Ichimatsu making that gagging sound? His burning throat constricted, tubes crushed into straws … What the *fuck* was going on, there was something clamped around his fucking neck, he’d seen it! He’d seen it … God, what had he done? What had he done … he liked Karamatsu’s playing, okay? It fucking made his day, and it pissed him off so bad every time. But he’d sooner walk through fire than admit it. Mortified, Ichimatsu wheezed that he’d meant every goddamn swing.

‘Okay, okay … If you say so, dear brother … But, Ichimatsu, please …’

Ichimatsu didn’t ever want to look up. He’d stab out his eyes with kitchen skewers first. But something yanked at his gaze. Stained red and feverish, his eyes met Karamatsu’s.

A harpoon thudded through Ichimatsu’s chest. His brother was fucking heartbroken.

‘Ichimatsu, you need to sit down. Please, listen to me—Ichimatsu? Brother, can you hear me? Ichimatsu …’

He was standing up. Ichimatsu hadn’t stood for weeks, not without half a dozen arms holding him up. How was he … he … he couldn’t. His legs had shrivelled to sticks, he didn’t have the fucking strength.

The realisation busted floodgates. His wasted muscles immediately folded in on themselves. Ichimatsu crumpled with them. Almost aware as Karamatsu caught him, he tried to cringe away. But he was a slave to sickness. And his master was not pleased he’d disobeyed.

Locked in convulsions, Ichimatsu’s body contorted as he retched. Spraying up watery acid, he suffocated as hysterical coughs devoured his chest … there was nothing to hack up! He’d had enough X-rays, his lungs were fucking clean! But he … couldn’t stop … coughing …

‘Mum! Dad! It’s Ichimatsu, he’s …’
Shredded by the horrific scream, Ichimatsu’s eyes rolled back, delirious. He couldn’t … breathe … he couldn’t …

A trembling hand stroked Ichimatsu’s back as he spasmed. Fading in and out, input nudged past his ragged awareness. The heat of wildfire beneath his skin. Cold hands, firm and gentle. A board beneath his back. The whir of sirens. But his body still pointlessly rejected living, pinning Ichimatsu beneath the brutal boot of blackout. Thank god. He huddled there, for hours and hours.

Ichimatsu fought the brush of wakefulness when it finally came for him. But over countless comatose minutes, he oozed into something resembling consciousness. God, why … his lungs were blistered, every shallow breath chafing his desecrated ribs and diaphragm. It felt like someone had taken a blowtorch to his throat … what the fuck was in his nose?

He was in hospital. Of fucking course. Ichimatsu glared, silent and sullen as a pair of weathered-steel nurses bustled around him—they’d drawn the fucking short straws, hadn’t they. He suffered their professional attention, muffled ears churning their words to mincemeat as they adjusted the oxygen-belching cannula in his nostrils. Insensibly furious they acted as though he’d heard, the two soon left.

His least-hated doctor appeared, pausing in the doorway. It hurt like a motherfucker. But Ichimatsu swallowed, sweat beading cold down his back That look promised nothing good. Reflexively, he twitched, overcome by need to escape. This was what his fucking life had become.

‘I’m sorry, Ichimatsu-san,’ the doctor said, voice soft as they approached. But they were all too fucking clear. Ichimatsu realised with a sick stab he was restrained; soft straps fastened his wrists and ankles to the metal bed frame. ‘But you hurt two nurses yesterday, and one of the paramedics. Don’t you remember?’

Oh, fuck … no, no, no! He’d been that terrified of losing his last illusions of freedom, Ichimatsu had done everything in his fucking power to avoid it. But all he’d done was make himself worse. And captivity had caught up to him anyway. Now he wasn’t just losing time—he was lashing out, attacking people!

‘Ichimatsu-san?’

Drained of all colour, Ichimatsu jerkily shook his head. The lance straight through his skull reminded too fucking late why he didn’t do that anymore. His moan pitiful, he tugged at the restraints, unable to anchor his head against the agony.

‘Wh-where’s …’ Ichimatsu’s voice was a faint scrape of sand. ‘Where’s … my …’

‘Your parents are here. Your brothers should be by this afternoon.’

His brothers … how could he even look at Karamatsu? Ichimatsu’s fists clenched weakly, eyes leaking with powerless rage. ‘T-take … these … fucking … th-th-things …’

‘We’ll take them off soon. But first, we need to talk.’

Ichimatsu iced. He couldn’t move—even if he could move, he couldn’t. Stepping up by his bed, the doctor examined the crook of his rigid left arm. A multitude of tubes snaked into his veins, dripping him full of drugs and nutrients. ‘You haven’t been entirely honest with us. Have you, Ichimatsu-san?’

His pulse pattered unevenly, picking up speed in electronic bleeps. Pulling up his heavy eyelids to peer beneath, the doctor’s latex hands probed his throat. Breath hitching in pain, Ichimatsu flinched, sure they’d feel out cold metal. ‘We haven’t got the best working relationship, have we? But I
promise you: every doctor here is 100 percent committed to your health, to your treatment, and recovery. It’s time you were the same. Ichimatsu-san, you need to tell us what’s going on.’

Half closed, the door swung inward. Heralded by a soft clack of heels, a woman in a crisp white coat entered. Ichimatsu had never seen her before. At her side and a step behind strode a security guard. Ichimatsu cowered back, pressing into the cranked mattress. ‘Your parents are worried sick. If you won’t do it for yourself, think of your family.’

Introducing herself, the unknown doctor began easing Ichimatsu through some reassuring elementary questions. He didn’t answer. She flowed with his silent defiance, like she didn’t need him to say a goddamn thing. Oh, fuck …

‘Ichimatsu-san, I know this is hard for you. But you need to trust us. Tell me, how long have you had these violent impulses?’

**Violent impulses … Just what are they going to do to you now …?**

His own voice spiralled from his depths, so sickeningly gleeful—he couldn’t get enough of this. Trapped, Ichimatsu’s eyes twitched to the door. The security guard closed it quietly, shutting them all inside.

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‘If there was any conceivable way that could have gone worse,’ Todomatsu found his voice. And he laced it with poison. ‘You’d have found it, Niisan.’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu …’ The tips of Ahn’s sweet sailboat ears drooped.

‘What were we supposed to say?’ Osomatsu said tonelessly. He wouldn’t look at them. Slowly, his eyes slid from the patch of wall Karamatsu had just vacated to his own loosened fists. If Todomatsu didn’t know better, he’d say the eldest was in some kind of shock. Well, good for him.

‘Actually sticking to words would’ve been a good start,’ Todomatsu verbally rapped him over the knuckles. ‘Your fists have an even worse vocabulary than you do—I don’t believe you, Niisan!’

‘We … we all fight,’ Osomatsu mumbled. ‘We wrestle, mess around …’

Todomatsu made a sharp sound through his nose. Osomatsu didn’t need the youngest’s chastising huffs to realise exactly how different this was from innocent roughhousing. He knew. And it piqued Todomatsu, the eldest still sought some sweet-scented balm to soften the blow.

‘Why couldn’t you have waited for Matsuno Choromatsu to return, placated him until then?’ Ahn’s lament grew from desolate to something shriller. ‘He might have helped me modify your brother’s memory, we might have …’

‘Might?’ Osomatsu’s head snapped up. Ahn started badly, needle claws digging into Todomatsu’s sleeve. ‘You might have? Thanks, really fucking helpful! Don’t say that shit like it’s obvious, you had no fucking clue what to do either! Someone had to … and I … we can’t wipe his goddamn head every time he does something stupid, there’d be nothing left! So unless you’ve got something better than “might’’, he glared at their poor mentor. ‘How about you shut the hell up?’

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu gasped. Privately, he had to agree. They’d already tweaked Karamatsu’s memories once. The youngest worried too many times might lead to something unpleasantly permanent—they couldn’t give him brain damage! But Todomatsu would never give Osomatsu the satisfaction—how dare he lash out at Ahn! If he’d had a rolled-up newspaper handy,
he’d swat his big brother upside the head for that.

Ahn’s inky eyes rounded, wounded by Osomatsu’s attack. ‘You might be a spark, Matsuno Osomatsu, but you are entirely …’

‘I’m too temperamental, I know, you’ve said it that many fucking times!’

The young Unicorn between them tugged between his own base emotions, Ahn’s slight weight stiffened into a stately statue.

‘There is little point speaking to you when you’re like this,’ she said with dignity. ‘I suggest you take time to reclaim your composure—if you might deign to entertain suggestions from such a humble envoy of the Spectrum Alliance as I.’

She arched Osomatsu a deep bow, all pomp but almost sarcastic. Todomatsu had thought lovely Ahn too strait-laced and earnest for that kind of jagged edge. ‘Are you all right?’ she turned to Todomatsu, even her whiskers tense. He nodded— he was fine.

With a heartrendingly distant nod in return, Ahn hastened from his shoulder, paws skimming off his sleek coat. Apparently she’d recovered feeling in her legs; Todomatsu’s shoes felt rooted to the bitumen. ‘Where are you going?’

The kitten’s tiny form pointed the direction Karamatsu had fled. ‘I’m going after him. This is not a time your brother should be alone … Perhaps it’s better if you don’t,’ Ahn said, a touch tentative as she dissuaded Todomatsu from doing the same. ‘Not until you know what to say. I’m sure you will manage without me,’ she added, reminding her guardians they had an evening of gem-encrusted scouting ahead of them.

‘I did not foresee this scenario. For that, I am sorry.’ Ahn’s fleet bounds lengthened into a miniature gallop, carrying her away. But her young voice was so clear she might have stared disappointment straight in their faces. ‘But you are guardians. There must have been some way to contain this without hurting an innocent such as Matsuno Karamatsu.’

Osomatsu grunted, giving no more reply as Ahn streaked after Karamatsu—she was completely smitten, it’d be adorable if this wasn’t so serious. Watching her go and rife with regret, Todomatsu had to demand: ‘Did you have to hit him?’

Osomatsu didn’t answer, countless seconds crawling by. Then:

‘… I just snapped.’

‘Really? I couldn’t tell,’ Todomatsu bit hard, tiptoeing around the fact he’d had no idea what to say, either. Entertaining the thought that Karamatsu might be onto them was one thing. Finding out he’d infiltrated every one of their cloak-and-dagger deceptions, Todomatsu was—and this tested the most refined Matsuno’s powers of understatement—taken a smidgen by surprise. And he was less than impressed with his critical oversight. He’d never thought there’d be need to explain their lack of conventional work hours … and conventional employers. Throw their golden pay packets and Osomatsu’s shady connections in the mix, it was no wonder Karamatsu had jumped to those criminal conclusions.

But he would have smoothed this over. Todomatsu would have invented some glossy explanation minus the magic. He’d have booted Karamatsu’s suspicions straight back in the red. ‘If you’d just listened to me,’ Todomatsu glowered. ‘For once in your life …’

All that effort in cajoling wasted, pointlessly hoping to spare his brothers a repeat of the beach. He’d
pressed Choromatsu into spilling just how bad that had been. Even wrapped up in his own fright, Todomatsu had felt the tension, a hike in the inn air pressure, innocent to why a shaky second born couldn’t look Osomatsu in the eye. He knew the eldest was scared—he was, too. Scared for Karamatsu’s safety, for his peace of mind now he knew far more than was good for him. But this had to be handled delicately. And it had never been less helpful, that Osomatsu didn’t know the meaning of the word.

‘Come on,’ Todomatsu snapped, Ahn sent them on to assess candidates in action. The youngest hadn’t quite deciphered what their mentor meant by “in action”. The remaining guardians might be tough, cut more from Osomatsu-style leather than Todomatsu silk. But not every candidate pissed people off enough to show off brawling skills on demand. The youngest made sure to kick Osomatsu in the shin as he sprang in skyward transformation, starlight descended to adorn him.

Todomatsu kept up a steady stream of acid as they soared, shadows caught between cloud and the electric-lit skyline. He understood why his brother had lost it. That didn’t mean he’d forgive him. Not until Osomatsu had punished himself to the youngest’s satisfaction.

But, despite himself, his scolding lacked somewhat in bite. Todomatsu usually handled his brother’s temper like a juggler—lighting the fuel himself, he played artfully through the fire and flames. But getting a rise out of Osomatsu was the last thing on his mind—Karamatsu thought they were gangsters! Osomatsu could’ve taken his head off, if he’d had one shred less control. Beyond intimidating, Osomatsu had exerted an unwitting pull over his younger siblings Todomatsu hadn’t known before. It was unnerving. And he was honestly a little afraid he might flare again.

That was one reason. But even more, Osomatsu was an open book, large print and zero subtleties. He already punished himself.

‘So much for trying to be nicer to him,’ Todomatsu rebuked from his uncomfortable crouch. Hidden by dying pot plants on their candidate’s narrow balcony, Osomatsu said nothing. His communication had been restricted to short shrugs and mumbles since he’d yelled at Ahn. ‘If he wasn’t a target already, he’s probably looking nice and juicy to Takuu now.’

The thought slapping him like a rancid sponge to the face, Todomatsu chose not to bring it to Osomatsu’s attention: what if their enemy had been watching Karamatsu watching them? Lord Takuu had a few more scenarios to play with to explain their subterfuge … if he could stoop to believing the guardians might be human. Todomatsu was suddenly absurdly grateful the Liberation Force scorned his race. Ahn promised that disregard would protect them for a long time to come.

‘What if you thought Karamatsu was at a crime lord’s beck and call?’ Todomatsu got back on track. ‘Look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn’t do something about it … Niisan, I’m waiting.’

‘… I can’t, okay?’

He finally got Osomatsu talking—about time. He’d already spoiled a perfectly nice night. Not dumping out the questionable contents of his head via his cakehole just made it weirder. ‘I … I’m not angry with him.’

‘Telling me won’t do you any good, Niisan,’ Todomatsu chided in sing-song.

‘He can’t keep following us like that,’ Osomatsu maintained haphazardly. ‘What if some grunt recognises him hanging around? He can’t just … and he might even catch on—really catch on! That can’t happen!’

Todomatsu massaged his calves through his pliable boots, hunkered unmoving for too long. ‘So it’s
fine with you, if you completely ruin your relationship?’

Though he plotted payback—Osomatsu just had to make Ahn abandon them, he was already over the tight squeezes and cramps; playing at magical spies took far more effort without her or Choromatsu to erase them from view—Todomatsu wasn’t overly harsh. But Osomatsu still blanched, his stricken look clearing like smoke wafted from a kicked-out campfire. ‘If that’s what it takes to keep him out of this, then yeah.’

Unable to interest himself in their lanky candidate’s internet activism, Todomatsu rolled his eyes. Their eldest’s unflinching drive to protect them was noble—something glowed warm and fuzzy inside Todomatsu, highly aware how treasured he was. But Osomatsu could also be pretty dumb about it. Did he honestly not see how badly that would hurt Karamatsu, too?

‘Karamatsu’s always fine.’

‘Did that look fine to you?’ Todomatsu pressed, hearing an infant inkling of doubt beneath Osomatsu’s unerringly steadfast invincibility.

‘No … but he’s just upset, he’s gotta get over himself and …’

‘Get over what?’ Todomatsu said, gingerly finding his feet—they were seeing nothing remotely useful here. Ahn’s number one Kraken hunched over his desk shovelling snacks, greased fingers greasing up his greasy laptop. Todomatsu wrinkled his nose. He could admit it was kind of cool, but there was a reason masked web policing wasn’t a spectator sport. ‘He’s right. We are involved with the mob.’

‘Barely!’

‘And now you’ve all but confirmed it,’ he spelt it out, nimbly scaling balcony ledges, his sceptre secured over his back. ‘And you flat-out refused to let him help. As soon as he’s over the shock, he’ll be even more obsessed with “getting us out”.’

‘So what?’ Osomatsu failed to make out it wasn’t a big deal, only just overtaking the youngest as they flipped onto the roof. ‘He won’t go to the police.’

‘He might!’ Todomatsu grabbed the back of his brother’s hoodie, about to vault and shimmy up the tower across. Loading extra weight in his heels, he dragged Osomatsu back. ‘If he thinks that’s the only way to help us,’ he made the eldest look at him. If Osomatsu wasn’t listening, he could read his pretty masked lips. ‘He might.’

Tucked into their next snooping corner—more perched, hidden among a network of wooden beams over a university gym—the hard comprehension of just how screwed they were if Karamatsu alerted the law knocked Osomatsu back into physical and mental muteness. Todomatsu picked at his costume, unable to concentrate. Flicking non-existent threads from his gloves, he admired the Alliance lettering that glistened silvery amid his lacy ruffles. Their spiralling chains consisted of one star-bright symbol. The same decorated his sceptre. It had also sealed his contract—the symbol of the Unicorn, curled in Todomatsu’s own unique style. He’d seen Osomatsu’s jagged symbol shine up on the white gold of his gauntlets, Choromatsu’s sleek and scripted along his pistol barrels.

‘I’ll apologise to Karamatsu,’ Osomatsu eventually spoke. The synchronised clack of bamboo on bamboo below, his tones were almost hesitant as they fed into Todomatsu’s neighbouring mind. ‘As soon as we get home, okay? We tell him whatever makes him happy, then we get Choromatsu and Ahn to wipe him … unless you’ve thought of something else?’ he asked hopefully.
‘Well, I haven’t,’ Todomatsu snapped, shuffling on his stomach for a better view. ‘If you haven’t noticed, I’m trying to choose our teammates. And while you’re at it,’ he added swiftly, ‘apologise to Ahn, too. This is hard enough without you two awkward and at each other’s throats.’

‘Right … argh,’ Osomatsu groaned. Stretched out on his front, he cracked his forehead hard against the ceiling beam beneath him. ‘I’m an asshole, aren’t I?’

‘Why ask when you know the answer?’

‘But I’m working my arse off,’ Osomatsu tried to joke. ‘I’m protecting humanity over here—this is the thanks I get? How come it’s gotta be me dragging the rest of you in the shit?’

Todomatsu arched one perfectly-plucked eyebrow—scraping to justify his anger? The youngest wouldn’t call him out, but he’d sure as hell dance around it. ‘Besides,’ he added a dash of sass when Osomatsu got defensive. ‘Your record is against you. Can you really see us turning bad first? I’m just too darling—’

He smiled to give the world a toothache.

‘—and Choromatsu’s too hopeless. Osomatsu-niisan, you didn’t drag us into being guardians,’ he reminded, softened when he saw just how affected the eldest was beneath his wisecracks. Karamatsu’s accusations had dredged up all the inner turmoil Osomatsu had stamped down, half convinced he’d signed Todomatsu and Choromatsu’s death sentences.

‘Yeah … sure.’

Cracking his magical neck loudly—‘Niisan!’ Todomatsu burst, sure the entire kendo club heard—Osomatsu abruptly threw himself upward from his belly. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting a drink,’ Osomatsu stretched and strode recklessly between the beams; Todomatsu’s stomach knotted anew every time he passed in plain view. Thankfully, the students were engrossed in their drills. No one noticed the crimson flash overhead. ‘I need to cool off,’ the eldest added more honestly, slipping outside the building. ‘Clear my head. I won’t be long.’

Feeling his brother phase to blend in as he scouted vending machines—and to access his wallet—Todomatsu sighed crabbily. This was supposed to be about getting Osomatsu’s opinion. He was the one who’d be working shoulder-to-shoulder with their Kraken and Sphinx, the long-awaited completion of their vanguard.

But this was a waste of time, anyway. Not only was Osomatsu no help at all, but without Ahn to blank them he was sequestered so high in the ceiling he could barely tell who was who. Unicorn eyes or not, Todomatsu only picked their unsuspecting Kraken hopeful by her cascading ponytail. In any case, the club’s scheduled gym time would soon end. Todomatsu made the executive decision that was enough recruiting for one night. Todomatsu’s current frame of mind wasn’t quite ideal for selecting virtual strangers with whom to entrust his life. And his brothers’ lives. And humanity. And the universes.

Sulking as their candidate flattened opponents with biceps as thick as her midriff, the enticing swish of her ponytail reminded Todomatsu of the third born—he’d better be having a good time with his idol. That had their only good luck tonight, that they’d already packed him off to his concert. The youngest had enough of a balancing act trying to navigate Osomatsu and Karamatsu without throwing Choromatsu’s frayed nerves in, as well.

Todomatsu’s heart skipped an unexpected beat. This was the first time he’d been alone transformed.
Not even Ahn beside him, shadows encroached his mind, challenging his buffered spirit. His fingers turned pasty, clutching at his supporting ceiling beam—the enemy towered over him, skeletal pale and robes whipping with darkness and lightning.

Todomatsu shivered. He wasn’t thinking about Lord Takuu and their inevitable clash. Not yet.

‘The Liberation Force has been hoarding power for months. Lord Takuu might attempt a mass infection at any time,’ Ahn’s persistent urging often grew frantic. ‘What happens when he does? You must be ready!’

But Todomatsu always pouted that he had enough to keep him busy, developing his skills as a leader and spellcaster. ‘And Choromatsu said, he said we were waiting—I don’t know how to beat an army, Ahn-chan! We should concentrate on saving people here and now. Once we’ve all upgraded we can … start to …’

Every time Ahn broached the subject, the youngest gave his frightening future the slip—he was an evil warlord’s sworn nemesis, for crying out loud! He knew he couldn’t avoid it forever. But the Kraken and Sphinx weren’t even on his side yet. And what was a Unicorn without a magical unit full and fierce at their back? And he was the Unicorn …

Todomatsu twiddled his gloved fingers. He hadn’t told his brothers—or Ahn, for that matter—that his true decision had been not to become leader of the spectrum guardians. He had no plans to enlighten them, no desire to test how that bombshell might go down—it wasn’t his fault! The choice had literally been ripped away from him, Choromatsu would be dead now if he hadn’t! What was he supposed to have done?

But he’d settled now—mostly. Todomatsu adored being a magical boy. This was who he was meant to be. But he couldn’t completely ignore that niggle in the base of his brain, fear and doubt that had initially tipped his scales in favour of passing this incredible opportunity by. The loss of his friends was a constant stomachache. His need to rescue them—and to keep his brothers in the realms of the living—gave Todomatsu formidable purpose to wear his sparkling battle hoodie. But that didn’t make him a paragon of goodness.

Ahn believed in him so blindly. Beneath their ceaseless taunts, so did his brothers. But the revelation of his light had raised a looking glass before the youngest Matsuno, the boy reflected for only him to see. And for the first time in his life, Todomatsu wasn’t sure he liked what he saw. He’d been proud to call himself the worst—he still was! How could he let himself be a light for salvation?

Manipulative. Dishonest. Stuck up. Wimp. He threw every accusation at himself. Internal defenses instantly rallied, warping the faults so they glowed in positive light—Todomatsu was clever, he was just so clever. But he couldn’t stop the damning montage, all the “clever” things he’d done to his brothers over the years, shamelessly sheltering behind one as another unleashed retribution.

Todomatsu’s stomach squirmed. Karamatsu sympathised on demand without a second thought. How many times had the second born taken care of him? Todomatsu shook his head—it was pointless to count. And what had he done for his loving brother in return?

Ahn had shunned him. Laughed at him. Taken advantage, shut him down. All the mud in the world seemed to slide straight off the hotshot. But sling enough, and eventually something would stick. His conscience stricken, Todomatsu bit down on his puffed lip. How many Unicorns had that claim to fame, if he’d helped sculpt a soul Takuu couldn’t wait to snatch?

But the Spectrum Alliance loved him. Especially his young team of experts, fresh from studies and ecstatic for the opportunity to work with him. After eons of traditional Unicorns, they gushed just
how thrilling he was. ‘Most need a grievous push, to switch from benevolent inspiration to ironfisted commander. But to be either at any given moment … Lord Takuu won’t stand a chance!’

‘Do you really think so? No, don’t tease me!’ Todomatsu showered them with honeyed affection and modesty, stealing into all their hearts. But it took a moment of true reflection for him to admit how much he relied on their encouragement. The Alliance thought him a brilliant change, a brilliant choice—they had chosen him. Remembering this—though conveniently forgetting a few less glamorous factors to his selection, like availability—Todomatsu’s spirits lifted a little. They’d chosen him. And his performance was nothing short of stellar—his brothers knew it, his experts knew it. Todomatsu knew it.

The gym plunged into darkness. Todomatsu almost rolled off his beam. He hadn’t noticed practice finish up, the last student out the door flicking off the lights. How long did it take to find a vending machine? Where on earth was Osomatsu?

Enclosed by darkness, Todomatsu wasn’t afraid exactly. Not how he’d used to be. Not now that he was light incarnate. But he still summoned a soft glow to keep him company. Pulling his sceptre close to his chest, he cupped one hand to its resplendent head like he shielded a candle from a storm, hiding its small gleam.

Too small a gleam.

*Is that such a surprise?* he chided, apprehensive. His hands sweated lightly inside his gloves as he felt his light strain. The same call had drawn a sphere of light twice the intensity yesterday. Could a moment of doubt really degrade his power? But Choromatsu had doubts constantly, he’d never mentioned anything like this.

Todomatsu’s boundless vitality teetered on a cliff’s edge. His light bumped down a notch, the darkened gym become threatening. The congested traffic on the nearby streets blared eerily. Todomatsu jumped badly when a door slammed, cry caught by his mask. Enemies prowled unseen hallways in his overactive imagination, converging to corner him 10 metres off the ground. Todomatsu moaned, gripping his faintly-glowing sceptre. Could he even defend himself if that happened?

Todomatsu gave himself a shake—of course he could! His sceptre pulsed a more strongly in response, the youngest’s bravery with it. But he was still relieved when Osomatsu barged rudely into his mind.

Relief lasted a grand total of two seconds. ‘Get out here, little brother—we have to go, now.’

An episode. That’s what Ichimatsu had suffered, according to their father in his rushed phone call with the eldest. The word made Todomatsu’s digesting dinner swirl. “Episode” had the same queasy connotations as “accident” when a road crash killed two carloads. ‘Choromatsu’s not answering his phone—I said why—and Jyushimatsu forgot his. They want us to look after Karamatsu …’

‘How could he?’ One arm wrapped around Karamatsu, Todomatsu pulled him close as the second born so often comforted him.

‘None shall ever replace you, my lifelong partner in song! Our journey together may be at its end, but our love shall live eternal in every melody we shared! Farewell, my friend! Farewell!’

Karamatsu dramatically mimed wiping away a tear. Todomatsu winced before he could stop himself. But he hugged his brother more firmly, resting his cheek atop Karamatsu’s dishevelled hair. The second born’s eyes were dry. But his face was a portrait of patched red, like he’d scrubbed his pain
away with sandpaper. Todomatsu excelled in duplicity, well enough to see through Karamatsu’s: he put on every scrap of that bravado. Pillar or not, he mourned the demise of his guitar like his only friend had passed.

‘How could he?’ Osomatsu echoed Todomatsu’s disbelief. ‘Your playing isn’t that bad.’

Eyes shining with tears unspilt, Todomatsu dealt the eldest a knife-sharp “You’re not helping, Niisan”, and pinched his toe under the kotatsu for good measure. For once taking the hint, Osomatsu shut his mouth. So reluctant to face Karamatsu, he’d been palpably—and very guiltily—relieved: all that had passed between them behind the theatre seemed forgotten. Not wanting to bring it up and clear the air of everything he regretted while Karamatsu grieved, Osomatsu sat awkwardly across the kotatsu while Todomatsu exercised all his devotion, filling Karamatsu’s ears with sympathy, tenderness—anything that might help him cope.

‘We don’t expect you to just take this on the chin, Niisan,’ he soothed, laying it on thick. ‘This is horrible! It’s awful, I’m so sorry. Cry if you need to. Or yell—anything you need, we’re here for you.’

‘Let’s snap all of Ichimatsu’s cattails,’ Osomatsu said, a little savagely.

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu exclaimed, aghast. ‘That’s terrible! How can you …’

The boy’s attitude made an abrupt about-turn—actually, you know what? Ichimatsu deserved it. Cat toys were far more replaceable possessions. Karamatsu’s guitar might have been secondhand (though it had emptied the teenage second born’s pockets for a year), but that kind of sentimental worth was completely priceless. ‘I think he keeps one under the couch upstairs.’

‘What? No!’ The cry was startled from Karamatsu.

‘Come off it,’ the eldest couldn’t hold off when he refused to hear a word against Ichimatsu. ‘He smashed your guitar, right in front of you!’

But Karamatsu insisted he was innocent, the fourth born’s violent hand forced by illness. ‘You didn’t see him, he was so confused. Like he didn’t know what was happening. And when he realised …’

Karamatsu gulped through a hole in his composure, needing a moment before he could go on. Todomatsu squeezed him around the shoulders, whispering that everything would be okay. ‘He was so upset. And his fever … I’ve never felt anyone burn so hot.’

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu wasn’t convinced. ‘He probably wouldn’t have wrecked it then, if he hadn’t thought about it before.’

Karamatsu’s head tucked against his shoulder, Todomatsu had a hard time not agreeing. ‘He has been saying some awful things—more awful than usual.’ Delirious or not, this was just like Ichimatsu, it was instinct as much as spite. If he wasn’t making life difficult for at least a dozen people there was no point even getting up in the morning.

That’s not fair, his more charitable self butted in. Todomatsu sighed, knowing he was right. Ichimatsu might be dreary, and bitter, and disgusting, and … He pulled himself up before he got carried away. And he might have an eternal vendetta against Karamatsu. But smashing his guitar was a line even Ichimatsu wouldn’t cross.

‘I cannot bear you to think so badly of him! Our brother is so ill, we must have …’

‘He’s sick,’ Osomatsu cut him off. ‘That doesn’t mean it’s okay to be an asshole. Speaking of, err,
assholes …’

Embarrassed, Osomatsu apologised for hitting him earlier. ‘And sorry for … you know. Everything else. We can talk about it later, okay?’

Karamatsu in the throes of insisting there was nothing to apologise for—‘Karamatsu-niisan, there kind of is …’—Todomatsu saw movement in the corner. A tiny ball of pure white unfurled, slinking low to crawl into Osomatsu’s lap.

‘I bit him,’ Ahn’s voice trembled like a leaf dashed by wind. A look of bewilderment flashed through the eldest’s eyes. But it flashed out just as fast. Less awkward with each passing moment, Osomatsu gathered Ahn up, cuddling the trembling kitten. ‘I attacked him, like I was no more than an Earthen cat! I hurt him … he wouldn’t stop, I had to make him stop …’

‘Ouch!’

Todomatsu jumped, hand clapping to his mouth just a little too late. Startled, Karamatsu unwound from his arms at once. Just poking out of his trouser pocket, the Unicorn’s scroll scorched.

Todomatsu gaped. Really? Right now? Was it possible for the Liberation Force to have worse timing? Catching Osomatsu’s eye, Todomatsu lifted a questioning brow. Ahn was a little worse for wear, and the eldest had more experience reading distance from the burn. ‘If we leave now,’ Osomatsu’s telepathy was tight, barely restraining anger their enemy struck when Karamatsu needed them most. ‘We should make it.’

‘Then we have to go … Karamatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu hesitantly took command. ‘We hate to do this, but we have to go out again—just for a little while. We’ll be back soon, I promise. Will you be all right?’

Shocked speechless, Karamatsu gazed at Todomatsu with such utter abandonment the youngest’s heart bled. Karamatsu had transformed from flashy NEET to a child, no more than 10 years old. Then, with a surge of violent upheaval, his mystified desolation suffused with horror. Todomatsu’s innards pinched, knowing what Karamatsu must be thinking, what he thought they deserted him to do. But one moment was all it took: he zipped that staggering emotional baggage behind an expression that on any other day Todomatsu might have classified a smile.

‘Of course, brothers. Don’t worry yourselves over me. Go, do what you need to do. But please, look after each other. Be careful. And don’t …’

Karamatsu’s eyes tightened, catching Osomatsu’s hard. ‘Don’t hurt anyone.’

‘Karamatsu-niisan …’

‘Look, man, we’re not …’ Osomatsu finally gave reason a shot. They couldn’t leave Karamatsu believing they chose a shifty assignment over him! But Karamatsu raised his voice over their protests. Every corner of the small living room resonating with his hurt, Todomatsu almost shrank back.

‘I don’t care, okay? I don’t care! So if you have to go …’

Todomatsu and Osomatsu silent by his second strained syllable, Karamatsu’s voice sank to a murmur. ‘Please, just … just go.’

The two magical boys reluctantly did so, leaving Karamatsu alone with the sad ghost of his guitar. ‘By this contract I submit my light to salvation!’
His light-drenched aerial acrobatics almost made him nauseous, Todomatsu’s stomach was so unsettled. ‘But there wasn’t time to explain,’ he insisted to Osomatsu and Ahn as they repelled between billboards for beer and phone plans. No valid basis for his prickling shame, he swiftly quashed it.

‘He’d want us to go, if he knew,’ Osomatsu agreed, oddly listless for the Salamander approaching battle. ‘We’ll take care of this, and when Choromatsu gets back he and Ahn can do their thing.’

Ahn huddled in Osomatsu’s snug hoodie pocket. Todomatsu could just see the tip of her tail fluttering limply with the Salamander’s powerful thrust. She’d been so upset, Karamatsu’s rigid shoulders sagging when even she wouldn’t stay with him. But she’d silently padded out the door without Todomatsu’s coaxing.

‘Over there!’ Osomatsu locked on first, steering them towards a stretch of green buried in the cityscape. Todomatsu’s lens quickly picked the active shadows and sharpened them. One alien, two targets. Abandoning their superpowered parkour, the two guardians bounced to street level. Curving paths lit by decorative iron lampposts, the remainder of the park was an ocean of darkness but for a few pinpricks of light. Todomatsu’s enhanced vision isolated the public toilets sign one illuminated. ‘Ahn, come on!’

The brothers come to do their duty, Ahn did hers, taking control of the surrounds so none who glanced out their windows would see. On foot, Todomatsu was still faster than the eldest. Heels carrying him lightly over the outfield, he cried out when he saw the soldier reel back. ‘Niisan, did you see that!’

‘What the …’ Osomatsu drove his boots harder into the ground, approaching warp speed. Arms pumping in tireless perfect form, Todomatsu watched wonder as one of the targets—someone, a human!—forced the alien against the toilet wall, swinging a long implement. The ensuing crack split the night. The soldier screamed, shivering the hairs on the back of Todomatsu’s neck. ‘How the hell did they … no, shit!’

Staggering upright, the soldier dragged one claw tip jaggedly through reality, one frail arm clutched to their heaving chest. The guardians skidded to a halt just as their enemy fell between dimensions. The rift they left flapped raggedly before sealing tight. ‘Shit,’ Osomatsu swore again, their enemy escaped. ‘We’re too late, they still got them …’

‘No, look.’ Panting once from their dash, Todomatsu pointed just beyond the toilet block. A shadowed figure helped another to their feet—the one who’d fought off the soldier! Ahn peeked from Osomatsu’s hoodie. ‘I … don’t believe it,’ she breathed. A single splinter of dark crystal glittered at the foot of the wall, smashed impossibly from their origin. ‘Who is this person?’

‘I don’t know,’ Osomatsu murmured, impressed. ‘But they’ve got balls. Big fuck-off brass balls. What does the Spectrum Alliance say about sidekicks?’

Hefting his staff, Todomatsu summoned starlight, throwing the grungy bricks and winter-browned grass into sharp relief. His back to them, the young man’s silhouette lined silver, marking him lean and strong. He looked very dramatic, like some hero from Greek mythology, hauling the fallen over his shoulder. But those shorts …

‘Wait,’ Todomatsu frowned. ‘Isn’t that …’

The human hero whirled in a wild circle; he looked decidedly less impressive in motion. Flinging a
heedless arm in their direction, his loose sleeve rippled like a banner of pure sunshine. Osomatsu
gapéd. ‘No way …’

His heart pitter-pattering a drumroll, Todomatsu angled his beam directly in the young man’s face.

That wide-open mouth grinned to greet him. ‘It’s you! It’s really you!’

‘Fuck me!’ Todomatsu yelped. His eyes exploded in delight. Jyushimatsu barged right up to them in
sheer defiance of their repellant dome, towing his suited rescuee all the way.

‘But … but how …’ Ahn stammered as the half-blinded man draped over Jyushimatsu demanded
answers.

‘Argh! What is that light? Who are you talking to, what’s going on? Let me go right now—what’s
wrong with you? Are you an idiot? Didn’t you hear me? I said let … me … go!’

Flustered and frantic, the office worker threatened to call the police, slandering his rescuer as an
accomplice. But his knees knocked frailly. Jabbering excitement at the tardy heroes and any variety
of unpleasant names bouncing right off his thick skin, Jyushimatsu hitched the man more firmly over
his shoulders.

One curse startled out of him and leaving him with absolutely no more words, Todomatsu’s eyes
catched Osomatsu’s. The eldest every bit as speechless, they watched as the glittering evidence of
Jyushimatsu’s first casualty in the battle for humankind crumbled into dust.
Zugzwang

Chapter Notes

So I wrote this chapter waaaaaayyy too long and had to cut it at a suitable-ish point. This does seem to happen. To me. Often. And, unfortunately, this cut was before the big reveal :( Sorry for the ridiculously lengthy build up to the next magical boy, it is taking longer than intended, especially given Oso and Choro pretty much had a chapter each for their grand introductions way back when. But Totty had five for his intro arc, I guess. And there's an awful lot more going on with the story now. It does take up rather more space :)

I think I've included this warning in chapter notes a few times now, but it's a continuation of heavy stuff with Kara from this chapter and into the next (... and next ...), just so you're prepared.

Still not much for our lovely magical boys to smile about :( But I hope so much you enjoy this chapter, I love and appreciate your thoughts and feedback so much, all of the thank you for sticking with me through this!

P.S. - I hope the title's not too pretentious ...

P.P.S. - I've gone beta-less for this chapter for various reasons. Please be kind if I've totally screwed up anything plot-wise or style-wise ... or other such stuff. And don't hesitate to shove my face in any mistake. Then I can get on with trying to dig myself out :) 

‘It seems the Doll of Darkness did well, to forsake his pet when he did.’

‘My lord?’

Lord Takuu’s favoured curved their willowy spine. A step back in his imposing shadow, they waited should their illustrious lord see fit to enlighten them. Touring the serpentine caverns of his stronghold, arcanists and servants flung themselves prostrate, the mere swish of the conqueror’s cloak with each stalking stride enough to make the most hardened shudder in willing submission. To cower in his wake was a reward endless tastes would never satisfy, forever moaning for more.

Just as hungry to obey, the trusted lieutenant had coursed with the thrill when Lord Takuu commanded their company whilst he inspected his forces. It was as much an inspection of the lieutenant; they personally supervised the entire Liberation Force in their lord’s name. Lord Takuu’s most trusted was his dominant claw, the enforcer of his will, purveyed with every clipped instruction, every punitive crack of their whip.

Thousands upon thousands mumbling devotion in incoherent waves as the flagstones beneath his boots throbbed with power, swelling hypnotically into the cavernous heights of the hollowed fortress, Lord Takuu paused by a gaping arch. It led into a small antechamber—small only when compared to the vastness of the warlord’s monumental throne room. Inside, ringed by arcanists and skewered by the sharp eyes of elite soldiers armed to the teeth, the Doll of Darkness tested his powers.
‘As tempting an opportunity as Lieutenant Uuen’s failed heist was,’ Lord Takuu continued, a slight extension of one claw enough to postpone grovelling so as not to hinder his servant’s concentration—and to ensure the unpredictable young man was under constant supervision. ‘I see now the time was not right. He required further development. In allowing his agony to ferment, exacerbated by yet more ingenious attacks by the doll …’

Shoved stumbling into the circle of arcanists weaving dark forces through their claws, a filthy young human’s eyes flashed with fright as the Doll of Darkness seized his forearm, yanking him close. Another member of the street rabble choking the doomed metropolis they stalked. Simple to lure away, slave packs ensnared subjects in their dozens. Even the gem-encrusted warriors, so devoted to the innocents of Earth, didn’t miss him.

The doll purred low in his ear. Instantly, the boy’s struggles went limp. His smile so obscenely satisfied, the doll planted one pale hand to his victim’s chest and pushed, slamming a vicious torrent of darkness until the boy’s mortal fibres burst with it and could hold no more. The boy thrashed in his arms, screaming. Something cold and glittering burnt through the doll’s eyes—the lieutenant saw exactly whose soul he lusted to next impart liberation upon.

‘The darkness now roiling within our husk’s most exceptional brother have become a force exquisite, possibly beyond my own imagining,’ Lord Takuu finished with triumph, a low chuckle at the impossibility. The sound shivered through the lieutenant’s marrow. No force dared trespass beyond Lord Takuu’s astounding foresight.

Venerating their ruler’s unparalleled wisdom, the lieutenant didn’t comment that Lord Takuu continued to humour his blood servant’s absurd delusion, that he was distinct from the skin he wore. Whether all of him knew it or not, Matsuno Ichimatsu was the Doll of Darkness. Once he cast off his sickened form, doubtless the unnecessary word play would cease. To educe such lasting tolerance in Lord Takuu was to squeeze blood from rock. But this was the enslaved saviour of the Liberation Force he coddled.

‘In any case, Matsuno Karamatsu did not agree to join us of his own volition.’

‘No,’ the lieutenant filled the pause so magnanimously left for comment. ‘He did not.’

The doll’s obsession to possess the broken young man aside, the lieutenant knew what became of a slave’s potential when sealed by their own commitment. Had there been some devilry to secure the doll’s consent before exploiting his body and soul as Lord Takuu’s cornerstone, they doubted not an instant that the Liberation Force would already march, bloody and victorious, through the streets and space stations of the Spectrum Alliance. They needed slaves like the doll’s brother to walk willingly into their dark embrace. And there were far more effective means than persuasion to guarantee that promise.

‘Now the time is upon us,’ Lord Takuu was saying. He did not comment on his doll’s performance—which, the lieutenant was obligated to note, surpassed that of many soldiers trained from hatchlings. But when the doll’s attention grazed the archway—beneath his mask, the lieutenant’s seven eyes narrowed. The reprobate barely inclined his head—he stood in the mighty presence of the Supreme Lord of the Liberation Force, not some two-bit Earthen president! But his lips quirked, one eyebrow arched questioningly into his brow.

‘One more strike,’ Lord Takuu finished—it took far more than this audacity for the favoured slave to provoke his master’s wrath. ‘And our slave commander will be at our pleasure. My doll shall have his pet.’

The Doll of Darkness’s waxen face blazed like a torch. With a consoling croon, he eased the now
smartly-uniformed boy to the flagstones—it was too much for him, barely able to withstand his violent entry into top ranks. Folding the boy’s hands over his void-infused heart, the doll shot from his kneel too fast to follow.

The favoured lieutenant had relished their share of conflict. As respectfully as the threat permitted, they angled to sacrifice themselves for an amused Lord Takuu should the need arise. The doll broke the ring of arcansists, their containment spells nothing to his exhilaration. Drawing his wakizashi, he flipped his blade, curled his gleeful lip, and whirled at the nearest soldier.

Feinting left, the doll unexpectedly dropped and slid beneath their heavy rake of claws, grinning up at them before scissor-kicking upright, downing them with the same snapping motion. Landing on lightning-fast toes, the lieutenant witnessed with grudging awe as the doll corkscrewed over another soldier, his every muscle contraction imbued with lethal grace; he bent so far back to avoid an overhead blow that his fingers brushed stone. He waggled them at the favoured lieutenant, no intent but to incense them.

The lieutenant had barely stifled their disapproval when, with a swivel and a lunge, the doll grabbed the soldier attempting to subdue him from behind. Disarmed and steel clanging to the flagstones, the soldier could only cough. The tip of the doll’s wakizashi had already snaked to tickle beneath their narrow chin.

‘What?’ The Doll of Darkness tilted his own chin over his shoulder, lording over the chaos he’d ignited. Beaded with sweat and grinning manically with all he was and all that would be his, he sheathed his wakizashi, pushing the hilt delicately into his chest with two fingers before raising his palms in submission. ‘I was just messing around. Do you have to?’ he said, not sounding at all put out as two soldiers clamped his arms between their claws, forcing him to his knees.

Lord Takuu laughed. That pleasure at his doll’s progress echoed chillingly through the fortress. But pleasure didn’t prevent him ordering his most trusted to unfurl their whip. The tip of a claw was dragged down the doll’s impeccable jacket, opening his narrow back to discipline. All emotion schooled from their features, the lieutenant drew back his muscled arm, whip whistling to split frail human skin seven times, collecting what Lord Takuu ordered paid from his servant’s flesh.

It wasn’t necessary to restrain him. But the soldiers didn’t shift. That enthralled distrust mingled in their masked eyes matched that the lieutenant ever warred with. They didn’t like the Doll of Darkness, could never like him. But they didn’t have to like him to revere what he was. And the slave was only a weapon. Only a tool. And while he was wielded by their Lord Takuu, that reverence would never fade. Yet it didn't absolve the pleasure the lieutenant secretly enjoyed as sluggish blood oozed between the doll’s bony scapulae.

The lieutenant flicked their whip clean, returning to their lord’s side to find he studied close the young man who secured their conquest. The doll was more concerned for the state of his slashed uniform, lamenting its rough treatment far more theatrically than the welts beneath. Though he said nothing, the lieutenant saw their lord’s mind—Lord Takuu allowed them to see. Despite that performance, the Doll of Darkness exhibited more control now than any he’d displayed since awakening to his true form. He still emanated turmoil. But it was concentrated. Focussed. A pinpointed beam of deadly black energy. And it seemed Matsuno Karamatsu had imparted that focus.

Plans for the young man Lord Takuu had decreed barely shy of perfection had evolved upward of the stars. Matsuno Karamatsu neared legendary status among the ranks—the soul who might have spawned a second Doll of Darkness. But if he was the ball-and-chain Lord Takuu sought, that finally leashed his blood servant and kept him under unerring control—save when Lord Takuu himself
commanded otherwise—even commanding their slave army would come second. And once the doll obtained the object of his fixations …

The anticipation tingled down the lieutenant's sinewy body, seduced. Already the doll grew so much stronger. All their Force’s power seething inside him, when the Doll of Darkness drained himself dry for Matsuno Karamatsu the stars would tremble.

‘Begin arrangements for our first mass turning,’ Lord Takuu ordered, leaving his doll with a stern reprimand for the unnecessary distress he continually caused his husk—‘What affects him affects you, however you deny this. And his absence is far more readily noticed in the medical centre your interference had him placed.’

‘Arrangements have already begun,’ the lord’s closest swelled to deliver good news. Their scouts had already found the perfect opportunity for the experiment.

Lord Takuu inclined his chin. Drinking in his approval, the lieutenant straightened to receive further orders. ‘Select from among my best and summon them to me. One must be worthy of handling our commander’s soul. My doll can suffer surrendering ownership for one night.’

It was not the lieutenant's place to question their lord. Nonetheless, Lord Takuu spied their fleeting hesitation—they were yet to deploy their best in combat. ‘Do not think I am unaware of the risk.’

‘Never, my lord.’ The lieutenant’s mask scraped their back-bent knees, they bowed so low.

‘My orders stand: they are not to engage if it can be avoided. But the guardians have history with the husk’s brother; I do not doubt they will make an appearance. My doll remains under strict instruction to not incite battle. But even unrefined, his pet’s soul is fathomless. Empowered by an elite soldier, its strength will overwhelm even the young Unicorn. Should they pose any threat, we will wipe out all three guardians in one fell swoop.

‘Liaise with Lieutenant Souudai and oversee finalisation of the mission yourself.’ Lord Takuu’s features had twisted fouly around his nemesis’s name. But his voice crackled like the spurting darkness he barely contained, claws curled tight with the chance to be rid of the guardians’ interference and the threat of the two-faced Unicorn once and for all.

‘Do not fail me. Needless to say, I will not take kindly,’ he said by way of dismissal, low tenor ringing with peril more terrifying than the void from which the warlord first drew his powers, ‘to being informed we have lost Matsuno Karamatsu again.’

***

To say Osomatsu was worked up was an understatement. Walking in on Jyushimatsu taking out an alien soldier with nothing but a polished chunk of wood wasn’t something he’d come to terms with any time soon. Still, he felt kind of bad. They barely gave Choromatsu a chance to skip in the door before waylaying him. The third born flying high on ecstatic real life achievements—apparently no one (himself included) had crashed his encounter with the idol kitty of his dreams—he let them drag him to the roof. When Todomatsu and Ahn looked tentatively to him (“Oh, sure, when it’s bad news suddenly I am in charge”) Osomatsu made short work of ruining their brother’s perfect night.

He’d bet on Choromatsu’s yells rattling loose the night-chilled roof tiles they sat on. But while his eyes bugged a little as the eldest outlined the shitshow he’d missed in lieu of his fanboying, the highly-strung hero handled the news far better than expected. He nodded the explanations along—Karamatsu’s unsettlingly-accurate accusations, to Ichimatsu’s ill-fated rockstar impersonation, to Jyushimatsu’s moonlighting hero work—knees tucked to his chin and mouth pressed in a tight
upside-down V. Osomatsu figured he should give him a bit more credit—or maybe a lot. In the grand scheme of things, this was just a new taste of their everyday crazy.

Choromatsu’s eyes did look a little glazed, though. He would have put it down to the dim moonlight’s reflection, but … Osomatsu stretched out on his back and glanced sideways at Totty, giving Choromatsu a much-needed chance to digest. Eyes sliding to the calm dispenser hidden by their brother’s plaid sleeve, the youngest gave a guilt-adjacent tweak of a smile. So he had sweet-talked their brother’s counsellors into upping his dose. ‘Don’t make a habit of it,’ Ahn warned later. Choromatsu had quickly fallen asleep, Osomatsu suspected, with a bit of extra help to shut down his relentless whirl of brain activity.

Todomatsu gave half a shrug, scowling when Osomatsu folded his hands behind his head; he knocked out the youngest’s supporting elbow, propped on his side to stroke Ahn’s ears. ‘Don’t be cross with me, Ahn-chan. They wouldn’t have agreed if they didn’t think it was a good idea.’

‘You underestimate your influence as the Unicorn,’ their mentor retorted. Curled between the youngest and Karamatsu, the kitten had a lot more room than usual. The second born had sprawled into Ichimatsu’s vacant space. Somehow, Osomatsu didn’t think it was down to unconscious shuffling that, on plopping down to sleep, they’d been faced with Karamatsu’s back. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu’s counsellors are highly-trained professionals. But you are a living legend. Many would never think to question you.

‘I wish you would never think to question me,’ Ahn snipped at her magical trio the next day. Still caught up in last night’s events, they’d “wasted” the entire morning bombarding their mentor with questions.

‘It wouldn’t be wasted,’ Osomatsu grunted, finally taking the hint and starting to give his ring of hanging punch bags hell, ‘if you’d just give us some damn answers.’

‘But how?’ Todomatsu took over badgering like the thumps and swinging creaks of Osomatsu’s training were a prearranged cue. Sweat flying off him, Osomatsu grinned. He practically saw the bright-eyed curiosity Totty layered from across the warehouse; lining up to race Choromatsu around the track they’d cleared, he piped in his best “aren’t I just so cute and confused how can you resist telling me everything I want to know” voice. ‘That was your barrier, Ahn-chan—you’re brilliant with that tech! And this isn’t like when Karamatsu broke through on the beach,’ Totty emphasised. ‘It didn’t even try to repel him—Jyushimatsu just saw straight through!’

‘I’m aware,’ Ahn remained tight-lipped.

‘Ahn-channn,’ Todomatsu drew out the affectionate suffix as he and Choromatsu shot past Osomatsu’s spinning back kicks. ‘Please, won’t you …’

‘As I’ve said 23 times already: I don’t know.’

‘You do so know,’ Osomatsu challenged, mopping at his drenched fringe with his elbow. Perched atop a tall stool set by the chalked start/finish line, he saw the tip of her tail twitch in irritation. ‘You’re just not saying.’

‘I know nothing for sure,’ she returned snootily. ‘Though you might have developed a theory far quicker than me if you ever stopped to …’

‘So you do have a theory.’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, shut up.’ Todomatsu whinged, his light puffs barely exerted as Choromatsu
picked up the pace. Usually such a lively participant in any debate whether it mattered or not, the third born said very little as the others besieged their exasperated mentor. Osomatsu wondered if he was still a little zoned out from his unexpected hike in medication.

‘As I’m sure even you have noticed,’ Ahn directed at Osomatsu, her snowy fur mussed with the others’ speed, ‘your smiling brother is not the most conventional of humans.’

‘Hey …’

‘That is not an insult,’ she countered Osomatsu’s hot temper—too many jackasses already made fun of Jyushimatsu without an extraterrestrial getting in on the action. ‘He exists in his own unique way. He thinks differently, reacts differently—he stood his ground and that soldier fled from him!’

Osomatsu went quiet. He’d inspected Jyushimatsu’s bat that morning. Left out on the kotatsu, it hadn’t quite split in two. But the crystal impact had done a serious number on it, wood once gleaming with care now splintered, blackened by unshiftable soot. Jyushimatsu had patched the cracks with what looked like an entire roll of sticky tape. Arrayed beside his own treasure, he’d made a valiant attempt to mend Karamatsu’s guitar in the same way, broken pieces shining with tape.

‘It stands to reason that Alliance technology designed to repel ordinary humans may not affect him in the same way.’

‘The night I first transformed,’ Choromatsu spoke up, slowing to a jog. Gleeful, Todomatsu whizzed straight past him. ‘I saw that giant squid beating the crap out of you, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘Ahh,’ Todomatsu sighed, his day improved by only the imagery. ‘I wish I’d been there.’

Osomatsu scowled—okay, they’d mocked him, now could Choromatsu get to the point?

‘I saw through the window. No one else did. No one else could get in. I had thought it was because Ahn laid the barrier when I was in the store, before they mutated,’ he said. Brought up short—Choromatsu had seen through Ahn’s barrier that day—Osomatsu released a surprised whoosh of air, clutching his middle as the bag he’d smashed two seconds before flew back to punch him in the gut.

‘But we’ve known for a while that’s not how it works.’

‘But the day I first transformed,’ Todomatsu claimed centre stage before Ahn could answer Choromatsu’s unspoken, but heavily-implied question—probably with another evasive “I don’t know”’. ‘Before you crashed into me …’

‘You and I remember that day somewhat differently,’ Choromatsu deadpanned over Osomatsu’s winded sputters—they crashed into him?

‘… a barrier practically threw me across the street! Why would they affect me?’ Todomatsu’s big brown eyes expanded, like he’d been forced to confront the most horrifying concept of their era. ‘I’m not an ordinary human, am I?’

‘They work on Karamatsu,’ Osomatsu pointed out, caught his breath and dropping to churn out some push ups—he had a serious record to hold.

‘But he’s not magical,’ Todomatsu almost whined.

‘Neither is Jyushimatsu—is he?’ Osomatsu’s eyes shifted suspiciously to Ahn.

‘No! By the Alliance!’ Ahn finally lost her patience. If he’d been any less shirty with her Osomatsu would’ve been blown away she’d held out so long. They were experts at coordinated annoying.
Telepathy just made it more fun. ‘You barely know anything about your own world, let alone the interlaced intricacies of the countless known universes! There is so much you don’t know.’

‘Hey,’ Osomatsu said, pretty sure that one was an insult.

‘There is so much you don’t need to know,’ their mentor stressed. Osomatsu was affronted—just how many loops did she leave them out of? But something about the way Ahn unblinkingly held his gaze kept anything more incriminating from storming out his fat mouth. ‘Of course I intend to consult the Alliance. But for you, this is nothing but a distraction. You have more than enough to occupy you. Such as your remaining allies,’ she reminded with lingering bite. ‘This should have been simpler than finding the Unicorn.’

‘Yeah,’ Totty chirped, a twinkling in his eye as he rolled out his squishy exercise mat. ‘We’re much more likely to find someone willing to work with me than you.’

Osomatsu sparked. ‘You’re the ones taking so long!’ Rocking back on his heels, he viciously swiped his filthy hands on his old jeans. If Todomatsu hadn’t laid his mat out of easy reach, those pristine exercise pinks would be facing a week of non-stop washes before they even resembled clean.

Pausing at the top of a sit-up, Totty exchanged a glance with Ahn. ‘They’re all good candidates,’ he admitted. ‘Any of them would probably do a good job. But we do have a certain special … dynamic … to consider.’

‘If that’s what you wanna call this.’

‘We’re brothers,’ Choromatsu said, kicking out his mat and dropping Osomatsu’s on his head, forgotten by their lounge crates. ‘We grew up together. No one’s going to just fit in with that kind of dynamic straight away.’

‘I know,’ Todomatsu sighed. It had happened very few times considering his lofty position, but in that moment Osomatsu spied the extra weight of a few cosmic responsibilities heaped on the youngest’s petite shoulders. ‘But they’re just … not quite right.’

‘How about this: I pick the Kraken and Sphinx,’ Osomatsu offered. Irritated as he remained, now he mostly just wanted to lighten his little brother’s load. ‘Then maybe you three can figure out how to convince Karamatsu we’re not criminals. That’d be great.’

Unmarred by both the unpleasantness behind the theatre and the unwilling hurt they’d caused him, running off after Ichimatsu destroyed his guitar, Choromatsu tried talking to Karamatsu over the next few days. He was such a bad liar, Karamatsu would have no choice but to believe him when he insisted they weren’t thugs.

‘I think he probably believes that now,’ Choromatsu said a week later as they tested their long-distance telepathy. Gathered with the Skytree their highly-visible centre point, the three had departed in different directions. They’d been walking for 15 minutes. Conversation hadn’t faded yet. ‘But when I couldn’t tell him what was going on …’

Choromatsu trailed off with the telepathic equivalent of clearing his throat. Osomatsu didn’t need him to finish. They’d a lot of practice prancing around the little truth they had to give. But Karamatsu had already uncovered that and more. And, after all Ahn’s insisting that was the solution, wiping his mind was a no-go. Their non-magical brothers deeply asleep at 4 am—Ichimatsu no doubt continuing this trend under close observation at the university hospital—Osomatsu and Todomatsu had pushed Choromatsu to explore Karamatsu’s slumbering mind. ‘I can’t transform here! Karamatsu might be a target, and we know Totty is! How can they not have seen him transform by
now?’ Choromatsu broke off, plagued by every happy little stroke of luck. ‘This is impossible …’

‘Then don’t transform,’ Osomatsu had shrugged. A frenzied vein pulsed at Choromatsu’s throat.

‘I haven’t done it untransformed! I don’t have my tech, I’d be going in blind!’

‘I will help you, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn had promised. Choromatsu clutched at his temples, sweat popping up all over his brow in the cool spring darkness. Osomatsu and Todomatsu had each tugged a hand away, kneeling either side of him until his breathing evened.

‘Ahn? C-Can’t you do it?’ His strangled stammers had diminished to a plea. At least he wasn’t getting many flashbacks anymore. But that was maybe a good time for Todomatsu to bat his lashes at Choromatsu’s Alliance team. ‘I could hurt him, I …’

‘You won’t,’ Todomatsu had promised. And he hadn’t. But all of Karamatsu’s admittedly first-rate detective work was tightly interwoven with weeks of everyday existence. His thoughts and theories stretched back even further. Choromatsu had only ever lifted memory in chunks, never more than an hour past. He didn’t have the training to pick through Karamatsu’s life story with tweezers. Ahn did—as much as her crash course in spectrum guardian mentoring had offered, anyway—but admitted it would take specialist equipment.

‘I could apply to have it transported, but I doubt the Alliance would agree. Should our enemy chance upon us using such equipment on Matsuno Karamatsu …’

‘I’m worried about him,’ Choromatsu said, voice clear as crystal in Osomatsu’s mind as they walked steadily on. ‘I know I’m just a novice, but I’ve been in his head twice now. It just doesn’t feel, you know … healthy … in there.’

‘I have felt the same,’ Ahn said quietly, bundled in Osomatsu’s hoodie. Not yet recovered from her futile attempts to block a delirious Ichimatsu’s destructive path, he patted her through the fabric. He could have been consoling a peckish stomach.

‘It hasn’t exactly been the best few weeks of his life,’ he said, pushing through a thin crowd emerged from the subway. ‘First the job, then he thinks we’re in with the mob and worries himself sick. I hit him,’ Osomatsu didn’t omit, very aware how stained his conscience was. ‘Ichimatsu wrecks his guitar. And now he thinks we’re shutting him out. If there was ever a time his head wasn’t in the right place, it’s now. What are you doing, hunting through a bargain bin?’ he added, grinning broadly as he caught the distinct impression of silken textures flowing beneath the youngest’s fingertips. ‘That tie is so last season.’

Todomatsu sniffed. ‘When I want your fashion advice, Osomatsu-niisan, I’ll give it to you.’

‘Don’t you do enough shopping?!’ Choromatsu shouted himself mentally hoarse over Todomatsu’s tangential browsing, having a fit over the state of the not-so-equilateral triangle their footsteps now drew. Osomatsu sniggered to himself. But the welcome distraction evaporated when Totty stopped baiting the third born and turned so swiftly serious someone might have hit a switch.

‘What are we going to do about Karamatsu-niisan? He knows now, we can’t just act like there’s nothing wrong. We have to give him something. Choromatsu-niisan, what should we do?’

‘I dunno,’ Osomatsu said, rescuing Choromatsu before he wrung himself inside-out—he’d come up with something, he was trying, he just needed more time. ‘Maybe we should recruit him—’ he’d come up with something, he was trying, he just needed more time. ‘Maybe we should recruit him. … That was a joke.’ Osomatsu raised an eyebrow, feeling both his brothers jolt like they’d slammed simultaneously into cement. ‘Since when do you take anything I say seriously?’
‘Karamatsu-niisan takes better care of himself than you two did,’ Totty’s voice rose in excitement, as though all their problems had been taken out by one oblivious stone. ‘He could take you down, Osomatsu-niisan—a year ago, anyway,’ he tacked on, teasing.

‘If you gave him a reason, he’d probably still give you a run for your money,’ Choromatsu added more contemplatively, making the eldest glower. Osomatsu’s soured mood didn’t last long. His incredulity, on the other hand …

‘Yeah, he’s a good guy,’ he said a few hours later. ‘More than a good guy. But a hero? Come on. He’s not exactly …’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu, will you pay attention!’

‘Gimme a break! This guy’s a joke!’ Osomatsu bitched, Ahn hissing from a second-floor balcony. Todomatsu knelt at the centre of the crackling ring of fire the eldest fuelled, his sceptre braced before him. Grumbling, Osomatsu paid more attention to his protective flames. A monster was a monster. Even if this one happened to be an arc of oversized juggling balls. Pathetic or not, it was still a chance to hone their manoeuvres. More aptly, their manoeuvre.

Todomatsu went through phases when it came to leadership, as changeable as fashion—except for clamping Osomatsu in sparkly irons whenever the mood took him. That would never get old. Their magical commander was currently in the throes of a vigorous soccer club captain style. ‘We need plans of attack,’ he’d announced the other week. ‘Manoeuvres we can pull off without even thinking.’

Talking them through “Christmas Angel”, Osomatsu had yawned, nodding off as Choromatsu typed notes against the diagrams, pointing out potential flaws while Ahn offered more constructive suggestions. He still preferred to wing it. But he guessed it wouldn’t kill them to have a few moves up their sleeve. It was simple enough: the Salamander and Wyvern distract while the Unicorn contains; the Salamander defends the Unicorn while the Wyvern gets into firing position; the Unicorn lifts the containment spell while the Wyvern fires.

But they were being so predictable; Totty made them practice the routine at every opportunity. The Liberation Force should have caught on by now. But apparently not.

‘He’s not exactly what, Osomatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu said, lifting his containment spell the microsecond after Choromatsu locked onto his spinning target. With one confident squeeze of his trigger, the Wyvern blew out the master ball. Crystal shattered, the defeated Kijuutsushi gave scream like air being released from a tyre on times 30 speed and dissolved in a bouncing shower of silver dust. ‘Karamatsu-niisan’s kind, loyal, strong—we’re this generation’s knights in shining armour, you know. You can’t say he’s not suited to that.’

‘Maybe,’ Osomatsu grudgingly allowed.

‘You’re not about to throw another tantrum, are you?’ Choromatsu asked, checking the unconscious career mascot on the apartment’s dingy front steps was unhurt. Half unzipped, her puffy costume had cushioned her fall. ‘About dragging more of us into this?’

Osomatsu huffed out a petulant “it’s not like that” that kind of hinted otherwise. The need to protect his brothers distended alarmingly with each addition to the team. Needless to say, he’d hardly warmed to the idea of adding another. But at least he’d never have to worry about Karamatsu in a fight—he was nearly as solid as Jyushimatsu. And a bonus: they wouldn’t have to point him in the right direction before siccing him on the bad guys.
‘Look,’ he said, grimacing as Ahn scrambled nimbly down a drain pipe. How could he even imagine putting Karamatsu in this kind of danger was in any way okay? ‘Why are we talking about this like he’s an option? He’s not. If he was,’ he said, tossing the lone police car that showed up an obscene gesture before blasting off, Choromatsu and Totty a whirl and a glisten behind his streaking flame trail. ‘We’d have scouted him ages ago. Ahn, back me up,’ he directed at the kitten, nestled in his blood red armour. ‘You’d have said if Karamatsu could be our Kraken, right? Or our Sphinx?’

‘Without doubt,’ she agreed, sounding more than disappointed he didn't have an inclination. ‘There would be no one better to watch our backs than Matsuno Karamatsu …’

‘Ooooh, Karamatsu girl,’ they teased. Just poking out, Ahn’s ears gathered healthy splotches of colour.

‘… but I’m afraid finding our remaining allies will not be nearly so convenient.’

‘You can't blame us for wondering,’ Choromatsu shrugged in elegant mid-flight. ‘It's been that convenient every other time.’

Emerged victorious from battle—if it could even be called that—the guardians rewarded themselves with a sinfully-decadent izakaya pub lunch. Osomatsu marvelled loudly at how much cheaper splitting the bill was when none of them drank while Todomatsu pinched the pinkest, plumpest sashimi straight from Choromatsu’s plate, piling a little dish high to lavish on Ahn (and himself). Then, because it was Sunday, they decided to head home and, with any luck, lounge the afternoon away.

‘We could go back to the warehouse,’ Todomatsu broached, hesitant behind his parfait. His sweet dessert was layered as delicately as edible lace.

‘Nah,’ Osomatsu waved the suggestion away with his spoon, licking it clean in the process. ‘Karamatsu might be home. The cherry blossoms opened the other week—we haven’t casually mentioned the picnic to him yet. He loves going all out on that thing.’

But he knew where Totty was coming from. The tension at home was so thick he could’ve carved it up with a knife—if he’d had a knife, and not the Salamander’s badass gauntlets. Ichimatsu was being discharged that evening. Jyushimatsu was the only one who’d been able to express any joy at that fact. Osomatsu couldn’t believe he’d destroyed Karamatsu’s guitar on purpose. But if Ichimatsu had made one measly scrap of effort to deal with his Karamatsu problems over the years, this might never have happened. Who else was there to blame?

‘His illness,’ Choromatsu reminded. Osomatsu dragged his sneakers out of their locker, slamming it shut. It wasn’t nearly as satisfying to blame something he couldn’t personally throttle. Terminally withdrawn, Ichimatsu was a breeding ground of deep-rooted personal issues. Osomatsu understood them about as well as he understand anything about Ichimatsu—as well as Ichimatsu let him understand. But whatever had screwed up his and Karamatsu’s relationship. Whatever his good intentions. Whatever his persistence. And whatever his devotion. Karamatsu would always come off worse. Osomatsu still wouldn’t intervene, he’d just make things worse. But he was sick of seeing Karamatsu hurt for it.

A no-holds-back party planning session was just what he needed. But when they walked in the entrance only Jyushimatsu crashed to greet them. ‘Karamatsu-niisan’s out!’ he proclaimed when the eldest asked. ‘He’s out a lot, isn’t he, Osomatsu-niisan?’

Osomatsu kicked his shoes against the step, a band tightened around his chest. Karamatsu had hardly been home all week, skipping breakfast and slipping in well after dinner. How were they supposed
to patch things up if he never let them? Sprawled in the living room, Osomatsu restlessly tried to interest himself in a manga, every old page well-thumbed and dog-eared. Behind his book, Choromatsu attempted the same. Todomatsu, his heart not in the game, sat uncomplaining through every rule Jyushimatsu accidentally flouted, his coloured pieces jumping everywhere as he ruled their Diamond board.

‘Boys?’

‘Down here,’ Osomatsu raised his voice. A moment later he heard mum’s light step descend the stairs, not quite smothered by dad’s thumping tread.

‘I thought I heard you call out. You’re all so quiet in here,’ she said, smiling tiredly before kneeling at the kotatsu. Dad plonked down heavily, his expression every bit as weighted. Mum gathered her children in with a sweep of her slender arm. Like they were barely toddling on their own two feet, the four present Matsuno sextuplets half slid, half crawled towards their parents. ‘Boys, we need to talk to you about Ichimatsu … Where’s Karamatsu?’

***

So maybe he was wrong about the mob. Maybe they were right and all wasn’t what it seemed. But there was something going on, they’d admitted that, they just wouldn’t …

Stop. Just … stop.

He spent the morning hanging out in his usual park. Again. Alone. In a pose that would have been mysteriously cool had anyone else struck it.

He’d promised. He’d promised …

He couldn’t remember when exactly he’d abandoned the tree he slouched against, the movements that brought him there. But Karamatsu stared out over the canal. Lined by blooming cherry blossoms in wafting clouds of softest pink, the still waters glistened deep. As deep as the unending skies they reflected. As deep as space in all its uncharted glory. As deep as oblivion.

Karamatsu took off his sunglasses. Tucking them into his jacket pocket, he started to shrug out of it. But he froze mid-motion. He stood, unmoving, for a long while. ‘Young man, what are you doing there?’ A voice cut from somewhere behind him, sharp with age. ‘Careful now, back up.’

Ignoring the voice’s owner, the snort that huffed from his nostrils rotted with self-loathing. But Karamatsu tugged his leather back into place. He returned his sunglasses to his face. Pressing deliberately with two fingers. Hard.

A tiny bead of blood welled at the bridge of his nose. He pushed harder. The tiny cut deepened. Deeper …

Turning on his heel, Karamatsu skulked from the water’s edge. The path before him was strewn with blossoms, blown from branches before their time. He crushed them beneath his boots. He ruined them.

‘Hey, Karamatsu … you know you can talk to me, right?’

Flushed and sodden with alcohol, Karamatsu slumped over Chibita’s counter. The back of his neck burnt in the sun. He’d been there for hours. Every day. Every day since he’d failed …

‘You know me, I’ll never refuse a paying customer. But maybe you should take it easy today. How
about some oden? On the house. Get a whiff of that!’

Chibita leaned over his bubbling vats, breathing in the rising steam. A ray of sunlight caught a greasy fish cake, light bouncing to reflect off his shiny head.

‘My best batch this spring, you gotta try it!’

Karamatsu fumbled through his wallet and produced the last of his stash, the money he’d so carefully hoarded to thrill his fashion sense and shower material affection on his brothers. Now his passions were shot. He didn’t give a shit what he wore. And his brothers …

‘The hell, you idjit,’ Chibita said, coarse voice tentative as Karamatsu shoved notes across the counter with a numb mutter. ‘They don’t hate you. Stop trying so hard, you gotta take care of yourself. You’re …’

His words jabbered through Karamatsu’s ear canals, barely leaving an imprint. He was so drunk. He …

‘I tripped off the roof the other night,’ he slurred, sculling his latest bottle and slamming it down. Karamatsu wasn’t sure why he told him. He could walk on his twisted ankle, and his jeans hid the bloodied scrapes on his knees. ‘But you know, I dunno if it was an accident. I can’t tell anymore. I dunno if I ever could.’

Chibita’s broad forehead wrinkled. With worry. A show of it, anyway. That was his job, right? To listen. To sympathise. Whatever pathetic waste of space whined to him. But:

‘Where did I go wrong? I don’t know … what I …’

‘Karamatsu, we’re friends, right? Please, you gotta listen to me …’

Karamatsu didn’t. He couldn’t. Something drowned Chibita out.

Water lapped at his back, stirred by the sweet-scented afternoon breeze. The sound drew his dull gaze over his shoulder.

Back to the canal.

***

Their parents shared a look of deep concern on hearing Karamatsu was still out of the house. ‘We’ll talk to him later. Boys,’ mum began again. ‘We know life hasn’t been easy the past few months.’

Dread prowled through Osomatsu’s systems. That sounded way too much like the prelude to a planned speech. This couldn’t be good.

‘But it’s not about to get easier. Ichimatsu isn’t getting better.’

‘He’s getting worse, isn’t he?’ Todomatsu’s soft voice rose.

‘Yes, sweet boy,’ mum smiled sadly, taking Todomatsu’s hand. ‘He’s getting worse.’

‘Apparently he hadn’t told his doctors everything,’ dad took over, giving their strong mother a chance to fortify her voice against trembling. ‘They aren’t sure his wandering habit is just due to fevers. Ichimatsu is having … problems. With his memory.’

‘What?’ Osomatsu blurted, his brothers gaping with dismay. Jyushimatsu froze over, a dynamic ice
sculpture in shorts. ‘Like, he can’t remember us, or something?’

‘No, son.’ Dad put a steadying hand on his eldest’s shoulder. ‘Nothing like that. Recent memory. He doesn’t remember when he wanders off. He doesn’t remember breaking Karamatsu’s guitar,’ he said more quietly, eyes falling heavy on the shattered instrument. ‘He’s lashed out at hospital staff; he doesn’t remember that, either. He’s losing that time. And during that time,’ dad said, looking between his shaken sons, ‘Ichimatsu is not in full control. He might say things or do things that he’d never say or do.’

‘That’s not Ichimatsu-niisan!’ Jyushimatsu protested. Something ominous squirmed inside the eldest. Fevered sleepwalking was horrific enough to swallow, but this … Mum knocked her glasses askew putting her arms around her fifth born.

‘I know, sweet Jyushimatsu, it’s not really him. But he can’t help it. Please,’ she said when Choromatsu pointed out the fourth born had hardly been an angel before sickness struck. Her voice was muffled by Jyushimatsu’s strong shoulder. But it didn’t break. ‘This isn’t his fault.’

‘We wanted you to know what’s going on. His doctors are trialling some new medications,’ dad said, unfolding a typed list from his pocket.

‘We’re moving him down here to the living room,’ mum added. ‘He can’t climb the stairs, and it’s too much for ask you to carry him every day. We know it’ll be hard, but we’ll manage.’

Silence crushed the small square of space they sat in, compressing every soul within. It was Choromatsu who eventually said it. ‘Is he going to get better?’

‘My sweet Choromatsu,’ mum murmured. Her two youngest nestled either side, she reached to take his wrist across the kotatsu, soothing with her thumb. ‘We don’t know. We just don’t know. But he’s very sick, very weak. If he can’t eat more he may have to be hospitalised until … until this goes …’

‘Until he does get better,’ dad finished. But what mum couldn’t say Osomatsu felt hang over him like an anvil: until this goes one way or the other. Was Ichimatsu wasting away? Was he dying? He’d shouted that at Karamatsu, but he hadn’t been serious—that was just angry word vomit! It couldn’t actually be true!

Burying the possibility and stamping dirt over it—if his dark little brother died, it’d be over his dead body—Osomatsu forced himself to pay close attention as dad took them through Ichimatsu’s new and improved drug regime. ‘He’s not happy about it. We might need help if he doesn’t want to take them.’

‘Not that he can put up much of a fight,’ Osomatsu took zero pleasure in pointing out. He was resentful, but mostly bit his tongue when dad directed his instructions mainly at Choromatsu. Researching the medications on his tablet, the third born’s face went slack. Osomatsu burned to ask what they were for. At the same time, he wanted to hurl Choromatsu’s tablet out the window.

Choromatsu caught a taxi with dad to collect Ichimatsu. Swallowing pride like a hunk of molten rock that dad didn’t ask him, Osomatsu helped mum set up the living room. Shifting the kotatsu, they lay a narrow futon against the wall and dressed it with soft pillows and blankets. Almost like the task was sacred, mum gently placed the remains of Karamatsu’s guitar in a cardboard box, hiding them from view.

‘How about your little kitten friend curls up here?’ she suggested, Ahn riding Totty’s shoulder as the two youngest reappeared, Jyushimatsu hoisting a laundry basket full of Ichimatsu’s belongings over his head. ‘That would make Ichimatsu so happy.’
‘I will not,’ Ahn flatly refused.

‘You heard them, it’s not his fault.’ Osomatsu tried rather pointlessly to secure Ahn’s promise she would at least be civil towards Ichimatsu. She’d already despised him. Now her aversion was through the roof. Instead, Osomatsu ventured to round up a few less-objectionable furry companions. Two glanced from their baths and immediately padded his way when Osomatsu stuck his head around the corner. Curled in the air, their tails twined happily. Like they already knew Ichimatsu was on his way home.

Dad carried him inside. His matted mane tamed to a degree by a nurse with a death wish, Ichimatsu looked so small in their father’s arms. So frail, so thin … but maybe he’d put on a little weight that week in hospital? Maybe? … Or maybe Osomatsu was making shit up, lying to himself to … screw it, he didn’t care. Ichimatsu had definitely put on weight. Their parents tucking him in like a child, he was asleep in seconds. They didn’t wake him for dinner. Slathered in tomato sauce, Osomatsu barely tasted his omurice. Karamatsu didn’t arrive in time to join them.

‘What is that shit?’ he asked, wrinkling his nose when mum dumped spoonfuls of powder into a mug of milk and hot water, turning it sludgy brown. Wordlessly, Choromatsu shoved the container at him to read. “That shit” was apparently jampacked with protein and nutrients.

‘It’s a little easier for him to keep down.’ Mum knelt beside Ichimatsu, rousing him gently. Seeing his brothers, Ichimatsu’s pasty face gathered pink shame as their parents helped him sit up to drink and swallow a joyless parade of tablets.

‘We can stay,’ mum said again. She’d offered a dozen times already. But if the last few months had been hard for them—excluding all intergalactic warfare, of course—it was nothing to what their poor parents had endured.

‘You’ve had this planned for weeks,’ Choromatsu reminded.

‘You deserve it,’ Todomatsu piped up. ‘You haven’t been to a nice hot spring in ages. You need to look after yourselves, too.’

‘We’ll take care of Ichimatsu-niisan!’ Jyushimatsu’s promise bounced, filling the room with his warmth. Ichimatsu curled miserably against the fifth born, head resting against his chest and Jyushimatsu’s arms tucked around him.

‘Don’t worry,’ Osomatsu walked his tired parents to the entrance. ‘We’ve got this.’

‘We won’t stay too late,’ said dad, stepping into his shoes. ‘Osomatsu? Son, will you make sure Karamatsu’s all right when he gets home? We were hoping he’d be back before …’

‘I’ll say you want to talk to him,’ Osomatsu promised. But it took another minute and a bit of a shove to get them out the door. Waving them off, Osomatsu offered any eavesdropping deities a sweet deal if they kept them off duty for just one night. Apparently someone took him up on that. Or Takuu was giving his troops some long-overdue personal time. Osomatsu’s scroll remained cool, dormant in his pocket.

Ichimatsu remained blearily conscious. His brothers did their best to keep him entertained. But he was hard enough to read at full health. When he could barely smile as the cats snuggled lovingly against him, Osomatsu was at a loss. What else could possibly cheer him up? He fast abandoned inventing stupid stories about work, seeing a flicker of jealousy beneath Ichimatsu’s fatigue. As insane and exhausting as it was, life was still going Osomatsu’s way. He had his glowing health, a good income. An actual future. Everything Ichimatsu didn’t.
Choromatsu and Todomatsu shared a glance loaded with the same culpability that churned in Osomatsu’s gut. They couldn’t be blamed for finally starting to succeed in life, any more than Ichimatsu could be blamed for falling ill. But their brother was cornered by his envy. Ichimatsu wasn’t supposed to care. But they knew he did. And there was only so much he could stand.

‘Do you want us to leave so you can sleep?’ Choromatsu asked quietly. Ichimatsu mumbled that he didn’t care. He seemed to pass out within minutes, anyway. Jyushimatsu burrowing in beside him, the magical brothers kept most of their conversation silent so as not to disturb them.

‘He’s not answering my calls,’ Todomatsu worried himself into a tizzy. ‘Where is Karamatsu-niisan?’

‘He’s fine,’ Osomatsu said, as much for himself as Totty. He gave the youngest a comforting shove. ‘Karamatsu’s a big boy, he can stay out as late as he wants. It’s not even that late,’ he added when Todomatsu’s knuckles went pasty, clutching his smartphone. The time on the muted TV read barely past nine.

‘Be kind when he comes home, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ said Ahn, ignoring the attempts of Ichimatsu’s twin cat guard to invite her into the fold.

‘Look,’ Osomatsu said, sick of being singled out. ‘I know I’ve done some pretty shit things, but just because you’ve got a gooey-eyed schoolgirl crush does not mean …’

Jyushimatsu’s eyes flew open. ‘KA … ramatsu-niisan!’

He stuffed his sleeves over his mouth a syllable too late, muffling his delight as the front door slid open. Beside him, Ichimatsu didn’t even stir. Springing upright like he was made of elastic, Jyushimatsu capered to the entrance. ‘You’re home, you’re hooooome!!! Welcome home, Karamatsu-niisan!!!’

‘Yeah, welcome back.’ His back to the doorway, Osomatsu hooked an ankle around a kotatsu leg and leaned backwards far enough to smile at Karamatsu in his awful leather jacket. Not even bothering to deny her affection, Ahn sidled shyly to press against his ankle. Tilting back her little head, she emitted such an adorable mew it took all of Osomatsu questionable restraint not to roll around on the floor laughing.

‘There’s omurice if you haven’t eaten,’ Choromatsu barely hid his own smile. ‘Sit down, you look tired. And cold,’ he added, frowning. Getting a better look, Osomatsu saw Karamatsu’s cheeks were pinked with windchill.

‘Sit down,’ Totty echoed, flitting concernedly to his feet. ‘Where were you? Why weren’t you answering my calls? Don’t worry me like that, Karamatsu-niisan.’

‘Mum and dad decided to do their hot spring thing,’ Osomatsu filled him in. Karamatsu didn’t sit, unravelling from Ahn and shaking off Todomatsu’s endearing attempts to tug him beneath the warm kotatsu. ‘But they won’t be too late. They want to talk to you when they get …’

‘What are you doing?’

Karamatsu stared between them, slowly shaking his head. Like something was almost funny. But there was nothing funny about his vacant tone. Startled, Osomatsu frowned a little. ‘What do you mean, what are we …’

‘I know you all hate me.’
Complete and utter stillness. It stole every second. Every sound. *I know you all hate me …* Osomatsu almost forgot how to breathe.

‘I disgust you. You can’t stand to be around me. So stop fucking me around,’ Karamatsu said like he hadn’t just ripped out the bottom of their world. ‘I can’t stand it, okay? I can’t … fucking … stand it.’

The stillness lifted.

Todomatsu reeled back, aghast. His hand clapped to his face like Karamatsu had slapped him. Choromatsu’s breath snagged halfway down his throat, the third born descending into strangled coughs. Jyushimatsu scuttled crab-like around the second born, his wibbly-wobbly smile so bewildered Osomatsu ached to sit him safely in the corner and say everything would be okay. But he couldn’t. Osomatsu could only stare. Karamatsu laughed a little. He laughed like a man with no other sound to express his anguish.

‘What’s wrong, man?’ Osomatsu finally got out, making his numbed knees pick him up off the floor. ‘Talk to us.’

Karamatsu snorted humorlessly. ‘Why start now? At least tell me why,’ he said, chuckles dying away. Tripping a step over the threshold, Karamatsu’s heavy footfall almost crunched down on Ahn’s tail. Swishing it from harm’s way, she slunk slowly backwards, ears drooping as she stared up at him. Reaching to thump Choromatsu on the back as he got his closing throat under control, Osomatsu felt every drop of blood drain from his face, leaving him cold. This wasn’t happening, he wasn’t hearing this.

‘I deserve that, right? Just tell me already. I don’t know what … I mean,’ Karamatsu garbled, one hand clamping on the doorframe as he tilted too far left, resting all his weight against it. ‘I know what I did wrong, I did everything wrong. But I don’t … just tell me, I have to know!’

Disoriented stumbles and slurring to back it up, Osomatsu got a whiff of breath that said the colour in Karamatsu’s cheek wasn’t from cold. ‘You’re drunk.’

A few pieces of his shattered reality mercifully fit back together. Karamatsu was shitfaced, the last few weeks had been hell. He just had to sober up.

So relieved, Osomatsu let out a low internal whistle. Karamatsu could hold his liquor. How long had he been at it to be blathering on like this? ‘Go sleep it off, man.’ He planted steadying hands on Karamatsu’s shoulders. ‘We’ll talk tomorrow.’

‘No.’

‘Come on,’ Osomatsu said when his brother wouldn’t move, giving him a light shove towards the stairs. ‘Look, you’re upsetting the others, you’ll wake up Ichimatsu. Go upstairs and …’

‘No!’

Karamatsu shoved him back. Unprepared, Osomatsu didn’t dig his feet in in time. He sprawled backwards, tripping over the kotatsu and crashing into the wall.

Hitting the ground hard, Osomatsu’s stunned mind conjured up the last time Karamatsu had decked him, dragging him out of this very room for terrorising Jyushimatsu and upsetting Choromatsu … that time last year. Osomatsu hated to think about it. But Karamatsu *never* started fights. He only finished them.

‘Let me talk for once,’ Karamatsu hissed, Todomatsu slowly sinking to his knees. ‘While I’m still
fucking brave enough. I get it, okay?’ His fists clenched at his sides, eyes boring into the floor as Osomatsu gingerly picked himself up, knees smarting where they’d struck the edge of the kotatsu. ‘I don’t blame you. I’d hate me, too … I hate me! Aren’t you tired of pretending you give a shit?’ he demanded. ‘Drop the act already!’

Osomatsu’s heart thundered. It was like he’d flipped over a stone, revealing all that had unknowingly festered beneath. All his swagger stripped away, Karamatsu wasn’t as they knew him. Osomatsu didn’t know him … fuck! He didn’t know his brother at all!

‘I’m so goddamn tired of pretending—I can’t keep this up anymore! I swore I’d stop … I’d do anything for you,’ Karamatsu exploded. Ahn scooted backwards as he lurched, tucking herself behind Osomatsu. He felt her against his ankles, a quivering wreck. Tears coursed silently down Todomatsu’s cheeks. Choromatsu looked two seconds away from throwing up while Jyushimatsu bobbed on the balls of his feet, sleeves clamped over his lower face like he physically held in some onslaught of cataclysmic proportions. But he was totally helpless.

‘I fucking love you guys!’ Karamatsu cried, releasing a wracking sob that twisted Osomatsu’s heart. ‘God, I wish I didn’t … I’m trying to be brother you deserve! But I never will be! I’ll never be good enough for you, I'm never enough! And I’m sick and fucking tired of getting my hopes up for something that’s never going to happen!’

‘Karamatsu.’

It took the sheer force of will of a hundred raging fires. But Osomatsu kept his voice even, taking a step towards his distraught brother. Looking at him with red-rimmed eyes like he fully expected a blow to fall—god, like he wanted one to—Karamatsu braced like a tidal wave towered over him. ‘Listen to me, man. That’s not true. None of that’s true. Just sit down,’ Osomatsu kept talking, muttering telepathically for Choromatsu to grab some cold water from the fridge. God, Choromatsu, Todomatsu … they’d been right. They were right and he was wrong, how had he been so wrong?

‘Choromatsu will get us a drink. We all need to calm down,’ he said, Choromatsu barely making it to his knees to shuffle into the kitchen. ‘We don’t hate you,’ Osomatsu had to spell out, the need screaming through his soul. ‘None of us hate you. I’ll swear it on my honour, on yours—anything you want. How could I hate you?’

Osomatsu swallowed hard, words lodged in his burning throat like a glass shard. ‘I’m your big brother, your hear? I love you, man.’

‘Stop fucking with me!’ Karamatsu almost screamed, tears of frustration and god knew what else leaking from his eyes. He wavered drunkenly, all balance abandoning him. Jyushimatsu reached him before Osomatsu could surge forward. But Karamatsu shoved his support away, staggering sideways and almost ploughing through the TV. Jyushimatsu skittered back a step. Just one. ‘I c-can’t … stand it,’ Karamatsu sobbed. Barely upright, he hammered the wall with one forsaken fist. The screen doors shook in their frames. ‘I can't stand it, it’s killing me …’

‘Then why don’t you spare us all the aggravation?’

Every organ that powered Osomatsu through this mess he was nowhere near emotionally mature enough to handle stalled. Slowly, he turned around.

Ichimatsu slouched against the wall. No surprise he’d jerked away; Karamatsu’s cries weren’t exactly quiet. But his dark eyes shone bright and wild. A horrible, lopsided smirk dug into his cheeks. Oh, shit …
‘Ichimatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu looked almost comically slowly from Karamatsu to Ichimatsu and back again. He hovered between them, uncertain where he belonged. Osomatsu’s heart clenched. Jyushimatsu was torn apart, ripped right down the middle by the two brothers who needed him the most.

‘We woke you up, Niisan! We’re sorry, we’ll be … Ichimatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu’s eyes went round, voice dropping to a whisper. A real whisper. Jyushimatsu was whispering. ‘Niisan, where did you go? Ichimatsu-niisan, please come back …’

‘You’re a piece of shit.’

Bright spots of fever on his cheeks, Ichimatsu spat at him, every word a toxic dart. Already crumbling before their eyes, Karamatsu was paralysed. ‘Ichimatsu,’ Osomatsu warned, a slow rush in his gut. ‘Shut the fuck up.’

‘A pathetic excuse for a human being. You can’t even pretend to be better—*drop the act already,*’ Ichimatsu mimicked. ‘It’s never going to work.’

‘Did you hear me?!’ Osomatsu yelled. ‘I said shut up! Shut up right now!’

‘And you’ve finally figured out just how worthless you are. What, do you want a gold star?’

‘Don’t listen to him.’ Choromatsu abandoned the water jug to grab Karamatsu’s arm. ‘Karamatsu-niisan, look at me!’

The second born wrenched away, never breaking eye contact with Ichimatsu. He could have been hypnotised.

‘You’re a painful, pathetic piece of shit, Shittymatsu.’

‘No! He’s sick!’ Todomatsu wept at their feet. ‘It’s not him, he doesn’t know what he’s saying! You believed in him before! K-Karamatsu-niisan, please!’

‘We hate you. We’ve always hated you. We will always hate you.’

‘Ichimatsu!’

Okay, he didn’t care what was wrong with him. If Ichimatsu didn’t staple his goddamn mouth shut in the next three seconds, Osomatsu would do it for him.

‘And if you don’t like it, why don’t you do the world a favour? Why don’t you just …’
This took longer than I thought, sorry. Especially leaving you with that cliffhanger ... I may have strayed into realms of the particularly obvious with a reference in here - it is long overdue, though :) Maybe it's a semi-unconscious counterbalancing action to give myself (and you) a bit of a tension break - I think it's safe to say this arc hits an emotional high here. The "please be aware Karamatsu in an extremely bad place" warning remains firmly in place, and I'm including one for Ichimatsu this chapter - I've added a tag out of an abundance of caution.

I hope it's mostly comprehensible, not too disjointed and weird. A lot is happening all at once ... a lot of talking ... wow talking takes a long time :)

We're approaching what might be the biggest climax of the first half of Magical Osomatsu-san ... first half ... almost finished ... what the hell have I done, the thing's not even half-finished yet ... But excitement and hooray!

Still beta-less - there's a few things I'm unsure of here, some stuff just doesn't feel right written how it is ... I've probably just read over it too many times ... hopefully. I don't think putting off posting any longer will help. Anyway, please if there's something that stands out as wrong in any way - grammatically, style-wise, plot-related, or anything else - let me know so I can (attempt to) fix it right up :)

I love reading all your amazing comments, thank you so much for getting involved with this story. Let me know how this chapter holds up! Thanks so much for reading, this fic wouldn't be a thing without all of you :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘WHO ARE YOU?!’

Jyushimatsu’s roar ricocheted through the the fog. No! Ichimatsu tried to cry out, clawing to escape. Enough of his jagged surrounds cleared to see Jyushimatsu’s mouth contorted in pure horror. What the hell was going on? Eyes wide as he shouted, the fifth born flung himself in Ichimatsu’s face and grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him like a ragdoll.

‘ICHIMATSU-NIISAN, WHERE ARE YOU?!’

Ichimatsu wanted to shrivel up and die. No matter how civilised society eyed the fourth born, leery and unwilling to engage, Jyushimatsu had never looked at him like that. Like there was something just … wrong … underneath.

His head lolled, Ichimatsu letting himself be … no, this wasn’t him! Whoever the fuck was in charge let Ichimatsu be manhandled. Shaken up, but not shaken free, through his reeling Ichimatsu felt agony in his cheeks almost as murderous as his head. Agony from … grinning. God, he was grinning!

Rattled so vigorously Jyushimatsu could’ve dislodged his brain, Ichimatsu’s head eventually flopped,
limp on his shoulders. Sensations of yellow flapped disorientingly, spinning away in a windmill. And the demonic smile that warped his face, desecrating his very identity … finally it released him.

‘No …’ Ichimatsu croaked, stolen control dumped unceremoniously in his lap. Just in time for him to cop every last consequence. How long had he been out of it? When had Karamatsu gotten home?

Oh, fuck … Karamatsu …

His every joint and muscle aching, throbbing in chain reaction as he struggled to prop himself to the wall, Ichimatsu raked every shadow of the living room.

Karamatsu was gone.

‘KARAMATSU-NIIISAAAANNN!!! WAIT FOR MEEEEEEE!!!’

Leaving Ichimatsu’s ears clanging in agonised symphony, Jyushimatsu floored it after the second born, all engines at maximum.

Jyushimatsu … left him …

‘Ichimatsu-niisan …’

Todomatsu broke the oppressive silence. Ichimatsu's name fell from his lips like a curse. Choromatsu’s mouth hung slightly open, speech capacity levelled by whatever Ichimatsu had … whatever he’d … Osomatsu was a gobsmacked mirror of the third born, smeared with shock. Until he wasn’t anymore.

No idea when the eldest started to yell, his barrage massacred Ichimatsu like a firestorm. ‘Osomatsu … n-n-niisan,’ he could barely swallow, mouth thick with his stupid tongue as the entire world spun sickly around him. Heat sucked him under, burning away what little sense he clung to.

He’d just … come home … and now he’d …

What had he done?

But Osomatsu’s rage struck again and again. Ichimatsu flailed, unable to break the surface as it crashed through him. ‘What the fuck! What the fuck is wrong with you?! There’d better be something really the fuck wrong, because I swear to god if there’s not …’

Osomatsu heaved like his only options were to slam Ichimatsu through the wall or snap him in two. The eldest’s looming brawn buried the fourth born in shadow. Enough survival instinct still lurked in Ichimatsu’s gut to flinch. The tiny motion rocked him, fluttering eyelids doing fuck-all to help, dazzling the world in strobe lights. It was bad, it was really bad, what had he …

Let me fill you in … You said to do the world a favour … You told him to just die …

‘No,’ Ichimatsu whimpered. ‘No, no …’

You kinda did … I heard you, I was there … I give you one more episode before they shut you away for good …

Ichimatsu didn’t give a fuck what happened to him! If Karamatsu … if he …

Dry as dust, the fourth born’s lips cracked and bled, squeezing out a moan. He wouldn’t, he fucking wouldn’t! Karamatsu wasn’t like him! He didn’t know how the fuck his brother did it—Ichimatsu made it an uphill battle every goddamn day—he couldn't stand it! But Karamatsu was 100 percent
agonisingly and unbearably fucking fine!

… Wasn't he?

Ichimatsu mind curled in on itself. But Osomatsu … wasn’t screaming anymore. Scraping up some pitiful will, Ichimatsu peeked from behind his eyelids. Osomatsu and Todomatsu had gone. Hovering half in and half out the doorway, only Choromatsu remained.

A humiliating blubber trickled over his chin. Choromatsu couldn’t lie to save his life. And the worst was scrawled all over his face, damning Ichimatsu to the deepest pits of hell. This was the most disgusting thing he’d ever done. And there was a 100-foot fucking list to choose from.

But Choromatsu … Ichimatsu would never say it aloud. Not seriously, it’d rip out Osomatsu and Karamatsu’s hearts. But of his older brothers, Choromatsu was the one who most fit the role. He stepped up and took responsibility once in awhile. He tried so fucking hard to set a good example. Ichimatsu messed with him mercilessly. But he’d do anything Choromatsu asked.

‘Ch-Choromatsu … n-n-niisan …’

Like he kicked helplessly over free fall and salvation was an endless inch away, Ichimatsu stretched his trembling fingers towards his brother. ‘Ch-Choromatsu-niichan … p-please …’

*Say it, just say it, ask for help, you need his fucking help, say it now, fucking say it now, tell him what’s wrong, ask for help, ASK HIM FOR HELP WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU JUST OPEN YOUR GODDAMN MOUTH AND SAY IT! HELP ME! PLEASE HELP ME!*

*Help me …*

Ichimatsu hated himself, all his goddamn gutless pride. But he couldn’t cough it out.

‘Ichimatsu, just …’ Choromatsu sighed, closing his eyes and pressing two fingers to the bridge of his nose. Choromatsu still got stress headaches … ‘Not now. I need to help find Karamatsu.’

Opening his eyes, something hard stared back at Ichimatsu. No affection, no misplaced desire to comfort him. Nothing but responsibility brought his older brother to Ichimatsu’s side. ‘I’m locking you in,’ Choromatsu’s voice clipped nearer. ‘You know the rules.’

The back of his hand passed over Ichimatsu’s burning cheek. His breath laboured and shallow, the fourth born mindlessly complied as he felt tablets pressed against his papery lips, followed by the cold rim of a water glass. ‘Go back to sleep. I’ll call Mum and Dad.’

Guided to lie on the lonely futon, Ichimatsu shook beneath the blankets Choromatsu threw over him. Fear and fever spiked through his cells. He heard the front door glide quietly shut.

He’d left him. Choromatsu had left him with …

*Oh, you’re in the shit now, aren’t you …?*

In the opposite corner, a fluffed ginger and a too-scrawny grey with lamps for eyes hissed, spines arching and tails toilet brushes.

‘What are you?’ Ichimatsu’s whisper barely stirred air. ‘F-First the guitar, and now … Why are you … using m-me to … hurt K-Karamatsu?’

*Me? I do my part, but I wouldn’t dream to take the credit. Why are you using you to hurt*
Karamatsu?

‘I … I … Wh-What … are you?’ Ichimatsu wheezed again. The malicious voice spiralled lazily from somewhere inside him. But people could say whatever the fuck they wanted about Ichimatsu: he’d never, ever sounded so cruel.

Tsk, memory problems indeed … Allow me to assist … Disembodied voices, loss of control … Shit-for-brains doctors questioning your sanity …

‘No …’ Ichimatsu rasped, clawing at his throat. Cold metal ratcheted tight. No one was there to help when he started to cough, chocolate-and-acid sludge bubbling up his oesophagus, staining the new futon—shit, shit! His useless fucking body practically self-destructed every time his useless fucking brain decided to check the fuck out and leave him to …

It was like he fought infection. Ichimatsu gasped, that one spark of realisation lancing his consciousness like lightning. He hacked and heaved and rocketed up a million fucking degrees like his shitty meatsack insides hosted a war of attrition, every last biological line of defence scrabbling tooth and nail to eject poison, not giving two shits if he carked it by the way. That made two of them.

‘I’m n-not hearing things … I’m … you’re …’

Maybe not … The voice agreed, taunting as Ichimatsu gagged, sure he was about to suffocate. But who’s going to believe you …? No, no, you’re not going to die … Not yet … I still need you, apparently … Let’s go for a little walk, shall we …?

‘N-no … s-stop, please …’

You’re nothing …

Something unbearably hot kissed up Ichimatsu’s spine, flowing quicksilver and spilling over like blood. Gasping—he couldn’t breathe, air didn’t exist—Ichimatsu almost dislocated a dozen joints as he arched, body contorting, hands slapping feebly into the futon and blankets tossed asunder. But it kept sliding up, caressing his neck—every hair on his body stood on end—stretching hungry feelers to wrap around the base of his brain.

You’re a worthless, miserable piece of shit … Nothing but a husk … an incubator … I’m growing inside you … Don’t you want to know who fucked you …?

Ichimatsu sobbed, shuddering. But it was no use. He couldn’t dislodge it, he couldn’t jerk free. It was already inside him. ‘No, p-please …’

Laughter echoing as oblivion swamped him, Ichimatsu fell, grappling blindly for hold. His metaphorical fingers bled. But there was nothing, and he went on plummeting into darkness, everything left behind but his numbing shell as the parasite once more took control.

***

Transformed seconds out the door, the Salamander left his allies in the dust. His boots firing the red magical boy almost vertical, Osomatsu shoved off jutting window ledges, no shits given for grace or anything else, except his runaway brother. He scaled the height of the nearest office block in record time.

Osomatsu scanned the streets, sweeping the area from his bird’s eye view. Karamatsu was nowhere
in sight. Shit, shit, why’d he waste so much time yelling, he’d let him get too far ahead! What the hell was wrong with him?

‘You were in shock,’ Todomatsu whisked full-tilt to catch up. His landing was off; Osomatsu hauled him to safety when the youngest grabbed his gauntlet, ledge unsettlingly close as he almost toppled. ‘We all were.’

Osomatsu growled, not about to forgive himself. How long had Karamatsu been like this? He wasn't just having a hard time, damn it—he was sick! He was sick, and Osomatsu, king of all morons, had just let his little brother suffer … what the hell? His sibling instincts should’ve been screaming at him! But he’d been hoodwinked, completely taken in by the cocky, cringe-worthy persona Karamatsu so seamlessly portrayed.

Furious, Osomatsu tore himself up, calling himself every name, hurling every damn insult—he was Karamatsu’s only big brother! He should have known! Whatever heartbreaking lengths the second born had gone to to to hide it, he should have known!

Just great, they were screwed! The Earth, the Spectrum Alliance—if Osomatsu couldn’t even look out for his own little brother, he didn’t have a hope in hell of defending the universes! Fuck!

Osomatsu slammed that sideways. He couldn’t think that, not now. This drama-dodging hero would steer well clear of that shit until he was good and damn ready to handle it. So ... never.

Partitioning like the pro he was so nothing eclipsed here and now, Osomatsu tried to think. Where would Karamatsu run? ‘Choromatsu, tell me you can track him.’

‘I’ve highlighted my DNA signature,’ Choromatsu looped an air current, skating to join them.

‘What good will that do?’ Osomatsu demanded, angry the third born had lagged. ‘We’re looking for Karamatsu, not you!’

The Wyvern had the nerve to look at the veteran Salamander like he had three heads and not a brain between them. ‘What?’

‘We’re identical,’ Choromatsu said in his most condescending “I have neither the time nor the crayons to explain this to you” kind of voice. ‘We have the same DNA signature.’

‘… Right.’

His supernatural composure a lighthouse in angry seas, Choromatsu forwarded a flurry of electromagical data to their lenses. A schematic traced over the world, human life popping up in a rash of dots. Spiralling frantically, his lens latched onto three bright dots—just three—letting the masses fade to grey. ‘Why aren’t we showing up?’ Todomatsu whispered.

