sea glass

by ishka

Summary

If it’s breaking up, making up, or learning to put themselves first, six adults have a lot of growing up to do.

Notes

hi, this is gonna be a long fic. it’s ~115,000 words; i already finished it. i dedicate it to nat, since we’ve written two sides of the same coin here and enable the fuck out of each other. constantly. and i would’ve scrapped this fic at least 3 different points without their help along the way. and just in general for being a really great friend. luv u.

this fic took like 300-ish hours to write/research/edit over 6 months. so if you like it, take a minute and let me know. commenting is important to me. i like to talk to people in fandom; it’s the main thing that keeps me in it.

chapters 1 & 2 in particular use this song, like that’s where the inspiration for this fic came from ha so. important detail.

thanks for reading and being cool.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Like an endless number of things before it, Makoto’s career ends without much fanfare.

“Well, that’s it.”

He’s only brought back to the present when the chain looped through the handles of the front doors of ISCR rattles for effect, Goro stepping away to face him after giving the padlock a solid tug.

“Thanks for all of your help for the last few years, Makoto. And Haru, good to see you again! Thanks for seeing me off.” Then he extends his hand, and Makoto takes it. He hears the exchange of pleasantries echoing between his ears, makes sure to wish Sasabe well on his next chapter of early-retirement-but-not-really countryside living, and smiles to get him to drop the handshake he never wanted.

“Athletic center, right?”

Makoto blinks slowly in incomprehension. “Excuse me?”

“That’s the next gig you told me about? Personal trainer?”

“Oh, right.” And there’s that uncomfortable shuffle again from Haru next to him that he won’t get away with not addressing today.

Goro grins and pats his pocket for his car keys. “Boys, good luck. I’ll be sure to visit. Makoto, your last paycheck will be in the mail tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Coach,” Makoto answers. For old time’s sake.

Haru blessedly takes over and ends the conversation that just won’t die, and they stand together in silence until Goro’s driven off. Haru’s the the first to break the spell, and walks in the opposite direction still without saying anything. Makoto catches up in a few strides.

“Lunch?” he asks.

Haru shrugs. “Sure.”

There’s something deliberate in the way Haru steers them towards a fancier corner café, one he’s complained about being too expensive in the past. Haru orders a bowl of soup, not a cup, as well as a nicer loose-leafed tea and dessert. “You owe me, right?”

Makoto knows what he’s doing, too, and doesn’t flinch at the total. “I do,” he answers, handing his card over to the high schooler running the register. Makoto adds a tea for himself.

“You getting anything?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Hm.”

Haru sits by a window with at least a one-table barrier to other patrons on every side. He does this when they go out anyway, but under these circumstances it’s about more than Haru’s privacy. Makoto takes his seat across from him and stares out at the street in lieu of matching his stare. They hold this stalemate until their items are served, and Haru takes a few sips of his soup, never
breaking eye contact. Makoto feels it burn into the side of his head, but he really can’t bring himself to speak.

“Fine. At least tell me you didn’t lie to Rin.”

“I didn’t,” Makoto answers too quickly. “Rin knows.”

“Good.”

“I’m sorry, Haru.”

Haru sighs, and pushes his soup at Makoto in favor of starting on his pastry. “No, you’re not. You’re sorry you got caught. What are you going to do?”

Makoto gives up and takes over the soup. He paid double what it was likely worth, might as well finish it. “I’m still looking.”

“You’ve had months to find something.”

“I didn’t look for a new coaching job because I didn’t want to,” Makoto admits. “So can we skip this part? I don’t know what I’m doing yet.”

“Why not?” Haru presses.

“Haru,” Makoto whines. “I’m fine, okay? I just need a little time to figure out what I want to do next. Rin is aware, we’ve talked about it, I promise.”

“Then why did you lie to me about having another job?”

“Because of this,” Makoto emphasizes, waving his hand towards Haru. “You’re worried.”

“I don’t care if you don’t want to coach, Makoto. I’m more concerned with lying about it. Why do you think I’d- of all people- care if it’s what you wanted to do?”

Makoto takes the opportunity to finish off most of the soup without immediately responding. There really isn’t a good answer, and Haru will hate that most of all.

“Do you ever feel like you’ve just consistently made the wrong move at every opportunity to change for the better? That you’ve held back the people you love because of it?” he asks by way of answering.

“No,” Haru says flatly. “And you shouldn’t either.”

Makoto bites his lip and worries the corner. “I don’t know. What if I’m throwing everything away because I’m a little restless?”

Haru grunts his mounting frustration with the conversation. “Could you not return to coaching for some reason if you changed your mind?”

He doesn’t know how to explain himself, this all-consuming fear that lurks behind him and whispers every so often, though lately louder and more frequently. The feeling that this sense of disappointment applies to literally everything he’s ever done, warping him into a washed-up, fucked-up version of the self he could’ve been. That no matter what he does, he’s beat himself down enough to never be confident that he did the right thing. Not with his life, not with Rin, not with anything.
Did he really want to coach or did he latch onto something that was comfortable and settle for it? Did he come back to Iwatobi because he wanted to or because he was lonely in Tokyo by himself? Does he really love Rin despite everything else feeling like a mistake? He knows the answers to those: settled, lonely, and yes.

He doesn’t know if Rin didn’t settle for him, though, and more and more often the thought chokes him. He can’t keep it away no matter what he’s doing or how hard he tries.

If he had turned Rin down and told him to keep swimming instead, he’s not sure he could claim he’s ever done anything he felt strongly for. And even then, that’s not something he’s proud of anymore. What about that wasn’t rooted in selfishness? The one time he was sure about something only brought on a deep seated guilt in its wake. The sort that gives him nightmares. The sort that’s unraveling him from the inside.

“Makoto.”

“How are you and Sousuke?” he challenges for a change of subject. Dares, maybe pleads.

Haru frowns and finally sighs. “I’m almost moved out. Have a few more things to pick up and we need to take a trip to my new place this weekend and move the furniture in. I’ll move in the week after.”

“I’m sorry, Haru.”

“Don’t be? It’s mutual. We’re still friends. There’s nothing bad about it.”

Makoto can’t even wrap his head around such a concept, and feels almost stupid. “Well I don’t know why you guys would break up if nothing was wrong.”

Haru shrugs- shrugs. Like it is nothing, all those years. “I want to move to Tokyo for work. He doesn’t. I waited for his answer for as long as I could, so it’s not like I pulled it out of nowhere. That’s it, really. We agreed on a split for now because that’s fair. But I don’t think we’ll ever really be out of each other’s lives for good so I’m not worried. Can’t seem to shake any of you.”

“Fine,” Makoto drops. “Can’t say as I get it, but okay. Couples make those sort of sacrifices, don’t they? Why can’t Sousuke bend?”

“Would you want Rin to do that? Something he didn’t want to do-just for you? He’d only resent you. I want him to figure it out on his own.”

Makoto laughs dryly. “I don’t know, he sort of already did.”

“No, Makoto, he didn’t.” Haru looks him up and down and frowns again. “He’s going to get pissed off if you keep implying that.”

“I don’t. He implies it for me.”

“It’s just a rough patch.”

“I don’t think he wants to be with me.”

Haru finishes his pastry and takes a drink of his tea, the energy between them reaching a tense peak that he’s choosing to back down from with the intermission. Makoto sits back in his chair, not having realized he’s been inching forward as the conversation has progressed.
“...Sorry,” Makoto says after a while. “I know you don’t want to hear it.”

Haru waves his hand in annoyance in an unmistakably Haru gesture. “It’s not that I don’t, but you should really take it up with him first, then me.” He digs around for his banged up phone to check the time. “I need to go.”

“No you don’t.” Makoto counters.

“Okay, I want to go. Sousuke will be home soon and he got a movie.”

Makoto doesn’t do anything to keep the mild exasperation off of his face. “You have an odd definition of a break up, Haru.”

“I told you we’re still friends.”

“With benefits apparently.”

“Well… why not? He’ll come around.” Haru pushes to a stand. “I just don’t want to force him to.”

Makoto sighs and rests his chin on his hand. “How are you so unaffected?”

Haru shakes his head, and Makoto gets the fleeting sense that Haru doesn’t think he’ll understand no matter what he says. Maybe he won’t, but it still stings to not be worth the trouble. “You have enough to worry about. Go get a job so I don’t feel bad about making you pay for lunch.”

“I deserved it.”

“You did,” Haru agrees. He offers his only half-smile of the day that Makoto’s seen so far, and leaves without another word. Their ascension towards thirty has only made Haru weirder, not maturer. It’s hardly surprising, but Makoto wouldn’t have him any other way, as always.

Haru’s departure only settles a thick silence over everything, which in and of itself is telling of the shift in their dynamic over the years. How he handles these life milestones with such flippancy always makes Makoto’s head hurt trying to understand. Haru never used to be like that either, and it’s just another reason Sousuke’s influence has been great. And another reason they shouldn’t just break up.

Makoto still wishes Haru would confide in him, though. He refuses to believe this split from Sousuke is as simple as it’s being made out to be. How could it be? They’ve been together longer than Makoto has been with Rin by years. They’re just throwing all of that away for what could be a temporary change in location. And Haru doesn’t think Makoto is worthy of any more information than that, for whatever reason.

He takes another minute to let go of his irritability over it. At the end of the day, he’s not as close with Haru as he used to be. They really don’t share many of their ongoing problems with each other, and didn’t even when they were younger. Now their occasional meet-ups are all about the good things, since they don’t see each other enough to take up their time with negativity. Hell, he’s not sure Haru even has any negativity in his life. He’s definitely made it clear that he doesn’t want to hear about Makoto’s problems with Rin.

At some point Haru became as much of an enigma to Makoto as he’s always been to everyone else. And yet he hasn’t felt much of anything over that other than numb. He’s moving to Tokyo in a week and Makoto feels nothing over that, either.

Besides, he thinks as he exits the café, Haru is right. He has enough to worry about.
Makoto gets home as the sun is setting, earlier these days as autumn seeps in. He lost the last few hours on the beach, even though he knew better. He should’ve found a job, but he couldn’t bring himself to look. He was only drawn to the sand and the shore, and it was just as good an answer as the fifty he doesn’t seem to have.

Rin’s shoes are at the door, and he tries not to turn around and walk back out impulsively. But he should’ve been home hours ago already, so that’s not going to do him any favors.

“Hey Mako,” Rin calls from the living room, effectively pinning him.