‘Your molecular composition shifts when you transform,’ Ahn whispered back, her first words since Karamatsu had staggered in the house.

The map sliced itself, zooming into more detail. One trace languished in their own house; Osomatsu disregarded Ichimatsu with a snarl. But Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu were both on the move. ‘They’re nowhere near each other, I can’t tell who’s who!’

‘Why are you just standing here?!’
Her voice recovered, Ahn charged shrilly into ordering them through this mess, so fierce Lord Takuu himself could’ve borne down on them. Impressed despite the pressure, Osomatsu made one of the wisest decisions of his life: never stand in the way of a lovestruck teenage girl. ‘Hurry, we can locate him using his …’

Ahn steamrolled into silence. ‘What?’ Osomatsu demanded, his nanosecond of amusement rudely snuffed. ‘We can find him with what?’

‘His DNA signature,’ she said too quickly. Her valiant attempt at nonchalance did nothing to conceal that she’d said too much. ‘I apologise, I was distracted. I didn’t realise Matsuno Choromatsu had already …’

‘Bullshit,’ Osomatsu fumed. What the hell wasn’t she saying? ‘You’re wasting time, this is Karamatsu we have to find!’

Ahn gave a funny mental hiccup. Choromatsu and Todomatsu regarded the tiny lump of their mentor with sliding degrees of curiosity and distress as she peeked from Osomatsu’s armoured pocket. ‘As we cannot distinguish between the traces, we must split up to …’

‘He’s alone out there,’ Osomatsu shuddered out, spiking Ahn with a look that would make every bully that had ever harassed a Matsuno sextuplet wet themselves simultaneously. ‘We … can … find … him … with … what? Spit it out!’

Anger rolled off him in elemental waves. No way Ahn didn't feel it. Barely more substantial than a few pairs of rolled-up socks, her three guardians towered over her. Ahn shrank, like the haughty kitten had never noticed the imposing size difference before. ‘You … you can use Matsuno Karamatsu’s …’

She gulped and got it out in a tumble. ‘You can lock onto his depths.’

‘WHAT!’

‘You told us he didn’t have an inclination,’ Todomatsu observed faintly, Ahn escaping an enraged Osomatsu to leap into her Unicorn’s arms.

‘Hear me out,’ Ahn breathed. ‘I … I have a reason, a good reason.’

‘Talk when we’re in the air,’ Osomatsu snarled. Loosing a high-pitched squeak, Ahn recoiled into Totty’s ruffles. ‘How long have you been hiding this?’ the eldest demanded once she’d dyed Karamatsu’s fleeing trace a shimmering sapphire blue. They soared over the glittering city in pursuit.

‘Since the day I met you,’ whispered Ahn. Osomatsu clenched his jaw, stinging—that long? Their mentor looked far more frightened of what her guardians now thought of her than the plummeting void beyond Todomatsu’s elbows. ‘I didn’t want you to find out like this.’

‘Keep talking,’ Osomatsu growled.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu, I’m sorry!’ Ahn wailed. ‘Please don’t be like that … Matsuno Karamatsu’s inclination is inborn,’ she flustered, a warning sound rumbling in Osomatsu’s throat. ‘Like your spark. Depths tend to be natural more than acquired inclinations.’

Ahn blathered detail, struggling to project her most cavalier airs. But her whiskers quivered. Osomatsu tried not to care. ‘That night in the pachinko parlour, his inclination surged in response to the danger. I’m sure yours did, too,’ she almost tripped over herself to assure Choromatsu and Todomatsu, afraid they might turn on her, too. ‘But I did not detect them. I was focussed on Matsuno
Osomatsu’s first battle—my first battle. But Matsuno Karamatsu’s depths are … for want of a better word … deep. They are powerful, very powerful.’

‘If he’s that good, why didn’t you sign him up then and there?’ Osomatsu demanded.

‘The Alliance requested I do,’ Ahn whispered. ‘I … refused.’

Osomatsu fumbled his jump, blasting off way too hard and setting a few balconies worth of drying laundry on fire. Choromatsu never paused. With a concentrated redirection of focus that had him in two seconds of freefall before catching his own airspace yo-yo style, the Wyvern snuffed out the flames. Despite that full-on display, the third born seemed mildly stunned. This had to be the only time Ahn, a stickler for rules and red tape, had gone against her Alliance.

‘So you’re telling me,’ Osomatsu said, tone dropping so dangerously Ahn cringed. ‘We wasted months looking for the right Kraken, all the while the best candidate’s been sharing our futon? And you won’t give him a contract? Why the fuck not? Is it because you like him, is that it?’

No other explanation, Osomatsu hurled Ahn’s harmless crush in her face.

‘No!’ Ahn cried, desolate. ‘Matsuno Osomatsu, please, it’s not like that …’

‘You like cuddling up to him, yeah?’ Osomatsu couldn’t stop. Deafening noise rushed through his ears. ‘So you’re okay pitting us against Takuu’s finest, but he gets a get out of jail free card?’

‘He’s not well! He’s too emotionally turbulent, it’s not safe for him to be a guardian!’

‘It’s not safe for any of us!’ Osomatsu’s flightpath jarred erratically, his vision hot and dangerously blurred. Furious, he blinked the tears away, blaming them on speed as they hurdled a crammed intersection. ‘What else have you lied about?’

‘Nothing, I promise you.’

‘Liar!’ Osomatsu couldn’t believe it. ‘You told us! You said there was so much we didn’t need to know!’

‘Anything I keep from you is under Spectrum Alliance instruction,’ Ahn’s young voice broke. A sparkle not of Todomatsu’s armour caught Osomatsu’s peripherals. Their tiny mentor’s eyes were lined with liquid silver. ‘I am a liaison, but I’m also a filter. My superiors decide what you need to know and when—you can’t know everything! They have only your best interests at heart. But this decision was mine. I felt,’ she tried to say carefully, ‘that I may feel pressure from you to recruit Matsuno Karamatsu if you knew of his depths.’

‘What?’ Osomatsu exclaimed. ‘I’d want him a million light years away, and you know it!’

‘But we hadn’t found anyone,’ Ahn almost whimpered, a harrowing sound from a creature so proud. ‘I didn’t want you to think there was no other choice. It’s not safe for him to transform, I had to protect him!’

‘Well, I’m glad his safety means so goddamn much to you. How the hell would we pressure you?’ Osomatsu changed gears, giving an oblivious demonstration exactly how he’d do that.

‘Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu recovered enough to snap. ‘Stop being a jerk. We know you’re worried about Karamatsu, but that’s no …’

‘You think that’s all this is?!’ Osomatsu seethed. He knew he was overreacting, big time. But
knowing only fanned his flames. ‘She lied to you, too!’

‘That’s enough.’ Quiet for so long, Choromatsu’s frowning attention fixed on his brother while he alighted slight changes in air pressure, vaulting higher and further than any of them. ‘I’d like a few more explanations, too. But this isn’t the time.’

‘But she … she …’

‘Ahn made a choice,’ the Wyvern said. ‘And right now you’re angry, and you’re looking for more excuses. Like an asshole,’ he added.

‘Excuses?’ Osomatsu spluttered. ‘Karamatsu’s sick, and she knew! Why the hell didn’t she say anything?!’

‘I … I tried, but … ’ Ahn’s childlike voice—she was just a kid—was a tremble. ‘I s-suppose I didn’t g-go about it … the right way …’

Her tears spilt over. Anger swollen in an ugly bruise, Osomatsu twinged—he was pissed, but did he have to make her cry? But, unleashed by stress and stupidity, his stoked temper erupted before shame could smother it. ‘She doesn’t trust us! How can we trust her?!’

‘Osomatsu-niisan, quit it!’ Todomatsu cried. ‘Leave her alone!’

‘I lost every one of my siblings when Lord Takuu escaped from prison!’ Ahn cried, stopping Osomatsu’s heart in his chest. His boots almost spluttered out, the spark inside him closed in a suffocating fist. ‘We all volunteered to carry contracts through the tear he left in space, one chance in millions we’d be caught in his wake. They’re all dead! My brothers and sisters are dead!’

‘Ahn-chan,’ Totty sniffled, eyes bright with tears that trickled to encrust his mask like diamonds. Osomatsu felt numb. Not only had Ahn done the bravest thing he could imagine, but her entire family had faced certain death beside her. She’d lost them all. Ahn had lost everything just to find them. To find Osomatsu. He was doing a pretty piss-poor job of appreciating that.

‘I know what it is,’ Ahn wept unrestrained, ‘to take for granted a love so precious, so infallible you believed it would be yours forever. And Matsuno Karamatsu is so fragile already!’

‘But he doesn’t know we’re heroes,’ was all Osomatsu could say, catching Choromatsu’s shadowed expression as he swooped nearer Ahn, all his quiet support conveyed by presence. Todomatsu hugged the kitten like he could tether her to them forever. ‘Why would he think he’s going to lose us?’

‘I don’t mean that he would lose you!’

‘Guys,’ Choromatsu said, raising a hand as he landed atop a glowing 7-Eleven sign. Before them spread a small park. A bridge, a few trees, a playground. Not much else, besides the canal. Chibita’s stand wasn’t too far away. ‘He’s slowing down.’

Osomatsu clattered onto the convenience store roof, shortening his gaze to skim his lens. Karamatsu had more than slowed. He’d stopped. ‘He’s just standing by canal. What’s he …’

_I don’t mean that he would lose you …_

Osomatsu’s mind blanked. Then the worst clicked.

An inferno almost charred a hole through the roof as he blasted off. Osomatsu shot like a rocket,
flames spewing from his boots as he scorched over the park. Not enough height to keep him airborne, Todomatsu leapt to the ground and sprinted after him.

Sparks rained from the Salamander’s heedless blaze trail. ‘You’ll set the whole park alight!’ the youngest gasped, shielding Ahn as his armour seared and singed. Tiny tongues of flames leaped crackling from blossom-laden boughs and patches of proudly-tended grass.

‘Who cares!’ roared Osomatsu.

‘You do!’

Swearing, the Salamander wasted a precious second siphoning the infant fires from their fuel. Primal instinct pounded through him. Osomatsu hit the ground heavy, transferring all power from his bent knees into dead ahead. He hurtled past the empty playground crowned by cherry blossoms, swings creaking and Totty at his heels … there he was! He could see Karamatsu silhouetted against the gloom.

All plans of phasing out the window, Osomatsu made a beeline for the water’s edge. Karamatsu teetered there. The canal glistened at his brother’s feet—shit, no, no! Faster, faster … ‘Choromatsu!’

‘I’ve got him.’

Choromatsu sailed overhead like an emerald eagle. Manipulating his currents, he worked the wind whistling through his hands and seized the air around Karamatsu, yanking hard. A grunt of surprise forced from his lungs, Karamatsu flew backwards.

The Salamander’s enhanced muscles screamed, skidding the last few metres and throwing out his gauntlets. Karamatsu thudded squarely into them.

Heart thumping, the Salamander spun and steadied his shell-shocked brother, setting him back on his feet. ‘Wh-what are you doing?’ Karamatsu tried to pull away. Osomatsu didn’t let go, resettling his grip on both elbows. Recognition dawned in Karamatsu’s hollow eyes.

‘You’re them … the spectrum guardians. What are you … I … I wasn’t doing anything,’ he insisted as the Wyvern swept down on the wind and the Unicorn cantered to his side. Ahn was nowhere in sight—maybe hidden in Totty’s lacy ruffles. ‘I was simply out for a stroll. The moonlight on the water caught my eye. I was in no danger, no need for you to …’

But Karamatsu stood in his socks. His boots sat by the canal’s edge. Beside them, folded neatly, were his leather jacket and belt, skull buckle glinting. On top rested his sunglasses.

Swivelling his neck to follow the guardian’s silent gaze, Karamatsu’s fists knotted. ‘So what if I … what do you care? Why are you even here?’ he demanded chaotically. ‘Get out of here, leave me the hell alone! Let me go!’

Karamatsu twisted, wrenching hard. Osomatsu’s grip tightened to twin vices. Like hell he’d let go. Shit … if they’d shown up even a minute later—no, he couldn’t go there. Not now. He felt sick enough.

‘What do we do?’ Todomatsu whispered. Drowned with despair, Karamatsu lost any semblance of self-control, trying to wrestle his freedom from the red warrior. His face flushed and frenzied, fluids gushed stickily from his eyes and nose. ‘Niisan, where should we take him? The hospital?’

Osomatsu’s immediate thought was to Chibita’s for a stiff drink. ‘Don’t you think he’s had enough?’ Choromatsu said tersely. ‘His eyes can hardly focus.’
Well, yeah. But maybe a friendly face he actually recognised would help. He might be foul mouthed and loud, but Chibita was a listener. Osomatsu had unloaded on him more than once at the height of his NEETdom.

But the eldest Matsuno set his jaw. He wouldn’t cart Karamatsu to Chibita’s and dump him there. He’d already taken out first prize for world’s shittiest brother, he didn’t need an encore. He’d take care of Karamatsu … somehow. ‘But I’m probably the last person he wants to see right now … besides Ichimatsu.’

The magical Matsunos whispered in each other’s minds, brief deliberations strained and shaking. Then, with a promise to be quick, Choromatsu whisked out of sight, leaving Karamatsu with the eldest and youngest. Totty fluttered to gather the perfect pile of belongings the second born had shed. Seeing how he hugged that leather jacket to his chest, Osomatsu’s throat scalded.

‘Over here,’ Ahn whispered from the playground, hidden in the climbing frame’s cross-hatching shadow. Karamatsu struggled the first few steps, dragging his feet and swearing. But he was no match for the guardians’ strength. And with Osomatsu and Totty sticking lichen-close and insistent either side, he had no say as he was half guided, half towed from the water’s edge. Karamatsu’s protests gradually petered out, replaced by a sullen, awkward silence. Motioning that he sit, Osomatsu felt his brother’s muscles lock up, hesitating. When he reluctantly sank onto the bench, the two guardians sat either side of him.

‘Don’t,’ Osomatsu warned when Totty’s fingers crept to take Karamatsu’s. ‘Just … give him a minute.’

He almost saw the youngest’s lip wobble behind his mask. But Todomatsu nodded, resting his sceptre over his knees.

Already overwrought, Karamatsu had no idea what to make of his hooded sentinels, silent and sparkling with gems. His mouth glued shut, he stared at his lap but for the occasional flick of his eyes, confirming the guardians were still there. As if their shoulders brushing his weren’t enough. A soft breeze played, cooling their heated faces. In his tank top, Karamatsu shivered. Tentatively, Todomatsu held up his jacket. Karamatsu stiffened. But he let Totty drape it tenderly over his shoulders.

Choromatsu soon returned, back in magical splendour after a brief phase to raid his pockets for tissues and coins. He placed a packet of the former on Karamatsu’s knee. Karamatsu ignored them, like he could deny the mucus glutting his nose and any need for assistance in the same stubborn act. He took so long that Osomatsu started to fidget. But eventually Karamatsu took the offered can.

No room on the bench beside Karamatsu’s boots, Choromatsu sank against a convenient decorative lamppost, face pressed into his palms. The only sounds to drift over the distant city soundscape were the wind, the soft lap of the canal, and Karamatsu’s stilted sips.

‘Don’t you have better things to do?’ he said dully, still refusing to look at them. Miming for his phone as he’d done on the train—not that Karamatsu could make that connection—Todomatsu swiftly typed, multitudes of charms chiming as he showed him the message.

*It’s our job to protect people.*

‘I don’t need protecting,’ Karamatsu muttered, self-conscious as he huddled over his can. ‘I said I wasn’t going to do it. I’m just … tired. I’m so tired …’
We’ll walk you home when you’re ready, Todomatsu tapped, the tips of his fingers skimming over typos as they trembled lightly.

‘Don’t waste your time,’ Karamatsu whispered harshly.

Osomatsu reached to snag the jangling phone before it slipped from poor Totty’s gloves, handling it in his bulky gauntlets. It’s not wasted.

A sound of disbelief muffled through his clogged airways, Karamatsu tilted his head back and gulped the rest of his tea in one breath. Coming up for air with a gasp, he started when Choromatsu tugged the half-crushed can from his fingers with a little tendril of wind, flicking it into a recycling bin. ‘H-How do you …’

Karamatsu cut himself off, shaking his head. ‘I’ll go ahead,’ Ahn spoke from shadow, downcast. ‘He may recognise me, that will only raise questions.’

Osomatsu knew Ahn wanted no more than to curl up beside Karamatsu, to offer him the same support he’d blessed her with so many times. But now that she knew he was okay—well, not okay, but … okay—the kitten slipped away, nothing but shade herself. She’d wait to welcome Karamatsu home once the guardians got him back on his feet.

Wipe your face Osomatsu tapped, waving the message under Karamatsu’s dripping nose. You’re covered in snot.

‘Eww, Niisan …’ Todomatsu complained, his telepathy thick.

‘Mind your own business,’ Karamatsu mumbled, slouching between them. But he finally crammed his face behind a wad of tissues, ripping them from their crinkled packaging. His nose honked mostly clear, Todomatsu folded a clean tissue and dabbed delicately at the raw skin beneath Karamatsu’s eyes, swollen and sore. ‘Why?’ Karamatsu’s murmur barely shifted his lips. ‘Why should you even care …’

Choromatsu’s head clunked into the lamppost supporting him. Not bothering to hide his own tears, Todomatsu went on tending Karamatsu’s tear-streaked face. Encased in glove and gauntlet, Osomatsu caught himself before his finger rubbed beneath his nose—the damn stupid comfort habit almost gave him away.

Nothing else to offer, so apprehensively, Osomatsu eased the warm weight of his gauntlet around Karamatsu’s shoulders. Karamatsu’s entire body tensed. Afraid he’d overstepped, Osomatsu was about to withdraw. But then, just as hesitantly, his younger brother leaned into him, so slightly, until his head just rested on Osomatsu’s shoulder.

That’s how Jyushimatsu found them 10 minutes later.

Osomatsu should have known it was him. Chest alive with guilt, he watched the fifth born’s trace on his lens as it turned into the darkened park and bolted towards their little pool of lamplight. He shouldn’t have forced Ahn to spill, he should’ve known that roving dot anywhere. A mirror to its owner, Jyushimatsu’s haphazard sprint was almost aimless, but purposeful. No way would Osomatsu ever understand Jyushimatsu’s Laws. But no matter how long it took, the fifth born always found whatever—or whoever—he was looking for.

‘KARAMATSU-NIISAN!!!!’

Karamatsu’s head shot up. Blinking in confusion, he oriented to the slapping footfalls that barrelled towards them. Blind to the heroes he’d been so exhilarated to meet a week before, Jyushimatsu
Skidding to a halt with the rubbery squeak of slippers on concrete, Jyushimatsu threw himself on the second born. ‘NIISAN!!!’ Jyushimatsu bawled between haggard heaves, lungs expanding like bagpipes. He’d been sprinting flat out since he burst out the front door. ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know that’s why you were sad!’

Jyushimatsu flung his arms around Karamatsu’s middle, omph almost knocking a magical Todomatsu flying. ‘I need you! If it’s hard to remember, I’ll say it every day! You’re enough, okay?’ The fifth born bumbled the same string of words, mouth running on broken repeat. ‘You’re enough, Niisan, you’re enough, you’re enough …’

Karamatsu couldn’t reply. Pinned by Jyushimatsu’s unconditional love and internal faucets cranked back to maximum, he buried his face in their little brother’s hair.

The last thing he wanted in all existence to disturb them, Osomatsu slowly withdrew his arm, letting his brothers sob in each other’s arms.

‘Should we phase and come back?’ Choromatsu put the fractured thought out there. Osomatsu bit his cheek. Even if Jyushimatsu had bowled through Karamatsu’s entrenched convictions, their poor brother held hostage by chronic misery, he wasn’t sure the second born could handle all of them right now. And if he was being honest—and he was—Osomatsu wasn’t sure he could handle Karamatsu. Not without losing his shit and melting in a humiliating wreck.

‘Jyushimatsu’s probably the best thing for him right now,’ Todomatsu whispered agreement. But he made no move to vacate the bench.

‘We love you, Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu gurgled, swinging Karamatsu so vigorously back and forth Osomatsu half-considered intervening. He didn’t notice when his lens crackled with crimson static. ‘I love you, you’re my only Karamatsu-niisan …’

‘How very touching.’

Osomatsu vaulted over the back of the bench, gauntlets flung wide to shield his brothers. Atop the nearest telegraph pole lounged a pale figure, getup darker than night. Omurice bubbled in the Salamander’s stomach.

He knew that drawl. He knew that hat.

The dark puppet grinned over the tearful scene he’d crashed. Looking over their shoulders, Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu blinked soggily up at the newcomer, identical images of dumbfounded. ‘Who’s that, Niisan?’ Jyushimatsu switched on, snorting his sinuses clean. ‘Wow, he’s really high up!’

Swinging his legs, the puppet boosted to his feet, holding easy equilibrium 10 metres straight up. Choromatsu drew so fast his pistols almost materialised in his hands, defending from his side of the bench. Hoisting his sceptre, Todomatsu angled to do the same. ‘Ahn,’ the youngest reached out. ‘Get back here! We’ve got …’

‘Well, hello!’ The dark puppet leaned precariously over the drop to leer at them. Was it too much to hope that he’d miscalculate his narrow step zone and splatter himself on the concrete? Probably. But Osomatsu hoped anyway.

… It was too much.
‘There’s nothing like a dramatic entrance to get the blood pumping. Now, I know what you’re thinking,’ he went on, Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu shivering with the inhuman chill lining his voice. ‘And I couldn’t agree more. A hardcore electronic soundtrack would kick the atmosphere up a notch. But we’ll make do.’

He da-dummed a few bars of a jaunty march, balancing on his toes. Then, with a smirk and no more warning, he jumped. A cry jerked from Karamatsu. But the puppet threaded through power lines with ease, short cape a ripple behind him. Arms slightly extended, he stuck his death-defying tumble, boots hitting cement. The force should have liquified his ankles and everything attached. But the clack of his heels was like he’d only stepped off a low stair. As if they needed any more proof: this was no ordinary slave.

‘My old friend the Wyvern,’ the puppet favoured Choromatsu with a flash of teeth. Choromatsu tensed slightly, the only sign he squared lasers at the young man who’d all but murdered him. ‘And the Unicorn,’ he swept his cap from his head, sketching Totty a mocking bow. ‘Such an honour. Hey there, firecracker,’ he added. Osomatsu’s hackles went right up, cracking his blazing fists together. The dark slave laughed, lounging against the pole. ‘We haven’t …’

‘Did you forget your costume?’ Jyushimatsu rang out from behind. So stifled it was barely sound, Karamatsu let loose a knot of frantic shushing. The dark puppet clicked his tongue. His lens catching Osomatsu’s need to see, it threw up a view from the back of his head. Screwed up by the black box slave’s proximity, the tech went all out to hold the image as Jyushimatsu’s grin locked up, the slave’s dark aura breaking over him.

‘Someone muzzle the moron. We haven’t had the chance to speak as yet, Unicorn,’ he went on fluidly, lips quirking at the guardians’ simultaneous outrage. ‘And it’s a crime, given our positions in our respective organisations.’

Done goading the Salamander—for now—Lord Takuu’s favourite slave fastened his gaze on their young commander. Osomatsu snarled, tensed so hard his muscles almost whined. The prick wanted to “speak” with Totty? Then he could do it with a wall of roaring wildfire in his way. The Salamander was halfway through a deliberate shift to block his brother from view when the diamond warrior stepped in.

‘I’m fine, Osomatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu’s mental timbre was high, but clear. Shining faintly with a boost of fortifying inner light, the Unicorn held fast.

‘Very nice,’ their enemy’s grin ransacked his face as Osomatsu furiously edged back into formation. ‘So you do know how to keep your sparkly ranks in line. Now, as eager as I am for a chat with the famous double-edged Unicorn—and I am,’ he added, slick menace made flesh. ‘Unfortunately I have rather a lot on my to-do list tonight. Do you mind if we reschedule? Though I have to say …’

The puppet’s eyes slid along the Unicorn’s trim body, devouring every sequin and sliver of skin his soft armour revealed. Osomatsu blurred, two seconds from exploding. Or maybe he already had, and this was the red-streaked aftermath.

‘Just in case you suffer a horrifying demise before I get another chance …’

‘What do we do, Niisan?’ Circuits overwhelmed, Jyushimatsu floundered. Childhood was years behind them all, and he’d grown up so big and strong. But Jyushimatsu sounded so small. So scared. Osomatsu fingernails dug trenches in his palms. He’d kill that dark bastard, for making his brother sound like that again. ‘What’s going on, what do we …’

‘… huge fan of the outfit. The tunic,’ he brought his darkness-gloved palms together, shaping narrow
hips. ‘A classic, very slimming. I couldn’t pull off the shorts myself, they leave nothing to the imagination. Maybe if I had your legs … and that tiara,’ the dark puppet kissed his fingertips. ‘The whole look just **reeks** Unicorn, I love it.’

‘It’s called a circlet,’ Todomatsu sniffed behind his mask, sass blooming. Osomatsu risked taking half an eye off their enemy, catching Choromatsu’s edgy glance. The dark slave was a barrel of unpredictable darkness and delight. But gushing over the Unicorn’s wardrobe? He was in an unnerving good mood—what was he even doing? If Osomatsu had one guess, it wouldn’t be to admit the error of his ways and turn himself into the Alliance.

The puppet pushed off the pole with his shoulders. Cracking all down his spine—Osomatsu’s non-magical brothers flinched, cartilage going off like gunshots—he made to saunter over. Osomatsu threw a warning punch, fireball blackening the cement at his pointed boots. Karamatsu reared back with shock and the searing heat. The impish angle of his hat slipped, the puppet breathed it in, letting the angry swelter lick up his body.

‘Tsk,’ he waggled a finger, riling Osomatsu worse. ‘It’s always straight to a fight with you. Let me put you at ease,’ he said, palms raised. The action had the exact opposite effect. ‘As I’m sure the Wyvern has informed you, I remain under strict do not engage orders.’

Osomatsu sneered just how reassuring that was. For some reason—he couldn’t imagine why—he didn’t give the impression of being all that fussy when it came to following orders.

‘Oh, we’ll have our moment in the arena, firecracker,’ the puppet breathed low, eyes dancing. ‘Trust me, I’m getting off on the anticipation just as hard as you.’

‘Don’t,’ Choromatsu and Todomatsu warned, Osomatsu practically spitting fire to roast him here and now. ‘He’s faster than you,’ Choromatsu continued, still the only one of them to have gone head-to-head with their most dangerous opponent. His breathing remained admirably even. ‘I could barely keep up. Who knows what kind of training he’s had since.’

‘Let’s not fight unless we have to, okay?’ Todomatsu veiled his command, angling to take the edge off the eldest’s temper. ‘Just protect Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu, that’s all we need to do.’

Todomatsu lifted his chin, light gaze boring into their enemy as his smooth forehead folded a questioning crease straight down the middle. ‘What do I want?’ the puppet interpreted, checking his impeccable boots for scorch marks. ‘To spare you some trouble, believe it or not. I’m only after that one.’

The dark puppet gestured over Osomatsu’s shoulder. Despite himself—and the fuzzed feed on his lens—he glanced back with the edge of his eye.

What else did he expect to see?

Karamatsu started, harpooned by the flippant gesture. His reddened eyes blinked in surprise. ‘M-me?’

Osomatsu’s blood boiled.

‘Now, before you get all high and mighty,’ the puppet drawled, the guardians barely keeping telltale distress from their eyes—not only was Karamatsu was a target, but Takuu had sent his most treacherous servant to ensnare him. ‘Save yourselves the aggravation and take the night off. There’s no one who’ll miss him. No one will care when he just disappears.’

‘Bullshit,’ Osomatsu breathed a volcano’s wrath, no time to thrash himself stupid that he’d been
wrong again. His eyes double their usual size, Jyushimatsu’s arms around the second born hardened to an embrace unbreakable.

‘Karamatsu-niisan? Do you know him?’

Dazed bewilderment withdrew from his face, freeing a focus so concentrated it could crumble mountains. Osomatsu flared with pride. Too much unfolded around him; Jyushimatsu barely skirted overload. But the maelstrom of events had just smacked a home run. Now he knew exactly what not to do.

He wasn’t about to let Karamatsu go.

‘It’s true, ask him yourselves … wait,’ the puppet sneered at Osomatsu’s mute fury. ‘Then take it from someone who knows him better than he knows himself: I’ll be doing the human race a service, taking him off their hands.’

The dark slave grinned malice. But however he slandered, Osomatsu wasn’t lost enough to rage not to notice: his enemy’s eyes glimmered, consuming every square centimetre of his target. Unbidden, the eldest remembered what Choromatsu had seen on the train. The puppet had been holding Karamatsu, keeping him close. He’d been all over him …

Osomatsu’s gut dropped. He’d thought the puppet had eyes only for the Unicorn. But now he saw with revolting clarity exactly what it meant, for someone so warped to have eyes solely for another.

‘He wants Karamatsu,’ Choromatsu put a coherent thought process to their synchronous horror. ‘He wants him …’

‘Wh-who are you?’ Karamatsu found his feet, the task made difficult by Jyushimatsu hugging him so tight they might have been conjoined twins. Osomatsu angled, keeping them covered. The puppet clapped a dramatic hand to his chest.

‘Who am I? Don’t you know me? How can you not … no! Alas, woe is me, dear oh dear, and all that shit. Our tender moments on the train, lost to the void … Who’s been playing brain surgeon with the humans?’

‘On the train?’ Karamatsu’s lips shaped the bewildered syllables as the puppet’s eyes flicked between the guardians. They settled on the Wyvern.

‘Well, you are the brains of the outfit. It makes sense you’d be the one hip deep in grey matter. What does this do for you,’ he directed at Karamatsu. Straightening his slouch, he quoted. ‘“You’re a sick young man, Matsuno Karamatsu. And I like it.”’

‘H-how do you know my name? What are you …’

Dread dawned in his eyes. Choromatsu twitched, feeling the tug as his trainee memory modification slipped, the second born swamped by horrifying recollection all at once. He staggered back, almost tripping over Jyushimatsu. ‘Kuro-san!’

‘In the flesh,’ the dark puppet curved another bow, never taking his eyes off Karamatsu. ‘I offer you now what I offered then: the chance to transcend the hell of your wretched existence. To be worshipped like a god, never scorned, but envied and feared and loved beyond your greatest imaginings. And I will remain by your side for countless human lifetimes. I get you, Matsuno Karamatsu,’ the dark puppet—Kuro, whatever the hell his name was—breathed. Osomatsu’s gauntlets trembled. All he could imagine was crushing the puppet’s skull between them. Slowly. ‘I choose you. I want you. Has anyone ever told you that in your whole miserable life?’
‘I want you, Karamatsu-niisan,’ Jyushimatsu made himself be strong. Jyushimatsu was strong. ‘Try to remember, okay? I want you here with me. Please, please, please …’

‘B—but you’re …’ A daunted Karamatsu stammered, too much to take in one hit. But he’d remember the Wyvern fighting for him now, remember the alien beings and monstrous transformations. He knew from exactly what kind of dark world Kuro hailed.

Osomatsu’s heart beat unsteady percussion. Karamatsu would never say yes. This was Karamatsu. Loving, compassionate, noble Karamatsu. He was depressed—Osomatsu forced that bare truth on himself. And he was a far better actor than he’d ever given him credit for. But Karamatsu would never turn to the dark side. ‘You’re with the cults. You tried to take my little brothers away from us—away from me.’

Todomatsu disguised his pang as an icy grimace. ‘You don’t want to go with him. Do you, Niisan?’ Jyushimatsu’s murmur barely muffled into Osomatsu’s enhanced ears. ‘Do you need me to …’

He went to swing out his bat before remembering it was busted. ‘No!’ Karamatsu seized the fifth born’s attention all the way to its source. ‘Stay back, do you hear me? Whatever happens. C-Can you do that, sweet Jyushimatsu? How could I …’ Karamatsu choked up, clinging to his relentlessly nodding brother as the dark puppet lounged, all unsettling patience. ‘I could never …’

‘Practically dropped in my lap, and I couldn’t have asked for a finer soul,’ Kuro crooned, Osomatsu tensed for wrath at rejection that didn’t come. ‘How can you have so much love for others and none for yourself? You’re afraid,’ he noted in his twisted rendition of gentle, black eyes burning cold as stars. ‘Don’t be. I could never raise a hand to you, Matsuno Karamatsu—could your dear brothers say the same? All I want is for you to choose me.’

‘Didn’t you hear him?’ Osomatsu said roughly, aggressive body language all the voice he needed. ‘He said no. Fuck off.’

‘All I want,’ the dark puppet repeated, gaze shifting to Jyushimatsu. ‘Is for you to say yes.’

The doll raised one black-gloved fist, clenching it on air. Karamatsu cried out. Osomatsu’s heart rocketed into his throat, almost spinning and exposing his back to the most dangerous slave in Takuu’s army. The fifth born had gone rigid. In less than a second, Jyushimatsu had been wiped from his own eyes. Kuro’s orbs were so alive he could have raised an army of ghouls from the grave. Osomatsu found himself numbly grateful, that cremation was the go-to afterlife experience in Japan.

‘No!’ Karamatsu cried, a voice for his voiceless brothers as Jyushimatsu threw him into the bench. Scrambling upright, he grabbed for the zombified fifth born’s sleeve. Swerving away with an empty snarl, Jyushimatsu drove his slippers into the ground, clearing the the bench like a darkness-infused kangaroo. Moving fast, Osomatsu nabbed him mid-air. Swivelling as sick dread burst beneath his skin, the Salamander clamped his writhing brother in front of him. ‘Choromatsu!’

Already set to stun, Choromatsu unloaded five rounds into their powerful little brother’s chest. ‘Don’t hurt him!’ Karamatsu shouted, clambering over the bench. Todomatsu got in his way, swishing his sceptre like a sparkling boom gate.

‘I knew we kept the moron in play for a reason,’ Kuro smiled, smug as the guardians gaped. Jyushimatsu went on straining against Osomatsu, shrugging off the bolts that should have dropped him. ‘Constitution of a fucking ox—no need for design in that department. But he does have other uses. Come here,’ he curled a finger at Jyushimatsu.

What the hell was happening, Osomatsu thoughts tattered, just keeping his gauntlets locked around
his bucking brother. How was Kuro controlling him? It was impossible. Unless, he thought, not wanting to think it, deflating like a lifejacket sprung a leak …

‘Unless saving a soul doesn’t eradicate darkness,’ Choromatsu came to the same awful conclusion. ‘And it’s been inside Jyushimatsu all this time, hibernating.’

Osomatsu barely held on. So everyone they’d rescued … everyone they’d thought they’d saved …

He gave himself a violent shake. All their fighting hadn’t been for nothing. It’d be all over the news if recovered victims were disappearing. That put a damper on the Salamander’s crushing defeat before it sucked him under. But if darkness slumbered in every victim … Jyushimatsu had been snagged with only the rationed speck Juuku had unloaded into him … shit, Totoko’s soul might be stolen again! She’d gotten the bigger blast by far. And if the idea of his pigtailed friend and forever fantasy date getting snatched wasn’t bad enough, if Osomatsu ever had to face that tusked monstrosity again, it’d be …

Osomatsu grunted in surprise, Jyushimatsu’s elbow flying out of nowhere. Colliding with his chin, his soulless brother twisted, ramming a knee into his gut. Almost winded—okay, so this was how Jyushimatsu had cracked a dark crystal—Osomatsu’s hold slackened. Jyushimatsu barged free. ‘Shit, shit …’

The Salamander couldn’t hit him. Not when holding back would do nothing against Jyushimatsu’s inordinate stamina. Nothing else for it, Osomatsu made another grab for him. Lunging through his gauntlets and evading Todomatsu’s chained lasso, Jyushimatsu leapfrogged to stand by Kuro.

‘How about a trade,’ the young man said casually, resting a hand on Jyushimatsu’s shoulder.

‘No …’ Todomatsu moaned, light flickering like his batteries ran low when the puppet drew his wakizashi, teasing the blade against Jyushimatsu’s throat. Not one bob at the danger; the fifth born was a slave to Kuro’s whim. ‘Ahn, where are you? Please, what do we do …’

‘This one lives if Matsuno Karamatsu comes with me. And this one is loooved,’ he drew out, putting his nose to Jyushimatsu’s sweat-stiffened hair and inhaling deep. ‘I can smell it on him.’

Osomatsu shuddered, all but paralysed angst scooped clean out of him. What the hell were they supposed to do? ‘They might share a face, but don’t be fooled. You’ve seen this one in action. That one,’ their enemy indicated Karamatsu with his chin. ‘He only ever seems to cause you trouble, doesn’t he?

‘I’m in no hurry here,’ Kuro said, reversing his sword to draw a shallow line of blood just above Jyushimatsu’s collarbones. Osomatsu roared. Choromatsu leaped on him, holding him back. ‘Take your time, chat amongst yourselves. It’s a win-win for us,’ he added, draping over Jyushimatsu. ‘Lord Takuu would prefer the moron didn’t make a habit of sidelining our soldiers.’

‘We can take him,’ Osomatsu heaved. With herculean effort, Choromatsu fought his raw power, narrower frame refusing to yield. ‘The three of his can take him, let me the fuck at him, I’m going to smash that grin off his face …’

‘Please,’ Karamatsu begged, lurching against Todomatsu’s sceptre. The situation crumbling around them, the Unicorn remained his steadfast guard; he wouldn’t let Karamatsu take another step. ‘Don’t hurt him, I’ll do anything you ask!’

‘I know you will,’ Kuro purred, Jyushimatsu’s hair fluttering on his breath. Osomatsu felt Choromatsu spasm, remembering something the eldest wished to high hell he didn’t. ‘And all you
have to do is promise. Promise that you’ll serve our lord and master, the Supreme Leader of the Liberation Force.’

Todomatsu shook his head so hard it might have swivelled right off. His eyes shone, frantic. But:

‘I … I promise,’ Karamatsu croaked.

‘Do you join us willingly?’

‘Y-Yes, I … yes, yes!’ Karamatsu whisper choked into screams when the wakizashi angled, Jyushimatsu’s blood sliding off its razor edge. Jyushimatsu stared, vacant in no way Jyushimatsu should be.

‘Will you ensure the success of Lord Takuu’s campaign to liberate the universes from their ignorant independence by any and all means?’

‘Oh god, oh god … yes.’ Karamatsu’s eyes trembled to meet Osomatsu’s limp disbelief. Stop me, please god, don’t let me hurt anyone …

‘Just … let him go. Don’t hurt him, please …’

‘You heard him,’ the dark puppet’s lip curled. Osomatsu’s body clenched like he was about to vomit. He didn’t choose you, you bastard! He chose Jyushimatsu! Choromatsu didn’t dare let him go. ‘His own free will, you love that shit. Now.’

Kuro clicked rudely at Todomatsu, glossy gloves somehow amplifying the sound. ‘That’s not free will,’ Totty shook with repressed grief at the injustice, the underhanded cruelty. ‘It’s not, you monster … you psychopath!’

But with Jyushimatsu’s life dangled before them, Todomatsu withdrew his sceptre. Loathing his powerlessness, Osomatsu manœuvre in Choromatsu’s grasp, fingertips brushing Karamatsu’s elbow as he stumbled forward. His promise. The Salamander wouldn’t let him hurt anyone.

Karamatsu’s wavering step carried him across too short a distance. Wan features alight, the dark puppet lifted his control of Jyushimatsu and shoved him away. The fifth born hit the ground, boneless. Todomatsu shot forward like a shining arrow. ‘Todomatsu, get back!’ Osomatsu yelled. ‘Totty ignored him, darting past their enemy to fling himself at Jyushimatsu’s side. Completely ignoring his master’s nemesis, the Unicorn dragging the former hostage out of range, the dark puppet returned the wakizashi to his chest and extended a gentlemanly hand. Shaking like the world tremored beneath him, Karamatsu let the young man take his wrist, drawing him forward.

‘Don’t worry your lovely head about a thing,’ Kuro soothed, Osomatsu cursing his supernatural hearing. He couldn’t hear this, he’d go berserk. One arm twining around Karamatsu’s waist, the dark puppet’s fingertips traced his victim chest over his thin tank top. ‘I’m going to give everything I have.’

‘Get your goddamn hands off my baby brother!’ Osomatsu wept helpless fury as Karamatsu smothered a sob. Leaning so close his lips brushed the fine hairs on his neck, the dark puppet murmured his own promise.

‘This won’t hurt for long.’

Fingertips embedding over Karamatsu’s heart, Kuro flattened his palm and shoved. A deluge of darkness rammed into his chest, so powerful that gaseous soot burst on impact, radiating to half-obscurc the pair in noxious mist, locked in twisted embrace.

Karamatsu screamed. Backbone arched to snapping point, unimaginable agony tore from the second
born’s lips, stretched and gaping like a hole ripped in his face.

‘NO!’ Osomatsu’s entire body jerked. Jagged claws knifing his innards and twisting, he smashed his gauntlets over ears that would never unhear, his brother screaming like the world was ending—this was it, it was all over, he’d let this happen. Karamatsu’s shrieks rampaged, rupturing the night, breaking Osomatsu down to base however hard he crushed his hearing. Body, heart, and soul, the eldest schismed, every shred of Karamatsu’s suffering resonating through him like they still shared a womb, breaching his skin, his bones, his very cells …

His brother … his little brother …

Somehow faring better than him—it paid to be a walking wellspring of light and courage, Osomatsu guessed from somewhere deep inside himself where they still might walk away from this—Todomatsu barked raggedly from Jyushimatsu’s side. ‘Now can we shoot him?’

His eyes haunted, Choromatsu took a fractured second to aim, and one more to steady his shaking hand.

Ping! The Wyvern’s volley ricocheted off a rippling sheen of darkness, midnight made solid. The garnet of Osomatsu’s zipper burned coal hot. ‘I hate you!’ he screamed grief and obscenities as Souudai’s shield slithered, the lieutenant stepped unnoticed through a rift. ‘I fucking hate you!’

Deaf to Choromatsu’s disjointed warning (‘They’re going to think he’s more than a random to us!’) and Totty’s shriek that he’d cook their brother alive, Osomatsu hurled mindless armloads of artillery, swearing and sweat evaporating with his own blistering heat. Knowing the Salamander too well, the lieutenant had already flicked their claws, encasing them—theirself, the soldier at their heels, the dark slave and Karamatsu—in a hardened shell.

‘Let’s keep it civil, Salamander,’ Souudai reproached, their shield undulating like a disturbed pond surface with each blazing impact. They waited until Osomatsu panted, bent double and gauntlets heavy on his knees, before continuing. ‘Whatever the circumstances, the human chose this—you’re not needed tonight. Let it go. Go rest,’ they advised, Osomatsu loathing Lord Takuu’s voicebox more with every echoey word. ‘You will need your strength now more than ever.’

‘Power me up,’ he could barely exhale at Todomatsu. ‘I’ll char that goddamn shield to ash.’

But Todomatsu wouldn’t. The garnet warrior’s death ray would drain his stricken spark in seconds—this was bad enough without Osomatsu burning himself out. For the second time that night, all the eldest could do was stand there as Karamatsu was destroyed from inside-out.

‘Fascinating, isn’t it?’ Souudai said with a researcher’s interest as the dark puppet packed the unprecedented onslaught into Karamatsu. ‘This puts our little experiment by the sea to shame. Who will give first?’ they wondered, almost commentating as the dark puppet’s forehead knotted, face contorted with the strain. ‘Will my Lord Takuu’s blood servant drain himself before our slave commander can hold no more? Let’s wait and see.’

The lieutenant sounded relaxed, tension revealed only by the vigilance they maintained their glistening shield. ‘Our doll may channel all the Liberation Force’s power, but it seems the commander can take a beating.’

Our doll …

‘Hey, Choromatsu,’ Osomatsu gulped. His humour reflex spared him nothing. ‘You know what? I think that puppet might be the Doll of Darkness.’
‘What gave it away?’ swallowed Choromatsu. He was right. Again. Stop the fucking presses. But for once the green superhero just didn’t care. The darkness just kept coming, some fathomless well within the puppet emptying into their helpless brother, faster and more relentless than Osomatsu had ever seen. Karamatsu went utterly limp in the doll’s arms, his screams died to strangled rasps become a voiceless scour of his ravaged throat. But slowly, so gradually, the two changed places.

Drenched in sweat and swaying, the doll lost strength with transferred power—Todomatsu gasped when their enemy collapsed. But now charged with darkness and straightened to stand strong against the backdrop of deepening night, Karamatsu caught his gaunt captor. Almost cradling the young man who’d stolen his soul, black rapids lessened to a trickle, and the doll’s weakened fingers fell away.

‘Interesting,’ Souudai murmured as the arcane transfer sputtered and ceased. Who had “given first”, as the lieutenant was so keen to learn, Osomatsu couldn’t care less. He was too busy staring.

Karamatsu had transformed. Osomatsu got the slow, sick feeling he only recognised him now because he knew this person was his brother. Whatever had been done to him, Karamatsu was no ordinary slave. Just like his maker.

A massive guard of leather studded with steel and black crystal took up his right arm, shoulder to wrist. Strapped across his bare chest, the rest of his dark attire comprised more straps and chainmail—very skimpy straps and chainmail. At the cuffs of tight leather pants he wore boots that could crunch the skull of a fully-grown Saint Bernard with one stomp. An elongated mask cut with seven eyes glared from his belt buckle. And at Karamatsu’s throat gleamed a silvered torque. Osomatsu’s breath came unsteady. The Liberation Force had collared his brother.

‘Almost perfect,’ the Doll of Darkness rasped. His entire body quivering with exhaustion—the guardians’ seemingly-invincible enemy was spent—the young man took his own military cap and set it lopsided on Karamatsu’s head. ‘There we go,’ he breathed, slumping in a faint.

Did the entire Liberation Force do its shopping at the same dodgy BDSM thrift shop? Shit, Karamatsu would probably like that getup if he could ever see himself. Beating that away—he wasn’t going to laugh this off, not now, not ever—Osomatsu clenched a flaming fist as Karamatsu scooped up the Doll of Darkness like he weighed nothing.

‘We’ll be taking our leave now,’ Lieutenant Souudai said, casting each of the guardians their own wary eye before degenerating their shield, darkness glissading into their claws as their subordinate tore a vertical rent through reality.

Not thinking, just acting, Osomatsu curled from the waist and punched. Hard. His flames hammered full-body into the portal. The soldier staggered back as the Salamander’s element distorted the impossibly-narrow space between dimensions, blowing it out—or collapsing it in. With a crack of implosion, the arcane doorway erased from existence.

‘I see,’ said the lieutenant. Their retreat obliterated, so slowly, Karamatsu glanced over his shoulder.

‘Karamatsu-niisan,’ Choromatsu almost moaned. There was nothing left of their brother in those eyes.

‘Are we really going to do this?’ The elongated tilt of Souudai’s neck was as dubious as an arched eyebrow. ‘This was the human’s will, I thought we had reached an understanding. It is neither our intention nor our desire to fight you.’

‘What, scared?’ Osomatsu jeered, heart clattering in his ribcage. ‘Don’t like your chances without a big ugly fucker to hide behind?’
He had no idea how to do this. And as complete screw up would have it, that was Osomatsu’s one comfort right now. Through unadulterated witless competence, he always emerged relatively victorious when he made shit up on the fly—they could pull this off easy. The soldier couldn’t mutate, they had no soul. Osomatsu wasn’t about to let them escape to snatch one. And with soulless Karamatsu’s hands full cradling Takuu’s favourite doll …

‘Does the Salamander speak for you?’ Lieutenant Souudai directed at the emerald and diamond warriors. ‘Wyvern, I would have thought you above this foolishness. And a leader should know when to retreat and when to make a stand,’ they added. Crouched by Jyushimatsu, Todomatsu’s displeasure would have iced a lake. ‘Our doll may be weakened, but know just how serious I am when I say this: you have no idea what you are getting yourselves into.

‘I see you leave us with little option,’ they said when Osomatsu locked in a brazen fighting stance, eyes burning challenge. He’d promised—Karamatsu would hurt no one. The Liberation Force would get away with this over the Salamander’s dead body.

‘Choromatsu, fire!’

But the fraction of a second the Wyvern took to decide if that was really the best idea cost them. A hair’s breadth too late, Choromatsu’s gold-medal shots pinged away at angles before they could obliterate crystal—Souudai was a goddamn wizard with that shield. Billowing their protection in a dark dome, the lieutenant’s nodded at their subordinate.

‘Soldier Kiuutsurui,’ they said, their soldier pricking claws to the doll’s thinly-rising chest. Something flared from the unconscious young slave, coursing to pulse within their own crystal. ‘Ensure the commander protects the doll. I have no doubt you are now capable of exterminating the guardians without his active assistance.’

‘I am prepared to serve my Liberation Force,’ their rough voice scraped like gravel. Lanky body bowed low, they curled into the air, cloak encapsulating their contorted body in a hardened cocoon. They’d taken Karamatsu’s soul, Osomatsu realised too late. Panic rose.

‘God, oh god, oh god …’

‘Get it together!’

Barely shunting his own torment aside—how was he supposed to know souls could be traded, how was that a thing?—Osomatsu stalked to yank Todomatsu to his feet. The youngest came reluctantly, all but cowering on the concrete. Every hero had their breaking point. Osomatsu had already hammered through a few. And Totty had just smacked face-first into his.

‘Look!’ To their clear amusement, he threw an obscene gesture in the lieutenant's direction. Karamatsu stared, blank expression unyielding. ‘That gossipy bitch is laughing at you, they’ll never let you live this down!’

‘I … don’t … care!’ Todomatsu wailed, hanging off his gauntlet like a leech. ‘They took Karamatsu! They took him! And n-now we … have … to …’

‘This is no different to any other fight.’ Choromatsu’s mental tones were distant, but steady. The Wyvern would always keep his head, so his allies might always find theirs. ‘Everyone we save is someone’s child, someone’s parent. A friend, a sibling. The stakes are always high. We’ll save Karamatsu, just like we’ve saved everyone else.’

‘Good speech,’ Osomatsu appreciated just as distantly. ‘Nice and short. I thought Totty was
supposed to be our inspiration.’

But Choromatsu didn’t need to fill in for long; Todomatsu had given his last sniff. Expression undergoing magical transition, his light rallied within him, leaving an afterglow gentle and invigorating—just being near him was a natural upper. ‘We can still save him, we can’t give up.’

‘I just said that,’ Choromatsu said tersely, hauling Jyushimatsu over his shoulder. He’d better not come to before this was over—how many of Choromatsu’s stunners would it actually take to knock him out?

Todomatsu’s bright expression hardened, snapping in a moment of cold command, ‘Get ready to do the Christmas Angel.’

‘What other manoeuvres do we have?’

But, tucking Jyushimatsu in a safety nook, the Wyvern swooped to claim the Doll of Darkness’s previous perch, narrow pole spindling over the cherry blossom-lined canal. Not out of sight, but at least out of reach. Assuming whatever burst out of that hideously-pulsating cocoon wasn’t 10 metres tall … what kind of monster would Karamatsu’s soul spawn? Osomatsu’s stomach knotted over his guts. But with Choromatsu so reliably composed and Totty now suffusing them with an uninterrupted glow of all things good, he steeled himself against that unknown

Igniting a ring of flames around the youngest, he watched on deadly pins and needles as the cocoon jostled mid-air—was that normal? ‘Get ready,’ Totty whispered, dropping lightly to his knees and driving the butt of his sceptre into the cement. Gleaming like starlight, chains shot to encircle Souudai’s dark shield, weaving and intersecting to cage their enemies from all angles. Filmy bubble-mixture pink, pliable as rubber and tough as diamond, expanded to fill in the silvery lines.

‘What if it’s bigger than that?’ Osomatsu backseat drove his white-hooded commander, little shudders stroking his spine as the cocoon splintered within the double dome, countless cracks splitting its black pearlescent surface.

‘Then I’ll make it bigger,’ Todomatsu gave the obvious answer more patiently than he usually would. His smile pure sunshine on a chilled face, the fist around Osomatsu’s heart loosened by a knuckle or two.

Regarding the cocoon’s progress with a few expert eyes, the lieutenant motioned that Karamatsu back up. ‘My lord’s blood servant won’t be impressed if his jacket is ruined.’

‘Matsuno brothers?’ Ahn’s voice lilted in urgency. Osomatsu practically felt her tiny heart pounding as she hurtled for all she was worth. Almost drowning out her too-distant warnings, the cocoon gave a shuddering clap like thunder. The deluge of translucent gunk splattering beneath was a rainstorm. ‘If they have appointed Matsuno Karamatsu a commander, this monster will be unlike any you have faced. Do nothing rash.’

‘Too late,’ Choromatsu intoned from his vantage point, pistol barrels locked on the vibrating shell below.

‘I’m coming, I’m almost …’

Their cue unknown, Lieutenant Souudai dropped their shield with a casual dip of claws.

The cocoon detonated.
AAAAAANNNNNNDDEEE ... another cliffhanger. I'm so sorry :(

Chapter Notes

For whatever reasons - and they are numerous - I think this was one of the most difficult things I've ever written. And I do mean ever. Thanks so much for waiting, I hope you enjoy :

‘Oh, christ …’

Sense. Reality. One overcharged blast and it all fell hard and fast, hurled off a cliff’s edge.

The concrete heaved, lurching beneath his fire-powered soles. Osomatsu’s flames flickered against the shockwaves. So did Todomatsu’s dome. Its curved inner face dripped with thickened mucous, every square centimetre sprayed by the cocoon’s cataclysmic destruction. Beyond the gunk, nightmare unfolded.

A pale monolith wreathed in monstrous feelers rose like a breathing addition to the skyline. Mutated flesh solidified into the gargantuan alien structure; it already dwarfed the scattered trees and telegraph poles. Crouched atop the nearest, Choromatsu’s chin tilted, silently following its ascent. Not designed to support this kind of weight, the man-made ground buckled, a great crater crumbling underneath. The beast dropped a full storey down. The ensuing thump shuddered sound, reverberating through their jolted bones as the latest addition to the Liberation Force Monster Catalogue rooted its thickening base in the earth.

Deep cracks split the night like artillery fire. Cement fractured and broke apart, crushed gravel flying as dust mushroomed. Osomatsu’s neck craned to keep the beast’s rising heights in view. Shit, shit, what the fuck is … Are you a superhero or what?! he hollered at himself, his first coherent thoughts in a good 20 seconds that didn't come with a language warning. Move, do something!

But the young hero was stuck, running boots glued to what fast became rubble. Osomatsu’s heart thudded, scared out of his wits. This was the beast Karamatsu’s soul had created. His little brother, who had never planned to come home tonight. All because he … christ, he’d let this happen, how could he let this happen?!

‘Osomatsu-niisan …’

Todomatsu’s eyes were perfect circles. By some miracle, his containment spell hadn’t shattered. The Unicorn’s sceptre gleamed, channelling more and more light into his shimmering dome; it ballooned to confine the colossal beast. But the monster—Kiuutsurui, a sliver of Osomatsu’s mind supplied. The living tower breached 30 metres, casting the entire shadowed park in pitch. It was huge, it was obscene …

The beast’s looming growth forced the youngest’s spell bubble backwards, straight through Osomatsu’s fiery defenses.

There was no defending against this.

Towering walls surged towards them with the ramming force of a hundred oncoming cement trucks.
Osomatsu snapped out of it.

Abandoning his smothered blaze, the Salamander grabbed his commander before Kiuutsurui flattened them. Somehow the Unicorn clung to his focus. Still caging the monstrosity, Osomatsu hauled him out of range, lengthening chains clinking purely in their wake.

‘Choromatsu-niisan!’ The youngest pitched on the uneven ground. Osomatsu held him steady until he planted his heels, sceptre slanted before him like a sword. ‘Find their crystal, now!’

‘My tech’s still malfunctioning.’ Choromatsu rose to his full pitiful height, an emerald fleck against the infinite volume of their enemy. Stepping off the pole, his streamlined boots skated the shivering surface of Todomatsu’s dome, eagle eyes peeled. ‘I’ll keep trying, but I’m getting nothing.’

Still holding out hope their tried-and-tested manoeuvre would end this, Todomatsu fast succumbed to trembles, pouring himself into his forcefield. One gauntlet making sure his brother remained upright, the other cocked to defend, Osomatsu scanned the bleached obelisk. Rounded almost like a lighthouse and crowned by a wicked-looking spire, their feeler-festooned base tapered to reinforced battlements—their eyes. The gilded curves and whorls of the intimidating parapet encircling the beast’s heights were its seven eyes, linked in an all-seeing circumference.

Finally halting its massive expansion project, Kiuutsurui’s hulking feelers wove, lazily probing Todomatsu’s cage. The pink substance rippled faintly, the beast’s touch no more than the brush of an insect’s leg.

Apparently satisfied, the feelers withdrew. For an instant.

‘Let it go!’ Osomatsu yelled, the monster begun to thrash, pummelling Todomatsu’s dome with savage accuracy. The youngest shuddered against the strategic battering, every bone-rattling impact sucking more strength from him. ‘You’re gonna run out of juice!’

‘Just … a little longer,’ Totty panted. ‘Until … Choromatsu-niisan …’

‘Todomatsu,’ Choromatsu dropped lightly back onto his perch, a shake of his hooded head. His lens defective, he’d scoured the beast in manual search. No crystal. Christmas Angel was a bust.

‘Totty, come on!’ Osomatsu shouted. Todomatsu shook his head rigidly, fingers clenched so tight to his drooping sceptre they could have fused.

‘That’s no monster, it’s a fortress! We can’t fight that! Not until we know …’

Feelers parted in a worming archway, Karamatsu stalked from behind the beast birthed of his troubled soul. His scanty leathers were unsplattered; apparently Lord Takuu’s envoy was finicky enough to shield against the deluge. The lieutenant’s satisfaction preceded them in an eerie chuckle as the angular being strode behind the Liberation Force’s newly-appointed slave commander. In his arms, Karamatsu bore the Doll of Darkness.

Todomatsu’s sparkling structure methodically weakened, he barely held on as Karamatsu plunged his fist straight through the doll’s narrow chest. The young man spasmed, a cry catching in his throat—it’d better be hurting him. Osomatsu snarled. His violent hunger to personally inflict on the Doll of Darkness every scrap of vengeance he deserved might be righteous; he didn’t know or care. But it was definitely ruthless.

Slowly, Karamatsu unsheathed a katana, the full-sized companion to the doll’s wakizashi. The darkness-infused blade a slash of deadly steel, he squared off with Todomatsu on the other side of the barrier. Deliberately, he extended the tip of his sword, just piercing a sliver of pink. Jagged spires
radiated from the tiny puncture. The Unicorn gasped.

‘Totty …’ Osomatsu warned, gulping as Todomatsu’s enormous eyes glassed. Forget the fortress, how were they going to take on puppet-edition Karamatsu complete with massive fuck-off sword? If they lost their Unicorn now, they were finished. Where the hell was Ahn? Their fearless leader might actually listen to her …

Teasing his katana down the only thing that divided him from the guardians, Karamatsu’s lip curled with menace. ‘Poor little Unicorn,’ he said, voice soft as lethal darkness spindled to defile the dome. Todomatsu’s light reinforced, repelling the taint. His gaze locked on their hijacked brother. ‘So small. So weak. Give it up. You cannot hold on forever, aren’t you tired …’

‘Todomatsu, please!’ Choromatsu shouted, jerking the youngest from his trance. With a breathless grunt, Totty finally disengaged. The spell abruptly severed, his forcefield deflated, breaking apart. The Unicorn’s sparkling chains shot back to his sceptre. Feelers snaked after them, the beast within released.

‘Move!’ Osomatsu hurled out of the way, skidding through the onslaught. Wobbly, but still out-gracing the Salamander, Todomatsu flipped neatly through the serpentine limbs. Choromatsu retreated into the air, barrel-rolling as a trio of feelers slammed into his perch. With a terrible crack and humming surge, the pole went down in a mess of splintered wood, wires sizzling as they snapped one after the other. The few lights in the park went out, the downed lines plunging a chunk of nearby city into blindness.

Fighting by the wan gleam of the fortress, Osomatsu pulled off some impressive acrobatics of his own as a few stealthy feelers slithered to bind his wrists. ‘Fucking let go!’ Trying out Choromatsu’s barrel roll, he ripped free and put on a reverse blast, forcing the beast to chase him. The Salamander retreated an infuriating hand’s breadth beyond their clutches, Kiuutsurui twined restlessly, eyeing his every move.

Karamatsu was on the line here. Osomatsu was all too aware. But he couldn’t stop it. Something madcap and feverish invaded his chest, a toxic brand of mettle he’d never had to deal with before—good. He welcomed toxic. Anything to power him through this shitshow. The garnet warrior had dealt with tentacles before. So what if these were a bit bigger? And not a smacking squid sucker in sight, that had to be a bonus.

‘You want some?’ he provoked as Todomatsu skittered to join him. ‘Come at me, I’m open!’

Osomatsu threw his gauntlets wide. Kiuutsurui’s baited feelers strained; leaning forward, he let them coil within a brazen inch of his chest. But hearing Souudai’s ghostly laugh dragged Osomatsu’s urgent light relief through the dirt—what the actual fuck was funny? ‘Soldier, if you would.’

Twin oversized worms as thick as overpass supports lowered in response. The lieutenant and Karamatsu leapt aboard. Bearing them up, Kiuutsurui deposited them behind their surveying battlements. Two eyes fixed on the Salamander and Unicorn. Another roved with the Wyvern’s descending sail, skimming to touch down a few fire-charged bounds away.

No one moved. The moment stood frozen, as though Totty experimented with some new spell. Then, his collar glinting in the half moon, Karamatsu brandished his katana, shattering the photographic still. ‘Fire!’

‘Fire, what?’

A hailstorm of razor spikes shot from the beast’s ornate pupils. The descending barrage blotted out
Nowhere to run—those spikes rained down everywhere—Osomatsu grabbed the youngest and swooped flames over them, so hot they pulsed livid blue. Spikes thudded at their feet, burying in the cracked cement. The dozen that could have turned them into twin pincushions evaporated in Osomatsu’s heat. Vaporised or embedded, they all hissed with release of gaseous darkness. Osomatsu retched, swamped as plumes of taint erupted like steam. But he’d hardly hacked once before his hood flapped—Choromatsu caught up the demoralising haze with a sweep of his arm, funnelling it away.

Sick and sweaty, Osomatsu saw a broad ring around the Wyvern distinctly lacking in spikes, his brother spun in a deflective whirlwind. His brain wobbling on a teeterboard, the Salamander wondered if any had shot beyond the obscuring shield his brother lowered over the battlefield. Probably not. Choromatsu didn’t take chances—he’d have emptied the entire neighbourhood. Osomatsu hoped Chibita had gotten out okay. But if any spikes had thudded into his oden cart up the canal, he’d be pissed.

‘Are you okay?’ Choromatsu asked as Todomatsu emerged, face smooshed safely in Osomatsu’s chest. One gauntlet planted heavily on his knee, Osomatsu waved his other groggily. He was fine, he wasn’t about to hurl. That sick squeeze through his gut would let up any second.

‘I can deal with the spikes,’ Todomatsu declared, confident now he knew they were coming. He obliterated the next volley, sceptre raying out piercing starlight. ‘My poor big brother,’ he added as the eldest moaned. Osomatsu didn’t have to put on much of a show; he already looked pathetic enough for the sweet youngest to take pity.

‘Twelve primary feelers,’ Choromatsu had counted on his flyover. ‘Maybe seventy secondary ones … assuming they don’t regrow.’

‘Twelve big-ass ones,’ Osomatsu interpreted, savouring the warm hit as Totty upped his stamina. ‘A lot of scrawny ones. Right, let’s do this.’

‘Wait!’ His brothers hauled him up as, shunting aside lingering nausea, Osomatsu made to plunge into the writhing fray.

‘What the fuck are you …’

‘What exactly is going through your head right now?’ Choromatsu demanded as Totty clung grimly to the back of his hoodie, two seconds from chaining him up. ‘Are you even thinking?’

Damn right he was thinking. For once he thought too fucking much. Overrun by panic for Karamatsu—not to mention any creeping fears for themselves; they fought monsters, not war towers!—Osomatsu stretched to snapping point, any humour or spark-charging vigor he scrounged up about as light as a leaden second skin. It took an angry second for him to even realise why his brothers stopped him—charging in without a plan, without even a target. That was reckless, even for him. Erratic. Definitely dangerous.

Osomatsu’s psyche raced his pulse. He was a mess. How could he ever look his parents in the eye again if he just let Karamatsu be kidnapped? How could he allow his sick little brother to be stolen from them, still convinced they all hated him? He wouldn’t, no fucking way! Forcibly, Osomatsu got his head in the game and bottled his mayhem of emotion—enough to function without royally fucking this up, anyway.

‘Choromatsu-niisan, keep looking for their crystal,’ Todomatsu directed; he admirably patched his
composure, sounding every bit a young commander. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, keep them distracted, do any
damage you can. Divide their attention,’ he said, pointing the Salamander left and the Wyvern right.
‘I’ll do what I can from here.’

‘Keep back,’ Osomatsu warned, a big brother before a subordinate. Todomatsu huffed a highly
obvious “I’m the one giving orders, do you have to treat me like a kid on the battlefield?”

‘I mean it. We’ve got this,’ the Salamander said, making himself believe before pumping his
gauntlets full of fire and bolting left.

A feeler snapped for his throat. Osomatsu ducked, parrying with his gauntlet as he hurdled a thicker
specimen that roped to trip him. Catapulting through a closing gap, he swivelled in an abrupt 180 and
slammed an uppercut bursting with raw power into the muscled limb. Sparking with the weighted
impact—god, that felt good—he rebounded, sweeping in a scorching crescent kick. But the boneless
feeler barely singed.

Forced to spin away, Osomatsu saw the nearest glisten wetly, smothered in a protective coating not
quite liquid or solid. Whatever it was, it was extremely fucking fire proof. The Salamander sulked as
he ducked and wove, not impressed his element was sidelined yet again. What good was it being a
sentient torch if he couldn’t burn shit when it mattered? At least he didn’t have to worry about
incinerating Karamatsu—shit, they had to get him down from there as soon as humanly possible. If
they dusted the fortress and he was still up top …

Choromatsu would catch him. If there was one thing Osomatsu didn’t have to stress over, it was the
Wyvern’s skill. He’d never let Karamatsu hit the ground.

Too many opponents to duel at once, Osomatsu existed one mishap from total annihilation. The
feelers shrugged off every strike, easily absorbing the shock down their sinewy lengths. Ramped
energy powering him flat-out, the Salamander helixed through their accelerated tangles helter-skelter.
Every feeler had devious intent of its own, all hankering to pin him down and crush the life out of
him python style. A punishing workout, Osomatsu could only keep moving.

‘What the hell are you doing up there?’ he wheeled from a potential femur crunch to pant at the
Wyvern; his brother darted through the knotted melee overhead. ‘Admiring the view? Tell me how
to beat this thing!’

‘Working on it.’

Their analyst’s telepathy slotted through clenched teeth. A glance at his own flickering lens reminded
Osomatsu to give his patience a much-needed stretch. The doll was out of commission. Apparently,
that didn’t stop him screwing with their tech.

But he was hemmed in by a snake pit, feelers whipping to intercept from above, behind, below—
every direction his immediate attention wasn’t. Managing to snarl three together with some badass
tumbling, Osomatsu let fly a heavy round of punches. ‘How hard is it to find one measly weak
point? Damn it, Choromatsu, at least give me some goddamn …’

His pistols a blur, the Wyvern’s whiplash assistance seared so close Osomatsu’s vision watered. He
dove out of the way, his brother’s precision barrage thudding into the hogtied tentacles. Kiuutsurui
roared.

‘Nice … I loosened it for you,’ Osomatsu tried to joke as Choromatsu streaked overhead. ‘That
almost took them clean off!’
Well … they kind of limped now. A bit. And Kiuutsurui definitely wasn’t impressed by the divots Choromatsu’s lasers had gouged, threats rumbling in deep vibrations. But Osomatsu felt rather than saw Choromatsu’s incredulous eyebrow raise—the beast was too big, his bolts insect stings at best. Even their scrawniest feelers were built to last millennia. And a dozen more already curled to throttle him.

True to his promise, Todomatsu kept well back, lancing light when the beast loosed waves of spikes from their battlements. Osomatsu flinched, cheating death every time Karamatsu barked the direction. But their Unicorn never faltered, banishing sharpened darkness with a brisk wave of his sceptre. While Todomatsu managed the ranged attack—since when had defending the universes turned into the stupid brain-busting strategy games Choromatsu agonised over?—Osomatsu bought their analyst time, aiming to weaken, to exhaust—at the very least keep them busy. ‘Come on,’ he growled as Choromatsu dodged looping perils. ‘Come after me, I’m the threat, I’m …’

A big-ass feeler lunged. A dozen smaller ones scattered, getting the hell out of the way. Inspired by his enemies—there was a first for everything—Osomatsu leapt aboard. Clamping one leg either side, the Salamander laid into it, gauntlets pummeling as it whipped to unseat him, a daredevil rookie in a crazed intergalactic rodeo.

‘I will end you, Salamander!’ Kiuutsurui bellowed from their unseen maw. Osomatsu scoffed. They had Karamatsu’s soul. Couldn’t they come up with a more entertaining threat than …

Snapped straight up and stomach left behind with his unfinished thought, Osomatsu found himself upside-down and hurtling for devastating crash landing. Swinging his legs up, the Salamander flung himself sideways. Kiuutsurui’s monstrous feeler walloped into the playground and packed earth beneath.

Their guttural cry crawled through Osomatsu’s skin as he spun and blasted his way through a jungle of incensed vines. ‘Are you just trying to be as annoying as possible?’ Choromatsu demanded, spraying laserfire to clear the Salamander’s path.

‘It worked, didn’t it?’ Osomatsu demanded back. Amid the crushed climbing frame and swing set, the feeler’s inner workings were squelched by collision, bruised and weeping translucent fluids. So the only thing powerful enough to actually hurt the bastard was themselves. Great. Somehow, Osomatsu didn’t think Kiuutsurui would fall for that again.

Landing in a deep crouch, Osomatsu rocketed straight up again—seriously riled, Kiuutsurui was hot to return his maiming favour. Caught in slithering net of impenetrable flesh, that might have been it. But the Wyvern coasted low, firing round after round, fending them off long enough for Osomatsu to wriggle free. ‘Thanks, little brother. I owe you.’

‘I know.’

‘Choromatsu-niisan!’ the youngest shouted, barely rayed the latest projectiles to destruction when the Wyvern changed direction, swooping directly at the tower’s heights.

‘What are you doing?’ Osomatsu yelled, locked in a brutal 25-on-one. ‘They’re already pissed—they’ll swat you like a fucking fly!’

‘If we take out the lieutenant,’ Choromatsu replied levelly, evading a dozen breakneck feelers, always a wingspan ahead. ‘There’s no one standing between us and Karamatsu.’

‘Besides a monster tower with a horde of rabid tentacles,’ Osomatsu had to point out.
‘The Doll of Darkness is vulnerable right now,’ Todomatsu cottoned on more helpfully. ‘He won’t be able to stop us. Can you get past Souudai’s shield, are you fast enough?’

Choromatsu had a lot more room to manoeuvre than the lieutenant. ‘I’m fast enough.’

‘He won’t come quietly,’ Osomatsu reminded, catching a slam on his gauntlets that would have taken off a normal man’s hands at the wrists. He wouldn’t hurt his brother. Not if there was any other option. But if it came to a fight, Karamatsu was no pushover. And he’d seen exactly what outrageous atrocities Takuu’s favourite slave was capable of. Going head to head with a slave commander didn’t exactly top Osomatsu’s bucket list. ‘Stun him first. Then take out the lieutenant.’

‘What if he falls?’ Totty’s laying out scenarios couldn’t be called fretting; he was in cold command mode. ‘And Karamatsu’s not a normal puppet. Will stunning work?’

‘I don’t know!’ Osomatsu burst. ‘But it’s worth a shot. If he falls, Choromatsu catches him. Right?’

‘Right,’ Choromatsu agreed, breaking the feelers’ defensive line. Alighting from his air current, he plunged in elegant freefall. Three dozen feelers slanted after him.

‘Ha!’ the eldest whooped, Choromatsu outstripping them all. Cramped and confused, Kiuutsurui’s overcrowded feelers butted heads, colliding awkwardly when Choromatsu seized his own airspace, slingling skyward with an absolute reversal of kinetic energy. Whistling past the battlements and coming face to face with Karamatsu, Choromatsu fired. The bolts rebounded, Lieutenant Souudai’s darkness slithered to repel. But Choromatsu already flipped boots over hood, reaction time surpassing the lieutenant’s by a fractured second, slender barrels raining laserfire from above.

Karamatsu’s blade blurred. Todomatsu gasped. Their puppet brother whirling the deadly katana, he caught every bolt, energy absorbed down its razor length. The unshakable Wyvern barely reacted, already veering to re-engage.

‘Watch out!’ Osomatsu yelled, Karamatsu’s sword tip darting. Almost forced to his knees by an overhead blow, he just saw the Wyvern pull up. His brother’s stilted cry branched sickly through Osomatsu’s viscera. ‘Choromatsu!’

‘I’m fine,’ he exhaled, terse as he dropped into a downdraft. ‘He barely nicked me.’

But Choromatsu clutched his shoulder, flight unstable as grace deserted him for pain. Distracted by his brother’s peril, Osomatsu barely managed to keep his head latched to his shoulders—figuratively and literally. ‘Arm the mines,’ he half-heard Karamatsu’s short instruction far over their heads. No time to process what he meant, Osomatsu faltered backwards over the ruined playground. Getting his gauntlets around a weighty hunk of debris, he swung around and lobbed it at the beast. The feelers withdrew en masse.

‘Bombs,’ Choromatsu breathed harshly as he hit the ground, crumpling to one knee.

‘What do you mean, bombs?’
Ears clanging, Osomatsu backpedalled as gravel hailed down, dragging the third born out of range. Todomatsu rushed over as the eldest prised Choromatsu’s fingers from his shoulder. The cut was shallow, only a few centimetres long. Any other weapon and it wouldn’t have been serious. But the cut bubbled and frothed, needles spindling across his shoulder. Already pale and sweaty, the third born greyed when he saw. Todomatsu caught Osomatsu’s eye, everything in that one loaded glance. He couldn’t heal this in a hurry. But they couldn’t leave it untreated. Not for long.

‘Now, doesn’t this look familiar?’ A thin voice scratched over the slippery sound of feelers sliding past each other. The Doll of Darkness had come around. Great. Just what they needed. ‘The ever-reliable Wyvern, always hip-deep in strife. Tone it down, the ranks will think we’re playing favourites. And there’s already so much talk about you …’

‘They’ve planted feelers underground,’ Choromatsu said hoarsely, ignoring the taunt. Ready to spit fire himself, Osomatsu pumped the air full of fireballs, handling the renewed waves of projectiles. The resultant dark mist roiled overhead until Totty unmade it with radiance. The Unicorn cast a mild analgesic spell, ordering the Wyvern out of the air as Choromatsu forced his tech to behave, sweeping the ground.

‘Watch … where you step,’ he gasped, shoving the hiccoughing data into Osomatsu’s lens. The Salamander wrinkled his nose—Kiuutsurui had a revolting troop of skinny worms tunnelling networks under their feet, spewing explosives as they went. Slowly, inescapably, their area of effect spread. At this rate they’d destroy everything this side of the canal—come on, bombs? What were they supposed to do with bombs? ‘What … do you think? Avoid them.’

Retreating a few more cautious metres, Totty strove to reach their absent mentor. ‘Ahn, please answer me! We need you, we don’t know how to win this.’

Osomatsu tried himself when Todomatsu shook his head. But it was like shouting into the void, no answer and no way through. Was it intentional or … damn it, Ahn! As if they needed any more reasons to panic. Atop the fortress, Karamatsu watched their huddle in silence.

‘We warned you of this,’ Souudai mocked softly as they licked their wounds, trying to regroup. ‘This is the result when my Liberation Force combines our strongest with a slave groomed to perfection. Even you Alliance fools must see: you are outmatched by premium darkness.’

He heard every word, but Osomatsu’s gut twisted with the whispers he didn’t quite hear, the Doll of Darkness breathing deceit in Karamatsu’s ears. Pressured, the brothers weighed their options. Either they kept retreating until Choromatsu found their crystal—as if the enemy would let them. Even if they somehow avoided the encroaching mines, Kiuutsurui was a treasure trove of shitty surprises—what if they ordered Karamatsu to deal with them?

‘Unlikely,’ Choromatsu said uneasily. The Liberation Force wouldn’t risk losing a slave so vital to their campaign. Still, the brothers avoided each other’s eyes, each troubled by their own overactive imaginings if they were wrong. Osomatsu’s mouth dried out, seeing himself unwillingly pitted against the corrupted second born. But if it came to that, the fight was his. Todomatsu would have to chain him to a tree before Osomatsu let his brothers suffer that emotional turmoil.

So they could retreat, or take a punt.

‘It’s up top,’ was Osomatsu best guess. The battlements were solid, elevated. Defended. The safest place to hide a crystal. Right? The odds were beyond his staticy lens. But at least settled on a goal, for an instant Osomatsu felt almost pumped. Then Choromatsu had to ruin it.

‘If you step on a mine … it shouldn’t explode straight away.’
Osomatsu balked. ‘It shouldn’t?!’

‘Don’t be a jerk,’ Todomatsu scolded. ‘It’s amazing he’s picked up that much.’

‘I’m the one who has to go back out there!’

‘Listen for them,’ Choromatsu struggled to finish, wheezing as Totty bound his wound with a spell, labouring to halt the spread. ‘If you hear something … get off the ground … fast.’

Dust just settled, Osomatsu faced the tower and swallowed hard. He’d trade a truckload of his power for just a slice of Choromatsu’s agility right about now. ‘Totty, could Niichan get a little boost?’

‘A morale one, or a physical one?’

‘Why not both … come on,’ he bitched when Todomatsu metaphorically pursed his lips. ‘How else am I gonna get up there? Pull that glorified magic wand out of your ass, I’m being pulverised!’

‘I noticed.’

‘Fuck you!’

Concerned his light reserves dwindled—now that worried him?—the fleeting boost the Unicorn delivered wasn’t exactly exhilarating. But given the circumstances, that was probably a good thing. Osomatsu was off enough without thinking he was untouchable. Maybe he could get away with being drunk on invincibility tackling your run-of-the-mill death demon. But, all ego maintenance aside, painful experience rang warning bells. Maybe—just maybe—Kiuutsurui was an opponent beyond him.

But what else could he do? Stuffing his doubt in an overloaded box and sitting on it, Osomatsu set his sights on Kiuutsurui’s upper reaches. Steeling himself, he lurched for a narrow opening, half an eye fixed on his footing.

The feelers whipped in renewed attack. Trapped in a constant foray of deadly movement, he couldn’t pause for an instant. Obscenely lucky once or twice, he managed to land a few glancing blows with his hard elbows. But his attempts to thread through Kiuutsurui’s writhing defences became an all-out exhibition of dodge rolls and acrobatics. Osomatsu fired his thrusters, staying airborne as long as possible. Overwhelmed, his lens sputtered out schematics, trying to guide him through the minefield and flying limbs. But a low click sounded as he skidded over uneven footing, following one of its blinking paths. ‘Shit!’

He blasted off just as the cement detonated. Tossed off course and entire body pounded, Osomatsu swore filthily at his poor tech. ‘The one time I actually need you! Piece of crap!’

One dejected bleep from his interference-scrambled lens and he felt like the ultimate bad guy. ‘Fine, I’m sorry.’

A little less cowed, the scarlet glass seemed to accept his apology, only to freak out, vomiting frantic symbols when Osomatsu made to barge straight through the maelstrom. ‘What?’ he demanded, grinning harshly behind his mask. ‘I’ve got to get up there, don’t I? There aren’t any bombs up close, they’d blow themselves up!’

But every time he surged forward, another burly feeler whisked to block his path. Swatted from the air again and again, Osomatsu tensed for that telltale click, thrusters firing him straight up and out—having the crap beaten out of him was preferable to being blown apart. But, hammered black and blue and fatigue sidling dangerously through his bones, finally Osomatsu didn’t get away fast
enough. He gasped, feeling his ankle crunch with the force of the blast. Knocked down as Kiuutsurui leapt on his weakness, his desperate prayers paid off—he didn’t land directly on a mine. But he couldn’t move, surrounded.

‘Come on,’ he breathed hard, shoving his spark into it. But his bones still needed a few seconds to knit.

‘Osomatsu-nyisan, get out of there!’

Todomatsu wove an onslaught of chains, tangling with Kiuutsurui’s feelers as Choromatsu fired from the ground, his brothers fighting to cover his vulnerable ass. But a wily feeler dodged both, snaking in a noose to string him up. Just twisting away and wearing a throbbing whack to his ear instead, he couldn’t wait around any more. Snarling obscenities, Osomatsu charged his boots and fired. Only one at full power, he set his jaw against the excruciating jar of his damaged ankle. But it was enough to blast him at missile speed horizontal. Skidding painfully over the rough ground, mines went off in quick succession as he flew over them. The feelers scattered, peppered by the cutting spray of debris.

Dripping blood and discombobulated, total chaos erupting around him, the filthy scrapes on Osomatsu’s face healed a lot faster than his foot. But finally he felt it fuse. Testing it as gingerly as he could—the feelers would be on him any second—Osomatsu rolled to his feet. He wouldn’t fall back any further, Karamatsu was …

A flash of yellow seized his peripherals. Hooded head swinging to follow, Osomatsu’s heart slammed through his ribs. ‘JYUSHIMATSU!’

He’d completely forgotten about him, out cold and hidden so far back in the park. But Jyushimatsu had bounced back. ‘Jyushimatsu, no! Back the hell up!’

Frantic, Osomatsu flailed to convey himself with something not quite resembling baseball hand signals. Coherent or not, his message was as plain as the lack of nose on Souudai’s pointed face. But Jyushimatsu either didn’t notice, didn’t understand, or just ignored him, charging headlong into the fray. ‘KARAMATSU-NIISAN, I’M COMING!!!’

Zigzagging through feelers, by some impossible instinct Jyushimatsu bounded straight over every mine in his path. The fifth born reached the foot of the tower with infuriating ease—or it would have been infuriating, if Osomatsu weren’t so afraid. And if hadn’t noticed Kiuutsuri completely disregarded him. The beast saw no threat in Jyushimatsu, one amused pupil fixed on the young human as he kicked off his slippers and began to climb, scampering up their sheer wall faster and stronger than any human had the right to scamper.

‘Choromatsu-nyisan, no!’ Osomatsu heard Todomatsu’s shriek, feeling the whoosh overhead, hoodie rippling as an injured Choromatsu skimmed air towards the exposed fifth born. Feelers cracked to cut him off. The Wyvern cartwheeling away almost clumsily—damn it, he couldn’t be out here, he was infected!—Osomatsu almost felt the temperature dive as the Unicorn iced harder than the diamonds he flaunted. ‘Don’t you dare touch them!’

Todomatsu’s chains whipped viciously, wrestling to clear a path to their heedlessly brave brother, Jyushimatsu dangling off the living fortress. Osomatsu squared to ram through, trying to follow his smoking trail of detonated mines. But he’d been taking punishment for too long. One feeler caught him hard in the stomach, winding him. Another swept low, lashing around his weakened ankle and constricting hard. Crying out frustration and pain, his bones shattered with one slimy squeeze. He barely blasted free, tumbling through the air as his ankle struggled to set a second time. Shit, shit, it was taking too long …
‘Osomatsu-niisan, I’ve got you.’

Landed awkwardly and almost falling flat on his face, Todomatsu flitted way too close, tiptoeing over treacherous earth to grab him beneath the arms, hauling him back from the skirmish. ‘Here.’

The Unicorn prodded his ankle in healing encouragement, casting the stingiest buff imaginable; Osomatsu’s skin barely tingled. ‘That’s all you’re getting, I can’t waste any more on you.’

Osomatsu bristled. He couldn’t waste it on him? Snotty little commander-in-chief shit.

Jyushimatsu had shimmied almost halfway up the beast—what the hell was he gripping? Karamatsu stood at the battlements, eyes hard and haunting as he watched their brother’s dark head ascend. Even so far away, Osomatsu saw—he knew he’d see. But it was still a kick to the guts. There was zero recognition in that dead stare. ‘KARAMATSU-NIISAN!’ Jyushimatsu yelled up at him, kicking his toes and digging his scrambling fingers through his sleeves into Kiuutsurui’s toughened blocks of flesh, somehow hauling himself up. ‘I KNOW IT’S YOU DON’T WORRY I’M COMING!!’

‘An overly muscle-bound little simpleton, isn’t he?’

The Doll of Darkness was back on his feet—mostly. He learned heavily on Karamatsu to stay that way. One arm draped around around his neck. The other hooked possessively over his abdomen. The dark young man grinned down at Jyushimatsu. ‘I suppose we’re all caught in the universes’ constant balancing act—he has to make up for lack of brains somehow. But we should probably do something about the moron.’

Karamatsu nodded, the doll’s peaked cap set firm on his head. Osomatsu ached, clobbered by every memory of the second born coming to Jyushimatsu’s staunch defence. ‘That might be best,’ the lieutenant agreed with passing interest. ‘He has proved troublesome in the past. Soldier Kiuutsurui,’ they directed at the beast beneath them. ‘I wonder if you might assist the human in returning to ground level.’

‘No!’ Osomatsu yelled unheard. But Kiuutsurui began to drip on command, thickened plasma leaking down the fortress in streams. Already slick with slime, great glops now oozed past Jyushimatsu, soaking his socks and oversized sleeves. Three reaches from the parapet, he scrubbed for purchase. But Jyushimatsu slid down a dizzy metre. Osomatsu’s stomach clenched. Shaking it off like he didn’t dangle 30 metres off the ground, Jyushimatsu doggedly tried to climb again, stretching his sodden sleeve high over his head.

Their brother’s clinging fingers slipped.

‘KARAMATSU-NIIIISSAIIAAAAANNNNNN!!!!’

Choromatsu already dived. The Wyvern shot through feelers that closed in from all angles, rolling to snatch Jyushimatsu from his fatal tumble. Choromatsu unbalanced by their solid brother and lagging from hurt, Todomatsu hoisted his sceptre with a grunt of effort. His chains linked, pinning Kiuutsurui’s every move for one quivering instant to let them through.

Holy … shit …

‘Osomatsu-niisan, a little help?!’

Blinking through shock, Osomatsu saw Jyushimatsu fought tooth and nail to return to the brawl. ‘NO THAT’S MY NIISAN I NEED TO GO PLEASE LET ME!!! WE CAN’T LEAVE HIM!!! KARAMATSU-NIISAN!!!’
Choromatsu had crash landed and collapsed in a heap, mumbling incoherently. Sorely drained by that shining display of power, the Unicorn was still more than Jyushimatsu’s match in strength. But he wriggled relentlessly, straining against Todomatsu. Numb in and out, Osomatsu limped to pull Jyushimatsu in a restrictive bear hug, squeezing tight. *Stupid, stupid, you’re not stupid but how could you be so stupid …*

‘Useless moron,’ Osomatsu heard the doll’s contempt and suddenly all he needed to die happy was to tear him limb from limb. ‘That has to be a record—five brothers and every one of them a worthless piece of trash. *This* is what real support feels like,’ he breathed, arms tightening around Karamatsu. ‘Nice, isn’t it? Stick with me, Karamatsu. We’ll go places. And don’t worry your little head about it, the slave part is just a technicality. We’ve got a good deal here—slick uniforms provided, competitive job satisfaction. A good whipping whenever we get the urge …’

‘It’s okay, Jyushimatsu-niisan.’ Todomatsu placed one gentle hand to Jyushimatsu’s flushed cheek. Immediately, he stopped all his struggles, dark eyes opening so wide anyone unsuspecting could lose themselves in them. Todomatsu didn’t. ‘We’ll save him, I promise. Rest now,’ he said, pressing the tips of his index and middle fingers to Jyushimatsu’s brow.

‘Ooph …’ Unprepared, Jyushimatsu floursack weight sagged in Osomatsu’s arms, so deeply asleep the apocalypse wouldn’t wake him. There was no time to drag him to safety. Instead, the Salamander lugged him behind the pitiful protection of a nearby tree. Todomatsu tottered, even simple sleep a strain on his diminished light. But the youngest set his jaw, spiriting a stirring Choromatsu behind their scant shelter.

‘I … found their crystal.’ Revived, Choromatsu finally rasped the words Osomatsu had been impatiently waiting for. ‘It’s buried … deep inside them.’

The Salamander’s shoulders slumped. He was barely bruising their extremities. How was he supposed to break down the walls of a fortress that fought back? ‘I think …’ Choromatsu said with increasing clarity as Todomatsu rationed out his healing glow. ‘… I know. Look at the tower …’

Osomatsu sneaked a glance around the knotted trunk. The entire broken battleground was slick with the fortress’ excretions. He couldn’t evaporate the slippery hazard, it was resistant to his element. But the body of the tower itself—and their feelers, Osomatsu saw with a bound—no longer glistened. How long it’d last, they couldn’t know. But temporarily, at least, Kiuutsurui had squeezed themselves dry.

‘Come oooouuut, guardians …’ the Doll of Darkness trilled faintly. ‘I see you down there.’

Fire still might not be their greatest weakness. But they couldn’t miss this chance. ‘Firestorm?’ Osomatsu suggested almost hesitantly. His burnout deathray aside, their combo was the most hell they could launch at an enemy. They were stronger together … so long as Choromatsu was up to it.

The pallid third born took a long moment to answer, impossibly calm and unable to lie. ‘… I don’t know. But … I’ll try. But the mines …’

‘Let me try something.’

As Osomatsu helped Choromatsu upright, Todomatsu delicately twirled his sceptre around him. A single gleaming chain ribboned out. Streaming over ground, the Unicorn directed the bright links in a full circle, encapsulating their enemy and most of the park. Giving his sceptre another flick, the chain detached, snapping to close the ring. Todomatsu’s brow creased, suffused in focus as he tapped the ornate apex of his sceptre against the broken earth. The glossy pink substance of his forcefield flowed to perfectly colour the circle, barring the plentiful hazards beneath from unsuspecting feet.
‘Totty,’ Osomatsu breathed out impressed relief. ‘Look at you, making up spells on the spot.’

But sweat already trickled rivulets down Todomatsu’s face.

‘Hurry, Niisan!’

Glancing sideways at Choromatsu, his ashen brother nodded. Emerging in perfect synchrony, their enemy loomed overhead, a waking nightmare. In seconds Choromatsu had conjured twin funnels of unrelenting wind power. His fringe and hood whipping violently with the deadly face of his brother’s element, Osomatsu summoned blazing pillars to match. Merging wind and flame, Choromatsu took control of the fiery squalls, blowing them straight into Kiuutsurui’s alarmed feelers.

*How do you like that?* Osomatsu thought savagely as the roaring beast erupted in blisters. *Not quite as outmatched as you thought, hey?*

Refusing to recoil even as burns rippled agonisingly down their length, the brunt force of Choromatsu’s cyclonic power shoved a furious archway through Kiuutsurui’s weakened tentacle army. ‘Go!’

Osomatsu charged. Todomatsu’s forcefield beneath his soles lending speed and support, he dive bombed through the opening. Feelers went berserk trying to stop him, only to be violently hauled up by the reality of the relentless firestorm that buffeted them, the Wyvern their opponent. His path actually clear for the first time and loving it, Osomatsu slotted through the origins of countless feelers, vaulting to get firm footing on the thickest. Finally launching at the body of the beast, he hurled his flaming fist in a devastating right hook.

‘Ow, fuck!’

Nauseating vibrations centred on his fist as he rebounded clean off, his entire battered body jarred like he’d punched a brick wall—what did he expect, he thought, angry as he gave his pulsing head a shake. He was trying to rip a hole in a war tower with his hands. But it was still, you know … *alive.* He’d expected *something.* But his knuckle dusters bit millimetres into their solid hide—this beast had no skeleton, no muscle. No inner workings. Only slabs hewn of unyielding flesh, denser than stone—he how the fuck did that work? How did they control their feelers?

Hammering his gauntlets into the pliant structure—it rippled slightly, like a disturbed pond surface—he barely dented it. But, throwing himself into the assault, Osomatsu fired his flamethrowers point blank. ‘Come on, come on, I know you burn—burn already!’

Finally, with a melted squelch, he felt the slab give beneath his fists. His nostrils scalding with the most revolting roast he could imagine, the Salamander curled from the waist and punched with enough concentrated oomph to put a space station into orbit. His fist drove straight through the wall, burying almost to his shoulder. Waggling his fingers, he felt empty space on the other side.

‘Did you see that?’ he shouted at his brothers, sneaking a glance to make sure they had. ‘What did I tell you? We’ve got this in the …’

Osomatsu trailed off in horror, feeling the merciless suck and pull against his gauntlet. Yelping, he yanked his arm free as not quite solid flesh flowed to plug the fissure, fortifying better than new. He’d have been trapped, the realisation speared dully through shock, his arm prickling unpleasantly. His entire arm would have been crushed …

‘Fire!’

‘Niisan, look out!’ Already shielding from beneath and standing guard over their snoring brother, the
Unicorn didn’t react in time. Choromatsu barely managed to spare a whit of wind to deflect the spikes from himself. But they rained down on Osomatsu. Most bounced harmlessly off his armour. But one lodged firmly by his eye, the sharpened spike burying its dark tip.

Osomatsu screamed. The god-almighty sting was a thousand wasps, he felt infection eating his frozen cheek, spilling into his eye—fuck, fuck, his entire face was going to melt off! The Salamander curled in agony, panting and scrabbling uselessly to pull the spike from his face with his bulky gauntlets. However small the dose, darkness already laced chillingly through his veins, sapping his body and spirit … god, oh god, oh god … how was Choromatsu still fighting? How had he survived this brand of torture not once, but twice?

But neither of them had survived this yet …

‘Osomatsu!’

His brother’s cry fuzzed through Osomatsu’s blaring ears. He’d always believed the Wyvern could do a million things at once. And he could. But, suffering that gash of darkness and all lasting effort eaten up wielding the flaming twisters, Choromatsu couldn’t keep Kiuutsurui at bay any longer. The onslaught breaking furiously free, Osomatsu just saw through blinding tears as the firestorms petered forlornly out. His devastated brother flew backwards, something bright lassoed him from behind.

Enraged, Kiuutsurui descended on him. Seizing the helpless Salamander and hoisting him high in the air, toughened feelers latched to his wrists and ankles. The last time he’d been in anything close to this situation he’d had a brother to each limb, pinning him down while Choromatsu delivered totally undeserved retribution in tickles. It’s just tickling, he tried to tell himself. Nothing worse than that, he’d breathe again soon, just …

‘Shit … oh god …’ he choked into agonised gurgles as the beast began to pull in medieval torment. The strain on his bones in every direction was unbearable, they were going to tear him apart, they’d rip him limb from limb …

Osomatsu’s joints went off like gunshots, pressured shoulders and hips popping one after the other. Body dislocated, Osomatsu’s head hung, gasping raggedly as he flopped limp like a ravaged marionette.

‘I don’t believe we’ve seen you in quite this predicament before, Salamander,’ the lieutenant commented quietly from somewhere behind him; Osomatsu was strung higher in the air than he’d realised. But he could barely see, the world reduced to a blur of colour and pain. ‘But I am a negotiator above all else.’

Osomatsu was hazily aware as he revolved on a vertical axis, Kiuutsurui’s multiple grips resettling against his numbed limbs. The angular lieutenant imprinted on his murky retinas. Gaunt and cold, the ailing Doll of Darkness’s eyes glittered, fixed on him and so alive with Osomatsu’s withered suffering the trapped hero moaned, shivering his hyperstimulated pain receptors into overdrive. He wasn’t healing. He just … wasn’t … healing … ‘Firecracker … you’ve never looked better.’

But as much sight as was left to him, Osomatsu only had eyes for his brother. Karamatsu … was still up there …

‘Salamander, you will not survive this. He may now be vulnerable, but in awakening our commander tonight, with such a show of strength my lord’s favoured slave will soon wield power far beyond any your Alliance can comprehend.’

Grinning to split his face in two, the Doll of Darkness dipped his chin in lieu of a saucy bow.
‘I offer you this final chance—we do have history, you and I. And it may come as a surprise, but retrieval of assets is still prioritised above all else, including your destruction,’ Souudai said, a skinny tentacle yanking Osomatsu’s hanging head back to look the lieutenant in their seven glinting eyes. ‘Live to fight another day. Let us deliver our slave commander to the Liberation Force unhindered. Tell your Unicorn to stand down.’

‘Like … hell …’ Osomatsu boiled with mutinous rage. But he was helpless. Damn them, the lieutenant preferred to see him broken and humiliated, they knew it was only a matter of time before one beast or another offed him for good …

‘We should retreat.’

‘No!’ Osomatsu’s ragged cries bounced around his skull, somehow finding his brothers. ‘We can’t … let them …’

‘We can’t win.’ After a single tremble, Todomatsu’s high voice held steady. ‘At this rate we’ll have to destroy the entire fortress just to reach their crystal. We’ve hardly scratched them. We’ll come back for him,’ their leader swore on Karamatsu’s precious lost soul—god, how had it come to this? ‘But Karamatsu-niisan would never forgive me if I let you die.’

‘No … no …’ Osomatsu’s lens spewed a watery image of Todomatsu stepping forward, palms raised and hooded tunic rippling like a white flag of surrender. ‘No … no, no … NO!’

Osomatsu spontaneously combusted.

‘Niisan, no!’

As surprised as any of them, he found himself falling through wildfire, Kiuutsurui’s earth-rumbling shrieks rushing past his ears. Todomatsu’s silver-pink forcefield hurtled to meet him—at least he’d bounce … probably. But a scalded feeler snaked around his flaming torso, slamming him into the tower.

‘Again you spurn my offer—given the circumstances, it was more than generous. And you disobey the direct order a superior,’ Souudai’s voice hardly stirred his senses, barely-begun negotiations with the Unicorn already broken down. ‘I see you are ever unconcerned with improving our opinion of your intelligence.’

But he … hadn’t meant to … he’d never lost control like that. Not of his fire … oh christ, he’d just signed all their death warrants, hadn’t he? What the fuck was wrong with him? Stupid …

Osomatsu felt blood trickle over his lips. He could barely breathe, chest squashed against the fortress and slime glopping disgustingly to put him out as Kiuutsurui regenerated, preemptively dousing themselves with their fire-retardant excretions. They scrunched him so hard salted rapids gushed down his cheeks. But the anguish ruling his body faded alongside the pinprick of darkness by his eye.

‘This is completely unacceptable behaviour from a soldier of your reputation and experience.’ The lieutenant hummed in poor imitation of reluctance. ‘Since the Unicorn fails to discipline you appropriately, I’m afraid that burden falls to me. Soldier Kiuutsurui,’ Souudai addressed their enormous subordinate. ‘I believe the moment has come for a demonstration of your true power.’

‘You’ve got … to be kidding me …’

Head jerked so roughly it was a wonder his spine didn’t snap, the beast directed the hapless Salamander’s vision upward to their spire, jutting from the centre of their battlements. At its glinting
pinnacle, a sphere of darkness spun into reality. Rotating, gathering speed and expanding alarmingly, it roiled like a great black eye atop the tower. The dark power crackled and spat, spinning incessantly, faster and faster, whirring hum building to a climactic surge …

The Doll of Darkness’s voice shivered low with ecstasy. ‘This one’s on you, firecracker. Enjoy.’

A beam of pure concentrated void blasted from the eye. Tracing in massive brushstrokes of destruction, it ripped through Todomatsu’s blanketed forcefield like tissue paper, tearing deep trenches through the earth. Osomatsu was pinned, forced to watch as Kiuutsurui reduced the next four telegraph poles along to toothpicks before swivelling their beam over the canal to split the trees, splintering trunks and branches. Cherry blossoms exploded outward, tossed to float on the canal as they turned the ungodly weapon on the nearest shops and tidy little urban homes, cleaving wood and stone into ruin.

*There’s no one inside* Osomatsu’s crashing spirit cast for any silver lining, dry heaving with the proximity of pure dark energy. *There’s no one inside …*

‘Look well, Salamander. See what you have made us destroy.’

‘Don’t you *dare* put this on him,’ Todomatsu trembled tear-streaked wrath. Choromatsu’s limp weight balanced over his shoulder and hateful common sense were all that restrained him from a light-fuelled rampage. If any of them had a chance … against that thing … it was their Unicorn. But Totty … He was already … so tired … ‘This is on *you*, so don’t … you … dare …’

Retracting with a spine-tingling hum, Kiuutsurui’s eye of void re-oriented. ‘NO!’ Osomatsu screamed; he could barely even twitch. A feeler slammed his head hard enough into the tower to toss stars in his eyes. Blinking through dizzily, he saw in horrific slow motion as the beam fired, lancing directly at his brothers. It’d vapourise them on impact, it’d slice Jyushimatsu’s tree in two and crush their poor brave brother while he blissfully snored …

Todomatsu could have escaped. But the Unicorn squared his stance, defiant. He wouldn’t abandon the others. Osomatsu’s sobbing, devastated pride in the youngest swelled to amazement when Totty swept his gleaming sceptre to meet the void. Throwing an opposing beam of pure starlight, the cataclysmic clash of light on darkness shredded the night, every hair on Osomatsu’s broken body gone rigid.

The captive Salamander mesmerised, he watched as the Unicorn strained against Kiuutsurui, every shred of light left to him pushing for all it was worth as the beast fought to regain ground, their point of shattering impact shivering back and forth like a magnet suspended by opposing forces. It was Kiuutsurui who finally bowed out, disengaging with a guttural … it was almost a whimper. Todomatsu keeled over, dragging Choromatsu with him. Osomatsu didn’t need Souudai’s commentary to know: Totty couldn’t oppose another blast.

But could Kiuutsurui fire again? Not straight away. In too much pain to notice the fresh onslaught as his body clacked violently upside-down, Osomatsu dimly noted the feelers’ sluggish movements, loose and slack as they tossed him away like a ragdoll. Falling obliviously and convinced he was finished, his helpless carcass cracking apart on concrete and setting off a million bombs in the process, he was still mumbling—‘They’re weak now … they’re weak …’—when the light pressure looping his waist let up. But it took Choromatsu’s hoarse shout to jerk him halfway to reality. ‘Ahn?’

‘Ahn?! Where is she? What’s going on? Choromatsu, talk to me!’ he heard Totty demand. But Choromatsu said nothing, breathing hard and apparently the only one Ahn would grace with a direct line of communication. ‘Tell me what …’
‘Look …’ Osomatsu croaked. Flat on his back beside Jyushimatsu, the stricken Salamander’s line of sight dazedly traced a tiny white speck as it hurtled towards them. At the top of the tower, Karamatsu’s deadened eyes followed its race towards the fortress.

‘AHN!’ screamed Todomatsu. ‘No, what are you doing?!’

‘Ahn?’ Osomatsu rasped, jumbled mind making connections at a bewildered snail’s pace. She’d streaked straight past them before it clicked. ‘Ahn … no! It’s dangerous, you’ll set off …’

But their mentor’s bare weight flew over mines, too light and too fleet to trigger them. Oversized paws springboarding her a mind-blowing height for her size, Ahn’s calculated momentum carried her straight into the side of the beast. Immediately, she unsheathed her tiny claws, latching there. Osomatsu’s heart missed a dozen beats. But she didn’t slip, hanging off the wet tower. As nimble as the cats she looked down her nose at, Ahn took a bare moment to catch her breath and compose herself. Then she began to scurry up the fortress wall.