Makoto kicks his shoes off and takes off his pullover, tossing it onto the washer before joining Rin. Rin stands to meet him from the couch and gathers him in a hug around his neck. Makoto smiles despite everything, as he doesn’t immediately drill for where Makoto’s been. “How are you?”

“Ah, you know,” Rin answers pulling back. “Same old. So how’d it go?”

“Oddly… uneventful,” Makoto answers truthfully. What a concept. “We said goodbye and he just left.”

“Sorry I couldn’t be there. One day I’ll be able to take time off for stuff like that.”

Makoto shrugs and offers him a quick kiss. “You really didn’t miss anything.”

“Hmm,” Rin hums. “So you stop by that gym for your schedule? When’s your first day?”

Makoto’s stomach turns over with nausea he should’ve seen coming. If he were thinking, he’d tell the truth and deal with it before it becomes an even bigger problem. Before Haru finds out Rin doesn’t actually know. Before Rin finds out he’s been lied to only after Makoto doesn’t come home with a paycheck in two weeks. Rin would be angry, but he might hopefully understand if he gave Makoto a chance to explain.

But he doesn’t fess up.

“Schedule wasn’t ready yet,” he says instead. “I’ll go pick it up tomorrow.” He smiles too, but Rin doesn’t match it, and Makoto knows by the ice creeping into Rin’s expression that his lying about this stops here whether he wants it to or not.

Rin lets him go and steps a sizeable gap backwards. “Yeah, you know, I wanted to give you one more fucking chance to come clean on this. Couldn’t do it though, could you?”

He laughs and cuts him off. “Haru texted me earlier that you’re a lying shit. Lied to him, lied to me. He saw right through you. You really think I’m a fucking idiot, don’t you? Sad thing is: I guess I am. Since I trusted you no matter how fishy it all sounded.”

Makoto gapes stupidly at this revelation and stumbles over what to say to keep Rin from detonating. It should be; I’m sorry, I fucked up, but it isn’t. “Haru had no right,” he decides on, as if the defiance is going to win him any sympathy or excuse this entire thing away.

“Oh right, yeah, Makoto, that is definitely the problem here,” Rin bites as he rolls his eyes. “I should fuckin’ thank him, actually! If he didn’t tattle on you, I’d still be standing here like some sort of asshole hanging on every word you said. I don’t know what’s going on in your head, but
I’m assuming a whole goddamned lot of nothing. Did you think when bills came up and you had fuckall to show for it, that I’d laugh it off or something?! You just planning on walking around Iwatobi all day when you were supposed to be at work?! What was the plan here, Makoto?"

“I don’t have one,” he answers lamely, looking down. “I don’t have a good reason.”

“You don’t talk to me, you never fucking have and it kills me. But now you’re lying to me to get out of talking to me and boy is that new. Isn’t that something.”

“I don’t want to coach,” he nearly shouts. “I don’t want to coach, I didn’t want you to know. I didn’t know what to do.”

“So you talk to me, dammit! We could’ve worked something out! Now we’re fucked. We’ve been pretty fucked for a while, but now we’re really fucked.”

“It’ll be fine, Rin,” Makoto tries to reason. “We have enough money–”

“I’m not talking about the money, Makoto.”

He’s been calm until now, because he deserves this. Rin has every right to yell and be angry even if Makoto is distantly contemplating storming out right now to find Haru and figure out why, why, why he would go and meddle like this. It isn’t his business. But now this is taking a turn for the alarming, and if he leaves he won’t be welcome back.

“Rin,” he begs.

“You lied to me,” Rin says in near disbelief. “I won’t put up with it. I’ve always told you that I don’t do lying.”

“I felt cornered, Rin, I thought you’d be disappointed in me!”

“Because I sure am proud of you right now,” he snaps. “For a guy that apologizes way too fucking much, you really don’t know how to apologize when it counts, do you?”

Makoto sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. You’re sending me so many mixed messages–”

“Forget it,” Rin mutters. “I’ll stay with Gou tonight.”

“Please stay and talk to me!”

He brushes past Makoto and pockets his phone and keys off the counter before disappearing down the hall for a change of clothes. He only spares a moment to glare at Makoto as he passes by again for his shoes, and calls over his shoulder while he puts them on. “No, I’m leaving, because if I stay I’m going to say something stupid like: maybe this isn’t working out.”

“Don’t say that,” Makoto nearly whispers.

“I’m fucking not. Because as fucked up as this is of you, and how shitty you’ve made me feel, of the two of us? I’m not actually trying to sabotage our relationship. So why don’t you take the apartment to yourself tonight and get a feel for it without me in it, just to see if you like that better somehow.”

“I don’t, Rin!”

Rin pops his head around the corner. His fury’s been replaced with a blank mask and Makoto’s
nausea lurches so hard he makes for the chair to sit down. Rin is rarely this angry. "I’ll be back tomorrow and we’ll talk then. But right now, I need to be away from you."

With that he leaves, and even has the decency not to slam the door.

Rin walks to Gou’s instead of hopping the bus to buy time to calm down. She won’t let him in if he’s fuming on her doorstep. Even so, he’s not sure if he has the ability to calm down for a solid three days. Hopefully she’ll just make an exception.

He only lets her know he’s on his way when he’s thirty minutes from her flat.

gotta stay with you tonight.

not a good night for me, she answers.

im already almost there.

He can feel the scorn through his phone when she responds. again? jesus rin.

sorry.

He puts his phone back in his pocket at that to kill any waning drive to text Makoto his ongoing anger. Not at least until he’s seen his sister and she tells him to grow up and not fight with people through texts, as much as he still wants to lash out at Makoto and make sure he feels every single ounce of betrayal Rin’s trying to shoulder.

Because how fucking dare him.

Rin doesn’t know whether he’s angrier that Makoto doesn’t trust him enough to bring those sort of problems up and finds an intricate months-long lie to be the better answer, or that he acted so damn selfishly- totally unlike him- and put their livelihood in jeopardy so carelessly. They’re not swimming in cash, a great joke any other fucking day but painfully grounding in this moment.

Makoto is not himself. Hasn’t been for a long time. And Rin is terrified, increasingly so as he gets worse and worse, that it isn’t just a phase. That he’s turning into a person Rin doesn’t know, and worse- a person Rin doesn’t particularly like.

It started innocent enough, Makoto slowly pulling away. Right around the time Sasabe announced he’d be closing up ISCR at the end of the following summer, and definitely by the time Rin and Makoto determined they couldn’t afford to buy the business off of him to keep it going in time. Rin tried to be gentler, tried to be supportive. It clearly hurt Makoto, something about it even though he’d literally never declared any sort of passion over being a business owner. Not that he was sharing exactly what was eating him. But Rin let him have his privacy. Even if he was distant, even though Rin felt neglected. He told himself it was temporary, stayed with Gou occasionally and now more often to give him even more space.

He got his hopes up when Makoto came home with news of a job offer. But the gym on the other side of town willing to wait weeks for him to start? Rin was suspicious. Yet he didn’t press it. Makoto never lied to him before, why would he start now?

How stupid of Rin to assume the best. And maybe part of his anger is directed at himself for knowing things that sound too good to be true usually are, and ignoring that anyway.
When he arrives to Gou’s building, he trudges up the stairs to her floor. His anger is faltering just enough to slow him down. He doesn’t know where he wants to be anymore, but definitely not here or home or with any of their friends. Sousuke and Haru try not to get involved in this shit except when they have to, apparently. Sousuke especially, who put a hard stop to Rin’s perchance for text novels. If he’s honest with himself, he is a little miffed that Haru felt the need to tattle. He wants to think Makoto is better than needing to be told on, even though it’s proven at least in this case that he isn’t.

He knocks twice unenthusiastically and waits for a few minutes before knocking again. She calls an annoyed “hang on!” and Rin groans. She’s pissy, he’s pissy, everything’s a goddamned mess.

She throws the door open after another few moments and Rin steps aside as some guy shuffles out and away with a hurried farewell. Gou ties her hair up and she waves him in, rolling her eyes all the while.

“You know you could try talking to him, right?” she greets.

“This is different.”

He watches her argue with herself for a few beats, likely hopping between I’m not your fucking therapist and I guess you’re my brother so spill. “Short version,” she finally says.

“He’s been lying about having a job lined up. There isn’t anything.”

“Oh boy,” she sighs. “Want tea?”

“Please.”

“Then help me make it.” She breaks to the kitchen and puts the electric kettle on, Rin joins her and gets out two cups from the cupboard and a box of teabags from the pantry. It hardly looks like Gou had ten second to get dressed, and he nearly wants to roll his eyes at her in retaliation for her own exasperation.

“I gave you thirty minutes,” Rin sighs, gesturing to her rumpled pajamas.

“Deal with it. This is my house and you interrupted my evening so I’ll parade around in whatever I want.”

He can’t help but smile a little. “He your boyfriend?”

“Definitely not now, you cockblock. Really I just wanted to get laid, but here you are again.”

Rin frowns. “Harsh.”

“Yeah, it really isn’t.” She clams up and they wait in silence for the kettle to boil another two minutes. Once they’re seated at her kitchenette with their drinks, she waves him on to continue.

“I’m just so angry.”

“I think that’s reasonable.”

“I don’t know what to do with him. He won’t talk to me. Now he’s lying. Now we’re broke. I’m going to need to get a second job if he can’t pull it together. I just don’t make enough on my own selling fucking business suits at a piece of shit department store.”

She hums and blows lightly over the top of her cup. “Did he tell you why?”
“He said he didn’t know. How can you *not* know why you’d do something like that?”

“You guys should really see someone who is trained to put up with this.”

“How?” Rin laughs. “You gonna pay for that?”

“If you asked me nicely to, I would help, yes.”

Rin recoils and focuses on his tea. “That’s not necessary.”

“ Seems like it is. Do you even love him?”

“I do,” Rin answers immediately. “He’s all I ever wanted in a partner. But he’s so different these days, I’m starting to think we’re not compatible anymore. And I don’t know if he loves me, because you can’t just lie like this to the people you love.”

She reaches across the space and lays her hand over his, and Rin steels himself for the brand of criticism she only delivers with affectionate reassurance. “I think you’re being hard on him.”

He certainly isn’t steeled enough for *that*. “What? Are you serious?”