But Ahn … wasn’t she afraid of heights? ‘Ahn, get down! What the hell are you …’

Osomatsu broke off, screaming as Todomatsu wrenched the spike from his face.

‘You’re going after her,’ Totty ordered, smacked into the outer limits of his ability to cope as he thrust his sceptre into Osomatsu’s heaving chest. But the Salamander was paralysed, unhinged limbs splayed akimbo. That should have been a breeze for the Unicorn. But his exhausted glow rivalled only a lonely candle that burned in an endless stretch of night. Osomatsu barely felt the nudge. His own spark puffed frailly, laced with taint and unable to ease his joints back into their sockets. ‘Please, please heal …’

‘Foolish Alliance brat,’ the lieutenant scoffed overhead. ‘Can’t you accept your guardians are finished? Get rid of her.’

‘NO!’ Todomatsu screamed as Kiuutsurui twitched one narrow feeler, busy regenerating and not caring to put much effort into flicking her away. ‘AHN, WATCH OUT!’

One instant the limb curled to lazily knock the tiny creature flailing. Then it froze, pulled up in mid-air. Osomatsu had barely the energy to turn his head.

Choromatsu staggered to his feet. One hand gripping his injured shoulder—Osomatsu could just see where his gakuran had been eaten away, as though by acid—he braced himself, his other trembling hand outstretched. Snatching the airspace of every single feeler that wreathed the beast, the Wyvern locked Kiuutsurui motionless.

‘I seem to recall you’ve been in this situation before, Wyvern,’ the lieutenant noted quietly as, plainly terrified, Ahn progressed inch by crawling inch up the monster’s vertical body. Their entire bulk strained for freedom from the Wyvern’s tenuous grip. ‘We all saw your clash with our lord’s favoured. And you aren’t doing so well, are you? That must hurt unbearably.’

‘Choromatsu-niisan …’ Todomatsu moaned. Choromatsu whimpered, crumpling to his knees. Already pasty, the unhealthy hue worsened, sweat pouring down his face—damn it, he trained harder than Osomatsu, he knew his limits! He knew them almost too well—he hadn’t even risked airbending that stupid screaming toad! This was a million times worse, he knew he couldn’t handle it! But somehow Choromatsu held, Kiuutsurui’s feelers quivering under his tenacious restraint. A snowy ant on a skyscraper, Ahn climbed as fast as her tiny muscles could fight gravity.

If she made it over the battlements, Karamatsu would crunch her under his boot.
Shit, this was totally insane! This was insane, it’d kill them both—and they called Osomatsu reckless? What the hell were they thinking? Distraught, he struggled to inflate his squished lungs like he needed them to scream. ‘Ahn, what the hell are you trying to do? Get down right …

‘Osomatsu!’ Her petrified timbre finally pierced his shoddy consciousness. ‘Please, trust me!’

‘Not unimpressive. Wyvern, you are the intriguing one,’ Souudai continued lightly—bastard, the bastard, talking like they shared a pot of tea while Choromatsu choked, wound bubbling through his fingers and blood starting to seep from his nose. ‘The Salamander—and your invincible Unicorn,’ they added, the Doll of Darkness laughing as Totty held back tears, struggling to rekindle his light. ‘Seem to lose strength in a pinch. You, on the other hand—you gain it. Rather like the doll. I suppose we should be thankful it isn’t storming.’

Osomatsu saw his brother’s lolling head tilt slightly left. Towards …

They spotted the downed power lines the same instant, snapped and sparking. ‘… Ahn,’ Choromatsu could hardly slur, eyes rolling back in his head. ‘Let … go …’

What?! She was still 10 metres from the top, had he lost it? But before Osomatsu could shout out, Ahn had already sheathed her claws in total trust. ‘AHN!’

The tiny kitten tumbled. But she didn’t fall more than a metre. Flashing quick as lighting, Choromatsu loosed his hold on the beast and, with the tiniest extension of his finger, caught their little mentor and sent her soaring in flight, arcing straight over the battlements. One more gust left in him, the Wyvern swept up the sputtering power lines.

Osomatsu gaped as electricity surged, conducted by Kiutsurui’s own protective fluids—not so protective now. Tokyo’s power supply barbequed the beast where they stood.

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Agony. It reigned exquisite in every vein, every fibre of his being. Unrelenting and unending, it toyed and caressed and tortured, breaking him in a million devastating ways, each passing moment stretched to infinity until time itself ruptured, unravelling in shambles. Karamatsu fell, tumbling into the gaping maw of a giant. His blasted throat burbled screams that trailed into nothingness behind him, the ravaged aural banner of a demise that just … wouldn’t … take him. Not until he’d been bled dry, leached of every miserable smidgen worth claiming.

But at last—at long last—the deities had mercy on his soul. Finally, darkness consumed him.

He wasn’t sure how long he ceased to be. But the vague thought did strike Karamatsu: there was an awful lot more to blank oblivion than he’d imagined. For one, it was soft. Almost a pillow, worn and familiar—that couldn’t be right. He didn’t deserve such comfort. Karamatsu frowned, confused. Eventually a second thought crossed his mind—sluggish, but inexplicably puttering on. This wasn’t oblivion. It couldn’t be. But something doing a fine impression of it clogged his senses. His nose, ears and mouth were dammed—the substance felt almost like cotton wool, but thicker. Dense. More packed around him, muffling all sensation of touch. But as Karamatsu gleaned knowledge from the scant tidbits his surrounds offered, enough fell away from his eyes to see.

It was so dark, he wasn’t sure they’d even opened. He couldn’t even know they were truly his eyes, or only his own impression of sight. Karamatsu might observe only as he would in dreamworlds. But none of the warped realities his subconscious had offered up in slumber measured up to this.

He was embedded in an endless dark realm. Buried to his chest and arms extended, they were
planted in the world to the elbow. Barely blinked into this impossibility, his vision dazzled as all
shivered with a flash of crackling violet luminance. That cold glow rippled across the landscape—
Karamatsu couldn’t call it light. To call it so was a slight to that life-giving source. Sight painted with
splotches, for an instant he was sure he saw the upright crosses of a hundred human forms, pinned in
every direction.

Seeing all those imprisoned, Karamatsu knew he suffered the same fate. At once, the quiet comfort
became a creep on his skin. A tight somersault turned in his stomach, as though he’d trusted a man
for years only to realise in the space of second something wasn’t right.

He’d agreed to this. Kuro had desired only his promise. And he’d given it. To spare Jyushimatsu.
The young cultist owned Karamatsu’s shell, obedient to his every whim. God knew what atrocities
he made the second born complicit in while his soul rotted …

Karamatsu’s head drooped. It was worth it … Jyushimatsu was worth it … And he’d never cause his
brothers pain again, he realised with a desolate sniffle. He had no cause to complain. So why? Why
couldn’t he stop crying …

Karamatsu’s next sob splattered. Startled alert, his hearing pricked up. Amid the distorting buzz, the
faintest brush of sound stimulated his eardrums. Straining, willing his ears be cleared, slowly the hum
sharpened into … screams. Karamatsu gulped, his own destroyed throat scraping as his stomach
tightened.

But there was something else. ‘ …matsu? Is …’

Language. Words. And they sounded close. Shifting with difficulty, the second born Matsuno turned
his head.

‘Todomatsu? Oh god, oh god, no …’

Karamatsu narrowed his eyes. Gradually, his sketchy sight defined enough to make out the prisoner
beside him. ‘No, they got you, too …’

‘Atsushi-san,’ Karamatsu recognised the handsome young man. They’d met all of once, entirely by
accident and to Todomatsu’s eternal mortification. But he’d seen photographs, the purikura sticker
strips Todomatsu showed off after long days spent in his friends’ company.

‘You’re … not Todomatsu,’ Atsushi realised, sagging against his smoke-like bonds. ‘Thank god,
thank … sorry,’ he added haltingly, cheeks as pale as death gaining a faint tinge. ‘I don’t mean I’m
glad you’re here … don’t struggle,’ he advised as Karamatsu couldn’t help but strive for freedom; the
touch of shadowed fleece to his skin was now sinister, almost nauseating. But it sucked at his body
like a vacuum, pulling him taut until he gasped.

‘Are you all right? It’ll ease up soon,’ Atsushi tried to comfort as Karamatsu heaved shallowly,
barely breathing his chest squeezed so tight. Todomatsu’s closest friend spoke from experience. But
even without that, Karamatsu felt he’d listen to every word Atsushi said. Imprisoned on a dark
landscape, he still emanated sad strength, showing Karamatsu kindness despite his own woe. He
could see why Todomatsu loved him so much.

‘Are you okay?’ Atsushi repeated levelly until Karamatsu nodded. ‘Listen to me. We’ll get through
this, someone will save us … which one are you?’ Atsushi gave him something simple, trying to
distract him. ‘Are you Osomatsu? Choromatsu?’

Karamatsu wheezed, but finally the bands around his chest loosened. ‘Ka-Karamatsu.’
‘Matsuno Karamatsu.’

Karamatsu started. Surprise had never hurt so badly, shoulders near wrenched out of joint. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘The screaming? They’re always screaming,’ Atsushi said quietly. His hoarse voice gave the distinct impression he spent most of his time screaming, too.

‘Matsuno Karamatsu, if you can hear me, please answer!’

‘Not the screams … my name. S-Someone’s calling me …’

Karamatsu angled his head as far as it would go, seeking out the voice. He saw no one. Regardless, young and sweet, it descended on him like an angel as it called him again. ‘Matsuno Karamatsu!’

‘I …’ he answered self-consciously. ‘I’m here.’

‘You must break free,’ the voice pealed, one bright speck in endless dark fields. ‘Your world and so many more need you. Your brothers need you.’

‘Wh-Who are you?’ Karamatsu whispered. ‘What do you mean … my brothers need me?’

Atsushi’s hanging head snapped up. But still Todomatsu’s friend didn’t hear as the angel pleaded, so clear she might have stood by Karamatsu’s side, a heavenly pillar of strength. ‘Please, there’s no time. Find a way to disrupt your master’s control, free yourself!’

‘I tried,’ he said hollowly, slumping into his bonds. ‘I can’t.’

‘The Liberation Force shall succeed in your capture if you don’t!’

‘So?’ Karamatsu replied, gone dull. Whatever the Liberation Force was, he was a sorry lifetime past giving a damn. His brothers didn’t need him. God, he’d sunk so low even angels lied to him. ‘Who cares?’

‘I do! I believe in you, Matsuno Karamatsu!’ the angel cried. ‘You are no one’s puppet, you’re stronger than they are! That night on the beach you let nothing hold you back, allowed nothing to stand between you and your brothers.’

Karamatsu’s trembling jaw dropped. ‘H-How do you …’

‘It should have been impossible. But your strength of purpose, your overwhelming determination to defend those you love got you onto that beach. I know it’s hard,’ she said, spilling forth such compassion Karamatsu wept. ‘I know it hurts, I’m so sorry to ask this of you. But I must. They may have stolen your soul, but it is still yours. Take it back!’

Almost spurred by her conviction, he squirmed his imprisoned shoulders. ‘Karamatsu!’ Atsushi shouted when he choked, cruel shadow ripping him apart.

‘Matsuno Karamatsu,’ the angel tried to get through to him. ‘Those aren’t your real arms, you can do this …’

‘No,’ Karamatsu shuddered out, haggard as darkness puckered up his nerveless arms. Heaven’s messenger was wasted on him. ‘I can’t take it, it’s not worth it … I’m not worth saving …’

‘They think you are!’ Karamatsu sniffed damp disbelief, but the angel refused to hear otherwise. But through his ears drowned in pain-riddled white noise, he still heard her voice quaver. Despite
himself, Karamatsu found something unbearably sad in that childlike tremble. When angels despaired, what hope was there for those condemned to Earth? ‘Your brothers fight for you, Matsuno Karamatsu! This isn’t what I hoped for you,’ she outpoured sorrow. ‘If there was any other way … but if you don’t do something,’ the angel’s words fired straight and true as an arrow. ‘Your brothers will die for you!’

Karamatsu was at sea. ‘What do you mean, they’ll die for me? They’re not even here, why would they … how would …’

Karamatsu drew a long, shaking breath. At long last, more than six months of uncertainty clicked irrefutably into place. ‘Are my brothers the … the spectrum guardians?’

Without awaiting an answer, he tore at his bindings anew. They ate him like a bear trap. Karamatsu flung his head back and howled. ‘No, stop! Karamatsu, what are you doing?!’

Karamatsu heard Atsushi’s yells. But they had no meaning, the drone of desperate sound unable to penetrate roaring agony as it crunched sense to dust. He wouldn’t last, he’d shatter in a thousand pieces, he’d …

It wasn’t real. He toiled to remember as he splintered, nerve by nerve, his body crumbling in ruin … His body was healthy and whole, it was out there, he had to escape …

Just … a little … more … Eyes rolling wildly, with superhuman effort Karamatsu refused to give in. The darkness struck again, its only purpose to break him. Mind ravaged, he forgot where he was and how he’d come there. Who he was grew hazed, ill-defined. But he could never forget who he fought for. He slammed that one thought left to him, the one thought darkness couldn’t steal away, into his prison again and again and again, fashioned in a battering ram. They need me … they need me …

Feeling the devouring shadows slacken in shock, Karamatsu wrested from deep within a strength to level cities. With a warrior’s scream and a final burst of cosmic power, he wrenched himself up and out. ‘You did it!’ the angel cried as he ascended, fast like he rode a cresting wave. ‘I knew you could, you possess depths unlike any … are you all right?’

Karamatsu couldn’t answer, panting as his essence—whatever this self was—wracked with the aftershock of excruciating escape. As limp as a newborn kitten, he could only flop into the world’s embrace as it rose beneath him. Poor kind Atsushi and his fellow condemned were left behind.

Somewhere high over his head, a tiny flicker emerged like a candle in the night. Karamatsu steered his insubstantial steed towards the light. Closer, the dark landscape began to fade around him. He almost felt his body again. Something rumbled beneath his feet; it should have knocked him sprawling. But his soulless husk still held the controls, massive boots planted firm and wide through the tremor … what was he wearing?

Smelling something like burnt rubber, with that extra sensory boost Karamatsu seized consciousness … in a manner of speaking. Mind fog blurred him. But he did grow acutely aware just how high above ground level he was. His innards dropped—what was the meaning of this? He stood taller than the trees, what could possibly …

He suspended his unhelpful denials and accepted a tower had sprouted in his go-to park. He’d been imprisoned in a shadow realm and singled out by an angel. Insta-grow structures weren’t a colossal stretch beyond his imagination.

Stranded in a body cut off from his command, Karamatsu spotted movement below. Not a lot. But he’d know that hooded fashion anywhere. The red and green guardians were on the ground. The
white one flitted to attend them—they were wounded, he realised with a jolt. Just beyond the guardians sprawled a fourth figure. Their hoodie was a beacon of sunshine in the despairing night … Jyushimatsu. His loving brother …

The spectrum guardians were his brothers! That was Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and little Totty down there!

‘And the Wyvern proves yet again they have more than half a brain between them.’

A voice curled by his ear as the discordant clash of truth and all Karamatsu had once known as right and reasonable bowed him to tipping point. ‘But what have we here?’

His soul clenched. But Karamatsu could only watch, helpless as he raised a boot and brought it down hard. A high-pitched yelp ensued. Stooping, he unwillingly hoisted a snow-white kitten into the air. The tiny creature writhed and spat, suspended by the scruff of its neck. One paw bent at an unnatural angle—god, he’d crushed it. The poor innocent thing … But as sick as he felt then, it was nothing to the stab he suffered as he slanted a blade beneath the defenseless kitten.

Karamatsu struggled. But he couldn’t move a muscle. He’d pushed his head above water, but he was still anchored to that shadowed realm. He felt its oily brush, creeping to pull him back down.

Karamatsu shuddered, fighting it.

‘Matsuno Karamatsu!’ His angel cried, her voice coming from the kitten he manhandled. Tattered as it was, his newfound acceptance of unreal let him draw the link: the creature he dangled before him was somehow the very angel who’d guided him from darkness. But it took another devastating moment to realise his angel was Ann.

No! He wouldn’t hurt her, her wouldn’t …

‘Do it,’ the voice breathed, low and disturbing … Kuro! Heart flipping unpleasantly, Karamatsu felt the other’s hands on him. One arm crooked over his neck, he supported the cultist’s limp weight. Kuro’s other arm crept around his waist. Unbearably hot, the young man’s lips almost kissed the fine hairs of his neck. ‘Come on, I know you want to …’

He wanted Kuro to get the hell off him! Sickened by the cultist’s touch, Karamatsu strained to do something—anything—before his puppet strings obeyed. With a push that left him teetering on a cliff’s edge, Karamatsu seized sluggish control. Barely thinking, he forced the muscles of his hand apart like he prised open the jaws of a lion.

The sword clattered at his heavy gothic boots. A dribble of blood oozed from his nostril, tickling his lip. ‘What is he doing?’ A new voice, distant and eerie, filtered through Karamatsu’s ears.

‘… Ah, I see,’ Kuro whispered, somehow loving that Karamatsu resisted. The cultist’s frail grip tightened, fingertips pressing into his firm stomach. Karamatsu’s leather-clad body locked rigid. ‘Clever boy. Let’s see how long you last … Soldier Kiuutsurui, I must say, a somewhat … less than stellar performance on your part. And Lord Takuu thinks so highly of you.’

‘Mind your tongue, slave.’ A bowel-voiding rumble resonated from the monolith itself. In any other scenario, Karamatsu might have come over faint—the tower had spoken. But the world already erased patch by patch as a force infuriated—his master—pushed back, hungering to bury him. ‘You think to defy me, human? Your struggles are both pathetic and futile. Once I destroy the guardians, I will crush you so deep into darkness that your very …’

The terrifying threat took second place as pain prickled through Karamatsu’s afflicted awareness.
Yanking his eyelids apart, he saw Ann coiled around his forearm, a furry burr with needle-sharp attachments. Karamatsu seized that god-sent focal point, bucking from the black bag cast over his head before the strings tightened.

Squirming free, Karamatsu unexpectedly found himself in full control. ‘They are weakened, but already they regenerate. They might reclaim you at any moment!’ Ann exclaimed, perfectly-phrased language somehow delivered direct from her brain to his. Retracting her claws and bad paw dangling, she hurled her tiny form into his chest. Karamatsu threw up an arm, catching her against his sprinting heart. ‘Go!’

Kuro still clinging heavily to him, he threw the cultist off and stumbled into a run. The tip of something sharp bit into his back. Crying out, he faltered as it raked through his flesh. Convinced the unhinged young cultist chased him down with the blade he’d dropped, Karamatsu almost went to pieces. But:

‘No!’ he heard Kuro cry, for the first time sounding anything but smug. ‘Don’t damage him! Your shield, Lieutenant! Must I think of everything?’

Cold sweat stinging, Karamatsu put as much distance as he could between himself and the cultists. Not nearly enough, he caught himself heavily on the battlements opposite. Expecting cold metal, Karamatsu gasped as the parapet sunk slightly with his dead weight, dry and scaly and warm, as though lifeforce pulsed beneath.

There was nowhere left to run.

‘You must jump!’ Ann cried, the stalk of boots and ominous swish of a cloak no more than three paces behind. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu will catch you, trust him!’

Ruined concrete lay below. A few endless metres further out glittered the canal. Perhaps fate would bend his way and by some miracle he’d hit the water. He’d go under, like he was supposed to … god, if he hadn’t hesitated like a goddamn idiot, none of this would have …

*Karamatsu, please!*

Hideous claws stretched to snag him. A future 30-metres straight down trumped an eternity under Kuro’s thumb. No more hesitating, Karamatsu hugged Ann tight and flung himself over the parapet.

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‘KARAMATSU! JESUS FUCKING CHRIST ALMIGHTY NO!’

Barely revived, Choromatsu soared to intercept. Todomatsu’s arms clamped around the eldest, pinning his pointless struggles as Karamatsu plunged in free fall. A black sail slithered from the battlements, Souudai bending their shield to catch their plummeting commander. But Choromatsu blew faster than a hurricane, weaving his element to knock their brother far from capture. Seized in total concentration, he threw every thread of focus into slowing Karamatsu’s fall.

‘Choromatsu!’ Osomatsu yelled, seeing events unfold with horrifying clarity. ‘Watch where you’re … no, no, NO!’

But Choromatsu was done. Barely strength to hold himself in the air, he gusted straight into terrible miscalculation—not miscalculation, holy shit, he’d have known his odds the moment he took flight. And he … did it anyway. The Wyvern smacked straight into Souudai’s sheen of darkness. Suspended on their rippling shield, Choromatsu convulsed uncontrollably, like a bug choking on insect spray. If he wasn’t wearing his mask, Osomatsu knew he’d be vomiting.
Todomatsu sobbed into his shoulder. Osomatsu watched, helpless as furious tentacles rallied, still smoking from electrocution. A great splash sounded as Karamatsu struck the canal, managed to flip onto his back to protect fearless little Ahn from the impact. And an eviscerating crunch splintered as a feeler thicker than a suspension bridge support came down on Choromatsu’s back. The Wyvern’s magical spine crushed to powder.

‘No …’ Osomatsu choked, Todomatsu clinging and rocking them back and forth as their brother’s sanity-shredding scream collapsed in a broken whimper. With a satisfied “hmph”, the lieutenant retracted their shield. Choromatsu tumbled, a handful of tentacles helping him down, almost passing him between them until one claimed the pleasure of hurling his ruined body into the canal—it made personally sure his head cracked the edge. Sympathetic agony exploded, a mallet to the back of Osomatsu’s skull. The Salamander and Unicorn felt their telepathic connection jar loose from the Wyvern, leaving deafening silence to ring.

‘… What do we do?’ Todomatsu trembled, Osomatsu too spent to even take his hand. ‘Niisan? Ahn? What do we do? Please tell me, I don’t know …’

‘Cowards,’ Kiuutsurui taunted as Souudai hitched a ride down. The invalid Doll of Darkness bent upside-down over their muscled shoulder, the lieutenant strode to the canal’s edge. A black military cap floated almost in reach. Claws twining, they fashioned their malleable shield into a net. Osomatsu’s fists clenched weakly. Bastard, the fucking bastard … ‘You lifted not a finger to save your ally, you left them to suffer alone. Foolish doomed cowards …’

The beast’s mirth vibrated deep; concrete miraculously unscarred split apart. They were intimidating enough. But Kiuutsurui was a whole lot more threatening when Osomatsu couldn’t even sit up. And they still had brothers left to save.

At least Choromatsu … Osomatsu swallowed what felt like a molten boulder. Choromatsu had zapped the fucker good. No way could he have survived that punishment. But Karamatsu was still out there. He had to reach him, before Souudai fished him out. And before he drowned.

Somehow …

‘Todomatsu, don’t worry about me,’ he rasped at the keening youngest, grimacing as the Unicorn’s healing presence finally popped his joints into alignment. Sluggishly, Osomatsu tested his fragile body, barely glued together. He could move again … sort of. But he felt so sick, stricken by cold fever and eye swollen to high hell. His wasted spark barely flickered, inundated with taint …

‘I’m fine, look after Jyushimatsu. Ahn, what’s going on?’ he sought out their mentor. No response. Something ominous slid through his gut. Karamatsu had sheltered her, but Ahn was so small. Had the fall … ‘Ahn? Are you …’

‘We have destroyed your ally,’ the beast uttered, pleasure rumbling to the core of the earth. ‘Now it is your turn. You cannot lurk at the edge of the inevitable forever, guardians …’

One moment, the beast lorded their destruction. The next, a geyser matched it in might, bursting white and spraying from the canal.

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The courageous emerald hero saved him … Choromatsu saved him. His execution by gravity sabotaged, Karamatsu didn’t die on impact. But he still hit water hard.

Oxygen pounded from his lungs. His thoughts scattered just as violently, shock vibrating to the tips
of his extremities, the very crumbling edge of his consciousness. Karamatsu floated, stunned. Then, weighted by his strange dark costume, the depths wrapped their coils around him, pulling him under. Claiming him …

This was what he’d wanted, the distant thought chanced upon him in the void. To sink beautifully beneath the waves. Never again to cause suffering. Never again to suffer. This was what he’d wanted … what he’d thought he’d wanted …

‘Matsuno Karamatsu …’

The weight of water pressed in. The pressure … Dazed and drifting down, Karamatsu gazed at the heavens beyond the surface. Burning pinpricks millions of kilometres away distorted with the ever-changing ripples overhead. Only during power outages when he and his brothers lay back on the roof to watch their celestial sparkle had Karamatsu seen so many stars grace his city.

‘Matsuno Karamatsu, please …’

Numbness drove pins deep inside him. Too deep for his body to even thrash as his lungs shrivelled and started to flood. Nothing processed. Nothing but cold and pain and pressure.

‘Karamatsu, I beg of you …’

His sheltering arms had drifted loose. But, shivering and waterlogged, Ann still huddled into his chest. Karamatsu blinked slowly down at her. Her paw was injured, he recalled distantly. But she still might have made the surface. He would gladly provide the springboard to her survival. But he felt claws dig into his deadweight chainmail, refusing to let him go.

She didn’t … wait for him to save her … did she?

‘I’m … so sorry.’ Barely able to think and wracked by guilt, Karamatsu unwittingly hacked litres straight through his airways. ‘D-Dear lady … my angel …’

‘You’re still … you’re alive! By the Alliance! I offer you a temporary power contract—accept, hurry!’

Sodden chest afire, Karamatsu felt something press against his heart. Cylindrical, metallic … On automatic, he fumbled, closing numbed fingers around it. ‘… Matsuno Karamatsu? Can you hear me?’

The surface broke with a torrent of bubbles. But his world swam in wavering shapes, dimming and blurring together; he barely registered the stars spiral into surreal masterpiece. But he did notice when Choromatsu rolled limply into the canal. He couldn’t tell by his face. But even through the murk, the vivid green of his costume marked him. He floated as though dead. Losing to unconsciousness, Karamatsu saw countless ribbons of blood diffuse into cloud, his brother’s hood soaked crimson …

‘Choromatsu!’ Ann screamed grief as Karamatsu wreaked deserved punishment on himself one last time, dying faster inside than out as Choromatsu began to sink. His brother died … because of him. They’d perish together, he was disgusting for taking any shred of comfort from that. How could he abandon Osomatsu and Todomatsu … to bear the tragic news of their precious third born’s passing … to Mother and Father?

Karamatsu ached—his poor heart. His poor loving parents … His poor brothers …

Poor Ichimatsu …
His eyelids drifted shut. How could he … do this to them? He was the worst … he was … he was …

Someone worth saving.

His brothers fought monsters and evil cultists … for him. Choromatsu died for him. Why would they … if they hated him …

Unless it was true. No ifs or buts. No conditions. If they truly … they actually … they loved him! How could they not? He despised himself—Choromatsu’s shadowed body sank past him, he was repulsive, he was vile! But some kind of happiness welled in his starving heart, at last finding him as the lights went down on his short life, as deep and pure and radiant as he almost remembered from childhood. He’d been such a happy child. They’d both been … him and Ichimatsu … Karamatsu had never dreamed he could feel so happy again …

But it was time … to say goodbye …

‘No one can defeat this beast but you!’ Ann’s frantic voice swam in a million echoing pieces. ‘Do you accept? … Please! If you die too, I … I …’

‘I … accept,’ Karamatsu’s thoughts finally floated to answering, not sure what he accepted or how long she’d pleaded for his word. He only hoped to ease her unjust passing.

The slender tube in his hand … when had that gotten there? He couldn’t remember. But it pulsed, warmth shooting down his chilled fingers. Bewildered, Karamatsu’s eyes opened, seeing its silvered sparkle as heat sank through his skin, thawing his chest and failing heart beneath. The invigorating warmth spurred the suffocated organ to soldier on, just another few beats. All but drowned, Karamatsu’s fogged head cleared. ‘Wh-what …’

‘Repeat after me, quickly: by this contract I submit my depths to salvation!’

Karamatsu stared, wasting precious seconds of borrowed time. Ann wasn’t an angel. Not in the heavenly sense. But was she … a companion? An animal companion … like the magical girls had in those old shows Choromatsu liked …

Magical …

Was this … how his brothers had become …

‘You can save them, but you must swear by your contract! By this contract …’

The kitten’s eyes grew round. Breath cleverly rationed, her little lungs could hold out no longer. Grief and defiance lodged beneath Karamatsu’s skin. His grip on the unearthly implement grew brutal. If Ann drowned tonight, he realised in a turbulent rush, it wouldn’t be because of him.

His anger redirected, Karamatsu’s eyes hardened, lifting to the surface and the true offenders hidden beyond. He hadn’t forced them to leap off that tower. He hadn’t attacked his brothers. He hadn’t killed Choromatsu …

Whirling the tube with a flourish as he bumped to the trash-strewn canal floor, with his last reserves Karamatsu roared love and fury to shake stars. ‘By this contract I submit my depths to salvation!’
A pulse centred on his own heart exploded outward. Waves roared like thunder. And with an
almighty crash, transformative waters caught him up in their spray. Amazed as forces far beyond his
world raised him up, Karamatsu’s flooded lungs emptied, the gash opened down his back
miraculously mended as his cultist leathers liquefied. Cocooned by that force of nature, the raging
torrent was somehow solace itself as power rose to soothe his battered soul—he was worthy, the
waters sang to him. He was enough. And for the first time in so long, he could believe it. Overcome
that he’d at last been set free, Karamatsu arced, arms swept back in majestic butterfly. Rapids surged
to meet him, breaking up his body from tip to torso where his element shimmered, solidifying against
his limbs. Swept from his fingers, the catalyst of his metamorphosis flowed to loop his hips, modelled
into a glimmering belt; a teardrop sapphire gleamed to clasp it. Water no impediment—every drop
was his, and only bore him higher—Karamatsu lunged to catch a shining shield; it plummeted as
though from heaven itself. The great weapon locked to his arm, he met the bottom of the canal
swivelled low. Rising fluidly, the magnificent coat he wore billowed in heroic splendour.

‘Cresting defender of innocents, Kraken!’

That was his voice. Karamatsu had just shouted with more cool and confidence than a rockstar. Him!
Still striking that proud pose compelled by magic, he breathed hard … he could breathe. An odd
metallic mask pressed over his nose and mouth, its mysterious properties synthesising oxygen. But he
didn’t pant to replenish his lungs, already filled to the bursting. It wasn’t even from shock …

What the hell was he doing? His brothers were inches from annihilation, and he wasted time posing?
Idiot! How could he be so disgustedly self-centred, what the hell was wrong with him? He was
despicable, he was …

The barrage still came, thoughts harsh and hateful. But they also came small and tinny, as though
through a poorly-tuned radio. Unimportant and flagrantly untrue—it wasn’t true, none of it!—the
abuse was the easiest thing in the world to disregard. He’d posed all of a moment; preening went
hand in hand with this kind of magical deal, no? And he’d lost so much more time to illness.
Karamatsu felt like a hero—he felt like a young god, all his doubt gloriously banished. He would not
derail. He would not hesitate. And he would never back down.

Karamatsu swivelled fluidly from his post-twirling rapture. His murky surrounds rendered startlingly
clear, he felt the disturbance through the water before it caught his eye—Ann struggled not five
strokes away, tossed by his transformation. Choromatsu drifted just beyond, his brother broken and lifeless.

He might have a miraculous rebreather, but his little angel’s lungs were empty. Not agonising over perfection or even how, Karamatsu flung out an arm. The canal flowed with him, reacting quicksilver to his barest movement, rushing to make his whim a reality. Somehow he’d known already, that the cool element was his to compel. That only made it all the more incredible. One with the water, he gathered Ann to him with a swirl. ‘Hold on, my angel—hold on, Ann.’

‘My name … is Ahn. P-Please hurry,’ she gasped with a frail splutter of bubbles. ‘I … don’t know … how long I …’

‘Ahn,’ Karamatsu corrected himself, tucking her securely behind his shield. Then, his heart so heavy, he conjured a gentle tide to retrieve his precious younger brother. Choromatsu, who had chosen Karamatsu’s life over his own. Choromatsu the Unfaltering. Choromatsu, his saviour evermore.

A strange glass stretched unsupported before his eyes, magic and technology fused in the most daring shades he’d ever flaunted. The elongated lens spiralled symbols in twinkling hues of blue as it focused on Choromatsu’s body. The characters were uselessly beautiful, conveying no earthly language Karamatsu recognised. But his grieving heart stalled when they twirled into perfect Japanese, bleeping vigorously—a heartbeat.

Choromatsu was alive?!

Karamatsu’s rapid movements blurred. Hooking his unconscious brother over his shoulder, he coiled to spring, summoning his element around him and channelling all the strength hope and valor gifted him directly into his knees. He shot like a cork from a champagne bottle. Water gushed to propel him upwards in a turbulent spin. Riding his geyser bareback, the clouded water lightened in seconds. Karamatsu broke the surface in a foaming rush.

Jetted high in the air by a glistening fountain, the rising young hero surveyed from a sudden bird’s eye view. The guardians hunkered on the edge of the battlefield by the tree that sheltered Jyushimatsu. Tall and sinewy, a cultist had lingered too near the canal edge—they were blasted head over boots by Karamatsu’s powerful spout. A defenceless Kuro tumbled with them, tangled in their sprawl. The chill that invaded the lining of Karamatsu’s stomach on seeing the manipulative young cultist was harrowing. But he shuddered once, then paid Kuro no more mind. He was a danger to no one in that state. And a far more pressing cause for concern loomed for his attention.

The tower. The beast.

Ahn coughing and spluttering down air, wedged safely between his shield and his chest, Karamatsu had his entire ascent to take them in. An honest-to-god monster born of grimmest nightmare, their tentacles suspended in shock; a fourth magical boy was clearly the last thing his immobilised foe expected to emerge from the canal. But the reprieve wouldn’t last. By the time he reached his soaring pinnacle, drawn almost even with their blinking battlements, the beast had cast off their disbelief.

A flurry of savage feelers whipped to intercept his descent—now that was an idea. His imagination a weapon, water leapt in synched response, siphoning litres upon litres into a writhing army of his own. His arms full, they streaked to defend, rivalling the beast with the barest tilt of his shoulders and hips. Karamatsu’s heart pounded thrillingly—this felt so natural, this felt wonderful!

‘Down here!’

 Barely out of range, the white-hooded guardian thrust their sceptre like its head weighed a tonne.
Twin chains drooped from it, sluggishly rolling a shimmering pink carpet over fractured concrete and craters. Deciding there was probably good reason for the grand gesture besides a hero’s welcome, Karamatsu angled his fall with a jet of sparkling water. Plunging through that cesspool of slithering tentacles, no harm could come to him, no twist or parry enough to penetrate his sea of defences—he was Neptune! He was Poseidon! He was …

Coming in way too fast! Something he thought was panic whirled through his chest, coat whipping madly and body streamlined, hurtling towards the narrow landing strip at breakneck speed. No man could walk away from an impact that devastating, what was he doing?! He was going to get them all killed …

But no. Come over giddy, Karamatsu laughed breathlessly, the mad rush of not of panic, but elation. Magic or adrenaline or some cloud nine combination, whatever it was he never wanted it to end. Karamatsu was a spectrum guardian. He didn’t know why he’d been chosen. But that didn’t matter, it never would. Because he’d never before felt so valued.

And did he forget? He was a hero now.

Unerring belief in his reinforced self, Karamatsu’s protective instincts remained unaffected. Coasting down as limbs of flesh and liquid clashed, he checked his two charges were secure, his lens spiralling the affirmative. Only then did he fulfil the overwhelming desire to give life to the positivity surging inside him, spinning in a spectacular aerial feat. Ahn’s faint moan kept him from pursuing a second somersault. But he had more reason to twirl than joyous release. His speed significantly tamed, Karamatsu twisted upright with inches to spare and slammed into his target. The gel-like substance rippled beneath his boots, absorbing most of the shock; he barely had to bend his knees. He did anyway. There may yet come a day when Karamatsu would forsake dramatic effect. But it was not this day.

‘Nice … landing,’ a murmur ambled into his mind, rewarding his attention to detail. With a gratified flourish, he directed a cascade to crash through a few skinny tentacles that snaked through his defences. Then, resettling Choromatsu’s limp weight over his shoulder—the bony third born had put on some healthy muscle, but right now Karamatsu could deadlift a whale if his honour ever rested on proving it—and strode swiftly beneath the rampage, droplets sprinkling like fresh rain. Laid over carnage just for him, the straight and narrow path led him directly to his brothers.

Tucked just out of sight behind the tree, Jyushimatsu was somehow fast asleep; his snores were at least as loud as the beast’s thunderous war cries. Todomatsu knelt among the roots. His quivering sceptre drooped, one white-gloved arm crumpling in exhaustion as he retracted his chains, dismantling Karamatsu’s path. His other clamped around Osomatsu. He only restrained their feisty eldest from force of habit. Beat up and broken, Osomatsu looked two seconds from blacking out. A sufficient hand’s breadth beyond the frenzied tentacles’ clutches, Karamatsu released his element. A great crash sounded behind him as the full body of water he’d twined defensively through the air dropped, gravity the only sculptor of its fortunes. A powerful ripple of air followed, like a massive flock of birds taken flight at once—the feelers hastily retreated. And not a moment too soon: series of blasts ripped through the battlefield, hurling dust and sea spray violently into the air—ah, good reason for a path, indeed. Not pausing to watch the explosions, Karamatsu hurried to his brothers’ side.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked urgently—he couldn’t speak, he realised. Not with his lips. But his thoughts travelled as easily to his brothers’ minds as they did to Ahn’s—they didn’t even need words. They weren’t shackled by mobsters. This was their secret. A secret Karamatsu now shared. ‘Brothers?’
‘Karamatsu … hey, man,’ Osomatsu eyes were glazed; his poor big brother could barely focus. ‘Looking … good …’

‘Karamatsu-niisan … ’ Todomatsu stared up at him like his eyelids had been sewn wide apart. ‘It’s you … it’s really you. But … but you’re their puppet! How … Ch-Choromatsu-niisan …’ he trembled when Karamatsu knelt, tenderly laying Choromatsu down. Practically shoving a dazed Osomatsu away, the youngest hurled himself at the third born’s side.

‘He’s in bad shape, but he’s alive,’ Karamatsu was quick to reassure. ‘And Ahn is …’

‘Ahn-chan!’ Todomatsu almost shrieked, spotting the tiny kitten as Karamatsu saved her from a nerveless tumble. ‘You’re all wet, you’re …’

That was all he managed, the rest frothing in indistinct nonsense. Admirably nimble after her cruel dunking, Ahn sprang mewling into the youngest’s affection—she was their mentor, his keen lens settled on a descriptor. The data flickered a little, but gamely threw up more for his magical brothers: Salamander, Wyvern, Unicorn.

Kraken.

‘Kraken …’

His ears quieted their explosion-induced blare of white noise, Karamatsu’s acute hearing detected a low rasp. ‘You … and the Wyvern … what did you do?!’

Amid the chaos, the costumed cultist had gingerly found their feet. Unceremoniously slung over their broad shoulder, Kuro surmounted indignant, his shallow breath downright deadly as he strained to regain his own two feet. ‘What … did you do with him? Where did you send … my …’

Karamatsu blinked. What in the world was Kuro on about? ‘They don’t believe spectrum guardians are human,’ Ahn shivered to enlighten him. ‘This puppet—’

‘The Doll of Darkness,’ Osomatsu hazily gave Kuro another name. ‘Smart-mouthed piece of shit …’

‘—must believe you spirited his slave—you, Matsuno Karamatsu—to safety. They cannot recognise you,’ Ahn finished, each new offering a curly-edged jigsaw piece. He had no hope of fitting this puzzle together. Doubtless he’d be regaled with the entire gripping tale soon enough.

‘Don’t fight me, doll—save your strength. What’s done is done.’

Karamatsu almost shivered, the tenor of the rail-narrow cultist hair-raising—they weren’t human. They couldn’t be. These alien beings could shapeshift. Transform into beasts. One was more than enough. His arms freed, Karamatsu gestured sharply, cracking a whip of water from the puddles at their feet. Surprised, the being almost stumbled, ducking to protect their vulnerable charge. But a decisive flick of their claws summoned a dark force to splatter the liquid weapon when Karamatsu snapped it for a second pass.

‘You’re late, Kraken,’ they called out, retreating step by measured step to place their back against the tower wall. ‘If we expected anyone to so demean themselves by aiding this pathetic race, it was you. The fact is as inescapable as your doom at my Lord Takuu’s claws: you have already failed them.’

‘Bullshit he has,’ Osomatsu spat weakly.

‘I have no idea what’s going on,’ Karamatsu lost not one drop of brimming confidence to admit it.
‘That’s … what Choromatsu said …’

‘Who’s Lord Takuu?’ he asked, seeking a slightly less tenuous grip on right here and now. ‘These are cultists, no? What are …’

‘Smash … their crystal,’ Osomatsu’s ragged breath came short. ‘Then we’ll explain … Ahn will, anyway. She’s … our …’

‘Brother?’ Karamatsu hooked his shield over his back like he’d done it a million times and hunkered by the eldest’s side. ‘Stay with me, Osomatsu.’

First monsters, now crystals? A bona fide fantasy plot unfolded smack in the middle of a modern-day Tokyo. Scores of fans would face lifelong disappointment if they ever learnt what wonders had passed unnoticed beneath their noses. Taking one of his heavy gauntlets, Karamatsu struggled to reignite Osomatsu’s stalled mental processes. But the eldest sank into stupor. ‘Todomatsu, what’s he talking about?’

‘Their crystal,’ Totty gulped. ‘Inside them. B-But we tried. Their walls are … their skin is too thick. We can’t … g-get …’

‘Never fear, dear brother. Leave this to me.’

They might as well ambush a mountain with sticks. But Karamatsu saw his brothers’ strenuous efforts hadn’t been in vain. The beast’s siege tower bulk smoked, pale flesh blotched and scarred. Dozens of their monstrous feelers hung in wait, slithering through air and ready to coil at an instant’s notice. But something about their vigilance seemed less than bold. Sheltering at their base, the narrow cultist’s many eyes were fixed on Karamatsu, decidedly wary. The newly-christened Kraken wasn’t the only one in unchartered waters here. But whether instinct or some other mysterious force at play, Karamatsu felt no such uncertainty. He marvelled at his talent, his sheer control—he might part the seas, if he wanted it enough. The mind-blowing prospect sent a tingle down his spine—the tingle of power’s great promise. And the responsibility that ever shadowed that gift.

But he couldn’t defend indefinitely. Even if he pinned their every flailing limb, they still had to get inside and destroy this crystal. Water was his unshakable ally, but he doubted a tsunami would breach this tower’s defenses. Not alone …

His lens immediately picked up on Karamatsu’s mental glissade from idea into inspired plan and spiralled firm support. No body of their own, this was the nearest the high-tech sunglasses could come to standing with him, shoulder to shoulder. Karamatsu was touched by their confidence. Ballads would be sung of their courage for a hundred years after the stout shades bleeped their last.

‘Totty, listen to me,’ Karamatsu turned to the youngest—the Unicorn. Their healer. Their captain and commander, such inspiring titles spiralled to decorate him. The thought of questioning Todomatsu’s suitability for the role never crossed his mind. Karamatsu saw his shrewd head, his unequivocal loyalty in troubled times, and his fierce heart. And Karamatsu saw their youngest standing tall at the forefront of armies. But it took a second, more compelling call for Todomatsu to raise his bowed head.

So big, so brown and beautiful, Todomatsu’s haunted eyes shone, encrusted by a few proud tears that refused to fall. Karamatsu’s heartstrings plucked a bittersweet anthem for their brave captain. He would lift this great burden from the youngest’s buckling shoulders. Just this once.

‘Totty, I need another path, straight to the beast. But before that, I need you to heal Osomatsu. Can you do that? Sweet Todomatsu,’ he appealed as the youngest clung to Ahn, his heartsick gaze caught
between their afflicted brothers. Choromatsu needed urgent attention—his life may depend on it. And Todomatsu was so tired. His power reserves blinked ominously in Karamatsu’s lens, almost run dry.

‘Just get him on his feet,’ Karamatsu said gently, gripping Todomatsu’s hand through his last moment of indecision. Then, with a shuffle on his knees and a soft clatter, Totty snatched up his sceptre. Little Ahn crawled beside an unmoving Choromatsu, pressing into the nest crafted of his crooked elbow.

Rising smoothly, Karamatsu reached over his shoulder for his shield. His eyes on what would soon again be a writhing warzone, he sensed more than saw the faint rejuvenating glow below him. A moment later, Osomatsu stumbled upright. ‘Are you with me, brother?’

Dazed, but ready, Osomatsu nodded. Raising his arm before him, Karamatsu rallied his element, manipulating water like a birthright.

‘Now that …’ Osomatsu declared, eyes sparking faintly as he took in the water-powered skirmish, ‘… is pretty cool. How the hell are you ….’

‘Does how truly matter?’ Karamatsu offered grand humility as he took control of his liquid symphony by the mere direction of his mind, placing a pre-emptive steadying hand at the wavering Osomatsu’s back. ‘Who am I to wonder at the vast potential of power thrust upon …’

Karamatsu broke off, smiling beneath his mask as Osomatsu prodded him a few times in the cheek, as though checking an artwork for forgery. ‘Yeah … It’s definitely you. So are we …’

The Salamander trailed like he’d completely forgotten how to finish a sentence. It was a moment before he thought to try again. ‘So … is there a plan, or are we winging this thing? What do you need … from me?’

‘Brother, all I ever need is your trust.’

‘Oh, is that all?’ Osomatsu shivered uncontrollably. One gauntlet pressed hard to his cheek. Karamatsu blanched half a shade in sympathy—his brother’s face was so swollen! Between the eldest’s fingers, he saw a wicked-looking welt spread stickily over his cheek, ominous dark spires marring the white of his eye where once-red vessels traversed.

‘Brother, you’ve suffered so much.’

‘Damn right.’

‘But I can get us through this. Osomatsu, do you trust me?’

Osomatsu grimaced. ‘Do I have a choice?’

‘Not at all!’ Karamatsu sang out gaily. Osomatsu groaned—his poor brother suffered so. Karamatsu couldn’t hold him responsible for a single harsh feeling. No more than he could hold himself accountable for the same. But Osomatsu trusted him. Karamatsu knew. He could feel it. ‘Follow me, brother. Stay close.’

Todomatsu’s forcefield path painstakingly relaid, barely a step forward and waves of projectiles descended on them, a windstorm of arrows. At least half made it through the renewed whipping frenzy. Unrerred, Karamatsu raised his shield. A dozen whining hisses and needle-sharp pings glanced off its sheen. Protecting their faces—Osomatsu’s bore sore proof of the spikes’ savagery—Karamatsu led his brother through the onslaught. The eldest trudged heavily at Karamatsu’s
shoulder, afflicted as direly by bemusement as his plentiful roll call of ailments.

‘So are you even paying attention to …’

He waved vaguely towards the Kraken’s weaponised waterways channeling around them, fending off the beast’s every attack as they followed Todomatsu’s pink chain-linked road. Glancing behind him, Karamatsu saw all their origins diverged somewhere around his own back. Good to know. ‘Should I be? Do you pay attention when you’re …’

Karamatsu imitated a burst of flames with his fingers, adding appropriate telepathic sound effects.

‘Nah, not really … well, a bit,’ Osomatsu mumbled, like concentrating was any reason for shame. ‘Not much—I’m kinda a natural, you know? But I’ve never had this many fires burning at once. And, you know … you’re kinda new at this.’

Osomatsu skirted woozily around having a fair point—did Karamatsu know what he was doing? Almost certainly not. He chose not to convey this blunt truth—poor Osomatsu had more than enough to trouble his mind. And a touch more focus could only help. ‘If my paying utmost attention will ease your mind, my brother and my blood, I shall most gladly oblige.’

At once, Karamatsu riveted all attention on his tough liquid tentacles. Already extensions of himself, trying to consciously contort his element felt strange, like he attempted to break down the minute processes of walking and breathing. And, now he thought about it, where did this water even come from? Most was certainly siphoned from the canal, but the brightest Karamatsu realised he’d summoned himself, pulled mysteriously from realms unknown. How …

A few serpentine streams lost form, collapsing with a chorusing round of splashes. A massive tentacle careened through the spray directly at them. ‘Oh no you don’t … stay back, you fiend!’

‘I take it back!’ Osomatsu gasped as Karamatsu swiftly emptied his head, looping a waterfall to toss the beast’s dominant limb off course. ‘Keep doing what you’re doing … and ouch, by the way. “Stay back, you fiend”? Seriously? Are you trying to kill me? Because I gotta say …’

Hidden by his mask, Karamatsu felt Osomatsu’s shaky humour as the eldest mimed a pistol to the temple. ‘At this point, it wouldn’t take much.’

‘Bang …’

One or two breaths a little quick, Karamatsu was slightly windswept by his mistake. But to live was to learn—he wouldn’t try thinking again any time soon. Reverted to feeling the flow of his cool element and loving every moment, Karamatsu held out an arm, stopping Osomatsu’s unsteady hobble in the shadow of the tower. That was close enough. ‘Brother, if I might trouble you for a bracing blaze? A little more,’ he said, overcome by compassion as Osomatsu confusedly produced a tiny tongue in his palm. ‘Everything you can give me.’

‘You asked for it,’ Osomatsu swallowed thickly, leaning heavily against Karamatsu for a moment. ‘But it’s oozing again. It won’t hurt them.’

‘Trust me.’

As though in the depths of brain fever, Osomatsu pushed off the second born’s support and stretched his arms before him. Almost sighing—such a rare sound from his happy-go-lucky brother—Osomatsu let his head clunk back. Eyes falling shut, it was almost like he made an offering. In his way, perhaps he did. Loath to leave his brother so exposed—Kuro and the towering cultist watched, too close for comfort—Karamatsu brandished one arm, swirling his index finger. Water leaped to
obey, wheeling around them in an impenetrable wall. The Kraken rapidly reassembled his arsenal, latching all his twisting water whips to this new source whirling around them. ‘Don’t worry, brother. I’ve got you.’

‘… I know.’

The next wave of spikes evaporated. Soaked concrete steamed. Grass withered, sucked dry as leaves crumbled to ash. Even his magical-imbued torrent wavered as Osomatsu erupted, exploding a pillar of fire into the night sky. Karamatsu knees almost weakened, staggered. He’d seen the red guardian on TV. But this …

‘Fuck …’ Osomatsu muttered, dim attention caught as a few noxious whisps of gas swirled, buffeted by the chaos. ‘Don’t breathe … Totty … can you …’

‘Amazing!’ Karamatsu heaped deserved praise upon him. ‘Incredible! The red-hot passion of your talents are rivalled only by the flaming heart of our ancient and irreplaceable sun!’

‘… I’ve done this before, you know.’

But Osomatsu couldn’t hide his dopey pleasure as Karamatsu directed his aim into the surrounding whirlpool. Heat incarnate boiled it in seconds. Bubbling ferociously, Karamatsu swept the whirlpool of volcanic springs up through his arsenal. Suddenly, tentacle on water-sculpted tentacle became tentacle on superheated water-sculpted tentacle. Though apparently fireproof, the beast was not immune to a sudden temperature hike of a few thousand degrees. All but the mightiest feelers shrank back, writhing as they scalded anew, cooking in their own thickened excretions.

Acting on pure impulse—it could almost be the will of another—Karamatsu fashioned a sphere so hot jets of steam vented from its rapidly-spinning surface. Almost as tall as he was, he shoved his shield behind the massive projectile, willing his weapons to meld. Eager to assist, his lens traced crosshairs on the tower, throwing up time estimating how long the way would remain clear. ‘Thank you, my friend.’

Locking his stance, Karamatsu drove his boots into the ground and rammed. The water cannon blasted into the tower, so powerfully the entire living structure swayed. Infuriated roars rocked the park.

‘Again!’ Osomatsu yelled, stumbling into a charge. Karamatsu already reloaded, firing as his brother swung drunkenly for the cultist. He pulled up just as fast, swearing as the alien being shielded. Whirling, he instead attacked the bubbling divot Karamatsu’s bombardment melted in the fleshy stone. Keen to get the willowy fiend—and Kuro—as far from his exposed brother as possible, Karamatsu rolled a distracting wave and sneaked another from behind as it broke against their forcefield, catching them up and tossing them both from the shelter of the tower.

Spluttering and quite literally in hot water, the cultist almost tripped over their sodden cloak as they rolled upright, scratching their claws down … empty space? Karamatsu’s head reeled as they dragged a jagged rent through reality itself, the torn night rippling around the fissure. ‘Fresh reinforcements are not a scenario we are prepared to face tonight. It’s time we left—do not argue. Your safety is paramount.’

‘Lieutenant,’ Kuro’s wrath slithered low and insidious in Karamatsu’s ears. ‘If it even crosses your mind to order me through that portal before we locate my …’

‘None but my Lord Takuu may give you orders,’ the lieutenant said, quite calm in the midst of turmoil. ‘I’m dragging you.’
With a bracing shake of his head, Karamatsu disregarded the pair, vanished as space stitched behind them—they were an issue for another day. Firing cannon after cannon, the Kraken was forced to abandon his bombardment to bolster their defences, the beast throwing caution to the winds to rally against the guardians’ pinpointed assault, hissing and searing as they wrestled body-to-body with boiling water. ‘Osomatsu, you can do it!’

Pummelling his fiery fists into the deep depression Karamatsu had gouged in the injured tower, Osomatsu ripped into the damage, finally digging both his gauntlets deep. With a drawn-out groan of superhuman effort, he tensed his shoulders and heaved, slowly prising open a narrow shaft. Gasping for breath, Osomatsu’s arms shook madly. Karamatsu swept a raging river to short circuit any plans to interrupt his brother’s heroic efforts, and saw with a surge of foreboding the edges of the passage distort, sluggishly oozing to fill the breach. Feeling Osomatsu’s own dread spike—he could be crushed in there!—Karamatsu flipped his shield from his arm to his sure hand, handling the oversized discus in what he somehow knew was a masterful grip. ‘Brother, get out of there!’

‘And where …’ Osomatsu huffed, ‘exactly … do you suggest …’

Not a doubt to drag him down, Karamatsu locked on and pivoted—once, twice, three times—releasing in perfect sync with his lens. Hard muscle and dynamic momentum behind it, the Kraken’s shield sliced air. Swearing, Osomatsu just managed to curl out of the way as it thudded into place above him, shoring up the narrow breach. ‘Nice,’ the eldest breathed, massaging his biceps. ‘I’m liking this badass, I’ll-fuck-your-shit-up Karamatsu. I totally thought I was going to …’

Osomatsu’s almost lighthearted comment died as the Kraken’s shield tilted ominously, the walls pressing in. Karamatsu’s heart clenched. With that kind of concentrated pressure, it could ricochet out of place any second. Their way inside vanishing all too fast, Osomatsu rammed his shoulders against the closing wall. Grunting, he levered himself up, shoving the flat of his boots into the flesh blocks opposite, a sentient prop crouched horizontal. ‘Go!’ he yelled, shoving with all his failing strength to keep it open.

Sprinting through the maelstrom, Karamatsu leapt straight for the fissure. Spinning, he propelled with sparkling jets of water and flew straight over his buckling brother, just sliding through the narrow opening. Nabbing his shield on the way, Karamatsu tucked and rolled into the belly of the beast—an open crevice plummeted beneath him. Angling his shield, he slammed its edge into a rock-like outcropping. The weapon dug in just enough to hold his dangling weight.

The fall wouldn’t have killed him, he reasoned, thudding heart easing with a logical nudge from his lens, suddenly analysing with more ease than the dogged tech had managed all night. It was barely two storeys down, it wouldn’t even have hurt …

With no more warning, the breach slammed shut. The ensuing scream froze Karamatsu’s magic-laced blood. ‘Osomatsu!’

Muffled by the beast’s thick hide, his brother’s agony right outside could have drifted on a breeze from countless worlds away. *It means he’s alive,* Karamatsu told himself over and over, his every swallow drier than the last. *He didn’t get out in time. But he’s alive. The sooner I find this crystal, the sooner we can help him and Choromatsu.*

Breathing to steady his shaken nerves—Osomatsu’s hoarse screams tapered into sobbing heaves, every one a cruel shard of shrapnel to his heart—Karamatsu stopped hanging and hoisted himself onto his shield. No more moonlight filtered in from outside, but the beast’s inwards gave off a ghostly luminescence. With the added glow of his lens, there was more than enough for his enhanced vision to latch onto and see with perfect clarity.
It didn’t look like the organic inner workings of a beast. It didn’t even look like the interior of a tower. The beast’s narrow heights were craggy and uneven, more like a cave an adventurer might boost and wriggle their way through for a thrill. With heightened strength and balance on his side, Karamatsu would make short work of it. Jumping across onto a rocky platform, he jimmed his shield free and began to climb through the claustrophobic tower, his sunglasses pointing him upward.

‘Kraken …’ The beast’s whisper suffused the air around him as Karamatsu squeezed vertically through gaps a squirrel would think twice about. ‘Come out. See what remains of your mighty Salamander after they dared defy this elite soldier of the Liberation Force.’

Finally enough open space to jump, Karamatsu clicked his heels and leaped a clean 10 metres. Getting his hand around a rocky knob on the underside of a platform that stretched across the tower’s breadth, Karamatsu spied an opening and swung his way over, digging in his fingertips for traction where there was nothing to grip.

Poking his head through the narrow fissure—there was barely enough room to squeeze his shoulders through—something impeded his fleet progress. Something like … a curtain. A hanging curtain of flesh, he realised with a passing cringe of revulsion—why was that so horrendous a slight to nature? This entire structure was fashioned of toughened skin and sinew.

Boosting himself through the warm living rock, Karamatsu planted his boots on relatively-even footing. The tattered curtain fell thick and heavy before him. He heard strange noises on the other side, almost like the clank of machinery. Raising his shield to boldly meet anything the other side might throw at him, with the back of one gloved hand Karamatsu pushed the curtain aside.

Something small and pale crouched inside.

Naked and humanoid, their hunched back faced Karamatsu as they pulled and pushed countless levers sticking up from a hellish console that ringed the creature, hemming them in. ‘Come out! Face me!’ The clearly harassed being pulled a dangling device—this beast’s rendition of a microphone—to their face to whisper, their cringing tones amplified into a bellow that rattled Karamatsu’s eardrums. ‘I am Kiuutsurui, and I can feel you tremble …’

The magical boy advanced a quiet tread. The creature spun around. Karamatsu’s breath hitched. But for a thin slash of a mouth, they lacked all but the barest of features, a novice’s first attempt at sculpting clay. On seeing—sensing?—the Kraken not five metres away, the slave-driven creature shrank back, curling over and wasted arms abandoned the levers to clutch at their head. But Karamatsu had already seen. A crystal shone darkly at their chest, precisely where a human heart would beat.

Karamatsu wrenched his eyes away to glance at his shield. His soaring vigor and self-belief remained. But seeing the creature cower before him, his magical high somewhat deflated. Whatever their story, whatever their allegiance. The poor creature was so afraid. Karamatsu couldn’t bring himself to bludgeon with the blunt instrument, harder than steel. It hadn’t been said outright, the situation too hectic. But Karamatsu inferred from what information he had: destroying the crystal would end the beast, without and within.

Moving slowly so as not to frighten them worse, Karamatsu hooked his shield over his back and raised his palms. The sad creature—the suffering heart and soul of Kiuutsurui—crumpled to the ground, shambling pathetically backwards to curl foetal against the inner wall of its console as Karamatsu vaulted the levers. They were crying—they didn’t have eyes, not in any human sense. But tears condensed on their upturned face, trickling down their hollow cheeks.

Karamatsu eyes dampened, his compassionate heart aching. Passing a hand over his eyes, the young
hero gathered his own tears in a tiny elemental sphere, closing it in his hand as he fell to his knees,
gathering the trembling creature in his arms. ‘Everything will be fine,’ he soothed unheard, willing
them to understand. ‘Don’t cry, we’ll be all right.’

Pressed tear-streaked cheek to cheek, Karamatsu gently cradled the creature, holding them until he
felt their trembles cease. For a moment, the much-calmed creature embraced him in return, squeezing
so slightly. Karamatsu felt their moment of sweet relief match his own. Harkened to some sign or
signal he may never understand, the young Kraken drew his tears into a shining pin.

‘Things will get better, I promise,’ Karamatsu whispered, his face buried in their thin shoulder. Then,
quick and clean, he drove the pin home.

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Reduced to a pillar of ash, with a shuddering rumble Kiuutsurui collapsed. Osomatsu smacked into
concrete flat on his back. Three-quarters unconscious, he almost rolled straight into the massive
crumbling crater they left behind, stuffing his face in his sleeve as feelers writhed madly overhead,
great lengths disintegrating. The gargantuan beast’s remains poured in an avalanche that buried the
entire park and swept silver into the streets beyond.

A soft thump sounded amid the cascading hiss of silt. Hazed by pain and only able to process one
wavering thought at a time, Osomatsu forgot about trying not to breathe in their vanquished foe. As
the dust storm settled, a proud figure rose before him, the shield on his straight back glinting white-
gold in the moonlight. He might have been swathed in designer ocean. His fitted combat pants the
grey of storm-washed seas, an elaborately-clasped trench coat shimmered blue all the way to his
ankles, swank collar swept into a deep hood. The lot adrift in the flutter of wind, Karamatsu couldn’t
have devised a more dramatic portrait if he’d implemented a six-point plan. The front of his coat
open and the back split for fighting ease, he hastened for Osomatsu’s disjointed sprawl.

‘Osomatsu!’ Karamatsu spoke with soft urgency, buckled boots churning dust as he crouched at his
side. ‘Are you all right? Speak to me, brother!’

His fingertips brushed dust from Osomatsu’s matted fringe. Limited attention occupied by his
brother’s magical getup, the eldest raised a shaky gauntlet and performed his mandatory test, scraping
knuckle dusters roughly against the other’s chest to satisfy himself the armoured coat would dispel all
but the darkest blade—only the best for his brothers. The second born’s blurred edges wavering into
sharper focus, Osomatsu tweaked a lopsided grin. His brother wore his lens long, stretched into sleek
ocean-tinted sunglasses. Even worse, as if the Spectrum Alliance couldn’t lay it on thick enough just
who bore their sapphire, Karamatsu’s combat pants hugged his toned legs like long-lost friends.

“You’re seriously … comfortable in that, aren’t you.”

Karamatsu’s masked face relaxed. ‘Believe it or not, these aren’t the tightest pants I’ve worn today.
Take it easy, brother,’ he warned when Osomatsu groaned. Concern rolling off him, the second born
made to scoop the eldest into his arms. Clumsily, Osomatsu held him off.

‘Nah, I’m fine. Just give me a …’

He hissed, vision greyed with the slightest shift. His face and eye—holy shit, his eye hurt like a
motherfucker—burnt with iced poison. The rest of him smarted like a blacksmith had hired him as an
anvil. And ripped him off—shit, when he’d flung himself from the closing breach a beat too late it’d
felt like Kiuutsurui chomped him in two. At least he was in one piece … right?

Absently taking this as read and barely glancing down to confirm, the Salamander’s stomach turned.
He really could’ve done without seeing the grisly mess of his legs.
Osomatsu squeezed his eyes shut. Defeated or not, the Liberation Force must be drunk on consolation triumph—one of them had finally succeeded in crushing him. His inner workings twinged and prickled, poor body slaving to rebuild. But Osomatsu was infected—not badly, thank every god who gave a damn. But the pinprick ravaged outward, playing havoc with his healing. Not that he’d be bouncing back from this under regular circumstances. Total obliteration from knee to toe was light years beyond the Salamander’s curative capacity.

His eyes crept to Karamatsu’s, too aware how frightened he looked. ‘I’m sorry, brother,’ Karamatsu had the heart not to make him admit he couldn’t get up. ‘No time to waste—our Wyvern is in peril.’

Shit! Somehow he wasn’t the sorriest-looking sight among them. It was a lot easier to swallow his pride with Choromatsu at risk, and he let Karamatsu lift him with minimal grumbling—he was hurt. Badly. And his brother’s arms were strong, and so safe. Osomatsu couldn’t pretend it wasn’t nice. To feel protected.

Karamatsu didn’t carry him far, setting him down with care by a blissfully-snoring Jyushimatsu. *Lucky bastard,* Osomatsu thought a little resentfully. Lucky they weren’t scraping up what was left of him with a spatula. But he’d be off-balance for a few days, if this was anything like his previous stint soulless. No one would suspect a thing.

A few short paces away, Totty knelt over Choromatsu. Osomatsu clamped his lip between his teeth like the world had seen it tremble. The third born wasn’t moving. Squirmed beneath Choromatsu’s limp hand was Ahn, soaked fur plastered to her body.

‘He’s made it through worse,’ Osomatsu made himself say. ‘He’ll be … fine. Get over here,’ his hoarse words sank to a whisper, gauntlet twitching in their young mentor’s direction. Shivering, she disentangled from Choromatsu’s fingers and limped towards him—fuck, that paw looked bad. Osomatsu managed to manoeuvre and rest his arm across his chest; Ahn crawled up to snuggle into the crook of his elbow.

‘That’s the last time you g-get off calling me reckless,’ he shakily told her off, floored by her bald courage. ‘You’re about as tough as a stuffed animal, quit trying to steal our thunder.’

Ahn only curled tighter into his warm hoodie. She really was just a twig with fur. Without the extra fluff, she shrank to less than half her normal size. Her pointy little teeth chattered—Ahn vibrated with cold, she’d get sick like this. Reaching inside himself, Osomatsu fumbled for his spark. Sorely depleted, it still had the spirit to crackle a little as he warmed himself against infection’s chill, infusing the air around him to dry the little kitten. Pushing through the strain, he directed more heat through the ground, toasting the concrete beneath Choromatsu.

‘Don’t waste your energy,’ Ahn finally proved she remained capable of both speech and nagging.

‘It’s my spark,’ Osomatsu slurred back. ‘I’ll do … what I damn well want with it.’

Puffed like a pompom, so warm and utterly drained, Ahn conveyed only a few cute mumbles before dropping as heavily out of commission as Jyushimatsu.

‘Is there somewhere we can go?’ Karamatsu was saying to Totty. Their Unicorn was miraculously unhurt. But his light ran on fumes. He couldn’t heal them, the dull realisation thudded home. Osomatsu couldn’t phase like this—his legs would fall off. Literally. ‘Totty? Sweet Todomatsu? We need to take them somewhere safe,’ Karamatsu repeated patiently. ‘Can you help me do that? Where can we go?’

‘The … the warehouse,’ Todomatsu whispered.
‘Is that near a station? It’s late, hopefully everyone will just think we’re drunk …’

What was he on about? Before Osomatsu could slot Karamatsu’s words with their meaning, his brother was phasing. ‘My service this hour is complete’.

Curled on his chest, the tiny lump that was Ahn rose and fell with Osomatsu’s rough breath. When had she taught Karamatsu how to phase? She was totally zonked. Maybe Totty had said something.

‘Karamatsu-niisan, it’s easier if we just … are you all right?’

Eyes drifted shut as his mind turned to frosted glass, Osomatsu stumbled into something slightly more alert. Back in his jeans and tank top—where was Karamatsu’s leather jacket? It’d probably wound up in the canal during the chaos. But he’d just saved their arses. At absolute minimum, Osomatsu owed his brother a new jacket. The second born coughed thickly, clearing his throat. ‘No cause for alarm, br-br-brothers.’

He coughed again, rounding off the chest spasms with a wet belch. ‘Eww,’ Todomatsu somehow had the wherewithal to be revolted. ‘That’s disgusting, Niisan.’

Osomatsu somehow had the wherewithal to be amused. ‘Nice …’

Karamatsu thumped his chest, flashing a hearty smile—what would no longer fool Osomatsu as a hearty smile. ‘Excuse me. Never fear, sweetest of all Todomatsus, I’m just …’

He broke off with a strangled gasp. Karamatsu’s hands flew to his chest, one creeping to paw tentatively at his throat. ‘Karamatsu?’ Osomatsu squinted blearily up at him. ‘… What’s wrong, man?’

‘I … I …’

A few beads of liquid foamed over Karamatsu’s lips. Suddenly coughing hard enough to rupture blood vessels, Karamatsu’s eyes exploded in alarm. He hit the ground on his knees, his hacking every bit as violent as one of Ichimatsu’s attacks. But it wasn’t mucus he choked on, or panic-stricken tubes. First a trickle, water now poured from his mouth. A wild thought hamstrung the barely-functioning Osomatsu as his brother gurgled, struggling to rake a breath through the deluge: Karamatsu drowned inside his own body.

‘NO!’

Falling beside him, Todomatsu rammed the head of his sceptre into Karamatsu’s convulsing chest. Nothing. ‘No, no, no!’

Totty threw his weapon aside, useless without a proper light supply. Their brother already slumped over, eyes stretched wide with shock and shrivelled oxygen supply. The youngest pushed him down the rest of the way and began to beat on his chest. ‘No …’ Todomatsu wept disjointedly as he thumped effort into clearing their brother’s flooded airways. But Karamatsu floundered, unable to hold his head above water. ‘We’re not losing him now! Not like this … not after everything …’

Move! Osomatsu grew numbly aware he’d been screaming at himself since Karamatsu crumpled, the torrents that had obeyed their brother like a snake their charmer turned on him just as fast. Move, do something!

Get to Karamatsu … just get to him …

No more to his pathetic excuse for a plan, Osomatsu shoved a comatose Ahn off him and slowly,
agonisingly, rolled onto his front. His trembling arms clawed at the narrow space between them—christ, it could have been a ravine—Osomatsu hauling his wrecked body behind him like a bloody ball and chain. Past Jyushimatsu … past Choromatsu … ‘Totty … move it …’

Finally crawling to Karamatsu’s side, Osomatsu fell over him. Weighted head jolted by the hideous events unfolding within the second born’s lungs, the eldest raised a gauntlet, thumping the second born’s chest with all his strength. Once, twice … his arm gave out, struggling to lift a third time. Still Karamatsu spewed water, an endless dam burst inside him. His brother’s struggles grown so frail, Osomatsu coughs were just as weak, unable to breathe hard or fast enough to fuel his desperation. He had to do something … he had to …

The saving instinct of the Salamander at last materialising to work through him—it happened less and less as Osomatsu came into his own as a hero—Osomatsu planted his palms to Karamatsu’s spasming chest. He’d all but burnt out. But the young Salamander scraped for the last of last reserves, kindling the tiny spark that burnt within him one more time—just one more, last time, please god let this save him …

Unprepared, Osomatsu reeled when he snuffed the last of his power. Defenceless against the dark, he felt the creep of oh so familiar tendrils around his consciousness, drawing him tantalisingly down. But he didn’t succumb. Not until he felt the remnants of his spark push through his brother’s lungs—Osomatsu wouldn’t be the Salamander for nothing.

He evaporated every last drop. Immediately Karamatsu gulped a noisy breath, spluttering up warm mist. ‘O-Okay …’

His eyes rolling into darkness, Osomatsu fell in a dead faint. Falling … falling … something faint tickled his ears—it might have been his name. Then he saw something. A dark glint … a crystal! He tried to smash it, but his body was wasted, too cold and too heavy to react.

Wait … that was no crystal. A brazier burnt nearby. Osomatsu was pretty sure he hadn’t lit it. But the warm glow of firelight reflected off … eyes. Dark eyes, dark for a …

Ahn blinked down at him. ‘Matsuno Osomatsu.’

He moaned, Ahn’s gentle telepathy enough to grind through his pounding head. He was in the warehouse. Osomatsu lay on his own crate, blankets tucked around him. The very building blocks of his existence were wracked with cold.

‘H-How did I get here?’

‘Matsuno Karamatsu carried you,’ Ahn informed, seated sedately on a cushion by his head. Even her soft timbre and the silken fur of her paw on his cheek was too much input; Osomatsu closed his eyes, sighing. ‘Matsuno Osomatsu?’

‘I’m awake,’ he mumbled. ‘Ahn … your paw …’

‘Nothing worth expending any concern.’ A hint of her bottomless pride showing through, the kitten pushed out her fluffy chest and displayed her once-mangled paw, now straight and whole. ‘The moment was so hectic, I barely noticed.’

‘Sure you didn’t,’ Osomatsu muttered, peeping through darkness long enough to see Ahn’s ears blush. ‘Why wouldn’t we worry?’ he added, feeling Ahn stiffen. ‘You’re family. Do you have any idea important you are to … Ahn, what happened?’ he asked, oblivious to how close he came to making her cry. Again. ‘Why’d you go dark on us? We didn’t know … where you were. Wh-Why
‘I’m so sorry.’ Ahn begged forgiveness for what must have been the hundredth time that night—
damn it, he’d been such a piece of shit to her. Then she’d had to go and make it a million times
worse by saving him and every one of his brothers. Except Ichimatsu. ‘I had to consult the Alliance.
I had to inform them I had … reconsidered … offering Matsuno Karamatsu a power contract, and to
confirm it was even viable in his condition.’

‘Depressed?’

‘Soulless.’

‘Ah.’ Osomatsu shuddered painfully, the sight of his brother robbed of the vibrance and kindness
that defined him burnt in his memory. ‘Right …’

‘We had never even conceived such a scenario. But our experts held swift council and decided that,
while an unacceptable risk under most circumstances, there was little option but to try.’

Overcoming his reflex bubbling anger, that his little brother had been used as a test subject for
magical tech fanatics millions of kilometres away, Osomatsu mumbled the obvious. ‘Guess it
worked.’

‘I suppose it did,’ Ahn agreed. Their intergalactic employer’s wager had paid off. They were alive.
They’d defeated the Liberation Force’s most horrifying beast to date. And the Spectrum Alliance had
their Kraken—a temporary Kraken, anyway. Yet Ahn didn’t seem happy. Osomatsu, however, was
too out of it police his fat mouth.

‘Why … didn’t you just tell us?’ he demanded. ‘We thought … Karamatsu was gonna …’

‘I needed your reactions to be genuine. The enemy might have suspected something otherwise. I
only told Matsuno Choromatsu, I needed his assistance.’

‘Choromatsu’s the worst actor of all of us … but if you’d just let us talk to Karamatsu …’

Osomatsu hated that Ahn made so much sense. But apparently he wasn’t going to let this slide—
poor Ahn was now the unwilling architect of one of the worst moments of his life.

‘Were you not so damaged,’ Ahn said, suddenly sounding a lot more like herself, too obviously
bending over backwards to be accommodating of the fact Osomatsu had been literally ripped apart,
‘no doubt you would appreciate: I could hardly open a communication channel between a spectrum
guardian and a Liberation Force slave. There was no guarantee even I could communicate with
Matsuno Karamatsu in that state, let alone that he could shake off his master's influence. I could
count on my paw how many times an individual enslaved by Lord Takuu has escaped darkness long
enough to regain their soul,’ Ahn saw fit to add, almost glowing. ‘But I knew Matsuno Karamatsu
… there must be something in your blood,’ she said instead, ears pinking again. ‘The Matsunos are a
family of exceptional souls.’

Momentarily placated by flattery, Osomatsu had to ask. ‘The darkness is still in him, right? Like
Jyushimatsu?’

‘Yes,’ Ahn confirmed. ‘It’s not ideal, but while he holds a contract the Spectrum Alliance theorise he
cannot succumb to Liberation Force influence. We will monitor him closely. And remember, there
will come a time when Matsuno Todomatsu will cleanse all those so afflicted.’

Osomatsu swallowed—while Karamatsu held a contract? What if he didn’t sign? What if he did
sign? But whether he took the permanent plunge into this deal or not … ‘They’re gonna keep coming after him, right?’ The realisation squeezed through Osomatsu’s gut. ‘If he’s that important to them, they’ll just keep …’

‘One problem at a time,’ Ahn soothed. Trying to rest as she advised—maybe he wouldn’t hurt so goddamn much if he could just relax—Osomatsu tried to look around. It hurt just to reorient his gaze, but he didn’t have to look far to see Jyushimatsu conked out on the youngest’s crate turned opulent couch.

‘How long is he gonna sleep?’

‘Hopefully until morning,’ Ahn said. Osomatsu was not comforted by that “hopefully”.

‘But even if he’s muddled up, he won’t just forget this—Choromatsu can’t wipe him, he’s stuffed! And you … how are we …’

‘One problem at a time,’ Ahn repeated, not quite crossly. ‘By the Alliance, your body has enough stress to combat as it is. Do not seek out more cause to upset yourself.’

‘Yeah … whatever …’

So much had already gone wrong that night. But he wasn’t the worrier, that wasn’t him. Their resident worrier had been laid on his own crate, pulled close to the crackling brazier. Wrapped in even more blankets than Osomatsu, Choromatsu was frighteningly pale. Beside him knelt Karamatsu, returned to full magical splendour. He held one of Choromatsu’s hands in both of his own. Osomatsu stifled a slight cough. For once he didn’t want to interrupt. But somehow the eldest still wound up muttering, ‘Shit, he looks awful.’

‘And of course you look like you just breezed awake from a refreshing nap yourself.’

Most of his face obscured, Osomatsu felt Karamatsu smile at him over their unconscious brother. ‘Never fear, Choromatsu will be up and about in a few days.’

He spoke with customary Karamatsu confidence … what Osomatsu had always thought was customary. ‘He looks better than he did,’ the second born went on, tenderly folding Choromatsu’s hand on his stomach and rising, stretching prolonged inaction from his magical knees. ‘He’s been beautifully healed, and you’re up next.’

Choromatsu didn’t wear his hood, Osomatsu was slow on the uptake. He must have roused long enough to phase while the eldest was out of it—Osomatsu tried not to think how he’d slumbered through his brother’s screams as he was painstakingly put back together. But his skull was patched, his annihilated spine now divided in the correct number of pieces. Totty’s powers had somehow been restored—obviously. Ahn was healed too, wasn’t she? ‘Wh-Where’s Todomatsu?’

‘On the roof,’ Ahn spared Osomatsu another painful scan of the warehouse. ‘Meditating. His experts taught him how to enter the state,’ she said, too dignified to acknowledge Osomatsu’s weak snort. ‘He rejuvenated enough to heal Choromatsu. Now he’s doing the same for you.’

‘He bathes serene in his element,’ Karamatsu said, sitting carefully on the edge of Osomatsu’s crate. ‘Our brother of starlight.’

The second born somehow sounding more poetic than painful, Osomatsu was about to say so when Ahn’s next statement erased his short memory. ‘The entire Spectrum Alliance knows you prefer to deal with your problems alone. But please, Matsuno Osomatsu. Contact your team—they think you’re avoiding them.’
'I’m not avoiding them,’ Osomatsu said. ‘If I ever need them, I’ll …’

‘You’ll need every one of them to pull you through rehabilitation,’ Ahn informed, jumping to the floor. Osomatsu stared after her.

‘Eh? Wh-What do you mean, rehabilitation?’

‘These are grave injuries,’ Karamatsu said as Ahn relocated to watch over Choromatsu—she didn’t want them left alone, even while they slept. Whatever bombshells she dropped, Ahn was just too damn good to them. ‘Don’t worry, you’ll be back on duty before you know it.’

Huffing lightly—like hell he’d need rehabilitation once Totty was through with him—Osomatsu rested in his mattress of 100 yen cushions. ‘Brother, had you ever done that before?’ Karamatsu soon asked. Shivering uncontrollably, Osomatsu wasn’t 100 per cent with the program, but he sensed through imagery woven amid his brother’s telepathy what he referred to: the eldest’s impromptu stunt with his brother’s lungs. ‘How?’ Karamatsu said when Osomatsu indicated the negative. ‘Todomatsu said that should’ve roasted me alive.’

Osomatsu scowled. Thanks for the vote of confidence, Totty. ‘I’m just a natural, I guess.’

‘I owe you my life,’ Karamatsu said quietly, earnest eyes on Osomatsu; the weight of meaning behind the second born’s words was incredible. ‘All of you. I owe you so much,’ he said, looking to Choromatsu and Jyushimatsu’s oblivious sprawl. Todomatsu and Ahn must have informed Karamatsu of the fifth born’s courageous rescue attempt.

‘Right back at you,’ Osomatsu tried to shrug—fuck, that hurt! It had to be impossible, to hurt this badly. And his legs … god, he didn’t want to think about his legs. ‘We were done for.’

‘Dearest brother, it was nothing,’ Karamatsu waved off his thanks, refusing to hear a word of it. Osomatsu’s eyebrow twitched dubiously.

‘If nothing is a massive hunk of murderous monster, sure.’

‘Niiiiisaaaaan, shut up,’ Todomatsu’s drawn-out whine dragged through their wordless, but apparently aggravating conversation. ‘I’m trying to meditate.’

‘It’s telepathy,’ Osomatsu complained wearily. ‘How are we … supposed to stop thinking?’

‘That shouldn’t be too hard,’ Todomatsu insulted delicately. ‘Not for one of your calibre, Osomatsu-niiisan.’

Osomatsu was all set to bite back, but cooled off when Karamatsu suggested rather jovially that bickering with the brother about to salvage his broken body was not a chance many would take. ‘What happened?’ Osomatsu soon asked, making a pissed-off, but concerted effort to keep the exchange between them—an effort that made him sweat, aggravating the injury beneath his eye; bubbling like tar, the agonising welt spread. ‘The water … it just …’

‘I’m not sure,’ Karamatsu said, gripping the edge of the crate and leaning back slightly, regarding the warehouse ceiling. ‘Ahn says we’ll talk about it once you’re healed.’

‘But you’re okay?’ Osomatsu pressed. Ahn’s words of only a few hours ago floated to haunt his heart—Karamatsu was sick, too sick to transform. It wasn’t safe …

‘Right now? Brother, I’m with all of you. I’m just fine.’
The two eldest Matsuno brothers rested quiet in each other’s company, the sounds of their brothers’ breath gentle in their ears—Choromatsu’s light and thin, Jyushimatsu’s deep and peaceful. When Osomatsu’s turned jagged, acid hurt spilling slow and relentless across his face—and his eye, god, his eye, he could hardly see—Karamatsu passed his palm over the injury, soothing with water bright and pure crystallised from the air around them. Sighing with relief, Osomatsu sank heavily into his cushions. So maybe Karamatsu was a natural, too.

‘Okay, I’m all charged up,’ Todomatsu hopped through the skylight Osomatsu had busted so many months ago, landing neatly in the patch of moonlight. ‘Ready, Osomatsu-niisan?’

So eager for the pain to finally end, the eldest balked when the first thing Todomatsu did after exploring the worsening of his injured face was summon a fine laser from his sceptre. ‘Whoa, whoa!’ Osomatsu exclaimed, leaning away when Totty angled the beam towards his face. ‘What the fuck are you doing!’

‘The spike puncture is too small to work with,’ Todomatsu said, firmly turning Osomatsu’s head back. ‘I need to enlarge the wound to pull out the darkness. Our skin’s too tough, what else are we going to use? Lie still, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘No fucking way!’ Osomatsu wasn’t in any state to control his gut reaction. ‘Keep that away from me!’

‘Don’t make a fuss, Niisan—you fight monsters for a living.’

‘I can handle monsters!’

‘And you can’t handle me?’ asked the youngest with a coy slant of his shoulders in place of a puffed and pouty lip. ‘You don’t think I can do it? Really? That’s so hurtful, Niisan.’

‘He did practice, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn spoke up from Choromatsu’s bedside. ‘Let him work.’

‘Practice?’ Osomatsu spluttered, gauntleted arms drunkenly warding off Totty’s so-called treatment. ‘How the hell did he …’

Karamatsu rolled his trench coat sleeves to the elbow, displaying the back of his arms. Osomatsu’s foggy vision caught a few shines of light-healed incisions. ‘But this is my face!’

‘I promise you it doesn’t hurt, Osomatsu.’

‘Oooh, you’re really worried it’s going to hurt?’

First teasing of the resistance he put up, Todomatsu grew a little impatient before finally being convinced Osomatsu was genuinely scared. ‘I’m sorry, Niisan, but this needs to be done.’

With a flick of his sceptre, chains snaked across Osomatsu’s shoulders, chest and waist, catching his gauntlets and binding him to the crate beneath him. ‘No, wh-what … what the fuck are you doing, Todomatsu?!’

‘Karamatsu-niisan, hold his head.’

Strapped too tightly to struggle—if he could have struggled at all, his pathetic strength already spent—Osomatsu’s heart thudded sickly as Karamatsu stood behind him, placing a firm hand either side of his head. Todomatsu leaned over him, preparing for the minor surgery … shit, Ichimatsu had been dealt a shit hand. This was just a small taste of what it felt to be him. Zero power, zero control. Zero say. The poor guy couldn’t even fight, no choice but to lie still and take it, let himself be poked and
pricked and drugged as disease slunk through his body, playing havoc with his brain.

That’s what Osomatsu feared. Anything he couldn’t fight. He was so afraid he couldn’t believe it.

‘Close your eyes, Osomatsu.’

As if he’d forget if he couldn’t see it coming. But as Todomatsu extended his hair-fine beam and Karamatsu’s hands pressed his head gently into the cushions, Osomatsu whimpered and squeezed his eyes shut. ‘What do you feel, brother?’

‘Cold,’ the word crept from his lips almost before he’d processed Karamatsu’s soft question. Osomatsu almost convulsed beneath his blankets, the brazier no shield against the ice of darkness that gripped him. ‘It’s so cold …’

‘I know, dear brother, I know … Do you feel anything on your face?’

‘I swear to god, if you got me to close my eyes just to bring up the fucking laser … w-warm,’ Osomatsu stammered, panicked retort severed. ‘It’s warm …’

‘What can you smell?’

‘I … I smell …’

A warm summer’s afternoon, the light humidity and grass and remnants of rain, the gorgeous sun beating on his cheeks as he played baseball with his brothers.

‘Can you hear something, brother?’

Osomatsu’s visualisation wavered—what the fuck was he supposed to hear? But then … Karamatsu was right.

‘Like a breeze blowing softly over musical pipes, all made of glass.’ Karamatsu gave words to the mystical sound, Osomatsu feeling oddly he might be one of few who would ever hear its unearthly beauty. This was what lasers sounded like? ‘And … we’re all done.’

Osomatsu breathed out shakily. ‘R-really?’

‘Don’t celebrate,’ he heard Totty say grimly as he hardly dared squint his good eye open. ‘That was the easy part. Don’t let him go, Karamatsu-niisan.’

In seconds Osomatsu was screaming, agony swallowed by his mask as Karamatsu held his head. ‘You can do it, Osomatsu … not much longer, you’re doing wonderfully …’

His sceptre pressed into the fresh cut on Osomatsu’s face, Todomatsu siphoned darkness from his strained systems, shifting to prise clinging coils that had no intention of surrendering their victim. The shit pierced his eye deeper, anchoring tenaciously to blood vessels … holy fuck … the sting … ‘God, oh god, oh god …’

Osomatsu rambled incoherently, no clue what profanities and pleas gushed from his hysterical mind, he was that close to blacking out—shit, oh shit, oh shit … why wouldn’t he black out already? Please, god, please … Karamatsu’s crooned encouragement somewhere above him barely penetrated his roaring ears …

Finally, the last of the poison was ripped from his face. ‘It’s over, Osomatsu. Let go, you’ll hurt yourself.’
Osomatsu gasped, saturated by sweat and tears. It was only after Todomatsu had vanished the revolting wad of muck he’d pumped from Osomatsu’s body that he figured what Karamatsu might be talking about. His restrained gauntlets had found the edges of his crate, gripping against the onslaught. With a weak whoosh of air someone kind might call a grunt, Osomatsu eased his fingers free. He left crushed impressions of his fists behind.

Lying back as Karamatsu stroked his sweaty hair—“You’re doing so well, brother”—Todomatsu started at the top and worked his way down. ‘How’s that, Niisan,’ the youngest asked, turning attention to Osomatsu’s eye once he’d sewn up his incision. ‘Can you see better now?’

‘Uh-huh …’ Osomatsu mumbled, testing his vision for barely a second before closing his eyes again, breathing long and deep as, one by one, his innumerable hurts began to fade. The youngest’s sceptre passed gradually down his body to ease the night’s flogging, paying particular care to his shoulders and hips, shoring up the tortured joints. Osomatsu completely burnt out, his spark couldn’t even do groundwork for the complex reassembly of his legs. It took almost an hour for Todomatsu to rebuild them, a direct link to both his and the Salamander’s team of experts. Osomatsu zoned out in the middle of it. But he was conscious enough to mutter when Todomatsu finally announced he was finished. ‘Thank fuck …’

‘Totty, sit down.’ Karamatsu fetched the high stool Ahn sometimes sat on as Osomatsu tentatively twitched his leg muscles. Todomatsu wearily obeyed, pulling down his mask to chug two full bottles of Pocari Sweat.

‘We’re done? Take these off, come on.’ Much stronger now, Osomatsu fidgeted, rattling the chains that bound him.

‘Half done,’ Todomatsu breathed, chin sinking to his chest. ‘Just … give me a …’

‘Half done?!’

It was little comfort to Osomatsu, that Ahn reminded him healing human injuries took less power than healing guardians—Todomatsu had more than enough light in reserve. Caught up in blessed relief, he’d completely blanked, forgetting the intense unpleasantness that would come after he phased. It was only when Karamatsu knelt beside him, somehow getting his arms comfortably around him in their awkward positions, that Osomatsu was able to grit his jaw and get it over with. ‘Fuck this shit … my service this hour is complete.’

Thunderous roars shredded him, skin, muscle and bone, straight to his core. Osomatsu’s screams given voice the first time that night, the tortured echo through the vast warehouse didn’t even whirl back to him before the crash against his splintered human form renewed a thousand times over and dragged him under. He woke what felt immediately after, retching. ‘There you go, Osomatsu … nice and easy …’

A brother … Karamatsu … held him as he dry heaved. His chains were gone. Osomatsu wasn’t game to look down—he hurt so goddamn much. But he could move. A little. But it felt like his legs were half sewn on, only one or two nerves re-attached that were unrelated to pain. Osomatsu tried not to sob as Todomatsu cast more spells, murmuring to himself or his faithful team. The intensity of his pain gradually easing, Osomatsu soon calmed enough to let Karamatsu help him up, holding him while Todomatsu tucked a folding floor chair beneath his backside—when had Totty brought those in? Not caring, Osomatsu collapsed into its support.

The eldest shakily sipping from the bottle Karamatsu pressed in his hands, Todomatsu turned his attention on Karamatsu. Osomatsu had never been more happy to relinquish being the focus of anyone’s attentions.
‘We can’t keep putting it off—you have to phase.’

‘I know.’

Karamatsu’s buoyant flair—Osomatsu was pretty sure it was 100 per cent genuine right here and now—sank a notch as he hesitated.

‘Ahn?’ Osomatsu rasped as the kitten climbed carefully into his lap, her eyes damp from his suffering. ‘Any time … you want to explain …’

‘Matsuno brothers … Matsuno Karamatsu,’ Ahn addressed the holder of the Kraken’s temporary contract directly, managing to hide most of her shy crush beneath a steadfast polish. ‘The truth is, you might have been a guardian since September—it was the Spectrum Alliance’s desire to recruit you immediately after Matsuno Osomatsu.’

Karamatsu nodded, indicating either he’d heard enough not to need any explanation of “Spectrum Alliance”, or to simply prompt the kitten regardless. ‘Please continue, my angel.’

‘It was my decision not to recruit you—not because I didn’t believe you’d make a fine guardian,’ Ahn tacked on hastily, demeanour cracked and ears now dyed bright pink by Karamatsu’s affectionate term. Osomatsu caught Todomatsu’s eye and cracked a grin—my angel. ‘Under different circumstances, you would be perfect. But … you’re ill, Matsuno Karamatsu.’

Osomatsu’s eyes flicked worriedly to Karamatsu. He hadn’t moved at all. ‘I … see.’

‘Of course, mentally ill guardians have functioned admirably in the past, or else the Alliance wouldn’t be so eager to have you. There are many avenues to manage … this is why we’re so concerned for your state of mind,’ Ahn rambled, getting off track with nerves. ‘The reason why half your support teams comprise counsellors. The stress of being a guardian is often exacerbated in those with psychological conditions. This may result in certain … reactions. That is what happened to you, Matsuno Karamatsu. It’s what’s been happening to Matsuno Choromatsu since Christmas,’ Ahn added unexpectedly, Osomatsu doing a painful double take. ‘The reaction is strongest after you phase, but it can …’

‘But,’ Osomatsu interrupted, ‘Choromatsu already …’

Choromatsu had had plenty of anxiety issues before he signed up, but he’d been having fewer attacks, he’d been doing great … until the Doll of Darkness almost killed him. Apparently post-traumatic stress didn’t mix well with transforming.

‘I … I don’t remember reading this.’

‘What, in your kindergarten contract? Choromatsu-niisan wouldn’t have missed it,’ Todomatsu said, his words sounding empty with no tangible scorn behind them. ‘You probably skimmed over anything you didn’t think applied to you.’

Osomatsu swallowed. That sounded like him. But that meant Choromatsu and Todomatsu … ‘You knew about this?’

‘I’m not an idiot, Niisan,’ Todomatsu said—again with the sassless sass. ‘I knew what I was getting into.’

‘Oh …’

It had been a while since Osomatsu had felt quite this exceedingly stupid—that he’d signed without
reading his contract. That he hadn’t read Choromatsu’s dumbed-down version properly. He’d let his brothers down so badly. Karamatsu hadn’t even signed, but that he’d even had to go through that, Osomatsu felt he’d already let him down—more than he already had. ‘Well,’ Karamatsu’s eyes flashed something resigned, but resilient. ‘I can’t shimmer for all time—all must fade.’

‘I’m right here, Niisan,’ Todomatsu promised, hefting his staff like he’d physically whack any negative reaction into submission.

‘There’s no one I’d rather …’

‘Mmph …’

When had Choromatsu come to? Disoriented, he tried to attract their attention, thoughts trundling a few paces ahead of his mumbling lips. Stuck on his crate as Choromatsu’s forearm flopped emphatically, Osomatsu watched as the third born pulled off some dazed, but impressive charades that ended up with Todomatsu hesitantly reaching for the dispenser around the third born’s wrist. ‘Are you sure Matsuno Choromatsu?’ Ahn asked anxiously. ‘This has been a difficult night for you.’

At Choromatsu’s obvious, if inarticulate, assertion, Todomatsu slowly eased the dispenser from his wrist, tensed like he deactivated a bomb. ‘Put this on, Karamatsu-niisan.’

‘But … Choromatsu!’ Karamatsu stared in horror as Choromatsu descended into rasping gasps. Immediately, he seized the offered dispenser and tried to clamp it back around Choromatsu’s wrist.

‘... No …’

So weakly, Choromatsu curled away. ‘I’m … fine … I’m fine …’ Todomatsu gently stroked his back, softening the hard constriction of his airways and sending him back to sleep once he breathed easy.

Choromatsu’s dispenser reluctantly fastened about his wrist, Karamatsu preemptively knelt on the ground. Todomatsu joined him, levelling his sceptre at the second-born’s chest. Osomatsu made himself watch as he phased—thank god for Choromatsu, he was a genius and a saint. Karamatsu still spluttered horribly, spitting up water that robbed him of oxygen. But the severity of his first disastrous phase wasn’t there. Droplets rolling off his armour, Todomatsu easily siphoned the spurts out, Karamatsu snatching air before his lungs refilled. A tense minute of drowning on dry land was all he had to suffer—shit, would this happen every time? What if he got worse? Fuck … with a brother like Osomatsu, that was fucking inevitable, wasn’t it?

He hasn’t signed yet, Osomatsu reminded himself as Karamatsu, soaking wet and trembling, slumped to sit beside him. Todomatsu wrapped him in a few of Osomatsu’s blankets. ‘It will get easier,’ Ahn promised so sadly from Osomatsu’s lap. ‘The Spectrum Alliance has managed such complications in the past, and will provide all assistance at their disposal. Matsuno Karamatsu, I’m so sorry.’

‘No need,’ Karamatsu shivered through chattering teeth as Todomatsu phased, nestling beside him. Jyushimatsu snored on unawares as, for the fourth time, Ahn told her tale of Lord Takuu and his Liberation Force, and the Alliance that opposed them. Still an enrapturing storyteller, she’d grown more succinct over successive tellings. Or maybe she trimmed it down for Karamatsu’s sake. He was practically unresponsive, not even nodding her along. Still, Osomatsu thought as he stared into the crackling brazier. It’d be nice if Karamatsu could hear the tale in all its original glory.

‘You’re so warm,’ Karamatsu mumbled unexpectedly. His spark slowly rekindling, Osomatsu had regained a shade of his human stove sensibilities. Not cranky with the interruption, Ahn fell quiet as
Karamatsu huddled into Osomatsu’s shoulder, Todomatsu industriously bundling the second born’s blankets closer around him. Barely thinking as he floated around Ahn’s flowing voice, Osomatsu took his brother’s hand, warming him. He didn’t register when Ahn began to speak again. But Karamatsu’s raw eyes were lined with tears by the time she was done.

“So you’ve been fighting,” he croaked, “all this time?”

“Osomatsu-niisan since last September,” Totty informed. “Choromatsu-niisan since Halloween. And me … just before Christmas.”

Flagging, Osomatsu glanced sideways at Karamatsu and saw the all the dates line up in his perceptive mind. ‘Pachinko, the forgotten sweets, and … your friends. I met Atsushi,’ Karamatsu said out of the blue; Todomatsu gripped the knee of his tidy jeans hard. ‘He was there … with me. He’s so glad you’re all right …

“So you’ve been hiding this from me … all this time?”

“They had to,” Ahn tried to console as Totty wept quietly into his hands.

“And I … didn’t even realise.”

“Bullshit, you knew something was up,” Osomatsu cut in almost sharply.

“I was wrong,” Karamatsu said, gone monotone.

‘Not 100 percent wrong.’ In as few words as possible, Osomatsu explained their payment situation. He’d hoped this might perk Karamatsu up a little—evidence they were right worked wonders on Choromatsu and Todomatsu. But Karamatsu wasn’t like them. And Osomatsu … should have known.

“I thought you hated me,” Karamatsu mumbled, almost nothing left of the daring and colourful magical boy they knew he was inside. ‘I mean, you already … I already … but then you were so close, leaving me behind. Looking at you together … it was like you shared entire conversations without even needing to speak.’

“Well … we were,” Osomatsu exchanged a guilty look with Todomatsu. How could they have been so obvious?

“You kept ditching me, avoiding me,” Karamatsu huffed unevenly through his nose. ‘Making things out … to be my fault …’

“We didn’t want to,” Todomatsu swore through mostly-stemmed tears. ‘We didn’t have a choice.’

“… Did you have a choice before you signed your contracts?”

It should have been impossible, for such a dull question to cut so deep.

“I … I’m sorry,” was all Osomatsu could say. He hadn’t even realised, he hadn’t known … he was the world’s biggest fucking idiot! ‘I’m so sorry, man …’

“Why are they after me? Don’t give me that,” Karamatsu ruined Todomatsu’s attempt to circumvent the sensitive issue, reminding him the Liberation Force strove to possess every human soul. ‘Kuro came after me on the train, and tonight. He’d been watching me. He knew so much …’

“They target people in pain.” Poor Ahn rescued the brothers from saying it. ‘You’re very ill, Matsuno
Karamatsu.’

‘Oh …’

Karamatsu pushed himself off the eldest and huddled small, arms wrapped around himself like a label was emblazoned across his chest. One he’d never be able to hide again.

‘Matsuno Karamatsu.’ Ahn placed her endearing oversized paws on Karamatsu’s knee. ‘Please know how honoured the Spectrum Alliance is to have you as their Kraken.’

Karamatsu made a raw sound of disbelief through his nose. ‘Don’t do that,’ Todomatsu scolded wetly.

‘Why would they want me?’ Karamatsu muttered. ‘I haven’t done anything.’

‘You just saved all our lives!’

‘If they didn’t want you,’ added Osomatsu, tightening his weak grip when Karamatsu tensed to yank his hand away, ‘Ahn wouldn’t have wasted her breath on you. But you don’t have to do this,’ the eldest emphasised. ‘It’s your choice—the Spectrum Alliance are cool, they’ll get it if you say no. Choromatsu can wipe your memory, you don’t have to remember any of this. We’ll look after you,’ Osomatsu blathered, barely making sense but meaning every word so much it hurt. ‘Then you’ll get better, and the fucking Liberation Force won’t want you anymore—you don’t have to go through this again!’

‘It wasn’t so bad,’ Karamatsu mumbled to his knees. ‘But you … don’t you want me to …’

‘It’s not like that!’ Osomatsu burst as Karamatsu’s shoulders hunched. ‘Yeah, maybe Ahn was right not to say something sooner—you’ve got enough shit on your plate as it is. But you’re the best Kraken we could have asked for!’

Karamatsu didn’t believe it—he couldn’t. Choromatsu’s dispenser might already alter imbalances in his brain, softening the blow. But his mind just didn’t let him believe.

Yet.

Ahn slipped to the cold floor, careful not to jar Osomatsu’s legs. Todomatsu yawned, eyelids drooping like he’d marathoned half of Netflix. ‘We should return home,’ Ahn said. Her young voice sounded like she’d shouldered a lifetime of experience in just one night. ‘We all need …’

‘Aren’t you going to take him through the contract?’ Osomatsu interrupted.

‘Later, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn said, stealing a look at Todomatsu as he upended a bucket, dousing the brazier with a massive burst of steam. Osomatsu was wrecked. But not enough to miss that look.

‘What’s going on? You need time to think about it, right?’ Osomatsu directed at Karamatsu, growing steadily more confused. ‘You haven’t decided if you’re signing yet?’

‘Show him,’ Todomatsu said softly. Unravelling his hand from Osomatsu’s, Karamatsu dug in his jeans pocket and tugged out his scroll. A tiny perfect sapphire secured its latch.

‘What?!”

Osomatsu grabbed at the scroll, snatching it away and bumbling the latch open. Clumsily, he yanked out the shimmering sheet of Karamatsu’s contract. A blue character shone up over the alien terms
and conditions, the Spectrum Alliance’s new Kraken already signed and sealed. ‘B-But …’

‘You were all out of it,’ whispered Todomatsu. ‘Karamatsu-niisan … transformed to help carry you all here. I didn’t realise until Ahn-chan woke up—he shouldn’t have been able to do that. He shouldn’t have been able to transform again. Not unless he’d already pledged … without realising.’

‘That can happen??’ Osomatsu stammered in dismay. Feeling Karamatsu shrug beside him, Osomatsu turned his gobsmacked gaze on the Kraken in question.

‘It’s not a big deal.’

‘It is!’

‘I was given the chance to help end this,’ Karamatsu said listlessly. ‘Stop it from happening to anyone else. No one would turn that down. And you’re my brothers,’ he added. ‘I’d do anything for you.’

The way Karamatsu said it, it was almost a sin. His love was a sin, and this was his penance. Or maybe his penance was for what he said next:

‘And that felt … I’ve never felt so …’ Karamatsu struggled to explain through Osomatsu’s lasting horror. The second born had no idea what he’d just done. ‘I … I’d do anything to feel like that again. Even just … one more time.’

Nothing he could say, Osomatsu slowly rolled his brother’s commitment to see this battle to its end back within its slender casing.

Chapter End Notes

Hihi, hope all is well :) There shall be a bit of a recovery/healing chapter for Kara next, but it may take some time, sorry. This isn't quite the point I'd been planning to leave you, but I'm intending to take a few months off from Oso to work on something else for a bit :) If I run into problems with other projects I may start working on this again, though - shall just have to wait and see :) Thank you so much for sticking with me, hopefully I won't be gone too long! So much more story to tell! One more magical friend left to recruit ...
Hi all you lovely people! It's been a while, sorry. I've been making slow but reasonably sturdy progress on other projects, and about to dive into another one for a hopefully not so ill-fated-as-last-year NaNoWriMo attempt. But I've been writing this chapter off and on since September. As always, a bit longer than I'd like - it was even longer, but I did my usual thing of squishing things along into the next chapter :) Hopefully that will be a good springboard once NaNo is over - aiming to try to get the next chapter up in late December maybe, but shall see what happens.

It's healing time for everyone, hooray! I think that's part of why it's so long ... this was meant to be mostly a Kara recovery chapter, but I forgot for a sec that Oso and Choro have a lot of healing to do, too. It was actually really good writing this, getting it done in a comfortable and cruiser manner. I think it's the first chapter I've written without a metaphorical fire lit under my rear ... Thank you so much for waiting for it, I really hope it doesn't disappoint! And seeing what you think means so much to me :D I'd love to know if you enjoy this chapter!

Thank you so much again for reading this fic. And waiting for this fic. Mostly for being as amazingly awesome as you are. Can't wait to come back so the magical boys can keep doing their thing :)

... AND CONGRATULATIONS ON SEASON 2 EVERYONE NEEEEEETTS WE LOVE YOUUUUUU

They took the train home. Osomatsu was fuzzy how they all wound up at the station. He was kept from transforming, he knew that. Totty was gently disparaging, pushing him down when Osomatsu pathetically struggled to wrench into action. Karamatsu hunched beside him, his head heavy in his hands. The eldest's eyelids drooped. They stayed open long enough to see their Unicorn transform; Totty hefted Jyushimatsu, snorting and snoring, over his shoulder with ease. Then Osomatsu was out. He roused again—enough to shuffle one foot in front of the next for a few metres, leaning all his weight on he wasn't 100 percent sure who—as they shambled through closing train doors.

The rhythmic jostle of the very late train easing him back towards the rest his body and soul wept for, Osomatsu slumped against Karamatsu. Ahn was a tiny bundle hidden in his hoodie. Todomatsu sat across in the otherwise empty carriage. Jyushimatsu sprawled on one side, Choromatsu on his other. The exhausted youngest cradled the third born’s head and shoulders in his lap.

‘Osomatsu-niisan? Niisan, are you awake? NII-?’

Osomatsu jolted, unwillingly whipped awake. ‘Sorry, Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu’s rendition of a whisper cranked through his skull. ‘But we’re here, we’re here! Let’s get you home.’

So apparently Jyushimatsu had woken up—so much for sleeping till morning. Osomatsu bit down hard on his lip as the fifth born pulled his sluggish arm over his shoulders. His abused joints ached beyond bone. The rest of him felt like he’d spent the better part of a month hogtied to a busy
highway. Jyushimatsu was understandably muddled; he tottered almost as badly as Osomatsu in his filthy socks—his sturdy slippers had joined Karamatsu’s treasured fashion in the realms of lost forever. But as Todomatsu invented them, the fifth born accepted the brothers’ explanations with total wide-eyed belief.

Navigating their local station by muscle memory, with Osomatsu supported by Jyushimatsu, Choromatsu carried by a forlorn Karamatsu, and Todomatsu to lead and shepherd as required, the Matsuno brothers limped home.

Police cars lined the street by their house. The brothers were bewildered when they were met by a uniformed officer. ‘You’re the Matsuno kids?’

‘Five of them,’ Todomatsu spoke for them after a long, very empty moment. He was always the best option for dealing with people. And right now he was pretty much the only option. Osomatsu was blearily miffed—Matsuno kids? He was a responsible adult, damn it.

‘Where have you been?!’

Mum was all over them the instant they were herded inside. ‘Is Ichimatsu with you?’ she demanded, before her frantic headcount gave only five. ‘No, no, this can’t be happening … where’s Ichimatsu?! Wh-Where’s my … oh my god!’

Matsuyo got her first good look at her sons. ‘What happened to you?! Osomatsu, what … no, Choromatsu …’

‘ICHIMATSU-NIISAN?!’ Jyushimatsu yelped as mum proceeded to further lose her shit. Dazed and confused he was, but not enough to miss that ugly detail: Ichimatsu had vanished again. Dumping Osomatsu in the officer’s arms, Jyushimatsu turned tail and bolted out the door. Several well-built police officers tackled him by the post box.

‘Lots of police are looking for him,’ Osomatsu heard them calm the distraught Jyushimatsu, not letting him run off on another rescue mission. ‘Settle down, son. Get inside, you’re dead on your feet.’

‘Boys,’ dad said, apparently calm. But he swallowed hard. His face hadn’t been this lined at dinner, had it? ‘I think you owe us an explanation.’

‘Choromatsu called!’ Mum wept in anger once dad relieved Karamatsu of the unresponsive third born, carrying him upstairs. ‘He said Ichimatsu was in trouble, but he didn’t say … and now he’s gone! Ichimatsu’s gone, and you … we couldn’t call you, you didn’t leave any more messages—what the hell were you doing?! What could possibly be more important than taking care of your brother?! Osomatsu, look at your eye!’

Good thing she couldn’t see anything else. His eye hurt, raw and weepy despite his extended healing session. But Osomatsu was in no mood to be coddled. For the first time in his life. ‘Mum, it’s no big deal. I’m …’

‘You sit down.’

Manhandling Osomatsu into a chair at the kitchen table, mum began rummaging blindly through cupboards for first aid supplies. Karamatsu retrieved them, handing them over without a word. Osomatsu ground his teeth against the sting as mum somewhat vigorously tended his eye. A large patch taped in place, Osomatsu let his head drop into his arms. Of course Ichimatsu was fucking missing. But Choromatsu had locked him in. No way would he have forgotten. How the hell had he
gotten out? How had he stayed upright long enough to get out?

‘Well? What have you got to say for yourselves?’

‘Oh dear,’ Ahn breathed, quivering with the tension. Jyushimatsu’s noisy snore made them all jump, mercifully breaking the worst of it. Their valiant fifth born had been deposited at the table, where he’d immediately face-planted. He was completely zonked.

‘What do we tell them?’ Todomatsu fretted silently when mum crossed her arms over her narrow chest. She was waiting. And Totty was worn thin, fresh out of stories. ‘What do we say? I don’t …’

‘They were looking for me.’

Osomatsu’s crying muscles tensed. ‘I ran off,’ Karamatsu stepped up to take the blame. ‘They came after me. This is my fault.’

‘No, it’s not,’ Osomatsu’s growl muffled past his sleeves.

‘Then what happened to you and Choromatsu?’ dad directed at his eldest when mum’s mouth flapped without much sound, the only response she had to Karamatsu’s admission and Osomatsu’s hot denial.

‘We ran into some assholes,’ he mumbled, very aware that officers were among those listening in the crowded kitchen. But he barely had to invent a thing. ‘Choromatsu collapsed—his anemia, or whatever. They were jerks about it. I lost my temper, and they beat the crap out of me. Karamatsu saved our asses.’

‘But why did you run off in the first place?’ asked dad of Karamatsu. He fixed him with a stern, but mostly puzzled look. ‘What happened to your jacket? And your boots?’

‘I … I … it doesn’t matter. It’s of no importance.’

Karamatsu didn’t want to tell them. ‘They have Ichimatsu to worry about,’ he murmured in Osomatsu and Todomatsu’s minds. ‘I don’t want to make things worse.’

‘You are every bit as important as Ichimatsu,’ Osomatsu told him forcefully, not yet forgiven the fourth born. He wasn’t sure he ever would—well, he would. They were brothers, and Osomatsu loved the piece of shit. But he wouldn’t forget.

‘You matter too, Karamatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu whispered.

‘It is best you receive care here,’ Ahn added softly. Slipped unnoticed from Osomatsu’s hoodie, she pressed to Karamatsu’s ankle. ‘To complement your treatment by the Alliance. This will be easier to manage if your parents are aware of your condition.’

‘But I … I don’t want them to be … I don’t want them to think I’m … I’m …’

‘Karamatsu!’ Mum exclaimed when his shoulders shook. Karamatsu turned away, hiding his face from their parents. ‘My sweet boy, what is it?’

Osomatsu pushed his head from his arms in time to see dad’s face slacken. Already a night where nothing had gone right, Matsuzo saw in his second born as sure as sunrise: something was very wrong. Osomatsu tried to be a rock for the second born—a bit fucking late, wasn’t it? ‘Just tell them, man. Get it over with—you can do it.’
Beside him, Todomatsu gripped his wrist. Karamatsu stiffened. But he didn’t pull away.

‘M-Mother …’ he finally got out. He still refused to look at anyone. ‘Father … if it’s no trouble … I could not choose a worse time, but could I …’

He broke off, swallowing hard. But with his brothers’ encouragement, he made himself finish. ‘Could I have a word with you?’

Osomatsu offered to stay. Karamatsu turned him down. ‘You need rest, brother. The city depends on you.’

‘The universes, you mean,’ Osomatsu managed a joke as Karamatsu all but carried him upstairs.

‘Of course,’ he agreed. But his smile was see through, a waning sliver of past efforts.

Once they’d tucked up Osomatsu and Jyushimatsu either side of Choromatsu, Karamatsu turned to Totty with an shrinking request. ‘Might we … face them together?’

Whatever he needs, the eldest rebuked himself for feeling so hurt. Karamatsu and Todomatsu used to be so close. Before Totty had blossomed into a social butterfly, and Karamatsu had tried so hard to do the same.

Ahn returned downstairs with them. ‘Don’t eavesdrop,’ she preemptively scolded Osomatsu. Reluctantly, he reeled in any plans to telepathically listen in. But knowing what conversation passed below, sleep just wouldn’t take him. The best he managed was a drift, splayed horizontal. He was alert the instant his brothers returned. But Karamatsu walked straight past and collapsed on the futon. He curled on his side, facing away from them. Todomatsu was emotional. He didn’t want to talk about it.

‘Later, Niisan,’ he sniffed wetly. ‘Go to sleep.’

His brothers did just that—at least, Karamatsu seemed asleep. Todomatsu soon joined Choromatsu in realms of nightmare. Choromatsu’s seemed particularly bad without his dispenser to temper them. Osomatsu scratched his hair when he whimpered, hoping it transformed some horror in his dreams into something more comforting.

‘Are you all right?’ Ahn whispered, crawling onto his chest.

‘Sure, why not?’ Osomatsu said, listless as he closed his eyes. His body cramped with just her slight extra weight. But even his sarcasm was spent. ‘… Ahn?’

He propped open a heavy eyelid. Her paws light on his collarbones, Ahn’s massive dark orbs blinked down at him. Her question still filled them. Osomatsu sighed. ‘If you mean something in particular,’ was his tattered request. ‘Keep it simple. My brain feels like it’s rattling around a cage.’

Haltingly, she did so. ‘I didn’t want to mention it. But when Matsuno Todomatsu was healing you, you were crying out … such terrible things.’

Ahn shuddered. Osomatsu felt blood pool in his cheeks as she described his pleas—just let him die, he couldn’t do this any more, he couldn’t cope, why god had he ever signed that fucking contract.

‘Don’t be ashamed, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn either saw through the dark or felt the heat of his flush. ‘But please. If you need help … if you can’t talk to me or your brothers, talk to your experts. I understand, if you feel you can’t confide in me,’ she went on, speaking increasingly loudly. As though she tried to drown out her own inadequacies, her mistakes. Her failures. ‘Especially now. I’m
so sorry. For not telling you about Matsuno Karamatsu, about his illness, or his inclination, or …'

Breaking off, she blinked at him so desolately. ‘I wanted to do the right thing. But I wasn’t sure what that was … and I’m your mentor! I’m supposed to know what I’m doing. And I just … please don’t hate me, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ her childlike voice sank to a whisper.

Osomatsu sighed. She’d been through way too much already, the poor kid. How could he have yelled at her like that? ‘I don’t hate you,’ he promised, clumsily rubbing her ears. ‘I was scared, I got angry—you know me. But I think you were right, not to say anything. Karamatsu shouldn’t …’

Osomatsu broke off, swallowing hard. ‘This shouldn’t have happened.’

‘I hated keeping things from you,’ Ahn sniffed, stuffing her face into his collar. ‘But if I hadn’t, and you wanted to recruit him … I have trouble saying no to you.’

Osomatsu snorted faintly. ‘You mean you have trouble saying no to Totty.’

‘No,’ Ahn’s ears flapped in dissent. ‘All of you. I don’t have anyone else. You are all … precious to me,’ she said, ears a pink sunrise. ‘I cannot bear the thought of making you unhappy.’

Osomatsu smoothed her silken fur with his thumb, distantly intrigued—exactly how much could he get away with? Softened though he was, he fully intended to test this. Just as soon as his legs felt like legs again. Not stockings stuffed with sodden cotton balls. ‘You’re the toughest kid I know,’ he said when Ahn’s claws dug into him. ‘But if you don’t know what to do, just ask. Yeah, you’re our mentor. But you’re still learning. Just like us. We’re in this together, you don’t need to figure shit out on your own.’

‘Says he who won’t consult his experts,’ Ahn retorted damply, before glancing over at Karamatsu’s back. ‘I wanted to protect him.’

‘I know,’ Osomatsu returned. Quietly. ‘Thank you.’

‘He has so much to give, but I … I hope I haven’t made a terrible mistake.’

‘We’ll look after him,’ Osomatsu repeated his promise from the warehouse. ‘We’ll get him through this …’

_You did this, it’s your fault. You’re the eldest, you’re supposed to protect him, and you didn’t even notice he was falling apart. You couldn’t look after him then, how the hell do you think you can do it now? He’s better off without you …_

‘Matsuno Osomatsu?’

Osomatsu was an expert in not thinking. But this was something else. Guilt and loathing wormed through his reinforced protective layers. He’d let Karamatsu get sick. He’d sat there and let it happen. What the fuck was wrong with him? He deserved to fucking … he deserved to …

‘Oww, fuck!’

Osomatsu grunted, grabbing weakly at his chest. ‘Osomatsu!’ Ahn exclaimed, screeching back in alarm. ‘What …’

‘Nothing, nothing. I’m just …’

Making excuses—he had plenty of them to be in pain—Osomatsu struggled to his feet. ‘I gotta use
the bathroom,’ he said, depositing Ahn on Todomatsu. ‘Try to get some sleep.’

‘Look after yourself, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ the kitten murmured, eyes already slow-blinking shut. Clutching at the door and then the bannister, Osomatsu dragged himself towards the bathroom. What the hell had …

‘Osomatsu? Son, what are you doing?’

‘Bathroom,’ he grunted, hating that his father saw how frailly he clung to stay upright.

‘Here, let me … I was wondering if you were still up,’ dad said, hooking Osomatsu’s arm over his shoulders and helping him stumble. The ordered kerfuffle of police downstairs had dwindled. ‘They found Ichimatsu,’ he confirmed. A lone weight of many that dragged on Osomatsu’s chest dropped off. ‘He was passed out behind a butcher’s a few wards over. They’ve taken him back to hospital. Your mother’s gone to stay with him—he hasn’t woken up yet. I’ll go in the morning … and take Karamatsu with me,’ he added, reeling in an anchor of emotion with excess gruffness. ‘We’ll get him in to see someone. How are you doing?’

‘Fine,’ Osomatsu replied automatically. But dad didn’t let him go when they reached the bathroom.

‘We’re worried about you, son.’

Dad unexpectedly pulled him into a hug—holy shit, ow. Feeling his eldest flinch, dad loosened his hold, worry amplified. ‘The only reason your mother hasn’t ambushed you is I promised to talk to you first.’

Osomatsu’s stomach sank ominously. ‘What do you …’

‘Ichimatsu and Choromatsu are sick. Karamatsu is sick. Todomatsu hasn’t been the same since his friends were kidnapped. And Jyushimatsu is … Jyushimatsu. We know why they might be acting out. What’s going on with you, Osomatsu?’

‘Nothing, Dad. Just …’ Osomatsu tried to grin. ‘I can’t take a punch anymore, I guess.’

‘But it’s not just tonight, is it.’

‘That’s from work,’ Osomatsu reminded, starting to feel the pressure as he was slowly backed into a corner.

‘I know what you’ve told us, son,’ dad said, gone almost gentle. ‘But I wanted to ask … are you seeing someone? A girl?’ he said, taking Osomatsu’s look of sheer bewilderment as a cue for clarification. ‘Because if you are, and she’s the one treating you like this …’

‘No!’ Osomatsu burst. Dad thought he had a girlfriend who beat the crap out of him? He really had to make his stories more convincing, if his parents were jumping to conclusions like that. ‘Seriously? On what planet would I get a girlfriend without … and even if I did, and she … I wouldn’t let … Dad, no. No,’ he repeated, turned very red when he failed to look convinced.

Shaking him off by swearing he was about to piss all over the floor, Osomatsu closed himself in the bathroom. Breathing deep to compose himself, he leaned on the sink and pawed one-handed at his pajama top, peering in the mirror.

A small burn shone up on his chest. What the fuck? When had that happened?

Perturbed, he thought about asking his experts. For about half a second. Then Osomatsu decided it
was normal. He was the Salamander, right? Firestarter extraordinaire. He must have accidentally torched himself during the fight. And it was a tiny sucker, no big deal. The next time he transformed, it’d heal right up.

But right now it fucking hurt. Osomatsu ran the tap cold, scooping water to bathe the burn—could a Salamander really burn themselves? It was his fire. Shouldn't he …

Osomatsu shut off the tap with an irritated jerk. Didn't he have enough shit to deal with without hyperventilating over a pathetic little burn? He was supposed to be a hero. Disgusted, Osomatsu made himself forget about it. By the time he crawled agonisingly back beneath the futon blanket, it had already blurred into the scenery of his passing thoughts.

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A prod in Osomatsu’s chest cruelly raised him from rejuvenating rest long before his body was ready. He moaned when the gentle nudge refused to end. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, time to get up.’

One eye cracked apart. Through caked sludge and the haze that still ruled his mind, he saw Totty’s familiar silhouette lean over him, haloed by the dawn. 'You’ve gotta be kidding me,’ Osomatsu choked out.

'Sorry, Niisan,’ the youngest said with sincerity that lacked any sugary embellishments. He grabbed Osomatsu’s crumpled jumpsuit from the floor, telling him to get dressed. ‘Really, I am. But that's an order.’

An order that took 10 minutes to obey. Raspjng jumbled strings of language that ranged from bribes to blackmail, Osomatsu painfully navigated his jumpsuit, and even more painfully stuffed his legs through the right holes. Probably.

'I don't want Karamatsu-niisan transforming,’ Totty said once he'd requested an anxious Ahn watch over their brothers. Shambled only to the entrance, Osomatsu already sweated cold, his fingers trembling as he laced his sneakers. 'Not until he’s ready. And Choromatsu-niisan needs time—they almost killed him. Again. I need to know where you’re at, Niisan.’

'This … isn't enough to know?’ Osomatsu gasped, grabbing at the wall to haul himself up. Christ, it was worse than staggering around last night, he could hardly stand. His legs tremored, burning and cramping and screaming at him to sit the fuck down. How was this going to convince mum and dad he'd only come off worse in a scuffle?

'Think of it as your first steps towards rehabilitation,’ Totty suggested, setting a snail’s pace and piping so brightly Osomatsu wanted to hang him by the back of his candy-coloured jumpsuit from the nearest streetlight. ‘That’s essentially a new pair of legs you have to train up from scratch.’

'Urrgh … I didn’t need to know that.’

Drained in minutes, Osomatsu barely hobbled along, clinging to Todomatsu like his fingers were splashed with puckering squid suckers. At least there was hardly anyone to see how pathetic he looked. A few sparrows hopped about in the early sun, pecking at the footpath. A scrawny cat watched them with primal interest while a golden Shiba yipped and strained on their lead. Trains rumbled nearby, overground and underground, and more frequent as this exercise in torture wore into commuting hours. The vibrations jarred Osomatsu’s bones. He’d never been forced to keep functioning through so much pain. But Todomatsu, the sadistic slave-driving shit … he proved he was capable of sainthood, when it suited him. He made no comment when tears gushed humiliatingly down Osomatsu’s face, soaking his eyepatch. He only clucked in sympathy, gently
patting his back. Osomatsu tried to make light of his waterworks. But cold and wind could no longer be blamed. It was still a little crisp so early, but that spring already promised a summer to remember.

Finally his body gave out. Osomatsu collapsed against a bakery wall, retching. Hair sodden and jumpsuit darkened to splotchy blood by sweat, Osomatsu sank to the greasy cement. Todomatsu gave him a minute. ‘No more … p-please,’ the eldest begged when the youngest made to pull him up. ‘I … I can’t …’

‘Not much further,’ Totty promised. If Osomatsu weren’t in a stranglehold of his own anguish, he might have heard the soft acceptance burgeoning on fear that edged his younger brother’s voice. ‘We just need to pick something up.’

‘You dragged me … out here … to p-pick something up?’

Todomatsu towed him into a dingy subway station. Bathed in pale artificial light, he squatted in front of a nondescript locker. It looked broken, jammed shut. Totty surreptitiously took out his scroll. Curious in spite of himself, Osomatsu watched him scan his diamond over the lock. The battered door sprang open. Quickly, Todomatsu extracted two packages wrapped in brown paper—what looked like paper, anyway. Somehow, Osomatsu didn’t think it was paper.

‘Special Alliance delivery?’ he panted, taken the opportunity to collapse. The tiles were some cold relief to the white-hot stab of his legs.

‘For you and Choromatsu,’ Totty affirmed. ‘They’ll be a little longer with Karamatsu’s dispenser, his counsellors want a few sessions with him first.’

Ignoring Osomatsu’s hounding to call a taxi—‘Not if it kills me!’ he made a totally-warranted fuss when Totty suggested he needed the exercise—the youngest half supported, half carted the eldest back the direction they’d come. Near the corner flower shop, just a few turns from home, Todomatsu stopped short. ‘What are you …’

He shut up, seeing his brother had gone pasty. Totty’s hand crept to his middle. Osomatsu already felt like he was about to hurl. That Todomatsu felt it so suddenly, however …

Totty hauled him behind the shop, depositing him in an unceremonious heap. ‘Stay there,’ he said, lofting his scroll high. His sparkling transformation put even the gorgeous young sun to shame.

The Unicorn fluttered off over rooftops, Osomatsu poked miserably at his gut before grabbing his own scroll. No heat. No soldiers. But that sick squirm was definitely Liberation Force activity—the neighbourhood had to be crawling with slaves.

Osomatsu growled low. Like hell he was staying put. It’d majorly piss Takuu off, to see the Salamander already back on his feet. So what if he could barely support his own weight? They didn’t have to know that. ‘By this contract I submit my spark to salvation!’

Transformation softened every blow his enemies had landed to almost nonexistence—why couldn’t he stay magical forever? Osomatsu hyped up, no problems. But that hyped dwindled when he touched down—what was this shit? He kept his feet. But he realised without any doubt that he couldn’t trust them. The Salamander enhanced himself, Osomatsu remembered uneasily. Wobbly newborn fawn sticks weren’t much of a foundation. Shit, Totty was right. He had to get strong again, and fast.

In slightly hesitant, but undeniably hot pursuit of his brother, Osomatsu pulled up on a squat apartment block overlooking the street behind theirs. Todomatsu stood below in all his glittering
glory. A semicircle of thirteen slaves hemmed him in. Totty hefted his sceptre warningly.

‘Ahn,’ Osomatsu reached out to her in the house. ‘Are you cloaking out here, or …’

‘Thank the Alliance,’ Ahn breathed. ‘I sensed them coming, but … yes, of course,’ she pulled herself together. ‘I’m drawing attention from the street. I’m with Matsumoto Karamatsu,’ she added more tentatively. ‘Do you need him to …’

‘Nah, we’re fine. Fine,’ Osomatsu stressed when Ahn was unconvinced. This was tense, but that was no reason to get transformation trigger happy. ‘We can handle this.’

‘You mean Matsumoto Todomatsu can handle this.’

Osomatsu scowled. Did she have to aim low right now?

‘He is only one man,’ a tall slave was projecting strongly. ‘He is of no value to you.’

‘That’s what you think,’ Todomatsu breathed unheard, his wrath barely leashing raw pain. Dressed in stylish dark civvies and emanating a charisma that clubbed Osomatsu over the head for all he’d run into him twice, he instantly recognised Atsushi. So the cutie beside him swinging that mean-looking crowbar must be Kaho. Half the engorged pack was made up of poor Totty’s friends.

They were after Karamatsu. That hadn’t taken long. Osomatsu gritted his fists in his gauntlets, about to intervene. Then his legs shuddered. Cursing, he quickly rested against the utility room. He’d step in if Totty got into trouble.

‘Will you destroy us for him?’ Atsushi gestured to encompass his intimidating mob. ‘Helpless slaves at the eternal whim of our Lord Takuu? But perhaps we will retreat,’ he fired from another angle, ‘if you let us collect our wayward pack mate. He is so alone without us. You wouldn’t deny a lost little boy his friends, would …’

Not hesitating, Totty slammed the head of his sceptre into the ground. A few dozen glistening chains snaked through the puppets’ feet, bypassing them to thread a cage around their house. Digging in his heels, Totty yanked his sceptre from the asphalt. His chains didn’t retract. Rather, they seemed to shimmer and fade against reality. But Osomatsu’s lens highlighted the powerful protective web.

With a tilt of Atsushi’s chin, a tiny girl with rust-dyed hair and a lead pipe stalked to their back wall. Reaching one hand towards the house, she retracted with a hiss. Hefting her pipe like a bat, she swung with all her strength. It cracked against nothing, emitting silvered sparks on impact.

No slave in the thrall of Takuu could touch that spell. Totty hadn’t done that before. Goddamn, Osomatsu whistled low. His experts were good.

‘That is a brilliant trick,’ Atsushi said as his packmate cursed and nursed her numb arms. ‘But once again, you stand between us and our objectives. And that was a hard battle won last night. You must be exhausted …’

Atsushi took a menacing step forward. Osomatsu punched fire. The pack leader skidded back when the fist-sized firebomb singed the toe of his boot. His head swivelled, quickly finding the Salamander. Osomatsu cocked one gauntlet—that’s right, there was more where that came from. But Atsushi sneered, seeing through his casual lean against the utility room.

‘So you aren’t dead. That’s disappointing … no.’

Atsushi thrust out an arm, stopping a snarling Kaho from approaching his apartment perch—what
was she planning to do, scale the damn drainpipe? Well, Osomatsu was both intimidated and highly aroused. Maybe Todomatsu could give them a fresh introduction. Once they freed her soul, that was.

Atsushi cast his cool eye over Osomatsu, calculating the likelihood of his pack emerging from a bout with an ailing, but angry Salamander. Slaves were not designed for combat with guardians. Not in these small numbers. Their stealth mission had been sunk. ‘There will be other opportunities,’ he made his pack back off. ‘We’re leaving.’

He shot a sneer at Osomatsu before giving the Unicorn a final scan with eyes like lasers. Totty stood his ground before his enslaved friend. ‘You can’t protect them forever. Sooner or later, your guard will be down. Is it worth all this effort, knowing that one day you will lose?’

‘I could have handled it, Niisan,’ Todomatsu said as the pack sauntered away, looking like a gang of wealthy youths that haunted strange hours. ‘I’ll have to handle worse.’

He was right, Osomatsu realised, abseiling down with infuriating care as Totty shunted more light into his spell—‘That should hold it for a while.’ When the enemy next attacked, now there was no doubt: the Unicorn would face them alone.

Phased and tripped inside, Osomatsu was on his arse in the entrance when Mum opened the door. Slowly sliding it shut behind her, she looked just as slowly between her wrecked eldest and her youngest, helping him with his sneakers. ‘Mum!’ Todomatsu squeaked, dropping Osomatsu’s foot—‘Ow, damn it!’ ‘I didn’t think you’d be back until …’

Mum sharpened her eye on Totty. Their fearless leader scarpered, leaving Osomatsu on the ground. Coward.

‘Mum, seriously,’ Osomatsu tried when she took over, roughly unlacing his shoes. ‘I’m just sore, there’s nothing—hey!’ he protested when she yanked his pant leg up past the knee. A damning mess of purple and black greeted her.

‘Oh god …’ she whispered, stern facade falling into despair.

‘Mum,’ Osomatsu tried again as she uncovered the same appalling bruises on his other leg. He didn’t stand a chance talking himself out of this half unconscious on the floor. ‘It’s just … it … it’s nothing.’

‘Back to bed,’ she said, pointing a shaking finger upstairs. ‘You can’t show up at work like this.’

‘Yes, Mum,’ Osomatsu mumbled, not game to challenge a thing she said.

‘What are you trying to do to yourself?’ she demanded, dragging him along like the disobedient child he’d been. ‘Pushing yourself like this … And I suppose you know absolutely nothing about the park.’

‘The p-park?’ His stomach took an icy plunge. ‘Wh-What are you …’

Mum barged on over his stammers. ‘Whatever on earth happened last night that none of you are saying, the very least you could do is … Osomatsu.’

Too spent to duck away, willowy Mum pinned him against the wall by their bedroom, one small hand on each shoulder. She gazed down at her eldest so pleadingly. Tears of anger and worry welled side-by-side in her eyes. ‘Osomatsu, please … just talk to me.’

Karamatsu’s space on the futon was empty. He and Ahn must be in the living room. ‘Dad’s taken the
morning off,’ Todomatsu murmured over Jyushimatsu’s sleep gurgling. The youngest had already changed into his snappiest vest. ‘To take Karamatsu-niisan to …’

‘I know,’ Osomatsu interrupted mid-yawn, stretching out his tiredness. He instantly regretted it.

‘I’m going with them … try not to worry, Niisan. Go back to bed.’

Osomatsu woke in the early afternoon feeling disgusting. Mum was gone, freshened up and returned to the hospital with a bag for Ichimatsu’s latest stay. He’d barely lasted half a day discharged.

Hobbling downstairs, Osomatsu stripped and had a cold rinse. His stomach growled as he towelled off with all the vigor of an arthritic eighty-year-old. But even navigating a cup of ramen was beyond him. Osomatsu had given up halfway through crawling back upstairs when he heard a taxi pull up.

‘For me?! Thanks, Totty!’ Jyushimatsu’s hearty voice bounced from outside. Their parents had sent the youngest home with Karamatsu and a teetering stack of lunch boxes. Todomatsu nudged Osomatsu annoyingly with his foot a few times before helping him up. His head down, Karamatsu edged straight past.

‘Did he talk to someone?’ Osomatsu mumbled. ‘A doctor? What happened?’

‘I don’t know,’ Totty murmured back. ‘I had to wait outside … no, I did not snoop,’ he said before Osomatsu could ask. ‘But we had to get him these.’

The bag of lunch boxes hooked over his elbow, Totty shook the little paper one in his hand. By that rattling, there were several bottles of tablets inside.

In their room, Karamatsu huddled on the couch, his face buried in a cushion. Looking at his brother for a long moment, Osomatsu rifled clumsily through the bentos. ‘Hey, man,’ he found the second born’s favourite. ‘Here’s your karaage … when you feel like it.’

Osomatsu pushed the lunchbox towards him. Karamatsu didn’t move.

Once they’d eaten, Osomatsu and Totty gently roused Choromatsu. ‘I … can’t …’

He could barely force out a word, jaw clamped hard against pain. His hands flopped like water-filled rubber gloves—he couldn’t grip his chopsticks. He couldn’t even sit up, slumping off the pillows Totty piled behind him. In the end, Osomatsu sat beside him, propping him up while Todomatsu fed him. Choromatsu moaned, trying to turn away from the rice—he didn’t want to eat. Todomatsu ignored him, making him swallow every grain.

‘You need strength to heal, Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn hoped reason might comfort the third born. She’d crawled out of Totty’s manbag, sneaked into the hospital in style. ‘Matsuno Ichimatsu hasn’t woken up,’ she informed them when Totty didn’t.

Osomatsu shrugged a little. It wasn’t like Ichimatsu hadn’t lapsed for days on end before. It was all part of his disease deal. He felt pretty bad, not being more worried—he was. But Osomatsu had a shit tonne to be worried about right now. And Ichimatsu had inadvertently scratched himself off the top of that list.

As Todomatsu cleared their empty boxes away—Karamatsu’s untouched, he shifted it onto the arm of the couch—Osomatsu lurched to the window. Jyushimatsu rolled around the little front yard, swimming through dirt. Even from a storey up, he could see that smile wriggle over his wide lips. But it was a few muscles smaller than usual. His frolicking was almost subdued. But Jyushimatsu still seemed pretty occupied. He wouldn’t be up any time soon. And they’d hear him coming half the
city away if he did.

‘The Alliance couldn’t send their best equipment,’ Ahn said as Totty hefted the futon, panting irritably at Osomatsu to get out of his way. ‘They are entire rooms in themselves. One might fit in the warehouse, but even if you could travel easily there are any number of security issues, not to mention none of you have the expertise to operate …’

‘We’re morons,’ Osomatsu interrupted. ‘We know. You don’t have to remind us every chance you get.’

Ahn’s neck ruff puffed up. ‘I, for one, am no moron. And I haven’t the expertise to …’

‘So what did they send?’ he said as Todomatsu retrieved the parcels. ‘It’s gonna fix us, right?’ Osomatsu gestured at himself and Choromatsu, laid carefully on his front. He hadn’t had the stomach to check out the state of his brother’s back in the light of day.

‘It will help,’ Ahn promised.

The strange, shiny stockings and straps contraption Todomatsu unboxed for him didn’t look like much—what was this, intergalactic underwear? But he wouldn’t turn his nose up at any offering from their employers. Cracking a few lingerie jokes, he gingerly rolled his jeans up past the knee. Todomatsu helped him pull the tech over his feet—damn, these things were tight. The mechanisms seemed pretty foolproof, but Ahn still saw need to instruct, Todomatsu snapping his ankles and calves snugly into the braces while Osomatsu took care of his knees.

‘You may wish to lie down,’ she advised as Osomatsu’s thumb bent to activate them.

He sat on the tatami, strapped legs sticking straight in front of him. ‘What, this isn't down enough for … fuck me!’ he yelped—the braces stiffened and contracted, gripping his legs in brutal vices. Then they went numb. Prickling with pins and needles, Osomatsu gasped, falling back and squeezing his eyes shut. It didn’t hurt—not exactly. But whatever this feeling was, it was vindictive. His stomach squeezed, wondering if Alliance tech was advanced enough to melt through his skin and individually mummify his cells. ‘Nope, uh-uh,’ he shook his head hard from flat in his back. ‘I don’t like this, I don’t like it …’

‘I did warn you.’ Ahn didn’t pity him enough to rescind her “I told you so” rights. The unpleasant tingling finally eased off, Osomatsu propped himself on an elbow. Looking in time to see the shiny white of the skintight braces ripple to imitate his bruised flesh—only someone really looking had a hope of noticing—he slowly sat up and bent into a cross-legged position.

‘Oww,’ he complained. But his legs obeyed without resistance. Whether they obeyed him or the braces was harder to determine.

‘Once you are used to them, you will not even limp,’ Ahn promised as Osomatsu gritted his jaw, easing through a few strengthening stretches. ‘In addition to support, they will keep your muscles stimulated, your blood flowing.’

‘I really don’t like this,’ he mumbled—that would be the spasms, impulses zapping up and down his calves; his legs would not stop twitching. ‘It’s weird, it’s fucking weird … when do they come off?’

‘They will detach once your strength is restored.’

Todomatsu cleared his throat. ‘About that, Ahn-chan …’

‘Todomatsu, you piece of shit!’ Osomatsu raged to hear their leader had requested the braces
imprison his brothers until they surpassed their previous condition. ‘How bout I lock you in a full body suit of this shit, see how you like it?’

Anything but guilty, Todomatsu stuck out the very tip of his tongue. ‘What kind of leader would I be if I didn’t encourage my subordinates to improve? I thought you’d be happy, Niisan,’ he said, feigning doe-eyed surprise. ‘You want to impress your little brother, don’t you? And you were always behind in flexibility—how can you call yourself a magical boy?’ he chided, rubbing Osomatsu’s nose in his weakness. ‘I mean, come on.’

Muttering promise of dirty retribution and swearing in every colour of the rainbow, Osomatsu staggered onto his knees while Todomatsu slit open Choromatsu’s “present”. The eldest winced when he extracted … a full body suit of this shit.

It took both of them to strap Choromatsu up, painstakingly fitting his uncooperative limbs in the set of interconnected braces. ‘Three sets of hands would make this a lot easier, you know,’ Osomatsu barged through any trepidation to direct a friendly jibe at Karamatsu. No reaction. Todomatsu twittered hotly over the eldest’s hopes of getting anything out of the second born. Forget his legs—how long would it take Karamatsu to recover? Osomatsu would do anything to make that happen. But the workings of the human mind and heart were a million times more intricate than muscle and bone.

The third born’s braces joined at a column that rode the ridges and grooves of his rebuilt spine, splaying muscle-stimulating feelers all the way to the base of his skull. Choromatsu sweated badly when it snapped in place, compressing deep into his back. Totty helped him to sit, manipulating him through a few exercises before encouraging him to try standing alone. ‘I’m here to catch you, Niisan.’

He hesitated. Understandably. But Choromatsu finally stood as though jerked by slow string; until his strength returned, his braces would hold him up like a marionette. Osomatsu felt a bit sick, seeing his brother’s limp body hang off his supportive tech. But, as unpleasant as they were, Osomatsu had to cut their new additions some slack. They’d be back to their kickass selves in no time.

Unfortunately, Osomatsu’s body had other plans. To his surprise, he found himself locked in recovery mode as intense as Choromatsu’s. After three days of barely breaking sleep’s surface long enough to gorge himself on nutrient cakes—the Alliance kept them well supplied—their parents were convinced Osomatsu was one sick day away from losing his job. ‘Choromatsu doesn’t have to,’ he mumbled, barely functioning when Totty bundled him out the door. But he had to keep up appearances. Choromatsu’s “office” had a reputation for easygoing—he could work from home for a week or two. Osomatsu’s had a reputation for sending him home in pieces. Todomatsu somehow got him to the warehouse. The youngest had barely left before Osomatsu collapsed anew. He didn’t like waking up in there alone.

‘We’re right here, Niisan,’ Todomatsu reminded telepathically, back at home keeping an eye on Karamatsu and Choromatsu. But the next day Ahn came to keep Osomatsu company between extended naps.

‘These are extensive injuries,’ Ahn reminded when Osomatsu grew frustrated with this routine. ‘Made more so by the delay in healing, and your infection by taint. Give yourself time. Your experts are finalising your rehabilitation regimen as we speak.’

His muscles twitched, braces working their technological wonders on him. Osomatsu shuffled, trying to ignore them. Unable to get comfortable, he scowled, ripping the biodegradable packaging from his fifth nutrient cake instead. Even that poison gas attack from Totty’s unforgettable Unicorn trial hadn’t put him out of action for so long. He’d been bloodied and bruised. He’d seriously stressed his
organs. He’d cracked his skull open at least twice, and suffered so many broken bones he’d lost count last November. He always ached, but he was back on his feet sometimes in moments. Choromatsu’s spine was serious, but why was this so different?

‘Your legs were completely crushed,’ Ahn said, countering his moodiness with all the patience she could squish into her tiny body.

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ grumbled Osomatsu, his mouth full. Weak was understandable. Maybe. But shouldn’t he feel better by now? His energy levels raced Ichimatsu’s to scrape rock bottom. And Ichimatsu had only just woken up, his prolonged period comatose finally at an end. To their mother’s red-eyed relief. Osomatsu hadn’t been to see him yet—he would. As soon as he could stay awake long enough.

‘Don’t be like that, Matsuno Osomatsu. Healing takes a lot out of a person.’ Ahn helped him feel slightly less like a useless lump. ‘To have so many spells worked on you, so much forcibly demanded of your life force—honestly, I’m astounded you and Matsuno Choromatsu are doing as well as you are.’

‘Always the tone of surprise,’ Osomatsu mumbled. But a smile wriggled his lips at Ahn’s fluster to deny it, already slipped into his latest snooze.

While Osomatsu and Choromatsu slowly regained their vigor, Karamatsu had dropped the few threads that remained to him. Whether curled on the couch or hidden beneath the futon blanket, the second born barely got up. In very few ways, this was almost a good thing. Karamatsu was the Liberation Force’s number one most wanted. At home, he was safe inside Todomatsu’s puppet-repellant web. And, for whatever reason, enemy activity had crashed to an all-time low. Good timing, Takuu—Osomatsu had never thought he’d have cause to thank the alien warlord. Wearily trying to catch up with reports, Choromatsu mumbled over his tablet one evening that creating their commander had sorely depleted the Liberation Force’s powers; they needed to regenerate as badly as the guardians. But though his soldiers couldn’t mutate, Takuu still deployed his human slaves to trick vulnerable targets into their parallel realm. For the first time, their Unicorn was going it alone, sniffing out puppet activity—or, rather, nauseating it out.

Todomatsu could handle puppets. Osomatsu reminded himself of that. Constantly. But his rest was haunted by worry whenever he knew the youngest was on a hunt.

Todomatsu’s pride (and eventual enjoyment, by his endless puppet patrol prattle) in being a sparkly lone ranger aside, the youngest insisted his primary concern was his big brothers’ care. But though Choromatsu required it in droves, Karamatsu saw to most of his own nursing. He crawled to the bathroom a few times a day. He crept downstairs and ate a little when no one was around. He even dressed for his psych appointments and took his meds without being prompted. Even sinking in depression he no longer denied like all their lives depended on it, Karamatsu’s all-consuming need not to cause his family any pains endured.

Watching his brother’s decline, Osomatsu felt powerless. But it wasn’t a decline, not really. Or it’d better not be. Because if it was … this was a jarring revelation. His brother’s condition under spotlight after too many shitty months—maybe years—of burying everything inside. And if this was bad … Osomatsu hated to think how much worse he’d be without Choromatsu’s high-tech medical dispenser hugging his wrist.

Not helped by fresh trauma—not to mention he was currently helpless—Choromatsu endured a fat handful of stress attacks without his medication, pupils exploding as his senses tricked him, mind hurling him back onto the battlefield. Karamatsu never failed to try and return the band to him, whenever he noticed the third born’s breath turn thready. The attacks were frightening, strangling
Choromatsu with panic. But he wouldn’t take it back. Osomatsu was relieved when Todomatsu returned from a midnight jaunt with a fist-sized parcel hidden in his hoodie. He slit the space-resistant packaging when Karamatsu made no move to open it.

‘Can I … keep it?’ Voice thin from disuse, Karamatsu made a disjointed request, his first in days.

‘It’s for you, Niisan,’ Todomatsu promised, reaching to take the second born’s wrist and swap the band he wore for the shiny new example of their employers’ scientific prowess. But Karamatsu pulled away.

‘No,’ he said. He cupped the dispenser in his other hand, pressing them to his chest. ‘This one. Choromatsu … gave it to me.’

Karamatsu looked across the futon at the third born. As though he’d heard, Choromatsu shuffled, mumbling and rearranging himself in sleep. He’d been twitching involuntarily since they’d snapped him into his brace, but actual unconscious movement; that was something to celebrate. Propped up beside him, Osomatsu gave a weary grin—they should definitely throw a party.

Bounding from Totty’s shoulder, Ahn was about to rest her sweet oversized paws on Karamatsu’s knee. Karamatsu visibly stiffened. Osomatsu watched, feeling heavier than he had a moment ago as Ahn realised: affectionate gestures were currently a big “no”.

‘This has been designed for your use, Matsuno Karamatsu,’ she said—the last thing she wanted was to push him. Lowering from her balanced hind paws, she enthralled herself with the tech in Totty’s hand instead. ‘To respond to the idiosyncrasies of your body, just as that you now wear—’

Ahn indicated with a flip of her tufted tail the cuff Karamatsu handled like pure gold.

‘—is programmed for Matsuno Choromatsu.’

Slumping a heart-wrenching smidgen, Karamatsu gave in. He offered no resistance when Todomatsu removed Choromatsu’s band, clicking the new one in its place. The tech activated, his eyes shot wide. ‘Karamatsu-niisan?’ Totty was startled, their brother’s slightly-diminished frame snapped rigid. ‘Are you okay? … Ahn-chan, what’s wrong?’

‘Nothing at all,’ Ahn assured, Karamatsu already starting to relax. ‘But the efficacy of personalised dispensers far surpasses that of others. His counsellors intend to lower his dose, depending on how he responds.’

Karamatsu exhaled—long, slow and shaky—as therapeutic waves began to pulse through his systems. Choromatsu sighed much the same, his sleep deepening the moment Totty fastened his dispenser back on his wrist.

The morning after, the youngest Matsuno finally coaxed Karamatsu on his first morning jog. Late that afternoon, they somehow got him outside again. Osomatsu walking unaided—a little slow and hesitant, but limp free—he’d built up a little cheery oomph, swinging a light tote bag stuffed with chopsticks, paper plates, and a brightly-patterned tarp. Totty kept very near Choromatsu on the footpath, the third born’s gait halting and pained. Osomatsu winced in sympathy. But he’d get used to his brace soon enough. Then he’d move less like a broken doll. Karamatsu shuffled not quite at Osomatsu’s side, a plastic bag of non-alcoholic beer buffeting his knee with every other step.

‘Hey, wait up!’ Osomatsu called as Jyushimatsu galumphed ahead, an overjoyed mutt let off his leash. But he pulled up with the eldest’s yell, obediently trotting backwards until he bumped into his brothers. He never questioned the need to stick together. The TV hadn’t stopped reporting on the
cultists’ most destructive activity since New Year, an entire street torn apart and a crater punched so deep in the park it cracked the subway. So long as he was reminded—often—Jyushimatsu remained safely inside the barrier Ahn held around them.

There’d been no more attempts to infiltrate the house. But the Unicorn was scattering puppets that loitered in the surrounding streets every other day. The brothers wouldn’t be out for long. Or venture far from home. Karamatsu couldn’t stay shut in his magical cage forever. But they’d be taking precautions for a while. If Jyushimatsu noticed the faint distorting shimmer, he didn’t think to mention it. Ahn fussed non-stop, convinced that bringing the fifth born was a mistake. But Osomatsu had put his foot down. He wouldn’t fuck up again. Not like he had with Karamatsu. Not if he could help it. Jyushimatsu would not be left behind.

Their tarp laid beneath spreading branches, as evening fell the brothers caught the very last cherry blossoms of the season. Falling like five-petalled snowflakes, the soft pink carpet spread thick in every direction Osomatsu looked. Todomatsu had scouted the little park for their picnic. It was almost deserted—the news had reported, too, how the cultist threat had kept hanami parties to a sad minimum that year.

There’d been no special cherry blossom bentos left in the department stores. But they’d nabbed a few seasonal treats on sale, taking a gamble on Jyushimatsu’s wild offer to cook. Scorching three trays of yakiniku on their little gas stove, the blackened meat was the most delicious thing Osomatsu had tasted. Lazily watching Ahn clean her meat-flecked whiskers, Osomatsu licked his own fingers, sticky with sauce. This was the most relaxed he’d felt in far too long. For a few hours, he was almost normal again. The only thing that wasn’t quite right were their numbers: five brothers instead of six.

Ichimatsu remained in hospital. And it sucked. The hospital was worse than prison to him … but it was the best place for him to be. Wasn’t it? His piece of shit disease was beating him to a bloody pulp. Ichimatsu had shown too many times now, that he needed the care. And not only the care—the eldest hated himself for thinking it—but the constant supervision. Not to mention dealing with Ichimatsu was the last thing Karamatsu needed right now. Osomatsu suspected Todomatsu and their parents went all out, ensuring the two never met when Karamatsu saw his doctor a few floors above intensive care.

The morning after their picnic, Choromatsu mentioned over his toast that a sudden vacancy had opened at his office; his boss was interested in hiring Karamatsu. ‘I’m starting back tomorrow, they asked me to bring him along. If he’s interested.’

His mouth stuffed with eggs and leftover meatballs, Osomatsu’s eyes panned from Karamatsu’s lowered head to Mum’s worried lips as they pressed together. Starting work right now must sound like the polar opposite of a good idea. ‘It’s lovely that you’ve mentioned him, Choromatsu. But maybe he should talk to his doctor first.’

‘I have,’ Karamatsu unexpectedly volunteered. ‘I’d … like to look into it. See how it goes …’

He trailed off, resuming his listless prodding at his meal. Taken aback, mum and dad exchanged a conversation in a look, as in-depth and silent as that four of their sons now shared. ‘Then that’s wonderful news,’ dad said, brushing crumbs from his moustache and trying to catch Karamatsu’s eye. ‘But don’t rush yourself, son. Take all the time you need.’

The next day, the four guardians and their quadruped mentor walked—slowly—all the way to the warehouse. Todomatsu had been productive in there over the weekend. Karamatsu now had his own crate, layered with squashy cushions in 10 different shades of blue. A few of his favourite snacks had been added to their bottomless stash. But those were the least of the additions. A few dozen water cooler bottles paraded in tidy rows—how had Totty gotten them all in here by himself? What looked
like an old-fashioned European claw-foot bathtub now sat where a clump of rusted junk had been. Dumped nearby, the youngest had claimed the tub on an inspired whim. ‘What’s this for?’ Osomatsu asked, leaning over the edge to peer inside. It was empty, the plughole stoppered.

‘What do you think it’s for, Niisan?’ Todomatsu sniggered openly.

‘Water …’

Karamatsu’s elemental needs weren’t the only ones their leader had seen to. There was now a small gym erected by Osomatsu’s punch bags, complete with thick tumbling mats and inflated exercise balls. Todomatsu surveyed his work with satisfaction. ‘We’ve been needing this for ages.’

‘Seriously,’ Osomatsu demanded—that leg press alone had to weigh a tonne. Totty had luged in seven different gym machines. ‘How did you get all this in here?’

‘How did you pay for it?’ was Choromatsu’s worry. Their paycheques were generous, but not that generous.

‘Company expense,’ Todomatsu said lightly. His brothers stared. ‘I spoke to a few higher ups,’ he clarified. ‘Asked whether any of the other guardians had to pay for their own equipment.’

Osomatsu shook his head. His little brother was a sly genius. ‘I maintain that gym membership fees would have been sufficient,’ Ahn muttered. Totty chose to be rendered momentarily deaf.

‘And how did I get them in here?’ he added, tapping their new chest press with his scroll like a magic wand. ‘Easy, Niisan: one at a time.’

‘You did … all this for me?’

Karamatsu’s gaze lingered on the massive bottles, the bath. The veritable tower of glossy magazines Todomatsu had chosen for him. ‘Well, we do need our Kraken at his best. But don’t rush into it,’ the youngest echoed their father’s warnings. Already wan, Karamatsu turned an unhealthy grey. He looked like he might throw up at just the thought of transforming—not transforming. Transforming was a fucking delight.

‘Take your time,’ Totty made him promise not to think about it yet. ‘We’ll be here when you’re ready.’

And they had a hell of a lot to do in the meantime. Their unofficial occupational therapist, Todomatsu wasted no time in ordering his Salamander and Wyvern to exercise. Gently. ‘Hey, you’re pretty good at this,’ Osomatsu said as the youngest helped Choromatsu—a very embarrassed, very unsure Choromatsu—ease on a mat for stretches. ‘Ever thought about becoming a nurse? It’d suit you—you’d have to be softie and a hardass.’

Osomatsu had been mostly trying to distract himself—over the last week, the prospect of rehabilitation had become increasingly daunting. Glancing between his braced legs and the weighted presses, he swallowed—funnily enough, he wasn’t feeling any less daunted. But he was rewarded by the pout on Totty’s face at the thought of any full-time gig that didn’t involve thigh-high magical boots. At the same time, he looked rather pleased. Even a little intrigued.

Once Osomatsu was all set up, the youngest mostly helped Choromatsu. His brothers linked to the expertise of their own and each other’s experts, Osomatsu pushed into the connection a few times to snoop, not liking Choromatsu’s colour. He’d whitened alarmingly minutes into his regimen, sweat pouring off him. But he barely made a sound, his lips glued together, gagging his moans as he soldiered through.
Osomatsu, on the other hand, did not subscribe to suffering in silence. ‘Okay,’ he huffed, sweat stinging his eyes as he strained. ‘This isn’t so bad … it’s not so bad … it’s not—motherF***ER!’

Wrenching an inch too hard for his infant muscles, Osomatsu slammed his fists hard into the padded plastic beneath him. ‘Piece … of … shit!’

‘Need a hand, Niisan?’ came Totty’s extra sugar. Choromatsu on his front, the youngest exercised his new medicinal massage skills on the inert, grudgingly grateful third born.

‘Nah,’ Osomatsu bared his teeth at the youngest. His pining muscles wouldn’t be getting any attention from those magic fingers any time soon. ‘Totty,’ he’d purred barely a minute into his first rejuvenating rub. ‘No one touches me like you do. No one makes me feel the way …’

His barely-restrained chortles had burst out with a spray of spit. ‘Come on, Totty,’ he’d appealed, still laughing as the youngest shoved him, getting up in a huff and stalking away, leaving Osomatsu sprawled in his mat and distinctly massage-less. ‘I’m shitting you, don’t take it like that! You know I love you … Come on, Totyyyyy …’

‘It’s not like I’m in pain over here, oh no,’ he griped, feeling all sorts of hard done by. ‘I’m just … goddamn … perfect.’

Osomatsu hurled himself face-down on his mat, refusing to move. This sucked. He’d be lapping up all the attention, if he didn’t look so goddamn weak. He hated looking weak … forget looking, he was weak … they’d better be enjoying the show up there, he thought sourly. According to Ahn, a few interested Alliance parties—important people, she’d stressed, grooming her glossy coat to a high shine—liked to look in on their progress. At least his experts were the kind of people who took joy in learning filthy words in every language they encountered.

His first direct contact with his team, Osomatsu jousted with guilt, that he’d never bothered to rely on their know-how until now. They knew encyclopedias more more about the Salamander than he did —his team leader had a genuine Salamander doctorate. Osomatsu knew they’d always been at his back, analysing, programming his lens, and generally trying to keep him out of trouble through Ahn. But his team were beside themselves to finally be working with him. Or so they claimed.

The training regimen they’d developed was deceptively brutal. Osomatsu still hadn’t worked out whether they were cheerfully punishing him for his long refusal to acknowledge their existence. ‘Nothing you can’t handle,’ they’d promised once Ahn had seen to belated introductions, taking him through the basics.

‘Goddamn liars,’ Osomatsu muttered a few days into their coaching. If he’d learned anything about his team in that time—besides the fact that they were closet sadists—it was that they approached their task of restoring the Salamander to peak fighting form in record time as though they’d signed a death pact.

‘Wonderful!’ the bubbly feminine voice who usually spoke on their behalf exclaimed. Osomatsu trembled, burning legs as limp as overcooked noodles. ‘That’s seven more than yesterday!’

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu exhaled sarcasm. ‘Hooray for me.’

‘You’ve earned a break,’ his expert declared, disgustingly upbeat. ‘Five minutes to hydrate—don’t sit down yet!’ she ordered as Osomatsu toppled off the leg press. ‘Keep moving. Five minutes, then onto your next stretch rotation. Then it’s running, running, running!’

‘I hate all of you,’ Osomatsu mumbled, clinging to the machine frame to stay upright.
'We know,' she assured brightly. 'But hopefully not for long.'

While he and Choromatsu struggled to restore their strength, Ahn kept close to the second born. As condescending as she was of cats, Ahn had learnt how healing and comforting they could be. For Karamatsu—for any of them, Osomatsu was well aware, despite his ceaseless digs—she was more than willing to ‘sink’ to their level. Sometimes when he glanced over, Ahn curled in his brother’s lap. More often she sat beside him, her furred shoulder just brushing his knee.

Already in good shape—embarrassingly above and beyond the state Osomatsu had started out—Karamatsu did stretch and jog around their track, or try to break Osomatsu's push ups record, when Totty, Ahn, and his experts toed the line between suggesting and instructing. But he only did what he was told, with no joy. No spirit. Mostly he just watched. If he wasn't told to do anything, then he did nothing.

But one morning Karamatsu appeared unbidden at the eldest's side. Saying nothing, he helped him to brace and hold agonising stretch after stretch, Osomatsu hissing as he gripped his feet, chest pressed flat to his knees.

Little else he could do for his brother, Osomatsu talked. And he talked. And he kept right on taking, trying to encourage Karamatsu to talk, too. Even policing himself to make sure Karamatsu had time and space to answer, his brother's words remained minimal.

‘This isn't your fault,’ he winced down at his prickling calves. ‘This one time, they made a monster using a baby—a goddamn baby! Was it his fault when the fuck-ugly toad busted our eardrums?

‘How’s therapy?’ Osomatsu tried when he felt his brother shrug. Not very convincing. ‘What’s your doctor's name again … Sato?’

‘Mmm …’

His earthly doctor was Sato. His counsellors, as per every Alliance native they’d encountered, called themselves by abbreviations of their apparently unpronounceable names. Osomatsu knew they treated his brother daily. One was on permanent standby, encouraging Karamatsu to contact them at any time. ‘When are you next seeing Sato? Didn’t she increase your …’

Karamatsu’s grip tightened on Osomatsu’s shoulders. 'I don't want to talk about it.’

‘Sure, man,’ the eldest hurried to say, foot firmly lodged in his mouth. It went against base instinct. But Osomatsu made himself not pry.

He grappled for anything else to talk about and engage his languishing brother. ‘We’re, uh … going to see Ichimatsu tonight,’ he panted once his experts had mercy on him. Half-crushing his bottle as he desperately gulped water, Osomatsu emptied the rest over his flushed face. He was already a dripping mess. ‘Me and … Choromatsu. Just … so you know.’

Osomatsu shook droplets from his fringe, scrubbing himself with a towel. Karamatsu took one of his burning legs, beginning to imitate Totty’s kneading techniques. Apparently focused on his work, Osomatsu’s brother failed to meet his eyes. ‘I want to see him. I do. Just … not yet.’

Ichimatsu probably wasn’t the most sensitive topic to broach. But Osomatsu’s gut wouldn’t let him keep quiet. As soon as Karamatsu was ready, the eldest wanted him to know: they’d be right there with him.

Osomatsu’s training regimen intensified fast. Most of his bodily systems were reasonably convinced he was dead by the end of each training session. But Osomatsu’s strength returned. He accelerated
through his increasingly-gruelling program as though it got easier. His legs still hurt, all the damn time. But Osomatsu began throwing in more of his own training, pulverising punch bags and sparring with Todomatsu. His experts simultaneously thrilled with and infuriatingly critical of his performance, he tried out most of the tricks and suggestions they bombarded him with. Now the lines of communication were open, none of them would shut up. There was so much they wanted him to try.

‘Just wait till you’re transforming again!’ their peppy spokesperson enthused; Niv, she’d told him to call her. Osomatsu guessed he owed it to them, for helping him get back in shape so fast. And their ideas were too damn cool. He itched to wrap himself in fire and try them out.

He hadn’t transformed in weeks. Blood and fire pumped through his veins, his very cells crowing to return to the frontline Totty somehow held alone. His braces remained firmly clamped to his legs. But he held his breath for that green light to go.

Still grounded days later and frustrated to high hell, Osomatsu hurled himself through one of the insane combat dances—did she have to call it a dance?—Niv made him practice. Sufficiently diffused—for now—and panting heavily as he rested his legs, he spotted Karamatsu alone on his crate. Totty was on patrol. Ahn had taken over as Choromatsu’s personal encourager as he concentrated on his back muscles—he was improving. Just more slowly than the eldest. Osomatsu knew the third born’s frustrations shattered his own.

‘Hey,’ Osomatsu said, grabbing a nutrient cake to pack more muscle onto his legs and dropping heavily beside the second born. ‘How are you doing over here?’

‘I’m not considering throwing myself in the canal,’ Karamatsu said flatly. ‘If that’s what you mean. … I’m sorry, brother,’ he added more quietly when Osomatsu froze.

‘Don’t be,’ Osomatsu swallowed his mouthful and caught his eye, trying to smile. ‘Come on, let’s do this.’

‘Do what?’ mumbled Karamatsu.

‘Choromatsu and Todomatsu are on support,’ Osomatsu said, stuffing his cake in his mouth and tugging his brother upright. ‘You’re up front with me. Let’s make that goddamn Doll regret ever messing with you. With us,’ he amended with Karamatsu’s dull reminder—the enemy had no clue who they were. ‘I’ll make him regret messing with you.’

Just as he’d taught the others, Osomatsu began Karamatsu’s practical lessons in close combat, introducing him to a few of his favourite punch bags on the way. ‘This suits you, you know,’ he said a few days into it, hoping to perk him up. ‘We’d just been saying how you’d make the best guardian. You’re the do-gooder … the not-so-evil twin, anyway,’ Osomatsu grinned, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

‘I don’t know about that,’ Karamatsu murmured, lowering his guard. Osomatsu feinted a hook, reminding him that wasn’t the best idea. ‘I think … I think I only ever tried to do good things for the recognition, the appreciation. Maybe …’

‘I doubt it,’ said Osomatsu as his brother’s words faltered. It was still a kick to the guts, to see bold as brass Karamatsu so timid. ‘And if that’s part of it, what’s wrong with that? Doing good’s a buzz. And trust me,’ he added, snaring Karamatsu in a lock from behind—let’s see him break out of this. ‘Our style of doing good is the best buzz there is.’

Karamatsu remained reluctant to do anything much, the slight drag to his feet giving him away when
he said nothing about it. But gradually he began to put some power behind his punches. Osomatsu had been using his brother’s training as a warm up for his own. That arrangement wouldn’t last long. Karamatsu getting into the rhythm of fighting was a good reminder: there was a lot more to him that made him an ideal guardian. He was good, sure. And his potent inclination sure didn’t hurt. But he was strong, too. This time last year, he’d been stronger than Osomatsu. Soon the eldest might need to work to hold his ranking. A flare of competitiveness spiked in him. Only to be temporarily snuffed when, distracted and forgetting how quickly he still tired, Karamatsu almost knocked him arse over head.

The training helped. Osomatsu hoped. Maybe even his own clumsy support wasn’t entirely useless. But whether he helped or not, the combination of medication, therapy, and time began to have noticeable effects on Karamatsu. His mood seemed to lift, one victorious inch at a time. The day he joined their morning run without Totty’s sweet concern to cajole him, the youngest gave all of them permission to transform—transform, not return to duty. Osomatsu and Choromatsu whipped out their scrolls the moment they set foot in the warehouse. April had breezed into an unseasonably warm May by the time Karamatsu worked up to pulling out the Kraken’s scroll. Watching the waters of his transformation spill and gush and leave not a drop behind, all of them breathed a sigh of relief.

‘I apologise, my brothers—my Angel,’ he included Ahn (she only blushed a little). ‘That I took so many weeks to shimmer once more. Truly, I am feeling better. And I know that when it comes time to phase,’ he added, ‘you will be there to help me through. I pray you know, to cause you any concern is no desire of mine.’

‘We know,’ Choromatsu said quietly. His own relief to finally move again, entirely unrestricted, was palpable. Osomatsu was just glad to hear Karamatsu sound like himself again.

‘Glad you could join us. You look really cool,’ the words left his mouth before Osomatsu fully processed them. Karamatsu looked cool. As unlikely as that sentence sounded in his head, something about it just sounded so right.

‘I do, don’t I?’ Karamatsu preened, admiring his magical getup. But Osomatsu could have sworn his faint shimmer picked up, Karamatsu’s flamboyant battle trench coat all the more vibrant with the compliment.

Once he was confident to transform, Karamatsu was keen to spend as much time as the Kraken as possible. Totty and Ahn, on the other hand, were keen to keep the second born’s transformations to a minimum. ‘Of course he must become accustomed to his enhanced self,’ Ahn said impatiently when Osomatsu butted in, demanding why. ‘But more important for Matsuno Karamatsu right now is to become as strong and as healthy—physically and mentally—as possible in his original form. Phasing remains a debilitating issue for him, it is never safe. Give him more time for his treatments to take effect.’

‘And don’t question our authority, Niisan,’ Todomatsu added, doubling Osomatsu’s sit ups quota as punishment.

‘A natural such as yourself will not need excessive training in your element,’ an irritable Osomatsu, his abdominal muscles a bonfire, later eavesdropped Ahn speaking quietly with Karamatsu. ‘But remember, the Kraken enhances your own abilities. I have no doubt you will make yourself even more formidable.’

When Karamatsu was the Kraken, Osomatsu’s grinned so hard his face ached, seeing the extent of his brother’s ability. He even managed to wall off most of his own shock and inadequacy. ‘What is wrong, Osomatsu?’ Karamatsu asked one morning, weaving a tapestry of streams before separating it out and threading water back into individual bottles.
Crap. Apparently, not as good at hiding it as he’d thought.

‘Nothing,’ Osomatsu breezed. But he caved, making a joke out of it when Karamatsu persisted. ‘I’m just not used to someone being more of a natural than me.’

But impressive watery displays aside, Osomatsu still had experience on his side. And his power reserves were still growing. Karamatsu had bottomless reserves right off the bat. Only they weren’t quite bottomless—just really, really deep. And Karamatsu had gotten into the habit of accidentally draining his extremely deep depths if he threw too much into his performance. And this was Karamatsu. He threw everything he had into it, every time. His experts had a hell of a task, teaching him attune to the extent of his powers, and his boundaries.

‘It never feels like it’s going to happen,’ Karamatsu panted, sprawled on his crate without a drop of magic left. ‘This feeling, it’s phenomenal! It’s … it’s …’

‘A high,’ Osomatsu supplied, no stranger to the thrall of invincibility. The Kraken’s display prior to his collapse had been mind-blowing. He’d adopted the tentacles of his first battle as his signature—‘It’s all in the name,’ Karamatsu had declared dramatically when Choromatsu told him stories of the mighty sea monster he was named for.

‘The Alliance has provided a report,’ Ahn had said proudly as a hundred of the liquid limbs whipped and coiled like true living extensions of Karamatsu. ‘He is the most naturally gifted of all the Krakens currently in service.’

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu had finally managed to say as water flew apart, Karamatsu hurling it in the bathtub and whipping a monstrous wave that crested the ceiling. ‘Yeah, I see that.’

Karamatsu’s state of mind was what mattered. But, for whatever damn reason, Ahn wouldn’t stop dropping hints that Osomatsu engage with his counsellors. ‘It’s been a stressful time for us all,’ she tried once more to appeal to him, on Osomatsu’s heels disguised as an affectionate stray while he poked around Ikebukuro for casual fights. ‘Matsuno Todomatsu regularly touches base with his, and the others are almost always …’

‘I know,’ Osomatsu said shortly. Todomatsu was at him about it, too. ‘If all of them are, I definitely can’t.’

‘As always, your logic completely escapes me,’ Ahn said daintily. Osomatsu shrugged, trying to laugh it off.

‘You know … someone’s gotta be the strong one.’

‘Strength,’ Ahn said in return, ‘has nothing to do with it.’

Crap, she was right—what the fuck was he implying? Moron … Osomatsu kicked at some grit on the bitumen. That wasn’t the right word, he hadn’t meant that. ‘Take the time to find what you mean before speaking,’ Ahn advised, not for the first time.

‘I can’t do that,’ said Osomatsu, almost as dry as Choromatsu. ‘I’d never be able to speak.’

‘And that shall be a day long remembered,’ Ahn said magnanimously, flipping her tail away when Osomatsu managed a real grin, pretending to step on it.

But he wasn’t grinning long. Apparently, that had been Ahn’s last-ditch attempt to have him agree voluntarily. Now the Spectrum Alliance insisted Osomatsu see his counsellors. ‘It is in the contract,’ Choromatsu pointed out when he wouldn’t stop complaining, highlighting on his tablet the clause
that required them to submit to any and all health-related care deemed appropriate. Abashed—seriously, was this necessary?—Osomatsu skipped out of most of his appointments, saying he had training, or he was tired. Then they began scheduling appointments during training.

‘I’m out of breath,’ he bitched when he was waylaid mid-punch by Sig and Tee—more feminine voices. Recent university graduates by the sounds, bright and so damn cute. Of course he’d be more inclined to speak to them. Osomatsu groused inwardly—why’d he have to be so predictable? ‘Don’t bug me now, I’m busy.’

‘You don’t need excess breath to speak to us,’ Sig pointed out tartly. Osomatsu wondered sometimes why he made such a big deal of it. It was mostly just talk … though he was far more eager to hear about them—his robust fantasies for an alien girlfriend were alive and well. But they kept steering the conversation back to him, his brothers, and the war. ‘There’s nothing you want to talk about? Honestly?’ they pressed him.

‘Why will you not accept help?’ Ahn bothered him, Osomatsu a hundred times more crabby that she was aware, to whatever extent, of what went on in his appointments. ‘Why must you hold yourself to different standards than your brothers?’

‘I’m talking to them, aren’t I?’ he demanded. He couldn’t wait to get back to work. Once he was busy again, they’d see he was just fine, and all this crap would end.

Midway through May, though Osomatsu’s leg braces remained locked supportively in place, Totty cleared him and Karamatsu for battle. Left in the warehouse to stew, Choromatsu was disconcerted: over a month had passed with barely any Liberation Force activity. ‘They spent most of their power on Karamatsu,’ he theorised feverishly. ‘But they should have regenerated by now. There has to be another reason, they’ve got to be planning something …’

‘Don’t mind Choromatsu,’ Osomatsu advised Karamatsu as they faced down a pale killer horse. Translucent wings tipped with lethal bone claws, they tossed their head, seven eyes rolling and foaming at the mouth as hooves the size of cooking pots tore a trail of divots from their soccer field arena to … wouldn’t you know it … crush the living daylights them. ‘He’s paranoid.’

‘Well, they are our enemy,’ Karamatsu allowed, abandoning his water whip and rolling aside as Tsuubauma swooped to scalp him, hooves flailing deadly. Their Kraken snapped upright with a flourish. ‘I believe he has the right to be paranoid, no?’

Without Choromatsu, the wings were a challenge. But Osomatsu expertly annoyed them, repelling off floodlights and dive bombing them with fire until Todoromatsu got a few chains around it. The beast tethered in the sky—the only place to go was down, where Totty waited—Osomatsu was about to close in. Then he pulled up, boots flaring.

‘After you!’ he yelled out to Karamatsu, blasting to circle Tsuubauma instead—they wouldn’t break free on his watch. With a joyous whoop, Karamatsu launched into the air on a fountain; he landed squarely on the beast’s back. Tsuubauma bucked madly. But Karamatsu wrapped his arms around their thick neck, swinging up and around to smash the glinting crystal on their brow with one well-placed kick.

‘Show off,’ Osomatsu threw at him, grinning as they hit the ground in a shower of silver dust.

Sure, the Liberation Force wasn’t shoving their noses to the grinder yet. And if their enemy was planning something? What were they supposed to do about it? Osomatsu wasn’t fazed by the limited abductions they short-circuited. It was a good chance for Karamatsu to ease in—and for Osomatsu to ease back in. And honestly, the Salamander couldn’t handle much more.
'For goodness sake,' Todomatsu tsked after a tangle with a motionless, golem-like shell that should have been a piece of cake. Only it wasn’t so motionless when nobody was looking. Wrecked and aching, Osomatsu sat dazedly as Todomatsu reinforced his in-built healing job, his elbow shattered when the beast materialised behind him. ‘You’re lucky this wasn’t your neck. I don’t know how you survived so long without me.’

‘You and I both,’ Ahn agreed as Osomatsu phased, moaning as his unenhanced arm erupted.

‘These were the first bones I ever broke doing this,’ he told no one in particular as Totty cleaned him up, rubbing the hurts with soothing balm—another gift from the Alliance. All he wanted was to curl up on his crate and fall apart in peace. ‘Totoko destroyed me with a stop sign …’

Karamatsu cleared his throat. ‘Brothers, I … wonder if we might talk.’

Osomatsu shut up. Choromatsu glanced sharply from his tablet, a sweaty towel around his neck. They knew Karamatsu was encouraged to share what was on his mind. They had some small idea what was going on inside Karamatsu’s head, a mild side effect of telepathy. And it was distressing. But all of their counsellors promised these feelings were better out in the open—they hardly shut up, but the Matsuno sextuplets were pretty shitty communicators. Osomatsu exchanged a somewhat nervous glance with the Choromatsu. If Karamatsu was ready to try and change that … If it would help him …

It hurt far worse than his elbow, hearing what Karamatsu had thought they thought about him. Again, he asked what he’d done to warrant their ridicule. ‘Nothing,’ Osomatsu gulped out, Choromatsu and Totty unable to speak. ‘Most of the time I thought you were trying to be funny, you know … make us laugh.’

‘What about … the rest of the time?’ Karamatsu forced himself to ask, hating that he caused his brothers any upset—of course they were upset! Their brother, who they’d shared their entire lives with, had felt like this—still felt like this! And Osomatsu … hadn’t …

‘I dunno, man,’ Osomatsu mumbled. ‘I didn’t realise it was hurting you. Otherwise I’d have said to punch me in the guts every time I was stupid enough to … don’t be afraid to tell me to shut my stupid fat mouth.’

‘You’re not stupid, Osomatsu,’ Karamatsu said quietly.

‘Yeah?’ Osomatsu gave him a friendly shove. But he couldn’t say anything else, he couldn’t agree. Not when he was far worse than stupid. His eyes starting to sting, Osomatsu slammed a lid on his shame. And it worked—mostly. He still felt hot and strange—was he feverish? Apparently not. The odd sensations mostly faded when Karamatsu smiled a little and shoved him back.

More improvements followed the brothers’ painful heart-to-heart. Karamatsu put on the weight he’d lost, picking at his meals for weeks. He started talking about conjuring a dramatic wave to embellish his spinning back kick. Phasing remained a problem; choking and spluttering, he needed Totty to siphon his lungs clear every time. But with healing, it grew easier. Osomatsu hadn’t yet shaken his grudge against the Alliance—they’d known exactly what Karamatsu would go through every time he phased, and they were still willing to put him through it.

‘You wouldn’t have done it to him,’ Osomatsu said to Ahn, moody after a tense confrontation between Choromatsu and Todomatsu. Functioning almost at full capacity, the youngest remained reluctant to give the Wyvern his all clear. He’d had more near-death experiences than the others combined. And if Choromatsu had an attack, and Totty was already helping Karamatsu … ‘Maybe you should rest a while longer, Choromatsu-niisan. We’ve got things under control, you should take
more time to …’

‘I’m useless stuck in here!’ Choromatsu had lost his cool, yelling his raging inner turmoil at their leader. ‘I’m healed, I can handle it, you know I can! Don’t you?! Please …’

He’d all but broken down, furiously smashing his face in his palms.

‘These are desperate times, Matsuno Osomatsu,’ was all Ahn would say. She didn’t want to foster a culture of distrust between her guardians and their distant employers who—Osomatsu grudgingly admitted—seemed pretty chill, given how much depended on them. Going quiet, Osomatsu tilted his head back, watching as Choromatsu slowly glided overhead. He couldn’t see his brother’s face. But his gentle float was serene enough. Todomatsu had convened with the Wyvern’s experts, and decided to assess him again in a few days.

Halfway through that assessment, the guardians’ scrolls burned. They found Choromatsu anxiously awaiting their return once they'd kicked a prickly alien plant's arse. Wily vines creeping and venomous spines triggered with every wrong breath, while all the while that monstrous fleshy blossom hungered to swallow them whole … that might have been a game over for Totty. Maybe their inexperienced Kraken might have tripped up. But Kaijuuhana didn't like fire. Osomatsu's favourite.

Karamatsu prepared to phase, no outward sign he was concerned. Todomatsu stood a short pace away, sceptre at the ready. ‘My service this hour is complete.’

Swapped his hood for jeans, Karamatsu clapped a hand to his mouth. Now a veteran, Totty readied to intervene. But the second born raised his other hand—wait. Karamatsu gave a few horrible wet coughs that engaged his entire body. Clearing his throat, he spat out a few mouthfuls of water. Bending forward like a great hand pressed on his spine, he braced one arm to his chest, the other to his knees. Closing his eyes, he remained like that almost a minute. Then he flashed a thumbs up. Osomatsu’s heart stopped attacking his ribs. Then it started again. Did that mean …

No. Karamatsu wasn’t cured. But he was feeling better—thank god. Osomatsu hid in the bathroom that night so no one saw his breakdown when he finally let it loose. His little brother was starting to heal.

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‘Nooo,’ Todomatsu moaned. He’d hustled them out of the train at Shibuya, leading his uncommonly well-dressed brothers (‘I won’t be seen in public with you if you wear that,’ he’d threatened, tugging Osomatsu’s wrinkled T-shirt away) deep into the recesses of a brightly-lit department store. Ten thousand sunglasses gleamed in revolving racks. And Karamatsu made a beeline for the worst ones. ‘Come on, Karamatsu-niisan …’

‘If it’s what he wants,’ Osomatsu said as Karamatsu modelled pair after flashy pair, seeking Jyushimatsu’s approval.

‘Those ones!’ Jyushimatsu shouted it out, his enthusiasm precariously near destroying an entire display of expensive watches. An energetic blur in his hands, the fifth born’s new baseball bat shone. A gift from his brothers, the bat was top of the range. Solid. A cement wall would crack before this bat would, the sales clerk had claimed when Choromatsu got very specific—Jyushimatsu’s stats were against him. The precaution was worth the cost. Just in case he ever ran into a soldier again.

‘They’re the best, pick them, pick … No, I like those!’ Jyushimatsu changed his mind as often as Karamatsu changed glasses. ‘Karamatsu-niisan, which ones do you … WAIT NONONO PICK
Sidling up to Karamatsu, the eldest said in undertone, ‘You don’t seriously want those, do you?’

Karamatsu pushed out his chest a little, sweeping the glasses from his face. ‘Brother, I have never wanted anything more than … I mean … that is to say …’

Karamatsu trailed off, his eye caught by a different rack. Understated, but with an undeniable inner swagger, those glasses were actually almost … cool. Karamatsu tore his eyes away, looking uncertainly down at the pair he now held.

‘Pick whatever you want,’ Choromatsu reminded. It took every fibre of his being not to escape the accessories section and find refuge among the books—particularly his idol’s latest photo book, Osomatsu noted with a devil’s grin—on the other side of the floor. But he managed. For Karamatsu.

‘Whatever you want,’ Osomatsu stressed.

‘Not what you think anyone else likes,’ Todomatsu weighed in, resigned to living with the embarrassment that once in his life, for whatever reason, he’d bought a terrible pair of shades.

‘What do you want, Niisan?’ Jyushimatsu asked, head tilted askew, like he tried to peep directly into Karamatsu’s soul. ‘What do you …’

Totty almost dropped the rose-tinted sunglasses he admired when Karamatsu threw his initial selection back on its rack. He couldn’t stop smiling at the checkout—it was small. But it was real. Besides, Osomatsu smiled broadly enough for all five of them. If Karamatsu looked this happy now, he couldn’t wait until they browsed for the jacket Osomatsu owed him. And they had one more secret little excursion planned: the music shop in the arcade.

‘A toast,’ their second born intoned with a hint of grandeur, raising his plastic cup. Already he wore his new glasses on top of his head. There was no need to hide behind them. Jyushimatsu's attention snared from the dispenser he’d taken over, delivering tea to everyone in the sushi train, he padded over to their dish-littered table and saluted. His bright yellow sleeve flopped in his face.

‘To us, and our eternal tomorrow,’ Karamatsu kept the dramatics low-key. And non-specific. He could have raised his glass telepathically. But he wouldn’t deny Jyushimatsu this sentiment—it was not one reserved for guardian ears alone. It was a toast for brothers, and family. For all humankind.

‘Darkness may invade our country, our homes, our very hearts—let it come! Together, we shall face it! We shall not—nay, will not …’

‘Ouch.’

Osomatsu grinned so hard his cheeks ached. He’d never been more happy to nurse cracked ribs. Swerving Todomatsu’s mountain of shop bags, he landed an affectionate punch on Karamatsu’s shoulder. ‘You’re so damn embarrassing.

‘Don’t ever change.’

Chapter End Notes

There's a bunch of gaming references stuffed in here, did you catch them? Sig and Tee
from PuyoPuyo Tetris; SCP173 the floating spine-snapping cement monster from SCP Containment Breach; and the plant boss from Battle Kid. I do actually play PuyoPuyo Tetris (the Puyo part, not Tetris ... I'm really bad at Tetris), but I haven't played the other games ... I just watch a lot of Let's Plays :D
Onwards and Upwards

Chapter Notes

Hello lovely people! November is done and dusted, and I did far better than last year :) I actually hit 50,000 words with a few days to spare, so I jumped back to fic and managed to finish up this chapter pretty quickly. Still leading up to the next big arc - time for some catch-up with sweet Ichimatsu and the Liberation Force. There may be a slight info dump in the latter half of the chapter - just a few potential inconsistencies I had to clear up :) But full steam ahead into next arc next chapter!

Attempting to balance Oso with the novel I'm working on, and factoring in that I'm on a three-week break over Christmas and New Year - counting down the days to 22 December - I'll aim to have a chapter out some time in January. Maybe two, depending on how things go :)

But ahh ... this chapter hasn't exactly been beta read - please don't hesitate to jump on anything and let me know if I've made any kind of mistake, from grammatical to landing myself in an inescapable plot hole. I'll do my best to fix it all up :) Also, a new tag has been added. Just in case. Regarding that, I guess you know if you've read this far, but please proceed with caution - magical or not, this isn't the lightest of reading material.

Thank you so much for waiting for these increasingly sporadic chapters. That you're reading my silly fic means so much to me; none of my grateful blather will ever come close to expressing it. I love so much to hear what you think of the story and how it's trundling on - I still haven't gotten over the excitement of seeing a new comment sitting in my inbox, and I don't think I ever will. :D Thanks for sticking with Magical Oso, thanks for reading, kudos, comments - all the lovely things :)
His shitty body won out against the racket. Dozed off in the MRI, Ichimatsu roused drowsy and confused. He had no clue when. Or where. Or … what the …?

A plastic mask pressed to his face. Ichimatsu’s lungs were fire, every breath a death rattle. He hurt … so fucking bad … what the fuck had happened? He tried to demand answers, but he couldn’t even speak. The least brisk of his tough, no-nonsense nurses interpreted his delirious mumbles. ‘Don’t worry, Ichimatsu-san,’ his words ebbed strangely in his ears. Sweat trickled through his hair. It was so … warm … ‘We’ll take care of you.’

Fever taken hold of him, a bewildering flurry of faces blurred. Impersonal hands shifted and pressed down on him. Drugs pushed through the tubes permanently embedded in his arm … and suddenly Ichimatsu found himself face to face with his mother.

‘My sweet Ichimatsu,’ she whispered, kissing his cheek. ‘How are you feeling today?’

‘How …’ he mumbled, barely stringing words together, ‘Do you think … I’m …’

A brother stood at the end of his bed … Osomatsu. Ichimatsu blearily recognised him as mum stroked his greasy forehead, combing knots from his revolting hair. Osomatsu was so quiet … why couldn’t he just keep talking, he never shut up, please just fucking say something …

Another brother stood behind Osomatsu. Ichimatsu tried to squint, struggling to recognise …

He tried to jump in the canal … He wanted to drown himself … I wonder whose fault might that be …

‘No …’

Ichimatsu’s heart rate monitor skyrocketed. ‘It’s all right,’ mum tried to soothe as he struggled pointlessly to escape. ‘Everything will be fine.’

‘Ichimatsu.’

Karamatsu said his name—how could he even say it, how could he fucking say it, how could he even look at him?!

You almost killed him … It’s your fault …

‘Shut up! Ichimatsu screamed. ‘Shut … the fuck … up!’

Karamatsu …

A haze of activity took over, impressions of ordered fussing and pushing into his imploding personal space. But Ichimatsu was sucked under. He couldn’t face Karamatsu, he couldn’t …

There was too much noise, monitors blaring, and though he couldn’t understand a word everyone seemed to talk at once. His psych’s face swam into being above him. She coerced him into talking or just flat out read his mind whenever he was conscious long enough for an appointment. Ever since she and his doctors had cornered him. Ichimatsu had been too afraid not to spill his guts. His head cracked apart beneath his mother’s gentle hand … more and more pressed to keep him from pulling free of tubes, to hold him down …

But Karamatsu’s voice stood out against the onslaught. Quiet and too fucking clear. ‘Brother, it’s all right. I know … I know you didn’t mean it. You cannot be held accountable for …’
His blather dissolved as Ichimatsu’s soul stripped down to nothing. What the fuck?! After everything he’d done … Karamatsu still … what was with his fucking kindness?! Why was he so goddamn good to him?! He didn’t fucking deserve it, he couldn’t take it anymore! Why wouldn’t he just hate him already?!

Hmm, not bad …

The presence that invaded Ichimatsu mused, intrigued as the tortured young man sobbed. *Not bad at all … I suppose if I’m to be deprived of my pet …*

‘Ichimatsu-san, look at me. We’ve got you, just breathe …’

Ichimatsu broke free and lashed out with the heel of his hand, striking the nurse in the nose. He felt her bones crunch in his fist as he squeezed, blood trickling down his wrist …

*I’ll just have to make do with you …*

‘No! Stop it,’ Ichimatsu screamed. *‘Stop it, please! I … don’t want to …’*

*But you will …* The demon in him mocked. *You’ll hurt anyone I want you to …*

‘Ichimatsu,’ his mother whispered. He thumb stroked soft over his burning forehead.

Ichimatsu seized her skinny wrist, snapping it like a twig …

‘No …’ he strangled, trying to throw himself back, away from his mother—nobody fucking touch him! Nobody come near him! He didn’t want to hurt anyone, please don’t make him! *‘Shut up! Get out of me, get the fuck out!’*

*And when I’m through with you …*

‘Brother …’ Karamatsu was kept back by Osomatsu’s arm, caught him hard across the chest. The eldest couldn’t look away, staring as doctors subdued Ichimatsu’s weak thrashes. ‘My dearest brother, I’m fine. I’m …’

*I’ll make you hurt him … You’ll make him mine again …*

‘I said fucking shut up!*

Ichimatsu’s frenzied eyes stapled to Karamatsu. ‘If you make me … hurt him again, I’ll … I’ll …’

*You’ll what …?*

Starting at his tailbone, a slow burn spilled between the voids of his backbone, fronds coiling to truss his brain. *‘NO!’*

Ichimatsu roiled violently, fighting for possession of his own mind. Blood trickled wetly from his nose, his head was a storm-washed killing field. Lightning seared before his eyes …

*So the husk finally grows a spine …* The intruder observed with delighted disdain. *I almost feel I’m starting to take a bit of a shine to you … But soon I’ll be here … and you’ll be gone … And who should give a fuck?*

‘Just leave me alone,’ Ichimatsu wept, barely aware as too many voices assured him: no one would hurt him, he was safe, he wouldn’t hurt anyone. Soft straps fastened to his wrists and ankles. The claustrophobic pressure of a thousand hands lifted. ‘Please, I’m fucking begging you …’
No … I think I want to see a bit more of this newfound spunk of yours … I want to feel you fight me …

The thing inside him pushed him so hard Ichimatsu screamed. The world spilled around him, colour dripping down reality and leaving only darkness behind. But the leech-like heat that had locked around his spine … it fell away. Thank god, thank fucking god …

He was fucked. He had a fucking psychopath inside him. He couldn’t control it, he was a fucking puppet! And even if he wasn’t out of his fucking mind, he couldn’t eat without hurling his guts up, couldn’t breathe without coughing up a lung. And his head, his fucking head … He could barely even keep his eyes open long enough to confirm: yep, he was still an oven and his brain still fucking baked.

What was the fucking point? If anyone could do it, he’d beg them to shove him back in that coma. It’d be fucking better for everyone, he couldn’t do this shit anymore! He wouldn’t hurt anyone. He wouldn’t hurt anyone.

Really …? Are you sure …?

Ichimatsu loosed a cracked sob. Why wouldn’t he just die already?

‘How’re you doing, buddy?’

He couldn’t see, he’d barely realised he was still awake. But sitting beside him was …

He felt his brother’s hand, gently scratching his head. His other hand …

Strapped to his bed, Ichimatsu closed his fingers, so humiliatingly frail, around his brother’s wrist. ‘Osomatsu-niisan …’

It could barely be called a voice. A scratch, a rattle, a shattered breath. Mindless, he had no clue that the screams within his heart dribbled from his lips. ‘Help me. Please … help me … Niichan … I need … I can’t … please …’

‘I'm here, little brother. I'm here …

‘I’ll stay till he falls asleep,’ he heard his brother tell someone not him. His voice sounded like it distorted through a few walls worth of glass bricks. ‘Jyushimatsu’ll be here first thing in the morning.’

Ichimatsu heard someone’s disapproval like a dark murmur through sound. The insult to Jyushimatsu raked claws through his gut. But Ichimatsu had already tumbled from his joke of awareness into the strange, soft support of darkness.

Enough sedatives pushed into him to knock out a small herd of elephants, both Ichimatsu and his worthless big brother were long gone before the Doll of Darkness slid behind the controls. It had been a while. Dragging eyelids open to slits, he waited as a doctor performed a routine nightly check-up. ‘You’re a handful, you know,’ they said almost fondly, and with so much understanding Ichimatsu would scream if he heard.

If only.

He had certain needs. Fucking with the husk had improved his mood, for sure. But the Doll of Darkness remained understandably pissed.
The moment the door snicked shut he slipped the straps, body passing straight through them. Yanking drips from his arm, he savoured the slight spasm of pain as the cannula jarred, before taking his true form. Shedding that revolting meat sack was a sweet fucking release. Was “comb” really such a foreign concept?

Slick in his military finery, he traced a gloved palm down the bed, sculpting as he went. He wouldn’t be long. But his lord and master was right: better to keep these humans off his scent.

Leaving a solid shade of his husk behind, the Doll of Darkness turned on his heel and vanished to meet his master.

***

‘Did you miss me?’

The dimensions folding back, Lord Takuu’s blood servant stepped unannounced into the cavernous fortress. Taking in the hundreds of frantic underlings stupefied on sight of him, the Doll of Darkness threw back his head and flared his nostrils. ‘I love what you’ve done with the place,’ he said, breathed deep of fear’s cold stench. ‘Much craggier. And more essence of void pulsing through the foundations, I see. Gone a few weeks and an entire redecorating scheme has already … ah! Is it that time again?’

He grinned insolence as Lord Takuu’s most trusted imprisoned the young man in their claws. With barely a muscle flicker to dispel his great will, Lord Takuu had his blood servant hauled before his throne.

The Doll’s long absence Lord Takuu had ordered himself. Weakened almost to a corpse, he had been unable to sequester enough power to make the journey himself. Barely a trickle had remained to the entire Liberation Force after his cosmos-shifting claim to Matsuno Karamatsu’s soul. This was punishment for the part he’d played that dire night. And for dumping his host like trash.

‘He is trash,’ the Doll emphasised, his snicker gleeful as he was chained to the whipping column. ‘Besides, I’d just channeled a few thousand cyclones worth of dark power, if you will recall. I was tired, I needed to rest …’

He complained on, grinning to see how it irked his master’s most trusted lieutenant. Lord Takuu smiled thinly. It was the most pleasure he’d exhibited in weeks.

The loss of his long-cultivated slave commander was enough of a blow to his interstellar campaign. But combined with the reemergence of the Kraken, Lord Takuu’s wrath had been cataclysmic. Blasting savage dark energy from his claws, the last of the power he could draw upon had catapulted corrals overloaded with the lowliest into the highest ranks of his slave army, the unrepentant power of void warping and rending, filling them to the brim.

He’d ordered Lieutenant Souudai scourged for the failures he’d presided over, his most trusted’s whip biting deep in retribution far beyond what the strongest of soldiers should withstand without falling, claws shattered and swiftly put out of their misery. But Lieutenant Souudai’s mind prevailed over their stripped matter yet again, proving once more their unwavering dedication. They refused to allow death to prevent them from serving the warlord of all space and time.

Necessary penalties aside and the intensity of his rage abated, Lord Takuu had to label himself impressed—or as deeply impressed as he was capable, set beside his own myth-worthy magnificence. The situation had escalated far beyond their capacity to control. But Souudai had remained calm. They’d reacted well under pressure, prioritising the Doll above their wayward
commander—even above the destruction of the guardians. Once their ravaged flesh had healed, Lord Takuu had again promoted his resident guardian expert and envoy. Among his lieutenants and advisors, Souudai was second now only to his most trusted.

He had consulted with Souudai in the weeks following the Kraken’s debut, the lieutenant divulging his limited impressions of this young iteration of the sapphire warrior. Lord Takuu had viewed the scrys a hundred times, hatred clawing his chest at his enemies’ triumph when he should have been scraping their broken corpses from the underside of his boots.

A handful of battles was not enough to form a concrete opinion of the guardians’ newest soldier. But, disregarding inexperience, they had gleaned one or two differences to the mighty Kraken of old. This Kraken had a sickening vibrancy that their selfless, but weary predecessor had not possessed. Just as noble and command of water enough to send a ripple of intimidation through every scryer who wove the images, Lord Takuu’s many eyes had not failed to detect the young guardian’s slight hesitations. What demons straddled their proud shoulders? Lord Takuu’s best and brightest worked without rest to pick the warrior apart.

Slime puckered and smacked, the moist sound reverberating through the vast hollowed hatchery. A sea of hatchlings squirmed in the nest pit at Lord Takuu’s feet. Hundreds upon hundreds of infant soldiers oozed, squirming in a mass of pale flesh, limbs barely begun to sprout from narrow worms of torsos, faces barely distinguishable. Soon their hatcheries would thrive on every planet in the Spectrum Alliance system, dominating their every space station. Survivors of the Liberation Force invasion would be forced to shovel their slop for eternity.

Carried there by his deep thoughts, looking out over the future of his empire Lord Takuu found his thoughts cleared. Countless dark intentions fell back to thrust his conquest’s most pressing problem once more to the forefront: one more guardian, and their enemy would be fully assembled. And their multitude of successes, what Lord Takuu had all but dismissed as luck for so long, he could dismiss no longer. The Salamander and the Wyvern—even their infuriating Unicorn—were now experienced fighters. And the Kraken was a fast learner. Long since graduated from annoyance to threat, the spectrum guardians were fast becoming the dangerous opposition Lord Takuu had sworn they would not.

Displeasure rippled through his towering form, cloak swirling in counter to the arcane forces. His forces would feel his disfavour. Every last one had failed him, that the guardians still offered any resistance to their victory … their all-but-inevitable victory. Lord Takuu seethed, despising the sudden need to qualify. His victory should be inevitable, he would trample the stars in his mighty wake!

The peak of his cap level barely level with his elbow, the Doll of Darkness stood at the edge of the nest pit with him. He was bare from the waist up, collar glinting and pale back crossed with livid evidence of the whipping just delivered. Powders rubbed into the welts and already healing with power that flickered through his every fibre, his back was raw. But he no longer bled. And his pleasure at his punishment had been quelled just as efficiently.

The Doll of Darkness had accosted his favourite scryer, intimidating the cowering whelp into joining them. At the Doll’s short command, they wove images of Matsuno Karamatsu. Uncharacteristically taciturn, Lord Takuu’s servant buttoned on his shirt. His eyes burned.

‘We must accept his temporary loss and move on,’ Lord Takuu said.

‘I had him,’ the Doll of Darkness displayed less than total willingness to obey. He pulled on his jacket with a jerk. ‘He was mine. I want him back.’
‘And so you shall have him,’ Lord Takuu was not inclined to punish for this small insubordination. The lord himself had sharpened the Doll’s focus directly on this young man. ‘In time. But look.’

Lord Takuu indicated the shimmering scry with the tip of a claw. It flickered with the interference that increasingly hampered views of the husk’s siblings. But every few moments a perfectly clear picture showed Matsuno Karamatsu fast asleep, his pathetic brothers around him. He smiled faintly, peaceful. His anguished soul was on the mend.

‘He is of little use to us in this state.’

A spike of residual anger crackled through him. They had spent so much strength on this young man, so much time refining the perfect soul for reaping. He had been reaped. But he had been stolen from them. And now he was no longer a prime target.

The Doll of Darkness argued when the very thought of defying their lord would have driven any other to hurl themselves into a ravine. ‘We can change that. We can bring him here. I will retrieve him myself.’

Lord Takuu forbade his blood servant from going anywhere near him. The guardians clearly realised Matsuno Karamatsu’s importance, to have layered such protection over his home. ‘You could not get within a hundred metres of that house. Should the husk be discharged tomorrow, doubtless that would prove an issue.’

‘We should bring him here, too,’ the Doll said, voice low and tight. ‘I don’t see why we haven’t already. I’m sick to high hell of maintaining this double existence.’

‘Do not question me, my Doll. We will abduct the husk when the time is right, and no sooner. As for Matsuno Karamatsu,’ the dark lord went on as the Doll of Darkness snapped for the grovelling scryer to get out. ‘His loss is unfortunate; I doubt we will find anyone quite the same. But we have several quality slaves in custody. My trusted assesses them as we speak—the pack leader you like to play with is among them,’ Lord Takuu informed his servant. The resultant spark of interest was there, though muted. ‘We will elect one to lead my slave forces, as second-in-command.

‘Do not forget: soon we will command every human soul. Our commander is not exempt. Have patience. He still resounds with the great darkness with which you imbued him. Once he is ours again, you may corrupt him anew at your leisure. Restored to perfection, he shall take his place at the forefront of my forces and lead our march on the Spectrum Alliance.’

Half a dozen cultivators bowed and scraped their way around the warlord and his unsettling servant. Deep pails in their claws, they flung globs of pale meat into the nesting pit, minced flesh splattering on impact with stone. The hatchlings descended on their meal. Ravenous, the squirmed and gulped and gnashed, fighting for every last scrap. Their only discernible features yanked wide to feed: hundreds upon hundreds of dark gaping maws.

The Doll of Darkness looked out over the pit, mildly diverted by the grisly feeding. Lord Takuu then experienced something strange—it almost resembled affection. His doll needed a new focus. Something to return him to the dark menace that haunted the spectrum guardians’ dreams. Destroying the guardians would be ideal. But he had already lost one of his finest soldiers to the Kraken’s unexpected arrival. Lord Takuu was omnipotent enough not to make that mistake twice, let alone risk the blood servant who would clinch his victory. He would continue to offer the highest of honours to any soldier who presented him a guardian hood with a head still inside. But the gem-encrusted warriors had strengthened beyond the abilities of the Liberation Force’s lower ranks.

Their efforts to intimidate them in the past had failed. But they were predictable. Devoted to the
pathetic Earthen race they defended. Takuu coursed with pleasure to imagine their frustration—the regret must be paralysing, knowing just how many slaves were beyond their ability to save. With these glaring weaknesses his tools, the guardians may be easily manipulated. They only needed an opportunity.

Plans for their next experiment were almost complete.

Their pails empty, the hatchling cultivators hunched from the nesting chamber, long necks bent low. The Doll bent deliberately to flick a fleck of ash from his boot. Coming up, he clipped a particularly timid cultivator with his elbow as they passed. They stumbled, going over the side. His arm shooting out, the Doll seized their skinny arm. ‘Try not to move,’ he said lazily as the cultivator dangled, petrified. ‘If my grip were to slip, what would we do?’

Lord Takuu watched his Doll toy with his victim, his jibes increasingly apathetic. He gained very little from tormenting those weaker than he—only that one small pleasure, that the cultivator knew not whether the young man would hoist his pathetic hide to safety or let him plummet. And that became less scintillating with each passing moment. This was merely an attempt to invigorate himself, his dark spark in dire need of kindling.

Releasing a huff, the Doll easily raised the snivelling cultivator high into the air and set them on solid ground. ‘You’re boring as fuck, you know?’

With a rippling flap of his cloak, Lord Takuu swooped on his chosen slave. His sudden momentum knocked the rescued cultivator screaming into the pit. ‘You are above this juvenile show of petulance,’ he reproached over the sounds of ravenous feasting renewed, capturing the Doll of Darkness’s wrist between his claws and compressing. The young man hissed through his teeth, pain and delight shuddering deliciously down his spine.

‘You have proved you are capable of focus. Now I will have you focus on yourself.’

The Doll grunted when his master unexpectedly jerked him into the air, suspending him until the toes of one of his boots barely scraped stone. His other boot dangled over the precipice. A few drops of blood slithered down Lord Takuu’s claws, drawn from his servant’s pale wrist.

‘The limits of your power now extend further than ever before. I intend to use that.’

The Warlord of the Liberation Force chuckled, a dark sound that the mindless hatchlings feasted on as surely as their cultivator, swelling into frenzy. He knew exactly how to invigorate his doll.

‘The husk deteriorates, but he will be sufficiently cared for. Use your power,’ he commanded, relinquishing his servant’s wrist. Saved from a similar tumbling fate by lithe grace, the Doll of Darkness licked at his trickling blood. With that one simple order, his slow grin was chaos reborn.

‘I will order our resources preserved for your use. Make yourself a force before which even the guardians of old would falter.’

‘Aren’t you going to advise me to be discreet?’ his servant tested, bowed gleefully low. ‘To avoid casualties? Not make a mess?’

‘It is not my wish to stifle your genius,’ Lord Takuu gave his doll a free rein. ‘The metropolis is your canvas and darkness your ink. Spread it. But do not go overboard,’ he gave one caveat. The Doll of Darkness swept his hand in showy obedience. A few beads of hot blood flew with the momentum, pattering down on the hatchlings. The pit erupted, every last squirming worm savage in their quest to suck them down.
‘Do not tire yourself unnecessarily before the experiment. Our ranks swollen by fifty thousand is a morale blow from which the spectrum guardians will not recover. They will descend into despair, knowing no soul on Earth will be spared. And when they are at their most vulnerable …’

Lord Takuu clenched the dark opal he rolled between his claws. Its twin embedded in his servant’s collar gleamed darkly.

‘Their own doomed fates will be sealed.’

***

The Ichimatsu lying in bed wasn’t his Ichimatsu-niisan.

Skittered back in alarm, Jyushimatsu tentatively crept back to his brother’s beside. Leaning in, he buried his nose in Ichimatsu’s shoulder—yep. Definitely not him.

Backing off, Jyushimatsu hustled uncertainty around the room. His tiptoeing slippers barely made a sound. This was a hospital. Everyone needed rest here. And Jyushimatsu could be super duper quiet—he was super duper quiet, the very best he could. He liked to be here in the mornings. Just in case Ichimatsu woke up. His poor big brother never said it, but Jyushimatsu knew he always felt a little better waking up to a smile.

But this wasn’t Ichimatsu! This wasn’t wearing the silver necklace Ichimatsu wore tight around his neck. This didn’t even smell like Ichimatsu's cruel double—who was this? What was this?

Spooked, but unbearably curious, Jyushimatsu hovered between a more thorough inspection and bolting straight out the door. Ichimatsu was taking so much medicine. That helped keep the nasty not-Ichimatsu away, right? Jyushimatsu didn't remember that night too well, but he’d never forget all the horrible things not-Ichimatsu had said with Ichimatsu's mouth. And he was making Ichimatsu sick! But this thing in Ichimatsu’s bed was …. strange. And empty. Like if Jyushimatsu knocked on its front door, there’d be no one at home.