“It sounds like he’s having a rough time. He doesn’t know what he wants to do with his life, and he just had the only thing that was stable taken away from him. He isn’t lying about not knowing why. And let’s face it Rin, you’re not easy to open up to. He’s probably afraid of what you’ll think.”

“Oh, so it’s a fucking invitation to lie to my face then?”

“Of course it isn’t. And like I said, I think you’re within your rights to be upset. But instead of yelling at him and making him close up *more*, maybe you could’ve sat down with him tonight and tried to get to the bottom of it instead of coming here. That was your chance, you know. He would’ve talked to you.”

He thinks back on Makoto asking him to stay and talk, trying to explain before Rin angrily cut him off, and shifts his weight uncomfortably in his chair.

“But you left him there, didn’t you?”

He runs his tongue along his teeth in annoyance and directs his glare to the ground. “I’m *angry*. Why would I try to talk to him when I’m so mad?”

“There’s something worse at play here, Rin,” she says gently. “He’s not lying to you because he wants to. He needs you and your help to get through this, and you’re not there.”

“What the *fuck*, Gou. I’ve been nothing but supportive.”

“No, you come over here when you can’t get through to him. You leave him alone a lot. Now you’re yelling at him. Honestly, I wouldn’t open up to you either.”

He folds his arms and shakes his head in disbelief. “I can’t fucking believe you’re turning this on me. He is an *adult*. He should know we have bills and debt and all that fun fucking stuff. He should know how to handle his emotions or at least trust me to help him.”

She matches his crossed arms. “Fine, keep thinking this way and lose him. You guys aren’t going to make it if neither of you will bend. He needs to grow up and not lie to you and include you more. You need to earn the right to be a person he goes to, not assume it. Take my advice or don’t, I’m
not a relationship counselor. But don’t come crawling to me when this blows up in your face and he’s gone.”

“Thanks a fucking lot, sis. You always know exactly what to say,” he clips sarcastically.

“You can leave if you’re going to be an ass to me, too. I don’t deserve it. You wanted him. You wanted to make it work and you gave up your dream to have him then and there instead of-

“Don’t fucking say it.”

“I will, dammit, you hypocrite. You gave up, and you went after Makoto so you could say you won something. Like he’s your consolation prize.”

“That is not true,” he roars. “I love him and I got sick of being away from him so I came home! Say what you want about everything else but don’t go and imply I would use him like that!”

“Then treat him better! I told you it was rash back then to give it up for him, and you were coming home for the wrong reasons. Don’t forget that.”

He snorts and shoves to a stand. “Oh trust me, I haven’t. I was young and dumb and impulsive. I could’ve had a fucking studded career right now if it weren’t for him, if I’d tried one more time instead of letting myself fail and just sucked it up and forced myself to do it. How was I supposed to know my relationship would turn out worse than my swimming career ever could’ve? He was everything and he went and fucked it up!”

Gou springs to a stand with him and leans over the table, rigid with anger he knows he deserves. “You know he beats himself up every single day for not making you reconsider. And this is how you feel? Like your fucking decision was his fault?!”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, save your rage. We’re a failed relationship, all right? Is that what you want to hear? That it all was a big ass fucking mistake so you can say I told you so?”

“You failed him. Makoto doesn’t deserve your regrets or frustration or neglect. If this is really how you feel Rin, I can guarantee you he already knows, and that’s exactly why he’s afraid of talking to you. He is terrified that he doesn’t make you happy.”

Rin chokes on a low noise of disgust in his throat. “Again, thanks for absolutely nothing.” He kicks the chair in and stomps down her hall for the futon he knows he shouldn’t be taking. But now he’s even angrier than he was before. Going home would be a nightmare.

“You can’t talk to me like that and still stay here,” she calls after him.

He growls and throws the futon to the floor of the living room. “I can’t go back there tonight,” he says on a turn. She glares at him. “So fucking kick me out if you want but I’ll just sleep outside your door if you do.”

“Do you really feel that way or are you just angry? I’m afraid for you right now.”

“Yeah,” he answers honestly and suddenly quietly. He’s never said it out loud, and it feels thick and perilous in his throat. It’s a point of no return to voice something like that, but now that he’s started he can’t stop. “I really do. If this is it, is what being with him is, then why did I do it? I could’ve forced myself to swim and at least had something to show for it. Now I got fucking nothing. What the fuck is all this? Four years of this shit and I’m sleeping on your floor again? That’s what all this was for?!”
Gou looks ready to cry, fists balled angrily at her sides and eyes glassy with hurt. Makoto didn’t even hear him say it and he’s got a knot in his gut as if he had, as if Gou’s reacting on his behalf. “You’re an asshole. Jesus, Rin.”

“Well we don’t trust each other! He lies to me, I regret quitting. It’s a constant cycle of one thing making the other thing worse. It’s a wreck, it’s the biggest mistake I’ve ever made.”

“I’m so disappointed in you,” she says firmly.

“That makes two of us,” he responds to her retreating back.

--

When Rin finally musters up the courage to go home and face this, it’s been nearly twenty-four hours. He hasn’t heard a word from Makoto or anyone else involved since Gou left without saying anything to him this morning. He locks her door with his spare key and walks home as slowly as his feet will carry him there.

He enters their home quietly, in case Makoto is sleeping or something which he sort of hopes that he is. Rin’s thought about it, and at least Gou was right when she said he shouldn’t have abandoned him and threatened him. It was out of line, even if he thinks he still needed the space away.

There’s a commotion in the kitchen, knocking out his wish for a random nap unless there’s a home invader making a snack. He sighs to himself and shakes out his hands. The nagging feeling of being a piece of shit for what he didn’t even say to Makoto hasn’t gone away since the night prior, and it almost makes it feel like their fight is on even ground now.

“Hey,” he greets as he enters the kitchen. Makoto doesn’t jump as if he already knew he was standing there, and finishes getting rice and chicken in a bowl with a slight smile on his lips.


“Sure.” Makoto hands him the prepared bowl and fishes another out for himself. “... I’m really sorry Rin.”

“Me too.”

Makoto sits on the couch with his food but sets it aside. Rin does as well. It’s far from a comforting meal. “I found something part time today,” Makoto starts, biting his lip. “Stocking job. It’s not enough, I know. But I can start on Monday.”

“Forget about that,” Rin says. “What’s going on with you?”

Makoto shakes his head and leans over his knees with his hands hanging between them. “I don’t know.”

“You just don’t know what you want to do?”

“I don’t. But that’s not all either. I think it’s just a symptom. But... I really need you to know that I am sorry. I shouldn’t have lied. I know I’m not myself and you didn’t sign up for this. But I think... Rin, I lied because I get the feeling that you don’t want this anymore.”
“Makot—”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you and make it worse. I’m not stupid, I know we’re barely getting by literally and figuratively. You love that I coach— it’s the one thing I can really say you love about me. And to admit to you that I didn’t want to… you’d just have another thing to be bitter about. I know I held you back already,” Makoto adds with strain, and screws his eyes shut.

“You didn’t.”

“But you still blame me for it. I wonder if I had turned you down for your sake, if you would’ve gone on to have everything you ever wanted. You could’ve moved on without me. I’m not that special. I feel like I took your lifelong passion from you, and sometimes the way you look at me… I know it’s true.”

Rin gives in and moves closer to him so they’re hip to hip, and leans his head on Makoto’s shoulder. “It was my decision. You were part of what I wanted. Part of that passion.”

“Were.”

Rin flinches. “Are,” he corrects weakly. But the silence settles in just the same. Makoto sits up and rests his head on Rin’s, and somehow he knows that it doesn’t matter why Makoto’s lying and distant, it doesn’t matter why they’re so unhappy, and it doesn’t matter why Rin can’t stop wishing he’d done differently lately. Because they’re done.

They can’t fix this. Not when neither of them knows what the root problem is, just that it’s hopelessly broken, and that there may be too many problems to name. They love each other, and it’s literally all they have going for them. The contempt and distrust is taking over.

Because a relationship isn’t committed people who can overcome everything that’s thrown at them as long as there’s love. He used to think that, used to roll his eyes at anyone who made it too complicated. No, the hard truth of it is, love on its own isn’t even close to enough. It doesn’t pay the bills, it doesn’t replace their dreams, and it isn’t an answer to any of the questions that whisper what if around every corner that have been plaguing them both. It’s just a condition. One pinch of one ingredient in an unfathomably complex recipe.

And if they both regret everything that’s happened so far to the point of resenting each other, not trusting each other...

“Are we going to be okay?” Makoto asks the floor.

“Of course we are. We can see someone, we can fix it.”

“You’re a bad liar, too.”

“I know. But I love you, Makoto.”

“I know.”

Makoto pulls off of him and stands, and it only registers that he adds that’s why this is over long after he’s walked away.
One of Sousuke’s favorite sights is Haruka—above him, below him, next to him—when his eyes are lidded—sometimes glassy, sometimes soft—and his mouth is parted, cheeks flush and ever so imperceptibly splotchy the closer you look to his ears. The blink-and-he-misses-it moment when Haruka’s already trying to steady his breathing but he’s still hitching on the syllables of Sousuke’s name or cursing some dead god to his lips.

Today when that moment is over, and Haruka rolls off of him to leave him to shiver as the sweat starts to dry from his body, Sousuke’s heart detaches and falls into the pit that’s slowly replaced his stomach. Or it feels like that, anyway.

Sousuke turns to face him after using a dishtowel hastily plucked from a moving box to wipe himself down, grimacing at the corners of his features when it’s rough and unpleasant. He rests on a bent arm, quiet, watching Haruka tend to himself.

The lighting sucks in here without a decent window. His back only looks sickly in the cold tones.

“Thanks for helping me break in the bed,” Haruka jests, rejoining him.

“Hey, I’m relatively certain mine’s the only ass you have the game to get. So really, I did you a favor to deflower it.”

“I don’t know what that says about you,” Haruka retorts.

“Oh, that’s easy. I’m clearly a pushover.”

Haruka falls silent, Sousuke’s hard-won air of amusement going quickly stale. He can’t stand it.

“Sousuke,” Haruka starts in that tone. Again. The tone that’s way too late to be using now.

Sousuke ghosts his fingertips along the side of Haruka’s face, pushing back into his tangled hair and through the snags, and pulls him in to close their distance. He knows how fucking desperate he must feel, all teeth and tongue. But Haruka lets his kisses clack, bump, and bruise.

“Don’t, okay?”

Haruka nods slowly at first, but follows up with one more solid and sure. “Okay.”