His brain felt squashed—what should he do? What did most people do when they found their brother was someone else, and then no one else? He couldn’t leave—what if Ichimatsu came back? He began to rotate circles, slowly, and then faster and faster, frazzled and trying to think. Should he try talking to it? Should he get a doctor? Should he …

There was someone else in here.

Jyushimatsu yelped. Flailing mid-spin and tangling his shins together, he went down in a heap. He scrambled up fast, knees knocking as a person wearing black from toe to crown stepped out of nothing. Chin tilting over his shoulder, he looked at Jyushimatsu. A moment trundled by. Neither of them moved. Then the man’s cheeks stretched to hold a stellar scary grin. His heart pinging around his ribcage, Jyushimatsu backed his scared rear up until he butted against the wall, eyes as big as saucers and jaw smacked into the sparkly-clean linoleum. Overhead, the TV playing old dramas on mute crackled, spitting static.

Jyushimatsu locked in the corner of one of his eyes, the man very deliberately went about his business. Raising one hand—he wore flexible black gloves. Like a biker. Bobbing on the spot, Jyushimatsu’s thoughts tumbled—but he had a hat, not a helmet, how could he … wait, had he lost his motorbike? Was that why he was travelling through … travelling through …

Jyushimatsu froze. Completely.

The dark man was wearing Ichimatsu's necklace.
He ran his hand down the not-Ichimatsu in bed. Jyushimatsu gave a second strangled yelp as the shell of his brother vanished into trailing black smoke. The dark man’s eyes bored into Jyushimatsu, dancing and daring him to comment. His jaw rolling up like a window shutter, Jyushimatsu lips stapled shut.

‘And for my next trick,’ the man said—Jyushimatsu shivered, arms erupting in goosebumps. His voice was so cold. Jyushimatsu hated the cold, how could his voice be so …

His thoughts choked off when the man’s colour and form seemed to shiver and distort, passing smoothly from dark stranger into …

‘Ichimatsu-niisan!’

Jyushimatsu surged forward. But he skidded to a horrified halt, slippers grinding into the slippery linoleum. He didn’t need his nose to tell him: the man in black was Ichimatsu’s doppelganger. This still wasn’t his brother! ‘Wh-Who …’

Jyushimatsu gulped. He’d be brave for Ichimatsu. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m wounded,’ the man who looked like Ichimatsu and wearing Ichimatsu’s hospital gown intoned, climbing into bed. ‘I’m your darling niichan, of course.’

‘No, you’re not,’ Jyushimatsu accused, much to the doppelganger’s amusement. ‘You’re … you’re not … are you a cultist? Where’s the rest of your costume?’

Now he was on a roll, Jyushimatsu couldn’t stop. ‘Why are you always so mean to Karamatsu-niisan? Who are …’

‘Let’s see if we can penetrate that thick skull of yours,’ the man didn’t answer a single one of Jyushimatsu’s questions. He pulled up the tangled sheets, arranging them over his knees as he threatened nonchalantly. ‘As you may be aware, I have the ability to make things very unpleasant. I would elaborate,’ he said, shrugging down the top of his hospital gown and swivelling so Jyushimatsu could see his back. Jyushimatsu’s stomach punched, cannonballing into his chest. Barely-healed cuts marched tracks across the man’s back—that was Ichimatsu’s body! He’d hurt Ichimatsu, he’d hurt him! ‘But I’m sure even you understand that much. So be a good little moron, and keep your trap shut.’

Jyushimatsu was nodding wildly before his brain even finished processing everything the man implied. But even as he nodded, his head on a hinge, he didn’t keep his trap shut. He couldn’t. ‘If you don’t leave them alone … If you hurt Ichimatsu-niisan again, I’ll tell our brothers!’

Jyushimatsu hit him with the most power force he knew. Nothing could stand against his brothers when they all stood together. ‘I’ll tell them, and we’ll … we’ll …’

‘You’ll do what, exactly?’

Jyushimatsu’s next words dangled unsaid from his mouth, like a string of spit. And, like a string of spit, one look at the man’s devious expression and he sucked them back in quicksmart.

‘That’s what I thought,’ the man said so quietly Jyushimatsu had to inch nearer to hear him. He raised an arm in the air, dangling at the elbow like a jointed doll. ‘You can’t do anything while I’m wearing him.’

Still smiling at Jyushimatsu, the man wearing Ichimatsu slammed his head into the wall. ‘NO! No, no, no, don’t … stop please stop please …’
Jyushimatsu garbled desperately as the man only grinned harder, panting as he knocked over the drip stand and beat at the bed’s metal frame. Arms sweeping, he knocked the pretty vase flying off the side table. It shattered into a thousand pieces of coloured glass, water spilling across the floor. The sunflowers Jyushimatsu had brought this morning had been way too big to fit. The lovingly-cut stalks went down in a shower of golden petals.

The flowers had been plan B. Plan A hadn’t made it further than the ward desk. The receptionist had heard mewling and demanded he open the cardboard box, revealing a dozen squirming balls of fur. Jyushimatsu was looking after his all brother’s furry friends so well.

Ichimatsu had never gotten to cuddle those kittens. And not-Ichimatsu smacked his brother’s poor head into the wall again … and again … and …

Ichimatsu suddenly exploded from his own eyes. ‘Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu cried, recognising him at once. ‘Are you okay, are you …’

Ichimatsu screamed. Then he gagged, spitting up bile. ‘NIISAN!’

‘What’s going on here?!’

A security guard slammed into the room. A pair of nurses flitted quick on his heels. One skidded, almost slipping in water and glass. Jyushimatsu faltered, mind blanking as she forcibly found her balance and rounded on him. ‘Were you playing with his straps?’ she demanded. Jyushimatsu bobbed helplessly—she was mad, she was so mad with him …

Ichimatsu’s straps were off. But they were still done up. His doppelganger had taken them off without taking them off.

‘What were you thinking?! What are you trying to … get out of the way!’

‘NO!’ Ichimatsu shrieked, rasping voice splitting as he flailed. He coughed weakly, trying to hold the nurses and guard off. ‘Don’t touch me! Don’t … leave me alone … leave me …’

The guard caught his arm—gently, so gently. Then something caught his eye, and he showed the nurses Ichimatsu’s wrist. Their faces clouded as one. ‘Get Dr Katsuragi.’

The younger nurse hightailed it out the door. Working together, the guard carefully pinned Ichimatsu while the nurse slotted one wrist back into restraints, securing the straps. She put pressure on his other, folding gauze and holding his hand into the air. ‘It’s all right, Ichimatsu-san, calm down.’

His straps had been off, Jyushimatsu re-processed, automatically making sure he still followed. His evil double had taken Ichimatsu out—he couldn’t do that, Jyushimatsu fretted. Ichimatsu needed rest, he’d never get better at this rate!

‘He’ll never improve at this rate,’ the nurse told Jyushimatsu tightly. At the end of her tether from dealing with one Matsuno or another day in and day out, she glared at him over a weeping Ichimatsu. ‘You’re a walking disaster! It’s not our job to keep on eye on you. We can’t trust you with him, come back with your parents. Go on.’

The nurse made a shooing motion with her free hand, like Jyushimatsu was a bad puppy who’d had an accident a little too near her foot. ‘Didn't you hear me? Get out of here, go …’

‘NO!’

Ichimatsu jerked away when the nurse tried to examine his assaulted head. ‘I swear,’ he breathed
raggedly, bearing his teeth when she expertly stuck a thermometer in his ear. Jyushimatsu could almost feel the heat pouring off him, Ichimatsu’s eyes gone glassy. ‘If you make him go … I swear to god, I will make your lives … a fucking living hell!’

‘You’re already doing a fine job at that,’ she replied crisply. But then her eyes sneaked back to his wrist. ‘Do you remember doing that, Ichimatsu-san?’ she asked more softly. ‘What did you use … do you have it?’ she directed more harshly at Jyushimatsu. Jyushimatsu raised empty hands. He didn't have anything. ‘Was it glass?’ she then prompted, nodding towards the glimmering mess on the floor.

Ichimatsu licked his paper-thin lips. ‘What the fuck … are you talking about? What do you …’

He followed her gaze, squinting blearily at his wrist. Jyushimatsu whimpered, seeing how blood oozed to stain the gauze. Already grey, Ichimatsu blanched. ‘No …’ he stammered. ‘I don’t … I didn’t …

‘Jyushimatsu!’

His brother crying out for him, all else fell out of focus. ‘You heard her, young man,’ the security guard got in his way when Jyushimatsu disregarded the nurse's protests. 'Back up, now.'

‘NO! JYUSHIMATSU!’

Ichimatsu restrained fingers stretched desperately for him. With a meaningful glance from a doctor just appeared in the doorway, it was the guard who backed off. But Jyushimatsu barely noticed, already crawling up into bed beside Ichimatsu. Slipping around tubes, he cuddled into his brother’s unnatural warmth.

‘Jyushimatsu!’ Ichimatsu sobbed. ‘I’m scared … I’m so scared … Don’t leave me, Jyushimatsu! Please … don’t leave me …’

Jyushimatsu tightened his arms around his brother. ‘Don’t worry, Niisan. I'll look after you.’

Memory of the dark man invaded Jyushimatsu's vocalised train of thought. He stood there in his mind's eye, just grinning at him. Jyushimatsu shrank protectively against his brother. He didn't know who the dark man was or what he wanted. But if he wanted to hurt Ichimatsu, he’d have to go through the fifth born. And Jyushimatsu was the strongest. Jyushimatsu would protect him.

‘I'll always stay with you, Niisan. I won’t ever leave you. Never ever never ever …’

***

Osomatsu had missed hanging out with Karamatsu. A lot. And it wasn’t only the sweets and sympathy he’d provided. Karamatsu was a brilliant audience to his lively retellings of past magical shenanigans. He gasped in all the right places and laughed stridently at Osomatsu’s jokes, maintaining almost the same level of wide-eyed wonderment that Jyushimatsu would—with the added bonus that he didn’t get antsy every few minutes and need to count off a few hundred jumping jacks to recharge.

Osomatsu stretched his arms over his head with a contented sigh. It felt good to share these stories. ‘And it is good study for Matsuno Karamatsu,’ Ahn had to ruin the moment by giving their fun a greater purpose.

‘At least it’s more exciting than reading Choromatsu’s reports,’ the eldest grinned, digging Choromatsu in the ribs.
‘Thanks,’ Choromatsu muttered, getting up in a huff and relocating to his own crate. ‘I’m glad all my work is so appreciated.’

Sarcasm aside, the third born butted into the storytelling occasionally, correcting an exaggerated fact or a date when Totty didn’t jump on it first. Osomatsu was almost embarrassed, how happy he was to be talking so freely with so many of his brothers. He’d thought secrecy would raise its wall between them forever. But the barriers between them had all but crumbled to nothing. Particularly when it came to Karamatsu.

As leader, Todomatsu had asked permission. Karamatsu had taken a few days to answer. But he’d self-consciously agreed. Now they all kept their minds tentatively open to his, keeping a concerned mental eye on him and catching glimpses of how he fared beneath the surface. Many impressions Osomatsu got were still far from healthy. Full recovery from an invisible enemy like Karamatsu’s was a long way off. But it was being managed. And Karamatsu did feel better. Right now, that was the best thing in the world.

‘We should probably think about heading home,’ Choromatsu said, Osomatsu lapsed into relative quiet after a languid retelling of his anything-but-languid tilt with a ghoulish lizard, one of the monsters the Salamander had faced before even the Wyvern’s recruitment. Osomatsu shrugged a little, no intention of moving any time soon. The sky had barely changed colour. And Osomatsu very much enjoyed the praise showered on them by their parents whenever they “worked late”.

‘We’re permanently on call,’ he protested when Choromatsu frowned and Ahn chided. ‘It’s not like we don’t deserve a bit of …’

Todomatsu’s phone chimed with a news update. The youngest was still subscribed for cult-related warnings, as well as a handful of breaking news alerts. With Tokyo’s current levels of paranoia, his smartphone overflowed with notifications. But there was always a chance something might make the news before their scrolls burnt.

Today, however, they were taking a lazy day. Totty was decidedly un-alarmed, busy checking his cooler box. Summer just around the corner, he’d loaded it with drinks and told Choromatsu to transform, lowering the air temperature inside to freezing before snapping the lid shut. Only a few bottles remained. Still icy cold through the warehouse stifle, Todomatsu cracked the lid off a tea and took a swig before checking his phone.

‘There’s an earthquake in Saitama,’ he read the pop-up on his screen.

‘An abduction?’ Karamatsu asked, his scroll already out and ready to twirl. ‘Soldiers of Takuu threatening the safety of our fellow citizens? Misguided slaves, perhaps?’

‘Unlikely,’ said Ahn. ‘Very few slaves could cause an earthquake. Even fewer soldiers would leave any such sign of their presence. Save those the guardians confront,’ she said, taking the opportunity to lecture them over damage they’d caused. Todomatsu animatedly protested the injustice of her reprimands—“We’re not trying to make a mess, Ahn-chan. But we’re fighting, it just happens. If I had the power to miraculously repair the damage, maybe …”

Osomatsu yawned. There was nothing supernaturally suspicious about an earthquake. Choromatsu, however, had apparently decided to be more paranoid than usual today. ‘Maybe we should check it out.’

‘Someone’s got a magical itch to scratch,’ Osomatsu teased. Choromatsu had been reactivated at last. But with enemy attacks still so few and far between, the most useful thing he’d done as the Wyvern for weeks was cool Todomatsu’s drinks. Apparently, that wasn’t cutting it.
Choromatsu reddened. But he didn’t relent. ‘I’ve just got, ah … a weird feeling about this. Don’t you?’ he shot at Osomatsu.

‘No,’ Osomatsu returned, refusing to get worked up. He was too relaxed. But Choromatsu had caught Ahn’s attention.

‘Are you referring to sensing slave activity? Do you feel ill? The Wyvern generally possesses the most sensitive of senses,’ she said when Choromatsu bit his lip, that he wasn’t sure. ‘Trust your instincts, Matsuno Choromatsu.’

‘I’m not sure it’s soldiers, or even slaves,’ he admitted. ‘But … it won’t take long for me to get there. Could I do a quick flyby?’ he said, looking to Todomatsu. ‘I might be able to help.’

‘Go for it, Choromatsu-niisan,’ their fearless leader cleared him for take off, ever smug that he was in charge. ‘Let us know if you need backup.’

‘But it’s just a little earthquake!’

Osomatsu got that Choromatsu was frustrated. Maybe he needed a bit of wind in his hair, or something. But wasn’t it nice, the four of them—and Ahn—just hanging out together? Osomatsu was a bit ticked off, that the third born was that eager to spoil their good time. ‘Earthquakes aren’t our thing, Japan’s built to handle them. Why …”

‘We won’t be fighting the Liberation Force forever,’ Choromatsu snapped. ‘Once we defeat them, what’ll be “our thing” then? Or are we giving our powers back? Will the Spectrum Alliance even let us keep them, once we’re done defeating their enemy for them?”

‘Matsuno Choromatsu!’ Ahn’s whiskers twitched in surprise. ‘What’s gotten into you?’

‘Nothing,’ Choromatsu muttered. Osomatsu’s jaw scraped the warehouse floor, swept fastidiously clean. Even thinking distantly of a Takuu-free future, he’d never imagined he’d be told to turn in his scroll. The Salamander was who he was now!

‘They’ll make us give them back?’ he blurted at Ahn. Put on the spot, her fluster seemed to confirm Osomatsu’s sudden worst suspicions. ‘As soon as we take out Takuu, they’ll just fire us?”

‘For goodness sake!’ Ahn exclaimed. Todomatsu’s big eyes blinked with genuine hurt that they’d be discarded so easily. Beckoning the youngest to his crate and putting an arm around him, Karamatsu looked very worried. He’d barely received the wondrous Kraken’s powers. Now there was already talk of relinquishing them?

‘Matsuno brothers,’ Ahn addressed her warriors from a squishy stack of Totty’s cushions. ‘The Spectrum Alliance could not be more thankful for all you have done for them and all you will do. They would never “just fire” you. But have you considered what state you may be in when your crusade is finally over?

‘I don’t mean to frighten you,’ she said more softly when the youngest shrank against Karamatsu. ‘But already you have suffered. Most guardians do not hold their contracts longer than a few of your Earth years, the strain is too great. And very few have faced anything resembling the perils that you do. When you defeat Lord Takuu, you will have earned your retirement a thousand times over. Should you choose to retire,’ she added when Osomatsu opened his mouth. ‘But there is a long way to go yet. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There is more than enough to occupy you right here in the present.’

‘I’m just saying,’ Choromatsu said, looking uncomfortable that his sour mood had caused this
discussion. He stood abruptly, digging out his scroll. ‘Maybe if we prove we’re useful for something besides smashing crystals, they’d be less inclined to take our powers.’

‘I’ve wanted to take up crime fighting on the side forever,’ Osomatsu complained.

‘So you’re coming with me?’

‘Earthquakes aren’t a crime,’ whined Osomatsu, earning himself a disgusted sound from Choromatsu. Subsumed by his transformative storm, the Wyvern soared out the skylight.

‘We entrust this to you, dearest brother!’ Karamatsu called after him, before turning to Osomatsu. ‘Crime or no, people may still need us, Osomatsu. Imagine what we could do for the world—together, we could combat Mother Nature herself! Earthquakes, tsunamis. Wildfires,’ he added, hoping to engage the eldest.

‘I know,’ Osomatsu mumbled. He hadn’t meant it like that, he wasn’t snubbing anyone in distress from natural causes. But that’s what firefighters and the self-defence force did. Sure, they could lend a hand. But they couldn’t do everything themselves, they couldn’t be everywhere. They were only four people.

‘Four magical people,’ Todomatsu reminded.

‘I know,’ Osomatsu repeated more hotly. ‘Go after him, if you want.’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn appealed. ‘This is most mature of you. I’m glad you know the weight of every turmoil does not rest solely on your shoulders.’

Usually being called mature led to a few days of strutting and belittling his brothers, jibing they had a lot of growing up to do before they caught up. But today it just made Osomatsu feel even worse. He wasn’t acting like the Salamander at all, what was wrong with him? Maturity sucked.

Flinging himself face-first into cushions, Osomatsu took an angry nap. He roused to the sounds of magical combat. Transformed, Karamatsu and Todomatsu were locked in mock battle, water whips versus light chains. Sitting up with a groan, Osomatsu scrubbed gunk from his eyes. He felt a little better, maybe. Enough that the first thing he did when Choromatsu swooped back inside and phased was apologise.

‘What’s up?’ he asked, suspicious when Choromatsu accepted his apology without a single retort. ‘How was the earthquake? Rescue any cute Wyvern fangirls?’

With a sidelong glance toward the elemental warfare taken over the warehouse, Todomatsu’s gleeful provocation and Karamatsu’s laughter raising the roof, Choromatsu beckoned Ahn and opened a triangle of telepathy between the three of them.

‘The damage was contained to a small area,’ Choromatsu told them. ‘Far too precise to be natural. One of the buildings caught fire, but I stuffed it out,’ he explained. A few healthy rays of pride shone through his hesitance. ‘Stole all its air.’

Osomatsu punched him in the arm, grinning at his new trick. ‘Don’t you dare try that on me.’

Choromatsu smiled faintly in return. But it didn’t last. ‘There’s something else. My tech, ah … got some serious interference.’

Osomatsu stiffened, the smile knocked from his face. ‘Do you see him?’ he asked, the image of the Doll of Darkness splashed all across his retinas just as an arc of water splashed them. ‘Damn it,
Karamatsu!’ he shouted, wringing out the bottom of his T-shirt.

‘Sorry!’ Karamatsu sang back.

‘No, I didn’t see him,’ Choromatsu pinched the bridge of his nose. One of his stress headaches crept up on him. ‘But nothing else has ever done that.’

‘We should tell the others,’ Ahn said, her sweet ears lowered to her skull at only the mention of the strange and powerful slave. ‘But why would he cause such havoc? Destruction for the sake of destruction is not Lord Takuu’s style at all.’

‘But it is his style,’ Osomatsu stressed, darkening to match their foe. ‘He’s just having some sick fun, the bastard.’

‘There’ll be a reason,’ Choromatsu disagreed. ‘Testing his powers, building his strength. Whatever it is, we should probably be on the lookout. Who know what else he’s capable of?’

Whatever the reason was, Osomatsu didn’t doubt the Doll of Darkness was getting sick fun out of it, too. The bastard. But he grabbed Ahn’s tail, making her yowl when she made to break up the others’ battle. ‘We’ll tell them later, okay?’ he said as Ahn plaintively licked at her tail. ‘He’s a touchy subject. For Karamatsu especially.’

Osomatsu’s scowl would have frightened off a pack of ravenous wolves, remembering the Doll of Darkness fawning all over the second born, terrorising him.

‘We should probably be sensitive about it … which means one of you should tell him,’ he skived from the duty. ‘I’ll just screw it up … you don’t have to just agree with me,’ he complained when Choromatsu nodded, looking distracted. ‘Hey, Choromatsu? You okay, man?’

‘Sure,’ Choromatsu said. Really convincing. Osomatsu regarded him worriedly. The Doll of Darkness was a touchy subject for him, too. But he’d been strangely quiet all day. Osomatsu got the sense Choromatsu had had a lot on his mind even before his discovery that the Doll was up to new mischief.

‘Will you two watch what you’re doing?’ the third born exclaimed suddenly. Transforming again, Choromatsu exasperatingly worked his wind, clearing paths and tidying the worst of the mess Karamatsu and Todomatsu made.

Osomatsu supposed he should be training, too. But his leg braces were yet to detach, declaring him better than healed. The prickle of muscular stimulation was annoying as hell. Plus, now that he was firing on all cylinders again, he was a lot more interested in taking advantage of their mentor’s lingering sympathy. Just while it lasted.

‘Osomatsu,’ the second born’s voice sounded quietly from above him. The Kraken vs. Unicorn main event was over. Karamatsu had phased with barely a splutter. Osomatsu sprawled on his back, he shifted the open manga he’d pulled over on his face to look into his brother’s troubled eyes. ‘Thank you again. For coming to see Ichimatsu with me yesterday.’

‘No problem,’ Osomatsu said, his own troubled look mirroring Karamatsu’s. He’d visited Ichimatsu every other day once he was back on his feet, trading off with Todomatsu, and then Choromatsu, too. One of them had always stayed with Karamatsu, who was understandably hesitant to confront the fourth born. Ichimatsu had been asleep every time.

‘Don’t wake him,’ mum had whispered yesterday evening when they arrived. She or dad was usually already at his bedside. And/or Jyushimatsu. The fifth born could jabber away at their
unresponsive brother for hours.

But last night Ichimatsu had woken. Unresponsive was bad enough. But seeing Ichimatsu like that was something else entirely. Osomatsu ached, remembering how frailly his brother had fumbled for his hand. Ichimatsu’s whispered pleas for help that Osomatsu just couldn’t give him …

The eldest Matsuno growled. He was growing far too well acquainted with helplessness.

‘You must be more careful, Matsuno Karamatsu,’ Ahn scolded, Karamatsu sheepish to admit the play fight had drained his depths to a puddle. ‘What if there was an emergency? I know your powers seem without limit,’ she said as Karamatsu apologised most profusely, getting down on one knee and putting a hand over his heart. Osomatsu snorted. Ahn’s ears turned lurid pink. ‘But that is just not so.

‘Guardians like Matsuno Karamatsu,’ she spoke up, Todomatsu drifting over to lounge leisurely on his crate. ‘And Matsuno Osomatsu may have the ability to summon great power with minimal effort. However, the intensity of their natural inclination may overwhelm them. Additionally, they tend to have trouble keeping track of their power levels. As such, they are prone to burning out. Or drying up,’ she included the watery equivalent to the Salamander’s powers depleting to zilch. ‘They often require expert assistance learning to avoid such situations.’

‘And here I was thinking you were the one who ate textbooks for breakfast,’ Osomatsu angled upside-down to grin at Choromatsu. Ahn lectured on, pretending she hadn’t heard.

‘Guardians like Matsuno Choromatsu are less likely to have these difficulties. While initially less powerful, those who are not born with their inclinations develop and hone their talents from scratch. They are intimately aware of their limitations and the inner workings of the element flowing through them. For the most part,’ she added.

‘Which am I?’ Totty asked suddenly. ‘You haven’t said which I am. Why haven’t you told me before?’ he added, a little accusatorily.

‘Haven’t I?’ Ahn said, sounding suspiciously innocent. Osomatsu said nothing. It was more fun to watch Totty swell with indignance directed at someone not him. ‘Well, of course I can’t tell you everything. Like I’ve said, everything you need to know you will know … but your inclination is acquired,’ she told him. ‘That is rare for a light. Your inclination might be described as … unusual.’

With that cryptic comment, Ahn clammed up. Totty was so miffed, Osomatsu was sure the youngest was about to pull rank and demand she enlighten him with all the juicy details. But then Choromatsu came out with something so unexpected that it rendered the youngest instantly mute.

‘So Osomatsu-niisan and Karamatsu-niisan were born with their inclinations. Todomatsu and I developed ours. Which is Jyushimatsu?’

‘Ahn,’ Choromatsu said with an odd edge when their mentor froze. She wasn’t the only one. Osomatsu, Karamatsu and Todomatsu were all suddenly statues. ‘I know he’s got one. Which is it?’

Total silence from Ahn. But then, so reluctantly:

‘... Acquired.’

Osomatsu gaped. So Jyushimatsu did have … how had Choromatsu known?

‘And his inclination,’ Choromatsu had no mercy, not giving them a chance to process all he’d unleashed. ‘He’s an earth elemental, isn’t he?’
‘… Yes,’ Ahn whispered. ‘He is a core.’

‘I knew it,’ Choromatsu breathed triumph. Like he’d taken on a personal demon and beaten it at its own game.

‘Wait, slow down,’ Osomatsu stammered, completely thrown. ‘What the fuck? What’s going on? Jyushimatsu is a what? How did you know all that?’ he demanded of Choromatsu.

‘I’ve been suspicious for a while,’ Choromatsu revealed. ‘It was our barriers that got me thinking.’

‘Barriers?’ Karamatsu frowned. ‘You mean the shields that obscure our battlefields?’

Reeling with the revelations, Osomatsu tried to follow as Choromatsu explained. They’d discussed it briefly before, how Choromatsu’s barriers had affected both Karamatsu and Todomatsu in the past. Ahn’s had not affected Choromatsu in the convenience store, or Jyushimatsu the night he’d attacked a soldier. ‘I wondered if there might be a fundamental difference in the way we design them. I asked my team about it,’ he said, the stark surprise on Ahn’s face suggesting she’d forgotten the brothers had any source of information besides herself. ‘They told me that Ahn leaves a tiny gap in her barriers. Only someone with a strong inclination can get through. In case of emergencies.’

‘That explains why my barrier worked on you two. But if Ahn’s doesn’t work on Jyushimatsu … I thought my theory was ruined the night you joined up,’ Choromatsu nodded at Karamatsu. ‘When he came to, my barrier should have repelled him straight out of there. But mine didn’t seem to affect him, either. I thought Ahn must be right, that Jyushimatsu might be special like that. But then I thought … he might have broken through, like you did on the beach,’ Choromatsu looked to Karamatsu again.

‘That was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done,’ Karamatsu said quietly. ‘I thought I was going to die. Jyushimatsu was fine, wasn’t he?’

‘We can’t expect to get reliable results from any test,’ Choromatsu said. They could have been back in science class, watching their over-achieving brother present a project. ‘There aren’t enough of us. But it seemed more likely that he’d just have an inclination,’ Choromatsu shrugged. ‘Rather than be the exception to every rule.’

‘So you were lying?’ Todomatsu thought to ask Ahn first, Osomatsu still too flabbergasted—six brothers, and five of them had inclinations? The odds of that had to be one in six-fucking billion! ‘Weren’t you, Ahn-chan? When you said you didn’t know how Jyushimatsu saw through your barrier?’

‘No,’ Ahn whispered as all four turned to look at her. ‘I promise you, I wasn’t lying. I truly don’t know how your brother did that. His inclination is not strong enough,’ she insisted, shying from Osomatsu. She was terrified he was about to lose his cool with her. ‘He shouldn’t have been able to, I honestly believed it was due to his unique soul.’

‘Why didn’t you tell us?’

Osomatsu finally found his voice. He didn’t feel angry. Not exactly. He’d been angry about this already, he knew Ahn had good reasons for doing what she did. But it felt strange to be so accepting of that. Folding his arms, he waited for their mentor to explain.

‘For one of the same reasons I didn’t tell you about Matsuno Karamatsu,’ she returned. ‘I feared that if you knew, you would insist on recruiting him.’

‘What would be wrong with that?’ Todomatsu asked, confused. ‘Jyushimatsu-niisan would be an
amazing guardian. Wouldn’t he?’

‘I would have thought so,’ Choromatsu agreed, Osomatsu and Karamatsu murmuring fervent agreement. In that moment, Ahn looked the most reluctant Osomatsu had ever seen her.

‘Matsumo Jyushimatsu … has already been rejected by the Alliance. We do not doubt he would fight bravely,’ she raised her voice when the brothers erupted, rallying defence for the fifth born. Osomatsu fumed. The Spectrum Alliance didn’t know what the hell they were talking about. Who the fuck were they, to reject Jyushimatsu? ‘And we do not doubt the beauty of his soul. But to be a spectrum guardian …’

Ahn trailed into mental mumbles. She knew none of her guardians would like what she was about to say. So Osomatsu said it for her.

‘You think he’s too stupid,’ he accused. ‘Don’t you?’

Ahn swallowed. ‘His intelligence is not the primary issue.’

It hurt Ahn badly, that she couldn’t deny that was part of it. All of them saw it. And it was with mammoth effort and equally mammoth affection for Ahn that Osomatsu cooled his temper. ‘Then what,’ he said, focusing on annunciating each word, ‘is the primary issue?’

‘His inclination is too small,’ Ahn whispered, tensed like a hellstorm could be unleashed with any wrong syllable. ‘Underdeveloped—that says nothing about him,’ she added in a hurry. ‘That is not unusual, it is the state of most inclinations. But it is not enough to harness a contract and integrate with the powers of a guardian gem. I … I …’

Ahn stammered, so young and full of regret. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘… It would be hard, you know. To keep him from blabbing,’ Todomatsu pointed out, so reluctantly.

‘Our sweet Jyushimatsu isn’t known for his ability to keep secrets,’ Karamatsu sadly agreed, his expression like he’d thrown Jyushimatsu under a bus.

‘Neither am I,’ Osomatsu heard himself say. He felt oddly gutted. Unbidden, he remembered that day they’d recruited Todomatsu. He’d been so convinced it was Jyushimatsu who’d be their light.

‘But Choromatsu!’ Karamatsu was now saying with extra bravado, diverting attention from a quivering Ahn. ‘Brother! Your brilliance never fails to astound! You deduced that Jyushimatsu had an inclination. But tell us: how did you know his affinity was for the earth?’

Choromatsu sighed. ‘Because it wouldn’t make any sense otherwise. There’s only the Sphinx left to recruit.

‘Come on,’ he said when the others could only stare. Osomatsu shook his head, helpless before the altar of inverted logic. ‘The entire time we’ve been doing this, everything has been too damn convenient to believe—that we just happen to be nearby when there’s trouble. That so many of us just happen to have inclinations. Our scrolls burning two seconds after we were talking about a trial run for Totty. It was really starting to freak me out.’

‘You don’t say,’ Osomatsu said, remembering just how paranoid the parade of coincidence made the third born when he barely questioned it, only pleased that fate seemed to favour them.

‘The Spectrum Alliance could find no explanation,’ Ahn murmured.
‘I was convinced something shady was going on,’ he went on, Totty’s already round eyes almost pushing the rest of his features off his face as they expanded. ‘I still think something shady is going on. But I’ve finally started to factor coincidence into all this.’

He waved indiscriminately, taking in the warehouse, Ahn, and themselves.

‘And, by the rules that seem to have been governing this from the beginning, I don’t see any way around it. I thought I might as well call it out first.’

‘Matsuno Choromatsu,’ Ahn said, seeing exactly where this was headed. ‘As much as you may wish to recruit him … as convenient as it would be and as fine a guardian as he might have made, Matsuno Jyushimatsu’s inclination is just not strong enough. Coincidence will not change that.’

‘You’re wrong.’

Osomatsu almost felt as magnetic north abruptly swapped places with south. Choromatsu was disagreeing with Ahn?

‘Jyushimatsu is strong enough,’ the third born wouldn’t budge. ‘I don’t care what you say about his inclination, or his intelligence, or whatever excuses the Alliance is making. He’s our brother, we know him. And there’s no one who’d be better at smacking Takuu’s monsters to fucking kingdom come!’

‘Choromatsu?’ Karamatsu tentatively touched his shoulder. ‘Are you all right, brother?’

He didn’t look all right. Taken a sharp dive from triumphant, Osomatsu wondered if Totty might have reactivated him a little too soon. But that didn’t stop him from believing every word Choromatsu said.

‘If I’m not right about this,’ he said shakily, ‘then nothing makes sense anymore! And I can’t handle that. It has to be Jyushimatsu, because it was us. Jyushimatsu has to be our fifth guardian. Jyushimatsu is our Sphinx.’
Almost thought I wasn't going to get a chapter done before the end of the month :) Writing during holidays didn't exactly go to plan - so ridiculously hot the entire time I could barely think, let alone channel that minimal thought into anything resembling a cohesive written structure. Trudging forward with my original stuff (it doesn't have to be good, it just has to be done, I can make it good later ... I keep telling myself this. I'm yet to be convinced I'm listening) but I hit a bit of a roadblock last week. Decided to have some magical fun in the meantime :) Hope you enjoy!

Also, I am now completely in love with a particular author's writing style ... a style that is unfortunately reasonably opposite to mine. I've tried out a few little things inspired by them throughout this chapter. Not much, but wanted to give it a go :)

It took a week for the magical brothers to win over the Alliance. That narrow victory resulted from a combined effort of all-out persuasion (from Choromatsu), beguiling (from Todomatsu), appeal (from Karamatsu), and good old-fashioned annoyance (from Osomatsu). But though he believed as steadfastly as Choromatsu that the only true final guardian was Jyushimatsu, Osomatsu’s aggravation techniques lacked that certain finesse he was famed for.

‘He’s not wrong,’ the eldest threw some support behind Choromatsu as he laid it out, bare and brutal, for Ahn and the Alliance higher ups. Who else would—no, who else could thrive alongside four magical Matsunos? A team with its own distinct dynamic, established as far back as birth? Every member with his own distinct abilities, personality, and difficulties? No other core on Earth was up to the task.

Osomatsu knew it. Hence his lack of annoyance finesse.

‘Come on,’ he said without much force. Choromatsu was done. Gripping his temples, the third born sank onto his crate. Did he reason so hard with their obstinate employers his brain vibrated in its bone cage? ‘Just trial him. If he can’t transform, he can’t transform. What harm will it do?’

Ahn’s mouth opened and closed slowly, more stunned fish than cat-like. ‘You’re taking this awfully well,’ Todomatsu gave Ahn’s disbelief voice. ‘Didn’t you challenge Choromatsu-niisan to a duel over recruiting me? Hey,’ the youngest pouted in realisation. ‘So you think Jyushimatsu can handle himself, but didn’t think I could?’

‘That’s right,’ Osomatsu said, earning himself a squawk and a shove. It almost threw him off balance, he was that off balance already. ‘You have prettier nails than Totoko,’ he made shitty excuses.

‘Remind me, Niisan,’ Totty shot back. ‘How many times have I saved your sorry ass?’

‘You’re my baby brother,’ Osomatsu shrugged. ‘Can you blame me? You’ve proved I was a moron, okay? But Jyushimatsu’s taken on the Liberation Force without any extra help. Twice.'
‘I’m still not okay with this.’

Osomatsu gestured to Todomatsu, and Choromatsu—worn and frustrated from his hours-long audience with Alliance decision-makers—and Karamatsu’s facing off against Osomatsu’s punch bag forest, to mark “this” as allowing his brothers to place themselves in harm’s way without offering himself up as trash-talking human shield.

‘But when it’s Jyushimatsu, I’m … less not okay with it,’ he admitted. Increasingly hot and bothered, he pulled at the neck of his T-shirt. He felt like a real shit. He’d royally fucked up with Karamatsu. Choromatsu hadn’t even wanted to tell Osomatsu when he was first medicated. Todomatsu only put up with his bullshit because they worked together. Now Jyushimatsu …

Osomatsu’s skin prickled strangely. He put his head back, staring unseeingly up at the busted skylight. Did anyone have a more worthless big brother than him? Any takers?

… He didn’t fucking think so.

Todomatsu gave a genuine sigh, snapping Osomatsu out of it. ‘I know what you mean.’

One moment of slumped shoulders was all their effervescent youngest allowed. Then he was dragging Choromatsu to his feet, pushing him between his bony shoulder blades. ‘We can’t mope all morning—training, training!’

‘Slave driver,’ Choromatsu muttered. Osomatsu rolled off his crate, hitting the ground on his hands and knees.

‘I thought you lived for work,’ he said, crawling to kick out his stretch mat. ‘Where’s that disgusting motivation of yours?’

A frown creased Choromatsu’s brow. Blinking wearily, he looked not at Osomatsu, but out across the warehouse. So much equipment, so much sweat, so many hours. So much to lose.

Osomatsu didn’t need a reply. Choromatsu dragged himself from every rut he tripped into. Plenty of motivation seared hot through his veins; he wasn’t about to lose that. He’d kill himself for their cause first … metaphorically speaking. But it’d be easier to show it, if Choromatsu wasn’t tired enough to question whether he was actually awake when his eyes were open.

Finally, the brothers were given a reluctant green light. ‘Offer Matsuno Jyushimatsu a temporary power contract,’ Ahn was instructed by an important Alliance figure; his voice boomed authority into their minds. ‘If he is incapable of aligning his inclination with the guardian topaz, remove his recollection of the event. That will be the end of it. Won’t it?’

He directed this mental raised eyebrow at the guardians.

‘Thank you so much, sir! You won’t regret this, I promise you.’

Todomatsu served up a few extra teaspoons of honey. The important figure melted like butterscotch in a blowtorch—really? For god’s sake. Their Unicorn could commit murder and the Alliance would find some way to spin it.


‘Bwehhhh …’ he mumbled. One bleary eye crept open. ‘To … tty?’
Seeing his brothers around him, Jyushimatsu sprang from his dream space and straight to his feet. Osomatsu yawned, envious: their brother, the sentient pogostick. He wouldn't be this alert for another hour or so. If ever.

‘Are we visiting Ichimatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu asked. Compelled into sneakers, he gambolled out the door. ‘The hospital opens this early? I didn't know that!’

‘Not this fine morning, dearest Jyushimatsu,’ Karamatsu rescued the hospital staff from managing Jyushimatsu any earlier than necessary.

‘We’ll go later,’ Osomatsu promised. His hand on the door, he felt his pulse prematurely pick up, thrumming through the wood. The atmosphere felt charged.

One, two, three, four.

Five.

‘Come on buddy. Keep up,’ Osomatsu teased. Jyushimatsu’s chest swelled.

‘I’m the fastest!’ he declared, and scarpered.

‘Wrong way!’

Choromatsu dashed after him, pointing Jyushimatsu in the right direction.

It was a long way to the warehouse by foot. Yet after the guardians’ collective months of training, Jyushimatsu’s elated energy still outstripped theirs. Racing ahead like a walk-starved puppy, it came as some comfort to Osomatsu that Jyushimatsu puffed himself out first. Sort of.

‘Where are we going?’

Jyushimatsu shambled to a halt, panting. Tongue lolling out, he tasted the morning air as the others caught up. Then he bounced back, from winded to energised the moment they drew even, cellular powerhouses amazingly restored. How fit was he?

‘Where are we going?’ he tumbled to know. ‘Niisan? Totty? Tell me, tell me! Do you run here every day?’

Their sneakers thudded in and out of time on the greasy asphalt. The buildings either side of the street were gutted, marked for demolition that cost more than they were worth. Every lot was riddled with glass and oversized junk. Parched tufts of grass struggled to poke through the dust. No one would mistake this for a popular jogging route.

‘Somewhere cool,’ Osomatsu promised.

‘Somewhere you won’t believe,’ added Karamatsu, ramping Jyushimatsu’s excitement.

The early sun sparkling, they showed Jyushimatsu the hidden entrance to their headquarters. Inside the warehouse, the fifth born flung out his arms, spinning in rapt circles. ‘Where are we?’ he asked, spotting their homey setup of comfy crates. ‘Is this where you hang out now? And where you work out? I want to try!’

He cavorted through the exercise machines and weights, each holding his full and eager attention for an entire split second. ‘Did you buy this place? Are you moving in? Are you turning it into an apartment? I can help! Can I help? Please, please, please … wow, is that a bathtub? Look, it has feet!'
What …’

The magical Matsuno brothers shared a look. Osomatsu pulled Ahn from his hoodie pocket by the scruff of her neck. As Jyushimatsu enthused on, they took out their scrolls and gave each other space. And they transformed. Fire and wind, water and light.

The warehouse was isolated. There was no one else to hear Jyushimatsu’s roar of joy.

‘YOU’RE THEM YOU’RE THEM I DON’T BELIEVE IT YOU’RE REALLY THE SPECTRUM GUARDIANS WOWOWOWOWOWOWWWWWWW!!!!!!!!!!!!!’

He couldn’t recognise them. Not their faces. But Jyushimatsu wasn’t fooled for a second.

‘This is your secret!’ he exclaimed, rushing from brother to brother, guardian to guardian, admiring their hoods and begging to hold their weapons—their secret? Osomatsu shook his head. How much had they totally failed to get past him?

Jyushimatsu staggered beneath the weight of Karamatsu’s shield, the second born the only one to indulge him. Choromatsu’s face said it all: “Give an over-excited Jyushimatsu access to a high-tech magical gun? How about no.”

‘This is your secret!’ Jyushimatsu couldn’t stop exclaiming. ‘It’s a super good secret, you guys! I never would have guessed!’

‘This is our secret,’ Karamatsu smiled. He pulled his mask down so Jyushimatsu could know his face and hear his voice.

‘Karamatsu-niisan! I’m so happy they shared it with you—you’re a guardian now, too! You’re the new one, the blue one! And Choromatsu-niisan’s green, Osomatsu-niisan’s red, Totty’s pink …’

‘Pink and white. And silver,’ Todomatsu demurred, looking at Choromatsu. Usually this was when the third born would explode about colour-coded coincidence.

‘You can’t tell anyone,’ Choromatsu instead made Jyushimatsu promise. ‘Jyushimatsu? Look at me … focus! Do you understand?’

Jyushimatsu nodded madly, crashing around the warehouse with unrepressed glee. Was this too much for him to handle? Osomatsu caught the fifth born, steering him to their crates. Ahn tidied her fur, prim and proper, before mincing after them.

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan, this is Ahn,’ Totty introduced her. ‘Ahn-chan is sort of our team manager. Like a baseball manager.’

‘Of sorts,’ Ahn agreed, unable to help liking Jyushimatsu’s thrilled reaction. ‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu,’ she addressed him, settling on a cushion with her paws demurely crossed. A missile of enthusiasm, straining to launch and definitely not about to sit still, Osomatsu slung a gauntlet around his little brother’s broad shoulders. ‘I’m sure you have questions. Perhaps if …’

‘You are the kitten who lives with us!’ Jyushimatsu took his delight up a notch. ‘Why don’t you like Ichimatsu-niisan? Are you talking? How are you talking?’

Admirably, Ahn did not allow herself to be offended. ‘I may look like a kitten, but I assure you I am not.’

‘She’s from space, Jyushimatsu,’ Osomatsu kept it simple.
‘Space, really?!’ Jyushimatsu’s wonder knew no bounds. ‘Is she an astronaut? Zero-G Spiral! Is she …’

Jyushimatsu’s unfurling thoughts snagged. ‘She’s … from … space,’ he repeated slowly. ‘So … how does she speak?’

‘Aliens speak too, Jyushimatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu said. He always had more patience for his bundle-of-fun big brother.

‘Nonono,’ Jyushimatsu shook his head hard. If he’d been in anything less than the sickening pink of health, his spine might have cracked from the rotational force. ‘If she’s from space, how does she speak Japanese?’

Osomatsu blinked. Huh.

‘… Why didn’t we think of that?’ Choromatsu asked weakly, logic dealt another blow. ‘How does she speak … how does the Liberation Force speak Japanese?!’

‘Why didn’t we think of that?’ Osomatsu repeated. Choromatsu was supposed to be the astute one. Not that this have taken “astute”. ‘Why didn’t you think of that?’

Even Choromatsu satisfied—at least temporarily—with Ahn’s assertion she was not speaking Japanese, they only interpreted her as speaking Japanese, their mentor began her tale for (with any luck) the final time. Good thing Ahn was a born storyteller and just kept getting better. Nothing else would have engaged Jyushimatsu’s attention for so long. Choromatsu and Todomatsu quizzed him at regular intervals, making sure he grasped the basics.

‘Give him a break,’ Osomatsu said about halfway through the juicy detail. Jyushimatsu had held out longer than he thought possible. But his neurons overloaded; he was about to explode. Or implode. Whichever was more destructive. Even with his eyes so determinedly drawn into focus, Osomatsu wasn’t sure he took in much at all. Not in any way it would stick. Jyushimatsu leaped at the chance to blow of steam and express his deepest feelings of that astounding moment in his life—he wasn’t truly himself unless he communicated 50 percent via body language, 50 percent by volume. Karamatsu gave him someone to race around their track.

‘So the cultists are really aliens,’ Jyushimatsu later summed up. Ahn had let out a long breath, finished. ‘And the aliens are really monsters, and we stop them from taking over the city by smashing their jewelry?’

‘From taking over the universes,’ Ahn corrected for the fourth time. Osomatsu was still impressed.

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan.’

As planned, Totty then said it straight. ‘We want you to fight with us. We want you to be the fifth guardian. The Sphinx.’

‘The Sphinx,’ Jyushimatsu repeated in a whisper. The way he said it, the word might have been holy.

‘The Sphinx,’ Ahn echoed his reverence.

‘You’d have power over earth,’ Todomatsu listed perks on his gloved fingers. ‘Like I control light, and Osomatsu-niisan gets off on burning shit.’

‘Hey …’
'You’d get to wear cool armour like us,’ the youngest ignored Osomatsu’s plaintive protest. That was … mostly not true. ‘You’d get your very own magical weapon …’

‘Like a baseball bat?!’ Jyushimatsu bubbled over. He looked hopefully to Ahn.

‘Your weapons and armour are made through you. They are a reflection of your soul,’ she said. Matching each of them to their weapons, Osomatsu thought nothing truer had ever been said. ‘A bat would not be inappropriate for a Sphinx to wield.’

‘And this job pays,’ Todomatsu finished on that triumphant note. ‘A lot.’

Osomatsu had resolved to say as little as possible, lest his irrepressible reservations slip through. But at that, he reached out and smacked Totty with his gauntlet. The youngest clutched his arm, totally unhurt and eyes bright with tears summoned from straight up his arse. That wasn’t fair; he was making this sound fucking irresistible. Jyushimatsu had a hard enough time thinking straight without baubles dangled in his eyes.

‘Joining us would be a selfless act,’ Karamatsu told him, solemnity written in every careworn line of his face. ‘But please brother: feel no pressure. This is a rewarding path, but a hard one. We would think no less of you, nor would your heart prove any less pure, should you choose to pass this opportunity by.’

‘It’s dangerous,’ Choromatsu said with the Wyvern’s unerring composure. He pulled up his gakuran sleeve, letting Jyushimatsu sniffle and paw at his odd brace; it remained as firmly locked as Osomatsu’s. ‘But you’re strong. If you transformed into the Sphinx, you’d be even stronger.’

Jyushimatsu bounced up and down. It was the only way he could handle the fact that “even stronger” was an actual possibility.

‘So how about it?’ Osomatsu asked, reminding him of the pros and cons in what he hoped was a neutral voice. ‘Are you in?’

‘I’m in, I’m in!’ Jyushimatsu cried without a second thought. An active, outdoors public service job that he could work with his brothers? Becoming one of the magical heroes he idolised? A universe didn’t exist where Jyushimatsu would turn that down. ‘I want to help you! I really-really-really wanna be a guardian—I’ll help you win! Supermega homerun! Thanks for playing! We couldn’t do this without you!’

Jyushimatsu bowed ridiculously to each of them. His happiness curled warm around their ankles like the touch of a loving furred companion. A furred companion less snooty than Ahn.

‘Please, don’t get too excited,’ Ahn was a little late to prevent that. ‘While you do have the inclination, the strength of your core is not to the standard that … you may encounter some difficulties,’ she re-selected her words when Osomatsu scowled. ‘Before you sign a permanent contract, the Spectrum Alliance requires you to have a trial. Not only to ensure you can transform, but so you may know firsthand what it is to fight as a guardian.’

Far from faltering, Jyushimatsu was thrilled at the prospect of a trial run. ‘We’ll need to wait for a soldier,’ Choromatsu said. ‘We shouldn’t trial him with … what’s been going on.’

Osomatsu staved off a shudder. Abductions were down. But the Doll of Darkness haunted Tokyo; they could barely to keep up with the trail of panic he left. Only the basics had made it into Ahn’s explanations. Did Jyushimatsu remember anything of his encounter with the Doll the night Karamatsu first transformed? Unbidden, Osomatsu imagined the fifth born face to face with the
powerful slave. This time on more equal footing.

His lip curled. He almost pitied the evil bastard. He had no idea what was coming for him.

Fully expecting his garnet to heat as soon as Jyushimatsu’s trial was mentioned, the eldest gaped when Choromatsu was unsurprised their gems remained cool. ‘Coincidence knows we’re onto it now,’ he said. ‘Things are going to get trickier to predict.’

‘Now you’re just making shit up,’ Osomatsu accused.

‘It’s okay!’ Jyushimatsu piped up, though he squirmed in his seat. ‘I can wait! But I can’t wait, I can’t wait!’

‘In the meantime,’ Ahn said, Choromatsu retrieving his tablet. ‘Perhaps we might read your contract together. That might …’

‘Which guardian is Ichimatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu interrupted suddenly, a pawn to enthusiasm. ‘Have you told him yet?’

Jyushimatsu looked eagerly from face to face. Osomatsu felt something knotted slip into his stomach. He hadn’t thought of that. By the aghast looks on his brothers’ faces, neither had they.

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu ventured hesitantly. ‘We haven’t told Ichimatsu-niisan anything.’

‘Are we telling him later? Is that why we’re visiting him today? What’s his power? What’s a purple gem, Niisan?’

‘An amethyst?’ Karamatsu suggested, only because he couldn’t say what none of them could. Ahn took pity on them.

‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu,’ she said, so kindly. ‘There are only five spectrum guardians.’

‘Until Ichimatsu-niisan joins? This will be so good for him!’ Jyushimatsu enthused. ‘He’ll feel better, won’t he? You feel better, don’t you, Karamatsu-niisan?’

‘I …’

Karamatsu didn’t look better then. He looked heartbroken. Osomatsu’s gauntlet pressed to his chest. His own heart was covered in fracture lines.

‘Then Ichimatsu-niisan will get healthy again, too!’ Jyushimatsu was overcome by delight. ‘This’ll make the not-Ichimatsu go away! He’ll be so happy! I can’t wait to tell him, this is even better than our birthday … IT’S ALMOST OUR BIRTHDAY!’

Jyushimatsu descended into ponderings of what to give each of them.

‘No, Matsuno Jyushimatsu,’ Ahn held her composure as Todomatsu’s eyes glistened. Choromatsu’s face had vanished into his hands. ‘Not until Matsuno Ichimatsu joins. Matsuno Ichimatsu will not join. There have only ever been five guardians. There are five guardian gems. Five power contracts. Five. Not six.’

‘But …’

Jyushimatsu’s face crumpled in on itself, he was so helplessly bewildered. ‘But there’s six of us,’ he said, unable to make it make sense. ‘What about Ichimatsu-niisan?’
‘You aren’t guardians because you’re brothers,’ Ahn tried to help him understand. She was starting to have trouble holding Jyushimatsu’s innocent gaze.

‘There’s six of us,’ Osomatsu made himself say, his horrible duty as eldest to confirm. ‘But Ahn’s right. There’s only five guardians. Ichimatsu isn’t one.’

‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu,’ Ahn said, now as heavily affected as her guardians. Before wriggling all over, Jyushimatsu now sat unnaturally still. He might have been suspended in fluid. Or in time. ‘Please try to understand. Matsuno Ichimatsu has no inclination. He just isn’t …’

‘Then I can’t do it.’

When Osomatsu had still been in high school, he’d skipped a lot of classes. Sneaking out the school gates with bad apple acquaintances, they’d hung around the nearby arcade, smoking and wasting time. He’d done it over and over, risking expulsion and giving no shits. Then one skipped second period he’d looked up, mid-snigger, to see his mother through the haze of cigarette smoke.

Osomatsu had turned to stone under her eyes. He’d known his mother shopped there. He should have known it was only a matter of time before he was caught. But he’d been too wrapped up in himself, his so-called friends, and their badassery. Without a word, his mother had turned her back and walked away, leaving Osomatsu numb. With guilt. With dread. And unable to comprehend how he’d not seeing this coming.

‘This is about a lot more than Ichimatsu-niisan,’ Todomatsu tried to get through to the fifth born. ‘Lord Takuu will take over everything if we don’t stop him! I thought you wanted to help us!’

‘I do.’

The youngest just couldn’t believe Jyushimatsu had said no. ‘But this is huge! This is so important!’

‘So is Ichimatsu-niisan.’

Jyushimatsu gripped the knees of his jumpsuit. He shook his head over and over, caught in a loop of regret and fierce loyalty. If Ichimatsu wasn’t a guardian, neither was he.

‘He wouldn’t know,’ Choromatsu said quietly. Jyushimatsu gave one last emphatic shake of his head.

‘He would know. Karamatsu-niisan knew. I knew. He’ll know we all share something that he doesn’t. And he’s so sick. I can’t make him feel worse, I can’t do that to him! I’m letting you down,’ Jyushimatsu said, looking lost at the thought he failed any of his brothers. ‘But …’

It was so hard for him to refuse. And, at the same time, so easy. ‘If someone else can be the Sphinx, how about you ask them? Ahn did say being a guardian would be hard for me. Didn’t she?’

‘Potentially,’ Ahn would not lie. ‘But it can't be helped. It's just the way you are.’

Jyushimatsu smiled. But all his joy had fallen out of it. Damn it … he thought she meant he was stupid. ‘Nice going, Ahn,’ Osomatsu gave her an earful. Ahn went rosy beneath her fur, spluttering to rectify the misunderstanding—what was mostly a misunderstanding. Karamatsu took it upon himself to assure Jyushimatsu that he’d be a glorious guardian, and then some. Now that Ahn had been good and told off, Osomatsu didn’t know what to say. Choromatsu might be the cleverest of them, Todomatsu the craftiest. But he’d never heard anything more wise in his life. Ichimatsu would know. He would know …
‘But you’re our core!’

Jyushimatsu had no idea how important he was. There was no one else who could round out this magical unit. As goddamn stupid as it sounded, Choromatsu was right: this was meant to be. Defying the Alliance and knowing he’d get away with it, Todomatsu did some fast talking, and convinced Ahn not to wipe Jyushimatsu’s memories there and then. It was harder to convince Jyushimatsu to sit on his final decision.

‘Tell us on our birthday,’ Todomatsu wouldn’t take no for an answer. ‘Please think about it, Jyushimatsu-niisan.’

As much as they could each live with themselves, Osomatsu, Karamatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu all worked on Jyushimatsu over the next week, separately and as a united front. They kept inviting him on their morning run, bringing him to hang out at the warehouse while they trained.

‘We promised we wouldn’t pressure him,’ Karamatsu observed, morose as Osomatsu drilled him, hurling increasingly complex strings of attacks, forcing him to react fast and be inventive about it.

‘That’s enough, Osomatsu.’

Karamatsu swept under an axe kick, knocking the eldest off balance with his shoulder. ‘I have an … an appointment.’

Sweat trickling, Osomatsu teetered on the balls of his feet as Karamatsu found somewhere to be alone with his Alliance counsellors. ‘Hey, Jyushimatsu?’ he called. Osomatsu was shocked by how dispirited he sounded. ‘Wanna fight Niichan?’

With the Doll of Darkness on the loose, Todomatsu overloaded his smartphone with news and warning apps. If anything more destructive than a loud sneeze went down within 100 kilometres of the Imperial Gardens, Totty knew about it. When the Unicorn intercepted a suspicious alert, the Wyvern would take off as fast as he could fly to monitor the situation, and aid anyone caught up in the chaos.

Roads that buckled under their own weight. A dark mist that engulfed the subway system, leaving dread in its wake. A heatless fire that corroded scaffolding. Every light in Shinjuku Station sputtering permanently out, from flashing sign to smartphone flashlight.

From the eerie to the downright dangerous, Choromatsu tracked the phenomena, noting no pattern. Just that the prefectures surrounding Tokyo now landed squarely in the strike zone. But there was timing to it: bar one or two, the attacks came either very late or very early, under cover of darkness.

The emergency services usually beat them to these bizarre scenes. The police, in particular, were never pleased to see the guardians.

‘I saw him,’ Choromatsu gasped early one morning. The others alerted by the thump of his landing, they’d hurried onto the roof to find him phased and trembling, clutching his shoulder. Osomatsu darkened, finding under his pajama sleeve a single black bruise, round and precise—the police had fucking shot him! The bullet was nothing the Wyvern’s armour couldn’t turn. But it was the indignity of it—they were trying to help, damn it! Didn’t the cops have bigger fish to fry? Choromatsu was fucking ashen. ‘I was trying to get people out.’

Helped inside, Choromatsu gulped the water Todomatsu fetched him. The Doll of Darkness had rusted an entire apartment block of water pipes in Edogawa. Plumbing cracked apart, the ensuing floods had hissed hot, streaked by dark water like splinters. ‘Water was pouring down the stairs—it was boiling. I was trying to cool it … Then I saw him, standing in the street. He winked at me,’ Choromatsu shuddered. Ahn pressed comfortingly into his knee. ‘Then he saluted, and vanished. I
let myself be distracted,’ he moaned. It was pretty clear this was the moment he'd been shot. ‘I was an idiot …’

‘I’m first responder now,’ Osomatsu told him, barely glancing at Totty for approval. They were both still brace-bound, but Osomatsu was the better recovered.

Todomatsu was reluctant. ‘You’re not fast enough, Osomatsu-niisan.’

‘Then I’ll be faster,’ Osomatsu growled. ‘At least let us take turns. This is too much for him!’

‘It is not,’ Choromatsu retorted. Premature lines carved his forehead with the strain. ‘I am perfectly capable, thank you very much, of doing my job without …’

He broke off with a gasp. ‘Shit! Ow … owww … shit,’ he finished miserably. Jyushimatsu’s eyes were saucers as Karamatsu iced Choromatsu’s ugly bruise. Osomatsu gritted his fists. The city was locked down by terror. People were getting hurt. What the fuck was the Doll of Darkness doing?

‘Getting stronger,’ Choromatsu was convinced. The Spectrum Alliance agreed. And the guardians were left with a sick pit in their collective stomach. Wasn’t the Doll was hard enough to handle already? They needed to get stronger, too. They needed to upgrade! But they couldn’t. Not until their entire unit assembled. Until then, the extent of their powers remained far beyond them.

Needless to say, Jyushimatsu never tagged along when Todomatsu announced a Doll-related threat. But two days before their birthday, their long-dormant scrolls burnt. Karamatsu was at the hospital. By the clock on Todomatsu’s smartphone, he was in the middle of a psych appointment. ‘We’ve got it, Niisan,’ the youngest snagged his attention from across the city before Karamatsu ran out of his psychiatrist. Whatever excuse they came up with, that still wouldn’t look good. ‘Jyushimatsu-niisan? Want to come?’

Turning a neat circle, Ahn flipped Jyushimatsu the last scroll she protected. He caught it. Usually when Jyushimatsu caught anything he fumbled, baseballs and beer cans slipping comically from one hand to the other like a bars of soap. Not today. The scroll almost wove between his fingers, latching firmly in the Sphinx candidate’s control.

‘I will distort attention around us,’ Ahn said. ‘No one will see you.’

Jyushimatsu traced his kanji through the air with the silvered scroll. He wouldn’t transform. He was afraid if he did, he wouldn’t be able to say no. ‘We’re not trying to bribe you,’ Todomatsu insisted. But Osomatsu felt where Jyushimatsu was coming from. Intensely.

‘I can’t do that to Ichimatsu-niisan,’ Jyushimatsu repeated, staunch against his own unbearable want to be the magic that so captured his wonder. But his eyes blinked so wide. So hopeful. He was every kid who’d ever pawed grubby handprints on a toy store window.

Almost surprising himself, Osomatsu was the one who brokered a fast compromise. ‘Do you still want to come? See what it takes to be a guardian?’

Jyushimatsu nodded on a hinge.

‘Then grab your bat,’ he said, transforming and slinging both Jyushimatsu and his indestructible new bat easily over his back. ‘Keep your head down. And hang on.’

‘YEEEAHHHHH!!!!’ Jyushimatsu whooped, blasting Osomatsu’s enhanced eardrums with pure joy as they blasted through the skylight, Choromatsu and Todomatsu on their heels.
‘Stay the hell back, you hear?’ Osomatsu warned as he set Jyushimatsu on the roof of a business tower. Windswept, the fifth born nodded. His grin was fixed with dozy bliss from the exhilaration of soaring over Tokyo. Expanding a shield to evacuate the top dozen levels, Ahn clambered onto Jyushimatsu shoulder and spun a personal cocoon of camouflage. ‘After you.’

Osomatsu swept an exaggerated bow to their fearless leader. With a petulant mutter about insubordination, Totty kicked in the door to the emergency stairs.

Yamuushisen offered nowhere near the spectacular fight of Todomatsu’s titanic trial. An attempted abduction, smack-bang in the middle of work hours, at the very top of a business tower? This soldier wasn’t exactly Takuu’s finest. Maybe they’d missed the memo: Doll of Darkness activity only. But they were no pushover. Osomatsu almost thought about thanking them. Yamuushisen offered an all-around solid battle, great for any guardian candidate to observe and learn.

Though admittedly, they were one of the weirder ones.

‘Is that a … line graph?’ The Wyvern studied the pale jagged length ruptured from their cocoon. He barely stunned their stockbroker slave before the line burst from two-dimensional space into three.

‘Protect her, Jyushimatsu-niisan!’ the Unicorn cried, tumbling neatly aside when Yamuushisen shot directly at him. The beast rippled with sharp edges. His bat out and ready, Jyushimatsu stood guard over the downed slave. ‘And look after Ahn-chan!’

Fearless as she was, Ahn looked like she wouldn’t mind being looked after right about then. Any hidey-hole she might have slipped into was hauled to destruction, cubicles and whiteboards and pot plants upended with the force of Yamuushisen’s darting slipstream. Cursing the restricted space and mess to pick through—‘Choromatsu, do something about this shit already!’—with a hiss of scorched linoleum, the Salamander ground his boots into the floor. ‘What, were you looking for this?’

The beast hurtled straight at him. Osomatsu hurled a flaming fist directly at their face … the front of the thing, anyway. Yamuushisen had no face.

The monster split, dividing straight down the centre either side of Osomatsu’s gauntlet. ‘Come on!’ he shouted, needing to spin low and fast to avoid being impaled from two directions at once. ‘Where’s their damn crystal?’

Moving targets in a living game of Snake, the entire office floor was a write-off in seconds. And it only took Choromatsu that long to pointpoint Yamuushisen’s crystal. ‘There, look!’

Axes. So it was a graph. Weird. Disregarding the rest of whatever Choromatsu was saying and flinging a fleeting look for Jyushimatsu’s safety—he crouched in a corner, on high alert with Ahn and the unconscious slave bundled behind him—Osomatsu charged for Yamuushisen’s all-but-forgotten axes. Both Yamuushisens flashed to intercept. ‘We’ve got this, Osomatsu-niisan!’

The Wyvern seized the airspace of both halves of the beast. Caught mid-streak, they writhed madly. But he pinned them just long enough for the Unicorn to raise a dome over their axes. The Salamander bolted, skidding through the web of Totty’s chains before the bubblegum mesh sealed.

Osomatsu was disappointed when the white-fleshed axes turned out to be nothing more than that. Inanimate. No fight in them at all. ‘Damn,’ he grumped, resigned to searching unhampered.

‘Don’t complain,’ the Wyvern told the bitching Salamander, his winds shunting office furniture to encircle the Unicorn, left exposed and defenceless. The makeshift fortress might hold for one pass. Todomatsu knelt with his sceptre locked before him, expression icy and hell-bent on keeping the
beast/s from interrupting Osomatsu’s search and destroy mission.

His pistols blazing, Choromatsu fought to pin the sharpened worms down. Abandoning Totty, the twin lengths twined in a deadly-looking drill. ‘Fuck me sideways,’ Osomatsu gulp, hurrying as Yamuushisen spiralled directly at him. With a distorted ping like laserfire in reverse, they glanced violently off Todomatsu’s dome. The forcefield shivered with the impact. So did Todomatsu. All force concentrated at that one minuscule point, Osomatsu’s worried lens spat data. ‘Yeah, I know it won’t take another hit like that,’ Osomatsu said, finding Yamuushisen’s dark crystal embedded in the end of the horizontal axis. It was very small. Osomatsu squashed it like a bug.

Yamuushisen screeched, a hair-raising shrill of pipes made all the more disturbing by its lack of discernible source. But they didn’t dissolve. ‘What the hell?’

‘The crystal’s divided in three,’ Choromatsu said as he circled low over the narrow beasts.

‘Did you want to maybe tell me that?’

‘He did,’ Todomatsu slotted through clenched teeth.

‘I did,’ Choromatsu agreed coolly. ‘Clearly you weren’t listening.’

Nothing to say to that, Osomatsu scowled. Then one of the Yamuushisens slammed Choromatsu into the ceiling. Fluorescent lights shattered. Ceiling panels clattered down. ‘Shit!’

Osomatsu found the second crystal fragment where the axes joined, destroying it. The last must top the vertical axis. Osomatsu’s lens bleeped confirmation, highlighting it. But the drill had already reformed, spinning to lance straight through Todomatsu’s forcefield. ‘Crap, crap, crap …’

Choromatsu was back on his feet. He seized the drill by the tail—Osomatsu would have time to marvel at his guts later—and summoned his most vicious winds. Caught in an all-out tug of war, Choromatsu grimly hauling backwards while the beast strained to rocket forwards, Osomatsu fired his boots.

Yamuushisen slithered from Choromatsu’s grip, streaking like an arrow released. They’d pierce straight through the dome and Osomatsu’s armoured hoodie at that speed. He’d have a hole in his chest the size of a bowling ball. Shit …

Blasting off, he shot out a gauntlet. Too late, too late …

‘NIISAAAAANNNN!!!!!’

Jyushimatsu’s bat swung. Yamuushisen crashed into a pile of chairs and computer towers. Osomatsu’s fist closed hard. The fragment crunched to powder. Yamuushisen only had time to uncoil from their humiliating heap before releasing a final piping screech and crumbling to coat the carnage with dust.

‘Teamwork …’

Osomatsu had come over rather shaky. ‘Teamwork,’ he said again. He shut off his boots and dropped a heavy two metres down, sprawling amid the wreckage. ‘I looove teamwork.’

‘Not as much as you love showing off,’ said Choromatsu.

‘What did I do?’ Osomatsu complained, resigned to a three-way lecture from Choromatsu, Todomatsu, and Ahn about taking the goddamn time to listen. ‘I know, I know. I’m sorry, okay?’
Thanks, buddy,’ he grinned at Jyushimatsu from flat on his back. ‘If you hadn’t jumped in, I’d have one too many holes and …’

Then he noticed Choromatsu’s hands. ‘Holy shit!’

‘I’m fine.’

How the Wyvern stayed so cool, Osomatsu had no idea. His armoured gloves and palms beneath were shredded to ribbons. A few fingers dangled. Osomatsu’s stomach turned. They were hanging from fucking sinew. ‘Don’t look at me like that. They’re already healing.’

With a nudge from the Unicorn, his messed-up magical hands knitted together in under a minute. But, back at the warehouse, Todomatsu made him sit and phase first. ‘Nice and easy, Choromatsu-niisan,’ he encouraged, his sceptre’s glow soft and cool as Choromatsu bit hard on his lip. His breath hitched, non-magical hands gushing blood.

‘You just grabbed that thing,’ Osomatsu smacked him gently on the back. Pasty and sweaty, Choromatsu tried not to whimper. ‘That’s so hardcore.’

‘Jyushimatsu,’ Choromatsu inhaled sharply, squeezing his eyes shut. ‘Go talk … to Jyushimatsu.’

Osomatsu looked up. Jyushimatsu lingered off to the side. Like he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with himself. He bobbed slowly at the knee, up and down, up and down—he could have stood at the bow of a ship. The fifth born’s features were a mishmash of exhilaration and alarm, his smile uncertain. ‘Choromatsu-niisan?’ he ventured. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, is he …’

‘Hey, buddy.’

Osomatsu phased and draped an arm around his shoulders, turning him away from the intense healing session. ‘Don’t worry, he’ll be fine. He’s had worse. Totty’s a great healer,’ he said, kicking himself as distress flooded his little brother. Like the rest of him, Jyushimatsu’s imagination was active. And now it ran wild, conjuring up everything that could be worse than Choromatsu’s ruined hands. ‘All he’s going to have after this are a few shiny scars. How’re you holding up?’

‘I … I … I’m great, Osomatsu-niisan!’

Realising this, Jyushimatsu’s eternal bounce became ecstatic. ‘That was sooooooo cool! Did you see? The monster just …’

Jyushimatsu made some illustrative sound effects, arms windmilling and sleeves flapping, triumphant banners in the wind.

‘And it just missed you! And you were like …’

Jyushimatsu re-enacted the fight scene, working off excess adrenaline swinging his bat over and over and over again. He finished, so jubilant he could have lit up half the city. ‘You guys are amazing!!!’

‘You were amazing,’ Osomatsu reminded. That was three times now, that Jyushimatsu had faced the Liberation Force as no one but Jyushimatsu.

Jyushimatsu’s jaw hit the ground. ‘Me?? Really??’

There was much shared hope after their clash with Yamuushisen that Jyushimatsu might change his mind. Electrified by the fight, the fifth born bombarded his brothers with requests—he wanted more monsters. More thrilling battle scenes. More daring rescues. His magical brothers obliged with a
vengeance. Jyushimatsu sat with his knees drawn to his chin, enthralled by nine months’ worth of terror and triumph. Always eager with questions, now only four out of five made zero sense, leaving one that surprised with its insightfulness. He asked about the difference between Totty’s forcefields and Ahn’s barriers. He wondered why a guardian always must be healed twice. He guessed reasons why the Spectrum Alliance and the Liberation Force must be kept secret, tripping over the truth on his own.

‘Magical girls wear the same sort of thing in anime,’ Jyushimatsu brought up something that had clearly dominated his thoughts for days. The night before their birthday, Choromatsu and Todomatsu had already fallen asleep. Ahn snuggled between Karamatsu and Totty; the second born stroked her silky ears with his thumb. ‘Don’t they, Niisan? Why are your costumes so different?’

‘Because we’re not anime. And they’re our costumes,’ Osomatsu emphasised. ‘I like something comfy and easy to wear, but it’s still gotta look damn good. The hoodie works.’

Jyushimatsu fidgeted leisurely, remembering partway through not to jostle Choromatsu. ‘What about you, Karamatsu-niisan?’

Karamatsu was slower to answer. ‘The trenchcoat is … my style, I guess. I was never comfortable wearing anything I really liked, because I was trying so hard to be cool.’

‘What’s not cool about a trenchcoat?’ asked Osomatsu sleepily.

‘I liked it,’ Karamatsu simply said. ‘So it couldn’t be cool. It was the opposite of cool.’

‘Trust me.’

Three-quarters asleep, Osomatsu fumbled around the sleeping Todomatsu to tousle Karamatsu’s hair. ‘The trenchcoat is cool. You’re pretty cool, too.’

‘Sweet Todomatsu’s costume really suits him,’ Karamatsu went on. He hid a very small smile. ‘It’s cute and stylish, just like him.’

‘What about Choromatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu wondered. ‘Why does he wear a uniform?’

‘The gakuran? Well …’

‘Cause he peaked in school,’ Osomatsu mumbled.

‘He thinks he peaked in school,’ Karamatsu said. Osomatsu hummed agreement. That’s what he meant. ‘He was so confident as a student. No doubt the gakuran is a vessel to feel so confident once more.’

‘Wow …’

His eyes closed, Osomatsu felt Jyushimatsu quit his stirring. ‘I wonder what my costume would be like.’

‘Dearest Jyushimatsu. You can find out, if that is your wish,’ Karamatsu was saying. But his words were a swirl of aural smoke, dissipating as Osomatsu dropped off.

Wednesday dawned warm and cloudy. May 24. Their birthday. The brothers couldn’t forsake their run-of-the-mill working adults charade. But otherwise, they provisionally gave themselves the day off, sleeping through their morning run. The five stumbled downstairs within 10 minutes of each other, in varying states of dress and alertness. Dad greeted them with hearty smacks on the back.
'We’ll visit Ichimatsu this evening,’ mum said, kissing each of her sons in turn. ‘We’ll do presents then, okay?'

Spoilt rotten with a spectacular breakfast, the brothers spent their birthday enjoying themselves. Keeping to parts of Tokyo where no one knew their face, they treated themselves to LaQua amusement park, riding every roller coaster and gorging themselves stupid on hot cakes. Tokyo Dome just across the street, Jyushimatsu galloped ahead through the Baseball Hall of Fame before the five wound down with a relaxing afternoon in Ueno Park; Ahn’s furry head just poked out of Todomatsu’s manbag. They made sure to jump on a train to the hospital with time to spare. Karamatsu and Todomatsu stowed all their shopping in a locker at the station.

Ichimatsu wasn’t well. Osomatsu knew how stupid that sounded—he was tied with tubes to a hospital bed. But his poor health had taken a frightening dive. He couldn’t sit up. He could barely move, an oxygen mask to ease his breathing. ‘Look, Ichimatsu-niisan!’

Jyushimatsu tore the wrapping paper off Ichimatsu’s gifts for him. Mum sat beside her bedridden son, holding his limp hand. ‘Look, look! Another cat!’

He set the delicate hand-painted cat on Ichimatsu’s side table, a gift from Choromatsu. Around it were already arrayed two multi-coloured kittens in teacups from Todomatsu, a sleepy, but suspicious expression from Karamatsu, and a trio of lazy cats for stress squishing from Osomatsu. The massively round cat plushie Jyushimatsu had procured did not fit on the table—forget the table. That thing had barely fit through the door.

‘Looks like your brothers know you after all, son,’ dad smiled at Ichimatsu. Ichimatsu narrowed his eyes—not in suspicion. He couldn’t see properly, illness starting to eat away at his senses.

‘Mmm,’ he mumbled through his oxygen. ‘Guess … so.’

‘Argh, you’re so depressing,’ Osomatsu tried to crack, shoving Todomatsu out of prime sitting real estate to poke Ichimatsu in the arm. Across his bed head was strung the bevy of health charms they’d bestowed on Ichimatsu at New Year. Smiling with the memory, Osomatsu then noticed his brother’s wrists. One was bandaged. Osomatsu gulped down a hot lump. He knew what that was from. They’d been told. But on his other wrist, knotted below his plastic hospital bracelet, was Ichimatsu’s charm against evil. That was a little strange, even for Ichimatsu. When had he started wearing it?

Mum and dad showered all their sons with gifts. Osomatsu wondered if they had a little more to spend, now that four of them were paying generously into the household budget. He hoped they were spending a little of that extra cash on themselves. God knew they’d earned it, dragging the six of them through puberty.

How much longer would they remain six …

Osomatsu felt sick, that he’d even let the thought slip through his mind. He’d been walling this off for weeks. Months, even. Drowning himself in magical conflict and conveniently avoiding this far more personal battle that loomed. How could they all just keep going on with their lives, when Ichimatsu’s had completely fallen apart? Ichimatsu might argue that he hadn’t had a life to begin with. And he’d be wrong.

‘What else are we supposed to do?’ Choromatsu counselled him silently as a smiling nurse carried in a cake with twenty-odd candles flickering cheerily on top. ‘The world won’t stop turning if he … you know.’

Osomatsu swallowed hard, feeling Choromatsu’s pain every bit as intensely as his own. He saw the
same masked behind Karamatsu’s smiles and Todomatsu’s sweet jibes. It was written in every
deepening line of their parents’ faces; a doctor motioned their father outside to talk. His face was
grave. All but Jyushimatsu, who was incapable of the thought. All but Jyushimatsu, they thought the
same thing.

This might be Ichimatsu’s last birthday.

They had dinner in an upmarket sushi restaurant Totoko had recommended. She had an idol show
that night; she’d been miffed the brothers had forgotten. Osomatsu couldn’t remember her even
mentioning it. He saw so little of her now, he thought regretfully.

‘Why not ask her on a date,’ dad suggested, revealing a final birthday surprise: nine tickets to the
Giants’ game on Saturday. A waiter dropped his loaded tray of drinks, Jyushimatsu bellowed his
delight so loudly. Snatching up the tickets, he danced with them hoisted high over his head.

‘There’s talk of the season being cancelled,’ dad said as Karamatsu prised the tickets from
Jyushimatsu before they got too sticky with soy sauce. ‘Because the cult activity has been getting
worse—no one knows how they’re pulling off all these accidents. Games are still on for now. But
most of a co-worker’s party pulled out—scared, I guess. So I got them cheap. We’ll bring Ichimatsu
if …’

Dad’s voice faltered. He disappeared behind his beer. Osomatsu felt like he’d been punched in the
stomach.

‘If his doctors say he’s up to it,’ dad finished, wiping his mouth excessively.

The five seated in a circle on their bedroom floor, Jyushimatsu gave his final answer. Osomatsu
already knew what he’d say. Jyushimatsu was the only one of them incapable of looking at their sick
brother any differently. Ichimatsu and Jyushimatsu were a matched set within a matched set. Except
Jyushimatsu couldn’t count the many ways he was blessed. And Ichimatsu had nothing. Not his cats,
not his health. Not even the comfort of coming home at the end of a long, sucky day.

Jyushimatsu couldn’t bear having anything so wonderful that Ichimatsu couldn’t. So if Ichimatsu
couldn’t have magic, neither would Jyushimatsu.

As set in his decision as Jyushimatsu was, the magical brothers had to work hard to convince him he
wasn’t a bad person for saying no. ‘I thought about saying no,’ Todomatsu told him. ‘My reasons
weren’t as good as yours.’

‘I should have thought about it,’ Osomatsu joked at his own expense, desperate to lift the mood a
few rungs above miserable. ‘Except I’m what is commonly known as a moron.’

‘We’re going to have to make you forget,’ Choromatsu said. He fiddled with the handles of his paper
bag stuffed with gifts. Though Ahn would supervise, again, it was Choromatsu who would do the
deed. ‘You know that, right?’

Jyushimatsu nodded. ‘I know, Niisan.’

‘Doesn’t that scare you?’ Todomatsu asked. Jyushimatsu smiled, shaking his head.

‘I don’t want to forget,’ he said. ‘It was so much fun! We got to spend so much time together—we
don’t hang out much anymore, do we? And I don’t want to forget Ahn-chan, or what it’s like to be a
guardian,’ he added, his subdued smile changing gears to a grin. ‘But I’m not scared to forget. I
forget things all the time.’
‘This is a big thing to lose,’ Karamatsu observed. He was the only one of them with any personal experience in the matter.

‘Yeah,’ Jyushimatsu nodded. ‘But it’s okay. If it helps keep people safe, I’m not scared.’

‘Are you absolutely sure, Matsuno Jyushimatsu?’ Ahn said quietly. She would let her guardians suffer no doubt once it was done. ‘There can be no turning back.’

Jyushimatsu almost hesitated. Almost.

‘I’m sure, Ahn-chan.’

With a shared sigh, Choromatsu and Todomatsu quietly transformed. Barely a brush of Todomatsu’s fingers to Jyushimatsu’s brow sent him slumping into deep sleep. He didn’t snore. Osomatsu and Karamatsu tenderly lay their strong brother on the floor, tucking a pillow beneath his peaceful head. ‘Choromatsu?’ Osomatsu said, seeing he dithered. ‘You okay, man?’

The Wyvern gathered himself. ‘I’m fine.’

Kneeling, Choromatsu placed a hand either side of Jyushimatsu’s head and breathed out, concentrating. While Karamatsu’s mind had been a jungle, Jyushimatsu’s was wide-open and brimming with light. Just like his heart. His lens spiralling mysterious feats of high-tech mysticism, the Wyvern easily lifted every guardian-related memory from Jyushimatsu. Everything from the moment they’d revealed themselves to him, in the certain belief he would become their Sphinx.

Jyushimatsu never stirred.

‘Well,’ Osomatsu said after Choromatsu’s task was done. Todomatsu picked at his nails. Ahn crawled onto Karamatsu’s knee. There was nothing more to say. ‘Back to square one, I guess.’

***

He stood in the centre of Tokyo Dome. It was empty. But it would soon hold 50,000 souls.

Soon.

Drawing a breath deep into his lungs, the night air imbued with the earth beneath his boots and the energy linked to this place, the Doll of Darkness threw out his arms and turned his face to the sky.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, Jyushi :(

This is the first inclination chapter where he who possesses said inclination doesn't get any POV time. But writing from Jyushi's POV here didn't seem quite right ... as in, writing Jyushi's inner thoughts and feels, desperate to be a guardian but choosing not to for his precious Niichan Ichi, might have squashed every last organ hidden in my skull and rib cage. I'm a little concerned, though, that Jyushi didn't seem Jyushi enough ... as in, concerned I didn't write him here the way I've tried to portray him previously. I'm not sure; it might just be because I wrote this chapter so quickly. But if you've got any comments or suggestions, I'd love to hear them :)
BIG IMPORTANT EXCITING CHAPTER COMING UP NEXT SORRY IN ADVANCE IF IT TAKES A WHILE BUT I HOPE IT WILL BE WORTH WAITING FOR!!!!!!
Hear Me Roar

Chapter Notes

So that took a while. I was trying to go back and forth with working on another project, then I thought I should get this done, then it took weeks to actually get on a roll and ... so many excuses :) But it’s here now, exceptionally long and probably unnecessarily so. In my defence, there is a lot going on from several POVs. And I had to reach a certain point to divide this big event in two - I don't think I could have put the chapter split anywhere else. Technically the next chapter should be quite a bit shorter to compensate, but knowing me that probably won't happen.

And ... I've been visualising these events in intense detail for almost two years. It's been kinda hard to get it all down in a way I feel is good enough. Still not sure I got there; it hasn't quite turned out how I've always imagined. Also I think atmosphere may be lacking a bit :( But I tried! And I can always have a bit of a tweak later. See if I can deliver a more resounding atmospheric punch :)

Thank you so much for waiting! I'm ridiculously looking forward to starting the next chapter and finishing up this arc. Can't wait to hear what you think of this chapter :DDDDDD I hope so much it was worth waiting for!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Crack!

‘YEEEAHHHHHHH!!!!!’

Jyushimatsu cheered at the top of his lungs, the swing rewarded with a glorious arch. The ball sailed over outfielders’ outstretched fingers like the colossal roar from the stands raised it up from below.

Hitting the dirt, the ball smacked into the boundary. The Tigers' silent communication semi-convincing Osomatsu the team was mentally linked, a single fielder pelted after it. The Giants’ batter bolted for first base.

The atmosphere bubbled and frothed with the concentrated hype of thousands. Brass bands honked. Banners waved like they heralded the coming of a king. Fans sang rally songs as mascots shimmied and danced, giant heads zipped onto their necks.

Osomatsu liked baseball plenty. But this tension crackled like lighting. It branched beneath his skin. He sizzled with it, loaded so full of energy that ... damn it, was he a little kid? Osomatsu was so excited he might burst.

Cameras chased the fielder. Osomatsu tore his eyes from the massive screen in time to see the third base runner skid home. ‘SAFE!’

‘SAAAAAFE!’ bellowed Jyushimatsu. He sprang to his feet, battering novelty plastic bats together. He was so pumped he could’ve played every position himself. Simultaneously. And still have the oomph to hurtle to Hokkaido and back.
Goddamn it. Jyushimatsu would’ve made one hell of a Sphinx.

‘Ah,’ Karamatsu intoned over the insane cheering. Another runner slid safely home. Hurling with pinpoint precision, the ball streaked for second base. ‘So much effort over so small a thing. But such is life!’

Karamatsu repeated “such is life” for good measure. Then he went for a cringe-worthy attempt at English. And then … was that French?

Osomatsu groaned. But he grinned, too. Before a wincing Choromatsu or an appalled-on-principle Todomatsu could coordinate—one hold Karamatsu down and the other smack him; he wouldn’t escape, smooshed happily between them in the crowded stands—Jyushimatsu roared, ‘HOME RUN HOME RUN SUPERMEGA HOME RUN!!!’

It wasn’t a home run; the batter made it to third. But Jyushimatsu’s voice carried. They had to hear him down there. Who wouldn’t appreciate that level of enthusiasm?

Catching a ride to Tokyo Dome, Jyushimatsu’s excitement couldn’t be contained by an entire train, let alone the one carriage they occupied. As he pinballed off the walls, weather reports on the news screens had warned groaning fans of possible storms. The sky was thick and soupy, a witch’s brew of grey and a wicked shade of green. But so far they hadn’t felt more than a few lonely drops of rain. And that didn’t dampen the brothers’ spirits: the game was on. And they had money to burn.

The magical and very well-paid Matsunos had all pitched in for a mountain of Giants merchandise that Jyushimatsu went nuts over. They’d kept an eye out for a little keepsake for Ichimatsu, too. Totty had found a display stand groaning under the weight of a million phone straps, all snowy-white cats modelling team uniforms. No one was surprised when Ichimatsu hadn’t been well enough for release from hospital. Not even for one night. And Jyushimatsu …

Choromatsu’s memory job had stuck fast. Jyushimatsu was again clueless of the truth behind his brothers’ employment. If he still felt off from their meticulous messing with his head, it didn’t burst a single one of his bubbles. Jyushimatsu was as buoyant as ever—more even. Only Mum had noticed his little excess confusion. Osomatsu had eavesdropped when she cornered him—did he feel sick? Was he stressed out, worrying for Ichimatsu? Missing him? ‘We want him home, too.’

Mum had steadied the quaver in her voice. She was always so strong for them. Osomatsu didn’t know how she pulled it off every damn day. ‘I know it’s hard, sweet boy. But we … we have to accept that Ichimatsu …’

Osomatsu had abruptly stopped eavesdropping, feeling a coward as he left Jyushimatsu to escape alone. But Jyushimatsu remained steadfastly unaffected by grim predictions of Ichimatsu’s future. Osomatsu sighed. Even he wasn’t that unrealistic.

‘Osomatsu? How’re you doing down there, son?’

Hearing Dad in his left ear—Jyushimatsu blasted his right—Osomatsu turned his head to maximise volume. ‘What?’

Leaning forward, Dad repeated his question. ‘Fine,’ Osomatsu said, aiming for breezy. But his fire for the game smouldered out. Damn. Just when he was getting into it. ‘What, do I look not fine?’

‘You just seem a bit … we’ve been having a rough time of it,’ Dad decided to keep it general. ‘Things are crazy in Tokyo right now. And with everything Karamatsu’s been going through … and Ichimatsu, of course.’
‘Ichimatsu, yeah …’

Osomatsu nodded along with his father’s remarks, making flimsy excuses about things being hard at work.

‘Work again?’

Dad wore a look. The exact same one he wore every time Osomatsu came home nursing bruises.

‘What does your slavedriver manager make you do all day?’

‘I dunno.’

Osomatsu was startled. His father, using “slavedriver” and “manager” in the same sentence? Any job was better than no job, right? ‘Lug things from point A to B? The usual.’

Dad pursed his lips behind his moustache. ‘I don’t like this, Osomatsu. All this … this …’

He made a gruff sound, unable to name what “this” exactly was. Nothing good. ‘If you need to look for a new job, we’ll support you. So long as you actually look,’ he emphasised, reassuring Osomatsu that his father had not been replaced by a shapeshifting soldier.

Dad’s attention lingered on the shadows beneath his eyes. Osomatsu turned back to the game, twinging uncomfortably. He’d never seriously wanted to steal Karamatsu’s shades before. Not to hide behind. His father’s hand fastened on his shoulder, giving Osomatsu a firm shake. ‘You need to take care of yourself. Please, son,’ he pushed over the ambient mayhem.

Osomatsu’s gut wrung. As if their parents didn’t have enough on their minds without wasting worry on him. He was fine. But as he said it again, not looking from the game, Osomatsu felt oddly like he settled into himself. Deep into himself. Somewhere molten, where no one could reach him. Weird.

‘Things are tough at work, Osomatsu-kun?’

Totoko fluttered her lashes. ‘But if you can do it, how hard can it be? Why are you even thinking about work?’ she fired off before Osomatsu could protest. She struck a pose, practically sparkling. A few dozen sets of eyes whipped from the action, summoned by instinct to ogle. ‘I dressed up just for this! Aren’t I cute?’

‘You’re always cute, Totoko-chan,’ Osomatsu promised. She looked too damn adorable, pigtails poking from beneath her cap. But Totoko tugged at the hem of her skirt, pouting when Osomatsu didn’t bury her with adoration—where was his usual fawning? She knew exactly how cute she looked. And she looked increasingly put out that she wasn’t making Osomatsu’s day.

‘What, I’m not cute enough for you?’ she demanded, before blinking into something teary. ‘That’s so hurtful, how could you say that?’

Osomatsu couldn’t keep up. His head spun. ‘But I didn’t …’

Then Totoko was aghast, her emotional rollercoaster turning all who heard upside-down. ‘Are you sick?’ she worried, no other explanation for his failure to worship. ‘Here, let me …’

Osomatsu started when Totoko touched him.

It was happening. It was actually happening. Her soft little hand brushed his fringe aside and rested against his forehead.
He couldn’t move. Partially from shock. Partially from not wanting the contact to end. Mostly from heavy concern a bomb might go off if he showed any resistance.

‘Osomatsu-kun, you’re burning up!’ she exclaimed. ‘You’re so hot!’

‘Oooh, I’m hot?’ Osomatsu eventually remembered speech was a thing. ‘That’s what you said, I heard you. Now you gotta go out with me!’

Flashing a grin, he flexed a bicep, showing off until Totoko rolled her eyes. Convinced enough of his health, she elbow charged him before giving a “hmph” and lifting her nose in disgust. ‘Ouch …’ Osomatsu rubbed his ribs. He had to pull himself together. But it was no use. Even attention from Totoko couldn’t occupy him for long. He was doing a pisspoor job getting over his regret.

Regret for Jyushimatsu. And Ichimatsu.

He was better off, Osomatsu reminded himself. He was happy that Jyushimatsu didn’t have to go through what they did every day. Osomatsu was happy that he hadn’t managed to screw Jyushimatsu over, too. But for the guardians, Jyushimatsu was a massive loss. And that Ichimatsu was the reason he hadn’t signed up … when Osomatsu didn’t watch himself, resentment reared its ugly head.

He beat it into submission, hating it. Hating that he even thought it—how could he blame Ichimatsu? If he’d stood where Jyushimatsu had … if he’d been the one to strand Ichimatsu alone, forever severed from the five who shared his face, who’d shared his entire life … maybe Osomatsu would have turned his scroll down, too. At least, he liked to think he would’ve considered it.

But Osomatsu knew himself. He wasn’t nearly as noble as Jyushimatsu or Karamatsu. Choromatsu would have reasoned it all out and made his decision based on probable outcomes for Ichimatsu versus outcomes for the universes. Who knew what Totty would’ve done if he’d been last.

From the corner of his eye, Osomatsu saw the youngest offer Ahn his arm. Mostly hidden by Karamatsu’s new coat—it was way too humid to be wearing that thing—their tiny mentor sneaked to settle on Todomatsu’s shoulder. If she kept still, she’d look just like a toy, under-stuffed and over-fluffed.

This was Ahn’s first baseball game. She’d tried to be haughty about it, but Osomatsu could tell how excited she was. Her sailboat ears were pricked, twitching whiskers pointed straight at the action. So she was capable of letting her hair down now and then—or her silk-furred equivalent. But Ahn needed a good time as much as any of them.

She’d brought up scouting a new Sphinx the day after their birthday—not with Osomatsu. Ahn had consulted Choromatsu and Todomatsu, leaving Osomatsu to his moping and Karamatsu to his quiet mourning what might have been. The despondent eldest brothers had been left out of the loop until Totty announced that morning: he and Choromatsu were going recruiting after the game.

‘We can review previous candidates,’ Ahn had been tentative with their feelings. ‘And I sensed another core inclination during your last battle. We should investigate.’

‘You’re on standby tonight,’ Todomatsu had directed at the eldest. ‘If anything happens, I’ll send Choromatsu-niisan as backup.’

‘Wait, I’m on standby during the game, too?’

Todomatsu had simpered his most innocent smile, the powder-puffed prick. But did Osomatsu really expect his brothers to take on any responsibility before him? Maybe he did … All the more reason he
should be the one on standby. It was too early for the Doll to cause havoc anyway. And if Totty did deploy him, he could pretend to hit it off with a girl on the way to the bathrooms or something. He might have a gutter mind and no filter. But he was reasonably respectable now. His parents should believe that. Totoko would be harder to convince. And more painful.

Osomatsu winced. For someone who refused to date him, Totoko sure got tetchy when his attentions wavered.

He couldn’t do anything, he told himself. Not right now. Not about the Doll. Or about his unease for the guardians’ future—a future without Jyushimatsu in it. Dad was right: he needed a break. So Osomatsu quit worrying. Walling it all away, soon he grinned again. He enjoyed himself again. And he enjoyed Totoko.

A vicious scissors over paper victory had won Osomatsu a coveted seat beside her. He annoyed Todomatsu on her left by loudly pretending the youngest was invisible—that Osomatsu and Totoko were alone, on a real date. Despite her bruising insistence otherwise, Totoko lapped up his renewed adoration, quickly turning Osomatsu’s make-believe into something profitable. ‘If this were a date …’ she prefaced every sentence, twining a strand of hair between her fingers.

The hair twirling would have been enough. Signed and sealed, Osomatsu ran around after her every whim—buying her snacks. Trotting outside for more merch. Hanging out near the Giants’ dugout trying to score her signatures.

‘Where’s she keeping your balls?’ Choromatsu said when Osomatsu returned with a tray of takoyaki.

‘You’re one to talk,’ Osomatsu shot back. A green hoodie draped Totoko’s knees. Apparently she’d hinted the evening was getting cool. Choromatsu’s sleeves dragged through filth at her feet. Osomatsu glowered, wishing his hoodie was filthy in Totoko’s lap, too.

Totoko descended on her takoyaki like a woman who hadn’t just inhaled a bowl of udon and mountain of shaved ice. By the time her tray was empty, Osomatsu was getting hungry himself. And it wasn’t just Totoko licking mayonnaise off her fingers.

Cheers resonated through the stands. Jyushimatsu lost his mind, another run to the Giants. Osomatsu stretched upright, change rattling in his pocket. ‘I’m gonna grab some wiener dogs,’ he announced. ‘I’m …’

He’d never learn to keep his mouth shut. Osomatsu was bombarded with orders from his brothers. And their parents. ‘Really?’ he demanded. ‘I expect this from them …’

Osomatsu whipped an irritated look at the carbon-copied shitheads.

‘But you guys …’

Dad gave a broad smile—so reminiscent of Karamatsu’s that Osomatsu blinked—and promised to pay him back. ‘Since you’re already going and all …’

Osomatsu ejected an injured sound. Mum actually laughed, eyes crinkled merrily. He couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed so freely. And, right there and then, Osomatsu suffered a horrible premonition: if Ichimatsu’s health went any further downhill their mother might never laugh like that again. When the cajoles of his father and the whines of his brothers didn't get him moving, that did.

Yakisoba, yakitori, curry rice… Osomatsu struggled to remember the orders they threw at him—no, fuck this shit. They’d eat what he damn well bought.
‘I’m mailing it,’ Todomatsu said, thumb drawing a purposeful swipe against his smartphone. Osomatsu flipped open his crappy phone: a perfect tidy list sat in his inbox, complete with tempura shrimp for Ahn.

‘Amazing, Todomatsu-kun!’ Totoko gushed as Ahn blushed, pleased that she’d been remembered. Osomatsu would’ve remembered to get her something.

‘Putting those barista skills to good use,’ agreed Karamatsu.

‘I can’t carry all this,’ Osomatsu pointed out, stuffing his phone into his pocket. That was a little detail no one seemed to notice as they applauded a preening Todomatsu. ‘Someone give Niichan a hand?’

He looked expectantly between his brothers. Jyushimatsu’s eyes were glued to the game. His shouting for a beef bowl might have been pure instinct—he’d be astounded when it arrived. Karamatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu all looked at each other. Then they looked at Osomatsu, identical blank expressions on their faces. None of them moved.

‘You guys suck.’

Osomatsu upended a bag of merch all over them, snatching it to stuff full of containers. Feeling very abandoned, he stalked down the stairs, dodging a beer vendor with her massive keg strapped to her back. He was pushing through to the food stalls—the same pudgy guy had been milling around this exit every time Osomatsu passed; he must have forgotten where his seat was—when he heard someone call out. ‘Osomatsu, wait!’

Weaving through the crowded aisle, Karamatsu caught up to him. Osomatsu pulled a face at the second born. Karamatsu grimaced back. He’d put up a good fight. But he always relented in the end. Osomatsu punched him in the arm. ‘Thanks, man. I’m starving,’ he declared, stomach growling over the blare of trombones. ‘Where are those damn wiener?’

This was the best! Nothing beat baseball! Baseball was life!

Jyushimatsu soaked up happiness. He gave it off in radiant beams. He kept the world’s supply churning in one massive lifecycle of happy. He was just so lucky. Jyushimatsu got to be outside. Jyushimatsu got to watch a real live baseball game! The only thing that could possibly get him down was knowing that Ichimatsu didn’t.

Jyushimatsu wished so hard, that he could share his luck. He wished that Ichimatsu would get better. He wished and wished. He poured all his wishes into a massive bowl and mixed them up, baking a towering wish cake. If only Ichimatsu could eat it, he thought in a sombre moment. That’d make him strong enough to stand up to not-Ichimatsu.

Jyushimatsu’s chest pinched. He couldn’t tell anyone about Ichimatsu’s evil double. He’d hurt Ichimatsu. Again. Again and again and … he was making everyone think, Jyushimatsu realised, a shocking jigsaw piece tumbling into place. Not-Ichimatsu was making everyone think Ichimatsu was sick.

He was already sick. But more sick, different sick. Speaking to people who weren’t there sick. Getting upset, hurting his nurses… but there was someone there! There was! And it wasn’t Ichimatsu! He’d never hurt anyone!

Why would not-Ichimatsu do that? He already wore Ichimatsu like a hood, so no one could see him.
He made him leave the hospital, wasting energy Ichimatsu didn’t have to waste … what did not-Ichimatsu want with Ichimatsu? He was hurting him! Using him! Why?!

Jyushimatsu squirmed in his seat. His doctors didn’t know. Mum and Dad didn’t know. No one knew what was wrong with Ichimatsu. Only Jyushimatsu. And he had no idea what to do.

Jyushimatsu was a fool.

But this was Tokyo Dome! The energy of the game and spirit in the stands recharged his sad droop in seconds—he’d know what to do soon! This was an avalanche of pure Jyushimatsu-brand certainty. Even if he was scared, Jyushimatsu was strong! He’d save Ichimatsu! That’s right, not-Ichimatsu had better watch out!

The Giants’ pitcher strode to the mound. His heart pumping like bagpipes, Jyushimatsu bellowed for him, ‘GO FOR IT! YEEEEAAAHHHH!’ The pitcher swept off his cap, waving it in the air. Thunderous approval pounded through the stadium. On the edge of his seat, Jyushimatsu crashed his plastic bats together.

The woman sitting in front of him shuffled, half turning in her seat as his bats thwacked. She’d done that a few times. The skin of her forehead pinched together—why was she frowning? The Giants were winning! Jyushimatsu was at a total loss. But the kids with her chowed down on curry. Maybe she was hungry? Jyushimatsu was sure getting hungry. ‘Niisan?’ he said. He floundered for Osomatsu’s sleeve to tug. ‘Osomatsu-niisan, are you hungry? Niisan? I’m …’

Unable to find his elbow, Jyushimatsu stopped floundering and crowbarred his eyes from the game. The seat beside him was empty. Where was Osomatsu?

Jyushimatsu glanced down their multi-coloured line, minus Ichimatsu plus Totoko. Where was Karamatsu?

‘Off getting snacks,’ Mum said, leaning forward to make sure he heard.

Jyushimatsu lit up. They’d read his mind! Osomatsu and Karamatsu were really getting snacks? For all of them? His grin cranked up to eleven. His brothers were the best!

‘Don’t you remember, Jyushimatsu-kun?’ asked Totoko. ‘They’re getting you a beef bowl.’

‘BEEF BOWL?!!’

They really had read his mind! Osomatsu and Karamatsu were amazing! And not just the regular kind of amazing: they were super amazing! Amazing amazing!

‘You asked for a beef bowl,’ Choromatsu said. His voice scraped drier than usual, worn from shouting. And Choromatsu was an experienced shouter. He must be going all-out to support the Giants.

‘Jyushimatsu?’

Mum draped her arms around him. Jyushimatsu snuggled backwards into her hug. ‘So you’re having a good time?’

‘This is the best birthday present ever!’ Jyushimatsu could barely enthuse to a level that would properly express his enthusiasm. ‘Thank you thank you thank you! Thaaaaaank yoooooooooouuuuuuuu!!!!!!!’
‘I think he likes it,’ Dad said loudly, pretending to whisper in Mum’s ear. Jyushimatsu was easy to please. But that didn’t mean he appreciated anything less. He liked it, he did, he did!

‘KEEP IT TOGETHER!’ Todomatsu screamed, pulling a face Jyushimatsu was pretty sure Atsushi and Kaho had never seen. He whipped back to the game, jumping to crouch on his seat. Every rule flew out of his head. There was only the crack of wood on rubber. The plume of dust and strain of muscles as the batter took off around the bases. The majestic trajectory as the ball flew.

‘Catch it catch it catch it catch it …’

Someone caught it.

Jyushimatsu blinked. Wait, the Giants didn’t wear black. What team wore black?

‘Who is that?’ Totoko frowned. ‘What …’

Her bright pitch collapsed. Along with the rest of sound.

A second ago, the stadium had been in frenzy. Now Tokyo Dome was silent.

Silence in Tokyo Dome. The words tumbled through Jyushimatsu arrested brain space. That sounded like a movie. It had to be an action movie. Maybe one where aliens flew down to blow them up? But it was America that aliens didn’t like in the movies. Japan was usually safe. Monsters were their movie problem.