“I should go,” someone says timidly. It sure doesn’t sound like Sousuke said it. “It’s... a long way back.”

Haruka sits up and bends over the side of the bed for his discarded pants, pulling them on as he speaks. “I’ll grab that food while you get your things.”

The meal for the road, Sousuke remembers, stepping off the bed and stopping by the bathroom to to wash up further. He gets his clothes back on, and he’d be whining over how dirty they felt after a day of moving and driving if only he could bring himself to care.

He finds Haruka leaning on the counter of his half-unpacked kitchen, Sousuke’s coat thrown over his arm already and covering his exposed chest. Sousuke tugs at the sleeve to get his attention, making him look up. His expression is blank and passive, which to Sousuke means he’s anything but.
Haruka loosens his hold on the coat and waits for Sousuke to pull it on before handing him a container of onigiri. Sousuke pats the pocket for his keys; they’re regrettably there.

“Oh, well,” he says, “don’t be a stranger. Carrier pigeons are making a comeback, I heard, if you want to write.”

Haruka hands him the food next. “I’ll call her Ebisu.”

“Then I’ll keep a window open.” He smirks and Haruka huffs, as if it’s any other stupid conversation they have, because they’ve already said everything else to make this part go easier. “Learn to lock your fuckin’ door.”

Sousuke slips his shoes on and lets himself out into the building hall. He thinks of turning around and quipping any old last thing, just for the fuck of it, or maybe even admitting he’ll miss him. But the handle latches to cut him off before he can, and the deadbolt turns over loud enough to bounce an echo past his ears and down the steps.

Haruka always was a quick learner.

In the few movies Sousuke’s sat through that depict a person walking away from someone else—presumably for good— they typically stop somewhere to reflect and be thankful for what was, or turn around and run back into that person’s arms, or go to their car to break down and pound hopelessly on the steering wheel while they scream and cry and wish it was different.

But he finds that he’s initially only thinking about how sore he is all over, and how shitty this drive is when you have to do it twice in one weekend. He won’t get back until well past midnight after starting that morning before dawn, and that was for the better. For him, anyway. Though Haruka would’ve wished he stayed the night at least and got some rest, Sousuke didn’t want to do that.

His phone dies long after he’s stopped bothering to check the time for how much longer he has to go. Without the music that’s admittedly mostly been background noise, he’s left with the sound of the road and the occasional squeal from a loose belt in the engine that only acts up in the cold.

He has to wonder when any of this will start to feel real. For something that was initially his idea, he’s finding a lot of missing footage when he tries to recall exactly when he decided to end it, replaced with a looping track of something laughing mockingly at him.

His feelings on it don’t matter. Of course he’s sad. But he knows he made the right decision. Haruka wanted more. Sousuke wasn’t enough.

It was the golden opportunity of Haruka’s career that gave him the courage to do it, to tell him to go. He applied for a layout position to a sports publication run out of Tokyo—way over his experience level but Sousuke encouraged him to apply anyway. Haruka didn’t think he had a chance in the world to even get a call— and he did it. The call, the in-person interview, the second in-person interview. Then the offer.

The way his face lit up when he told Sousuke about it— he’ll never forget it. And he’d have never forgiven himself either if he didn’t match Haruka’s enthusiasm and help him move forward. For his sake. It was so exciting for Haruka; Sousuke’s never seen him look forward to anything in his entire life. He’d never been able to make Haruka feel that way, and from that realization sunk the pit in his stomach that’s been steadily growing until now.

By contrast he loves his quiet life in Iwatobi. It’s everything he needs and upturning that stability again just makes him sick to think about. But Iwatobi isn’t everything for Haruka, not even close.
And Sousuke realized he didn’t fill the gap by a long shot.

Haruka would never force or guilt him to follow, and just knowing that they both respected each other enough to be smart about the reality of their few differences made it so much easier to let Haruka go.

So much easier to admit to himself that he wasn’t anything worth sacrificing for.

He couldn’t have asked for a better relationship, a better few years to happen to him, or a better opportunity for the man he loves so fucking much— as much as this hurts, hurt goes away. They’ll be okay. He’ll be okay, he’ll be okay, he’ll be okay.

It’s comforting in the wake of feeling this hollow to tell himself this over and over, even though that laugh freely bouncing around in the back of his mind tries to drown him out.

Sometimes these things just have to happen. It’s not fair, but Sousuke’s long since made peace with the fact that nothing is ever completely fair. He’s also made peace with the fact that things end. Everything eventually ends no matter how long it can be put off. There is no such thing as forever. For some things, that’s good. No one should suffer forever. For other things, that’s bad. Because everyone wants to be loved eternally in some way.

And a little, quiet part of him— a part he’s shoved into the corner of his being and nearly silenced with a lifetime of learning not to dream too big— whispers that it works both ways, and maybe this separation isn’t forever, either. Maybe Sousuke’s worth coming back for.

Sousuke’s downright delirious when he turns down the final road to their building— well, his building now. The pit in his stomach is still there, and he figures it will be for a while. He forgot to eat his snack, and plans on just throwing it away. He only wants a quick shower and a full day of sleep and a return to a (now adjusted) routine.

It’s three in the morning when he finally looks at the radio clock again just before he shuts off his car and walks to the back of the complex to his corner unit on the ground floor with the few items he brought or picked out of the moving boxes that were packed by mistake haphazardly stacked in his arms. He nearly drops it all when there’s someone sitting on the ground outside of the door, head bent into arms on pulled knees, because he briefly thinks it’s Haruka somehow, who he’s found like that in the past after the idiot got himself locked out on a handful of occasions over the years.

But it can’t be him, and when he steps closer, the person is way too large and definitely isn’t Haruka.

“What the fuck?” he asks out loud, making the bundle stir. “Dude go be drunk on someone else’s—Makoto?”

Makoto blinks sleep out of his eyes for a moment and stands stiffly. “Well, I take it Haru left today. Sorry. I didn’t know. I thought I had another week, considering that’s what he told me.” He’s pensive and not all that upset by the realization, doesn’t really seem out of sorts at all despite where he is and the time.

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Would you mind letting me stay here tonight?”

“... Are you okay?”
“Not in the slightest.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure, hold on.” Sousuke shifts his weight back so his items rest against him while he uses a hand to unlock the door, and gestures for Makoto to get the handle. Makoto goes inside and Sousuke follows, setting the items down on the dining table for now to address his out of left field guest. Makoto’s moved to his couch, shoes already off.

“What hap- actually, you know, I’m pretty tired, so you don’t have to tell me. I’m not one hundred percent sure I’m not hallucinating right now, to be honest.”

“I’m sorry to intrude,” Makoto mumbles as an afterthought. “Can I ask you something about Rin?” Sousuke almost groans. Their endless drama is really not what he needs today. It’s not something he ever needs, but especially not now. He settles on a sigh. “Makoto, I can’t do this right now. I’ve been awake for nearly twenty-four hours. Can we talk tomorrow? You look like you need to sleep too.”

Makoto smiles tiredly and waves him off. “Yeah you’re right. Sorry.”

“You know where all the shit is,” Sousuke says, yawning. “Take what you need.” And then he can’t bother himself with this anymore, takes a shower he definitely doesn’t remember taking, and falls asleep before he realizes he made it to his bed.

--

He does groan when he finally gets out of bed at some high hour in the afternoon to find Makoto still putzing around his place. He likes the guy just fine, really does, but he swore off The Rin and Makoto Shitshow months ago, and is hardly feeling sympathetic enough to deal with it not even a full day after he dropped Haruka out of his own life.

Makoto looks up at the protest, clearly wounded by it though he replaces it quickly with indifference.

“What did he do now?” Sousuke sighs. Always something so fucking stupid-

“I left him.”

For whatever reason it totally knocks the air from his chest and bludgeons him behind the head hard enough to knock the words out of his mouth, too. They’ve been fucked up for a while, struggling to make it work, but separation was never anything Sousuke considered an option. Not after everything they stubbornly did to be together. Just seemed like a little tumultuous time for them that was bound to pass. No, he must’ve misheard.

“Excuse me?”

“Yesterday. I couldn’t… I mean, you know. It wasn’t working.”

Sousuke rakes a hand through his disheveled hair and takes up the other side of the couch, legs not interested in holding him up anymore. “You sure about this?”

“I… well that’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Right, the Rin question.”

Makoto nods. “Haru tells me it isn’t true but… he regrets what he did, doesn’t he? He wishes he
kept swimming.”

In hindsight, it’s really stupid that Sousuke assumed this would never come up with their relationship ripped open so raw lately. That Rin could not be a selfish shit for just long enough to not detonate something good that he wanted. That Haruka maybe wouldn’t continue to shelter Makoto once it was so painfully obvious that Rin dropped the ball on that.

Suddenly he’s full of an unbearable guilt that he ever removed himself from this mess, because he shouldn’t have to be the only one left at the end of the road for Makoto to feel like he can go to for a little bit of fucking honesty. Because he isn’t a person he wants Makoto to turn to, there should never have been a last resort. He’s not good at dealing with people who have no fucking spine and he should’ve been around to reprimand Rin and Haruka sooner.

But then Makoto says something surprising, confident, and resolute. And Sousuke only feels worse to hear it. He hasn’t answered the question yet, and has only been staring in dumb, gaping noncommitance for what feels like five minutes.

“I thought so.” Makoto stands and walks over to his shoes. “It’s okay, that’s the only reason I’m here. I just wanted to know I made the right call, and I knew you’d be the only person who would finally answer me.”

He really wants to let Makoto leave. Every piece of him is begging not to get involved. The damage is done, they’re over. There’s nothing left to mediate, and there’s the issue of even putting himself in this compromising position when Rin’s still his oldest friend. But damned if he doesn’t feel a little sorry for Makoto, who’s effectively been told he was a mistake. “Hey, wait a sec.”

“It’s really okay. I know we aren’t close, it was only a question about Rin. Don’t feel obligated to do anything, all right? Thanks for letting me stay.”

“Do you have anywhere to go tonight?”

“I do.”

It comes out so fucking brittle and uneven that Sousuke groans again. “That was a terrible lie.”

“Hmm. Well I’d like if you pretended it wasn’t so that we can both go on with our lives.”

He gestures to the couch. “Sit back down. Stay with me until you line something up. Not like I don’t have the space now. I’ll take you to go get your shit after I can get some food. Deal?”