Choromatsu gasped, breath snagging like a thread on a nail. ‘No,’ Todomatsu whispered. His eyes shuttered wide. ‘No no no …’

‘What’s going on?’ Mum murmured. Jyushimatsu blinked the scene into supreme focus. A man in black from head to toe—he was a long way away, but Jyushimatsu narrowed his eyes, zoning in. That was waaaaay too tight for a baseball uniform. Was he a soldier? He kind of looked like one. He had a soldier hat. But he wore a short cape, too. Soldiers didn’t wear capes, did they? Heroes did.

He’d caught the ball. But he hadn’t even been on field before. Jyushimatsu was sure. Where’d he come from?

The base runners slowed to gawk. Tossing the ball casually, the young man whipped off his hat and waved it. Just like the Giants’ pitcher.

‘Well, that’s disappointing,’ he said when not one fan cheered. His voice carried, louder than the stadium sound system. But he didn’t sound disappointed at all. He sounded cold. Jyushimatsu shivered like he’d been tossed in an ice bath. He couldn’t stand the cold. ‘ Couldn’t spare me a little applause? How about this?’

He tossed the ball high. Jyushimatsu followed its route upward. Until he couldn’t anymore. The man in black bowed, his arms twirling like a magic trick. ‘Ta-da!’

Jyushimatsu’s jaw dropped. Where’d the ball gone? How were they supposed to finish the game now?

‘That not do it for you?’ The man’s eyes flicked from stand to silent stand. ‘Really?’

The floodlights flickered. That’s when Jyushimatsu knew him. Even his hair shivered, prickling on end. Jyushimatsu knew him. He knew him he knew him he knew …
'Anyway,' not-Ichimatsu said. He stretched his arms in front of him, cracking his knuckles. Every pop was a gunshot. Mum and Dad grabbed Jyushimatsu from behind. ‘We’re here for your souls. Resistance is futile, and all that shit.’

Someone screamed, high and terrible. Not-Ichimatsu spun on his heel, grinning up into the stands. His eyes burned. They burned with something so frightening Jyushimatsu almost blanked. They burned for panic. For terror.

They burned for mayhem.

And the stunned Tokyo Dome finally gave him exactly what he wanted.

***

Wading through hungry baseball fans, Osomatsu and Karamatsu sneaked up the queue at the nearest yakitori stall. Two heavily-accessorised university girls ahead of them gabbed a convoluted order, one bubbly and one aggressive like they tag-teamed an interrogation. Osomatsu stole a sideways look at his brother. Cracking a few jokes, he tentatively worked up to asking Karamatsu how he was.

‘Me?’ Karamatsu said as Osomatsu stuffed a container loaded with Choromatsu’s grilled chicken sticks in the bag he carried. He sounded more concerned that Osomatsu hadn’t blabbed his question a dozen times over. ‘What about you, dearest brother? Are you all right?’

Now that was way more than Osomatsu deserved. Whatever interrupted his nosy expressway, it wasn’t tact. There was something far more selfish at work in Osomatsu. He felt ... warm. The unpleasant tingle was like spotlights beamed on the back of his neck, throwing everything he was into harsh relief. ‘I’m fine, man. But seriously,’ Osomatsu redirected attention where it was due. ‘How’re you doing? Therapy’s okay?’

The two of them alone amid the food-seeking crowds, Karamatsu dropped most of his smile. ‘I’m … not sure,’ he said, gone pensive. ‘Fine, probably. I guess.’

‘Have Dr Sato or your counsellors said anything?’

‘Mm-mm.’

Navigating a gaggle of knee-high siblings squabbling over shaved ice, Karamatsu’s fingers brushed the flesh-coloured camouflage of his wrist dispenser. He still didn’t want to talk about anything said during his many appointments.

Osomatsu tried to respect that. Karamatsu had plenty of people to talk to. Highly-trained professionals far less shitty than him. ‘I don’t know … you’ve just seemed pretty down since our birthday. We’re not that old, man,’ he made another pathetic crack. Surprisingly, that got a bit of a smile out of Karamatsu.

‘That, Osomatsu, is the pot calling the kettle black.’

‘Black, what?’

He had a sudden mental image of themselves as the Salamander and the Kraken. Only their armour didn’t shine in vibrant shades of blood and sea. They were shadowed, rippling with black on black.

‘You know, eye goop laughs at snot?’ Karamatsu resorted to Japanese idioms. ‘We’ve all been down.’
‘Yeah,’ sighed Osomatsu. He handed over money for Jyushimatsu’s beef bowl. He was so preoccupied, he almost didn’t recognise the suits and swagger headed their way.

‘Jesus …’

Almost dropping his armload of tea, Osomatsu grabbed Karamatsu and steered him sharply left. ‘Osomatsu, what on Earth …’

‘Keep your head down,’ Osomatsu muttered. Karamatsu matching his quick step, the brothers pushed into the nearest bathroom. Karamatsu looked bewildered, but disappeared into a stall at Osomatsu insistence. Osomatsu slammed hurriedly into another.

‘You have food in there,’ Karamatsu had the sense to swap to telepathy. ‘Choromatsu and Totty will kill us.’

‘It’s in containers, it’s fine. Don’t come out till I say.’

Osomatsu hung his bag on the back of the stall door and sank onto the toilet seat, holding his breath. The next footsteps in and out were the pitter-patter of children’s sneakers. But what followed was an all-too familiar stalk. ‘Matsuno? There’s no point hiding. Where are you, you piece of shit?’

Osomatsu gritted his teeth. He really didn’t feel like this right now. They weren’t here for him. But Fedora always had a few dozen bones to pick. And that mountain of muscle? Osomatsu had definitely roughed him up at least once. His need to trawl backstreets for fistfights had lessened, now that he had three sparring partners. But these were gangsters. And even the lowest-level gangster held a cosmic grudge.

‘Come on, Matsuno. We just wanna talk. Tanaka’s bringing a friend tomorrow,’ Fedora drawled, kicking a stall door casually. Karamatsu’s stall. ‘Wants him to get a load of you. Important guy. Nasty guy. Wouldn’t recommend running your shit mouth on him. Matsuno, if you don’t show your fuck-ugly face, I’m gonna …’

‘Matsuno?’

Osomatsu’s heart skipped a beat. ‘I don’t know who you gentlemen are after, but there’s no Matsuno in this stall. Just Sato. And I’ll be a while …’

Fedora hesitated. Osomatsu had never been more grateful, that he and his brothers no longer sounded alike. Karamatsu scraped his pitch, dropping a good fifteen years on his shoulders. If Osomatsu weren’t holed up in a bathroom stall, he would’ve whistled. So Karamatsu was not as bad an actor as they gave him crap for. Spinning a painfully-believable tale of work colleagues guzzling too much curry and beer, the thugs soon slouched out.

Osomatsu leaned his heated forehead against the stall wall. He’d seen both Fedora and Mountain Man at his last exchange with Tanaka. His middleman wouldn’t stop dropping hints. Higher ups were interested. They were interested in his source of gold and gems. They were interested in meeting him. They were interested in his right hook.

‘Less interested in the mouth attached,’ Takana had said, shuffling Osomatsu’s wad of yen, getting his greasy insincerity all over it. ‘But all things are negotiable.’

Seeing Fedora’s deference to Tanaka was unnerving enough. But if Tanaka actually brought in one of the higher ups he kept name-dropping, Osomatsu was in deep shit.

‘Osomatsu?’
Karamatsu tapped on his stall. He needed no explanation. He fitted every glaring piece together himself. ‘They don’t know about all of us, do they?’

‘And I’m keeping it that way,’ Osomatsu said through clenched teeth.

‘Maybe,’ Karamatsu broached as they left the bathroom, Osomatsu on high alert for anything shady. ‘We should look into other ways to get paid.’

‘Right,’ Osomatsu scoffed. ‘Do you know anyone else who’ll turn this …’

He tapped his hoodie pocket. Choromatsu would burst a blood vessel if Osomatsu left gold lying around.

‘ … into this, no questions asked?’

He dug out 5000 yen note, breaking it to pay for their parents’ takoyaki. The kid serving them screwed up his change, eyes nailed to the nearest TV screens. The third base runner danced on his toes, determined to steal home.

‘But they are asking questions,’ Karamatsu was grave, hooking Osomatsu’s attention from the game.

‘If I tried to back away now,’ he shrugged, seeing no easy escape from mob pressure. ‘They’d give me hell. They won’t like their treasure supply cut off.’

Karamatsu said nothing. But then he stopped saying nothing. ‘I … I think it’s important. That we talk about this. But until we figure something out, please be careful.’

‘What’re they gonna do to me?’ Osomatsu said, getting crabby about it. ‘I’m better than all of them. That’s why they want me.’

‘There’s a lot more of them than you, Osomatsu.’

Now Karamatsu went quiet. Irritation fizzling out, Osomatsu could have kicked himself. Worrying himself sick over Osomatsu being mixed up with the mob was the reason Karamatsu was in this mess in the first place—well, not the only reason. But it hadn’t fucking helped.

‘I swear, I won’t piss them off more than I have to.’

It was a welcome change of pace, for Karamatsu to be the pained one. ‘And do you have to piss them off?’

Once, Osomatsu might have said yes. And he would have gotten his ass kicked. Now he was the one kicking ass. And getting smart with dangerous players had somewhat lost its appeal.

The food rush was mostly over. The brothers walked the ring of stalls, footsteps almost echoing and eyes peeled for Todomatsu’s yakisoba. ‘I’m sure we passed …’

The TV screens flickered. Osomatsu’s stomach punched.

‘Osomatsu?’ Karamatsu was baffled for the second time that snack run. ‘What …’

‘It’s him.’

He knew before he even saw. That static was as sickeningly familiar as poor Ichimatsu’s gaunt face. Osomatsu inhaled sharp and hot, his fists clenched. Gangsters could wait. There was now room in him for one antagonist only. And he appeared bang in the middle of the stadium, smirking face
caught on a million stuttering cameras.

‘Him?’ Karamatsu repeated. He followed Osomatsu’s glare to the screen. Interference reflected in his perplexed eyes. ‘What do you … oh!’

Karamatsu froze. His face washed out. Osomatsu took hold of his shoulders, making Karamatsu look at him. ‘It’s okay, man,’ he promised as their scrolls glowed hot. Soldiers. A lot of them. Takuu had sent in the goddamn cavalry.

Something was going down. Something big. Shit, Mum and Dad were here! Totoko was here!

‘He’s not after you right now,’ Osomatsu promised, no idea if he lied. ‘I won’t let that asshole touch you—you won’t let that asshole touch you. He doesn’t know you’re here …’

Karamatsu valiantly reined in his fears. ‘I’m fine,’ he swallowed after a moment. Osomatsu knew he’d waited until he was sure his voice wouldn’t crack. ‘Brother, I’m fine. And I’ll be even better once I’ve transformed. Let’s go.’

Karamatsu made to dash back towards the bathrooms. Osomatsu caught his elbow. ‘Hold up,’ he said. Attendants abandoned their stalls, joining the confused milling of those caught out of their seats. ‘Shouldn’t we get a look at what we’re about to barge into?’

‘Looking before you leap?’ Karamatsu’s smile was shaky as the two crept to peer through the nearest entrance. The Doll’s voice echoed eerily around them. ‘Who are you?’

Osomatsu flashed a grin. He was the goddamn Salamander.

***

But ... but ...

But Ichimatsu couldn’t come tonight! He wasn’t strong enough! Why was not-Ichimatsu here? What was he doing, what was going on?

‘Stay in your seats like good little humans, now,’ Ichimatsu’s dark intruder called out. ‘This will all be over soon.’

A shriek rent the night. Then another.

‘Todomatsu!’

Jyushimatsu flew three feet straight up, Mum’s scream exploding behind him.

‘Todomatsu! Choromatsu, come back!’

‘What are you doing!’ Totoko squealed. ‘He said to stay in our … don’t leave me!’

She made a grab for Totty’s bag strap. But he and Choromatsu raced down the stadium stairs, plunging deep into the crowd. Totoko scooted sideways, mashing herself against Jyushimatsu. One son left to shield, Mum and Dad clung to him so tightly they cut into his circulation.

His hands turned cold. But Jyushimatsu barely noticed. Because people were changing. Their skin bubbled, skeletons stretching and warping until masked cultists blocked every exit, long and white and frightening. Their curved claws veined with something black and toxic, razor edges aglisten.

Jyushimatsu’s plastic bats hit the ground and rolled. They changed. They changed skin. Not clothes.
Cultists didn’t wear costumes. This was what they looked like. This was them …

Mum screamed after his brothers. Was Dad was saying his name? He wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure of anything. Jyushimatsu’s peripheral vision pulled and distorted, giving him almost 360 vision. Muscle and mind locked him still. Like he couldn’t quite process what unfolded before his eyes, slow and fast and terrible.

Nothing was further from truth. Jyushimatsu processed everything at once. Eyes glassed by fear. Lungs emptied by sobs. Frantic shouting and shoving, wild limbs pawing and crawling for vain escape. Parents squeezed children. Lovers clung to lovers. Friends crowded together, painted with shock. Phone cameras flashed in a confused maelstrom, the solemn duty to record fulfilled by hundreds and streamed live across the world.

The atmosphere thickened, soaking up pandemonium like a sponge. Until walls closed in. Until there was no more air. Crushing. Suffocating. Jyushimatsu suffocated.

Swamped by an onslaught of information—too much, too much was happening, he couldn’t keep up, he couldn’t …

Jyushimatsu fogged up. His eyes glazed. An air raid siren whirred in his head.

And over it all, not-Ichimatsu grinned.

***

‘We’re too late.’

Even if Ahn could’ve thrown a net over the entire overstuffed neighbourhood, a helicopter chopped overhead. They were on live TV. A shrill overture of sirens wailed, fast approaching. Ahn couldn’t contain this. And even if she could empty the stadium, Todomatsu thought, threading through narrow gaps in the sea of bodies, they wouldn’t get out fast enough. Thousands would still be caught up in … whatever the Doll planned to do.

Spilt beer slick beneath his feet, Todomatsu almost slipped over the lip of a stair. One arm squashed Ahn to his chest. His other flailed wildly. Choromatsu grabbed his wrist, dragging him on as people spilled into the aisle, barely keeping ahead, a few steps now all that separated them and total chaos as they shot down the last steps, wheeling to face the passageway that led to the food stalls, bathrooms, and secret places to wave magic scrolls.

Three soldiers morphed from human disguise, limbs spindling and flesh melting waxen. Todomatsu reeled back, revulsion almost expelling straight up his oesophagus. Choromatsu gaped in an empty shout. One of Takuu’s grunts wielded an mean-looking axe. Two more slender beings lurked behind them. Totty’s eyes snatched around the stadium perimeter. More soldiers shed human skin. They blocked every exit.

So much for transforming.

‘Hey, guys?’

Osomatsu’s telepathy put him somewhere unseen. On the other side of those soldiers. ‘I don’t think that pudgy guy hanging out in the passageway was a real pudgy guy.’

‘No kidding!’ Todomatsu shrilled. ‘Since when can you get off calling anyone pudgy?’

‘Fuck you, I’m solid.’
‘We can’t transform here. We’d be seen.’

Crisis raining down, Choromatsu somehow kept his head. ‘Please tell me Karamatsu’s with you?’

‘I’m here, brother,’ Karamatsu tripped to reassure him.

‘Leave this to us,’ Osomatsu said with infuriating swagger. ‘We can handle it. But it’d be nice to have you around to …’

‘You are not going out there without me!’

Was he insane? There had to be at least thirty soldiers and 50,000 souls to choose from! To say nothing of the devastatingly-unpredictable Doll. They needed their Unicorn! But whether command or whine or plea, Todomatsu’s attempts to deflate Osomatsu’s head went unheeded. ‘Niisan, don’t you dare …’

‘We have no choice, Matsuno Todomatsu!’ Ahn cried.

The source of all Todomatsu’s vast petulance simmered. Oh, didn’t they?

Pandamonium spun around him. Letting it, Todomatsu swayed. Loosing a desolate cry, he grabbed at Choromatsu, clinging to stay upright. ‘Be careful!’

Caught between them, Ahn wriggled down Choromatsu’s leg, claws latching to his sock. Todomatsu buried his face in his brother’s shoulder. Weeping was no test for his supreme acting skills—the more vulnerable, the better. One shaky breath. Two. One more was all it took to gather his nerve.

He was smaller than those soldiers. He was lighter than them. Quicker than them. ‘I’m going for it.’

Before Choromatsu or Ahn could process—and before common sense had more time to argue—the youngest Matsuno rushed Takuu’s soldiers.

‘Todomatsu, no!’ Ahn shrieked. He barely heard her mewl, ears fuzzed and driven like whips licked his ankles. Osomatsu and Karamatsu couldn’t do this alone. Not without him.

The armed soldier was too slow. They’d never expected the pathetically-snivelling boy to charge. Todomatsu darted straight past the bulge of their back-facing knee. Their axe blade swooped. Todomatsu felt the ripple distort air somewhere over his ducked head—that blade could lop him in two! He cringed, faltering. No, no …

Skirting one willowy broom in boots, the second flashed darkness down their bladed claws—too close, too close! A forcefield slithered into his path. Todomatsu crashed into it.

The force hurled him back like an charged fence. Black steam hissed from his clothes. Crumpled in a heap, his muscles spasmed. His heart jolted. All he was screamed, organs stuffed in skin to the untouchable reality of his soul, tarnished and tortured by the wrongness that engulfed him.

Twisted on his side, Todomatsu stared wherever his eyes pointed. He only distantly appreciated the roil of his innards. He heaved, tasting acid all down his throat. Trapped in that sick daze, he felt his body leave the ground. He dangled strangely by the back of his vest. Then his staggering feet met ground again. ‘Have patience,’ a crawl of a voice prickled goosebumps as he stumbled, shoved forward. ‘Soon you will truly know the touch of darkness.’

Choromatsu caught him. Feeling his brother shuffle backwards, this time Todomatsu collapsed and meant it. Choromatsu held him up, helping him lean over to finish vomiting. Sick splattered their feet.
His disgust fully intact, Todomatsu still vibrated. It was like Osomatsu had “borrowed” Karamatsu’s new pre-loved guitar and struck a jarring chord, and now it was all he could think, the unnatural distortion grating him from inside-out.

Todomatsu tuned in in time to hear Choromatsu ask whether Ahn could hide their transformation. ‘The process is too powerful,’ Ahn replied. ‘The force would obliterate any barrier I tried to hold.’

Thinking blearily of chemical reactions and explosions, Todomatsu saw the forcefield was now fixed across the passageway. Like a thin veil of disturbed lake, anchoring the darkness were two crystals. He could just make out the cracks in the wall where they’d been lodged. One soldier kept their claws splayed there, feeding the dark shield power. The other spun tiny spheres of muck, now ready to steal any soul that ventured too near.

The temperature dropped. Not a steady descent, day into night or autumn into winter. All at once. Tokyo was dressed for humidity and an early summer. Todomatsu shivered in his vest.

The field shimmered. Faint and violet, the iridescent smear over darkened grass was ominously familiar. The Doll of Darkness strode towards the vacated pitcher’s mound. The rounded patch of dirt glowed, intensifying into a beacon that washed the entire stadium. A pair of soldiers stood either side, their abnormally tall forms lit by cold brilliance as they …

This was that night of horrors all over again! The stadium and his creepy old apartment block merging in his mind, Todomatsu choked. The walls of that hollowed cavern had glistened just as pretty and purple as these crystals strewn through the field. They’d spellbound Kaho so deeply she’d sighed.

He’d known something wasn’t right, why’d he let his friends down there on that stupid test of courage? Now they were enslaved, and Todomatsu was bound by a contract he hadn’t chosen!

Did he even deserve this? Despite Ahn’s words all the way back in December, he’d begun to feel that it might be fate after all. That this was his calling. That the Unicorn was someone he was always meant to be. But as that night came flooding back, Todomatsu remembered like a kick to the stomach: this wasn’t destiny. He hadn’t chosen this. Not freely. He’d only done it to save …

Todomatsu sagged into Choromatsu, all tremble and turmoil. His Alliance team—not just his team. The entire Spectrum Alliance adored him. But if he hadn't chosen this … if he wasn't the right Unicorn … if he was a fraud in a diamond circlet, how was he supposed to save anyone when it counted? How was he ever supposed to defeat Lord Takuu?

‘Matsuno Todomatsu, we need to move!’

‘Totty, snap out of it!’

His cheekbone stung. Todomatsu jolted. ‘D-Did you just slap me, Niisan?’

Indignant, Todomatsu’s head mostly cleared, eyes snapping up to see a towering doorway of reality melt away. Much more than a slashed rift through dimensions, Todomatsu was at a bad angle. He couldn’t see what the soldiers had done to pull it into existence. But he could see it was grounded in the pitcher's mound. Fifty thousand entranced, the mound gleamed, scattered crystals an earthbound galaxy as the portal activated.

Murderous thunderheads. Searing lightning. The edge of a darkened blip in a craggy wasteland; it might be the entrance to a tunnel. Through the portal, Todomatsu could see a sliver of the other side. Takuu’s domain.
‘A transport hub?’ Choromatsu’s voice was grim.

“They must have set it up in advance,” said Ahn, her timbre shot with urgency. Whatever setting was higher than high alert, she was cranked well past it.

Set up in advance? Todomatsu mustn’t have completely snapped out of it. Because his only cogent thought was so stupid he might have spontaneously combusted with embarrassment. ‘Set up for what?’

‘Come on, Totty—move!’

Dragged up through the clogging press of bodies, he didn’t look where Choromatsu pulled him. Todomatsu craned to see over his shoulder as the Doll knelt before the portal. He folded something beneath his knees first—a soldier’s cloak, maybe? Whatever it was, it kept dirt off the Doll’s pristine trousers. Todomatsu felt a chill. Practical yet vain, that that was something the youngest Matsuno might do himself.

Removing his gloves, the Doll planted his palms and fingertips in the dirt. With a long, rasping breath, he arched his spine until his nose drew a straight line into the sky. One hypnotised among thousands, Todomatsu watched as his head flung down, shoving like he jolted Earth clean out of orbit. Todomatsu shuddered, feeling the Doll’s laboured grunt butcher his guts. Nothing human should make that sound, something ancient and animalistic clawed from pits that long predated thought.

The Doll hunched, unmoving. Then gasps stole air all through the stadium. Todomatsu’s immediate thought was of the Wizard of Oz, when cute and crafty Dorothy threw water over the wicked witch and took her the hell down.

The Doll wasn’t melting. But something oozed from where his hands met the earth. As black as the stone collared around his neck, the strange pool radiated out, sluggish at first, a creeping nightmare that ate up the bases and grass, cresting in a shadowed wave. Only the scattered crystal was spared, pulsing and shining ever brighter.

The baseball teams had long since fallen back, jaws dangling and eyes cemented in stares. A few had retreated into the nearest dugout. Most had just retreated, instinctively backing away until their backs hit the advertisement-bedecked boundaries. The dark wave hit them first.

A billowy substrate wedged between oil and smoke, it lapped up the players’ ankles. They yelled, trying to shake it off as tendrils coiled up their legs. It looked like they tried to kick dog shit off their sneakers; at any other time, Todomatsu would have been doubled over in stitches. Spectators to a surreal sight none had signed up for, people cried out as darkness arced around the hardened athlete’s struggles and dove into their chests.

Like a blow to the head, they crumpled. Then came the thrashing, muscled limbs spasming as they flailed against earth. Todomatsu watched numbly, stumbling behind his brother. That was some punch the Doll had packed. They’d make deadly puppets.

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ Ahn moaned, clinging to Choromatsu’s shoulder. ‘Matsuno Karamatsu, please hurry!’

Their jerking come to an abrupt end, the players jumped to their feet. Dead eyed and controlled. Darkness poured into the dugouts, engulfing the helpless teams.

Takuu was enslaving baseball players? They were a tough breed, but if tough was what he was after
wouldn’t he be targeting the defence force or …

The wave didn’t stop. Smacking and puckering, it slipped up and over the barrier, spilling into the stands.

The players weren’t the targets. The dull realisation echoed around Todomatsu’s blanked mind. The target was …

‘It’s a mass turning!’ Ahn screeched.

‘MOVE!’ Choromatsu shouted over the din. ‘Don’t let it touch you!

Todomatsu’s face almost met cement when Choromatsu swung him hard, hooking the youngest ahead of him and shoving him on and up. ‘Come on, move, move!’

But bodies pressed in on them. They were swamped. Choromatsu shoved and strained, trying to force a path with his narrow shoulders. Todomatsu breathed hard, trying to squeeze through gaps between shins and hips. But it was no use. There was nowhere to run. He clung to Choromatsu as they were buffeted, caged by the crush. They sank in a bog of human flesh and raging hysteria. Choromatsu scooped Ahn protectively against his chest. The darkness was a slow relentless sweep up the stands and infecting everyone it touched. Below them, screams pierced the roar in Todomatsu’s ears as human prey collapsed into shakes, their souls enslaved by the Doll.

‘Choromatsu-niisan!’ Todomatsu gasped. ‘Mum and Dad! Where are they, can you see them?’

Choromatsu’s eyes narrowed, standing on his toes as the crowd surged around them. Spotting them a dozen rows up, he signalled frantically. ‘Mum! Dad! Totoko! Get as high as you can!’

He hollered his voice to shreds. But it was just too loud; their parents couldn’t hear him. Totoko couldn’t hear. And Jyushimatsu …

‘JYUSHIMATSU!’ roared Choromatsu. ‘GO!’

‘Jyushimatsu!’ Todomatsu joined in, shrieking to shatter glass. His face blurred into the mob, through the gloom Todomatsu saw a lone figure in yellow freeze. Jyushimatsu’s head cocked to the side, orienting to Todomatsu’s high-frequency screech. ‘Jyushimatsu, get them higher!’

Giving a single nod in their direction, Jyushimatsu immediately began to shepherd their parents upwards. Mum strained to stay right where she was, eyes scanning desperately for her sons. Todomatsu saw her lips form his name, her shouts tossed soundless in the fray. But Dad grabbed her, and Jyushimatsu grabbed him, practically picking both up in a massive bearhug. Deceptively brawny beneath her designer sweaters, Totoko lent a hand, helping Jyushimatsu barge a path and bellowing for everyone around to move the fuck up!

Totoko was no damsel in distress, however she liked to pretend otherwise.

The darkness lapped upwards like toxic floodwaters. People collapsed in waves. They screamed, caught in the mad rush as the pulse caught up to them.

The Doll shuddered on the field. He panted hard, elbows locked and shaking. He threw everything into this—please let him be tired, Todomatsu begged for mercy. Please, please, he can’t keep this up …

But he could. Climbing higher only delayed the inevitable. Todomatsu had to transform! He was no good to anyone like this, he was nothing without the Unicorn! Where in hell were the Salamander
and Kraken?

The soldiers who’d opened the portal now stood either side of the Doll of Darkness. Barely needing to stoop their limbs were so long, they pricked their claws to his shoulders. White as an acid-bleached skull, twin glares flickered within the young man and licked up their claws. Crystals throbbing with the souls they’d taken, the soldiers curled in on themselves, cloaks hardened to cocoons.

They were pre-empting the guardians. Tonight Takuu took no chances.

Hemmed in, Todomatsu almost lost his balance when someone’s shoulder flew for his face. Choromatsu yanked him closer, shielding as best he could. Todomatsu’s scroll scorched through his jeans into his thigh as the darkness swept nauseatingly close. Three rows down, a few teenagers leapt atop their seats. Putrid darkness washed up concrete and plastic, latching to their sneakers. This was bad, this was really bad …

The first of the infected rose from their convulsions, scraped up and grimy. With an effort that paralleled shunting the sky up on his shoulders, the Doll of Darkness raised his head. His face gleamed, fringe lank and pasted to his forehead. ‘If Lord Takuu’s new recruits … could please approach the largest interdimensional exit,’ he rasped. ‘In an orderly … fashion.’

He sounded two seconds from passing out. Please pass out, please …

The army of puppets turned eerily as one. With mindless intent, they began to crawl and climb, up over the boundary and onto the field. The baseball teams fanned out. Transformed into uniforms of pitch with the power of the Lord Takuu’s servant, they guarded the portal, the cocoons, and the swooning Doll. Vacant faces stony, most twin-wielded heavy bats.

They had to do something. Todomatsu’s thoughts were an out-of-control carousel. He had to do something, they were going to empty the entire stadium straight into Takuu’s clutches!

‘… an idea. Todomatsu? Can you …’

Todomatsu’s hearing was pummelled by cacophony and catastrophe. Strangled shouts burst like geysers. A tiny old man swimming half a dozen squashed bodies away almost went down, lost beneath feet stampeding on the spot. A fast-acting high schooler rescued him, half her hair flying out of its elaborate piled-up do. ‘Todomatsu?’

Todomatsu started. Choromatsu’s thoughts pierced crystal-clear into his own. ‘What?’

‘I have an idea,’ Choromatsu repeated, not edged with the impatience Todomatsu expected. His brother scoured the heavens, heavy with unfallen rain. ‘But we have to get higher.’

‘How much higher?’ Ahn was nervous. But half the stadium was now inundated. Crowds fallen in stifled heaps jerked upright on puppet strings, joining the mass exodus that vanished within Takuu’s domain. Todomatsu snatched a glance at the Doll. He heaved with exertion. But his strength had exploded far beyond the night he’d stolen Karamatsu’s soul. He just kept pushing—if it didn’t kill him he could keep this up forever. He could drown the entire world in shadow. He could …

Both the Doll and Todomatsu’s free falling thoughts were interrupted by a collective gasp. Soldiers blasted head over heels, crashing through the puppet army like bowling pins. And with a burst of ravaging heat, a fireball ripped straight through their forcefield.

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‘Call that a shield? Not as good as that piece of shit Souudai, are you?’

Grateful as fuck for that, the Salamander rocketed into the stadium, a fire-propelled streak of superpowered crimson. ‘Karamatsu, you’re up!’

Surfing on his heels, with a burst of spray the Kraken whipped out his arm. Waters summoned from the Kraken’s pristine reserves, the wave he conjured knocked the soulless horde sprawling, swept all the way back to the electronics company ads that plastered the boundary.

‘Did you want to take any longer?’ Todomatsu demanded, lost somewhere in the crowd. ‘What the hell were you doing?’

‘Dearest brother, we were but two minutes,’ Karamatsu swept the sodden grass with his staticy lens, trying to ensure no one was hurt.

‘A lot can happen in two minutes!’

‘We know!’ Osomatsu butted in before Todomatsu could carve more chunks out of them. ‘We had our own shit to deal with, all right?’

“Shit” in this instance referred to the gaggle of scared senior citizens they’d crashed into while hurtling back to the bathrooms. ‘Priorities, man,’ Osomatsu had said, impatient when Karamatsu insisted they escort them outside before ducking out of sight, scrolls hot in hand. ‘They would’ve gotten out fine.’

‘Look, it’s the spectrum guardians!’

Cheers erupted. Highly aware this was their first full-on battle with an audience looking on, even cocky Osomatsu did a double take. Public opinion was hard to gauge; he had a bad habit of trawling through bloodbath comments sections in bad moods. But tonight Tokyo raised the open sky for them. His ears stuffed with wild sobbing and mad excitement, Osomatsu basked in the thunderous applause. The very structure of the stadium vibrated support.

Karamatsu caught Osomatsu’s eye. A moment hesitant, the bold Kraken almost sought approval. Then he swept a bow, sapphire sparkling and trench coat whipped out in the valiant pose. The crowd lost it. Osomatsu grinned like mad. Thrusting his gauntlets over his head, he lit them with a roar of flame. Anyone who hadn’t already lost it immediately lost it.

‘You have a job to do,’ Ahn snapped. ‘Stop showing off and get on with it!’

‘Apologies, my angel.’

Karamatsu blew a single kiss into the crowd—only for Ahn. The shrieks of delight drowning, Osomatsu felt their mentor blush. Really? In the midst of panic, it was still that irrepressible? Osomatsu didn’t know anyone who could pull off what she did. But Ahn was still just a kid with a confusing crush—he’d knock Choromatsu and Todomatsu’s heads together if they weren’t looking after her. This was a madhouse. One wrong move and she’d be flattened. Rosy ears aside, Ahn was taut as overwound guitar strings. So was Todomatsu. Choromatsu was … not?

Weird. He hadn’t transformed yet. Had Totty sweet talked the Alliance into upping his meds again?

‘Osomatsu-niisan!’

‘All right!’
Only a little ashamed by how good firsthand recognition felt, Osomatsu gave a final wave. Then he pivoted with a scorch. Levelled by the force of their grand entrance, the Doll was as frail as tissue paper. His concentration broken, his area of effect retracted, evaporating into evil smog. Drifting low and thick over the stadium, thousands coughed on the arcane pollution. Karamatsu coughed, too.

‘You okay, man?’ Osomatsu said, alarmed when his brother hacked behind his mask, gripping his chest hard.

‘I’m f-fine, brother.’

Clearing his throat, Karamatsu straightened, emanating “no problem” smiles. But one gloved hand comforted his lungs, rubbing gingerly through his armoured trench coat. Osomatsu’s tubes felt a little raw and unhappy. But he didn’t waste another thought on them—the Doll of Darkness was down!

Osomatsu stalked to their fallen enemy. Kicking out his struggles to rise, the Salamander planted one smouldering boot on the Doll’s chest. The Doll breathed hard, pinned by the garnet warrior with a hiss of singed jacket front—see? Look how well he controlled himself, not melting the bastard down to his ribcage. Drained to a trickle, the dark slave didn’t even try to fight.

‘Well, I won't say this position isn't compromising,’ he smirked up at the Salamander, insidious to the last. ‘How long have you been waiting to get me on my back?’

Osomatsu growled low in his throat. He’d break the bastard. He’d take him apart, piece by charred piece. But if anyone had claim to payment in blood from Lord Takuu’s special little slave, the scar splitting his torso said it was Choromatsu.

Choromatsu wasn't here. But Karamatsu was a close second.

‘He’s all yours,’ Osomatsu flicked him the grim offer. ‘If you want him.’

As always, the Doll had no issues interpreting. ‘Am I, now?’

He raised an intrigued eyebrow. ‘Is our Kraken in need of a little vengeance already? This one’s not above demanding satisfaction? Or maybe they are?’ he drew out lazily. Karamatsu didn’t move. His eyes were bolted on the Doll—on Kuro, who’d tormented him time and time again. Who hungered to own him all over again. Karamatsu gave nothing of his identity away. But the Doll instilled such fear in him. And he didn’t try to hide one scrap of it. Emotion churned fierce in Osomatsu, the spotlight of his brother’s courage shining.

‘So you don’t have what it takes to rip a man limb from … Oh, I see,’ the Doll breathed twisted delight. ‘The Kraken’s conflicted. How did you know, I love a hero with a dark past and smoking hot …’

‘How’s this for smoking hot?’

Osomatsu slammed his boot down. The Doll spasmed, winded. So slowly, the Salamander dragged his burning sole across his chest. It was hard to ignore just how satisfying their enemy’s pain was. ‘Don’t be jealous,’ the Doll croaked, no care he was at Osomatsu’s mercy. ‘You’re still … my favourite guardian to fuck with. You always … go so ballistic. Exhibit A,’ he delicately indicated the flaming boot crushing his lungs. ‘Though there’s something … about our Kraken, isn’t there?’

The Doll’s eyes roved Osomatsu’s little brother. ‘I can’t … put my finger on it … but …’

Shuddering with rage, Osomatsu slowly increased pressure. The Doll’s lips smacked, lungs running on empty. ‘Osomatsu,’ Karamatsu warned. Osomatsu gritted his teeth. Was it his fault the Doll
wouldn’t take a goddamn hint?

‘Okay, firecracker. You … ow.’

The Doll groped at Osomatsu’s boot, his fingers searing. ‘Take it easy. You … got me.’

Osomatsu didn’t budge. The Doll could take a worse pounding than this. If he was trying to act all pathetic, it was a too late to … now the front of his uniform caught alight. Another great show of self-control from the Salamander, right there. Karamatsu doused the catching fire, careful to give Osomatsu’s furnace footwear a wide berth.

‘Now tell me;’ the Doll said, smoking and completely limp beneath Osomatsu. ‘I’m curious …’

‘Osomatsu, we can’t!’ Karamatsu exclaimed when he seriously considered blasting a hole straight through him. See if he could heal that shit.

‘Can’t what?’ Osomatsu demanded.

‘Of course the Kraken gets it.’

The Doll closed his eyes, chuckling—fucking chuckling. ‘But something important has slipped our Salamander’s mind.’

‘The fuck is he …’

‘I’m not alone in here,’

The dark young man’s taunt was a death rattle. ‘So … now that you have me … what exactly do you plan to do?’

Osomatsu stopped short. His boot retracted an unconscious centimetre. Oxygen flooded back into his enemy so fast the Doll almost fainted.

The Salamander’s lens hiccuped. Gone grainy with the Doll’s presence, the tech hesitantly tried to capture his attention. Osomatsu ignored it.

What was he going to do? Kill him? Maim him? He might be the most dangerous weapon in Takuu’s arsenal, but he was still a slave. Forced to do his master’s will. Osomatsu swore. Whatever warped pleasure he got out of it, that was the Doll. It wasn’t the soul trapped inside.

‘You want to save souls … right? This soul in here …’

The Doll pressed blistered fingertips over his chest.

‘He’s sick. He’s scared. And oh how he is suffering.’

‘Osomatsu …’

Osomatsu’s lens scrambled scarlet, its bleeps tinny and frantic—what was its problem? Karamatsu’s shield went up. Osomatsu thought his brother might be speaking. To him. But he barely heard. Not brother or frenzied tech. The Doll of Darkness held Osomatsu prisoner as surely as Osomatsu restrained him. He murmured through lips like paper, barely moving. ‘I’ll tell you now, Salamander: I will never let him go. If you kill me, you kill him. Of course,’ he went on. Osomatsu heard something crack. It might have been his own bones, he was so tense. ‘By then he might be gone already. There’s only room for one of us in …’
Twin blasts rocked the stadium. ‘Fuck!’

Knocked from his rage trance, Osomatsu seized the Doll by the collar. Overlapping circles of wet slime radiated from where the cocoons had hovered. Two dark shadows swooped overhead. ‘Holy shit!’

Osomatsu hurled himself and the Doll back to the ground. He felt the bowel-voiding rush as a gargoyle the size of a small house thumped its wings with the raw force of a million bats. Claws outstretched, a predator spotted its next meal, they retracted when Osomatsu lit himself on fire.

So that’s why his lens was freaking out—damn it fucking shit! Was this his first night on the job? He had to make an ass of himself with all of Tokyo Dome watching. Not to mention the millions plastered to their TVs. Hoping the feed had cut out with the Doll’s interference, Osomatsu yanked his enemy upright—this was his goddamn fault.

But it wasn’t just the monsters he’d forgotten.

‘Don’t let me distract you,’ the Doll hummed. Stunned by the Kraken’s wave, his soulless army had found their feet. The gargoyles circled overhead, guards to a distant underworld as hundreds marched, sights set on the portal—shit, how many got through before they’d shown up? The ground tremored, the field trampled by countless feet.

The sky rumbled in response.

‘Take care of the Doll,’ Karamatsu shouted, swivelling to meet the hellbent onslaught.

Let Karamatsu face two monsters and a horde of slaves alone? Not fucking likely. ‘You really think I’m gonna …’

‘You have to! But hurry—I shall pine for your presence till you stand once more at my side!’

Karamatsu dredged up a little drama, almost normalising the situation. That was some feat, given he effortlessly swept ten million scattered droplets into a stream, forcing the frontmost ranks back a few steps.

Osomatsu’s grip on the Doll smoked. If they could imprison Lord Takuu’s own slave, the Liberation Force would be screwed! He vaguely recalled Ahn saying once that they were in no position to take prisoners. That went a million times over for a prisoner like this. But they were stronger now, too. The Doll would be slowly regaining his former strength and so much more as they stood there. But if Osomatsu could hold him long enough, the Unicorn might be able to chain him up more permanently. At least he’d give the Spectrum Alliance a chance to come up with a better plan.

His panicky lens passed a jumbled message to the Salamander’s team of ever-present experts, who respliced and sent it quicksmart up through the chain of command. Meanwhile, Osomatsu hoisted the Doll clean off the ground. With a short blast from his thrusters, he launched over the horde, angling to land in the Giants’ vacated dugout.

Tossing him on the ground and sticking a heavy boot between his shoulder blades, the Salamander uprooted a chain-link fence, ripping off the wire. Smashing one of the bars into jagged sections, Osomatsu slammed the Doll into a pole and got busy, melting and transmuting, securing his hands behind his back with glowing-hot steel. Cooked flesh singed his nostrils. Osomatsu blocked it out, superheating another bar to bind him from knee to ankle. Grabbing the discarded chain links, he wrapped them around and around his prisoner, welding them for good measure.

‘I take it back—you’re much kinkier than the Unicorn,’ the Doll said. Unable to move, his eyes
angled down, considering Osomatsu’s work. ‘And you’re more thorough than I thought. I’ll give you that. This might actually hold me for a while.’

Back ing out of the dugout, the Salamander lit a ring of fire in a burning cage. Those nearest who still owned their souls shrieked with the burst of heat. How was that for fucking thorough?

Osomatsu shoved down nerves about leaving it to burn—the smallest sliver of attention should keep the licking prison bars from spreading. ‘Keep an eye on things here,’ he told his lens. ‘Don’t give me that,’ he said when it spluttered. The tech barely functioned. And Osomatsu needed whatever edge it could give him. ‘I can handle myself—I always do. I need you over here, I trust you.’

Leaving his lens to struggle with stress and a glimmer of rare pride, that the Salamander trusted it, Osomatsu again blasted over the heads of the puppet troops. He beat most of them to the portal. Reigning in his fire, he cautiously beat back a few that slipped past the Kraken’s guard—they had to get rid of the portal! If they had nowhere to go, this fight was all but won.

A gargoyle lunged. Engulfed by shadow and fighting every instinct in his body as Karamatsu threw up his shield with a clash, fending it off, Osomatsu turned on the portal. He’d blown one apart before. That one hadn’t been grounded like this. But the same theory was a good place to start. Pumping up his gauntlets, Osomatsu loosed a barrage of fire into its structure.

The portal wavered, disturbed. But it didn’t implode. Shit. Hearing Karamatsu’s grunt of surprise, Osomatsu’s attention snatched away, pulse thudding sick in his stomach. But the Kraken was doing fine, parrying a gargoyle with a few streaming tentacles swept from water in the grass. Weaving low, he caught its monstrous bulk on his shield, throwing it clean over his head—nice. But where was the other …

‘Whoa!’

More marble than flesh and more demon than human, its face hewn almost featureless, the second gargoyle descended on Osomatsu. Tripping onto his back and drenched in deadly shade, Osomatsu crossed his gauntlets over his face, blasting a pale imitation of his death ray.

It did the trick. The gargoyle roared, wheeling away with monstrous flaps like thunderclaps. Osomatsu squinted—its stony skin didn’t even blister. He didn’t need his faulty lens to figure out fire wouldn’t undo it. But no one liked a faceful of flames. Very keen to find out just how hot he had to get to really piss them off, Osomatsu was about to spring after the monster when Ahn pierced his mind.

‘Leave them! They’re trying to distract you. Destroy the portal!’

Furious, Osomatsu swung back to the interdimensional doorway. Clapping his gauntlets together, he dug his boots into the ground, bracing for an all-out assault. Karamatsu had his back if he burnt out. Wrenching spark from everything inside him that burned, he pumped himself full until his very essence crackled. Thrumming violently and ready to burst with power, Osomatsu steeled himself. Then something smashed into the back of his head.

He staggered forward, almost tripping through the portal. Baseball bat … The dim knowledge of what hit him floated barely in reach. His hood absorbed the brunt of it. But he still felt a dozen fractures rupture his tender skull. Every bit as surprised as he was, his healing systems were slow to kick in.

‘You didn’t want to warn me?’ he slurried at his frazzled lens, forgetting it had orders besides watching his ass. Sharp little pains pricked his neck. The bat had apparently shattered, splinters
digging in his skin. Nothing to the throb of his head, he brushed them away in slow motion, lights hammering his eyes like paparazzi had caught him falling-down drunk.

That wouldn’t happen, he thought, stupid with hurt and head spinning as another heavy swing clipped his knee, almost smashing it. A third smacked heavy into his stomach. Osomatsu doubled over, wheezing and surrounded—not by paparazzi. They were famous. But they didn’t get paparazzi. No one knew he was the Salamander.

‘Osomatsu!’

Karamatsu appeared at his side, helping the injured eldest fight off the fifty wrathful baseballers that bore down on him. Distantly humiliated—Karamatsu held his own against monsters, and Osomatsu was overwhelmed by a handful of slaves? Pathetic—he shunted shame aside and fell into blindingly rhythm with his brother.

They hadn’t trained together for long. But Osomatsu and Karamatsu had spent their whole lives as two members of an inseparable unit. They knew how they moved. They knew how they thought. And they capitalised on every advantage they had, quickly getting the situation under control.

‘Careful,’ Osomatsu warned Karamatsu to hold back. An unwary guardian could pulverise any human, darkness-enhanced or not. But Karamatsu was on top of it, mindful of every sweeping blow as they fought back to back. At least he didn’t have to worry about barbecuing anyone alive.

As Karamatsu swung one of the Giants’ relief pitchers around his waist, tossing him lengthways into three charging outfielders—Osomatsu beamed with savage pride; he’d taught his brother that throw just last week—Totty piped up over the commotion.

‘There’s a lot happening down there,’ he said, doing his best to sound in command without the Unicorn as backup. Osomatsu had to hand it to the kid: that was tough. Then he remembered Totty wasn’t the one facing down an army, and was less impressed. ‘So let’s make this simple. Guard the portal. Don’t let anyone else through.’

‘Simple. Right. Gotcha,’ said Osomatsu, hurling the Tigers’ star batter over his shoulder and dipping, just missing out on another few dozen skull fractures and a storm of angry bats. He didn’t have extra breath for sarcasm. But he wasted it anyway.

‘Don’t let the monsters distract you,’ Totty added, the clip in his voice warning Osomatsu to watch it. Osomatsu scowled. But now wasn’t the time for his problem with authority. With a shout from Karamatsu, Osomatsu rammed into five players at once, knocking them flying before firing straight up, feinting for a gargoyle’s crystal. It roared obscenities, one stonelike hand clamping over their forehead where darkness glinted like a mystic third eye. A news helicopter swerved nearby, just missing being slammed mid-air. That pilot had no sense and a mega crap-tonne of guts. Hair blowing wildly in propellor gusts, Osomatsu mimed wildly. ‘Get the fuck out of here!’

The fiery Salamander safe in the air, the Kraken hurled another wave, again catching up the thousands that poured onto the field, lifting them and tossing them back. But his force was less than before, his wave less ferocious. He hadn’t dried up his depths again—thank god. But without a ready water supply, there was only so much he could do on such a huge scale. He threw back his head, looking desperately to the sky. A few half-hearted flashes tugged at Osomatsu’s hopes. But the clouds hadn’t squeezed a drop in hours. Karamatsu had to make do with his depleted reserves.

‘I can’t do this forever,’ he admitted freely, crashing out a final foaming wave, clearing a wide circle around them before gathering what he could of his scattered waters at his back, branching in a dozen darting tentacles.
Osomatsu swore. Drenched and spluttering, half were already back on their feet. ‘Hey!’ he shouted, hurtling for crash landing. Twisting, one gauntlet launched a flamethrower, blinding the gargoyles as they dove after him. His other lay down a ring of fire, encircling the portal. Steam hissed and billowed, tiny droplets evaporating. Karamatsu winced. Of the ridiculous number of innate skills he had, condensation wasn’t one of them. Osomatsu couldn’t pretend he wasn’t a little relieved, that Karamatsu had things to work on, too.

‘Whoops. Sorry, man. Guys?’ he directed at Choromatsu and Todomatsu, wherever they were. The gargoyles bellowed, a gutteral scrape of stone vocal cords. Something about Banshuuishi and Kaijuuzo, mighty vassals of Supreme Warlord Takuu, would know no rest until the Salamander learned the true meaning of suffering. Nothing out of the ordinary there. ‘I know I said we could handle it. But …’

Catching his breath, Osomatsu cast an eye over the encroaching army of innocents and swallowed. Hard.

‘A little help, please?’

‘I can take care of the monsters,’ Choromatsu spoke up. He sounded a little strange. Distant. Like his mind worked a million different ways and a million worlds away. Someplace Osamatsu’s intellect could never hope to tread. ‘And the soldiers—I can open the stadium. And I think I can destroy that portal.’

Osomatsu’s eyes widened. Shit. What the fuck was he planning? ‘What do you need from us?’

‘Time,’ Choromatsu wasted no words. ‘As much as you can give me.’

Osomatsu caught himself thinking almost wistfully of the reinforcements that blasting out all those forcefields might deliver—Tokyo Police were no fans of theirs, but they were trained for tough situations. Their duty to serve and protect should, with any luck, see them fight alongside the guardians. But this was no battlefield for humans, police or not.

‘Well, that ought to hold them for a while,’ Osomatsu indicated his flames charring a circle into the field. Fuck, his head hurt. ‘Hurry up and …’

‘Osomatsu?’ Karamatsu broached. ‘They’re, ah … not stopping.’

‘What?’

Osomatsu dragged his lens away from the dugout, zeroing in through the fire and flames. The image stuttered. But it outlined hundreds upon hundreds approaching from every direction like they were blind to the blaze. They sweated and stumbled, blanked faces glowing with heat. But they didn’t stop.

‘What’s your move, firecracker?’ the Doll mocked from his cage. ‘Gonna let them burn?’

‘Shit, shit …’

A beat ahead of Karamatsu, Osomatsu snuffed out before they stepped straight through and caught alight. Raising his clenched gauntlets and feeling his brother take a fighting stance at his back, Osomatsu edged until they stood right at the portal entrance. The Liberation Force’s domain stormed a step beyond.

‘All right!’ Osomatsu hurled out mute challenge. He was already damaged, skull patched until he could relax long enough to heal. But he couldn’t let head injury hold him back—he was the
Salamander! Blinking confused lights from his eyes, he suspended all common sense. Guard the portal, their fearless leader said? Piece … of … cake.

‘Just try to get past us! I fucking dare you!’

***

Choromatsu and Todomatsu gave him something to focus on. Cleared his head. Enough to follow their instruction and ferry their overwrought parents higher. His wits reconfigured and senses working overtime, Jyushimatsu watched the struggle below, wide-eyed and immersed like the conflict was a pachinko animation. Captivated, every glancing moment burrowed deep into his unconscious mind as time marched relentlessly over him.

This was no animation: this was a survival horror game. Controlled by the cultists, the zombie ranks swelled, surging for the spectrum guardians in endless waves—too many! The heroes wouldn’t hurt them on purpose—it was no one’s fault they’d been zombified. Back to back in a sea of enemies, the guardians fought so hard, punches pulled and strength cranked right down. But they barely stayed afloat. There were just so many. And not-Ichimatsu was in charge.

Tied up in the dugout, Jyushimatsu’s attention twanged to Ichimatsu’s doppelganger. The red guardian’s cage had been leaping. But they were kind of busy. Jyushimatsu’s heart ricocheted into his mouth—was their fire going down? Why did not-Ichimatsu want everyone to go through the glowing door? Was the cult’s secret hideout through there? Jyushimatsu didn’t have to understand—if something didn’t want to make sense it wouldn’t make sense. And sometimes not making sense made more sense than sense. Jyushimatsu’s gut could usually tell the difference. But his gut was busy twisting in knots. There was too much going on—like wow, Jyushimatsu couldn’t tell the players apart! All their uniforms dyed black, they swung harder at the guardians than they’d swung at any ball. Their faces didn’t look like their faces anymore.

… Their faces hadn’t looked like their faces. Jyushimatsu hadn’t recognised them, either. But he’d known it was them … who? Who hadn’t he known, what?

Jyushimatsu gave his brain a rattle. Hypnotised by the cult’s powers, the baseballers fought to clear a path straight through the guardians. But they were a red and blue blockade. They’d never back down. They’d die first.

Jyushimatsu’s heart belly flopped when the red guardian faltered. ‘No! Go for it!’ he lurched forward, hollering. ‘You can do it, Red! Fight, fight! We believe in you!’

But at the hint of weakness the athletes swarmed the fire guardian. Tired and smarting, they raised their gauntlets, trying to catch the hailstorm of blows. But Red was hit over and over and over. The endless batter of small hurts that they doggedly shrugged off built into damage that dragged. Their reaction time sluggish and concentration dazed, Jyushimatsu ached empathy. He knew just how it felt. To be overwhelmed.

Two giant things flap-flapped over the fight, dive bombing like unwieldy jump jets. ‘Projections?’ he heard Dad mutter. Butterflies fluttered through Jyushimatsu’s chest. He was always nervous when their father sounded unsure. If Dad didn’t know something, who did?

‘Like when Tokyo Tower burnt up?’ Totoko whispered.

‘They don’t look like projections to me,’ said Mum. No more tears, her voice was hard-edged, forcibly dragged from her children. She stared unblinking down at the field. Her eyes were on the guardians.
They didn’t look like projections to Jyushimatsu either. One pulled in its wings, a spinning missile that plummeted towards the guardians. Swinging from their two on thousands fight, Blue crouched and sprang, thrusting their shield over their head. The thing rammed into it, glancing off—wow wow wow! That was amazing! But could a projection bounce off shields?

Blue rocked with the impact. But they saved their beautiful landing, smooth as a swan on a mirrored lake. Red shoved a gauntlet clear of the scrum, punching flames. If they had a voice, Jyushimatsu was sure they’d be yelling. Each blast a grenade, they ripped into its wing even as it spiralled away—bullseye! The projection howled, stony-looking webbing trailing smoke. Jyushimatsu clamped his hands over his nose, keen smell engulfed by the acrid stench.

They weren’t projections. Jyushimatsu didn’t realise. He didn’t reason it out. Jyushimatsu knew. These were monsters.

Jyushimatsu scanned every bit of the stadium—where were the other guardians? Where were Pink and Green? Red and Blue needed help!

Smog drifted over the stands. A byproduct, Jyushimatsu’s ears picked out someone’s haphazard rationalising. But a byproduct of what?

Something that could be sucked up and burped out by the giant flying monsters. The audience again become a part of the show, they screamed as the beasts plunged over the stands, breathing out the smoke they swallowed. Thousands descended into coughs, clawing just to breathe. Not thinking, just doing. Jyushimatsu’s hand plunged into his pocket, yanking out a handful of face masks. He always carried spares. In case Ichimatsu forgot.

‘I don’t know if that’ll help,’ Dad still sounded so unsure. But Jyushimatsu already heard his lungs scrape and tickle.

There were only three. Jyushimatsu shook his head when Mum tried to push hers back in his hands. He shook out his hoodie sleeve instead, ready to stuff it over his face.

They were trying to lure the guardians away. That’s why the monsters went for the crowd. The poor heroes were so upset, hearing the people they tried to protect in pain, airways turned against them. But they wouldn’t abandon their post. They …

Jyushimatsu drew together in sudden focus, untangling unknown threads. Were they … buying time?

They were buying time! Jyushimatsu figured it out! He shouted to the sky, letting off the heady steam of success. The other guardians were coming! What were they going to do? Jyushimatsu could help! He’d helped before! That cultist in the park, he’d …

Something hit pause. That cultist in the park. Was it just that one time?

Visions grabbed his mind in sudden flashes. A tower wreathed in tentacles. An office torn apart, the sensation of a heavy downward swing all through his shoulders.

Then they were gone. Jyushimatsu blinked, not sure what he’d just thought. He lost grip on the moment so often he wouldn’t have worried. But he felt … not normal. Almost his mind was slipping. But not slipping away from him. Towards him.

‘Look out!’
Some of the zombies clambered onto the packed field turned back. In the confusion, the guardians didn’t notice. Or they did and could do nothing. Jyushimatsu bobbed, inside fighting over which was worse. But then he moved, squashing up and up, scampering over seats all the way to the very back of the stands. ‘Come on, come on!’ he cried, pulling Mum behind him as dozens under cult control grabbed at everyone they ran into. Their iron grips prison chains, they dragged their captives, struggling and screaming, towards the cultists that blocked every way out. A few exits over, marbles of swirlly black stuff pinged from a cultist’s claws, striking six people bang in the chest.

Jyushimatsu reacted viscerally as all six dropped, clutching his chest with no clear and present memory to attach. He knew that had happened to him. He knew it was something to be afraid of.

All done double-checking Mum and Dad and Totoko were safe, Jyushimatsu searched for his brothers. Eyes catching Choromatsu’s plaid shirt, he almost choked. Caught hard by someone’s heedless elbow, his brother went down.

A handful of zombie hands dragged him up.

Jyushimatsu filled his lungs. Ready to bellow and bolt to Choromatsu’s side—Jyushimatsu would save him! But then he stopped short. Choromatsu had already slithered free. In the same twist, he landed a punch to a man’s jaw that made even sturdy Jyushimatsu wince. Todomatsu emerged from the crowd, brutally kicking away another zombie’s scrabbles to grab Choromatsu’s ankle.

They were fighting—they were really fighting. Jyushimatsu’s jaw hit the ground when Todomatsu rolled a lurching zombie clean over his back. He wouldn’t be so flabbergasted if it were Osomatsu. Or maybe Karamatsu. But when had Choromatsu and Totty learned to fight?

A thought just out of reach strained to touch him, a single fingertip poking through a cracked doorway. Jyushimatsu grappled for it, not knowing why, but needing to pull it through.

His brothers could fight because … it was … their job?

The dam exploded. Memory crashed in rapids. For an instant, he was almost omnipresent, subsumed by that moment of truth. Jyushimatsu floundered, swamped by the weight and wonder. That was Osomatsu and Karamatsu out there! They were the spectrum guardians! His brothers were guardians, he remembered! A million and one points to Jyushimatsu! With a feeling like his sinuses popped, the world sharpened at the edges. Suddenly everything bounced, vibrant paint splatter on a white background. The world had never tasted so clear.

Choromatsu stared up at him—Choromatsu had taken his memory, he remembered. Jyushimatsu didn’t mind. He’d had to. But the look on his face said Choromatsu knew that memory was back. Why hadn’t they transformed yet?

Like he’d heard Jyushimatsu wondering, Todomatsu’s eyes lit with frustration. They couldn’t transform, he realised, a slow sink through his stomach. They couldn’t get through the crowds. They couldn’t get past the guards.

… But maybe Jyushimatsu could.

‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu.’

Where had the kitten come from? She bounded to balance on Choromatsu’s head, a tiny blip of white fluff floating over an ocean of dark heads.

‘I offer you a temporary power contract. Do you accept?’
Across the chasm of space between them, the kitten spoke—Ahn spoke. Jyushimatsu knew her name like he’d never forgotten. But at her question, the boy who could have been the Sphinx went still.

People looked at him funny every day. Jyushimatsu knew he wasn’t like a lot of them. He thought in his own way. Perceived in his own way, happily off-kilter on a spectrum all his own. But he’d never felt funny in his own skin before. And in that moment Jyushimatsu belonged in his own body like a ten-tonne truck belonged in the sky.

‘I am so sorry,’ Ahn ears drooped, regret pouring from her heart. ‘But your brothers need you. Here and now, there is no one else I can ask. There is only you.’

Only Jyushimatsu. The concept swirled watercolour nonsense through reality.

‘I know you did not choose this. But the Spectrum Alliance begs of you.’

Jyushimatsu couldn’t hear so well. Like someone turned the volume all the way down. But his mind heard Ahn clear as crystal. She bowed her soft little head, placing herself and so many others in Jyushimatsu’s hands. Jyushimatsu felt his mind link up with his brothers. They were already linked on a level no one else could understand.

On the diamond, Osomatsu swayed like a drunk man. Even superheroes couldn’t fight forever. Breathing hard, he snatched too long a pause; Osomatsu tumbled off the edge of his limits. Mindless hands fastened all over his body, pounding and beating and burying.

‘Osomatsu!’ a cry startled from poor Ahn.

‘Hold on!’ Karamatsu exclaimed, hoarse as the eldest went under, swallowed by the horde. His shield flashed, deflecting a dozen at once and looking wildly over his shoulder for their brother. ‘We can do this! Please,’ he begged. ‘Brother, you have to get up!’

‘Osomatsu, get up!’ Todoromatsu screamed.

He didn't. He couldn't. Then it was Choromatsu's turn.

‘We’re coming,’ he said. ‘So get the hell up.’

He spoke so calmly, Jyushimatsu was almost afraid. Choromatsu pushed as fast as he could, pulling Todoromatsu behind him … wait, he was pushing up, further and further, away from the fight. Where was he going? Jyushimatsu was lost. But Choromatsu spoke like there was no one else. Just him and Osomatsu. Jyushimatsu felt that with Ichimatsu, sometimes. And deep through their magical connections, he felt Osomatsu stir.

‘Osomatsu, I know you can get up. So get your ass in gear and …’

Osomatsu burst free, scarlet hood breaking the surface. Jyushimatsu’s poor brother choked on exhaustion. His bludgeoned body shook. But Osomatsu groaned and set his jaw, beating back the renewed surge. He held on. Barely. ‘G-Guys?’

His voice trembled. Osomatsu couldn’t even notice Jyushimatsu had joined the loop, he was so out of it. ‘Could you hurry it up? P-Please? I … I can’t …’

A bat flew out of nowhere. Jyushimatsu scrambled, feeling Osomatsu’s head crack open. For an instant, he flopped through space like a blood-coloured ragdoll. Somewhere soft and still in their mind, Jyushimatsu’s big brother let out a sob. ‘I don’t want … to kill anyone … Please don’t make me …’
‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu, I beg of you,’ Ahn rushed, ripping her eyes from Osomatsu’s distress. ‘Become the Sphinx once. Just once.’

Jyushimatsu couldn’t speak. He had no words. Everything felt sluggish, all of Tokyo Dome slowed to a crawl. Jyushimatsu couldn’t move, either. He could only stare unblinkingly at the battlefield. He stared where not long ago there’d been baseball. He stared at all the violence, and the pain. He stared down at his brothers’ struggle. For justice. To save people—all people. To do what was right. Jyushimatsu stared it all in the face, so afraid.

But he still wanted this. He wanted it so badly. To be just like his brothers; he admired them so-so much. This could have been his. But Jyushimatsu had already decided. He’d already said no to that “just once”. For Ichimatsu.

… But he could say yes for Osomatsu.

Just once.

One endless millisecond was all it took.

‘I’ll do it!’

With a flick of her tail, Ahn tossed the last transformation scroll. Silver caught by the guttering floodlights, the scroll arced high over the undulating crowds. Jumping up on a seat, Jyushimatsu leapt to catch it and didn’t stop, barely snatching a moment to confirm the warm pulse of metal between his fingers before charging for the nearest exit. Totoko’s scream trailed behind him as Dad shouted out. ‘Jyushimatsu, what are you doing? Get back here!’

‘Wait here, okay? I’ll be baaaaaack!’

‘Jyushimatsu!’ he heard Mum’s throat strangle. His heart rent when she wept. ‘No! Not you, too …’

They were safe. They’d be okay, they’d be okay, they’d be okay …

A battering ram on two feet, he barged straight through anyone who didn’t see him coming. They tumbled over seats, knocking elbows and scraping knees. ‘SOOORRRRRYYYY!!!’ he yelled, zooming by on hyperdrive. Scrapes could really hurt. But Jyushimatsu reasoned on the run that scraped up with souls was better than no scrapes no souls.

‘Get out of sight,’ Ahn ordered in a hectic tumble as Jyushimatsu shoulder charged through rampaging puppets. They grabbed him, latching to his pumping arms and whipping hood. But Jyushimatsu never slowed, anyone tangled up in his race dragged along until their fingers slipped. ‘Then say this: by this contract, I submit my core to salvation. Do you understand?’ she pressed. She didn’t sound like she thought he understood. ‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu? Do you understand what to …’

‘I UNDERSTAND OKAY!!!’

Bursting from the throng—SAAAAAAAFE!!!!!!!—Jyushimatsu stamped towards the passage. Three soldiers barred his way. Something dark and shiny stretched out behind them. Jyushimatsu was struck by a strong urge to poke it. Just to see what happened. ‘Don’t touch it,’ Todomatsu warned with a wince. Ejecting the thought from his mind, Jyushimatsu whipped out his bat, ready to bust up every crystal in his path. ‘Hi! I'm Jyushimatsu! Who are you?’

‘You!’ a soldier exclaimed—wait, Jyushimatsu knew them! It was Yakyuu!

‘Hey, you’re the cultist from the park!’ Jyushimatsu gushed, ecstatic. ‘Remember me?’
Yakyuu flinched. Yep, they definitely remembered Jyushimatsu. His mouth stretched in his scariest of grins.

‘Hold your position!’

A strong-armed soldier jabbed with a pointy pole; they wanted to pin Jyushimatsu like a beetle—too slow! Jyushimatsu was the fastest. He'd already ducked and whirled around, skittering straight at the startled Yakyuu. ‘I got a new bat, look look look!’

Hefting to swing at the speed of sound, the soldier made a sound like a frog being squished. Scuttling to shield their crystal, their claws clattered from the wall. The dark veil spanning the passage dissolved. Dodging spheres of rapid-fire taint, Jyushimatsu sprinted through. His feet all tied up in sneakers, they slapped through empty space, silence muffled with the great commotion outside.

Jyushimatsu looked left. He looked right. There was no one here. Digging in his feet, he pulled up with a rubbery squeak.

'Please hurry!' Ahn cried out. 'Matsuno Osomatsu won't last much longer!'

This was it. He was ready. Just once. Only once. To save Tokyo Dome. To save Totoko, and his parents. To save his brothers. To save Osomatsu.

Threading his scroll firm between his fingers and opening himself to treasure every moment for the rest of his life, Jyushimatsu threw back his head and hollered to wake the dead:

‘BY THIS CONTRACT I SUBMIT MY CORE TO SALVATION!’

…

… …

Nothing happened.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no, Jyushimatsu!!!

Sorry, another cliffhanger ... I suppose they're to be expected with two-part chapters :) I haven't actually started the next chapter yet ... I've got some good notes though :) We'll see how thing go.

Also, I think I've kinda made a decision. The next chapter is chapter 30. Amazingly, I think we've hit the halfway-ish point on that lovely round number. With that in mind, once chapter 30 is up I think I may need to have a break from Magical Oso. I know I've said that multiple times before and I've always come back pretty quick, but if you will endure my being whiny and pathetic for a moment: I'm fed up with where I am. I'm turning 30 next week, my job is mentally and emotionally exhausting, and I'm still nowhere near having anything ready to send in to publishers. I know the odds of actually being picked up and being successful as a writer are fantastically small. But it's all I've wanted to do with myself since I was a kid.

I love this fic so damn much. I'm so happy I started writing it and I feel so awful to say
it, especially when I know it's being enjoyed and you're giving me so much incredible feedback and support. But writing this story takes pretty much all of my effort and creative oomph. I like to daydream sometimes that I could turn it into an original work, but that's probably not very realistic - what with the sextuplets and their traits being kinda distinctive and all :) However damn long it takes, I'm going to finish this thing. But I think I need to really commit to leaving it aside for a while so I can focus on getting something out there so I actually have a chance of ... getting out there.

Sorry for venting at you :( And I'm sorry if I'm being dramatic or self-centred or ridiculous; I don't mean to be. But if Magical Oso is going into stasis for a while - and by a while, I'm thinking at the moment six months absolute minimum - I think it's fair that you know it's going to happen. Thank you so much for being so consistently lovely; writing this thing wouldn't be nearly so amazing without all of you.

But I'll definitely get chapter 30 out before disappearing! I'm not sure exactly how long that'll take ... with any luck not tooooo long, if I work just on Oso until hiatus time. Hopefully I can be a bit more concrete by the time chapter 30 is up about how long I'm intending to be away. In the meantime, I hope so much that you're looking forward to part II!
Like a Firefly

Chapter Notes

So two Hear Me Roar chapters have become three. Probably should've seen that coming. My biggest excuse is that we wound up moving house, so searching for a new place + the moving process + settling in kinda ate up most of my time for the past two months. Also this week's the first time I've been sick since I can't remember when (only a cold, but I'm pathetic) so that hasn't helped either. But it's been so long that I wanted to get something posted. Not quite in time for the sextuplets' birthday, but only a few days belated :)

This chapter split kinda messes up my tidy plans to go on a long hiatus after chapter 30. It's not a big deal, but it's going to annoy me so badly, that it'll be after 31 instead of 30 - grrrr. Because I'm still planning on finishing this arc before wandering off for a more extended break than usual. Current plans are that once this arc is wrapped up (damn you number 31) I'll work on my own stuff for the rest of the year. If the story I'm working on doesn't have a complete draft by the end of January next year, I'll try to get at least one Magical Oso chapter done some time soon after then.

This chapter feels a little odd on its own - it's hardly short, but it spans such a short time period and doesn't seem to cover a great deal of content. I suppose it's my fault, for doing an arc where there's a lot happening all over the place. Anyway, I hope you like it - let me know if you do :D Or if you don't. Constructive criticism so welcome. Must work on thickening my silly skin, or the internet will eat me alive if I actually manage to release anything of my own.

Thank you for being so patient with me. And thank you so much for reading and enjoying my stuff - it's more than any writer person could hope for :) You're the best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The others had them worse. He heard Choromatsu’s groans. Todomatsu’s weeping in the night when he came awake and huddled in the corner, hoping no one heard. But they all had bad dreams, the young guardians’ sleep hounded by visions that left their pillows stained by sweat and tears, more warped and frightening than even the realities they faced every damn day.

This was a nightmare. Osomatsu moved haltingly through it, a landscape sluggish and hazy and so terrifyingly real—it was real, god, why did this have to be real? Endless faces crowded his awareness, every one of them empty. They stared him down, swimming through his sight, their only goal to break his guard. Whatever it took.

Osomatsu fought on, frightened. His head spun. A hand axe could’ve been lodged in the back of his skull. Sickness crashed through his systems. His oesophagus flexed and rolled—god, he was going to be sick, he had to throw up … he picked a great fucking time to be concussed.

Where was Karamatsu? Osomatsu whipped his head over his shoulder. Off balance, the rush of fluid through his ears and colours through his eyes almost made him faint.

‘K-Karamatsu? I c-can’t see you, where are you …’
Osomatsu stifled a sob. Where was Totty? Where was Choromatsu? He said he was coming, he’d promised. Choromatsu wouldn’t leave him, don’t leave him, please god save him …

His reaction time dragged. Osomatsu's body clunked dangerously out of whack. His brain struggled to keep command. But the rest of him unilaterally decided "fuck this shit" and quit listening.

One perk of being a guardian—more specifically, a Salamander with a natural spark—was the control. Osomatsu always had total control. To have that whipped from beneath him, funnily enough, did … not … help. Maybe his body made the wild guess that his mind was currently more scrambled than a few dozen omelettes and not in the best place to give orders. Or maybe he was just fucking spent. Every opponent he knocked back surged headlong into his defences, again and again, attacks renewed as he struggled to repel two dozen more.

Bodies pressed in, the garnet warrior surrounded on all sides. Osomatsu could barely move an inch; the ground rocked beneath his rubbery legs every time he dared shuffle. Pitched against thousands, this wasn’t guard duty. Osomatsu flung himself in a cramped, all-out dance of survival that went on … and on … and on …

God, when would this end? How was this so hard? He was magically enhanced, damn it! Sure, the dark-dyed baseballers packed an amped-up punch, but the rest of these freshly minted puppets were just people! This should’ve been easy, what was wrong with him?

You know … besides the gushing head wound. Osomatsu felt a sticky trail of blood down the back of his neck.

The puppets had numbers. And the twin gargoyles lunged without mercy, battering the stadium and badly flustering the confused guardian. Osomatsu’s only relief was that the massive monsters had less room to work with than he did—apparently flattening a few dozen slaves to take out a guardian was a big no-no. Flinching from its guttural roar and warding one off with a clumsy gauntlet, barely ripped from its talons before it yanked him off the ground, Osomatsu shuffled nearer the portal, refusing to leave an opening.

Giving himself every excuse in the world, he felt a little less pathetic. But that was Osomatsu’s only victory. No room in him for anything but speed and instinct, he fought like a machine. One that slowly shut down after years of loyal service. Hurling a backfist and barely looking where it landed, he clubbed two Giants fans with his other gauntlet. Five more went to the ground, caught in their tumble. A carpet of bodies writhed beneath their feet. Most shoved up in seconds. Osomatsu tried not to think about those caught under the stampede. If no one died here it’d be a miracle …

‘Osomatsu, look out!’

Train of thought derailed and falling through blank space, Osomatsu jolted and lashed out.

Hard.

A woman soared backwards as though yanked by an invisible leash. Airborne at least 10 metres, her tumbling body vanished beneath the masses.

Seconds staggered. It took a handful of them for it to click that Osomatsu had hit her. He’d hit her and he hadn’t held back … he’d forgotten to hold back!

‘No!’

He lurched forward, straining to see. Was she dead? Had he killed her? God, he’d killed her, hadn’t he? He’d killed her … he’d fucked up, how could he fuck up like this? Again and again and … Oh,
fuck ... no, no, no ... Osomatsu was the worst Salamander. And the Spectrum Alliance hadn’t fired him yet? That was … the real miracle …

Levelled by the crushing weight of bodies and shock at what he’d just done, Osomatsu’s body buckled. For the second time that fight, he went under.

This time he didn’t get up.

Thwacks of baseball bats melded into the pummel of feet and fists, each individual excruciation to his breaking body evolved into one unending existence of pain. Shouts splattered in his ears. Thousands he didn’t know. A few he did.

‘Come on, Red! Fight!’

‘Stay strong!’

‘Yeah, you can do it!’

‘Osomatsu! Osomatsu, please …’

‘Get up! For the love of god, Osomatsu!’

He tried. Really he did—did they think he liked being beaten to a pulp with an audience looking on? But his will shrivelled. The Salamander was the first guardian to sign up. And he was the first one to fail.

He failed his brothers. The Spectrum Alliance. His people.

But he was done.

‘I … c-can’t … Don’t hate me … p-please … I’m sorry … I’m sorry …’

Osomatsu numbly noted his lens garbled for forgiveness along with him. ‘Not … your fault,’ he mumbled, the poor tech devastated the Salamander went down on its watch.

He’d been guarding the portal. That was the point of all this. He’d collapsed right in front of it. Osomatsu felt torrential rain from the other side mist on his cheek. Other than that, he didn’t feel much of anything anymore. Was he still being trampled? The world could’ve inverted and Osomatsu clinging to the grassy roof of the universe for all he noticed. Or cared.

He’d killed someone. He’d thrown the punch, and it’d killed someone. Osomatsu had helped cause a little structural mayhem now and them. He never felt great about it, but such was the gig. Collateral damage was unavoidable. But he’d never had to worry about human life before. One or two slaves were easy to handle. And Ahn was always there to empty the battlefield. To make it safe. And the one time she couldn’t, it had to slip his goddamn mind that he could put his fist through a concrete slab!

A ragged thought pushed through guilt: he was in the way. If he didn’t move, he'd be churned to fleshy butter underfoot as the horde spilt into those purple canyons. Unless Karamatsu could stop them single-handed.

‘Karamatsu? C-can you … hear me?’

Osomatsu felt he was close. Still fighting, valiant as he strove to block passage into Takuu’s domain. But he couldn’t do this by himself. Osomatsu had failed him so many times … He tried to imprint on
his brother's mind. Karamatsu had to retreat. Who knew what kind of numbers they’d lose through 
the portal if the Kraken fell back. But they were going to lose them anyway. That was on Osomatsu. 
And he’d be damned if Karamatsu got hurt when there was no way to save them.

But he might as well scream gibberish to the sky. Even if he could scrape together a message 
halfway coherent, his mental output had ruptured. He’d gone telepathically dead. Karamatsu couldn’t 

Osomatsu was alone.

The earth rumbled. He squeezed his eyes shut. Waiting for the end.

Alone.

But an ending never came.

Wait, what?

One eyelid squinted a painful slit. The puppet ranks had fallen back. His vision pieced through a veil, 
fading in and out, Osomatsu numbly comprehended as they opened an aisle, parting like a sea 
confronted by religion. But this was nothing so holy.

If a Spectrum Alliance analyst played back the disaster, maybe they could pinpoint the moment. Hell 
if Osomatsu knew. But his fiery cage had quenched.

His wrists burnt and bleeding, the Doll of Darkness had broken free.

***

‘Huh?’

Bewildered, Jyushimatsu tried again.

‘By this contract I submit my core to salvation?! By this contract I … come on, come one, let’s go! 
Sphinx powers activate!’

He windmilled his arms, waving the scroll madly. Still nothing.

Jyushimatsu’s jaw dangled. Had he done something wrong? What did he do? Nonono, he couldn’t 
mess up, not now!

Maybe he wasn’t doing it wrong, but he was doing it wrong. That was it.

‘By THIS contract I submit MY core to salvation! By this CONTRACT I submit my CORE to 
SALVATION!’

Nonono, that wasn’t right. Jyushimatsu bobbed, knees a blur and mental gears pumping. Maybe he’d 
gotten the words back to front?

‘By my core, I submit this contract of salvation? My core is salvation, I submit to this contract?’

But Jyushimatsu still stood there, two feet on the ground in his overalls and cap, waggling the 
superhero scroll like he led an out-of-control orchestra. Why wasn’t it working? He’d wedged those 
words in the deepest rift of his brain—this was important! He knew it was important, how could he 
forget something like this?
‘You haven’t,’ Ahn reassured Jyushimatsu he’d done nothing wrong. But his burst of pride and relief  crumbled with what she said next. ‘We hoped this wouldn’t happen. But the Spectrum Alliance hypothesised you might encounter difficulty in … that transforming would be hard for you,’ Ahn  picked new words when Jyushimatsu’s vacant stare rivalled a puppet’s.

Jyushimatsu blinked, confusion setting in. ‘Whyyyyy?’

‘Your core isn’t like your brothers’ inclinations. It’s … not as strong,’ said Ahn. ‘I did mention … Matsuno Jyushimatsu? Please don’t take that the wrong way.’

Ahn paused, anxious. The pressure of the situation so heavy on them both, Jyushimatsu struggled to process. Half recalling the topic raised somewhere in his restored memory, the raw bombshell phased to shame that tunnelled into his chest, hanging off his gaping lips. But disbelief trumped them both—how could he not be strong enough? If Jyushimatsu was one thing only, Jyushimatsu was strength.

No, he decided. Self-belief blooming, he shook his head so hard his cap took off, coming in for landing a skip away. Jyushimatsu had a lot of accidents—they just happened. What if there was an accident in his core? Or just something different? And what if the Spectrum Alliance had seen that and just decided he couldn’t do it? Decided, just like everyone who didn’t get to know him decided he was weird or stupid or not normal?

Too used to being judged on first impression to be surprised, Jyushimatsu only shook his head again, more sadly. But sometimes he still shocked even his brothers. And his brothers always believed in him. They knew he could do this, they wanted him on their team!

If they believed it, so did Jyushimatsu. He was strong enough to be the Sphinx. Something else was wrong.

‘That’s possible,’ said Ahn. ‘Maybe.’

Her “maybe” sounded a lot more like “I hope so”.

Jyushimatsu was young. But it only hit him then, how young Ahn might be. Her voice belonged piping with friends in his junior high classroom. Not on the edge of a warzone. She’d lost her family to this war, he remembered with a pang. Jyushimatsu didn’t know what he’d do if he lost his brothers. If he lost Osomatsu … if he lost Ichimatsu …

Jyushimatsu jumped up high, coming down in a wake-up slam that jarred his bones. He wasn’t going to lose them.

Something crashed outside. This time his bones rumbled—he’d never felt such a ginormous crash! Jyushimatsu swung about, orienting through solid walls. He spotted a TV screen as he spun. One of the huge flapping monsters had smashed into a floodlight tower. ‘Hey!’ he exclaimed. That was dirty! Out, out! Hit the showers! ‘You did that on purpose!’

Jyushimatsu gaped as glass and rubble showered the crowds on the flickering screens. People shrieked, ducking and covering their heads.

Gotta go fast, faster, fastest! Watch him go!

Undaunted by monsters, Jyushimatsu tried again. ‘Don’t give up!’ he chanted, keeping at it even as he grew more and more frazzled, unable to shunt through his transformation block. ‘Don’t give up, okay? Next one for sure!’

The screens flipped to another shot—how were the cameras all still working? None of the
camerapeople were zombies now? That was weird.

That rational wondering in one side of his brain and out the other, he saw the flames that barred Not-Ichimatsu in the Giants’ dugout. They spluttered low—too low! Alarm cut Jyushimatsu off mid-transformation attempt, seeing the shadowed figured that prowled behind them. The shadow crossed its arms, casual. Pretended to check a watch. The flames crackled lower—Not-Ichimatsu was gonna get out!

‘Someone’s coming to help,’ Ahn said after a moment quiet. ‘The Alliance summoned our most respected Sphinx expert.’

‘Thank you thank you thank you!’

Jyushimatsu didn’t know what they were up to. Or where they were going, pushing up and away through the stands like that. But Choromatsu said they were coming. Whatever he planned with Totty and Ahn was superduper important … poor Ahn. She was pulled so many different ways right now, he was amazed she kept all her thoughts in the right boxes.

The expert linked in to Jyushimatsu, Ahn made harried introductions before ducking out with a final plea. ‘Please hurry! If anything happens to Matsuno Osomatsu …’

She didn’t finish. Or couldn’t. And she didn’t or couldn’t say what Jyushimatsu should do if he couldn’t transform.

Everyone was counting on him. He couldn’t not transform. That wasn’t an option.

His voice deep and even, the expert spoke like they had all the time in the world. ‘Call me Mei,’ he said. ‘Listen to me, Jyushimatsu. I’ve studied core inclinations for 50 of our years.’

The way he said “our years”, Jyushimatsu thought that must be much longer than “his years”.

‘I’ve worked with more than twenty Sphinxes,’ Mei went on, using all the best words to make sure Jyushimatsu followed. ‘So don’t you worry. If anyone can help you transform, it’s me.’

His brothers in peril and their birthday baseball in ruins, Jyushimatsu’s grasp of exactly what was happening slipped and slid. But Mei was so sure. This was someone who knew things, who knew just what was going on. Jyushi inherently trusted him.

Mei now giving pointers—the expert picked up that Jyushimatsu only needed a fresh starting point and the occasional prod; spelling things out would only bog him down—Jyushimatsu reached for his core. He closed around it straightaway—look, see? Jyushimatsu grinned, a blood rush of delight as his inclination clamoured to greet him. He wasn’t sure how he hadn’t noticed before, when it was right there inside him. Maybe he had noticed, but he’d never known a name for it.

Because Jyushimatsu knew that smell. It hugged his strongest sense like he buried his nose in their back garden on a day after rain. He felt soil and stone against his skin. Tasted the brush of leaves and vines and sweet velvet petals. From cells to soul, his core rooted deep and firm inside him. And it was strong—it was strong! What was harder to notice was …

‘There’s something in the way!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, still unable to get his core and the guardian topaz talking. ‘It’s not bad,’ he said when Mei asked. Curious, he pawed at the odd presence. It didn’t mind his investigations at all. ‘It’s soft and quiet and gentle … like a candle! Or a firefly,’ Jyushimatsu changed his mind, liking that pretty image. But it felt more like a blanket. Something gauzy and light that bundled Jyushimatsu close. Safe. But too safe. And:
‘I don’t think it knows it’s in the way!’

‘Interesting,’ Mei mused as TVs zoomed in on Osomatsu. He’d collapsed in his blood-red hood, nothing left to give. When had the zombies backed up? Why … then Jyushimatsu saw Not-Ichimatsu’s slow stalk. Processing through the zombies like a general or a king—or a general king! —the dark man stopped right over Jyushimatsu’s big brother.

His heart pinging around his chest cavity, Jyushimatsu zoned out. Finding focus. He had to transform. That was his only job now. Everything else came after.

Mei wasn’t sure what the candle/firefly/blanket was. ‘Sounds an awful lot like an inclination to me,’ he said, more thoughtful than puzzled. ‘But no one has more than one … this might act like one, though,’ the expert decided. ‘Did you know inclinations are aware, Jyushimatsu? Most people aren’t designed to notice,’ he said when Jyushimatsu shook his head. ‘But I think you’ve got a shot. Why don’t you try talking to it?’

Jyushimatsu lit up—that’s exactly what he’d wanted to try! With Mei’s support, he turned inward to the soft presence. Impressions settled over Jyushimatsu. An arm around his shoulders. A quiet voice telling him everything would be okay. Two seconds together, and Jyushimatsu knew it’d do anything for him, if he only asked. So he did:

‘Hi! I’m Jyushimatsu. I think you know me … I think I know you, too—that’s so weird! Hey, are you okay in there? Are you stuck, can you move? I don’t want you to go—I like you, I really do! But maybe you’re covering me too much? I need to reach my core and my brothers need me and please please please …’

Jyushimatsu’s next “please” fell empty out his open mouth, feeling the shift. Folds drew back, exposing Jyushimatsu to the untempered extent of his core. Like a ballistic missile to the brain, Jyushimatsu felt more … more *Jyushimatsu* than he’d felt in his life. His eyes popped—it was too much hustle to handle!

Almost.

People already muttered how unfair it was, that Jyushimatsu had more energy than he knew what to do with. His energy levels now shooting beyond what an Olympic team needed for four non-stop years of training, his excitement hit pause, feeling something waft off the candle/firefly/blanket. Was it … sorry?

‘Don’t be sorry!’ he burst, jumping up and down. ‘You didn’t know! Thank you thank you thaaaaannnkkkk yooooouuu!!!’

‘Go for it, Jyushimatsu,’ Mei urged.

‘This time!’ said Jyushimatsu. He pulled up his sagging sleeves, voice a trumpet before the charge. ‘This time it’ll work!’

‘We trust you, Jyushimatsu. Now, go and …’

Osomatsu screamed. His big brother’s agony burst every fibre that knitted Jyushimatsu in one seamless piece. Unprepared, he clutched his head and crouched, rocking forward. Jyushimatsu gave a squashed whimper. He’d never stop hearing that scream, it was imprinted on him forever, the sound of his big brother falling apart …

He couldn’t fall apart. Inch by inch, his knees cranked him upright … he was faster than this!
Jyushimatsu shot up the rest of the way.

‘Ready set go! By this contract I submit my core to salvation!’ he shouted. Finally the scroll leapt to life between his fingers, taking charge. He couldn’t have fumbled if he’d wanted to. Not even when his element rumbled beneath him. Thrumming with the strength of its call, Jyushimatsu launched into its belly, scooped in a landslide of glorious dirt and ore conjured from nowhere and everywhere. He rolled over and over, kicking feet-first straight up as his overalls collapsed to dust. Happily bared and wheeling in weightless free fall, Jyushimatsu shed his skin like an insect in spring. Powers ancient and wild and part of him for a long, long time ruptured at the seams, burying him in encouragement as he became who he always was, the best of him—all of him. The ageless hands of earth held his soul so close. Then they turned him loose, letting him fly as the world cheered him on—he could do this! Jyushimatsu could be a hero! He bellowed soundless joy, caked with cracking clay and bundled in vines that sprouted at light speed, golden blossoms melding against his skin. Muscles infused with his own strength a million times over, Jyushimatsu swung a bat from the sandstorm; it gleamed, glossed length stuffed and cemented in his hand. His transformation eager to show off just how cemented, Jyushimatsu spun the gargantuan weapon from hand to hand, a blur through his tumbles. And the magic scroll that made all this real burst from its own chrysalis, reborn a long flat strap. Buoyant overhead as it fused in a loop, it lowered to rest around Jyushimatsu’s neck.

Jyushimatsu hit the ground. The tiles cracked beneath him.

‘Roaring berserker of virtue, Sphinx!’ he shouted. Or he heard someone else shout. With Jyushimatsu’s voice—another Sphinx? All the other Sphinxes? Right now that was 100 percent completely and positively possible.

‘Incredible!’

Jyushimatsu’s grin pulled in a massive upside-down rainbow, springboarding from his superhero pose as Mei applauded. He’d forgotten the expert was watching—how’d he do, how’d he do?!

He glowed, feeling the answer like a hundred hearty smacks on the back. Mei wasn’t the only one who’d seen the Sphinx reborn. They’d opened communication links all through the Spectrum Alliance just so Jyushimatsu could hear their cheers.

Amazed by everything captured in that spectacular moment and so proud to be him, Jyushimatsu’s broad shoulders pushed back. He could have stood on a podium, a gold medal around his neck—he had a gold medal! The Sphinx’s brilliant topaz bumped against his chest, the medallion reflecting fluorescent lights in a million golden rays.

‘Congratulations!’ he crowed, pumping his arms in the air. ‘We did it, good job everyone!’

But they hadn’t done it. He hadn't won anything yet. The fight was out there.

His excited jabbers crash landing, Jyushimatsu gripped his behemoth bat. The weapon cast shadows halfway down the corridor. Osomatsu’s scream still echoed down the hallways of his mind.

Osomatsu hated anyone to fight for him. But if anyone wanted to hurt Jyushimatsu’s big brother again, they had to get through him.

‘That was some transformation, kid,’ Mei declared over celebrations dimensions away. ‘You’re one in a trillion. Now get out there!’

***

Osomatsu hazed. In. And out. But he felt the Doll crouch by his ragdoll collapse. And he definitely
felt when hot fingers gripped his chin. Osomatsu tried to jerk free. But the Doll only squeezed harder.

‘Now who’s in the compromising position?’ he said. One gloved thumb brushed Osomatsu’s lips through his mask. He shuddered away, barely clinging on to consciousness.

‘We’re always so busy trading insults, I never noticed till now,’ said the Doll. His murmur worse than a shout, he hooked his thumb in the indent at the corner of Osomatsu’s mouth. ‘But you’re not a bad specimen of smoking hot yourself.’

The Doll’s eyes lazily roved the fallen guardian. Osomatsu’s heart thumped, erratic. Again he tried to squirm away. But the Doll held him fast.

‘Osomatsu!’

Scattered droplets leapt in streams. A heartbeat later, Karamatsu launched a cannonball. Not taking his eyes off Osomatsu, the Doll raised his empty hand, the spinning asteroid of water hurtling straight for him.

The Kraken’s attack blew apart. Stopped in its tracks at the Doll’s palm like it struck a seawall, waves burst around him, leaving him untouched. Ever one for theatrics, the Doll brushed non-existent dust from his glove. Osomatsu’s eyes rolled, watching the fractured torrent splatter through the portal as he slowly caught up.

The Doll deflected it. No forcefield required. He was the forcefield.

Since when was that a thing? Osomatsu’s stomach twisted, nervous with his enemy’s swollen powers—nervous? That’s all? He was in the Doll’s creepy clutches, and all he got was a roll of nerves? What, he still thought he could take him? His head must be so fucked up right now. If their powerful water elemental couldn’t even …

Osomatsu was an elemental too. Inspired, he tried to strike a match, too out of it to finish the connection: if the Doll could repel the Kraken, a concussed Salamander wasn’t much of a challenge.

Not that it mattered. His frail spark wavered, falling-down drunk. He was too damaged. Osomatsu couldn’t burn.

‘It’s okay,’ he thought he heard Karamatsu say. His brother’s voice trickled through ruptures to reach him. ‘Osomatsu? Can … brother, we’ll figure … out of this. Just …’

What was he saying? He couldn’t tell. But it didn’t sound like Karamatsu was fighting. The Doll must have called off the monsters as well as the hordes of … shit, were they making him watch?

Osomatsu didn’t flare. But his spirit did. He wouldn’t let Karamatsu see this. He wouldn’t let his parents see—they were out there somewhere, no idea the stricken guardian was their son. They didn’t deserve that shit.

His struggles renewed, Osomatsu tried to fend off the Doll. But though his healing systems spluttered to life, tightening a few stitches, his head was a smashed egg. He couldn’t even wipe his grainy vision clear. But any hero would notice when an enemy took their hand.

Osomatsu gasped, the Doll’s black-gloved fingers lacing slow through his charcoal ones—they were hot, they were so hot … This wasn’t like Osomatsu’s heat. This was a sick heat. A wild fever that set everything it touched to burn. The swelter the Doll gave off casting the world in mirage, Osomatsu flailed for freedom. No effect at all, the Doll smirked and eased his arm back so it crooked behind his
head. Nearer and nearer, he leered so low over Osomatsu his face hovered a blurred inch from … bite his nose off!

The Doll chuckled at his pathetic lunge, Osomatsu’s teeth scraping the inside of his mask. ‘Down, firecracker. I can’t bear to see you like this,’ he said, now draped entirely over Osomatsu. Fingers sliding to press his gauntlet into the ground, the Doll’s other hand played with a strand of hair pasted to Osomatsu’s forehead. ‘This is so humiliating. That ego of yours must hurt like hell. This hurts too, doesn’t it?’

The Doll’s hand slid inside his hood. Osomatsu’s stomach punched, panicking. His hood only came off when he wanted it to, how the hell was he … Osomatsu shuddered, pain and repulsion warring as the Doll cradled his smashed head, fingers splayed through hair matted with blood and sweat. This wasn’t happening, this wasn’t happening … all he wanted for the rest of his life was for the Doll to get off him … get off him, get the fuck off him, please god, get …

Tenderly lowering Osomatsu’s head back to the earth, the Doll withdrew his hand. Osomatsu sobbed in relief.

‘Despite how this may appear,’ he said. His eyes flickered to bask in the suspended chaos and Osomatsu’s torment. His eyes glassed, Osomatsu gazed up at him. ‘And despite my recent levelling up—impressive, no? But I remain the subject of strict no engagement orders from my lord and master.’

Closing all distance between them, the Doll of Darkness’s burning lips grazed Osomatsu’s cheekbone. ‘But,’ he murmured low. ‘I really don’t think this counts.’

In the midst of that warped moment, the Doll’s wakizashi materialised. Flipping it blade down, he drove the sword straight through Osomatsu’s palm.

Osomatsu screamed. His spine arched and contorted, the anguish of his head thrashing against the ground nothing to what consumed his hand. Impaled, the blade pierced his gauntlet and buried deep into the ground. Agony ravaged outwards as darkness bubbled into the wound, salt and shit and poison. Tears flooding eyes screwed shut, Osomatsu shuddered and jerked, taint shooting hungry thorns up his arm, radiating towards his elbow, overtaking his systems millimetre by tortured millimetre.

He’d known the acid touch of darkness. He’d never been in more pain than when Totty surgically ripped it from the delicate tissues of his eye. Until now.

Face drained bloodless, Osomatsu coiled against the onslaught as his body went cold, sweat drenching him with ice. He was going to die. Darkness ate him alive. No one could survive this kind of infection.

… Choromatsu had. Choromatsu had been hurt worse than this. Choromatsu had lived. But Choromatsu had had their Unicorn. ‘To … tty …? P-Please …’

But Todomatsu was lost in the crowds, unable to transform without handing the Liberation Force his identity on a platter. The pitiful dregs of his strength devoured, Osomatsu slipped near void. The magical stitches holding his skull together unravelled.

The Doll crouched over him. Osomatsu’s ears blared senseless noise. But he understood way too much.

‘Now that really hurts, doesn’t it? A word of advice: get used to it. The Wyvern would’ve gone
A flash of black. A sleeve. The Doll mimed, slashing his arm across Osomatsu’s chest.

‘But you’re in for an drawn-out, festering end. Though we do have history together—listen to me, you’ve caught me almost sentimental. All right, you’ve talked me into it: I could end this a little more quickly. Just for you. How about it?’

Osomatsu could barely gasp around agony. That was enough answer for the Doll.

‘A shame we won’t have our moment in the arena—and look! My master even provided us one.’

The Doll grabbed Osomatsu’s chin, tilting his head left. Then right. Tokyo Dome rolled around his eyes. His moans crackling, Osomatsu could only let himself be manhandled.

‘Get up, get up!’

Shouts merged in an endless chant. Osomatsu narrowed his eyes at the blurred crowd. He’d lost. Plain and simple. He’d failed. But were they … still cheering for him? ‘You can do it! Stay strong!’

‘Make the asshole pay!’

Sound poured from halfway up the stadium stands. ‘Get up, get up!’

Emotion dismembered him. Gratitude. Guilt. And a gut spike of annoyance—let’s see them take a few hundred baseball bats to the back of the head and just get up.

‘But I’m sure your allies will give me a fight to remember one day,’ the Doll said. His fingers left Osomatsu’s face and a smear of blood behind. Rising, he left his wakizashi where it was.

‘Vengeance is a powerful motivator. Even for bleeding hearts like guardians.’

Osomatsu felt the Doll stand over him. Then came the low squeak of heels on grass. He was walking away? Where was he …

Understanding lanced his fog of sense and surrounds. The Doll of Darkness wouldn’t end Osomatsu's suffering. Not with a mercy slaughter. But he would let his army trample him before darkness stilled the stricken hero’s heart. Osomatsu would be crushed after all …

‘… No one’s … gonna … crush … me …’

Defiance was a drug. It surged through him. Warmed glacial blood. Lit wildfires.

Die here? In front of 50,000 people? Bleeding on live TV?

Fuck that.

Not today.

Not like this.

Fumbling behind his head, Osomatsu struggled to dislodge the blade that pinned him to the pitcher’s mound. His teeth almost met through his lip, he bit down so hard. Sweat dribbling and every pant a knife, Osomatsu felt the slow stampede unpause. A glimpse of blue at his ragged edge of sight was Karamatsu, swept up in monstrous flapping assault. His brother couldn’t dodge long enough to free him. And it was no good. Osomatsu’s unpinned hand smacked down. He couldn’t free himself, stuck fast. Fresh agony flared, every cut spawning another spire of darkness. Hard needles rayed to
claim his shoulder. His arm ravaged like it turned to splintered stone, Osomatsu’s defiance wavered with the shadow of death.

Then it hardened. The Doll’s blade was sharp. As in, magically sharp. He couldn’t pull the sword out. But he should … be able to …

Thoughts shutting down, Osomatsu clenched his jaw and wrenched straight through the blade, slicing flesh and metal apart. Then he was on his feet. Yelling, he lunged blind. His taint-sapped spark rallied, setting his fist aflame as it collided bone-breakingly hard with … something.

He drowned in a roar of sound. They were … still cheering for him …

It took a dozen sluggish heartbeats for Osomatsu to be sure cool grass tickled his cheek. He’d collapsed again. No more plan than going down on his terms, he would’ve liked to get in one more hit. But one would … have … to do …

Osomatsu’s eyelids fluttered closed. But not before he’d seen the Doll’s jacket burnt to ruins. His body bent at a funny angle … the dying Salamander had shattered his spine.

‘Now that … hurt.’

Osomatsu tasted blood and sick, the crack of bones going off like bombs as the broken Doll jointed back together. A hundred banshee shrieks went off. The crowd’s horror so real it was almost solid, Osomatsu felt his enemy’s horror show shamble past. Then back again, jolting as his body realigned to kneel over Osomatsu. With a grunt, the Doll’s last vertebrae popped back into place. He slid his hand beneath Osomatsu’s neck, drawing him up.

‘I was … a mercy,’ the Doll’s whisper wove through his ear, barely veiling something ravenous. ‘The death you just threw away … kinder than any … give you. But as always …’

Cradling him, the Doll pushed the tip of his reclaimed wakizashi into the hollow between Osomatu’s collarbones. Dark web sprouted, branching through his throat. Osomatsu’s gasp fractured, gurgling poison. ‘The Salamander has to … final word. Not that I’m complaining.’

More dead than not and facing endless torture in that limbo, Osomatsu whimpered as the Doll dug his blade deeper. Blood pooled and spilt. But the Doll was surgical. This wasn’t a race. It was a show. And he had an audience of millions.

‘… Anything else for me before …’

Pushing his eyelids open, Osomatsu dragged himself up a cliff face and latched on the Doll.

You … bet … I do …

‘Now that’s just rude,’ the Doll tsked when Osomatsu’s intact hand curled in the foulest gesture he knew. Forcing his eyes to stay open, Osomatsu bit the mess of meat inside his ruined cheek as the Doll withdrew his blade. Tar stretched, breaking off with a squelch. Flicking off excess darkness, the Doll slit open the Salamander’s battle hoodie, separating the woven armour like paper to expose Osomatsu’s scarred torso.

‘It’s been fun, firecracker,’ he said, tracing the blade on his chest. A slow swirl of blood welled in its wake. Osomatsu would’ve hissed at the bite, if his throat weren’t clogged with thickening taint. ‘Try to stay alive … you can. You’ll do that for me, won’t …’

The Doll paused mid-scorn. Torture put on hold, the dark puppet’s brow creased in a light frown.
‘Well,’ he said to no one. ‘Hello in there.’

***

‘I … I know what you’re trying to do.’

The darkness dissolved—no. Not dissolved. It was still fucking dark. But it backed off. This was darkness at low tide.

No longer the encompassing softness he’d nestled in, its comfort turned oily with the lie, and not the cliffs he clung to every time he wasted effort trying to haul himself out of this nothing nightmare, Ichimatsu knelt in empty space at twilight. A veil stretched in front of him. So thin and gauzy it could’ve been spun of spider’s silk, on the unearthly movie screen played a scene Ichimatsu knew. He’d only seen it once. But its horror branded his memory, prophetic impressions that taunted with a whisper: “I couldn’t do it without you.”

A sky scorched. A world emptied. Billions of stolen souls called to march on the stars, an endless army at the whim of a warmongering lord who commanded magicians and monsters.

And … him. The dark lord commanded him. Controlled him. Ichimatsu’s soul hadn’t been his since last summer.

He hadn’t told anyone—who the fuck could he tell? He was already doped to the eyeballs. And his soft-spoken shrink was hard as fucking nails. If he let this mad shit slip within 100 kilometres of her, he’d be an inpatient for life, however fucking much he had left. And his brothers? Ichimatsu whimpered at the thought. He’d been too afraid to ask for help when something still could’ve been done. Too weak. Too fucking proud.

He snorted, self-loathing towering to all-time heights. He had nothing left but pride and nothing to be proud of—look at him! He wasn’t even brave enough to accept the affection he craved. Every single person he loved offered it free of fucking charge. And it felt like it killed him. Jyushimatsu was different, mostly. But Osomatsu’s playful head scratches had become almost unbearable. And Karamatsu was relentless, even after Ichimatsu made him … he’d pushed him to … he couldn’t do it! He couldn’t handle it, why were they so good to him? Christ, he was starving. But he still smacked away every hand that stretched out to him.

Fuck. If he could cuddle one cat … just one …

His cats didn’t know. But his family could. And if they really knew him … if they knew everything he thought, everything he was … fuck, fuck, fuck! If they ever found out what had taken hold of him, what now filled the gaping hole inside him … Ichimatsu clutched his head and moaned. If they knew the monster that he’d become, they wouldn’t offer him that love any more. And that scared Ichimatsu more than even the demon inside him.

‘You hear me?’ he rasped while the future played before his eyes. It would happen. This entire disaster would fucking unfold if he didn’t do something. He wasn’t sure why he gave a shit. It wasn’t like he’d be alive and kicking long enough to see the world fall. And the continents weren’t exactly overloaded with people worth saving. There were one or two. A handful, maybe. Not enough to give a shit. But for whatever reason, Ichimatsu did give a shit. He gave a big fucking shit.