Makoto wavers on one foot, finger ready to hook the shoe over his heel. They both know Sousuke’s in the middle of this now, and Sousuke doesn’t blame his hesitation. Still, it’s a serious offer. He can’t let the guy sleep on the street. “...I just need one more night to talk to my parents. I’m hoping I can stay with them.”

“Hoping?” Sousuke answers. He really doesn’t care that much yet here he is. “Can’t you just show up? I mean you’re close, I thought.”

He only spares a glance in response as he returns to his spot on the couch. “...You know I thought I was just- at first, anyway- being hard on myself like always.”

“Huh? With your parents?”

“And I kept saying: it’s all in my head. Don’t panic, don’t put pressure on anyone to make you feel better about yourself. Haru doesn’t coddle me like that anymore. Rin always says what he thinks.
Gou’s my friend and loves us both and wouldn’t want Rin to settle for me. If it was true that Rin regretted me, I would know. Someone, somewhere would tell me and save me from having to find out the hard way, right? So I could keep some dignity? My issues were my own, weren’t they? I was just so unhappy because of me, and nothing else. My friends would never do that to me.”

Makoto isn’t sad at all. He’s livid. It’s so deathly silent in the living room as he finishes speaking that the analog clock ticking over from Sousuke’s bedroom sounds like someone’s methodically throwing a tennis ball at the wall.

“You all think I’m weak.”

“Makoto that isn’t true.” But wasn’t he the one who bitched to himself about how spineless Makoto was not two minutes ago?

“You all think I’m weak,” he repeats louder. “I don’t know when it happened… or if I even deserve it… but I think that’s what hurts most of all.”

Sousuke doesn’t deny it again.

“Third floor has the break room, some vending machines, a fridge and the large custodial closet. We share our floor with the political rag across the hall, and the first floor has a legal office, a finance something-or-other, and an overpriced coffee stand.” Mika Megumi, his new boss. Or maybe it was Mika Yagami. He doesn’t remember.

“Okay.”

“So in our space, you got big boss Hachi’s office, the writers’ room, the writers’ area in general, the big board room, the review room, the art room for photography and such when it’s necessary, and your area- creative. That’s my office straight ahead. Follow me.”

“Okay.” What else is he going to do? Haruka would like to ask sarcastically.

“And here’s you. Feel free to make it yours; nothing creepier than a creative with a blank work space, in my opinion.”

It’ll do, Haruka thinks. The space is wide and the backwall of the desk is a pin board. The computer’s already there; as far as he knows with everything he needs already. He sets his small box of belongings down next to the keyboard. “It’s nice.”

“Cool. So now we should meet everyone.”

Haruka pulls of face of totally vested interest that he practiced on Sousuke and received a barely passing grade on, but he passed nonetheless. “Okay.”

“Don’t talk much?”

Haruka shrugs. “New city.”

“Right. Where you from again?”

“Iwatobi.”

She purses her lips. “No idea.”
“South. It’s small.”

“I’ll look it up. So anyway…”

He’d really just like to get to work. But after taking over an hour to meet Naoko, Yumi, Ishida, Yuu, Romi, Tetsuhina, Keiji, Goto, Hayumi, and Kasaki- he’s starting to think he won’t ever get to. Most of them are way too chatty for his tastes. Romi in particular won’t let him leave for twenty minutes, and Haruka doesn’t even get more than five seconds to talk about himself. The designer at the desk next to his- Goto- is blessedly anti-social by contrast.

“Seems like you two should get along,” Mika remarks when Goto shrugs his greeting and turns back to his work. He’s quite a bit older than everyone else, and at a glance this sort of work seems odd for someone like him, someone who looks like they’d be more comfortable in a mechanic’s garage. “I’m going to take you to get a coffee and then I’m setting you loose. I’ll just have you sit with me today. The spreads are due so you can get a feel for what I’m looking for this way. Tomorrow you’ll get your assignment for next week’s issue.”

“Okay.”

She walks him back out and past the door to the “political rag” that he’ll have to satiate his interest in another time. *The Chiyoda Review*. Sounds stuffy to him. Looks stuffy. All the furniture that he can see through the frosted glass looks about as boring as the typeset of the characters on the door.

He orders a tea and Mika gestures to a bistro. “Sorry for information overload. I like to just get it all out of the way.”

Haruka hums and sits. “I appreciate that actually.”

“So what’s the deal with you? Your portfolio is really nice but you’ve been working out of the same weekly pick-up mag since you graduated from some no-name university. I mean obviously I think you’re good, but I still took a bit of a chance here.”

“There aren’t a lot of options in Iwatobi, and I couldn’t move to a bigger city sooner.”

“Family?”

“Something like that.”

Mika rolls her eyes and sighs. “I’m only trying to make conversation, you know. We’ll be working closely so we should at least have a feel for who the other is, right?”

Haruka appraises her briefly over the edge of his cup. She’s trying to be his friend, but will no doubt ease off that as soon as he makes a mistake. He could tell by glares the other creatives threw at her back when they moved onto the next meet and greet. She’s a bit imposing, just as tall as he is and dressed in loud, sunny colors. There’s some sort of large tattoo peeking from beneath the left sleeve of her blazer and simple silver wedding ring that she spins idly with her thumb. Mid-thirties, probably lived abroad for a while gauging by the western influence everywhere on her, and married long enough to form a habit with the metal band she stopped noticing was there years ago. In sum, Haruka would say he has a pretty great initial feel for who she is.

“I was in a relationship. Now I’m not. Freed me up to move,” he answers. It’s the first time he’s said it out loud, and it feels foreign. “I lived there my whole life; I wanted something else.”

“Oh, I see. Well I grew up in a small town too. Honestly don’t know why anyone would want to stick around those places.”
“I guess it’s not for everyone.”

“Then I think you made a good choice.”

He looks up from where his gaze has been trending downwards and shrugs.

“It’s a good portfolio move,” she continues when he doesn’t say anything.

“Yeah. It is.”

She seems to like being agreed with, and launches into a lot of words about herself next. She isn’t unpleasant or anything; she’ll probably be a normal boss. Not someone Haruka would go and get lunch with, not that she probably thinks highly of him in that regard either.

Mika takes them to the review room instead of her office so there’s space for Haruka to get a look at the layouts for this week’s issue. This issue features a story on a nearby university’s baseball team, and the starting pitcher’s story of overcoming some disease. The first mock-up looks good to him; it’s Goto’s. The baseball stats are arranged so they’re easy to read and force the eye flow in the order they’re meant to be read. She doesn’t have a whole lot to correct on it, and it’s a slight relief. Looking at the information he had to work with, Haruka wouldn’t have done it differently.

He mostly sits in silence while she picks away at the different spreads before sending them back for final revision. He notices she isn’t a fan of blues, which is mildly offending him. It’s offset by the fact that she also hates script font, which he agrees vehemently with, and that someone would even try to push past a script font on a professional publication is mutedly horrifying to him. It was Romi, and he already finds he isn’t surprised.

Before he realizes it’s time to go, she lets him know. He stops by his desk and unpacks the box to pin up his old whittled Iwatobi charm and two swim team photos; the one from his second year and one taken at the end of the summer of his third. He and Sousuke are on opposite ends of the group after fighting over something that he doesn’t even remember, which still amuses him to this day. Up next is a birthday card from Ren and Ran where they tried to draw him an angler fish that turned out so hideous Makoto jumped in alarm when he saw it.

Other than that, it’s all he has to display.

--

He’s not sure what he feels when he gets home and finally thinks to check his phone only to find nothing waiting for him. Not that he was expecting anything from Sousuke who’s made his desires clear, but Makoto or Rin usually send him something at some point during the day.

With everything that’s been going on, it just makes him feel uneasy.

Makoto probably knows he’s gone by now. After their lunch, then his texting Rin stunt, Haruka figured he’d be shit-listed for a while by both of them and opted to bow out silently. It was cowardly, he knew that when he decided not to tell them he pushed his move up by a week, but he didn’t know how else to properly convey how worried he is for both of them. Makoto won’t hear it, Rin swears he has everything under control. Rin wants this, Makoto’s just paranoid, all of it. But Makoto’s lying revealed an entirely new layer of issues that Haruka never anticipated. He had to do something.

Sousuke just shook his head when he found out and changed the subject. It was never his area of interest, and they’d both been pre-occupied on the impending expiration date of, well, everything else.
It really only leaves one person involved that will even talk to him at this point, and he calls her. Gou doesn’t answer, but calls him back after a few minutes.

“Hey, I can’t talk long,” she says, background noise suggesting she stepped outside. “Rin’s over.”

“Oh. Sorry. Just checking in?”

“He’s really upset,” Gou reveals.

Haruka nods to himself. “I knew he would be, but I had to do it.”

She’s quiet for a moment before answering in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“...What do you mean?”

“...Oh boy,” she sighs, devolving to a nervous giggle. “Well of course I’d be the one… they broke up. Makoto left.”

“Makoto what?” he asks thickly, holding his phone away to stare at it in disbelief before returning it to his ear. “He what?”

“He broke it off. They had some sort of fight the other night that landed Rin with me, I guess Mako lied about his job and Rin found out. He went home Saturday to deal with it but… last night he showed up again and told me Makoto left him.”

He pushes down the knot in his throat. “Where’s Makoto?”

“I don’t know. Rin isn’t talking and Makoto isn’t answering his phone.”

“Did you check if he’s with Sousuke...?”

“You’re with Sousuke, you tell me!”

“...I’m not. I moved Saturday. I didn’t tell anyone.”

She’s quiet again. “...Haruka…”

“I’m sorry,” he says quickly.

“You didn’t… tell me? Anyone?”

“It got really difficult to stay,” he admits. He’s not sure Gou heard him, knowing it barely eked out past his lips. “I couldn’t… he kept packing my things, said I should get here sooner to… get used to it.”

“Haruka,” she repeats uneasily.

“He was right,” Haruka adds firmly, thinking better of it and rescinding his forlorn tone. This isn’t her problem or her business. “It was useless to wait another few days.”

“But you were spending time together, Haruka, why did you do that?”

“I have a lot to learn and get through at this new job,” he says matter-of-factly. “And this way Sousuke didn’t have to use any of the time off that he hoards.”

“Right,” she mutters. Defeated. She knows Haruka is turning away from her, and she doesn’t call
after him. Good, he thinks. She’ll just tell Sousuke. He can’t have that.

“Okay… well I have Rin over,” she recovers. “I need to get back to him. Maybe finally find out what went wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” he mutters. “I didn’t know you were so involved.”

“Well where do you think Rin goes? You and Sousuke shut him and Makoto out.”

“... I guess I didn’t think about it.”

“Anyway. This is just terrible, Haruka… I feel bad, I can’t help it. He’s pretty beat up about it. But you want my opinion?”

“Of course.”

“It’s for the better.”

It’s certainly the first time anyone has said it, to Haruka’s knowledge, and he doesn’t find the anger in himself to fight it either. Maybe all of this- him leaving included- is for the better. None of them, not even Sousuke, seem to be doing one another any favors by being so involved with each other. Maybe they all need a break.

“I can’t help but wonder if I’m thinking the same thing about my place, too,” Haruka confesses.

She hums low. “This is more fucked than it seemed at a glance.”

“It is. This is sort of my fault... I meddled, but I didn’t know what else to do. I told Rin that Makoto lied. Otherwise he probably wouldn’t have found out right away.”

“I understand why you did it, though. Honestly I’ve wanted to intervene myself for a while but I really couldn’t find the courage… someone had to do it. Do me a favor and try to find Makoto? Let me know he’s okay. Rin’s really worried too, all issues notwithstanding. It’s never good when Makoto falls off the grid.”

“Okay. Do me a favor and tell Rin I’m here. But I understand if he’s mad at me for a while, and I’m only not calling him because I know what I did was invasive.”

“Deal. Keep in touch, okay? I don’t like losing all of my boys like this,” she pouts. “If there’s anything you all share among the four of you it’s that you’re all too damn stubborn to do anything right the first time.”

“I guess I can’t deny it... I promise I’ll call.” He winces even having uttered the words.

“Well don’t kill yourself trying,” she laughs. “A text is fine from you.”

“Yeah, thanks. Sorry I caused so much trouble.”

“It was inevitable. We’ve always known you’re the primary troublemaker anyway. Sorry I can’t talk longer, but I need to go make dinner.”

Haruka knows she’s only trying to make him feel better, but it really doesn’t help. Instead he sits on his bed and gives into the weight on his chest. “Good night, Gou.”

He sits in the dark of his bedroom for a while until the small stab of light the cracked door provides goes out with the sunset. This really is his fault. Whether he should’ve said something sooner or
never at all, maybe he could’ve had a hand in preventing this. His timing was abhorrent either way.

Meekly, he opens a new text. He knows Makoto won’t answer him if he’s not responding to Gou either. As much as it pains him to, because he wanted to leave that door closed for a while so that they could both move on, he addresses the message to Sousuke.

is makoto with you?
sorry.

The phone is loose in his hands now buzzing with adrenaline and dread.

yeah, he answers.

will he talk to me?

A few minutes pass. Then twenty do. He gives up after that and goes to his kitchen to make dinner, but takes the phone with him. It isn’t until he’s sitting with a quick miso, as he honestly doesn’t feel like he can stomach anything better, that Sousuke responds.

why dont you text him and find out

He doesn't.
“Would you go home already?” Gou whines, drilling a foot into Rin’s side where he’s sleeping on the floor. “It’s been two weeks!”

“Yeah yeah,” he mumbles, cringing away from her. “I’ll leave today. Makoto get all his shit?”

“I guess so,” she answers. “Sou said he did.”

The way he curls in on himself and pulls the pillow over his head tells Gou he’s dealing with another wave of surrealism, so she leaves him be to wallow and make breakfast. She’s been trying to kick him out for days now. Maybe it would help if she stopped feeding him, but he’s just so… mopey.

He seats himself at her table long after the omelette she put out of him has gone cold. She’s already cleaned off her plate and taken her spot back up with her phone, browsing the news while she waits for him.

“You owe me a grocery trip,” she says when he starts eating.

“I know.”

“How much longer do you have on that lease?” she continues.

Rin sighs. “Like three months or so.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t even know how I’m going to cover three months, much less what I’ll do afterwards.”

“Makoto offered to keep paying on it.”

“That’s hardly fair.”

She pauses to think on it. “Why don’t you sub-let it?”

“Then go where? I don’t have a deposit for a new place.”

“Mom, maybe?”

He pushes his plate forward and slumps onto his arms. “I guess I have no choice.”

“If I had the room you could stay,” she offers, more out of politeness than anything.

“Nah, you got your life,” he mutters, waving his hand vaguely. “I’ve taken up enough of it. If I move back in with Mom at least I could save some money. I’ll have to get a job closer to her
though, which is an entirely new headache."

She can’t bring herself to argue or pretend it isn’t a good idea, and the thought of her living room floor being clear again is the best thought she’s had in days. It’s so rare for Rin to experience such a level of self-awareness.

Gou’s in a weird place with her brother. She’s angry at him, no doubt. His deplorable hypocrisy came to light in an ugly way; the entire basis for his relationship with Makoto is based on a lie that he just didn’t want to swim in London. No, he didn’t even qualify- he was put on the reserve roster. And Gou is sworn to secrecy about that detail, a lie she’s being forced to shoulder for him.

At this point she’s not sure if it does more damage to keep it buried or unearth it, and worst of all she resents being put in a position like this at all. By the time he told her he was coming home, it was already too late to talk him out of it. He was at the airport. Makoto showed up to drive with her to get him. Overjoyed, over the moon, gushing about the beginning to the rest of his life. Makoto never speaks whimsically like that. She couldn’t ruin it for them by asking too many questions. What sort of monster would? As long as they were happy.

Makoto shouldn’t have lied regardless, but she has a better idea for why Makoto pulled away like he did. Anyone can sense when something isn’t right in their relationships, no matter the type, and Makoto couldn’t have felt loved or wanted with Rin putting all of his neuroses and regrets on him. She feels awful for Makoto, who thought Rin just wanted to be with him above all else. Not that he failed and was settling for his next best option.

Yet Rin certainly loves Makoto, and that makes it difficult to fault him completely. She’s seen the way he looks at him, seen the way they laughed together when things were good. She’s been there when he’s picked Makoto out gifts and panicked over the best thing for him, been there for his loud drunken confessions that Makoto is his light or whatever weird romantic phrase he wanted to use at the time. Love did factor into his decision, even if- in her opinion- it wasn’t a smart reason to make a permanent decision over.

There was a period of time where his decision didn’t seem so wrong to her as it did when he told her or as it does now; he really lived for Makoto. They were happy. Maybe turning away from his career for Makoto was the right choice for him, even if it wouldn’t have been her choice.

Until Makoto proved to be a person who made mistakes, of course. Until he wasn’t perfect anymore. Then it was obvious what was really going on.

Rin never processed his second failure in Australia. He never accepted it and moved on to the next chapter without baggage, and only took out his insecurities on Makoto to cope, depended on Makoto’s smile too much. It was what worried her originally, what’s rearing its ugly head now. He never talked about being benched, or why he struggled. Gou still doesn’t know; he could only say he failed and refuses to talk about it otherwise even years later. What about it is healthy? Of course it never went away. So when Makoto finally blindly stumbled under the weight of Rin’s secrets, it ripped open all of Rin’s unhealed wounds. His fantasy love story was put to rest and reality caught up with him again.

The entire world rumbles when Rin is hurting. Because if there’s one thing Rin’s really yet to learn in his life, it’s how to manage his own personal failures without destroying everything in his path along with himself.

Eventually though, you hit an age where that sort of reaction is no longer excusable, and Rin hit that age, oh, eight years ago? A decade ago, even? She sighs and Rin looks up.
“I need to get to work,” she states, perhaps with a bit too much ice floating along the top of it. “Lock up on your way out.”

Once she has her coat, her shoes, and her lunch, she’s gone without a goodbye and drives to her office in frustrated silence. Even once she’s there, the project team she manages barrage her with their issues too. All things they should know how to do, all things she patiently and kindly corrects them on anyway.

One day maybe her life can finally be about her. These days it sure doesn’t feel like anyone remembers she’s a fully-realized person and not just an advice-dispensing kiosk that accepts other people’s problems as currency. Rin doesn’t respect her privacy in the least either and she hasn’t done anything for herself in ages other than look after him. She knows she’s sabotaging her life when she’s canceling plans with others to accommodate him. Somewhere along the way she stopped putting her foot down as hard as she used to and should be.

Gou’s ready to leave work a little earlier than usual to enjoy her apartment all by herself for the first time in weeks when a simultaneous two things happen. One, the newest girl on her team has a question about the layout of the second floor of the building being remodeled Gou’s in charge of, and while Gou is no architect, even she can tell Yazaki that her confusion is due in part to her looking at the blueprints for the third floor, not the second (as denoted by the “3” in the lower right-hand corner, she points out as non-condescendingly as possible), and all of the materials orders must now be canceled and re-ordered with the corrected specifications. Which makes leaving early officially impossible. Being a project manager is great until it all goes haywire. Training new people is a headache.

The second thing is a text she receives while on the phone with the contractor that she only remembers to read after she’s done and leaving.

*how you holding up. makoto is driving me fucking nuts.*

She laughs to herself on the way to her car imagining the deafening volume of Sousuke’s internal screaming with Makoto in his space. Providing this sort of support isn’t really his forte, and she’s not surprised that Makoto is still staying with him either.

They haven’t spoken much in a long time, lives drifting them apart and all. He’s the one that fell off; and she let him be after a few unreturned calls. This common ground is as good as any for him to reach out again, she figures.

*rin’s going home today!!! i love him but i need my house back,* she answers.

*wanna celebrate
this is a shameless plea to get tanked btw for old times sake*

She taps her phone a few times to her steering wheel before responding. She really *did* want to just go home and *stay* home and revel in the peace and silence, but some mutual venting after this multi-week ordeal sounds downright cathartic.

*okay, sure. izakaya by me? i’m leaving work so i’ll pick you up.*

She doesn’t bother checking for his confirmation, knowing he’s just that damn desperate.

--

“Shochu.”
“I like it.”

Gou raises her eyebrows in unfettered judgement. “You really are getting old.”

Sousuke frowns. “How is this old?”

“It just screams old. You don’t even do anything to it. It’s just neat, no ice. That’s old.”

He takes a sip even with his frown only deepening around the rim. “It’s mature.”

“Geriatric. No one will sleep with you if you’re mentally sixty.”

“Harlot.”

Gou laughs and reaches over the low table to clink her beer glass to his stubby one in silent truce. “Maybe, but not lately. Live-in brothers sort of kill that momentum.”