He swayed on his knees, trapped inside himself. The demon had control. He knew that by now. Ichimatsu scowled, dull spirit roused. He was being used like a fucking wind-up doll. Indignant, he inhaled sharp and slow, clenching his fists on his knees. He was sick to death of doing fuck all about this bullshit.
‘I know … you’re there … you evil shit,’ Ichimatsu spat. ‘I’m not gonna let you do this. I know … what you …’

‘Do you now?’

Ichimatsu’s skin crawled. For the first time, that voice—his voice, low and slick with mockery—came from somewhere without.

‘You took your sweet time cottoning on,’ he went on. Ichimatsu’s neck swivelled, voice sliding between directions and unlit world spinning as the demon’s stifling presence loomed. ‘I’ve corrupted infants quicker on the uptake than you … nah, I’m fucking with you. Actually,’ he said as Ichimatsu coughed, overwhelmed. Darkness lapped at him, embedding him where he slumped. ‘I’m almost impressed. I thought you’d be decomposing long before you figured out any of this existed outside your own head.

‘Let’s not have any of that. Shhhhhhh,’ the demon soothed as Ichimatsu choked out empty threats. ‘Quiet now, let’s be a good little husk. This is what’s going to happen. We’re going to corrupt your entire world. Then we’re going to corrupt every dimension we can jump into. And when I say “we”,’ he clarified with delicate spite—wait, was that fucking fingers in his hair? Flinching, Ichimatsu tried—and failed—to jerk away. That was exactly how Osomatsu comforted him. ‘I mean you slowly die inside me until the last of your essence winks out of all existence.’

‘No,’ Ichimatsu croaked, curled over and fused to the ground. So much for fucking stopping him. Pathetic. ‘Get the fuck out of me … get out … I won’t let you …’

‘You won’t? Oh what am I going to do?’ the demon feigned despair. Ichimatsu’s projection of his own waxy skin went hot. His stacks of pride were fully intact. And the demon burned him bad. ‘No, tell me: how exactly do you plan to not let me? I’m just dying to know. Worthless … piece … of shit,’ he said over Ichimatsu’s wheezes. ‘Here’s what you can do: absolutely nothing. You are nothing.’

Ichimatsu shivered from the cold fire that laced the demon’s voice. Ichimatsu’s voice. It wasn’t him, it wasn’t him …

‘The only thing you’re any good for is incubating. And whoring,’ he sneered. ‘My master fucked you good, didn’t he?’

His master … planted the demon inside him? A sob rattled up his tubes. Of all the fucked-up bastards in the world, they had to single him out.

The metallic collar no one else could see tightened around Ichimatsu’s burning throat.

‘You’re all fucked,’ the demon breathed. ‘So don’t try to make up for a lifetime of shittiness by doing something about it … not that you can do anything,’ he taunted Ichimatsu’s total helplessness. ‘But just in case …’

Ichimatsu felt a creep, like hot wind from a bonfire kissed the back of his neck. Every tiny hair lifted, quivering on end. Then a pair of arms encased him from behind. One hand slid over his eyes while the other grabbed his shoulder, forearm clamping over his chest. Tugged hard against the demon’s burning presence, Ichimatsu gasped. But not before a second set of arms grabbed him, snaking over his mouth and hooking his waist.

More and more arms seized him, caging him, melting together to bag Ichimatsu in darkness. Smothered by heat and pressure, he tried to struggle—let him go … let him the fuck go …

But Ichimatsu shut down in seconds, seething with despair. Fuck, the demon was right. How had he
thought for a second … that he could’ve saved anyone …

Gone limp, the demon held Ichimatsu’s head under. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think … his revelations suffocated, greying out to empty static. Bound, gagged and blinded, the last Ichimatsu sensed before darkness swallowed him whole was satisfaction as his demon watched him drown.

***

A satisfied smirk erased the Doll’s frown. What had snatched his attention? Anything that could interrupt his dishing out torment had to be big. Osomatsu tried to think. But his brain cells had given up everything but base function, sluggishly sparking just to keep him alive. A part of him that didn’t require conscious thought hoped his lens paused its panicked display of Osomatsu’s empty health bar and intense diagram of injury stats and infection levels long enough to record that odd look on the Doll’s face. For Choromatsu and Ahn to pore over later.

You know … once they’d cremated him. Because the Doll of Darkness wouldn’t be put off dissecting his plaything for long. ‘Don’t fret, you know how I … You have my full …’

He brushed his blade’s edge against Osomatsu’s mask, following the curve of hidden lips.

‘… and undivided attention.’

The tainted sword angled over him as though wielded by shadow. He wouldn’t look away, he wouldn’t look … Osomatsu’s head flopped back, ruining his resolve. Desperate screams buzzing in his ears and expecting nothing but the agonising death promised him … how could anything be more agonising than this? But if anyone could manage it … it was … the Doll …

The wakizashi flashed, slicing down.

_Crash!

Magic clashed on metal, shaking every heart in the arena. People cried out, skin exploding in goosebumps and hands clamping over ears. Osomatsu’s whole hand twitched, unable to join in, the unearthly impact grating his systems as they shut down … crap, he’d shut his eyes again.

He forced them open one last time before he passed out. Someone stood over him. Someone new. Someone bright. Jutted over the shallow heaves of Osomatsu's chest they brandished something enormous.

A lead pipe? A club? A warhammer?

… No.

An overblown goddamn skull-splitting baseball bat.

Chapter End Notes

_Hooray!!! All the first transformation scenes are done! Now I can reveal what I hear as their transformation music yayayaayyyyyaayyy!!! I've kinda settled on a Lindsey Stirling song for each guardian, as her style ooooooozes badass magical._

The Salamander - Roundtable Rivalry
The Wyvern - Take Flight
The Unicorn - Electric Daisy Violin (benevolent healer Unicorn)/Prism (cold as ice general Unicorn)
The Kraken - Elements
The Sphinx - Sun Skip

I'm still not 100 per cent sold on the Sphinx's selection - also considering Afterglow, though I think that's more a team music thing - but I think Sun Skip wins. Also thought of Master of Tides for the Kraken, but Elements triumphed. If anyone has a more apt Lindsey song for Jyushi's Sphinx - or any other musical transformation thoughts - I'd love too know! Also sweet Ichi does indeed have his own special Lindsey Stirling song ... but I'm not going to tell you what it is. Not yet :DDDDDD

Also because I'm a young ARMY and over-excitable they all get BTS songs. My choices for them are:

Osomatsu - Not Today (Fire is maybe a little too obvious ...)
Choromatsu - Dope (my sister thought of this one and I was like ... heh .... true :D)
Todomatsu - DNA (Spring Day also springs to mind, but I think DNA wins for now)
Karamatsu - Blood, Sweat and Tears ( ... or Fake Love *weep*)
Jyushimatsu - The Best of Me (of all their brightest and most lovely songs, this seems the brightest and loveliest, though I'm wondering if Anpanman now better suits)
Poor Sweet Ichimatsu - Don't Leave Me (because I'm a terrible person)

Sorry for going on ... when I like things, I like them hard.

See you next chapter!
Spectrum Guardians Unite

Chapter Notes

Some lovely action for you in this one :DDD I'm not 100 percent confident with all of Jyushi's stuff, honestly. I don't think he's given me quite this level of uncertainty before; usually I'm pretty in tune with Jyushi. And things in general seem maybe a little dragged out and everywhere ... I really hope it isn't not all bad, but I might forgive myself if it is a bit scatty and confused - there's still a lot going on that I'm trying to keep track of :) Please forgive me too! Also just about my favourite Wyvern moment to date coming up! We've been building up to this throughout the past few chapters ... it's gonna be good :DDD

You might have noticed, I went back and adjusted a few chapter titles throughout the fic. That was a little on a whim, but it was annoying me. The chapter list looks much tidier now :) 

Also I'm so ridiculously excited - Snowyh2o has been doing the most incredible spectrum guardian art! I love it so much, you've got to check out their Salamander and Kraken - the Kraken is my current phone background :DDD

I know this arc has been a bit of a slog, but we're almost there! Thank you so much for reading, I can't wait to see what you think of this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘GET AWAY FROM MY NIISAN!’

Jyushimatsu levered the wakizashi up and away from Osomatsu. Exhilarated from his flying leaps up and into the stadium (he’d shocked police officers and thrilled the crowds that grew outside with his sudden appearance) he dipped and barged with his shoulder, shunting not-Ichimatsu back.

Almost stumbling—almost surprised—the dark man wearing Ichimatsu fell back a few paces. A calculating look overwrote his features as he took in the topaz warrior. Slowly. Inch by inch, his eyes drew all over Jyushimatsu, top to yellow-booted toes.

Then he grinned. Not-Ichimatsu grinned so hard his face could’ve fallen off.

‘And,’ he breathed. ‘The Sphinx has finally joined the fray.’

‘Look, there’s a yellow one!’

‘There’s another spectrum guardian?!’

‘YEAH! GO, YELLOW, GO!’

Baseball fans were expert cheerers. Jyushimatsu was ecstatic, that they gave it their all to cheer for him. But he couldn’t be distracted. Ducking down, he checked on Osomatsu. ‘Niisan?’ Jyushimatsu shook his shoulder. ‘Niisan, are you okay?’

Osomatsu didn’t answer him. He didn’t even move—breathing shouldn’t look so hard, should it? Oh no oh no … Scared for him, Jyushimatsu saw Osomatsu’s neck and one mauled hand were sticky
with black stuff that made his nostrils want to cave in. It wasn’t just the smell. It was the wrong.

Pulling a face and pushing his lips up beneath his mask to block his nose, Jyushimatsu crouched over his brother and hefted his bat, muscles locked and loaded. Eyes honed on not-Ichimatsu.

Ready.

Set.

Go.

‘I know you, of course,’ not-Ichimatsu was saying. Invisible hands sewing his smoking uniform back together, he crossed his arms and leaned back. Was there an invisible wall too, that supported him wherever he slouched? ‘But perhaps proper introductions are in order. I am the Doll of Darkness, blood servant to my Lord Takuu, conqueror of this little planet and Supreme Warlord of the Liberation Force. You get the idea.’

The Doll made a fancy bow, even deeper than CEOs on TV when their companies messed up big time. But a bow was only polite if you meant it. ‘And you are?’

‘I’m Matsuno Jyushimatsu, nice to meet you!’ Jyushimatsu burbled at the invitation. He clamped his mouth shut too late.

‘He can’t hear you,’ Mei reassured. ‘Your mask caught that.’

Phew. Catching his relieved sag himself, Jyushimatsu met the Doll’s black-black eyes and declared exactly who he was with his own.

‘I’m the roaring berserker of virtue! I’m the Sphinx! And I’m a hero, just like my brothers!’

The Doll barked a laugh. Cuts healed over at his wrists, burns scarring into whole white skin beneath blood that dried and flaked like rust. He cracked his neck, grimace disguised as a smirk—the Doll’s backbone wasn’t happy with him. And he’d transformed half of Tokyo Dome into zombie slaves. That’d take a lot out of anyone. The Doll was tired. But he was definitely still dangerous.

‘And the Sphinx is every bit as mute as their allies. So sad. I wanted a proper chat out of at least one of you.’

So the Doll of Darkness was not-Ichimatsu and not-Ichimatsu was Ichimatsu’s evil double and Ichimatsu was …

Puzzle pieces slotted together and waiting, Jyushimatsu propelled backwards for his first alarming look at the big picture: the Doll of Darkness was Ichimatsu’s evil double. The Doll of Darkness lived inside Ichimatsu. Making him sick. Driving him mad. Stealing his skin …

Jyushimatsu knew all this. But he hadn’t connected all these awful dots, one very simple truth completely overlooked. Maybe he’d been trying to protect himself. But now it was out.

Jyushimatsu’s heart jammed.

Ichimatsu! His niisan! His best friend in the whole wide world! If Jyushimatsu hurt the Doll of Darkness, he’d hurt Ichimatsu too!

But he couldn’t let Ichimatsu hurt … no! Jyushimatsu wouldn’t let the Doll use Ichimatsu to hurt their brothers! If Ichimatsu ever found out, he’d never forgive himself!
‘So.’

The Doll brought his hands together. His clap cracked through his gloves, giving Jyushimatsu a startle.

‘The Sphinx will fight for the beaten Salamander? Not the wisest decision, but I’ve been told to expect anything but wisdom from you.’

Jyushimatsu didn’t waver. Wise or not, he’d fight for his brothers every day for the rest of his life. ‘You’re not gonna hurt them ever …’

*What if the Doll recognised him?*

Jyushimatsu stopped working.

‘Jyushimatsu?’ Mei asked after too many endless frozen seconds, his voice urgent. ‘Kid, what’s the problem? Can you hear me? Jyushimatsu?’

‘Brother?’ said Karamatsu. He was somewhere behind the portal. Surrounded by monsters. And zombies. Jyushimatsu had come to help. But his dynamic everything had ground to a halt. ‘Jyushimatsu, can you hear me?’

‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu!’ Ahn’s tiny voice tumbled through Mei and Karamatsu. ‘Please, you cannot just stand there …’

‘MOVE!’ Todomatsu shrieked over them all. ‘Niisan, what are you doing?!’

‘Hello?’

The Doll took half a step towards Jyushimatsu and raised his hand in a vigorous wave. ‘And the Sphinx has fallen off the planet. I think the Alliance chose a dud,’ the Doll announced when Jyushimatsu didn’t even blink. The monsters’ deep laughter boomed. All around the stadium aliens cackled at the Sphinx’s vacant panic.

‘So much for the bravery of guardians,’ they mocked. ‘Better a brave fool than a spineless one. The legendary Sphinx cowers before the might of the Liberation Force!’

Jyushimatsu just stood there, taking the ridicule like his spirit had left him. Or he’d taken a bigger tumble than usual and had the wind knocked right out of him. He was waiting to catch his breath so he could keep trucking on. But he was still waiting. And waiting.

‘Jyushimatsu? Jyushimatsu, talk to us!’

The Doll didn’t recognise him. Jyushimatsu’s train of thought careened helter-skelter. If he lived in Ichimatsu, he’d seen all the sextuplets. He didn’t recognise the others, right? But Jyushimatsu knew! He knew the Doll’s secrets, he knew what he was doing to Ichimatsu—he’d seen the Doll turn into Ichimatsu right before his eyes! What if that made things different? What if transforming into the Sphinx was the biggest mistake Jyushimatsu had ever made? And he’d made so many mistakes, so many.

Joy at his magical metamorphosis flip-flopped to total dismay. If the Doll recognised him, Jyushimatsu wouldn’t just give himself away. He’d get his brothers in trouble, too. Then Earth would be taken over, they’d never be able to save Ichimatsu … he’d ruin everything! Why hadn’t he told his brothers that someone dark lived in Ichimatsu? Choromatsu and Ahn were so clever, they’d have figured out it was the Doll.
Jyushimatsu was a fool. Just like the aliens said. Like everyone said. He was such a fool …

‘Jyushimatsu, can you hear me? If you can destroy the portal, do it. Before he …’

Somehow Choromatsu was the only one who found him. The portal glowed behind Jyushimatsu, grown straight out of the pitcher’s mound. Without thinking, he swung around, hurling his bat and all his brute force straight into the astral doorway.

The crash almost knocked him flying. Vibrations rocked the ground, pulsing through scattered crystal. His arms jarred and numb, Jyushimatsu’s bones hummed hard.

‘Well, they’re not completely broken. But it might take a teensy bit more than that,’ said the Doll. His eyes danced as Jyushimatsu tottered, hunting down balance. The aliens murmured among themselves, suddenly nervous. That was a big swing.

‘It’s okay,’ Choromatsu was saying. Glued to his bat, Jyushimatsu finally prised one hand free. Smacking at his ears, he shook his head hard to knock the ringing out of them. ‘I can do it. I just need a few more minutes to …’

Jyushimatsu’s head jumbled. Why weren’t his legs working? He had to do something! But if being the Sphinx meant he had to hurt Ichimatsu … he didn’t want to hurt him, he wouldn’t hurt him … what was he going to do?

‘Well, this is an anticlimax,’ said the Doll when Jyushimatsu made no move. ‘I didn’t actually expect you to barge in with no more plan than looking good. On an related topic,’ the Doll switched gears, eyeballing Jyushimatsu’s costume. ‘That is the most garish colour I’ve ever had the misfortune of seeing.’

Jyushimatsu’s toes crept unconsciously to better cover Osomatsu—a plan. That’s what he needed. Jyushimatsu’s desperate tailspin of thought inverted—a plan, a plan, he needed a plan …

Protect Osomatsu. Give Choromatsu time. Don’t hurt Ichimatsu. That was Jyushimatsu’s plan. It was a good plan.

So why was he still stuck?

‘Alarming shade of yellow aside,’ the Doll went on, voice ringing out for the entire stadium to hear. ‘It seems you’re really not the brightest, are you?’

Jyushimatsu shrank into his shoulders. He’d shrugged off worse since high school, but never with such a huge audience. And never when his motor kept stalling, leaving him defenceless. Muscles stronger than they’d ever been, Jyushimatsu's heart hadn’t felt so weak in a long time.

‘Come on, Yellow! Snap out of it! We believe in you!’

‘So the Sphinx has shoulders for days,’ the Doll raised his voice over the uplift of cheers. Supporters in the stands spurred Jyushimatsu on, drowning out the aliens’ renewed jeers. ‘But no head worth propping up. How will you dig yourself out of this one—show us the inner workings of that incredible mind of yours,’ he pushed buttons that would’ve sent grade 9 Jyushimatsu scurrying to hide behind the school sports sheds for the rest of the day … hide, hide, he had to hide!

So badly shaken, Jyushimatsu was still ashamed of himself. But finding somewhere to bunker down with his arms wrapped around his head won out. A dugout would do, he could huddle down there. Just as soon as he got his legs working. ‘Come on, Sphinx. Impress me with your …’
‘Enough of your strutting.’

A uptight voice crackled from the nearest exit. A muscly alien with a funny-looking axe squinted from their guard post. One eye on Jyushimatsu. Six on the Doll.

‘You have your orders,’ they said. ‘The fifth guardian has appeared. Remove yourself from this situation, or I will have you removed.’

Jyushimatsu blinked. The Doll of Darkness wasn’t in charge? What did the muscly alien mean, remove himself?

‘He’s under orders not to fight guardians. Not that he always follows orders …’

Ahn’s whisper reached him through the heady buzz of taunts, cheers, and his frantic brothers trying to get through to him. His brain could’ve been lodged in a beehive—the sound, not the sting. But he’d feel more than a sting soon if he didn’t start moving. Come on, start, start!

‘You took some time to exert authority, Lieutenant—I almost forgot you were here. But you can’t be serious,’ the Doll said. He flung out an arm at Jyushimatsu; his cape snapped with the motion. ‘The Sphinx has all but bitten the dust for us, and you’re sidelining me?’

‘I will not repeat myself,’ the lieutenant repeated themselves. ‘Retreat now. That’s an order.’

‘I was under the impression you were acting in a supervisory capacity only.’

‘Do not test me, Doll.’

‘I cower in the face of your authority, Lieutenant. Truly, I do,’ the Doll yawned, stretching his arms over his head, sword and all. ‘Under ordinary circumstances I wouldn’t dream to disobey your orders.’

‘Wouldn’t you now.’

The lieutenant’s scaly face bunched in a scowl.

‘But if the oh-so-fearless fledgling Sphinx is about to take on them …’

The Doll’s chin angled towards the two stony monsters. Jyushimatsu managed to winch his neck far enough to see they sat on their haunches, wings tucked in like triple-jointed umbrellas. Their shadows swallowed half the field. Karamatsu crouched between them, a nasty cut over one eye and shield up. ‘Jyushimatsu?’ he never stopped trying to reach through the fifth born’s panic freeze and pull him out. But Karamatsu’s eyes kept flickering back to Osomatsu. Crumpled at Jyushimatsu’s feet, he hadn’t moved at all.

‘ … and let’s not forget about them …’

The Doll indicated the aliens on guard duty. Far across the stadium, a jittery Yakyuu’s claws were busy magicking their forcefield again. Could Yakyuu turn into a monster too? Could all of them? That had to be at least …

Jyushimatsu gulped. A lot of monsters.

‘… and twenty-odd thousand slaves single-handedly, I’d much rather watch.’

The Doll sauntered forward a step. ‘Keep your distance.’
One of the monster’s maws grated open. They spoke so low Jyushimatsu felt decibels roll in his stomach.

‘Keep your scales on,’ the Doll drawled. Striding straight past Jyushimatsu—he feinted at the frozen Sphinx on the way, his smile a spreading rash—and hopped to grab the rippling top of the portal. ‘See,’ he said, hoisted himself up and legs dangling over the entrance to another world. ‘This one’s not firing on all engines. Don’t worry, firecracker,’ he crooned down at Osomatsu’s crumple. ‘We’ll finish what we started soon.

‘I’m out of the way, aren’t I? Don’t drag me back to my master’s halls,’ the Doll wheedled. The lieutenant darkened. Jyushimatsu shuffled to put himself between Osomatsu and the Doll. The movement was gut instinct and literally all he could do. Someone tell him what to do, please please please …

‘I trust you aren’t so rude as our very important and recently-promoted friend Lieutenant Souudai. Are you, Lieutenant Muunou?’

He wriggled an eyebrow as the aliens shared more murmurs. They were edgy. So were the monsters. The Doll was a slave, Jyushimatsu remembered someone saying. But he was more powerful than they were. None of them wanted to drag him anywhere.

‘Stay at your posts,’ Lieutenant Muunou snapped. ‘I am in command here! Soldiers Banshuuishi and Kaijuuzo can handle one frightened guardian. You,’ they shifted attention from their troops, eyeing the Doll with wary distaste. ‘Watch your mouth, or the first thing I’ll do when I drag you through that portal is chain you to a post.’

The Doll pouted. ‘Oh, come on. I won’t take it upon myself to step in, I promise. And I’ll be sure to go into fine detail with Lord Takuu just how well you’ve kept my shenanigans to a minimum. Now, soldiers!’ he said. He thrust his wakizashi at Jyushimatsu’s chest from above. ‘Have at them!’

‘We take no orders from you,’ one monster rumbled. But the other’s wings rustled, more hesitant. They looked to the lieutenant.

‘I am in command of this experiment,’ Lieutenant Muunou repeated, pointy jaw gritted. ‘Do not think your status as Lord Takuu’s pet gives you any…’

‘If you won’t order them to attack the Sphinx,’ the Doll interrupted. Tilted back on his perch, he glanced over his shoulder. ‘Would you at least order them to finish their tussle with the Kraken before they drag the Salamander to safety?’

All attention on the Doll and the shiny new guardian who quaked in his boots, Karamatsu sneaked to do just that. Brushing Jyushimatsu’s arm in support as he rushed past—“You can do this, brother! Believe in yourself, as I believe in you!”—he had Osomatsu half pulled over his shoulders. Their big brother’s head lolled, his dead faint a dead weight.

‘Soldier Kaijuuzo!’ the lieutenant squawked. ‘I give you the honour of bringing our Lord Takuu their heads!’

The more talkative monster roared, wingspan clipping dozens of zombies to the ground as they took off. They shot straight at the exposed guardians. Their jagged claws glinted in the floodlights, zooming closer and closer. Bigger and bigger. Time flexed strangely. Karamatsu looked desperately over his shoulder. He had his hands full of their brother, he couldn’t get his shield up in time. Come on, Jyushimatsu! He tried again and again to wrench his feet from the grass. Work, work … why wouldn’t he work?!
Kaijuuzo was coming. Too fast too fast, oh, no no no … Jyushimatsu’s eyes squeezed shut. He should’ve known he’d screw this up. He always screwed everything up, he was a disaster! His heart knocked against his ribs harder than his knees knocked together. He was afraid, he was so afraid …

BUT HE DIDN’T CARE!

Jyushimatsu sprang to life. He’d fit inside one of those giant fists and still have room to bounce around, if Kaijuuzo didn’t squeeze to squish. But Jyushimatsu smashed through his fears. If the Doll recognised him, then he’d doom the universes. If the monster caught him, then they’d squash him. If/then, if/then … Jyushimatsu didn’t have time for if/thens! They didn’t help, so he threw them away, get off his shoulders—nothing would drag him down! What happened always happened. And right now, Jyushimatsu decided what happened.

Kaijuuzo dived. Swollen with self-belief restored, Jyushimatsu coiled into a spring and shoved into the air. ‘YEEEEEAAHHHHH!!!!’

Two boot-shaped holes crumbling behind him, he swung with enough concentrated oomph to knock a city block halfway to Jupiter. With an apocalyptic crash, his studded bat smashed straight into the monster’s shoulder. He’d been aiming for the glinting crystal on their forehead … but oh well!

The monster’s arm broke apart. Howling, Kaijuuzo dropped to their knees. Stadium rocked and rubble raining down, their entire arm crumbled to nothing. Jyushimatsu fizzed with excitement. ‘Whoa! Did you see that?’

Banshuuishi balked. So did the soldiers. Lieutenant Muunou’s pointed jaw dropped. Jyushimatsu had done that! Look what he could do, watch him go! Watch them go!

‘Oh, very nice,’ the Doll said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands as the crowd whistled and applauded. ‘Label me impressed, exhilarated … maybe a little aroused.’

‘He is so creepy,’ Totty mumbled. He sounded squashed and scared. But he gave a shaky sigh, relieved that Jyushimatsu’s glitch had reset. ‘Great job, Jyushimatsu-niisan. We’re coming,’ he said when Jyushimatsu wondered what held them up. ‘We’re trying, but we can’t move without …’

‘I trust you,’ said Jyushimatsu.

‘Maybe it’s the soldiers who should be sitting this one out, Lieutenant,’ the Doll suggested over the fractured monster’s moans. Kaijuuzo clutched at the crumbling knob of their shoulder. Shocked the reanimated Sphinx had left one of them in pieces with one hit, neither monster moved as the Kraken flew across the stadium.

‘Go, go, go,’ Jyushimatsu chanted as Karamatsu soared over thousands of blank faces, Osomatsu in his arms. ‘Yes!’ he exalted, waving his bat in the air, their big brother ferried to safety. The crowd whooped. Jyushimatsu whooped back with his entire body. Jumping up and down, he worked the stands (and himself) into a frenzy.

‘Lieutenant Muunou?’ said the Doll, as delicate as Jyushimatsu wasn’t. ‘Any orders? You’re the one who keeps insisting you’re in charge.’

The Doll tweaked an innocent smile across the field. The Lieutenant’s jaw still dagged slack. Their eyes ping-ponged between Jyushimatsu and the monster’s he’d just operated on with a comically-oversized baseball bat. The soldiers guarding exits flinched at the thought of becoming his next target.
‘Everyone’s waiting for you to make a call, Lieutenant,’ the Doll sang out. ‘If one lonely guardian
scares you, might I suggest you join me in retreat? This is predominantly an experiment, after all. Not
worth losing so many …’

His eyes trailed around the stadium, taking in the ranks with a nasty smirk.

‘… fine soldiers. We’ve accomplished all we can here. Why don’t we cut our losses …’

The Doll made a slashing motion. Thousands of zombies jolted back to their right minds.

‘… and pick up the pieces later?’ he finished over the onset of screams, the Doll’s freed victims
scared and confused to find themselves on the field. Some were hurt, bruised and aching from being
forced to fight. Jyushimatsu’s hearing was much better now he was magical. He could pick out every
one of their cries. ‘Lieutenant? What do you …’

‘What do you think you’re doing? Take them back!’ the lieutenant snapped from shock. ‘Get those
slaves through that portal Doll, or so help me …’

The Doll gave a dramatic sigh. ‘Okay, okay.’

He clenched his fist on air. Souls snapped back to him, the zombies’ moment of frightened freedom
over. Their screaming stopped. The Doll doubled over on his perch, one hand pressed to his chest
and breathing hard. That one hurt him. But he grinned through his pants, pushing himself up to give
a sharp click. The stand down order that held his army back ended.

‘Looks like retreat’s a no-go, Sphinx!’ the Doll called out. ‘Sorry about that—Lieutenant Muunou’s
so unreasonable, aren’t they?’

Streaming around the bulk of monsters and rubble, the zombies surged for the portal. They’d rip
through anything that got in their way.

Jyushimatsu got in their way. He reversed until his backside hovered millimetres from crossing
dimensions, planting his weight low and poised to swing. Jyushimatsu could fight an army, just
watch!

The Doll leaned down over him. ‘One knock from that fine bat of yours could liquefy a human’s
insides,’ he said in a mock whisper. ‘How are you at holding back?’

Oh no oh no … was he too strong now? But he had to save them, he couldn’t liquefy their insides!
How was he gonna hit anyone without …

Jyushimatsu tuned inwards. Some deep instinct engraved on the Sphinx’s bones—wow, it felt funny.
Like someone talked to him through his core. Funny, but just right, like a hoodie one size too big.
And somehow Jyushimatsu knew just what to do. His gaze shifted from the soulless army’s advance
to his bat. Then to the ground at his feet.

Ohhhhhhh … That’ll work.

Relaxed loose and springy and combat ready, Jyushimatsu took his eyes off the encroaching horde.
Leaning back, he smiled at the Doll upside-down. His mouth was masked. But his most savage of
grins beamed from his eyes.

The Doll hesitated.

Jyushimatsu didn’t. Because right now a battering ram would break on his chest. And it didn’t matter
if one hit could turn a person to mush. He wasn’t going to hit anyone.

Hollering unheard, Jyushimatsu sprang straight up. Humidity rushed joyous past his cheeks, a loosed cannonball—wowowowow this was amazing! He was alive, he was strong, this was the best! Flipping at his pinnacle and coming down face first, hard and fast, Jyushimatsu hammered his bat straight into the dirt.

The field splintered. A wave of pressure blasted outwards, tossing the mindless ranks backwards in a broad halo. Jyushimatsu twanged from his crouch. Breathless with exhilaration, he bounced out of the crater he’d busted as zombies untangled and shambled to their feet. ‘Come on, I’m waiting, I’m waiting, you wanna fly again …’

Alert on the outside, again Jyushimatsu paused within. He hadn’t noticed when he was stuck. But he smelt every tree in the parks nearby. He was sure the grass and that dirt that held the blades together listened. He felt them stir, listening for him, rock and soil, leaf and root … they wanted to help!

A dull bleep toned. Throwing down another earth-splitting swing—this time a few scattered crystals shattered, he hoped they weren’t important—and blasting a second round of zombies off their feet, Jyushimatsu blinked. There was a pretty yellow lens in front of his eye. He was surprised he hadn’t noticed until … wow, it really was floating! Poking at it, swirly finger paintings Jyushimatsu couldn’t read rewrote into Japanese that he could, glowing bright and beautiful.

‘Why not?’ he asked when the magic glass covered itself in crosses, warning him not to try anything earthy.

‘You weren’t born with your core,’ Mei said, watching over him. ‘Your element still gives you an advantage—like your brother Choromatsu was an ace flier before he could control air. Or how your earth is magnifying shockwaves through the ground right now.’

Jyushimatsu’s eyes were huge. ‘It is?’

‘But that means your chances of using your powers right off the bat are low.’

Jyushimatsu blinked again. ‘So I shouldn’t try?’

‘I didn’t say that,’ Mei laughed. ‘Just be ready with plan B in case nothing happens.’

‘I have a plan, yes, okay!’

Jyushimatsu’s lens had been counting on Mei for back up. It sulked with the expert’s betrayal. ‘Don’t be like that,’ Mei consoled the tech. By the sounds, they already knew each other well.

Jyushimatsu focused on his lens, hopeful. ‘Pleeeeeease?’

Blowing out a huff of tone and data, the tech arranged its priorities to better monitor Jyushimatsu’s core—as best it could. Its readouts fuzzed like the old video tapes he and his brothers had watched as kids. After they’d spilt juice all over them.

One thought of his brothers and Jyushimatsu’s lens drew beyond the swarm of oncoming enemies, highlighting them in gold. Choromatsu and Todomatsu were somewhere off-lens; he spun and found them high in the stands, still fighting through the packed crowds. Karamatsu bunkered down with Osomatsu in the Giants’ dugout. A few zombies had been tossed inside by Jyushimatsu’s pulse. Karamatsu tossed them out again, no problem. But he was trying to look after Osomatsu. The dugout was completely open.
Ooooohh, Jyushimatsu had the best idea!

He didn’t know how. He just knew. But from Jyushimatsu to his core to the earth they called, he could’ve done this a million times. ‘You wanna help, right?’ he enthused, already aligned with his element and completely ignorant of the mayhem that caused dimensions away. Feeling the earth’s eager strain, Jyushimatsu matched it. ‘Then let’s go, let’s go!’

Swivelled to pick the best spot—that’s good, that’s good, right there in the middle of the outfield—Jyushimatsu dug in his feet, dug into his core, and heaved.

A hunk of field bigger than a car shovelled itself free. Zombies tumbled into the crater left behind as Jyushimatsu hefted it up and out. ‘Sooorrrryyyyyyy!’ he shouted. ‘But look, I did it!’

His core a massive extension of his hand, Jyushimatsu wound up and pitched the craggy baseball across the stadium. The Doll leaned out of the way as it hurtled past. ‘Crude,’ he said, straightening his hat. ‘But whatever works.’

‘INCOMING KARAMATSU-NIIIIISAAAAANNNN!!!!’

Jyushimatsu’s lens made a point of showing him the white that exploded around Karamatsu’s eyes. He threw himself over Osomatsu, barely getting his shield up before earth crashed to bury them in the dugout.

‘They’re not buried,’ Jyushimatsu corrected his lens. ‘They’re safe!’

Not 100 percent safe. There were still one or two skinny openings left. But it was a tight squeeze to get in. And he’d dig his brothers out soon, why was his lens so gloomy?

Flipping into the air, Jyushimatsu slammed a third shockwave before any zombie could push too near the portal. He was on guard duty until Choromatsu could break it.

Jyushimatsu chest puffed out. No one would sneak past him.

His lens gave short, sharp beep. ‘What do you mean, am I sure … wow, look at that! That’s a great idea!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed as the tech traced a deep defensive trench circling the pitcher’s mound. Just to make extra extra sure. ‘Thank you!’

Readouts gone shy, his lens gave a grudging bleep to get on with it. ‘Niisan, look!’ Jyushimatsu shouted to any niisan who could marvel and be proud they were brothers. ‘See what I can do?!’

‘Steady, kid,’ warned Mei. ‘Find your centre. Take it slow, stop if you need … Jyushimatsu, are you listening? Can you …’

‘I’m here, watch me go!’

Throwing his bat over his back—it just stuck there! He knew it would!—Jyushimatsu dropped and ploughed his hands straight into the dirt.

No earth had ever been more happy to crack.

His lens was less happy, scrambling to lay out more straightforward plans and steer Jyushimatsu clear of sewers and subways. He tried so hard to follow the dotted lines. But Jyushimatsu was just too excited. Letting loose, his powers tunnelled at breakneck speed—he couldn’t believe what he could do! And if Jyushimatsu was excited, his earth was off the scale. The ground raced to fissure, deep rumbles punctured by snaps and splits and screams.
Wait, screams? Why screams? What’s wrong?

Buried to the elbows, Jyushimatsu was confused. Then he remembered.

This was Japan. They’d been trained to react to earthquakes.

‘Whoa!’ he yelped, wrenching his hands out. ‘Please stop! That’s too much! Nonono … please stop please stop …’

‘Oops,’ the Doll remarked as a frantic Jyushimatsu finally yanked his element back. The tidy trench hadn’t happened. Massive tracts carved carnage like a child dragging a stick through dirt on a cosmic scale. This didn’t even look like a baseball field anymore. A craggy wilderness spread from boundary to boundary, rising and falling and ravaged by a wild maze of ditches. Ditches full of zombies—so many people had fallen in. Oh no ... were they all okay?

Steamrolled by shock, Jyushimatsu surveyed the raw devastation. Something squeezed the pit of his stomach. What had he done?

‘More mallet than a scalpel,’ the Doll noted. ‘This is what happens when something doesn’t come naturally and you try to brute force it. Too bad you didn’t destroy the whole city,’ he added.

‘Shake it off, Jyushimatsu,’ Mei told him as the Doll breathed in the chaos the Sphinx had accidentally wreaked. Jyushimatsu’s lens took pity, scanning the pits to show him everyone who’d tumbled were banged up, but breathing. ‘That was incredible! Messy,’ he wouldn’t lie. Jyushimatsu was glad. Lying only made it worse. ‘But you’ll learn control. Just … keep magic to a minimum until then.’

‘Okay. But I … I broke Tokyo Dome.’

Jyushimatsu’s lips quivered. Tokyo Dome was his second favourite place ever and he’d broken it. ‘Cheer up,’ he still tried to make his element feel better. It only wanted to help. But it was like Jyushimatsu. Sometimes it forgot its own strength. ‘We’ll get the hang of it.’

Jyushimatsu was scared to try again. Controlling himself was never something that came easy. But it would come.

At least there definitely was a trench! Jyushimatsu brightened, seeing the alien soldiers’ horror all across the stadium. The monsters had taken off as earth shook apart beneath them, wing beats pumping plumes of dust all over the field. The partially-busted Kaijuuzo flapped lopsided, their stony face agape. Zombies scrambled, trying to claw up from twenty different holes. It didn’t look easy. But two sets of dirty pink nails already clamped over the lip of the pit right in front of him.

‘I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Lieutenant,’ the Doll called out gaily. He didn’t hate it, he definitely didn’t. ‘But you may be running out of options. Still no plans to retreat?’

‘A few holes in the ground and a fledgling Sphinx can’t hold off 20,000 slaves forever,’ Lieutenant Muunou forced through gritted—did they have teeth?

‘Do we have forever?’ the Doll fired back, laughing as Jyushimatsu helped the quick-climbing zombie slide back down with a nudge from his bat. ‘Besides, I reckon they’ve got a shot. Hmmmm,’ he hummed, gone thoughtful. ‘Perhaps we should have put Souudai in charge after all. They’re a failure in the field as well, but at least they can improvise.’

Muunou’s beady eyes bulged. ‘You insolent little …’
’But did the Spectrum Alliance really send a Sphinx with an acquired core all this way with no training?’ the Doll mused, pretending not to hear Lieutenant Muunou’s spluttering rage. ‘They must be more desperate than we thought. I’d recommend you ask the Wyvern for a few tips. They’ve got control up the wazoo—where are they, anyway?’ he asked. He looked up like he expected the Wyvern to swoop overhead at any moment. ‘And your ravishing young leader in the short shorts? They’re missing one stellar party.’

‘Don’t worry!’ Jyushimatsu warbled cheerfully. ‘They’ll be here!’

He smiled upside-down at the Doll again. This time he was ready. He swung his legs up and around the portal and leaned back, returning a dark copy of Jyushimatsu’s inverted smile.

Unruffled, Jyushimatsu took in the situation. The closest trench cracked its way around the portal. As they clambered from pits further out, zombies who lumbered straight for the glowing gateway would slip into this one. The outer trenches slowed them down. But this was the final line of defence. Besides Jyushimatsu.

‘Could you help me?’ he asked his grudging lens, darting to push another zombie gently tumbling. ‘Please please please?’

The tech caved with one more “please”, setting a blinking dot for every zombie. Jyushimatsu would know exactly when someone crept and climbed near the top. His lens gave a sullen bleep. Jyushimatsu bleeped back. He could tell already, they were going to work great together.

The Doll’s snarky commentary rolling right off his back, the Sphinx swung about, five dots blinking on rapid fire. He pinged around the portal, shaking their respective zombies loose. Already more vacant faces pushed up over the bluffs.

The game was on. Jyushimatsu was going to win.

***

Karamatsu crouched with his shield over his head and his older brother hugged against him. The ground shook. Dirt showered from Jyushimatsu’s makeshift barricade. But it didn’t cave in—of course it didn’t. Whether consciously or not, Jyushimatsu was ever vigilant. He’d do nothing to compromise their safety.

The earth trembled again. Hairline fractures forked through the cement beneath Karamatsu’s boots. Scattered dirt particles and pebbles rattled, migrating across the dugout with the shifting tremors.

‘Whoa, Jyushimatsu,’ Karamatsu murmured, taken by awe as his lens—its static much improved by the blockade dividing him from their dark enemy—displayed what was happening outside. A touch more nervous for their earthen wall’s structural integrity while Jyushimatsu’s element ran rampant, Karamatsu pulled Osomatsu more securely beneath the protection of his shield. Karamatsu would take every chance on Jyushimatsu if he chanced only himself. He was more reluctant to risk another. Particularly a brother already broken.

So the earth moved for him with no experience and no training. Who said Jyushimatsu wasn’t a natural? His inclination might be acquired, but Jyushimatsu remained the exception to every rule. Karamatsu smiled a little, imagining the frenzy that must grip the Spectrum Alliance. But he’d never expected less from their fifth born. This tectonic display was just a little more … robust … than he’d expected.

Chiding himself that he’d allowed any doubt to mar his belief in the fifth born—this was their
Jyushimatsu! There wasn’t a day in his life he’d been less than robust—and more than satisfied with the safety of the refuge the Sphinx provided, Karamatsu lowered his shield. Jyushimatsu had more than enough time to bridle his wild element. But right now time was of the essence.

‘Osomatsu!’ Karamatsu exclaimed, his telepathy low should his brother’s awareness flicker into being. ‘Your poor head!’

Arranging him more comfortably, Karamatsu was about to pour his depths as balm into the horrific wounds when an Alliance expert rushed into his headspace. Not a Kraken expert. It was Niv. One of the Salamander’s team.

‘Leave his head,’ she said, directing Karamatsu to assess his arm and throat. ‘If one slither of that shit touches his heart, with no Unicorn handy it’s game over.’

Sure there was a reason Osomatsu’s team expressed themselves with far more cursing than his own, Karamatsu took his brother’s arm. His battle hoodie was already ruined, courtesy of the Doll. ‘Sorry, brother,’ he still apologised, ripping up his sleeve. Fashioning a few beads of sweat into a sharpened string, he sliced through Osomatsu’s broken gauntlet and cracked what remained off his hand.

What lay beneath was ugly. Karamatsu’s inhale was harsh, surveying the black and bloody mess of his brother’s hand. Tendrils of darkness veined his arm almost to the shoulder, skin an unhealthy hue of mouldy porridge. Tearing his eyes away, Karamatsu checked his brother’s throat. Where the Doll had pierced only oozed a few drops of blood, clogged by choking darkness. Osomatsu’s pulse flickered. Karamatsu didn’t like the thin whistle of his brother’s breath—his airways were in jeopardy!

‘You need to stop the spread,’ one of Karamatsu’s own experts spoke up. ‘Only until Todomatsu can treat him. Can you do that?’

‘Indeed, I can,’ said Karamatsu, the combined skill and experience of all Krakens past and present rising as instinct to guide him. His fingers traced a loop around Osomatsu’s shoulder, just above where the hungry feelers of taint claimed.

Nothing happened. Surprised, Karamatsu tried again, giving his inclination a nudge. Still nothing, Karamatsu’s steady heartbeat picked up—how could nothing be happening? Had he drained his powers again? How could he be so stupid? Darkness clawed to devour Osomatsu’s heart and this so-called brilliant Kraken had rendered himself useless. He was such a idiot …

No.

Karamatsu’s brief alarm levelled out, abuse tuned to background static. He’d never conjured waves on such a large scale before. He was physically and magically exhausted. But his element had dried up. Not of his depths. He’d spent all last week under the instruction of his experts, learning to store a fraction of his inclination for emergencies. His depths were ready and willing. But he had no water. It would take precious minutes to generate enough liquid in sweat to purify for first aid.

And Osomatsu wasn’t the only one running out of time. Hands scrabbled at the edges of their barricade. Dirt rained from the widening gaps, a small contingent of puppets diverted to swarm the Kraken and Salamander while they were vulnerable. Karamatsu peered outside, his lens showing him the sky. Storm clouds swirled low and unbroken. If only it would rain.

Confident he’d figure it out, Karamatsu labelled the encroaching puppets less imminent and focused on Osomatsu’s sickly gasps. The second born’s tender heart wept as his brother twitched, unconscious and agonised. Then a pile of melted metal caught his eye. The chain-link fence
Osomatsu had repurposed as restraints. His makeshift bonds were in pieces, edges ragged and smoking taint from the Doll’s escape. Who knew what terrors Lord Takuu’s darkest puppet might have unleashed had he been free to rampage unchecked? Osomatsu was exceptional in so many ways, but his crowning ability went beyond his firepower. No one could improvise like Osomatsu. He worked best under the pump and on the fly, nothing in reach that he couldn’t fashion anew to turn the tides of battle.

Inspired by his brother’s genius, Karamatsu hunted through the barricaded dugout, lens gleaming to light his way. Five seconds of search and he pounced on a few water bottles rolling on the ground. Two were open and empty, contents already called to fulfill the Kraken’s will. But one bottle of precious water was more than enough—how could he not have thought of this already? He was such an …

Karamatsu never ceased to marvel how easy it was to dismiss internal harassment as the Kraken. But it grew easier no matter the form he wore. That, perhaps, was the true marvel.

Twisting off the cap, Karamatsu siphoned the fresh litre into the Kraken’s wells, making it his own. Purer and brighter and all the better to sooth, Karamatsu fashioned a tourniquet around Osomatsu’s shoulder and tightened it. The watery band compressed and held. The limb below deadened, halting the dark infection’s advance.

But he couldn’t do the same for Osomatsu’s throat—he’d be paralysed! And he needed Osomatsu on his feet. Karamatsu couldn’t leave him here alone—a thick clod of earth broke free, crumbling with the puppets’ mindless assault on their refuge.

‘Any ideas, dear friends?’ he asked of his lens and the guardian experts. His dauntless lens never ceasing its analysis for any possible solution, Niv only said:

‘Keep your hand on it.’

‘Brothers?’ Karamatsu finally had a moment to reach out to Choromatsu and Todomatsu. ‘My sweet angel Ahn? I don’t want to rush you, but …’

Osomatsu pulled into his lap, one of the Kraken’s hands soothed his butchered brain with bright waters while the other pressed to his throat, rallying the healing nature of his element to keep darkness at bay. ‘Osomatsu’s in bad shape. And Jyushimatsu’s alone out there!’

‘You think we don’t know that?’ came Totty’s shrill reply.

‘Well,’ said Karamatsu. ‘There’s no need to bite my head off.’

‘Sorry, Karamatsu-niisan.’

Todomatsu restrained himself, his calm under serious pressure. ‘I’m only teasing,’ Karamatsu was swift to avert misunderstanding. Apparently battle humour was another forte where Osomatsu outstripped him. ‘I never thought you anything but 100 percent appraised of the situation. I only hoped for some sign, to know when your glorious entrance shall sweep us to victory.’

‘Don’t worry, Karamatsu-niisan,’ said Choromatsu. He sounded much further away than Todomatsu. Unnerved, Karamatsu got the distinct impression that the third born was taken by some trance, an ancient mystic that could traverse worlds without taking a single step.

‘You’ll know.’

***
‘This is such a bad idea …’

If they transformed, the Doll, the beasts, the soldiers—even just one of Takuu’s arcanists spying from afar. Someone Liberation Force would notice. They were less likely to notice two nobodies vanish in a crowd. With a prod from the third born, Ahn wrapped the repellent shield that made them all but invisible skin tight. And, as their brothers faced down their enemy, Todomatsu and Choromatsu sneaked through the throng. Elbowing and stepping on toes as they squeezed through, the youngest’s nerves frayed, convinced someone would notice and make a scene.

‘Could they make a bigger scene than this?’

Choromatsu was drier than kindling. Sneering into his brother’s back, Todomatsu hoped for some comment from Ahn, assuring him there was no need to worry. Or maybe a reminder that he was a champion of love and light—something encouraging like that. But Ahn’s needle claws pricked deep into his vest. She was too wound up to comfort him, distraught over Osomatsu and frantic over Jyushimatsu—first his freezing act, then the accidental devastation of his debut battle. They’d barely kept their feet, the Sphinx’s quakes rattling panicked spectators as the outfield shook itself apart.

Pretending he didn’t resent it, that he was scared and Ahn paid more attention to his brothers, Todomatsu said nothing. He forced fear into a grim face, keeping close on Choromatsu’s heels.

He wished he’d spoken up. He wished he could have acted more like the leader he was meant to be. Then maybe he wouldn’t have wound up clinging to a service ladder on a floodlights pole 30 metres straight up.

‘Can we transform yet?’ Todomatsu whimpered, his breath whipped away as gusts tore at his clothes. Ahn didn’t answer, now as distracted by the height as the situation on the field below. Monstrous wing thrashing the air, a gargoyle pulled up far too close, eclipsing them in shadow. Oh no, oh no … the beast was right on top of them! The ruins of wrecked floodlights stood forlorn sentinel diagonally across the stadium. If either monster pulled the same stunt and smashed into the brothers’ pole before they transformed … Todomatsu threw up a little in his mouth.

Blinded to them, the unhurt monster—Banshuuishi, a buried part of Todomatsu had been paying attention—roared and flared their wings, swooping to pluck Jyushimatsu up like carrion. Not sure who he should be more afraid for, Todomatsu glued himself flat to the ladder. ‘Ch-—Choromatsu-—niisan? Can we …’

‘Not yet,’ Choromatsu said, half a dozen rungs above. Todomatsu bristled. Choromatsu didn’t sound scared at all. Not of the long drop. Not of blasts of wind. He didn’t even seen nervous. He wasn’t the Wyvern yet, this just wasn’t normal. Todomatsu would’ve been unsettled by the strangeness that had settled over the third born—stranger than usual, that was—if he weren’t so frightened. This kind of height was nothing when he stepped out in thigh-high white boots, but right now it was death if his fingers slipped. Not looking down, he groaned when Choromatsu did, providing reports on Jyushimatsu’s antics below.

‘He looks like he’s playing an arcade game,’ the third born said. In spite of himself, Todomatsu peeped into his lens. Zipping on a mad trajectory around the jagged trench that bordered the portal and somehow staying ahead of heads that popped over the edge, Jyushimatsu looked less like he was playing an arcade game and more like he was the arcade game. The Doll lounged on his vantage point atop the portal, enjoying the live-action Sphinx pinball.

‘How long can you keep this up?’ he said as Jyushimatsu darted past, pausing half a heartbeat to take a swing at Kaijuuzo. The one-armed beast balked and swerved. But not before the Sphinx took a chunk off their shin. ‘Ouch,’ the Doll grinned, Kaijuuzo wobbling through the air to join
Banshuuishi’s overhead circling. ‘I think they can keep it up for a while,’ he called out to …
Todomatsu’s lens switched view, showing him a heavily-muscled lieutenant. Todomatsu hadn’t been able to see when stuck in the crowd. But this must be the Doll’s latest verbal sparring partner. ‘I don’t deny, this is very entertaining. But how long did you plan to just watch?’

The Doll paused. Five of the lieutenant’s seven eyes twitched. ‘The retreat option remains open.’

The lieutenant snarled. That wasn’t happening. Todomatsu knew that hunger. The lieutenant was too keen to collect—slaves, praise, and anything else that would pave their way to the top.

‘Ah, but I see you’re otherwise engaged,’ the Doll hummed so the whole stadium heard. ‘Let me know when you’re ready to take command. I’ll wait right here. I’m sure nothing adverse to your ambitions will happen in the meantime …’

The lieutenant snarled again, shunting back half a dozen people with the shaft of their axe.
Todomatsu’s heart bounded to see spectators swarmed the blocked exits. Inspired by the guardians and fed up with being held hostage, first a few dozen, then a few hundred, had taken matters into their own hands. Pride for his people bolstering his courage, Todomatsu bombarded them with positive energy as they yelled and shoved against the towering soldiers. Dozens dropped, souls sucked from their bodies by shots of darkness. But they were tiny shots. The Liberation Force’s power reserves were dried up. And the waves of uprising just kept coming.

‘See how you like it,’ Todomatsu hissed, Osomatsu’s bloodied head going under nailed to his memory.

‘Soldiers!’ the lieutenant shouted, showing oncomers the savage blade of their axe. ‘Now is the time to serve your lord and Liberation Force!’

‘Oh no,’ Todomatsu trembled. Fresh souls taken, ten more soldiers curled revoltingly into cocoons. People shrieked, seeing their bodies fold in on themselves, boots leaving the ground and transformative capsules glistening like spilt oil. ‘Oh no, no, no …’

‘Todomatsu?’

Choromatsu had widened the gap; he glanced down from a few body lengths above. ‘How are you doing?’

How long had Todomatsu been gaping at his lens? ‘How do you think I’m doing?’ he snipped, feeling foolish and barely feeling his fingers. He wished they’d stop trembling. Trying to shake off the flood of monsters that would burst into play any minute, the youngest Matsuno tied his thoughts to the next rung. Then the next. Reaching over his head again and again, Todomatsu climbed on, the brothers’ ascent carrying them ever further from the prying eyes of the Liberation Force.

And carrying Choromatsu nearer the soupy sky.

Finally, they reached a tiny maintenance platform. Three times higher than most birds were comfortable nesting, Todomatsu curled into a ball, slippery fingers locked around his knees. ‘Okay,’ Choromatsu spoke like an afterthought, looking over the stadium and Tokyo beyond. ‘Ahn, you can stop now … Ahn? Todomatsu?’

In no state to care what his brother was saying, Todomatsu squeezed his eyes shut when Choromatsu touched his shoulder. Uncommonly patient, the third born extracted a smooshed Ahn from her refuge burrowed in the youngest Matsuno’s chest and eased Todomatsu upright. ‘Come on,’ he said, fringe whipping over his forehead. He brushed it back with an absent hand. ‘I’ll fade right into this, I’ll go
first.’

Choromatsu nodded at the angry clouds and transformed. Disguised by the unbroken storm, all anyone saw was a few extra flashes of lightning. Touching down on the edge of the platform so Todomatsu had plenty of room to sit and shiver—the muggy pre-summer heat was a distant dream up there—Choromatsu coaxed the winds, layering low-slung cloud to hide the the Unicorn’s transformation. Fully aware someone still could see, but infinitely more prepared to deal with that in magical form, Todomatsu relished the surge of confidence as starlight rippled into armour against his skin. That was the Unicorn’s true sparkle: his self-belief. And his bravery.

Todomatsu was brave. It felt good, to remember that.

‘Okay,’ Choromatsu said again. He planted his boots more firmly. ‘Charge me up.’

‘Osomatsu’s hurt,’ Todomatsu reminded. Washed with static, his lens conducted speedy reconnaissance on his scattered guardians. ‘Karamatsu’s patched him up, but … okay,’ he raised his white gloves when Choromatsu’s eyebrow arched into his hood, speaking plainer than words: “Just how stupid do you think I am?” ‘I know you know, Niisan. But I need to save something for him.’

‘I know,’ said Choromatsu, eyeing the storm. ‘Give me everything you can spare.’

Highly aware the Wyvern had never tried anything so dangerous and not about to stop him, Todomatsu brought his powers to gleam in his sceptre—slowly. Carefully. So the magic resembled no more than a determined star through storm cloud. Then he took Choromatsu’s shoulder. Anchoring him, Todomatsu cast the spell directly into his brother.

Choromatsu jolted.

‘Are you all right?’ Ahn fretted. Through the intensifying glow that engulfed them, Todomatsu saw tension clamped hard in Choromatsu’s jaw. But he nodded. Only slightly against his better judgement, the Unicorn pressed his sceptre deep into his brother’s chest. Choromatsu hissed as light cascaded through him, chasms flooding as his powers magnified over and over.

Todomatsu boosted the Salamander all the time. Osomatsu relished the high, an instant refresh and short-term vamping of his firepower. But there was a big difference between a rejuvenating hit and charging to capacity.

‘I’m okay,’ Choromatsu gasped. His shoulders working hard and body made of shakes, he curled forward, gripping his knees. Todomatsu followed his curve, keeping contact. ‘I can do it. I’m …’

Choromatsu’s eyes pulled wide, telepathy choked off in a cry. Todomatsu hesitated. That had to be enough. But, his teeth cemented together, again Choromatsu shook his head. This hurt. A lot. But he could handle it.

‘Honestly?’ he struggled to deepen his breath. ‘It feels … really good.’

Todomatsu winced. He could’ve done without Choromatsu being so honest about that. He had to make this weird … but what wasn’t weird now? Take Todomatsu: he was making excuses for his brother’s weirdness. If that wasn’t weird, what was?

‘It feels good, but it’s … hard to contain,’ Choromatsu shuddered out, senses tweaked far beyond the exhilarating rush Osomatsu described. ‘I …’

Choromatsu spasmed and collapsed. ‘Matsuno Choromatsu!’ Ahn cried. Todomatsu stepped quicksmart on his brother’s gakuran, not about to let him tumble off the platform. Squatting in his
flexible boots, he hauled Choromatsu to safety.

Could this hurt him? As in, permanently? Todomatsu tried to get a read on his brother’s inner workings. Choromatsu’s heart stampeded, brain waves tearing jagged peaks through the Unicorn’s lens. His body already started to wear at the edges, every organ strained to its limits, forced to support so much power all at once. All was within acceptable limits. But Todomatsu clamped his lower lip between his teeth. His lens wasn’t entirely reliable right now.

‘He should be all right,’ Ahn ventured. ‘Just … be careful.’

Their mentor didn’t sound nearly sure enough.

Choromatsu chose that moment to scream. Head snapped back, he thrashed against the platform.

‘I’m calling it,’ Todomatsu said, dislodging sceptre and spell. ‘That’s enough, you …’

Choromatsu seized his wrist. Todomatsu yelped, his grip harder than diamond.

‘No,’ he rasped, chest stalling through every gasp. His eyes squeezed shut. ‘If I’m going to … control the storm … I need …’

Choromatsu broke off, caught in a net of spasms. His words unravelled as they lost all meaning to him. Magic thundered through his circulatory and sinew, a heartbeat from bursting every cell and evaporating the third born into memory. Todomatsu shook his head. Choromatsu wasn’t thinking straight—he could barely breathe, he couldn’t get enough air! Not while his mortal tissues caged a maelstrom. Choromatsu couldn’t take any more, he had to stop, this could kill him …

Then he saw lightning streak beneath the veil of his brother’s eyelids. Spellbound by no work of his own, Todomatsu slowly repositioned his sceptre over Choromatsu’s heart, kneeling beside him. His spell woven anew, Todomatsu again washed them with light.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu, please be careful,’ Ahn swallowed. He wavered with the strain, his own strength diminishing as he built his brother’s to unscalable heights. He had to save enough for Osomatsu … and Choromatsu, in case this stunt left him smoking. And he needed some spare, in case they had to fight their way out of a pinch—their track record was against them. And there had to be hundreds injured down there, what about them?

Todomatsu set his jaw. He’d figure something out. Undeterred, he drained himself to a brimming cupful and, shoving everything he could into the Wyvern, broke his spell.

A speck of sunshine waged lonely battle below, Jyushimatsu charging full tilt in every direction to keep the scrambling puppets at bay while gargoyles held formation in wait of reinforcements. Ten cocoons glistened wet and revolting in the stuttering floodlights. Through his lens, Todomatsu saw the first cracks shoot across their pulsating surfaces. ‘We’re coming, Jyushimatsu-niisan!’

Heart jammed in his throat, Todomatsu counted the moments. This had to work. ‘Choromatsu? Niisan, are you all right?’

Choromatsu made no sound. He could have stopped breathing. For an instant Todomatsu was petrified that he had. But then Choromatsu opened his eyes. ‘Oh … okay.’

Todomatsu clutched his sceptre against the ruffles on his chest. Even the sound of Choromatsu’s fractured breath frothed with power, enough to light up a few dozen gods of thunder. Electricity spluttered at his fingertips. Lightning pulsed, illuminating his skin from within.
Oh, this would work, this would definitely work …

His crackling hands weaving wind and not wasting another moment, Choromatsu fed the storm. Thunder rumbled in instant response, chained flashes rallying across the sky. Osomatsu never shut up about last year when the Wyvern harassed the storm at the beach, skating on updrafts and directing lightning. He’d only managed due to adrenaline, Choromatsu always clarified. And pressure. He couldn’t do anything like that under normal circumstances.

This wasn’t normal. He didn’t even need to skate to stay aloft. Choromatsu’s feet left the platform, rising amid the intensifying violence of his tempest. He laced calm control through writhing weather and called on the clouds to break, drawing its cataclysmic potential into his arsenal.

Todomatsu clutched his whipping hood; rain streamed off it, the downpour a bottomless bucket emptied over the entire ward. Spectators cried out, suddenly soaked. Ahn tunneled into the refuge of his tunic, Todomatsu heard only the shrillest screams under the roar of wind. Thousands pointed skyward, gaping at the roiling mass of bruised heavens. ‘The Sphinx isn’t alone, Lieutenant!’ the Doll called out. ‘Can our reinforcements best theirs?’

More cracks raced across the ten transmuting shells. The besieged lieutenant bellowing orders Todomatsu could only assuming the cocooned monsters heard, he caught the Sphinx staring.

‘Don’t be distracted,’ Todomatsu sent an order Jyushimatsu’s way. Somehow it felt far stranger to give Jyushimatsu orders than their older brothers. Jyushimatsu obediently hurled his bat into the ground. Leaving behind another crater for his collection, the concentrated pressure knocked fifty-odd puppets clambered from his trenches sprawling.

Choromatsu floated higher and deeper into the storm’s dangerous embrace. Wreathed by lightning, his arms flung out, head lolling as he bridled it. Todomatsu peeked through his lens at his brother’s face: splattered by raindrops, Choromatsu’s eyelids fluttered strangely, the rest of him suspended deathly still. He poured everything he was into the storm. Todomatsu almost cringed, clutching Ahn and heart playing percussion on his ribs as his older brother not only commanded the storm. He merged with it.

‘It’s the Wyvern!’ came Banshuuishi’s guttural cry, finally spotted the emerald speck through the storm.

‘Really? I couldn’t tell.’

The Doll leaned back, finding the Unicorn balanced high under floodlights. His distant smile so crooked Todomatsu could see it without his lens, the Doll saluted him. Todomatsu glared majestically back.

Four of the lieutenant’s eyes whipped from their skirmish. Then they widened, jaw dropping as lightning lit up the sky. ‘Destroy the Wyvern!’ they squawked. Bursting from their holding pattern, Banshuuishi and Kaijuuzo took off like winged missiles, closing in on their tiny green target.

But it was too late.

‘Get away from the portal!’ Todomatsu shouted. Without a shadow of doubt—see, that’s how a soldier was supposed to act, the Unicorn saved a snide thought for the Salamander—Jyushimatsu fell back, leaving the interdimensional gateway exposed. ‘Get everyone down!’

Unable to hack anything himself, Todomatsu called on his experts to earn their wage. A second later his clever team had hijacked the stadium’s massive screens through the Unicorn’s lens. Slashed by
static, the message was unmistakable:

“WATCH OUT! TAKE COVER!”

Scrambling and screaming, Tokyo Dome obliged.

Lightning branched in spidery webs over Choromatsu’s head. His arm shot out. Thunder clapped loud enough to rupture sewers. Fur plastered to her tiny frame, Ahn huddled into Todomatsu’s chest as their platform vibrated. Comforting the quivering bump beneath his tunic, Todomatsu watched as Choromatsu threw one hand down like he hurled a lance. Silver streaked the clouds, electricity coiled into a heavenly weapon. The monsters threw on hasty brakes, taking cover as the Wyvern, his every angle and charge calculated to the nth degree, hurled the sizzling bolt of lightning …

Straight through the portal.

A few hairs on the Doll’s head fluttered as it streaked past. But that was about all the damage it … Choromatsu missed? Todomatsu couldn’t believe it. How could he miss, this was Choromatsu they were talking about!

‘Well, I’ll give you an eight for stealth!’

Dumbfounded spectators murmured at the green guardian’s slip up as the Doll swung his legs, jumping to stand on top of the entirely unharmed portal and shout up at them. ‘But I’m whittling you down to a two for skill. Sloppy, sloppy—that’s just not like you, Wyvern! Ten out of ten for style, though! Impressive light show, very good!’

Jyushimatsu stared again, his neck craned and face inverted from the shocked Todomatsu’s vantage point. With distance and his dawn grey mask between them, the youngest couldn’t see his brother’s mouth. But he knew it was wide open.

‘Why don’t you come down here?’ the Doll suggested with upbeat air of a sadist offering a starving man a single sweet. ‘Join the party. The Sphinx gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “tear it up” …’

‘What are you doing?!’ Todomatsu screamed at Choromatsu.

‘Matsuno Todomatsu!’

Claws pinning him through his gauzy ruffles, Ahn seized her Unicorn’s mind and held him. ‘A leader must have faith in their soldiers! Trust your brother!’

Choromatsu didn’t hear them—he didn’t ignore them. Todomatsu knew ignoring. This was definitely not hearing. Choromatsu didn’t hear the Doll either, as he offered advice for failure to perform. ‘Not that I’ve experienced this myself, but I’ve heard …’ The Wyvern hovered, locked in concentration, a furrow to his brow and gaze sketching a perfect line to the portal. His fingers flexed and stretched like he tested something, or measured.

A little less frantic even as mutative gunk sprayed, cocoons starting to fissure, Todomatsu sneaked into his mind, trying to see exactly what Choromatsu …

‘There.’

Todomatsu squealed and tumbled from Choromatsu’s mental space as his brother threw both his arms down.
His own consciousness infused with the storm sent streaking through the portal, Choromatsu tapped into the maelstrom that raged in Lord Takuu’s domain. Todomatsu went weak at his magical knees. The storm on the other side made this deluge look like a little April shower.

It was official. Choromatsu had lost his mind.

Stressed to breaking point, the Wyvern gritted his jaw and scooped upwards with enough concentrated traction to dislodged an entire convoy from quicksand, hauling the typhoon from the Liberation Force’s realm straight into theirs. The Doll of Darkness blasted across the ruined field as the arcane structure beneath him ruptured. The link between worlds collapsed in one terrifying heartbeat, unable to withstand the force of wind, electricity and unadulterated pressure.

‘JYUSHIMATSU! ONE MORE TIME!’

Bravery his mantle, Todomatsu almost quailed, Choromatsu’s voice roaring through their collective consciousness. No more prompt needed, Jyushimatsu hurtled headlong into the maelstrom, fighting a world of wind and rain concentrated in a few deadly metres squared. Mighty silhouette lit by lightning, he raised his bat high over his head and brought it down, a monstrous hammer of the gods.

The portal exploded. The ground throbbed, impact radiating outward as cracks sluiced through earth and concrete, Tokyo Dome itself scarred as everything glass shattered.

At the base of a crater once the Giants’ pitcher’s mound, Jyushimatsu lowered his bat to drag at his side.

An eerie calm settled over the storm-washed stadium, the otherworldly titan of nature swallowed straight back into its dimension as the doorway imploded. Todomatsu shook his head, the mass destruction in windpower trapped before it could unleash itself on Tokyo and test the true extent of the Wyvern’s control. He’d had this planned the whole time?

Todomatsu would never tell him. But Choromatsu was a genius. It was really gone, all of it, as quick as it’d come.

Only the lightning remained.

Harnessed the voltage of two storms, with another explosion and surging hum of destruction, Choromatsu swept lightning in a current around the stadium as cocoons burst. The Wyvern directed the glittering serpent of electricity straight through them. For the first time crystals just didn’t matter, the beasts obliterated before Todomatsu could make out hide or hair. The high-powered beam lanced between crystals wedged in the stadium exits, destroying every forcefield that locked it down. The lieutenant and soldiers screeched, caught up in the surge. Searing from crystal to crystal, they didn’t just shatter. They vaporised, along with everything attached.

The gargoyles roared fury as their allies joined the winds. Tombstone teeth gnashing, they streaked to splatter the Wyvern from the sky. ‘NIISAN!’ Todomatsu shrieked the same time Jyushimatsu bellowed.

Choromatsu split the current. Summoning energy and throwing his arms over his head, the twin lightning spears slashed sky quicker than sound. Sonic boom exploding, the Wyvern blew Banshuishi and Kaijuuzo apart an instant before collision.

Nothing left but clouds of silver dust, Todomatsu panted as though he’d pulled off that impossible feat himself. Choromatsu shuddered once in the air. Then he called his element, starting to siphon the raw power straight into himself.
‘Don’t!’ Todomatsu cried, his lens insisting the Wyvern’s body could take no more. But the weaponised lightning couldn’t be released—that amount of energy could level an entire ward! Where was Choromatsu going to put that much electricity?

The Wyvern’s shaking arm raised in answer, pointing across the city. Merged anew, the current arced to follow, a celestial arrow piercing pitch clouds with a rolling trail of thunder.

Choromatsu hit his target bang-on. Seven kilometres away, the world’s tallest lightning rod lit like a beacon. Cosmic electricity surged backwards, overloading circuits.

Half of Tokyo went dark.

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‘WOWOWOWOW! YOU’RE SO COOL, CHOROMATSU-NIISAN!’

Shut down to process the unbelievable they’d just done, Jyushimatsu bounced back and out of his latest hole. His jaw immediately dropped to bump his knees, a river of electricity splintered in ten thousand branches to slam straight into the Skytree. Silver cracks in the sky rushed to converge at its spire, strike after strike. Thunder crashed and crashed, the deep hum and roar of voltage vibrating Jyushimatsu to the bone kilometres away.

His wide eyes shone with wonder and reflections of lightning as the power surge wiped out lights across the city. The Skytree was the only building in Japan—maybe the whole world—that could take that kind of beating. Choromatsu had known all along. Jyushimatsu beamed. His brother was so clever.

Choromatsu hung dazed in the air, rippling with white sparks. Jyushimatsu waved his bat madly—could he see him? ‘HI NIISAN!!!!!! HI HI HI!!!!!!’

Choromatsu dropped a few metres. Jyushimatsu squinted through his lens, seeing his brother lift a hand, fingers wagging in a disoriented wave. Then they went limp. Lightning sputtering out, Choromatsu collapsed.

The sky was a long way to fall. ‘NIIIIIIISAAAAAAANNNNN!!!!!!’

‘I’ve got him!’

A flash lit the blackened stadium, darting starlight reflected off a mirror. Todomatsu bounded to the very top of the pole he’d climbed. Two seconds of calculation—trajectory, speed, timing: all important things for heroes to know in a hurry—and the Unicorn took off. The pole groaned to its foundations, power thrust into it by Todomatsu’s boots sending him shooting straight for their tumbling brother. Arms whipped from streamline as their paths crossed, he snagged Choromatsu out of the air. ‘YEAHHHH!!! GO TOTTY GO!’

Jyushimatsu’s soundless cheers led a chorus of noisy ones as the Unicorn gracefully fell, angling to touch down on a tall building nearby before hopping safely between rooftops and back into Tokyo Dome, the Wyvern in his arms. ‘Take him, Jyushimatsu-niisan,’ he said, landing beside him on a narrow strip of even ground. ‘Is anyone hurt?’

Jyushimatsu swallowed, looking over the damage. He really hoped not.

Juggling Choromatsu into Jyushimatsu’s waiting hug, Totty raised his sceptre, bringing light into the stadium so everything glowed soft and white. He sank to his knees in the pounding rain, letting out a long, slow sigh like he blew out their birthday candles a few days late.
Jyushimatsu’s eyes widened to full moons as everyone his light bathed gasped—it touched them all, right down to the zombies trapped in the pits. The bumps and breaks they’d collected faded and knitted. The crowds’ countless scrapes, so many people bleeding from glass and rubble and panic, healed right up.

Wow … area of effect healing.

‘Just a patch job,’ Todomatsu gulped as Jyushimatsu bubbled with praise and amazement. Turned splotchy grey, he teetered where he knelt. ‘If anyone was badly hurt … that should hold them together until paramedics get here.’

‘I take it back, Wyvern!’

Todomatsu’s head snapped up. The Doll shouted from behind where homebase used to be; he’d wound up behind the field boundary. He slumped lopsided on top of a whisky ad, chin heavy on his folded arms. The Doll’s face all cut up and bruised, he bled from twenty different places.

‘That’s definitely 10 out of 10 for for skill,’ he announced through his cut lip as the handful of alien soldiers spared by Choromatsu’s shocking performance—shocking! That was funny! He’d made a word joke, he had to tell Totty! But Todomatsu brushed off Jyushimatsu’s chortles as the few remaining soldiers abandoned their posts, ripping emergency exits like space was something solid.

The Doll didn’t seem to mind, that all his friends ran away. Or had been vapourised. Then again, the monsters and lieutenant hadn’t seemed all that friendly with him. Maybe they’d just worked together. Or maybe the Doll didn’t mind because he still had plenty of friends.

A few hundred zombies had made it out of the trenches while Todomatsu shone. Feeling much better and no more portal to fight towards, they turned their empty glares on the guardians. The Doll shrugged like he was bored. No one who was bored had eyes that glittered like that. ‘I’m in no rush to get back. Might as well leave them to it.’

Dumping Choromatsu, Jyushimatsu circled his brothers, bat cocked and anxiety bubbling up as zombies rambled on narrow ledges towards them. Most skidded down with puffs of dust, not enough room for them all. But there were still plenty, squishy and human and breakable, thousands and thousands and …

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan, get back here!’

Breathing hard, Todomatsu whipped a few snaky silver chains from the end of his sceptre. Weaving a trembling dome over them and planting his sceptre in the dirt as bubblegum pink blew to fill the gaps, the Unicorn grabbed the Wyvern by the shoulders, shaking him. ‘Wake up, Niisan!’

A magical smack on the cheek brought Choromatsu around. Eyes unfocused, he moved too slowly for Totty, the youngest snatching the pair of pistols Choromatsu pulled from behind his shoulders when ordered. ‘Here.’

Todomatsu shoved one of the pistols at a bewildered Jyushimatsu. ‘Here’s too out of it to aim. Don’t worry,’ he said, grabbing Jyushimatsu for balance as he scrambled to his feet. ‘It’s set to stun.’

Jyushimatsu swung his bat over his back, grin stretching wide. So there was a way to beat zombies without turning them to mush!

‘Hold down the trigger and spray,’ the youngest said. Shoving Choromatsu down when their confused brother tried to stand up, he went back to back with Jyushimatsu, pistol raised. Jyushimatsu imitated him. Zombies now pounded on the flimsy dome that sheltered them. Totty was so tired his
spell shuddered with each hit. ‘I’m going to lift it,’ he said, grim as he plucked up his sceptre one-handed, his sights trained on his first target. ‘Ready?’

Jyushimatsu nodded wildly, picking the barrel-chested dad in a Giants’ jersey who leered right in his face. Reminding him to not let go of the trigger—‘It’s okay, I remember!’—Jyushimatsu’s lens locked little gold crosshairs on the dad’s heaving chest.

‘Ahn, just stay in there.’

‘No force in the Alliance could make me come out,’ her whisper came from the miserable lump beneath Totty’s tunic. Poor Ahn. She didn’t want to be in a magical gunfight. But they’d protect her, she’d be okay. They’d all be okay.

‘One,’ Todomatsu counted, arms shaking. ‘Two …’

A dynamite blast startled Jyushimatsu five metres into the air. Just as surprised, Todomatsu’s spell slipped early as the torrential downpour swirled into airborne rapids. The Doll wasn’t quick enough. Caught up in the vicious spray, it hurled him backwards into the stands. A furious streak of red hurled from the Giants’ suddenly-open dugout, tackling the Doll before he could get up.

‘You couldn’t warn us?!’ Todomatsu shrilled, wildly spraying laserfire. So did Jyushimatsu, sweeping his pistol to follow the bouncing crosshairs.

‘Easy, firecracker,’ the Doll rasped. It sounded like Osomatsu had a gauntlet jammed hard against his neck.

Against Ichimatsu’s neck.

Jyushimatsu’s finger slipped off his trigger.

‘Niisan!’ Totty yelped when his pistol went silent. ‘What are you doing?!’

‘Honestly, I’m just impressed you’re back on your feet. But you really don’t look so good … okay, okay,’ the Doll relented when Karamatsu vaulted into the stands and yanked him to his feet. Pivoting, he slammed the Doll into the field barrier and twisted his arms behind him. ‘Well, someone’s into rougher play than they look. Be gentle with me, Kraken,’ he purred. Karamatsu stiffened. But he didn’t let go, shoving him hard against the barrier. ‘I swear I was about to call them off. If you’ll just let me …’

The Doll clicked behind his back. Twenty thousand souls ricocheted back to their bodies. Shouts erupted, everyone back in control in the worst place ever: rain pouring, friends lying on the ground and Tokyo Dome looking like a bomb just went off. Todomatsu hurriedly lowered his gun, throwing out his sceptre to knock Jyushimatsu’s stupefied arm down.

‘As I insinuated earlier, no need to collect today. This was an experiment first and foremost: we just wanted to know if I could do it. Of course,’ the Doll added, hissing with delight when Karamatsu wrenched his shoulders. ‘Picking up a few slaves ahead of schedule never hurts.’

Jyushimatsu saw the Doll’s smile twist. He shivered, needing the warm swell of goodness when Todomatsu expanded his positivity, calming the stadium. Hundreds sank to sit in the mud, helping the stunned or starting to look for friends and family by the light of the Unicorn. ‘Help us!’ more shouted, trapped in trenches with mud puddles creeping past their ankles. Todomatsu splashed into the nearest pit and borrowed someone’s phone. The message shouted trench to trench—sit tight, the guardians would get them out—the Unicorn leapt up, sticking his landing in muddied white boots. Forehead wrinkling, Totty wiped them clean on the wet grass.
A frightened riot avoided, the Unicorn turned icy. ‘He just wanted … to see if he could.’

Snarling, Todomatsu thrust his sceptre straight at the Doll. Chains shot out, lashing down his arms and legs. Cheers danced dizzy through Jyushimatsu’s ears as Totty stalked towards Tokyo Dome’s terroriser. People whispering and pointing at his crown, they fell back to let him pass.

‘Let’s go, Niisan.’

Throwing Choromatsu over his shoulder, Jyushimatsu jumped straight over the craggy field. He landed right where he aimed: in the first row of stands beside Osomatsu. He slumped in a plastic seat, one arm riddled with black splinters and tied across his chest in a makeshift sling. A tight silver band clamped around his shoulder—was it holding his arm on? Osomatsu’s other hand pressed against his throat. His breath rattled so miserably in there.

‘Niisan!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed. Banging down a few seats and lying the groggy Choromatsu across them, Jyushimatsu hovered over the eldest. The Doll was right, he really didn’t look good. ‘Are you okay, Osomatsu-niisan? Are you cold? Your hoodie’s all ripped, you’re shaking … can’t you light a fire?’

‘Hey, b-buddy,’ Osomatsu croaked before Jyushimatsu could hunt down something to cover him with. Eyes down and boot shuffling, he tapped his toe, showing Jyushimatsu what lay beneath. A million cracks raced across the ground and straight up the stadium walls. ‘You b-busted up … Tokyo Dome. Th-That’s awesome.’

Jyushimatsu squirmed. He felt a little better, that Osomatsu joked about it. But he didn’t think it was so awesome. Jyushimatsu’s element gazed up at him like a dumbfounded puppy who’d expected nothing but praise—didn’t it do good, making that last hit so big? ‘… It was an accident.’

‘I know, buddy. But it’s still standing,’ said Osomatsu. He stamped on the concrete as Jyushimatsu huddled small beside him. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Yeeaaaaahhh?’

‘Yeah, it is.’

A smile wriggled back beneath Jyushimatsu’s mask when Osomatsu nudged him with his knee. ‘Plus you made a new world record—b-biggest swing ever! That has to count as a … home run or s-s-something.’

‘Really????!!!’ Jyushimatsu enthused, all things bad beautifully driven away. Osomatsu always knew how to cheer him up. ‘I scored a home run in Tokyo Dome?!’

Osomatsu coughed out a squelching sound. His eyes glazed over—poor Osomatsu, he hurt so badly. ‘Sure … d-d-d-did …’

‘Osomatsu,’ said Karamatsu, eyes flickering from where he locked the Doll’s arms. ‘Rest, brother. Don’t strain yourself.’

‘I’m fine … We had to win,’ Osomatsu reminded Jyushimatsu. A trail of blood dripped off his hair. ‘You did good. C-Come here …’

Jyushimatsu plopped into the seat beside Osomatsu and put an arm around him, helping his big brother sit up. Glaring holes into the Doll and gauntlet hesitantly leaving his neck, he scraped his knuckles into Jyushimatsu’s chest. He didn’t feel a thing. ‘What are you doing, Osomatsu-niisan?’
'Checking your armour’s … tough e-e-enough,’ he gagged on the last word, hand clapping back to his throat. ‘Feels … pretty good,’ he rasped. The Sphinx’s bulletproof fibres knitted stronger than steel. ‘Looks … good—like you, you know? You’re d-definitely … one of us.’

Jyushimatsu swelled with the praise, finally able to beam down at how good he looked. Striking in brilliant sunshine, his princely hooded overalls buckled high over the lightest grey sleeves. Cheerfully loose—not too loose for fighting!—and so comfy, they fastened at the wrist so they wouldn’t flop over his grippy gloves. His bottoms puffed out too, tied just below his knees—long shorts were the best to play in! Jumping up to demonstrate, he held up his topaz medallion, then one great big combat gumboot for his brothers’ approval as Choromatsu slowly sat up.

Osomatsu tried to smile. But his eyes wouldn’t meet Jyushimatsu’s. Jyushimatsu frowned. Why wouldn’t Osomatsu look at him? But he mostly forgot his wondering when Choromatsu tugged at the short cape that fluttered from his shoulders. Wriggling like a puppy with a brand new ball, Jyushimatsu twisted to see. A small smile on his face and eyes half-closed like he hadn’t slept in years, Choromatsu held it up for him. Jyushimatsu could have burst with happiness—he had a cape! He really was a hero!

Then Totty finished his dramatic approach, halting on the other side of the boundary line where Karamatsu had the chained Doll pinned. Slow and menacing, the general of the spectrum guardians shoved the head of his sceptre up beneath their prisoner’s chin.

Jyushimatsu stopped being so happy, helping his brothers up. On his feet and taking the time he needed, Choromatsu edged from Jyushimatsu’s support. Osomatsu tried to do the same. ‘Lean on me, Niisan,’ Jyushimatsu said when the eldest sagged into him. Hitching Osomatsu’s good arm over his shoulders, Jyushimatsu steered him to where the Doll leered into Todomatsu’s scowl.

‘I’ll act intimidated if that turns you on.’

‘How dare you,’ Todomatsu inhaled anger. ‘You menaced all these people just to see if you could?’

‘Well,’ said the doll delicately—wait, could he hear Totty? ‘There’d be no point preparing a worldwide infection, would there, if I don’t yet have the capacity to commit a stadium full of humans to my master’s service. So,’ he added, ‘it would seem total domination is still a while off. Lucky for you. But I think I did good today, don’t you?’

‘You did good?’

‘Dear brother,’ Karamatsu soothed the irate youngest. But Jyushimatsu saw the second born’s iron grip tighten on the Doll.

‘That bastard,’ Osomatsu seethed. Tied up and surrounded, the Doll just kept talking. Jyushimatsu wished he’d stop. Then maybe his brothers would stop looking at Ichimatsu like they hated him.

‘Oh, I did do good, didn’t I?’ the Doll breathed over Totty’s fury. ‘Twenty thousand isn’t quite 50, but it’s still a good day of recruiting, no? See all them?’

He tilted his chin past the Unicorn’s frosty glare. Past zombies cried and comforted each other, mingling with those spared who carefully ventured onto the treacherous field.

‘They’ll drop everything to serve to my master the instant I call. Every. Last. One. How does that feel?’ he whispered to the five spectrum guardians united. Jyushimatsu shuddered, Ichimatsu’s stolen voice unrecognisable, poisoned and cold. ‘Demoralising? Devastating? How does it feel, knowing that you’re only buying them time? That no human soul can truly be saved?’
‘Want me to slit that forked tongue?’ Todomatsu hissed.

‘This is just a taste,’ the Doll grinned, licking his chapped lips as if daring Totty to try. ‘Of the total morale collapse you will suffer when Lord Takuu empties this entire world and crushes the worthless shell left behind. They already belong to him. Billions and billions. Are the gem-encrusted idiots starting to get some idea how fucked they are?’ he said. His own black gem glistened at his tight necklace. Jyushimatsu’s head cocked slowly to the left, perception hooked on the Doll of Darkness’s opal. He was gem-encrusted too …

‘You’re exhausted,’ the Doll said, quiet like he tormented at their deathbed. ‘You’re suffering. You’re trying just so damn hard. And believe me when I say,’ he finished with a cruel flourish, ‘because I’ve never been more serious in my short existence: it’s all … been … for nothing.

‘Stick that in your pipe and smoke it.’

Jyushimatsu rocked back on his heels. He couldn’t have been more stunned if a stampede had just hurtled past. His brothers can’t have been fighting all this time for nothing! That wasn’t right, he was lying! Jyushimatsu looked desperately between his grim brothers, his hope squashed flat. The Doll was lying, wasn’t he?

‘We’ve heard all this before,’ said Todomatsu. ‘At great length. Lord Takuu will never convince us to quit. This has never been pointless and it never will be.’

His telepathy didn’t quaver. But his sceptre did. Just a smidgen. His job done, the Doll’s smile twisted hard into his cheeks.

‘What do we do with him?’ Choromatsu spoke up. He leaned so slightly against the boundary Jyushimatsu hadn’t even noticed he was on a slant. ‘He’s drained, but he recovers fast. We can’t hold him like this for long.’

Ahn crawled out of Totty’s tunic. The Doll’s smile widened a mocking muscle as she made the stately climb onto the Unicorn’s shoulder. ‘The guardians’ fabled mentor makes an appearance!’ he exclaimed. ‘I haven’t seen you since you persuaded our slave commander to leap off his tower.’

For the first time, the Doll’s casual body language tightened. Slave commander? ‘That’s Karamatsu-niisan, right?’ Jyushimatsu asked, bits and pieces floating back.

‘Don’t,’ Osomatsu muttered in Jyushimatsu’s ear. Jyushimatsu felt Osomatsu’s knotted fist tremble in fury.

The tip of Ahn’s tufted tail trembled too. But she sat as tall and proud and grave as her little self could sit—she had an entire Spectrum Alliance to represent.

‘Ahn, my angel,’ Karamatsu flashed the shortest of smiles. ‘We seek your counsel. What would our wisest of mentors have us do?’

‘None of you will like this,’ she replied. As cool and calm as Osomatsu wasn’t, she groomed down fur that prickled on end and crossed her paws on Totty’s rosy frills. ‘But I’m afraid we may have to kill him.’
‘Wh-What? What do you …’

Even in their heads, his voice strangled to nothing. Time stopped. Jyushimatsu stopped.

They had to kill him. He heard Ahn say it again and again until it faded beneath a mounting roar of white noise.

They had to kill him. Kill the Doll of Darkness.

Kill not-Ichimatsu.

… Kill Ichimatsu.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not leaving it here, I promise! One more to wrap things up! Hooray, I get to break on an even number after all! This thrills me way more than it should! I think I got a bit lazy with some English jokes and idioms in there - I've been trying to avoid those as much as possible, but oh well! I couldn't find the Japanese equivalent for the idiom, and I had to leave the English joke in, just for sillies :) We've almost at the end of the Sphinx arc - most of the next chapter probably isn't completely necessary, but I wrote it to help encourage me to write this chapter :) You know how I adore brotherly healing scenes :) And we may have to drop in and see how the Liberation Force fares before hiatus, of course :) I've only got the end of 32 to write. Hopefully it won't take any longer than two weeks to post, but if I ever stopped to look back over all my notes of the past two years, I'd probably come to the conclusion that no one should ever listen to me when it comes to timing - not ever. See you soon!
Hooray, last chapter in the Sphinx arc! Thank you for being so patient with me for so long. I think I said in the end notes last chapter, I'm not sure entirely how necessary a lot of this chapter is, really ... but writing the unnecessary bits made me happy, so I hope you enjoy them! I love hearing so much what you think - what you liked, constructive criticism on style, pointing out any plot holes I've accidentally dug myself into ... anything! If there's anything you want to tell me, please do :D Because I'm forever amazed over here - I'm so lucky all of you have taken the time and trouble to read my stuff and share this story with me :) It means so much, and really ... Thank you ~

I started talking about going on hiatus back in March, and it looks like I've finally reached a point where I can safely(?) leave Magical Oso for a bit of an extended period. I'm sorry it won't be updated for a while after this :( Depending on how my novel project goes, I'm hoping to be writing Magical Oso again around February or March next year, so maybe start expecting a chapter around end of March/April? If there's nothing but tumbleweed and crickets, feel free to give me a prod on tumblr or Twitter and ask what's going on - I'll include my handle in the end notes.

I know it's a long time ... I don't know how I'm going to go not writing Magical Oso for so long. I'll make sure to take good notes if I think of anything important! But I need to focus on my original stuff for a bit :( I'm terrible, I can't concentrate on more than one thing at once, and Magical Oso has been my main focus for over two years now.

I'll ramble on for a while in the end notes ... For now, I really hope you have fun with chapter 32, which brings us hopefully to what is the approximate mid-point of this silly magical fic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘This is war,’ Ahn said, cool and quiet, when all five magical Matsunos stared. His legs gone rubbery, Jyushimatsu stumbled back. Osomatsu staggered with him. ‘It is regrettable. But in war there are casualties. There is collateral damage.’

‘No,’ Jyushimatsu shook his head. He kept right on shaking, no, no, no, until his brain rattled between his ears. Denial clamped down in his chest. He felt sick, they couldn’t kill Ichimatsu, Jyushimatsu’s everything roared no, no, no …

‘He’s a slave,’ said Karamatsu. He shook his own head. ‘He isn’t responsible for his actions. We cannot harm an innocent.’

‘I take it she said something that none of you like,’ the Doll said, straining his shoulders. Did he struggle just so Karamatsu would twist him still? ‘And I take it from that that none of you have the stomach for murder in cold blood?’

‘You destroy enemy soldiers every day,’ said Ahn. She hissed through her bared teeth, growl low in her throat as the Doll smirked. ‘I know this boy is being used. I know this isn’t fair. But there’s a big difference between murder and unfortunate, yet necessary death.’
'Yeah?’ Osomatsu’s inhales shook. It wasn’t just the toxic ooze clogging his throat. ‘Explain th-that … to me.’

‘Oh dear, the Salamander is not happy. But I see the Unicorn and Wyvern look a little more calculating,’ the Doll noted they hadn’t instantly tossed the idea out. ‘Ever the discerning ones. I did tell you, Wyvern.’

His black eyes settled on Choromatsu. ‘Remember? The night I split you open. You should definitely be trying to kill me.’

‘Of course we don’t want to kill him,’ said Choromatsu. He looked from Osomatsu to Karamatsu to Jyushimatsu, a reluctant voice of reason. ‘But there are billions of people on Earth to think about, to say nothing of countless other civilisations. Takuu needs us to invade the Spectrum Alliance. And he needs the Doll to enslave us. Killing the Doll would throw the Liberation Force into chaos—might,’ he corrected. Nothing was for sure. ‘It might ruin Takuu’s plans badly enough that he never recovers. We might not like it, but killing the Doll might stop the war, here and now. Killing him might save everyone.’

Everyone but Ichimatsu!

‘That’s an awful lot of mights,’ Karamatsu observed. Jyushimatsu nodded madly, scared lips stapled shut.

Choromatsu nodded, too. ‘But isn’t that chance worth a single human life?’

‘Wh-What the hell, man!’ exclaimed Osomatsu.

‘Quit it, Niisan,’ Todomatsu stepped in before the eldest could blow up at the third born. ‘He’s right and you know it.’

No, no … not Totty, too …

‘We have him,’ Choromatsu said, surveying the Doll. His gaze was a laser scanner. ‘He’s weak. We may never have another chance like this.’

‘Exactly. And Lord Takuu chose this guy,’ Todomatsu reminded, wedging his sceptre harder into the Doll’s neck. Jyushimatsu shivered, his little brother giving off Arctic blasts. ‘I don’t think he’ll be much of a loss.’

‘That’s n-not our call,’ Osomatsu insisted.

‘Yes, it is.’

‘No, it’s n-not! We’re not … k-killing anyone.’

‘And if the Spectrum Alliance issued the order?’ said Ahn.

Osomatsu’s glassy eyes sparked. ‘What?’ he hissed. Or gurgled. Something in between. ‘They expect us t-t-to … execute someone in front of thousands of p-people and …’

‘We wouldn’t do it here,’ Ahn said tersely. She stayed so professional. But her will was fierce. Soft little Ahn eyed the Doll with pure loathing. ‘We’d take him somewhere deserted first.’

‘Shit!’ Osomatsu burst. ‘D-Do I even … know you? How c-could you even think … we'd just g-go along with this?’
Ahn’s ears turned bright pink. Lifting her chin to hide how abashed she was, she was about to answer. But Jyushimatsu had finally figured out the trick to speaking. Tongue and teeth tripping over each other, he babbled out the most important thing he’d ever said.

‘But we’re heroes! We’re heroes, aren’t we? Heroes don’t do that, right? Right?’

Jyushimatsu looked desperately between Ahn and his brothers.

‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu,’ Ahn said, her sweet voice softened. ‘Sometimes doing the right thing is hard. How do you think this boy feels?’ she appealed to her guardians’ gentler selves. ‘He is being used for evil against his will.’

‘Supposedly,’ murmured Totty.

‘Then he’d want us to save him,’ Osomatsu uttered. ‘Not kill him.’

‘And would you leave him to suffer if there is no way to save him? The Doll of Darkness is …’

‘No.’

Osomatsu scowled hot coals at Ahn. He saved plenty for Choromatsu and Todomatsu. ‘We’re not Alliance dogs. We’re not your attack animals.’

His forehead bunched up, like he’d been called that before and really didn’t like it.

‘Neither I nor anyone in the Alliance has ever regarded you as such,’ Ahn spoke very slowly. She stretched out her patience as thin and far as it would go. ‘I had only hoped you would be pragmatic enough to realise …’

‘We d-don’t kill on command,’ Osomatsu breathed. It didn’t sound easy. He hung heavy off Jyushimatsu, good hand clutching his throat. ‘We’ll figure … this shit out.’

‘And how exactly do we “figure this out”?’ Ahn demanded to know. ‘What would my oh-so-wise Salamander suggest?’

‘I dunno,’ Osomatsu muttered. Jyushimatsu’s chest fluttered with fear—didn’t Osomatsu know how to save Ichimatsu? But one of his brothers had to know! Together they knew everything! ‘Wait t-till the Unicorn can … free slaves? Then Totty can …’

‘That may take months!’ Ahn exclaimed. ‘The Liberation Force could enslave this entire nation before then! And the Doll is no ordinary slave, there’s no guarantee that would even work! One life stands between us and sparing your world, and you hesitate?’

‘Osomatsu is not alone in hesitating, my angel,’ Karamatsu stood firm with their big brother. So did Jyushimatsu; he nodded until his head blurred. Choromatsu nodded once, still somewhere far away. ‘I will not support this course of action.’

Todomatsu shot a light frown at Karamatsu over the Doll’s shoulder. ‘We’re short on options, Karamatsu-niisan. We might never …’

‘Of c-course I’m hesitating!’ Osomatsu flared at Ahn, cutting Totty off. ‘What scares me … is that you’re not!’

‘You’re a spectrum guardian!’ Ahn fired back, hair prickling all down her back. ‘You have a job to do, and so do I! It’s my duty to …’
‘Would you just look at this?’ said the Doll, eyes trailing gleeful between them. ‘Trouble in the ranks, is there? The firecracker and the midget mentor are fiiiiiiiighting,’ he drew out, loving the tension and that he caused it. Jyushimatsu couldn’t stand it.

‘Don’t fight, please don’t fight …’

‘Ahn,’ Karamatsu tried to diffuse the sparks. ‘Osomatsu, we can talk this through without …’

‘We’re not killing him,’ Osomatsu spat. ‘P-Period.’

Ahn’s eyes flashed. So did Todomatsu’s—he was leader, not Osomatsu. ‘You, my most volatile Salamander,’ their mentor reminded him of that, trembling with all the feelings she held back, ‘do not have the authority to make such a decision. He may take your counsel, but the final word rests with the Unicorn.’

‘Like hell … it does,’ Osomatsu hissed.

‘Niisan, quit acting like you’re in charge!’ Todomatsu had had enough. Finally getting a word in, his eyes snapped to deliver Osomatsu an icy glare. ‘This is my decision, and I …’

Osomatsu’s breath snagged. Dragged through uncontrolled wheezes, he did exactly as Totty ordered: he stopped acting like he was in charge. He also stopped standing up. ‘Matsuno Osomatsu!’ Ahn gasped as Jyushimatsu scurried to sit him down. Curling so tight he almost fell straight out of his seat, Osomatsu’s poor body heaved, thin and frail—what should he do? What should Jyushimatsu … he crouched up on the seat beside his big brother, holding him up and patting his back. Ahn dithered on Todomatsu’s shoulder. She’d forgotten in the fierce argument how badly hurt Osomatsu was.

‘Did I make him worse?’ she whispered. ‘Did I …’

‘This is my decision,’ Todomatsu repeated, sceptre jammed against the Doll’s throat. His breath rasping out as his tubes squashed, the Doll’s eyes glittered.

‘Come on, come on,’ he breathed evil all over the youngest. ‘I’m at your mercy. I’ll loan you my blade and lie flat on an altar, if that’s what you want. I’m yours. So make … up … your … mind.’

‘The choice is yours, Matsuno Todomatsu.’

Ahn bowed to him and stayed down, unable to watch the youngest make that awful choice. The Doll jagged grin ate into his cheeks, seeing all their turmoil. Totty steeled himself. Jyushimatsu’s pulse thundered. He rocked back and forth in his crouch, cradling Osomatsu. He had to do something. What could he do? What could he …

‘… Totty? Baby brother? Don’t … please don’t …’

‘I have to,’ Todomatsu said, voice perfectly steady. But his hands trembled with the pressure. ‘I’m the Unicorn, and I … I …’

A muscle flickered in Totty’s set jaw. Karamatsu’s knuckles bulged and shook, locked on the Doll’s thin arms. Choromatsu looked on, quietly resigned, while Osomatsu stained just to breathe. He’d killed the last of his strength, trying to save Ichimatsu …

Five fat tears sloshed down Jyushimatsu’s face. They couldn’t kill him, please please please … Ahn had said they’d take him somewhere first. But Jyushimatsu’s muscles loaded, ready to fire. Not quite processing the jumbled implications of what he was about to do, the fifth born leaned Osomatsu back in his seat and coiled to spring, ready to hurl himself between Ichimatsu and their baby brother.
‘Damn it,’ Todomatsu hissed, resolve breaking. He couldn’t do it. ‘Damn it …’

The Unicorn withdrew his sceptre. Inch by inch. Like at any moment the Doll would slither free of his chains and go for the throat. ‘Don’t get any ideas,’ Totty warned, instead squaring his sceptre at their enemy’s narrow chest.

‘Very well,’ said Ahn. Gathered herself and gone stiff and formal, she tried to cover up her distress. But she was a scared kid pretending. Poor Ahn was torn between the right thing and the “right thing”. ‘We shall spare him for now. However, Matsuno Todomatsu and I must convene with Spectrum Alliance officials to discuss this decision and any consequences that may follow.’

Consequences. Jyushimatsu fidgeted. He hated that word. It reminded him of school. But thank you thank you thank you … his knees knocked with relief. Ichimatsu was safe.

‘I’m sorry, my angel,’ said Karamatsu.


‘What do we do now?’ asked Karamatsu, resettling his grip on the Doll. The guardians’ prisoner smiled, smug like their inner struggles were the funniest thing.

‘The Unicorn isn’t yet strong enough to detain him indefinitely,’ Ahn said, her small voice heavy with truth. ‘The Alliance might send a detention cell by freight. But a slave possessed of such powers to rival a guardian requires extensive study. He is still in many respects an unknown entity. There is no guarantee any cell would hold him.’

‘So what do we do with him?’ Choromatsu said quietly.

Todomatsu’s scowl bit through his forehead, every move he made more reluctant as he retracted the Doll’s chains. ‘Truth be told,’ the Doll said as his restraints fell away. Jyushimatsu stood guard, bat at the ready as Karamatsu distrustfully released their prisoner, eyes chasing his every shuffle and stretch. ‘This is not quite the outcome I expected. I knew you were too pathetically moral to execute a slave, but I had thought you at least had the guts to …’

Todomatsu grabbed the Doll by the neck of his jacked and yanked him over the side of the boundary. Hurled down, the Doll smacked hard into the muddy field. Hearing more than one bone break, Jyushimatsu flinched. Todomatsu didn’t.

‘Did you expect that?’ he hissed, kicking the Doll onto his back. ‘Don’t expect me to be so forgiving next time, either. Now, get the hell out of here.’

Lying in a heap of mud and fractures, the Doll gave a breathy chuckle. One eye fused to the Unicorn and the other flicking to devour his allies, one second he was there. Then he wasn’t. Jyushimatsu gave his head a rattle to be sure he’d seen right. The Doll could have fallen straight through the ground, swallowed up from beneath. ‘Hey, where’d he go?’

Was that weird? It was hard to tell now. But his brothers didn’t look surprised; their faces were a matching set of regret and anger. Osomatsu was the angriest. Killing the Doll wasn’t an option, but letting him go was almost as bad. But Osomatsu put a lid on it, steam only trickling out the sides.

Ahn leapt from Todomatsu’s shoulder onto the boundary fence. Then she jumped again, a huge
distance for someone who could snuggle safe in Jyushimatsu’s hand. Her paw pads gripping the back of the seat beside Osomatsu, tentative and so tiny, she gazed up at her first guardian. ‘Matsuno Osomatsu, please don’t be like this,’ she pleaded. ‘I don’t want that boy dead any more than you, you must believe me. But … but I …’

She tried to crawl onto his knee. Osomatsu pushed her away. ‘He might have f-family,’ he growled. ‘They’re looking … for him. Did you th-think about that?’

Tears sprang into Ahn’s eyes. ‘Nice going, Niisan,’ Totty quipped when she backed off, curling tight in a ball beneath his seat. Not even Karamatsu could convince her to uncurl. ‘Are you really that dense? How hard do you think that was for her? And me,’ he included, tight voice rising. ‘Do you think I want to be a magical hitman?’

Jyushimatsu’s relief burst dams—Todomatsu was being brave! He’d sounded so scary. But he didn’t mean what he’d said about Ichimatsu. Ichimatsu would be a huge loss, so huge Jyushimatsu couldn’t imagine a world without him. When he tried, all he got was vacant static. Poor Totty was only trying to make “the right thing” easier.

‘We should g-get them up,’ Osomatsu rasped, ignoring their leader’s earful. ‘The p-people in … the … p-pits …’

He grabbed at seat backs and nearby brothers, trying to haul himself up.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Todomatsu snapped. He raised a threatening sceptre. ‘You sit down.’

‘I’m not … sitting d-down …’

Osomatsu had already dropped shivering to his knees. ‘I can … myself,’ he muttered, trying to push Jyushimatsu away, too.

‘Sorry, Niisan.’

Jyushimatsu plucked him off the cracked cement and deposited him back in his seat. Knocking three more down, he helped his big brother lie across them. Protests clamped furiously quiet, Osomatsu’s shaking fingers crept to his infected throat. Raindrops splattered his grey face. He glared up at the stormy sky like something was its fault, ignoring Jyushimatsu’s offer to use his cape as a blanket. ‘But you’re so cold! How can you rest if you’re cold? Niisan?’ he imploded, crouching close beside him. ‘Want me to stay with you?’

Osomatsu said nothing. He didn’t look at him, eyes turned away. His hovers uncertain, after a moment Jyushimatsu left him alone. ‘Feel better, Niisan.’