Sousuke snorts and rolls his eyes. “Not like you had a lot of luck before him.”

“It’s not my fault men are soundly unsatisfactory on the whole,” she sighs.

“Maybe you just don’t know how to pick’m.”

She sticks her tongue out at him for lack of a better retort, since he’s clearly not wrong. She hasn’t really been able to put her finger on it in her near decade of being active in the dating scene, but no one ever feels right, even when she’s just looking for something casual. The longest relationship she’s had lasting a whopping nine months, and half of those months were lackluster at best until she took the relationship out back and put it out of its misery. It stopped being worth the steady sex, which is typically her benchmark for ending any of her relationships.

“Hold it over me all you want but you’re not in any sort of better situation now, you know,” she decides on saying.

Sousuke shrugs. “True.”

“How are you doing with that, by the way?”

He draws his mouth into a line and flicks a few pings onto his glass. “Haven’t really been able to process it well with everything else going on.”

“Is Makoto that bad? I thought you were just exaggerating.”

“I was. He’s totally harmless. But I don’t know, we’re not really… we’re pretty different. I don’t mind letting him crash but I was hoping he’d’ve lined up a stay with his parents by now. Sort of regretting telling him it was fine until he found something else.”

She hums. “He probably doesn’t know how to break it to his parents.”

“It’s pretty straightforward in my ever-humble opinion,” Sousuke laughs.

“Well don’t tell Rin I told you, he’s embarrassed about it, but they don’t know. They think Rin is his roommate.”

Sousuke gapes. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” she says. “Yet another point of contention.”
“I’d kick his ass,” he states. “I might still anyway. That’s fucked up. It’s been like four years. Rin doesn’t deserve that.”

“It’s complicated, I think.”

“Nothing complicated about a lie that fuckin’ big.”

“Don’t put yourself in the middle of this, Sou,” Gou warns. “Just don’t. It’s not a good idea. They’re both our friends and that side of them isn’t our business.”

“I’m not,” he protests. “But shit.” Sousuke scratches at the back of his head. “Fuck, my parents know and they’re all haughty and in denial about it still. But I told them, at least. They even started to come around and sent Haruka a birthday card this year. They didn’t write anything in it, but still. Watershed moment.”

She shakes her head in dismissal as she drinks from her glass. “Everyone moves at different paces, don’t be so hard on him. That’s not easy to do, and you have no idea how traditionally Makoto was raised or how hard it was for him to admit it to himself just enough to be with Rin. Just because you don’t care what people think about you doesn’t mean he doesn’t.”

Sousuke clicks his tongue dismissively. “I don’t even wanna argue about the implications of a nearly twenty-seven year old man in a committed relationship too afraid to come out to his parents. That’s some deep-seated, self-hating-”

“Enough,” she interrupts. “You’re so unnecessarily mean sometimes.”

“It’s their fuckin’ miserable life. Whatever,” he grunts, dropping it in favor of nursing his shochu.

For all of the sides of him she adores, Gou doesn’t like this side of Sousuke. Bitter, bitchy, and judgemental when he’s stressed. Reactionary and quick to defend himself with too much hostility. It’s caused them a few rifts in the past, it causes him worse rifts with everyone else, and she doesn’t need it causing one now. Enough time goes by without either of them saying anything that Gou considers he won’t budge on this, and it hurts a bit. She finishes her drink and orders another, Sousuke on her heels to do the same.

“I’m sorry,” he finally says. “We don’t need this right now. You’re right, it really isn’t my business.”

She breathes a quiet sigh of relief. “It’s fine.”

“I still miss Haruka,” Sousuke confesses. It’s a start, she thinks. “It’s just winding me up having Makoto around in this context.”

“I get it. Have you talked with him?”

“No. Not really. Quick text to make sure Makoto was with me and that’s it. He has a new life to focus on and shit.” He waves his hand as if it’s inconsequential.

Gou hates the hollow ring to his voice, and wishes he’d just admit that he made a mistake. Everyone seems to think that but him and Haruka, apparently. Gou isn’t one to make assumptions for others, but even now Sousuke’s gaze has fallen somewhere far away over her shoulder, and always seems to when this topic comes up. It’s not the look of someone who wanted things to end this way.

“You should stay in touch—”
“If he really wants a new start this badly, I’m going to give it to him,” Sousuke says sternly. “I refuse to hold someone down like that. I left my door open if he wants to break no-contact but I won’t be the one to go knocking at his.”

“And what about you? Do you want a new start? It doesn’t seem like it.”

“I do,” he argues stubbornly. Loudly. “I don’t want to be with someone who isn’t ready to fucking settle. If he wants to go fuck off and around in Tokyo, if that’s better than- you know what, forget it. I wanted him to do it and he wanted to go, so it doesn’t matter. It’s a great opportunity and he shouldn’t have passed it up because of me. I’m not fucking leaving.”

She instinctively reaches over to cover his hand with hers. “I get what you’re saying. But it’s okay that it still hurts.”

“A little bit, yeah. I thought we were on the same page and then all of a sudden we weren’t. But I really do want to just forget about it now. It’s over and done. He’s probably already dating someone else,” Sousuke says with the barest hint of a smirk he probably doesn’t mean. “He wouldn’t want me to be hung up on him, so I’m not going to be.”

Gou doesn’t let up off of his hand, and gives a quick squeeze. None of that was the impression she got from Haruka during the small window he gave her into his feelings over the phone before cutting her off. But both of them seem really desperate to move on from something they didn’t want to end. “I talked to Haruka-”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I’ll deal with it, okay? You’re not a shrink. Don’t worry about me.”

Shut out again. “Sure,” she concedes, because none of them ever want to hear to what she has to say if it’s something critical, and it’s exhausting by now to force it.

“How have you really been?” he follows up.

Gou sighs into her glass, bringing her other hand back to herself. “Honestly? Like my life isn’t my own. Battered around to the winds of everyone else’s problems. I’ve been better.”

“Take some time off,” Sousuke suggests. “Just get away from this shit for a while.”

She hums. “I mean that’s nice for a few days, but not quite what I mean or want.”

Sousuke leans his chin on his hand as he drinks and speaks. “What do you want?”

It’s a shamelessly loaded, prying question, and she wants to answer it. If someone is actually listening to her, who is she to pass up the opportunity to vent?

“I want a relationship that doesn’t fucking suck. I want Rin to get over himself and I don’t want to ultimately care so much if he does or doesn’t. I want to feel like my team at work can do things without me breathing down their necks. There’s a lot that I think I should have better control over, and I don’t. Where do I even start, though,” she more states than asks.

Sousuke waves their waiter over and orders a third round. “Right here with me, I think.”

--

They go to the beach long after they’re done and sick of talking about anyone else. It’s freezing, making them the only ones there. That’s why they chose it.
She misses this, misses him. The last few years he’s been gone. Still here physically, but gone. He stopped responding to her calls and texts, declined her invites out. Before, after highschool and leading up to that, Gou and Sousuke could tear up the town. They’ve been kicked out of more than half the restaurants here, which for a while proved to be an issue since they started to run out of places to terrorize.

He’d tell her to buck up when some douchebag dumped her because “he was a lumpy dickbag anyway”, she’d tell him to stop being a chickenshit and ask Haruka out. Repeatedly. It took months. Then Haruka dumped him initially for being standoffish, so she had to help them with that too, and teach Sousuke that you don’t have to play hard to get once you already got him.

Gou’s always had Sousuke. He’s always listened to her when no one else could remember to call, given her advice if he could. In a lot of ways he was there how Rin couldn’t be growing up. He took her out for her birthday, or took her out just because. Sometimes he called and said he just had a feeling something was wrong, and he was always right. They’ve stepped in for each other when a guy stared her down too sharply, or when a woman at the bar made a goal out of getting onto his lap.

Who among any of them- even Rin- have seen her cry? Only Sousuke. It was fair, because she held him when he had to take a break from pretending and let life crush him for a moment, too.

And then he sort of pulled away. Settled down. Asked her what sort of curtains look best on beige walls. He didn’t call her at midnight to sing her happy birthday off-key; he was already in bed. He didn’t want to go out on Friday, because he had an early meeting on Monday. Even Haruka could barely get him out of the house, and she kept him company instead, though those outings were always much more somber and quiet.

Haruka asked her questions she didn’t have answers to, and still doesn’t. She doesn’t know what a comfortable relationship should feel like, or what’s normal. She doesn’t know the meaning of complacency and couldn’t relate to Haruka’s description of months gone by that he simply called gray. He asked her if that’s what love really is, and her only answer for him was another round of drinks. She’s never had the luxury of asking herself those questions, much less able to find answers to them for her friends.

Makoto and Rin were shocked that Sousuke wouldn’t uproot to Tokyo with Haruka, the apparent love of his life. That he’d rather stay right where he was instead.

She wasn’t. She might not know a lot about love, but she knows a lot about Sousuke and the sort of lofty value he places on stability.

“I think I was distant,” Sousuke says over the roll of the waves with her curled into his side in the sand after an eternity of silence.

“You think?” she sighs.

“Sorry.”

She finds his hand for the second time that night; there’s a lot of time to make up for. “It’s okay. I missed you though.”

Gou can feel his frown in the slump of his shoulders. “I missed a lot. You, and I missed everything that’s been hurting you because I wasn’t there.”

She looks down and splays his fingers, turns his hand around and back. “I’m sorry about Haruka,
Sousuke. Regardless of the reasons. I don’t like it when you hurt either.”

“I’ll be okay,” he tells the sea, and twines their hands tight again.

Kisumi checks the time on his phone. Fourteen minutes late. He’ll camp this exit into next week if he needs to.

The Mayor’s press secretary has eluded Kisumi for weeks on end and he’s had enough. It’s his damn job to answer questions, and the quieter he is, the more suspicious the Mayor’s going to look. Kisumi would like to believe the Mayor is innocent, but he’s not here to hope. He’s here to report.

Finally at half-past seven, Mr. Matsuda eases the door open to his office with a degree of trepidation, and his face falls when Kisumi’s standing at attention to receive him. “Mr. Shigino,” he sighs.

“Thank you for not forgetting our meeting. Few questions, Mr. Matsuda.” Kisumi clicks over his recorder to run.

“Of course.”

“The allegations against your office-”

“That have been denied.”