‘Osomatsu’s right,’ Karamatsu was saying as Jyushimatsu vaulted the boundary, joining him and Todomatsu with a splatter of mud. ‘Their efforts may be gallant, but it will take emergency services many hours to rescue them all. Sweet Jyushimatsu?’ the second born turned to him. ‘Do you think you can …’

‘Whoa!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, boots making friends with friction as earth jumped for joy beneath them—not toooooo much. But even Karamatsu and Todomatsu had trouble with balance, squelching their boots for traction.

‘Jyushimatsu?’ Karamatsu asked over startled shouts and screams. He was wearing an “I’m-trying-not-to-make-a-big-deal-of-this-but-maybe-this-is-a-big-deal” kind of face. ‘Are you doing that, dear brother?’
‘No? I dunno … maybe? I think so,’ Jyushimatsu cycled through possibilities, perplexed. He hadn’t been talking to his element, had he? ‘But I didn’t … I don’t understand?’

‘Perhaps the earth is settling?’ Karamatsu said to Todomatsu in undertone. ‘Aftershocks?’

Totty looked doubtful. Jyushimatsu’s thoughts collided. He had to make this better. ‘I’m sorry! Let me try and …’

‘No,’ Todomatsu put his foot down. ‘No more powers. Not until you can control them.’

The enthusiastic earth sank at Totty’s no-nonsense tone, rumbles petering out. Jyushimatsu felt so sorry for it. But maybe holding off was best. If he couldn’t control himself yet … but he couldn’t wait to use his powers again! But wait … he had to use his powers again? What if next time he broke Tokyo? The city was a lot bigger than a stadium.

His bewildered imagination crumbling with fallen buildings and sinkholes, Jyushimatsu cringed into his shoulders. Before it was only Jyushimatsu himself who got in trouble when things got out of hand, only Jyushimatsu left covered in dirt and scrapes and sticky plasters. But “out of hand” suddenly got a whole lot bigger.

‘He’ll learn,’ Mei spoke up, telling the others. ‘We’ll get him there, you have our word.’

The Sphinx expert had been at his back all this time. It was impossible to express that kind of gratitude in words. Jyushimatsu fell back on his favourite forms of communication: body language and volume. ‘No problem, kid—it’s my job. Looking forward to working with you again. But no pressure, understand? Only if you decide to …’

‘Thank you thank you thank you!’

Jyushimatsu mental shouts were deafening. He felt Mei smile all the way from space. ‘You really are something special,’ the expert said, signing off with a promise: he’d be back whenever Jyushimatsu needed him.

Jyushimatsu re-inflated with positivity, Karamatsu tried to keep Totty upbeat. But the youngest still looked at Jyushimatsu like he’d explode at any moment. Jyushimatsu deflated a little, a tiny hole in his happy balloon. But that kind of worry from his brothers was normal. Worry that he’d smash up all the eggs in the supermarket again and worry that he’d smash up Tokyo Dome again were only different on a matter of scale.

‘A manned rescue mission it is, then,’ Karamatsu announced, leading the way to the nearest pit. He waved down at the people trapped—they were coming. ‘Shall we? We should hurry,’ he added. For the first time, Jyushimatsu noticed the police and paramedics that streamed in, organising evacuation by megaphone—that’s right. Choromatsu had taken out the barricades. ‘Before Tokyo’s finest decide we’re not on the same side tonight. And our talented Unicorn must tend to Osomatsu and Choromatsu as soon as possible.’

‘Choromatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu repeated. Karamatsu nodded.

‘He may not be injured in ways plain to the eye. But the use of such power leaves its marks, sweetest Jyushimatsu.’

‘No,’ Jyushimatsu shook his head. ‘Choromatsu-niisan is here.’

The third born picked up on his radar, Choromatsu picked his slow way to join them. People strewn across the warzone, someone forgot his own troubles when he saw the green guardian’s struggle and
squelched to his feet. Choromatsu seemed to thank him, but didn’t accept his offer to be the guardian’s human crutch.

‘Niisan,’ Todomatsu scolded as he joined them at the crevice. ‘What do you think you’re doing? Go lie down.’

Signalling Jyushimatsu and Karamatsu to begin without him, Todomatsu started to guide Choromatsu—poor Choromatsu, he’d been so amazing he’d knocked himself right out—back to the stands. His guardian self already as comfy and familiar as the wrinkles in his worn hoodie. Jyushimatsu jumped into the pit on Karamatsu’s heels. They landed with a splash surrounded by people, all muddy and scared and confused.

‘Do you mind?’ he asked, polite as he hefted four of them up; his lens said they were the worst hurt. Careful as he settled them in his arms, he grinned at a few kids. Not so scared now, they stared awestruck up at Jyushimatsu. ‘Hey, you want a piggyback ride?’

Kids understood Jyushimatsu better than most grown ups. Even without his voice to help, a pair clambered up onto the Sphinx’s sturdy back, shaking off worried parents who tried to help—they had to look cool for the guardians! Karamatsu all loaded up, they bent their knees to spring. ‘Hold on!’

‘Whee!’ the kids squealed as they flew up and out of the crumbly pit. Two of the people Jyushimatsu cradled moaned, jostled by his turbulent touch down.

‘Sorry,’ he apologised, lowering his charges to the mud as the kids leapt off his back. He’d get better with practice. And he was going to get a lot of it. Even Karamatsu shook his head, looking over the field of craters that waited. They’d be quicker than emergency services. But this was still going to take a loooooong time.

‘One more boost.’

Jyushimatsu’s ears pricked up, tuning to to Choromatsu behind them. Totty hadn’t led him more than a step. ‘That’s all I need. You know I can do it.’

‘But you might hurt yourself. And I’m running low—I can’t recharge like this.’

Todomatsu jabbed his sceptre up at the cloudy sky. ‘I won’t be able to heal Osomatsu properly. Or you,’ he added.

‘It’s your call.’

Todomatsu wasn’t pleased. But he was their general. And he made the call, boosting the Wyvern’s powers one last time.

It was still storming. Raising his arms, Choromatsu conducted gusts down in whistling currents, shaping a dozen controlled funnels. Jyushimatsu watched, slack-jawed, as the Wyvern used his tornadoes to scoop hundreds from where they were trapped, spinning them through the air and depositing them dizzy, scared and stumbling, but unhurt all across the stands. The pits were emptied in less than a minute.

‘Spectrum guardians! Stay where you are.’

‘Haven’t you got more important things to do?’ Todomatsu sighed, one weary hand on his hip as a handful of police detached from assessing victims to surround them. Nerves bumped and jostled in Jyushimatsu’s chest—should he put his hands up? Karamatsu caught one of his hands as it inched
into the air, guiding it down. Were they going to arrest Jyushimatsu for wrecking Tokyo Dome? But none of them pulled out their handcuffs. Or their guns.

‘There’s too many people,’ Karamatsu assured him. ‘They won’t try to shoot us.’

The four of them ringed by destruction lit by a million flashes from cameras and phones and glaring beams from a few brave helicopters, people chanted and cheered and booed the police.

‘They beat the cultists!’ they shouted. ‘They saved us!’

‘Couldn’t have saved us without destroying half the ward?’ a sergeant grumped under her breath.

‘You try it,’ Choromatsu returned, leaning heavily on Karamatsu.

‘Wh-Where … were you?’ Osomatsu muttered, Todomatsu marching straight through the circle of police to half carry, half drag their brother across the field. The officers did nothing to stop him. Ahn burrowed into Todomatsu’s tunic. All Jyushimatsu could see was the tufty tip of her tail.

‘Th-That’s right,’ Osomatsu kept griping, disjointed as Karamatsu bundled him over his shoulder. ‘Sh-Shut out and … h-h-helpless … without us. So m-much for … anyone th-thinking… you’ll g-get this … under control.’

‘Stop talking, Niisan,’ Todomatsu ordered. No hesitation, Jyushimatsu launched straight into the sky with his brothers. The cheers rose with them, people shrinking to a farm of busy ants as they touched the highest point of the stadium and jumped even higher. The thrilling rush collided with Jyushimatsu every time he left his stomach behind on the last darkened building they launched off—look how high he could jump! Jyushimatsu tumbled through the air, this was so exciting! But Choromatsu could barely keep his eyes open; Todomatsu stayed right beside him, one arm linked through his. But even half asleep the third born out jumped them all. He almost flew, the wind always at his back.

The darkness of a powerless Tokyo unfolding beneath them as the youngest guardian lit their way, Jyushimatsu’s happiness soared, around and around, caught in a loop of wonder. He’d never get bored with this. The thrill. The purpose. The freedom. This was what it meant to be a guardian.

It was harder than he’d ever imagined. But Jyushimatsu liked it. He really liked it.

Back in the warehouse—Jyushimatsu remembered now, this place was so cool!—Karamatsu lowered Osomatsu onto his crate. Helping him lie back on the cushions, Karamatsu folded the eldest’s numbed arm over his chest. The warehouse huge and echoey, Jyushimatsu heard a scary difference between Osomatsu’s breathing before and after their trip over rooftops. Already thin, now it rattled up a pinched straw. Jyushimatsu stared at the sticky wound below his neck. Rays like veins pumping dark blood branched beneath his ashen skin. Slow and sneaky, they curled around his neck to strangle him.

‘Leave it, brother,’ Karamatsu said. He pulled the eldest’s good hand away when Osomatsu grappled at his throat, giving Todomatsu room to work. ‘Jyushimatsu? Brother, are you all right?’

Karamatsu put an arm around Jyushimatsu’s shoulders, pulling him in a one-armed hug. ‘Have no fear! Our brother is in the best of hands.’

Todomatsu bent over the eldest, white fingers probing his throat before gently turning his head. Back on his shoulder, an anxious Ahn peered down at the Unicorn’s patient. ‘Let me take your hood off, Niisan.’

Osomatsu’s hood came off with Totty’s light tug, the youngest examining his head. Osomatsu
croaked something telepathic, eyes glazed. Jyushimatsu couldn’t understand. But Totty did. Karamatsu was right: their little brother was the best healer. Jyushimatsu remembered that fight in the office block, when he’d watched his brothers in action. Afterwards Totty had put Choromatsu’s broken hands back together like magic. He could fix Osomatsu, no problem!

‘I know it hurts, let me look. This will be easier when he can breathe,’ Todomatsu said to the others. ‘But I don’t want to mess around here.’

His fingertips measured the cut between the bumps on Osomatsu’s collarbones. ‘Not unless I have to. Osomatsu-niisan, I’m sorry. But we have to take off your mask.’

Jyushimatsu didn’t know what was coming. But Osomatsu sure guessed. He wouldn’t let Todomatsu pull down his mask, moulded metal cemented over his face. Three failed attempts and Totty got cranky. ‘Would you prefer I cut your throat open?’ he snapped. Osomatsu’s eyes wild, he shook his head. Jyushimatsu hugged himself tight, feeling the spasms of pain that cursed Osomatsu’s every movement.

In the end, Totty didn’t wait for permission. Osomatsu’s lungs gasped on fumes. ‘You two, hold him. Choromatsu-niisan, can you …’

Jyushimatsu wordlessly did as he was told, helping Karamatsu pin Osomatsu’s weak resistance as Choromatsu held his head. ‘Ahn, don’t,’ Todomatsu said when their mentor shimmied down his elbow to settle by Osomatsu’s cheek. ‘This isn’t going to be …’

‘I know what this is,’ she surprised all of them, interrupting the Unicorn. ‘Am I in the way?’

‘No, but …’

‘Then I’ll stay,’ she said, nestling into Osomatsu. So warm and soft, she must have said something only Osomatsu could hear. His tears were still fear and pain. But now they were something more, too. Jyushimatsu thought it was more because of Ahn than any of Totty’s threats—“It’s this or surgery, Niisan”—that his mask came off with the youngest’s next pull.

Instantly, Jyushimatsu wished it was back on. He couldn’t block his ears, busy holding down Osomatsu’s legs. But the wet gurgle of his brother struggling to get air down his tubes was unbearable. Only one sound could be worse. And that was the sound of poison being wrestled up Osomatsu’s throat.

‘You’re doing great,’ Choromatsu said as he tilted Osomatsu’s head back. Even from where he pinned his thrashing feet, Jyushimatsu saw Osomatsu’s eyes burst, gagging as darkness thickened. Clinging pincers buried into his throat, refusing to budge. Choromatsu was the right brother to talk him through this. He knew the “help me I can’t breathe” panic better than any of them. ‘Not much longer,’ he said. ‘Keep breathing, nice and slow …’

Osomatsu gave another strangled gasp. Then his breath cut off.

‘Shit,’ Karamatsu swore, Osomatsu’s writhes redoubled. Pressing into his brother’s legs, Jyushimatsu’s chest caved in. Osomatsu’s airways were completely blocked.

‘Come on,’ Todomatsu coaxed, the glow of his sceptre brushing Osomatsu’s gaping lips as he suffocated. ‘Come on …’

‘Todomatsu,’ said Choromatsu, the picture of tense calm. Osomatsu’s grey face faded into violet. ‘Any time you want to …’
Todomatsu wrenched his sceptre up. Osomatsu spasmed. A wad of blackened phlegm as big as Jyushimatsu’s fist ripped out through his mouth. The way cleared, Osomatsu’s broken scream burst out. Jyushimatsu watched, transfixed and horrified, as Choromatsu angled the eldest over the side of his crate. The third born rubbed his back, soothing as Osomatsu sobbed and coughed and heaved. Todomatsu vanished the disgusting blob with a wave of his sceptre.

‘L-Let … g-g-g …’

Coiled over and shuddering, Osomatsu tried to shove his brothers off him. He wasn’t strong enough. But Karamatsu did what he wanted. Choromatsu let him go, but left one hand to rub between his shoulder blades. Jyushimatsu imitated them a few beats late. He couldn’t stop staring at the growing puddle of sick Osomatsu brought up, streaked with soot.

Twitching away from Choromatsu, Osomatsu dragged himself upright. But Totty wasn’t done. Glaring at no one and entire body rigid, when the youngest told him to lie down Osomatsu didn’t move. ‘Do it, Niisan,’ Todomatsu ordered again.

Breathing hard through his nose, Osomatsu wouldn’t budge. ‘Fine,’ Totty snapped, fed up. ‘Don’t come whining to me when when your arm rots off.’

‘Matsuno Todomatsu,’ Ahn appealed when Osomatsu hunched over, clutching his useless arm. ‘Your brother is hurt, he’s tired. Please don’t …’

‘We’re all tired!’ Todomatsu exclaimed. ‘The sooner he lets me save him, the sooner we can all …’

‘I’ve got him.’

Sitting up on the crate, Choromatsu put his arms around Osomatsu.

Osomatsu jerked like he’d stuck a paperclip in a power outlet. ‘Don’t t-touch me!’

Slowly, Choromatsu let him go. He said nothing, still lost in a realm the others couldn’t quite reach. But Jyushimatsu spent enough time floating through his own planes of existence to know Choromatsu was definitely still here. He understood. But it still hurt. No angle Jyushimatsu could tilt would make this look right. Osomatsu loved attention—here he was, right in the middle of it! Jyushimatsu had never seen him shove it away.

‘S-Sorry,’ Osomatsu muttered when they all stared. He tried to laugh it off. ‘I just got hammered, g-gimme a break. I c-can’t even …’

He gingerly rubbed his head. ‘I feel like shit, okay? Just …’

Osomatsu coughed revoltingly. Disgusted, Todomatsu fussed with his ruffles to hide how bad he felt. ‘G-Give me that, would you?’

The fingers of his good hand flexed towards his mask. Jyushimatsu trotted to retrieve it. Pressing it to his face, Osomatsu let Choromatsu anchor him from behind. Todomatsu took his numbed arm and, quick like a band-aid, he ripped off the Kraken’s silvery tourniquet.

His pride spared by a simple mask, Osomatsu screamed only in their heads as Totty painstakingly disinfected and healed his ruined arm. Then he sewed up Osomatsu’s skull. The youngest made up for his shortened temper, wincing at the state of the eldest’s bruised brain and making gentle jibes that they hadn’t noticed any difference. ‘I know you hate this part, Niisan, but I need you to phase now. Can you do that for your adorable baby brother?’
His powers almost used up, Todomatsu did as much as he could. Intense healing session finally over, he put Osomatsu to sleep without warning. ‘Give us some peace, Niisan,’ he sighed, giving Choromatsu a quick checkup as Karamatsu wrapped the eldest’s oozing hand and battered head in bandages.

‘You’ve put your body under far too much stress,’ Totty scolded the third born, scanning with lens and sceptre. ‘How is it always you and Osomatsu … you’ll be sore and tired for a few weeks,’ he sighed. He leaned back to peer up through the busted skylight. It was still stormy out. No moon or stars to recharge. He bit his lip under his mask, uncertain. ‘If it’s bad when you phase, maybe I can …’

‘I’ll be fine,’ Choromatsu said. ‘Let’s get home, Mum and Dad’ll be freaking out.’

Sharing a thought, the four of them phased as one.

‘WWWhhhHaaaaaaaa!!! Niisan this feels really weird!!!!’

Jyushimatsu barrelled into a storm of jumping jacks. ‘That’s our Jyushimatsu,’ Karamatsu smiled. From the corner of his bouncing eye, Jyushimatsu saw the second born kept a close watch on Choromatsu. Bent double and resting all his weight on a stool, a wincing Choromatsu did the same for Karamatsu. But both breathed fine, no phasing problems today—well done! Jyushimatsu cheered them on. Karamatsu and Choromatsu were both doing so well!

His blood pumping and almost used to being normal again—wow, Jyushimatsu really was normal!—he was sprinting on the spot, knees almost whacking into his chin, when Choromatsu turned an abrupt half circle and limped away a few paces. ‘Choromatsu-niisan?’ Jyushimatsu asked, digging in the brakes. Exhaustion hit him like a tonne of pillows the instant he stopped moving. He blinked, sleepy as Choromatsu unbuttoned his shirt. ‘Why are you stripping?’

‘My brace unlocked,’ he said. ‘Finally.’

He shot Totty a dirty look as the second born went to help him. ‘That means I’m stronger now than when you joined,’ Choromatsu told Karamatsu before adding more hesitantly. ‘Maybe, ah, we shouldn’t tell Osomatsu just yet.’

‘I’m worried about Osomatsu,’ said Karamatsu, solemnly peeling the skin-tight body brace from Choromatsu’s arms and backbone. ‘Something’s up with him.’

‘He’s humiliated,’ said Choromatsu. He looked like he knew exactly how that felt. ‘He hates not finishing a fight on his feet. And the fact that we all did, on top of what the Doll …’

‘I’m not sure, my dearest Choromatsu,’ Karamatsu cut in, ‘that being princess carried from on high by our mighty Unicorn counts as finishing on your feet.’

Jyushimatsu laughed—it was true! Todomatsu giggled a little, humour a relief. Ears a little pink, Choromatsu punched Karamatsu in the arm with his bony knuckles. But after a few chuckles Karamatsu was somber again.

‘But it’s not just today.’

‘He was our front line by himself for a long time,’ said Choromatsu. Embarrassment set aside, he buttoned his shirt back on. ‘He’s been hurt even more than me.’

‘He needs rest,’ murmured Ahn. ‘His experts have been harassing Spectrum Alliance officials for an
extended leave period for some time now. But Matsuno Osomatsu has a fragile ego.’

‘I don’t think he’d take that well,’ Karamatsu agreed. ‘Neither would we—we need him. He has the most experience.’

‘By a month,’ Choromatsu pointed out. Not being mean. Just being right.

‘What would we do without our Salamander?’

‘There is the option,’ said Ahn. She placed one soft paw on the sleeping Osomatsu’s bandaged hand. ‘Of a temporary replacement.’

‘He’d take that even worse,’ Choromatsu shook his head. ‘When one of my experts suggested that to me … you know,’ he said, looking away from them for a moment. ‘When I was having problems … it felt like the end of the world. I thought the Alliance wanted to kick me out. And it probably already feels like the end of the world to Osomatsu,’ Choromatsu added. ‘You know he thinks he’s dragged us all into this?’

‘What?’ said Karamatsu, thunderstruck.

Choromatsu nodded. ‘And now that Jyushimatsu’s transformed to save him …’

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan?’

Todomatsu drew Jyushimatsu from the others’ conversation. ‘Don’t worry, he’ll be okay,’ he said, sitting on his crate across from Osomatsu’s snooze. ‘We’ll look after him.’

‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu.’

Ahn followed them. Pouncing up beside the fifth born, her little head bowed low. ‘I can never begin to express how grateful I am to you. The Spectrum Alliance is in your debt.’

‘We couldn’t have done it without you,’ Totty piped up.

‘Yeah?!’ Jyushimatsu beamed, exhausted and happy. ‘We saved the day, didn’t we?’

‘You did. You did so well … But I’m sorry, Matsuno Jyushimatsu.’ Ahn’s nose brushed her toes. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Jyushimatsu blinked, eyes itchy with tiredness. He yawned wide enough to swallow a low-flying airplane. ‘What for?’

‘For asking you to fight,’ Totty reminded. ‘When you’d already decided not to be a guardian.’

‘Ohhhhhhhhhh …’

Just once. That’s all Ahn had asked. That’s all Jyushimatsu had agreed to. In all the excitement, he’d totally forgotten. This was only temporary.

Ahn peeked up at him. So tired, Todomatsu tried not to look so hopeful. They were about to ask him, Jyushimatsu realised. Whether he’d change his mind and be the forever Sphinx.

He’d have to give back the scroll if he didn’t. He’d have to give back his costume. His lens. His earth. And he’d have to give back his memories.

No, he couldn’t do that! Jyushimatsu couldn’t forget again! Then no one would know the Doll of
 Darkness was inside Ichimatsu! His brothers didn’t know! What if they were fighting and …

They’d know if Jyushimatsu told them.

Why hadn’t he told them? Jyushimatsu vaguely remembered wondering the same thing caught in his panic freeze. He guessed he’d forgotten that too … not about the Doll of Darkness and Ichimatsu. But so much had happened all at once, all crammed into such a small space. He’d been so excited, and so scared. Maybe he’d forgotten, just for a little while, that his brothers hadn’t noticed something he had. That happened a lot, now that he knew it happened … but this was too important! If his brothers had known the Doll was Ichimatsu when they fighting over whether to … oh no, Totty was going to be so upset!

‘Totty, Totty!’ he exclaimed. Tiredness forgotten, his sleeves flapped overtime. ‘Ahn, I’ve got something really superduper important to tell you about …’

Jyushimatsu’s urgency drained. Right along with the healthy splashes of colour in his cheeks.

You know what will happen …

A cold voice uncoiled smooth like a snake from the back of his mind. He remembered Ichimatsu’s bleeding wrist. Ichimatsu’s poor head thrown against the wall. Again and again and …

You know what will happen if you say anything …

Now he remembered. That’s why he hadn’t told them.

Maybe that’s why. Jyushimatsu hadn’t said a thing. He hadn’t shouted out "wait wait that’s Ichimatsu-nisan please don’t hurt him", even when they could’ve killed him. Maybe he’d added up the clues without even knowing. Because if the Doll ever figured out the guardians knew who he was wearing, there was only one person who could have told them. And he was wearing Jyushimatsu’s overalls.

He’d know. The Doll of Darkness would know about all of them.

Jyushimatsu wouldn’t be the fool who let that happen.

‘Niisan?’ asked Totty. He tried to bring the fifth born’s focus front and centre. ‘What’s wrong?’

Jyushimatsu thought about Tokyo Dome in ruins. He thought about alien soldiers and monsters that exploded from black shells. He thought about Osomatsu, broken on the ground. Choromatsu as he fell from the sky. He thought about the thousands of people they’d saved, the chanting and cheering and their masked faces blown up on massive screens. He thought about the Sphinx. The wonder of their strength. The terror. And the responsibility. Jyushimatsu knew himself. He knew he could cause problems, whether he wanted to or not. Could he really be the warrior his brothers needed him to be?

And he thought about Ichimatsu. About the Doll of Darkness hurting him forever. He saw the Doll hurting his brothers. He saw his brothers hurting the Doll.

They’d let him go him today. But one day his brothers might have to make that tough decision. One day, the spectrum guardians might really kill him.

Jyushimatsu couldn’t let them do that.

He put his hand in his pocket, gripping the scroll he’d stuffed there. He’d transformed once. And now he couldn’t say no. The reasons were different. But this was exactly what he’d been afraid of all
along. *Sorry, Ichimatsu-niisan. I’m sorry.*

‘Jyushimatsu-niisan?’

Hand on his sleeve, Totty tugged Jyushimatsu from where he zoned out.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Ahn, ears tilting with concern. ‘Matsuno Jyushimatsu?’

Jyushimatsu felt his tiny topaz appear beneath his thumb. He rubbed the gem once. Twice. Then he hitched up his lips in the biggest grin he could.

‘I’m great, Totty—look, look! Ahn, look!’

He waved his bejeweled scroll in their faces. Jumping up, he danced with it thrust high over his head.

‘Look, I’m a real guardian! Look, Niisan!’

He scampered to show Karamatsu and Choromatsu.

‘See? I’m the forever Sphinx now! Nope, nothing’s wrong! Nothing’s wrong …’

***

Her slippers soundless in the dark hallway, Matsuno Matsuyo slid back the door of her sons’ bedroom. Five of them slept in there.

They’d had a call: Ichimatsu was having another episode. Matsuzo had dropped everything to hurry to the hospital.

‘I’m not through with you,’ he’d directed at the bulk of their sons once he’d called a taxi. He slammed the receiver down, angry lecture interrupted. Only Todomatsu had moved, his nod speaking for them all. Matsuzo had blustered until his taxi arrived, like his sons quietly standing there (slumped over the kitchen table, in the case of Osomatsu and Choromatsu) and taking the tongue lashing of a lifetime was worse than if they’d made excuses, insisting they’d done nothing wrong. Pulling himself together and grabbing his house keys, he’d ordered them to bed like they were bad little boys aged backwards a dozen years in a night.

Matsuyo sighed. Poor Matsuzo. They’d aged backwards. He’d aged forwards.

Osomatsu and Karamatsu were mostly excused. They’d been caught out of their seats when the cultists took over the stadium. Her hand on the doorframe, Matsuyo paused, chewing over the word “cultists”. She was having a hard time trying to whittle the widely-accepted theory to fit with all she’d seen. But their father was furious with the others for running off when the proverbial shit hit the fan.

‘Anything could have happened!’ he’d exclaimed, not quite shouting. But his voice was gravel by the end of it. ‘Did you stop to think what we were going through? Your mother was worried sick. The least you could’ve done was answer your damn phones!’

Karamatsu’s call had come after an hour of frantic searching, begging police and bystanders for help as they were evacuated from the wrecked stadium into the cordoned-off streets. Totoko tore her sweet voice to ribbons, shouting their names. Matsuyo smiled with fond exasperation. She’d felt much the same for the silly girl for almost twenty years. Beneath it all, Totoko cared so much for her boys.
‘We’re together,’ Karamatsu had assured, his voice raised over the chaos of sirens and pounding rain. Matsuyo’s hand shook so badly she’d almost dropped her precious smartphone twice, fingers slipping against the screen as she tried to answer. Her sons had given her the phone last Christmas. ‘Choromatsu’s a tad ill and light headed. Too much stress—my poor brother. And Osomatsu, he … got caught up in the panic,’ Karamatsu said. Matsuyo’s hand almost crunched her phone to trash in that brief pause. ‘He’s a bit worse for wear, but he’s in one piece. He’ll be hale and healthy in …’

‘Karamatsu, my sweet boy,’ Matsuyo had said, her chest squeezed tight. ‘Just tell me where you are.’

Saying they were in a nearby emergency room, Karamatsu had sidestepped his parents’ intention to be there as soon as possible. ‘It’s crowded here, but we got in early—they’ve both been looked at already. Why don’t we meet you at home?’

Matsuno Matsuyo had raised six boys and a husband. There wasn’t much anyone could get by her. Least of all by those boys she’d raised. She hadn’t expected to find them in the streets around the stadium. And if she’d rushed to the hospital her darling second born had named, she had a hunch she’d find no record they’d ever been there.

But Matsuzo was in enough of a fix already. Matsuyo had kept her suspicions close to her chest for months. But she was sure of nothing. She needed proof.

Framed in the doorway, Matsuyo looked over her sons’ sleeping faces. Choromatsu and Todomatsu looked exhausted. Choromatsu was particularly gaunt—apparently under doctor’s orders to get plenty of bed rest and increase his supplements. Karamatsu had seemed tired and dishevelled as he supported Choromatsu through the door, but otherwise all right—thank god. Matsuyo hugged herself around the chest. Thank every deity who watched over mothers and their troubled children, Karamatsu was all right.

Snoring loudly, Jyushimatsu looked as healthy as ever—no surprises there. But something about his sleeping smile was different. It was subtle. But Matsuyo knew it by then. It was the same change that had taken hold of the others, one by one.

Osomatsu looked terrible. Matsuyo knelt by her eldest’s head and took it in her gentle hands, wrinkled by time and worry and love. Tenderly, she pulled back his bandages and lit her smartphone to a soft glow, leaning in to better see. She inhaled sharply, seeing just how battered he was. Half a mind to wake him and bundle him (back?) to hospital for observation, Osomatsu shifted in his sleep. He moaned. Then he whimpered.

Her heart compressed, Matsuyo swallowed and took her son’s bandaged hand, slowly unwinding the wrappings. She snapped her lip between her teeth, cutting off her outcry as they fell away. It wasn’t the ugly rupture in his palm, though that was awful enough. But the rupture was half wound, half scar. Osomatsu had only been hurt a few hours ago. An injury like that couldn’t heal in such a short time. It was impossible.

Holding her breath and so afraid of what she would see, Matsuyo turned her son’s hand over. A matching puncture marred just beneath his third knuckle. Osomatsu’s hand had been stabbed clean through.

Osomatsu’s breath shook. Tears trickled from her eyes, clinging to her lashes as she re-bandaged her son. Leaning in, she kissed his grey cheek.

He was so warm. No human should be so warm.

Consumed by pride that burnt hotter still, it was almost enough to combat the ice cold fear she knew
would now never end. ‘My poor boy,’ she whispered. Matsuyo buried her face in Osomatsu’s shoulder. A few greying strands fell from her bundled tail, mingling with her son’s dark hair. ‘My poor boys …’

A soft sound raised her head. Wiping her face on her sleeve, she saw a tiny snowflake of a kitten stood on Osomatsu’s stomach. ‘Where did you come from?’ Matsuyo murmured. She kitten didn’t respond, eyes fixed on the sextuplets’ mother. Such dark eyes for a cat. It was hard to be sure, so many felines had been welcomed into their home over the years. But this little one wasn’t Ichimatsu’s friend. She’d showed up around the same time Osomatsu and Choromatsu found work. Shouldn’t she have grown a little more by now?

The kitten narrowed her eyes. Not suspicious or indignant how cats often fancied themselves, lording over neighbourhoods from the heights of stone walls. But Matsuyo could have sworn the little thing sized her up.

She shook it off. One earth-shattering realisation was more than enough. Still, Matsuyo didn’t feel entirely foolish when she took a stern stance with the kitten. The creature padded to sit on Osomatsu’s chest, posture perfect and little chin tilted to maintain studious eye contact.

Matsuyo held out her hand. Not a peace offering. An agreement. A contract.

‘If you’re in on this,’ she said as the kitten inspected her fingers with the air of one extending a grudging courtesy. At Matsuyo’s words, though, she went completely still. ‘You have to do better. Do you hear me? They’re my boys. For god’s sake, take care of them.’

***

Singled out among a fortunate few favoured, Lord Takuu’s most trusted lieutenant stood on their lord’s right side, a single step back from the throne. The mighty seat was hewn in honour of the occasion, transported to the stone pavilion shaped at the head of their builders’ most impressive project to date. A hall colossal beyond mortal imagination, crystal and essence of void shimmered and throbbed ghostly purple through stone. The endless floor stretched and swept into pillars as imposing as the weather-beaten rock formations kilometres above their heads. Wider than 10 earthly coliseums and 100 times as long, regiment upon regiment marched for the pleasure of their omnipotent warlord.

Boots thumped to the savage beat of skin drums. Spears glinted and axes clashed on shields. Ranks of arcanists wove their claws, their art on black display. An elite mutator prowled in beast form, an armoured living tank so large their shoulders brushed halfway up the pillars. More beasts soared and slithered and spindled, an splendid array of muscle and stealth and speciality with all manner of idiosyncrasies to offset their menace.

At the foot of Lord Takuu’s pavilion, the marching ranks parted and filed to stand at attention down the parade chamber. The trusted lieutenant watched the proceedings with only two eyes. Four traversed the pavilion and the cavernous chamber. Not for pleasure, but restless and alert for threats and potential deviations from their meticulous plans. This parade might be a credit to their loyalty and ability, demonstrating once more why the lieutenant ran the Liberation Force while Lord Takuu burdened his indomitable intellect with tasks less menial. Other efforts of late, however, had not been executed so faultlessly.

Their great experiment had failed. Of 50,000 target slaves, fewer than half had been claimed. Of them again, not 100 had breached the spectrum guardians’ shifting line of defence and been secured in the expanded caverns of the slave corrals—expanded, it seemed, too soon. The favoured lieutenant allowed themselves a prickle of annoyance. They had placed too much faith in the
ambitions of a mediocre lower lieutenant. Too much value on numbers over substance.

This wasn’t entirely accurate. Banshuuishi and Kaijuuzo had been fine soldiers and brilliant mutators, each specifically selected for the mission. Lord Takuu’s most trusted lieutenant had personally approved every appointment, simulating the coliseum scenario countless times, factoring in every probability they could envisage. Of course an appearance by the spectrum guardians had been taken into account. A possible re-emergence of the Sphinx had been studied by a dedicated team ever since the Kraken’s arrival had ruined the coveted subject of their previous experiment.

They had been prepared. The sheer number of slaves and the guardians’ unwillingness to kill should have brought them to their knees. The Salamander should not have survived. No untested Sphinx could tear asunder a mutated soldier with a single strike. Yet it had happened. Had the favoured lieutenant any belief in fate, they might have been suspicious of the coincidence: without fail, however knowledge of the past and endless research assured Lord Takuu’s forces they had the upper hand, the young guardians continued to triumph. This was only the latest in a long string of humiliations, peppered by minuscule consolation success.

But it was battles lost. Not the war—that had barely begun. And the favoured lieutenant had no doubt in their disciplined mind the Liberation Force would win. But still. Insurmountable preparation and effort expended, all for nothing. Resources wasted. Opportunities lost. And not only had the Sphinx joined their allies, but this failed experiment had witnessed the spectrum guardians united. All the glory and favour and riches of conquered worlds offered by their generous lord had not been enough. The entire Liberation Force had laboured to prevent this: efforts to locate their hidden base and ambush them; experimentation to develop mutations to better exploit their weaknesses; fighting with unwavering conviction when the gem-encrusted warriors intercepted missions. All efforts had failed. And the Liberation Force had expected only wrath from their lord.

The trusted lieutenant deeply regretted these trying circumstances. But they confronted the disappointments with the impassive nonchalance they were known for, the indiscriminate right claw of the rightful master of the universes. The lieutenant reacted just as they were expected. What had the ranks of the Liberation Force suffuse with terror was that Lord Takuu reacted in much the same way.

The night their experiment had gone so awry, the arcanists’ scrys disconnected, Lord Takuu had nodded a few times. The entire throne hall bent as though already broken, waiting for his fury to crash through them, Lord Takuu had risen from his rock throne and strode to his personal chambers. He hadn’t said a word. He rarely did, except to his most trusted, and even that was uncommon. Only the Doll received the honour of Lord Takuu’s eternal humour. But he had stayed in his chambers for many cycles—underground, the Earth’s sister sun failed to usurp their natural rhythms, still living the long days and nights of their home planet devoured by gravity eons past. And through those long days and nights, the trusted lieutenant had smelt fear ferment, the ranks treading a knife’s edge. What kind of insurmountable rage did their lord work himself into? The instant he emerged, the Liberation Force expected him to crunch the first skull that crossed him beneath his boot.

Instead, he had announced a parade.

Scales still tingling with the rush of dread and expectation, the trusted lieutenant had overcome their confusion and bowed, their thoughts only to serve. They had dozens of iterations of such a military extravagance pre-planned. The lieutenant needed only adjust for detail and logistics. The entire feat of large-scale coordination took only days.

Lord Takuu caught his trusted lieutenant’s eye and offered a slight nod of approval. More acknowledgement than most dared dream for in a lifetime of devotion, the lieutenant bowed so low
their mask scraped their boots. By the time their neck unfolded, Lord Takuu had returned his attention to the parade.

His collar attached to a narrow chain that snaked into Lord Takuu’s claws, the Doll slouched on the other side of his throne. His military blacks impeccable, he flicked at non-existent imperfections on his new ornamental shoulder pieces; the Doll’s uniform had embellished with his recent increase in strength. The dark human looked unimpressed by the military splendour pledging themselves anew to his master. Their power would be nothing without him.

The lieutenant bristled. They would be nothing without Lord Takuu, either, and neither would the Doll. A true warlord knew to utilise every tool at their disposal; anything useless would have long been discarded … but the Doll was not a warlord. He was only a weapon. Nothing but a slave, a favoured pet.

Leaning back, the Doll caught the trusted lieutenant’s eye fixed on him. They kept ever a close watch on the Doll, he was so prone to unexpected moves. There had been need to subdue him more than once to prevent needless injury or destruction. The Doll sneaked a grin behind Lord Takuu’s back. Again, the lieutenant prickled with annoyance. This one they didn’t allow themselves. But it happened all the same.

Their perfect experiment had failed. The fiasco was almost entirely the Doll’s fault. Yet he’d done not a thing wrong. He’d made the right move, calling for retreat. But he’d only made the move because he’d known that, if the suggestion came from him, retreat would never happen. Lieutenant Muunou was at fault, too, allowing themselves to be so goaded. But the Doll had manipulated his master’s soldiers and as good as ensured their destruction, all to taste the thrill. So few had returned. The handful of soldiers who had abandoned the weakened Doll had not been punished. But a clutch of hatchlings would soon burst from their initial chrysalis stage and replace the soldiers they’d lost—perhaps even a lieutenant was among them. Then the cowards would feel the consequence of deserting their posts. None had the strength of mind to survive the trusted lieutenant’s lashes.

The Doll had been chained to the whipping post as a spectacle before the parade commenced. What he had received there had not been delivered by the trusted lieutenant’s claws. And it had not been punishment.

Lounging and looking bored, the Doll grew more animated when the ranks of slaves marched up the hall. He favoured those he liked, pressing his fingers to his lips and blowing kisses. He pretended to pout, but only grinned wider with their lack of response. The slave second-in-command led his human troops, surrounded by the five members of his incomplete team, armoured in arcane steel over (what the lieutenant could only assume were) stylish uniforms fitted to their inferior forms.

Eyeing the second-in-command, this time, the Doll’s pout was genuine. He favoured this slave more than any other. He’d made that abundantly clear. But the Doll didn’t like the human Atsushi more than he liked Matsuno Karamatsu.

Noting his blood servant’s sullen face, Lord Takuu turned from the march and bent his neck to address him. The trusted lieutenant’s prickles deepened, thorns in his side. Lord Takuu bowed to no one!

‘There is no need for concern, Lieutenant.’

The trusted lieutenant flicked one of his roving eyes right. Lieutenant Souudai stood there, another pace back from the throne.

‘I have no desire to rise any higher,’ Souudai went on when the trusted lieutenant made no overt sign...
they minded if the other lieutenant continued. ‘Unlike Muunou, who would have sliced your throat in your sleep, had they climbed to my rank.’

The trusted lieutenant was unconcerned. Death was a considerable handicap to promotion. Nevertheless, Muunou would never have risen to where Souudai now stood. Souudai was resourceful, quick-witted and silver-tongued. Muunou had been none of these, their position as lieutenant only a coincidence of biology. Their ambition had overpowered any true want to serve. Souudai was certainly not unambitious, but their scales tipped in favour of devotion. To say nothing of their supreme use to Lord Takuu as resident spectrum guardian expert. Already Souudai spearheaded study into this perplexing new iteration of the Sphinx, so different from their predecessor—so different to any guardian they’d encountered. Souudai had been the trusted lieutenant’s unquestionable first choice to command the coliseum experiment. But Lord Takuu had vetoed their appointment—Souudai had other concerns. It would be some time before they ventured again to Earth. Unless called upon to act as their lord’s envoy once more.

‘Your position is safe from me,’ Souudai said. The trusted lieutenant narrowed a few eyes, unsure of the other lieutenant’s motive in raising such a subject. ‘Relinquishing all that I am, my name included, while an admirable calling, is one that very few may suffer with grace. One such as myself,’ they continued. ‘Is best suited to quicken our lord’s conquest by other means. This might not be, were it not for you,’ Souudai said, the compliment unexpected. The great march ended, tens of thousands arranged themselves to receive the blessing of Lord Takuu’s address.

‘What?’ said the favoured lieutenant. ‘The parade?’

Lieutenant Souudai laughed, an echoing, unpleasant thing. ‘No, no—our Lord Takuu’s return. Though we all suffered the torment—’

Souudai broke off to shudder, recollections of their eons imprisoned as near to mind as revenge.

‘—you were at our lord’s side the instant he called, when I still could not recall my name. You had already given up yours,’ said Souudai, with an odd mixture of respect and distaste. The trusted lieutenant stood unruffled. ‘I trust your reduction to an extension of our lord’s will expedited your recovery. Moreover, without you, it might have taken so much longer to locate our Doll and restore our powers.’

Following Souudai’s shifting eyes, the trusted lieutenant saw as Lord Takuu chuckled at some impertinence the Doll had uttered. Irritation spiked in their narrow chest. ‘Do I sense, perhaps,’ Souudai murmured, ‘something like jealousy for your great discovery?’

The trusted lieutenant’s neck whiplashed back to stare at Lieutenant Souudai. Jealousy? For a collared slave in a pretty uniform? They felt nothing, nothing at all. Only the quiet thrill and thirst to serve, content to ever remain in Lord Takuu’s shadow.

‘Hmm,’ hummed Souudai when the trusted lieutenant denied it. Lieutenant Souudai was more interested than satisfied, that their calculated dissection punctured the trusted lieutenant’s smooth mask. ‘Of course, as you say. It is only my hope that your personal feelings for the Doll of Darkness do nothing to subvert the Liberation Force’s imminent victory.’

The trusted lieutenant almost spun on their heel, about to demand an explanation from their outspoken subordinate. But at that moment Lord Takuu rose from his throne.

‘My Liberation Force,’ he began. A roar of sound returned the salutation, thousands shouting warcries, clashing weapons upon shields. ‘Never has a force been more worthy to exact revenge upon an ancient enemy and march upon the stars. I am most pleased. But perhaps there is confusion
among you,’ he said as scores gasped, forgetting to breathe as Lord Takuu’s praise rained upon them. ‘As to why it is not displeasure I now feel.

‘The experiment was a success.’

The trusted lieutenant started. They made it a point to expect nothing. Nonetheless, had they expected anything, this was not what they would have expected.

‘Perhaps the result was not all I had envisaged,’ Lord Takuu went on. The Liberation Force hung on his every word as if each syllable sustained them beyond the nourishing power of void. ‘And perhaps the cost was greater than expected. But know this and exalt: I am in no doubt that, had the spectrum guardians not intervened, the Doll of Darkness—’

Lord Takuu yanked on the Doll’s chain. Jerked from his recline on the arm of the throne, the slave tripped forward, hand snatching to his bruised throat. He panted, grinning as his master shoved him to his knees before the force that would conquer universes.

‘—would have delivered me the entire coliseum. Already he solidifies in his true form. Soon the sickly mortal form that anchors him will no longer be required. The moment he breaks those chains,’ said Lord Takuu, ‘the Doll of Darkness will swallow this pathetic planet in darkness. My slave army complete, our conquest will begin at last!

‘While the Doll cultivates our power,’ he said, the Doll’s lip curled on mention of his human form; he remained petulantly insistent they were not one and the same. ‘I want efforts to capture powerful slaves tripled—no human with potential in the entire metropolis is to be overlooked. The rest of you,’ he spoke to his entire Liberation Force. ‘Our time is nigh. We will tear through the Spectrum Alliance’s streets and space stations. The dead will burn in dark fires while the enslaved weep rivers of blood and tears. At last we will reduce the so-called greatest civilisation in all history to ash. At last will have our revenge!

‘Do I sense hesitation?’

The roar wavered, thousands scrambling to deny it most vehemently.

‘Perhaps you already envisage defeat not unlike the humiliation we suffered eons past? These young spectrum guardians …’

There was outcry and hurling of abuse at their absent gem-encrusted foes.

‘… have shattered hundreds of our crystals and scattered your fellow soldiers to the winds. Now five stand together, united as they once were. This should be our moment of despair! Most of our hatchlings remain in larve state, barely a handful spun their first cocoons. Already the Wyvern enters their own phase of metamorphosis. The others will soon follow. I hear your thoughts: what hope have we to defeat a force of guardians united and matured by magic?

‘I offer you this gift.’

Lord Takuu raised his claws. Scrys opened across the hall, tilted overhead, circling the pillars and unfolding from stone. The same moment flickered across them. Zoomed close on the hated Unicorn’s white-masked face, their dark eyes glared icy majesty.

Then, for a fractured moment, their face crumbled. The sparkle of their eyes dulled, eclipsed in shadow.

Even the trusted lieutenant scarcely believed what they saw. The Unicorn, Lord Takuu’s arch-
nemesis and general of the spectrum guardians, was scared. The Unicorn had doubts.

The Unicorn could be defeated.

‘You see?’ Lord Takuu’s said, quiet as his army screamed delight, frenzied with the gift their lord bestowed, ridiculing the Unicorn’s moment of darkness. ‘Our enemy might be dangerous. They might grow more formidable. They might surpass even our strongest of soldiers. But this will not last. The Unicorn knows this as well as we. The day the Doll of Darkness consumes this planet in my name will be the day the spectrum guardians’ victory streak comes to a permanent end.

‘They had our Doll!’

Lord Takuu raised his voice thunderous to the ceiling. The Doll rose from his knees, chain clattering in his master’s left claws. In his right, Lord Takuu gripped the opal that mirrored the crowning trinket of his Doll’s collar. ‘The Doll of Darkness offered himself to them, weakened and defeated, to prove it, once and for all: the spectrum guardians are weak! They had the chance to destroy him! They did not take it! If they cannot destroy one lost human soul, their hopes of saving billions are in vain! While we have the Doll of Darkness, we cannot be defeated! Long ago, it is I who wore the opal! The day may come when the Doll of Darkness’s talent exceeds even my past self!’

The lord’s most trusted lieutenant frowned, caught in an inner web of contradiction. It was not possible for their Lord Takuu to be wrong. But it was also not possible that anyone, let alone a mere slave, might equal his past magnificence as the Dullahan.

‘But by channelling void through him, my strength will far surpass that of any gem warrior! I will become the ultimate power in the universes! Through me,’ he roared, claws trust to pierce the sky, ‘the era of the Liberation Force will see no end!’

The monstrous hall resounded with warcries that battered the cavernous ceiling, hankering to burst free and spread doom all across the dimensions. Lord Takuu’s trusted lieutenant watched as the army exulted. The Doll bowed, as though he’d done anything to deserve such awe as Lord Takuu commanded. Again, annoyance pricked their scales.

Annoyance, yes. The powerful slave annoyed them, his insolence and his wildness. But he was also their saviour. To that end, he warranted all of Lord Takuu’s attentions and more. They might resent his immunity, the lieutenant denied the right to exact punishment for so many of the Doll’s misdemeanours. But resentment was was not jealousy.

‘Hmm,’ Souudai hummed again, as though they heard the other’s thoughts. Thoughts which neared virtual turmoil. The trusted lieutenant’s resentment further built, that the Doll stirred their innermost convictions. But they said nothing. The first great military parade of the new era at its end, they bowed to their lord as he departed to raucous celebration. Then they summoned aides. Directing their underlings to dismantle banners, the trusted lieutenant began to orchestrate the orderly exit of his lord’s army.

***

‘No … no …’

Suspended in a dark womb, Ichimatsu pushed against his confines. The soft surrounds offered none of the comfort they used to, the illusion shattered. He knew this holding cell. He couldn’t remember how he’d come to be there. He couldn’t remember much of anything there. Only that he was slowly dying.
Through the still tone of white noise and nothing, Ichimatsu thought he heard thunder … no. The roar of countless voices, guttural, screeching and cawing. The clash of metal on metal. The scraping of sharpened claws …

‘… sickly mortal form …’

Words floated to him, disjointed and adrift on the distant rumble of sound.

‘… no longer be required …’

‘No,’ Ichimatsu mumbled, muffled and stuffed full of what felt like thick oil-soaked socks. Now he remembered. He began to struggle again. ‘No …’

‘… Doll of Darkness will swallow this pathetic planet in darkness.’

‘No … fucking … way …’

‘Don’t fight it,’ his intruder recommended from the outside. He whispered low and evil in Ichimatsu’s voice … the Doll of Darkness. ‘There’s no point.’

Shit, he was right, he was right …

‘Helpless. Useless. Worthless,’ his jeers caressed insidious through Ichimatsu’s mind. ‘There is nothing you can do to stop this. The time has come for you to sit back, relax, and die.’

‘No …’

Shit, they were all fucked! Why was he still trying?

‘So hurry up and die, would you?’

The Doll of Darkness pushed him. White-hot agony sucked up his spine, so merciless that he screamed.

But when the Doll of Darkness pushed, Ichimatsu pushed back.

Chapter End Notes

So this is where we leave the magical boys for a while. Sorry the Liberation Force stuff was nothing really new … just needed to reaffirm how evil they were and that everything’s going according to plan despite setbacks sort of thing … stereotypical cartoony villain kind of stuff :) And Mama Matsu knowwwwwwwws :D And Doll's getting stronger, but Ichi's fighting back, and Choro's starting to upgrade, and the others will soon upgrade too, and the entire world now knows for sure how dangerous the "cultists" are and that there's hooded heroes with strange powers and questionable methods running around Tokyo and ... stuff's happening :D I have pretty solid ideas for the next chapter and the arc that follows, but after that, besides the major events, nothing is concrete. So that'll be fun, when I get back to writing this next year :D

Again, I'm so sorry it'll be a while before this updates again ... honestly, it feels kind of scary, knowing I'll be setting Magical Oso aside for over half a year. But I need to try to stop myself from bowing out of my novel project if I hit a snag. I've done that before ...
so I can't say I'll be back sooner if things don't go well :( I need to try to stick it out. DISCIPLINE! I HAVE NONE! But I'll definitely still be around! If anyone wants to chat, you can message me on tumblr (I'm narwhalsonnets there, too). I don't really post very much (except for reblogging Magical Oso fan art :D) but I usually see messages, and I try to check reasonably regularly ... you'd think I'd be better at internet-ing by now.

Also there is Twitter. Again, I don't use it much, but I'm trying to train myself to. My Twitter is supposed to be a vaguely official writer sort of thing, so I most likely won't be posting anything Oso-related. But when I get my act together I'll be putting a few short stories up free to read - on Inkitt, most likely. They're ebooks right now, but I can't market to save myself ... plus they still need serious work ... so that didn't pan out :) I'll be popping things like that up, if anyone's interested in having a look at anything else I've written. My handle is @BLSMadden

Thank you so much again for sticking with me all this time. I can't wait to see you again when hiatus is done ... and hopefully I'll have a complete novel draft by the end of it! Please wait for me! I have no intention of letting Magical Oso languish unfinished forever ... just for a long time :) So much further to go ... but this fic is so ridiculously special to me. This is where I finally developed a writing voice I actually like and that really feels like me. Hopefully I'll be able to carry that over to my original stuff, though I seriously need to work on making things more compact :D No more going all-out ... now is the time for discipline :( 

Thank you again so much for being so amazing and for reading Magical Oso ... sorry if the thanking is a bit overboard :) So I'll hopefully be back some time around March next year, and please talk to me on tumblr or Twitter if you want! I'm really looking forward to working on my own stuff ... but I'm already reaaaaaally looking forward so much to being back! Shall see you then!
Hello, lovely people! Sorry it's been so long, but I think I'm roughly on time? According to my estimates last July (?) of when to expect a chapter... maybe? Maybe-ish? Thanks so much for waiting for me, and I hope you like chapter 33!

See the end of the chapter for more **notes**

They’d already been famous. They’d been on the world’s lips, trending from Tokyo to Toronto, politicians and researchers and starstruck kids who defended their doorsteps in coloured hoodies all braying to know more. Where did they come from? How did they conjure fire and command wind and water as though by magic? What was their connection to the masked menace that stalked the world’s biggest city? And why did these vigilantes, these so-called heroes, ignore all requests to cease, desist, and surrender themselves and their technology to the authorities?

Fewer cosplaying kids and more people with power pondered this particular point of interest.

But after Tokyo Dome, all that attention paled.

Now the spectrum guardians were an international phenomenon.

This was the first time the guardians had truly been seen in action, the footage salvaged from stadium cameras and cell phones slashed with static and greyed to an ancient horror film that witness accounts and imagination splashed with vibrant technicolour. Hundreds of editors on the job and thousands of sources to scour, the entire incident had been clipped together, beginning to end.

Hunched over computers and phone screens, the world watched every move on repeat, every strike, every split-second decision as the magical Matsuno brothers faced the Doll of Darkness and his puppet army. The moment the evil prick stepped up to the pitcher’s mound. Choromatsu’s harnessing of not one, but two murderous skies. Jyushimatsu’s titanic swing that cracked the foundations of the stadium.

Osomatsu flushed, watching in third person as the Doll leaned over the stricken Salamander, harassing and humiliating him—he’d *kissed* him, the bastard! Osomatsu was all too aware more than half the planet had seen it, too.

What the planet didn’t see—besides the hints and clues they’d devoured to date, missing persons, dazed victims and minor structural damage left in their wake—was that Liberation Force “cult” activity had exploded. Abduction attempts surged from near standstill the day after the Tokyo Dome Disaster.

The guardians’ scrolls burnt nonstop. But their lineup was in disarray. Osomatsu, to his disgust, was temporarily out of action. Again. Choromatsu needed at least a few days to recover from his mammoth effort in the stadium. And the Sphinx experts requested time to build up Jyushimatsu’s confidence before regularly sending him into the field. There was also that tactfully-framed concern that the rookie hero might accidentally shatter any neighbourhood he wanted to protect if he didn’t learn to control his strength. That meant Karamatsu and Todomatsu shouldered the brunt of Takuu’s forces—Karamatsu, who was still technically a rookie himself. Osomatsu sometimes forgot their
Kraken had only been with them a few short months, he was that damn talented.

So while his brothers fought, trained, and quietly rested before rejoining the daily grind, Osomatsu spent the next few days moaning whenever he moved and barely able to talk—you know. From getting stabbed in the throat. By a dark shit-infused sword. And having the infection ripped out through his goddamn mouth. The whole process had shredded him from tubes to tongue, and left him with a pathetic scrape of a voice.

‘You’ll only make yourself worse,’ said mum, ordering him to take time off his fake gig. Ahn said much the same thing. Worn out and at his wit’s end, Todomatsu was blunter when Osomatsu tried to argue.

‘You’re no good to us like this. I never thought I’d have to order you to be lazy.’

‘Wh-whatever,’ Osomatsu said—well, rasped, his voice box choked with gravel.

Osomatsu was annoyed, that he didn’t try harder to get himself out of bed rest. But, despite their Unicorn’s best efforts, his arm felt freshly thawed from a block of molten ice. His hand felt like it was about to shrivel up. And his head felt like an eggshell taped back together by a kindergartener. Trying to hide the full extent of his pain, when Osomatsu couldn’t sleep he tried reading manga to distract himself. But it hurt to hold up his comics. And he was so restless. He kept clicking the news back on—on TV, or on the smartphone Choromatsu and Todomatsu had bought him for their birthday. His tech-savvy brothers’ annoyance at his refusal to upgrade had finally reached the point where they upgraded him themselves.

The final figures were in. The casualties of the Tokyo Dome Disaster: 114 missing, 789 injured, and 11 dead.

Osomatsu almost vomited when he heard. Reading and watching and staring at photographs of the dead until his eyes could’ve popped out, he finally convinced himself no death had been their fault. He couldn’t see the woman he’d accidentally punched across the stadium, thank any almighty interference that had spared her, because shit, she should be dead. There’d been four heart attacks in the stands. The rest were very old or very fragile victims of the Doll’s mass infection.

‘They did not survive the shock of having their souls stolen,’ said Ahn, small and solemn. Osomatsu was even more grateful they hadn’t brought Ichimatsu along, if that was possible.

He was relieved. But somehow, knowing no one was dead because of him didn’t make Osomatsu feel much better. Making excuses when his counsellors tried to engage him, he comforted Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu as best he could, assuring his devastated brothers they’d done nothing wrong—forget nothing wrong: they’d done great! But saying it didn’t stop the burn, Osomatsu’s guilt so hot his heart could’ve been pressed to a hotplate.

If he’d done something different… if he’d done better… if Osomatsu had already stopped the Liberation Force, 11 people might still be alive.

‘It could’ve been much worse,’ said Choromatsu of the dismal stats. ‘Given Tokyo Dome is now an official disaster zone.’

Too right. To poor Jyushimatsu’s despair, the rest of the baseball season had been cancelled.

‘The game was sold out,’ Choromatsu went on. ‘Todomatsu’s mass healing probably saved a lot of people.’

Osomatsu’s stomach flip-flopped. He hadn’t thought of that. How many more would be dead if it
weren’t for Totty?

‘We did everything we could,’ said Choromatsu. Osomatsu hunched over the low table in the living room, the third born gave him a gentle nudge with his elbow. ‘Don’t dwell on it.’

‘I’m n-not,’ said Osomatsu. Feeling oddly like his and Choromatsu’s roles had been violently reversed, he shut his mouth and flicked between channels. He counted three different expert panels trying to dissect the guardians.

Sometimes it was fun, listening to theories about their powers. And their “mysterious benefactor”—both very close and nowhere near the truth, the favourite story was still the anonymous billionaire genius with a personal vendetta against the cult. But lately, Osomatsu just wasn’t in the mood. It didn’t help, that the panel he settled on featured a senior commissioner who just wouldn’t shut up about hotshots who fancied themselves above the law. He got on well with the politician who sniped about the cost of damage to Tokyo Dome.

‘Yeah,’ Osomatsu muttered. ‘You’re welcome. You’d th-think they would’ve… lightened up on us a b-bit,’ he complained. ‘The public’s all ch-cheering… for us. A lot of officers are, too,’ he said, remembering that, despite the huge turnout of police at the stadium, they’d let the five young superheroes leave without any fuss. *They* knew the guardians were doing good work.

‘Hmm,’ hummed Choromatsu. A bit annoyed his brother wasn’t listening, Osomatsu grabbed the remote and flicked to another channel.

His heart stalled. A newsreel of terror dominated the screen.

In some far-flung countries it was unrestrained. Foreign correspondents filmed the panicked hoarding food and governments tightening border restrictions. Even where the fear was lowkey, tensions worldwide were stretched to breaking point, a bitter taste of what Japan had endured for months. Unidentified mothers admitted to second-guessing leaving their homes. Leaders strobed by camera flashes addressed their citizens as countries in Japan’s Pacific neighbourhood prepared for cult infiltration, experts attempting to predict where their airborne chemical hypnosis and monstrous machines would strike next.

But what simmered Osomatsu past boiling point were the copycats. Incidents dotting the globe, the bedbound superhero fumed at clips of morons in masks waving hate signs and machine guns beneath hand-scrawled Liberation Force banners, the cult’s name claimed for their own “causes”. Osomatsu seethed to take those bastards out himself. But:

‘Tell me, Niisan: how exactly to you plan to “take them out”?’ Todomatsu quipped during an evening checkup, gently probing Osomatsu’s throat while dinner smells wove temptingly from the kitchen. At least, mum’s cooking should’ve been tempting. He ate when his family did, but Osomatsu had lost track. Of the last time he’d felt good and hungry.

‘Let someone else deal with them,’ said Totty. He unwound the bandage from Osomatsu’s hand to inspect the healing puncture beneath. ‘We’ve got enough on our plate.’

‘I know, I know…’

‘Even if we could do something,’ Todomatsu said the next day. He and the others were arrayed across the city, at work while Osomatsu watched his screens and wallowed in angry funk at home. ‘*You* can’t. You’re not ready to come off the bench yet.’

‘Bullshit I’m n-not.’
Osomatsu was royally sick of how his brothers were treating him. He was still sore and sorry for himself. He still reeled when he moved his head too fast. But there was no lasting damage, was there? This wasn’t like when his legs had been rebuilt—Osomatsu prickled with frustration and the ongoing stimulation from his leg braces. They still refused to loosen until he surpassed himself at the time of that hellish battle. Of every monster that resurfaced in his nightmares, Karamatsu’s tentacled war tower terrorised him the most.

There was no lasting damage, no. But:

‘Matsuno Todomatsu couldn’t heal you completely,’ Ahn reminded, perfectly calm even after the seventh time Osomatsu demanded the same answer. ‘He did his best, but he was too drained. And the storm prevented him from recharging that…’

‘Then why d-doesn’t he heal me now?’

‘It is not so simple,’ she said, infuriatingly patient. Osomatsu would almost prefer she lost her temper with him. At least that would be normal. ‘Your human body has taken over. It is best not to tamper mid-way through the natural healing process. Todomatsu is a fine healer, but he still has much to learn. And you are still weak from infection,’ Ahn reminded when Osomatsu swayed in his kneel, needing to brace himself on the living room table. ‘You must let yourself rest if you are to become strong again.’

Osomatsu ground his teeth. How was he supposed to get stronger when he kept getting the crap beaten out of him and taken off duty? Sure, it would’ve hurt. A lot. But even with Todomatsu’s slapdash healing job, he should’ve been training again in days.

He knew something else was up when there’d only been one joke cracked about his ruined voice and how quiet it was now. Karamatsu’s attempt had been valiant, but fell flat.

Osomatsu’s brothers were being extra careful with him. They were treating him like he was more than hurt. Like he was delicate, or even sick.

Well. Fuck that for a joke.

Osomatsu tried to laugh it off. ‘G-Guys, I’m not… f-f-falling apart here,’ he called them out. ‘C-come on, quit it.’

‘Brother, don’t speak,’ Karamatsu replied. Concern deepened his frown lines. ‘Let your throat heal.’

‘Fine.’

Osomatsu continued to call them out telepathically. Totty denied it with a convincing jibe about how self-absorbed the first-born was. ‘Me??’ Osomatsu exclaimed, sufficiently sidetracked.

Karamatsu, Jyushimatsu and Ahn weren’t so coy.

‘Sorry, Osomatsu-niisan. But we’re worried about you,’ Jyushimatsu said, blinking his wide, wide eyes. ‘You sure took a beating, huh?’

He wasn’t wrong. But that couldn’t be it.

Osomatsu got more out of the third born.

‘It’s not just your injuries,’ Choromatsu confirmed when Osomatsu waylaid him. ‘Or the infection. It’s your ego. That’s what really took a beating, isn’t it? And,’ he added, not a hint of hesitation
when Osomatsu’s gritted fists trembled. ‘The Alliance is concerned for your mental state. They…’

‘My mental state’s fine,’ Osomatsu snapped—goddamnit, Sig and Tee! So he skipped out every time his counsellors tried to set a time. He still talked to them when they barged into his headspace, didn’t he? Goddamn adorable traitors.

‘Maybe. But you’re no different to the rest of us,’ said Choromatsu, distantly. ‘We’re all under pressure. We’ve all got doubts and bad memories to deal with. I don’t think spending your appointments trying to break into the intergalactic dating scene counts as dealing with anything.’

Choromatsu’s words were dry. His delivery was not.

‘How would you know what we talk about?’ Osomatsu challenged. What passed between their counsellors and themselves was supposed to be confidential—confidential-ish, anyway. And it wasn’t like he needed help. Osomatsu was dealing just fine, thanks. ‘I’m just doing this to keep Ahn and the Alliance off my back, that’s all.’

‘Hmm.’

Choromatsu hummed doubt. It took a lot of willpower for Osomatsu not to punch him in the face.

‘You’re the one they should be worried about,’ he shot back instead.

‘Hmm?’ Choromatsu said again. ‘Why do you say that?’

A light breeze played through Choromatsu’s hair, his neat comb a memory. Osomatsu’s lay untouched. They were inside, every window shut and the new air-con their parents had installed rallied against the muggy summer outside.

Choromatsu had been acting weird ever since the stadium—sort of there, but not there there. Like he’d breached an all-new level of focus and was now stranded beyond that veil. His irritated spiels, anxious stammers and dry wit had all but vanished, just their shadows left. He seemed to hear them fine, and he spoke when spoken to. But everything except his body and a slither of conscious presence were somewhere else entirely. Somewhere Osomatsu wasn’t. Somehow, even though they still lived in each other’s heads half the time, this made him feel terribly lonely. What was going on with Choromatsu?

As always, Ahn had the answers: the third born might have entered his upgrade phase.

‘We must keep a close watch on him,’ she said. The brothers crowded around her on their futon, Ahn groomed down a few hairs ruffled with nerves. ‘Upgrades are generally facilitated under strict control conditions in Alliance laboratories. And this is the first time a human has undergone the transmutation. We cannot be entirely sure what will happen.’

Osomatsu didn’t like the sound of that. ‘He’s okay, right?’

‘I’m fine,’ said Choromatsu. Not quite looking at anyone, he absently stirred the air with his hand. A tiny whirlwind swirled there with him. Choromatsu didn’t seem to notice. Jyushimatsu stared at the third born, not afraid, but so solemn.

‘That’s amazing! I didn’t know you could do that without the Wyvern, Choromatsu-niisan.’

‘Huh?’ Choromatsu barely blinked. ‘What am I doing?’

Without a word, Karamatsu gently pulled Choromatsu’s hand down and held it. Todomatsu pinched
his lower lip between his teeth, eyes flickering between Choromatsu’s vacant expression and the dissolving miniaturised weather system. If that ever happened in public, there’d be some interesting questions to answer.

‘I wasn’t asking you,’ said Osomatsu to Choromatsu. He looked pointedly at Ahn.

‘His experts and upgrade specialists are monitoring him day and night,’ she said. ‘For now, he’s fine.’

Osomatsu didn’t like the sound of that “for now”.

But Choromatsu wasn’t the only guardian being monitored. Ahn had a delivery the next Saturday, two weeks after Tokyo Dome all but crumbled. Karamatsu lent his thumbs to open the space-worthy package. Osomatsu was pretty sure they were designed to be opened regardless of thumbs. But he bit off the comment halfway. Karamatsu was just trying to be helpful.

A dark scowl devoured Osomatsu’s features when the packaging fell away: three wristbands like those Karamatsu and Choromatsu wore.

‘No way.’

‘It’s part of your contract,’ Ahn reminded him, ‘to submit to all care the Alliance deems appropriate. This is long overdue.’

‘It is,’ Todomatsu agreed. ‘Don’t you think so, Niisan?’

Osomatsu glared molten ore. Removing a tag marked with his shiny pink symbol in Alliance lettering, the youngest slid a band onto his wrist. It tightened and faded to match his flawless skin. Damn it, the little shit had probably been included in the decision-making process, to have them all medically spied on.

‘Ooooooh, what is it?’

Jyushimatsu inspected the band with the sparkling yellow tag and held it against his skin, bursting excitement when it changed colour. A two-sentence summary from Ahn was enough to convince him. ‘They want to look after us better? That’s great! Thank you, thank you so much!’

All warm and bubbly with the thought that the Spectrum Alliance cared—damn it, Osomatsu knew they cared, that wasn’t the point—Jyushimatsu held out his wrist. Todomatsu fitted the band on snugly.

But Osomatsu refused.

‘What’s your problem?’ Todomatsu exclaimed when his attempts to wheedle the band onto Osomatsu’s stubborn wrist failed. ‘Is this a joke to you? Why are you so against this?’

The answer to that was too complicated for Osomatsu to deal with. So he didn’t.

‘I don’t need it. That’s why.’

‘So what? It’s a precaution, we all have them,’ snapped Todomatsu. He shoved the band at Osomatsu. ‘You’re being an idiot. Just put it on. Don’t make me order you.’

‘Fuck off.’

Totty gave him a terrible look and flounced instead to Choromatsu. As he fitted the third born with
an arsenal of extra sensors, adhered to his temples and chest and all down his body, Osomatsu dredged up more pathetic arguments. When they failed, he tried to negotiate.

‘You can only use it to monitor me,’ he directed at his experts, counsellors included. They’d been listening closely to the brothers’ argument. ‘You can’t drug me or anything, okay?’

‘We won’t,’ Niv spoke for the Salamander experts. ‘Unless it’s an emergency. And we have both the Unicorn and your mentor’s approval.’

Osomatsu didn’t want to. But he spotted Karamatsu’s gaze skim the shag rugs on the warehouse floor, hiding his eyes and fiddling with his own very active medicinal band as the eldest carried on. The second-born’s insecurity was the real reason Osomatsu sucked it up and shut up. It wasn’t like any “emergency” would ever happen. So it wasn’t a big deal, right?

Osomatsu ripped off his fiery red tag and jammed the last band on his wrist. Instantly it contracted, colour and texture rippled to match the linger of last summer’s tan, mole for mole and scar for scar. ‘Niisan, look look look! We match!’

Jyushimatsu waved his hand in Osomatsu’s face. Even browner than Osomatsu, in the warehouse dim the fifth born’s new addition was invisible. So was Osomatsu’s. But Jyushimatsu still found it on his first try, pumping Osomatsu’s hand happily into the air with his own.

‘Jyushimatsu’s really something special. Isn’t he?’ Sig said to Osomatsu as he mooched, listlessly gulping water and wringing sweat from his hair. Their gym equipment smoked behind him. Niv’s relentless slave driving to hammer him back into top shape was done for the day. Osomatsu might have graduated to leaving the house, but if he tried to go anywhere but the warehouse Totty and Ahn would banish him to their bedroom. He was only allowed to train. He wasn’t allowed to transform. Says who?

Osomatsu dug out his scroll and stared at the smouldering glint of his garnet.

Ahn? Totty? Who cares? I’m the Salamander. It’s my contract. It’s my scroll. I can transform if I want…

His own burning eyes reflected in that bloodred stone, staring back at him.

Osomatsu clenched the scroll in his fist, hiding the gem. He didn’t transform. He wouldn’t. Guess the Salamander was a good little soldier, after all—shit. How did that please him and piss him off at the same time?

‘Osomatsu? Was there something on your mind?’

‘Nah,’ said Osomatsu when Sig probed, and steered her back to Jyushimatsu. ‘What were you saying? How’s he special? Besides…’

He nodded towards the fast-moving fifth born. He’d been galloping laps around the warehouse track for almost an hour, a huge happy grin on his face. ‘You know. That.’

‘We’ve never seen anyone quite like him,’ she said. Osomatsu liked hearing his clever counsellor talk about Jyushimatsu with admiration. People were going to be using that glowing tone when they said his name a lot more often. ‘It seems he’d already harnessed his inclination and developed a relationship with it. That’s unheard of.’

‘And the Alliance has been studying inclinations for…?’
‘Longer than your young human mind can comprehend.’

‘Hey, watch it,’ said Osomatsu. He felt Sig’s mental equivalent of a shrug. Nothing she’d said was untrue. Just mildly offensive if taken the wrong way.

‘He’s got our top researchers ecstatic. They can’t wait until the war is over and you can visit our system,’ said Sig, unexpectedly. ‘You’ll all be much easier to study in person. But that pre-existing relationship is what gives Jyushimatsu the appearance of being a natural, though he lacks the control of a true natural, such as yourself.’

Brought up short by Sig’s casual mention of an end to the war, like it was something that could actually happen and soon, and the promise of being whisked away to Spectrum Alliance space stations to finally meet their employers, Osomatsu had to shake himself to get back on track. He rubbed absently at his chest. The feelings tumbling in there were expectant, excited, relieved. But also a little empty. And really goddamn tired.

‘They’re keen to find out what made Jyushimatsu’s inclination seem so small and weak when it’s really a force to be reckoned with,’ Sig was saying. ‘And how he developed his core. Setting aside his love of the outdoors, you’d think he’d be more inclined to light.’

That’s what Osomatsu had thought at first, too. But that had been a knee-jerk reaction to Ahn’s revelation that one of their brothers was a potential Unicorn. Osomatsu knew Jyushimatsu better than that.

‘Jyushimatsu’s always been a bit different,’ he shrugged, feeling as his counsellor listened with ramped interest. ‘He says the weirdest, best things. And he goes all hyper—he’s got an attention span of, like, two seconds. He was terrible at school. And he’s really strong on the outside, but sometimes that kinda made things worse. He was picked on really bad growing up, you know? And I… wasn’t the best defender,’ Osomatsu admitted. ‘I always got angry and threw a punch or something, got us in worse trouble. Ichimatsu’s the one who looked after him best. He was a really sweet kid. A good kid, everyone liked him. Dunno what the hell happened there,’ he said, an odd pang knotted through his emotions. What had turned poor Ichimatsu so dark, so angry? He had no clue. Maybe Jyushimatsu knew, or Karamatsu. Karamatsu was a much better big brother than Osomatsu was.

‘Anyway,’ said Osomatsu before Sig could jump on him and wheedle out what he wasn’t saying. ‘Things got really bad in high school—I mean, really bad. Jyushimatsu spent more time hiding than in class. But then it was like he… decided to be strong inside as well as out—he was trying to be strong,’ Osomatsu amended. ‘Really hard. So more like he decided to stop trying and to just be, however stupid that sounds. He had to be sturdy. Solid. He couldn’t let anything get to him.’

Osomatsu shrugged again. ‘I guess developing a core makes sense, when you think about that. Plus he loves to get dirty.’

Their brothers split up to tackle simultaneous abductions (Karamatsu fought alone with Ahn for guidance while Todomatsu kept an eagle eye on Choromatsu), Osomatsu flopped on his crate and watched Jyushimatsu attempt to bridle his enthusiastic powers. He tried to help out a few times when the Sphinx experts asked. And then when they didn’t, butting in until they told him to stop.

‘You can assist in combat training later,’ Ahn said from a distance when, disgruntled, Osomatsu backed off. ‘But Matsuno Choromatsu may be the best mentor for him. They are the same, yet so different. They…’

‘Whoa!’
Osomatsu gripped the edges of his crate like he rode a rollercoaster, the ground shuddering beneath him. ‘Jyushimatsu, the flower pots! Not everything else!’

‘Okay, Niisan!’

Stretched on his magical belly with his big booted feet kicking through the air, Jyushimatsu furrowed again with concentration, trying to funnel his power through the array of pots they’d lugged in and filled with earth from the nearest gardening centre.

‘Once Matsuno Choromatsu completes the upgrade process,’ said Ahn once she was sure the warehouse hadn’t crumbled on top of them. ‘Perhaps he can teach Matsuno Jyushimatsu the fine-tune control he developed with his acquired inclination. It may be Matsuno Jyushimatsu will have something to teach him, as well. Though Matsuno Choromatsu needs no further assistance in the strength department.’

‘No,’ said Osomatsu, drooping with tiredness. ‘He doesn’t… Aren’t you supposed to be helping Kara… Karamatsu?’ he said, yawning.

‘He pierced their crystal before they transformed,’ said Ahn, gushing forth pride. ‘One drop of water was all it took.’

‘Oh… okay.’

Damn it, Osomatsu had to get back out there! But Niv’s workout had wiped him bad… goddamn, his head hurt. And his arm had barely held out for one pathetic gym rotation. He hugged the unhappy limb to his chest. This was getting so old…

‘Osomatsu-niisan, look!’

Jyushimatsu sprang to his feet, the smallest pot clamped in his arms. Osomatsu ached to high hell. But he shoved off the anvil of exhaustion and trudged over to Jyushimatsu’s pots. ‘What is it, buddy?’

Osomatsu saw exactly what: a perfect cylinder had been gouged straight down through the middle of the pot. A large clod of dirt suspended overhead. Jyushimatsu seemed to have forgotten about it. ‘I dug a hole,’ he said, so proudly.

‘You sure did,’ said Osomatsu. He gave Jyushimatsu the best grin he could muster, and ruffled his brother’s hair through his hood. ‘Look at you, you could’ve scooped that out with a teaspoon. Great job, that’s awesome.’

Words couldn’t express Jyushimatsu’s delight. The dirt clod explosion did.

‘Oooooh,’ said Jyushimatsu as earth erupted from a dozen pots to join the happy mess all across the warehouse floor. And deep into the shag of Totty’s favourite rug. ‘Whoops. I’m sorry…’

‘No problem,’ said Osomatsu, shaking a shower of dirt off his hoodie. ‘It’s not a big deal. When he gets back Choromatsu can clean…’

‘NO WAIT I CAN CLEAN UP WATCH ME GO!’

Charging to plop in the midst of the mess—good thing their magical getups didn’t require dry cleaning—Jyushimatsu plunged into his next lesson as though it had been planned: trying to scoop the scattered earth back to him. Without making a bigger mess. From his happy jabbers, Osomatsu guessed the Sphinx experts were giving him plenty of encouragement.
Slouched back to his crate, Osomatsu tucked his legs beneath him like a child and looked at his brothers’ vacant seats. Jyushimatsu’s the latest, his crate dragged over and decked out in squishy yellow cushions and blankets, ready for when the weather turned cold again. Since last autumn, their arrangement had progressed from parallel to triangle to square to pentagon. One brother after another.

Osomatsu groaned. He had to stop. Obsessing over this was part of what had his counsellors on alert and everyone else treating him like he’d explode if they looked at him the wrong way. But Jyushimatsu was yet another brother he’d condemned to the guardian life. And this time there was no denying: Osomatsu was directly responsible. Jyushimatsu had become a guardian to save him. Just like Choromatsu had.

‘That’s the reason he first transformed,’ said Choromatsu, guessing what had Osomatsu so glum when he painfully tossed and turned that night, unable to sleep. And Choromatsu… Osomatsu wasn’t sure he was sleeping at all. ‘That’s not the reason he became a guardian. He doesn’t regret it. Neither do I.

‘And it’s not all you,’ Choromatsu said. ‘Todomatsu signed his contract to save me, remember?’

‘But he was going to sign anyway,’ said Osomatsu, cursing his moodiness. At least Ahn wasn’t awake to rub his nose in it. ‘Jyushimatsu wasn’t.’

‘Karamatsu saved me, too,’ Choromatsu pointed out, quietly.

‘He kinda saved all of us,’ Osomatsu reminded.

‘My back was broken. My skull was smashed. He carried me out of the canal.’

Choromatsu spoke with a touch of sadness, the same responsibility Osomatsu felt so deeply. But he was perfectly level. Apparently, Choromatsu had come to terms with this. Osomatsu was the one who couldn’t let go.

Osomatsu shook his sore head. He didn’t say anything, it didn’t matter. It still felt like he’d shoved those scrolls in their hands himself. He’d been the first. If Ahn hadn’t seen him get his ass kicked in that alley, none of this would have happened… but Osomatsu loved being a guardian, so much that sometimes it scared him. He wasn’t sure he knew himself any more, without the Salamander. He wasn’t sure he was worth anything without his contract. And he sure as hell wasn’t about to say this to anyone. His counsellors would get the wrong idea, and Ahn would freak out… what if the Alliance made him go on leave? Like, long-term leave?

Osomatsu’s stomach dropped. Being grounded even longer was the last thing he needed. And the last thing the universes needed. They needed the Salamander, who knew when the next massive monster would show up?

Osomatsu set his jaw, even more determined to make his big comeback. The next morning he raced Jyushimatsu around the warehouse and then challenged him to a pushups championship. He only declared his little brother the victor when, the ninth time he collapsed, Osomatsu couldn’t get up again, his arms overcooked noodles and his heart on fire.

‘When… I’m better,’ he heaved, cheek pressed to the cold cement as Jyushimatsu hovered over him. ‘You’re in… so much trouble. I am the pushups champion! That… trophy’s… mine.’

Osomatsu was unashamedly ecstatic when Todomatsu finally cleared him to transform and sent him on a training mission with Choromatsu and Jyushimatsu.
‘All right,’ said Osomatsu, swathed in the Salamander hoodie and loving it as he spied their target below, the three of them crouched on a balcony across the street. On his left, Choromatsu was still. On his right, Jyushimatsu’s entire body hummed, vibrating with excitement. ‘I’m going in. Choromatsu, give me some cover. Jyushimatsu, watch and…’

‘Shouldn’t I go first?’ said Choromatsu. Pistols at the ready, he brought Osomatsu’s attempted barge into action and all his gung ho up short.

‘You?’ the eldest exclaimed. ‘Seriously? Come on, man! I’ve been sidelined for weeks, and you…’ Osomatsu restrained his reflex objections and plummet from his short-lived high. ‘Right, sure,’ he said, shrugging. ‘Do your thing.’

The rainy season pounded down in the dusk, the streets submerged in puddles and thin waterfalls splattering from gutters. The soldier loitered in elderly human disguise just beyond the lights of a dingy 10-stool ramen bar. Osomatsu didn’t know when their tipsy salaryman victim would emerge and the enemy reveal their true self. Wasting time would be dumb as hell. And:

‘It’s a solid strategy, if we’re quick enough,’ said Osomatsu, taking the role of Sphinx instructor as the bar door groaned open. Choromatsu flitted over the balcony ledge for a better angle and fired a single laser bolt the instant the soldier drew themselves to full height and shed their wrinkled facade. The brilliant pulse of green splintered their crystal on impact.

‘What the…’

The intended victim blinked. An instant subsumed in the alien’s shadow, now dust and glass showered at his feet. He shook his head. Apparently decided he must be far drunker than he’d thought, he wiped his rain-splattered face, opened his umbrella, and began to totter down the street towards the nearest subway station.

A long-established tactic, Choromatsu sniped their angular enemies whenever the opportunity presented itself, taking his hidden shot before they had a chance to cocoon and emerge far more difficult to deal with. But this meant fewer monsters to fight and less for Osomatsu to set on fire. He hardly appreciated being outshone by his gun-toting brother, particularly when Jyushimatsu had only been deployed a few times. The young Sphinx had never seen the veteran Salamander in his element. Who could blame Osomatsu, for wanting to show off for his adoring brother?

But the faster a fight ended, the better. Not to mention it spared a victim the agony of having their soul ripped away. If Choromatsu could take a quick shot and destroy a crystal, he took it.

‘How often does that happen?’ asked Jyushimatsu, bouncing between rooftops like an overpowered kangaroo in gumboots. ‘How often can Choromatsu-niisan stop a fight before it even starts?’

‘You know. Now and then,’ yawned Osomatsu. ‘But it’s definitely the most boring way to fight,’ he said, looking forward to mackerel and a mountain of rice as they soared towards home. The heavy rain did nothing to impede them, drops sliding straight off their armour. ‘I guess Choromatsu is the expert when it comes to boring.’

‘Hey,’ said Choromatsu, no bite behind his automatic retort. ‘At least I don’t get a little too eager and almost turn a training mission into a show-off stunt show.’

Osomatsu had no reason to complain again: he was pitched back onto the frontline from sunrise the next day. Three days later, he already wished he’d cherished his time off a little more. A week later, he was floored.
Aching and exhausted, Osomatsu collapsed in brief reprieve early on a Monday afternoon. ‘Shit,’ he panted, phasing where he sprawled facedown on his crate. He was the last to return from this latest round of attacks. He’d just flattened a bony beast, some cross between a vengeful ballet dancer and an over-eager anteater... or was it that sky-swimming triple-jawed barracuda? The morning was a blur. He couldn’t line up his battles in order to save his life. ‘So it’s not like these monsters aren’t pushovers. But when they just… keep… coming…’

‘What’s Takuu thinking?’ said Todomatsu, arms hugged around his sceptre and frustration in his eyes. He was the only one who hadn’t yet phased, still their light-powered general in his pristine tunic. ‘We’re ripping through his forces… those we can reach in time, anyway,’ he amended, his even teeth clenched tight.

‘The Liberation Force has attacked relentlessly before,’ said Ahn, her agreement troubled where she shared Jyushimatsu’s cushions. ‘But…’

‘Not like this,’ Osomatsu cut in, his voice muffled. Five to ten attacks a day had been rare, but not unheard of. Thirty plus was the new norm.

‘Now he’s as good as wasting his soldiers,’ said Todomatsu.

‘To run us ragged?’ Karamatsu spoke up quietly. The instant he said it, Osomatsu realised it must be true. And he was not impressed.

‘That warlording piece of shit.’

‘Takuu is no fool. If he can afford to spend soldiers’ lives so recklessly,’ said Ahn, the end of her tail a nervous twitch. ‘Then he must have replacements waiting. Depending on their nurture, these young recruits may be faster, stronger and smarter than many of the soldiers you have faced. They grow fast,’ she added. ‘And he must have hatched vast numbers.’

‘Hatched…?’

Trying to erase mental images flat-out determined to solve how the Liberation Force reproduced, Osomatsu groaned and pushed himself upright. On the crate angled on his right, Jyushimatsu blinked tiredly, his entire upper body swivelling between speakers and his mouth zipped shut. Karamatsu refused to slouch, weary and uncomplaining in his cool summer clothes. Todomatsu was grey and grim, and Ahn was pensive—Osomatsu wasn’t 100 percent, but he was pretty sure her silken fluff looked thinner than it had at the start of the year. The only one of them who seemed unaffected by the onslaught was Choromatsu.

While the others talked, Choromatsu was the subject of a few dozen tests run from a few thousand light years away. He lay back on his crate, decorated by sensors. The air around him pulled and pushed and pressured strangely. None of them had said anything to him, but they were all sure Choromatsu had been the unintentional cause of their toaster short circuiting that morning when the third born absently waited for his toast.

The days nudged the end of June, but the rainy season showed no sign of letting up. Rain pounded down like bullets, rattling the grimy warehouse windows. Humidity had Tokyo in a headlock. Karamatsu had experimented a few times with the waterlogged air, trying to make their training sessions less disgusting. At last phasing back into his smart shorts and buttoned shirt, Totty sighed and fanned himself with his collar, already sticky.

‘It’s so hot. Choromatsu-niisan,’ he whinged, chugging the cold tea Karamatsu tossed him. ‘Can’t you cool it down in here? Please, Niisan… Niisan?’
'Not now,’ came Choromatsu’s eventual reply.

‘He’s busy with tests, Matsuno Todomatsu,’ said Ahn as their leader crossed his arms in a huff. Todomatsu sniffed, wiping a trickle of sweat from his temple with a hand towel.

‘We need a better secret base,’ he said, much later that afternoon. Personally dealt with two more threats and reluctantly leaving the attacks further out that they had no chance of reaching, Totty had spent the last few hours with Osomatsu and Jyushimatsu, embroiled in combat training.

The warehouse sweltered wet, despite Karamatsu’s past dehumidifying efforts. Osomatsu didn’t complain much—sure, the humidity wasn’t exactly comfortable, but the heat didn’t really bother him. And Todomatsu bitched enough for the both of them.

Osomatsu probably hadn’t helped. One way to remind his brothers that he was not fragile in any goddamn way was to beat the crap out of them—all for the sake of education, of course. Getting Jyushimatsu started with some basic blocks, takedowns and evasions, Osomatsu worked him hard before turning to Totty. ‘All right, street fighting prodigy: let’s see you hit me. Show Jyushimatsu how it’s done.’

The youngest was even crabbier, his legs shaking hard by the time they’d finished sparring. Even Jyushimatsu teetered, a little giddy after his extended session. He might be built for combat, but he had a long way to go before he had a hope of landing a hit on a moving target, let alone his brothers. ‘I think you need a bit more practice first,’ Osomatsu said when Jyushimatsu bounced to face him, enthusiasm trumping tiredness. ‘We’ll spar next time, okay?’

‘I wonder why,’ said Choromatsu, still flat on his crate.

‘Aren’t you doing tests?’ Totty snipped at him. ‘If you’re not going to cool things down, be quiet.’

‘Mmmm… okay.’

‘I mean,’ said Todomatsu, changing out of his workout sweats as Karamatsu dropped in through the busted skylight, his quick mission in Shinokubo a success. ‘If we put all our money together, we could buy an apartment, or maybe even some office space. With air-conditioning,’ he stressed. ‘We could do it up like a real business. What do you think, Karamatsu-niisan?’

Todomatsu knew exactly which brother to get on board. Karamatsu was beyond keen for the proposed project. ‘Deep down, I am nothing if not an interior design enthusiast!’

‘It’s not that deep, man,’ said Osomatsu as the two interior design enthusiasts jabbered colour palettes and the pros and cons of faux leather couches.

Osomatsu wasn’t so keen. Setting up shop somewhere else? Sounded like a lot of work—it wasn’t that bad here, was it? Plus they’d been at the warehouse since almost the beginning. Osomatsu had found it himself. The warehouse felt like home.

‘But it’s not very central.’

Done with tests for the day, Choromatsu transformed before Totty could ask. The temperature inside the warehouse immediately dropped, to the brothers’ vocal relief. Even Osomatsu sighed. That felt
‘It isn’t,’ Todomatsu agreed, rummaging for the last of the bakery rolls and sandwiches they’d picked up that morning. Choromatsu hadn’t eaten since breakfast. ‘If we could get somewhere right in the middle of the city, we might be able to respond to more calls. We could each have our own office and training areas.’

‘Why would we need offices?’ said Osomatsu.

‘Fine. Those of us who do work besides with our fists can have offices,’ said Todomatsu. Osomatsu shrugged—what other work mattered? ‘We could have a full gym, a proper medical bay…’

Todomatsu looked around the warehouse. Osomatsu knew he did his best to keep it clean, but however the youngest dressed it up, the building was condemned, dilapidated and filthy. Their Unicorn would much prefer to heal in more hygienic conditions.

Not sold on shifting their headquarters, Osomatsu still got caught up in his brothers’ excitement. ‘We could get a big TV set up, and a PS4.’

‘Yeah!’ Jyushimatsu exclaimed, cheeks stuffed full of Choromatsu’s last sandwich, turned down by the third born.

‘And a kitchen, we could get drinks and snacks delivered…’

Osomatsu stopped, guilt a worm through his gut. He felt like he was betraying their home… but the warehouse could always be a backup headquarters. No hero knew when they’d need somewhere safe to retreat and lie low.

Todomatsu had now moved beyond excited planning; he now spoke like the move was agreed and imminent. ‘We should ask the Spectrum Alliance for extra funds, like they paid for our gym equipment. Technically this would be a business expense, not a personal one.’

Osomatsu expected Ahn to burst forth that the Alliance wasn’t made of gold, if the brothers wanted a new base that was their responsibility, that any other guardians would make do, etcetera, etcetera. She seemed to start along those lines with an exasperated yowl. But then Ahn wilted. Choromatsu’s quick cooling had already begun to fade. Added to stress, the heat was having a bad effect on her. She hadn’t responded well to Osomatsu’s suggestion they get her shaved.

‘Perhaps an upgrade to our facilities is in order,’ she said, surprising them all. Todomatsu beamed in triumph. ‘I will speak with Alliance officials. They have a soft spot for all of you, they would prefer you be as comfortable as possible. After all,’ she said. ‘We don’t know how long before Lord Takuu makes his move to enslave your planet. It could be weeks. It could be years. The Master of the Liberation Force is hungry. But he is patient.’

The brothers met this little speech with silence.

‘Hey, you guys? What did he mean by that?’ Jyushimatsu finally broke it.

‘What did who mean by what?’ said Karamatsu. ‘Context, dearest Jyushimatsu.’

‘The Doll. Of Darkness,’ clarified Jyushimatsu, strangely hesitant. ‘He said we couldn’t save anyone, didn’t he? Not really. That everyone we help will just be…’

‘He’s lying,’ Todomatsu growled.
‘As soon as Totty upgrades,’ said Osomatsu, energised by his workout and blazing confidence without even trying. ‘He can scrub clean everyone’s tainted souls—sorry, guys,’ he directed at Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu. Karamatsu held up his palms: no offence taken.

‘Can he do it in one hit?’ said Choromatsu, unexpectedly. ‘Like the Doll?’

‘Well, no,’ said Ahn. ‘Not straight away.’

‘One by one?’

‘It takes a great deal of effort,’ said Ahn, defensive of their Unicorn’s yet untapped powers. ‘And practice.’

‘I’ve kept records as best I can,’ said Choromatsu. Todomatsu listened without a word, his lips pursed. ‘But finding everyone we’ve saved and cleansing their souls will take a long time. And as soon as Takuu realises what we’re doing, he’ll have the Doll snap his fingers and bring them in. And even if he doesn’t,’ he went on, Osomatsu’s confidence fizzling with every word, ‘if the Doll hits us with a mass infection, none of this will matter. That means…’

‘We have to beat Takuu before then,’ Osomatsu finished. Like that was something they didn’t know.

‘How do we do that?’ asked Jyushimatsu, wide-eyed. ‘Ahn? Choromatsu-niisan?’

‘We don’t have a timeline,’ said Choromatsu, not sounding nearly as nervous as he should. He looked at Ahn. ‘You just said, it could be weeks, it could be years.’

‘My angel?’ said Karamatsu, gently, when five identical sets of eyes rested on their tiny mentor.

‘For now, keep training,’ she said, her chin high. She refused to crack under pressure. Osomatsu felt a surge of pride and deep affection. Ahn was way too tough for that. ‘Keep fighting. We need to get all of you upgraded as soon as possible. The rest of you should start soon. Theoretically speaking.’

That was all they could do, for now. But even though Jyushimatsu was still an infant in terms of guardian service, Osomatsu saw in his brother’s eyes: he knew as well as the rest of them. They had to start thinking about the endgame.

As soon as he thought this, Osomatsu started thinking of ways to distract them. Not that he wanted them not to think about it. But he couldn’t stand seeing his brothers look so frightened. At least they could break things up with some fun.

‘Hey, if you were turned into a monster, what would it be?’

‘Matsuno Osomatsu,’ said Ahn. Hopped across onto his crate, she tilted her head back and peered sternly up her nose at him. ‘That is not funny, don’t joke about that.’

Her eyes flickered to Karamatsu. But the second born was already answering.

‘An excellent question! I know you’ve already had the pleasure of meeting a beast forged of my soul, but now I am a new man! Well,’ he faltered slightly. ‘I’m becoming a new man. Should I be turned again, you would find yourself facing a creature you could never imagine!’

Karamatsu barrelled off on an in-depth description of his massive reflective wingspan. Ahn was shocked, but her surprise fast faded. By her contented purr, probably into the same happiness Osomatsu felt, that Karamatsu spoke so easily. He threw more demons off his back every day. ‘You’ve seriously thought about this, haven’t you?’ Osomatsu said.
‘Perhaps.’

Pushing out his chest, Karamatsu struck a mysterious-cool pose. Then he broke it, laughing with his brothers.

‘I’d be the biggest!’ Jyushimatsu jumped in, exploding eagerness. ‘Really big! And the fastest, too!’

‘But what would you look like?’ prompted Karamatsu.

‘Umm… ummm… big? And yellow! And tentacles!’

Jyushimatsu waggled his arms. ‘Watch me do tentacles, Niisan!’

Osomatsu groaned, his grin pained. He’d had enough of tentacles. And he’d already decided he never wanted to meet a monster made from Jyushimatsu. ‘Totty? What about you?’

Apparently too mature for this game, Todomatsu had sniffed a few times through his brothers’ descriptions. But Osomatsu had sneaked a few looks his way. He was totally into it. Totty was into any chance to outdo his big brothers.

‘Mine would be small, stealthy, slippery—like a phantom,’ he said, slow and eerie. Jyushimatsu shivered in delight, knees drawn right up to his chin. ‘Every time you manage to get a good look, you’re not quite sure what you’re seeing. And every time you try and get a closer look, you’re driven closer and closer to madness.’

‘Shit,’ said Osomatsu, impressed despite himself as Karamatsu applauded and Todomatsu took a bow. ‘I don’t wanna meet that. How would you kill me, though?’

Todomatsu gleamed a grin. ‘I’d convince the other guardians to kill you for me.’

‘Maniacal!’ Karamatsu exclaimed as Ahn yowled in dismay. ‘I love it!’

‘These are my guardians,’ Ahn was saying to herself, either ignoring or just not noticing as Osomatsu gave her a friendly scratch on the shoulders. She shook her head in disbelief. ‘These are the guardians who will save the universes.’

‘Choromatsu-niisan?’ Todomatsu said. ‘What about you?’

‘Hmm.’

Choromatsu didn’t play with it, like Karamatsu and Jyushimatsu had. And he didn’t try to one-up them, like Todomatsu. His brow furrowed, the brothers watched as Choromatsu briefly psychoanalysed himself and produced a monster to match from the data.

‘I’d spin. Maybe I’d be some kind of drill? I’d tunnel underground and come up from beneath. You could follow me on your lens, but my path would be completely unpredictable, so it’d be hard to keep up.’

‘Cool,’ said Osomatsu. That was still pretty creative. He hoped Choromatsu’s spinning had calmed down somewhat, over the past few months.

‘Osomatsu-niisan?’

Osomatsu grinned. His turn. ‘I’d be a fighting machine, all muscle and all-out. No one can keep up with my punches.’
‘So pretty much how you are now,’ said Karamatsu.

‘Aww.’

Karamatsu across from him, Osomatsu mimed punching him in the shoulder. ‘Thanks man.’

‘No,’ said Totty, his expression thoughtful. ‘I think you’d be like an ogre. Big and dumb.’

‘What?!’ Osomatsu squawked. ‘Hey!’ he complained when the others sniggered. They wouldn’t quit building on the ogre imagery. He huffed for a minute—is that any way to treat their big brother? But he soon laughed with the rest of them.

‘Hey,’ said Jyushimatsu as the time ticked past five. Their scrolls hadn’t burnt in hours. They’d almost had the whole afternoon to themselves. ‘We should all go see Ichimatsu-nyan!’

Osomatsu twinged. All his time taken up recovering, mentally dealing with the aftermath of Tokyo Dome, and now back in the thick of battle, he’d barely thought about Ichimatsu. He’d only just roused from his latest coma state, struck down the same night as the disaster. Ichimatsu was probably the only reason dad hadn’t punished Choromatsu, Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu for running off, too distracted by the fourth born’s plummeting health.

Osomatsu felt terrible. He hadn’t even seen Ichimatsu in weeks. Not that Ichimatsu would have noticed, but still… it wasn’t right. Shit, balancing work and life was a bitch.

Jyushimatsu was afraid of this, Osomatsu remembered. Of leaving Ichimatsu out. That he would know the rest of them had something that he didn’t… though he guessed they already did. They had their health. They had work, their parents informed that Osomatsu’s company had been hiring and he’d introduced them to Jyushimatsu. For Ichimatsu to sense they shared anything else that he didn’t… that could seriously hurt him. Beneath his angry armour, Ichimatsu’s feelings were porcelain. And he was already in such a shit state of mind, falling apart outside and in, the greatest medical minds in the country unable to figure out why.

Osomatsu gritted his fists. So what, if they were magical and Ichimatsu wasn’t? He couldn’t let that happen. He wouldn’t let Ichimatsu fall away, not if he could help it.

‘We can all go, right?’ Jyushimatsu repeated, so hopeful.

‘We’d better not,’ said Choromatsu. Jyushimatsu deflated, a punctured beach ball. Shooting Choromatsu exasperation, Todomatsu tried to let Jyushimatsu down more gently.

‘The hospital doesn’t like us all coming at once without knowing in advance. And what if our scrolls burn? Some of us have to stay on duty.’

‘I’ll visit him after my next appointment,’ Karamatsu promised where Jyushimatsu squirmed, unhappy.

‘You go, Jyushimatsu-nyan,’ urged Todomatsu. ‘Say hi to him for us. We’ll play a game when you get home, okay?’

‘Okayyyy.’

They arranged for Choromatsu to go with Jyushimatsu and meet mum at the hospital later that night. She’d been there all day.

‘I’m worried about her,’ said Karamatsu, his thick brows meeting in the middle. ‘With everything
that's been happening with Ichimatsu—and us,’ he added, looking at Osomatsu and Choromatsu. Their state after Tokyo Dome had been impossible to hide. ‘Our mother is strong, but she’s proud, she wouldn’t say anything. But I fear it’s eating away at her.’

Todomatsu agreed, his smooth features bunched in worry. ‘And… you know. If Ichimatsu keeps getting worse and he… he…’

‘No,’ Osomatsu put his foot down, hard. Jyushimatsu’s jaw had hit the floor. Karamatsu swallowed, his throat working hard. This was one conversation they weren’t ready for. Not on their own. ‘When we talk about this, it’s not just us. It’s Mum, Dad. And Ichimatsu. It’s all of us.’

Todomatsu tried to scoff. But this wasn’t a guardian matter. For once, he didn’t try to overrule the eldest.

Sobered, the five of them and Ahn settled back with their own thoughts. However heavy these thoughts were, the silence was comfortable as they sipped drinks and nibbled snacks. Karamatsu and Todomatsu browsed guardian-related hashtags on their phones. With a shout, Jyushimatsu took off running around the warehouse track—no, skipping. He’d grabbed a rope on the way.

Scarfing an Alliance nutrient cake when Ahn badgered him—‘You aren’t yet at full health, you must keep your strength up’—Osomatsu drifted towards a comfy nap, sprawled on his side facing Choromatsu. The third born rested on his back again, eyes on the ceiling. Osomatsu's sleepy mind had almost convinced him that his air elemental brother drifted slightly off his crate when Totty said it out of the blue:

‘I think we should do an interview.’

Chapter End Notes

So not an overly excitement-filled chapter, sorry - just getting up to date, dealing with the aftermath of Tokyo Dome, recovering, etc. I don't know why I get the urge to do recovery chapters after every big arc... we could probably take it as read that, yes, they will recover. Eventually. Slowly. A better writer could probably condense all the important stuff here into two paragraphs. But that's no fun :D And I guess the way this story is, it's so linear... hard to skip anything :D

But next chapter will be fun :) I've got lots of notes, but I haven't written any yet. Hopefully it won't take too long. In case anyone's interested, I haven't done too well with my original stuff - I've been doing heaps of writing, don't get me wrong. And even more thinking about writing, plotting, editing, re-writing etc. Just... it's not really going anywhere. At least not fast. And not in any practical sense. A few reasons for that. I'll leave you be for now. I'll prattle on for a while in the end notes of next chapter, or something. Feel free not to read :) Anyway, thank you soooooooooooooo much for hanging out and reading my fic again - or for the first time, if you're new! You're all awesome. I hope you've had some fun meeting/seeing our favourite magical boys again - it's been a looooonng time since I've written them, so hopefully they're still coming across okay. I had a bit of trouble balancing them out, getting enough of all the bros in there. I suppose I should swap around with POVs a bit more, but I like sticking with Oso during the normal-ish sort of stuff... he's my main dude.
Again, thank you so much. I'm really looking forward to getting the next chapter up and continuing this story, even if it takes forever. Even if it's just a little bit at a time. Honestly, I had about three-quarters of this chapter done by the end of February, but I've had a bit of an off month, just not feeling up to it :( Hopefully that won't last much longer!

BY THE WAY for anyone who hasn't seen, uncannyinsight has done some SPECTACULAR art of Magical Choromatsu and Magical Todomatsu that I still haven't been able to stop staring at :DDD They're so completely gorgeous, please check them out!

Until next chapter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!