“Yes. The allegations of assault-”

“Mr. Shigino, if this is your topic-”

“I have it on good authority that a search was ordered on Mayor Shibata’s personal computer,” Kisumi says quickly.

“Your good authority is misguided.”

Kisumi holds up a finger in pause and fishes out a sheet of paper from his sling bag. “My authority is you, Mr. Matsuda. Is this not your email confirming the relinquishment to IT?”

“Where did you get that,” he frowns.

“More cooperative sources than you.”

Matsuda glares at him. “If you think you can sleep your way-”

“Excuse me,” Kisumi bristles. “This is on the record, Mr. Matsuda, and I’ll ignore that for your sake. Now, the findings of this personal computer search are unavailable. Why is that?”

“Because nothing was found. There is no story here,” Matsuda laughs. “You’re looking for a scandal that doesn’t exist.”

“I’m not looking for anything,” Kisumi shrugs. “I’m following through on an anonymous tip. Merely my 9-to-5.”

“You’re aware this is politics, correct? And that Mayor Shibata has enemies by nature of his even being elected? People will say anything.”
“They will, I agree. In order to keep the facts straight, then, we have to report and dismiss such ugly claims with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, right?”

“I wasn’t aware the Mayor is guilty until proven innocent solely because a disgruntled constituent emails your publication a blatant lie.”

Kisumi heaves a sigh and shuts the recorder off, making sure Matsuda sees him do so. “Shozo- can I call you Shozo? Are we there again yet?”

“No even close.”

He snorts. “I would not be here outside of your office right now if I was only going off a single, solitary disgruntled email. Trust me, I wouldn’t bother. I have other stories I’m working on. There’s plenty going on around here.”

Matsuda takes a step closer to Kisumi and smiles, and intimidation tactic he’s more than used to dealing with by this point. He smiles back and doesn’t flinch when Matsuda claps his hands down on Kisumi’s shoulders. “You’d be better served with the stories that have weight, then.”

Kisumi forces down a full-body shudder at the contact. “And you’d be better served not touching reporters without their permission, considering the nature of the allegations you’re fighting to cover up.”

Matsuda chuckles and drops his hands, but not before he taps a knuckle to Kisumi’s chin. “All the best, Kissy. I always enjoy our chats.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Kisumi calls to his back as he walks away. He waits until Matsuda is long gone before angrily deleting the recording he made, a snarl on his lips as he does so. Then he runs to the bathroom to try and wash his face of that fucking touch.

“Goddammit,” he mutters dejectedly only once back in his car. He knows there’s a story here, and he knows Matsuda has him trapped if he digs too far to find it. Revealing it could very well be the end of his career, and Matsuda is smart enough to ruin every fucking recording that Kisumi takes with a personal jab.

He briefly dated Matsuda when he first moved here, and it’s caused him literally nothing but grief. He didn’t know any better then. Didn’t know he was being silenced long before any scandals came to light. He was the new reporter in town, and the Mayor’s office needed to make sure he could never expose anything without ruining himself, too. So Matsuda singled him out, used him, then dumped him to make sure. Ran away with the evidence, enough to paint a jealous lover scorned should Kisumi ever have the gall to go after the office. His credibility would be destroyed, because that’s the unfair way this shit works. Matsuda and the Mayor go down either way. It’s mutually assured destruction.

Not to mention how fucking embarrassing it is that he let himself be tricked so easily, and how much it’s obliterated his trust in everyone to have been used like that.

He’d hoped his flippant disregard for Matsuda’s blackmail threat would be intimidating enough, but it hasn’t been. Matsuda has stood his ground, and instead it’s Kisumi’s knees that are feeling weaker and weaker the deeper he takes himself into this. He’s too young to be blacklisted from an entire sector of Tokyo. The thought of losing everything he’s worked so hard for again terrifies him.

But Matsuda can never know any of that, or Kisumi may as well pack it up and move across the
country again right now. He’s already blacklisted from the greater Kyoto area.

He drives back to the office with the intent of finishing up another short fluff story on the expansion of one of the major financial firms in the district. He would’ve been finished by the end of the normal workday if Matsuda hadn’t rudely put off their meeting on purpose. But it’s for the better to get some pointless work done, because at least for today, his faith in himself is shaken. He might not be able to pull this off, as much as he wants to be the one to put an end to the unchecked abuse. He was just as conned into silence as the rest of them and he’s come to realize why he’s the only one who will touch the Mayor’s office with anything shorter than ten meter pole.

“Kisumi!”

He looks up from where he’s slotting the key into the office door to see Mika hanging out front of *Active Issue* and chokes on a groan. He’s in no mood. “Mika.”

“What are you doing here so late?”

“Same to you.”

“Issue goes to print tomorrow. It’s Thursday, duh.”

“I had a late meeting.”

She folds her arms and leans on the door jamb. “You still fucking around with the Mayor’s office? Your far-off look of helplessness is tipping me off.”

“It’s an impressive cover-up,” he answers. “But it’s not impenetrable.”

“You’re gonna get torn down if you keep trying, Kisumi,” Mika warns. “Others have before you.”

“I know. I already got fucked by Matsuda, remember? He sure likes to remind me. I’m aware of the consequences but someone needs to try. But hey, they win today. I just want to write my bullshit and go home.”

Mika purses her lips. “Don’t let them get to you like this.”

Kisumi shrugs. “Sometimes I can’t help it.” He moves to end the conversation by turning back to the door, and gets it open before Mika speaks again.

“Hey, so… that guy you knew.”

“Huh?”

“I ended up hiring him. He’s all right. Really inexperienced, though, and way too quiet.”

Kisumi turns again and stares at her for what feels like an eternity. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Nanase? You said you knew him when I was flipping through applications a few months ago?”

It takes another half of an eternity for Kisumi to even recall the memory. He’d said it so passingly he never thought twice about it. “Oh. I totally forgot about that. Yeah, I knew him, is what I said. Haven’t even seen him in ten years. Were you that desperate to hire someone? I didn’t even say if he was any good. He could’ve been my high school bully or something.”

“Eh, if you knew him, couldn’t be that bad, right? You’re a stand up guy.”
“Honestly, Mika,” Kisumi sighs. “I literally only recognized the name. For all I know he’s a drug kingpin on the side now. Are you going to let me go so I can get home before midnight or not?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she huffs. “I’m grabbing you for coffee soon. You really don’t look good, Kisumi.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Just take it easy. And please be careful. Really think about why you’re the only person in that entire office of yours who even thinks there is a scandal, all right? Lots of people in there have thirty-year careers because they wised up fast.”

“Jesus is it really so fucking asinine that I’d want to see this blown open? At least three women have been assaulted and no one gives a shit.”

“Easy,” Mika says. “I’m on your side. But you’re my friend and I don’t want to see them hurt you more than they’ve already managed to do.”

She doesn’t know the half of it. She doesn’t even know the tip of it. “I can figure this out. I just need to be patient.”

“And sleep with one eye open, apparently.”

“Good night, Mika.”

--

It’s one of those things you don’t notice until someone brings it up, and then all of a sudden you see it everywhere as if its mere utterance in your life has made it exist. A word in a book that Kisumi only just learned the definition of yesterday and has now seen in three different places not twenty-four hours later. Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, if he wants to be a pretentious fuck about it. Such is the case with Haruka Nanase: his back as he entered the building at a distance, over the top of Kisumi’s newspaper at lunch as he walked by with a beverage nonethewiser to his audience, and through the frosted glass of The Chiyoda Review as a dark blur shuffling quickly away after closing time.

...He’d like to keep it this way. It’s not like they were ever best friends, and in retrospect, Haru was sort of an asshole for no good reason. He’s a total stranger now to boot. Kisumi’s the guy that disappeared without a trace after high school, and he hasn’t looked back to keep tabs on anyone either. He was hoping it could all stay dormant and in the past in Iwatobi. Yet if he’s learned anything from Kyoto to Matsuda, it’s that nothing stays buried when you want it to.

Still he manages to avoid him for another two weeks, his own work coming up to his ears and keeping him late. A phone call with an IT grunt out of the Mayor’s office revealed his personal computer and tablet were wiped clean when they were confiscated, which raises more flags than it lowers. When Kisumi asked if anyone made a backup, the answer, of course, was no. And that line of evidence died along with another small piece of Kisumi’s resolve.

You don’t just take photos with a fucking tablet, Kisumi reasons. You can, sure, but it’s not anyone’s default camera. A phone is though. In order for Mayor Shibata to have something worth deleting on his computers, he probably also has the same offenses on his phone. By that line of reasoning, it’s stored in a cloud. At least he hopes so. Shibata is the type to keep trophies if he’s taking photos at all; he wouldn’t delete all of the evidence. He’s too much of an egotistical prick.

There’s no good way to get to any of that, though. Not without a warrant. He needs more. One of
the victims to have something tangible, and be willing to testify if it came to it. Stories are great but that’s all they are.

He calls the still-anonymous woman who tipped him off originally a few months ago. He has her number but can’t get any name or description out of her, and she never answers the phone in favor of Kisumi leaving a voicemail. He asks for anything else she has that might incriminate Shibata that she’s been keeping from him, suggesting that he’s going to hit a wall if he can’t get anything else, and hangs up.

Finished for the day and ready to escape, Kisumi gathers his things and slings his bag over his shoulder with his phone clutched in his hand in case his contact calls him back. He’s halfway across the parking lot and under a streetlamp when it goes off again, but it’s a text.

he told me to send this to you if you called me again.

Kisumi’s blood runs cold when he realizes there’s an attachment with the text. He already knows what it is and doesn’t open it.

i need your help, he texts back.

i’m sorry, she answers. i have a good life. a job, kids, a husband. i never wanted to be involved like this. i’ll delete the photo of you he sent me.

“Fuck!” he shouts, raising his arm to slam his phone into the pavement and only stopping himself at the last second. That won’t help. He shoves it in his coat pocket instead and resumes the walk to his car, or plans to anyway before Haru is suddenly in his path.

“Uh.”

“Everything okay?” Haru asks.

“My... dog died.”

“I’m… sorry?”

Kisumi sighs. “I don’t even have one. I don’t know why I said that. It’s nothing. What’s up, Haru?”

Haru shrugs. “I gave up waiting for you to say hi first.”

“Didn’t figure you’d care. It’s just been a long time.”

“I guess it’s nice to know someone around here,” he mutters. “Mika said you put in a good word for me.”

“I didn’t,” Kisumi says irritably. “I said I knew you when she was flipping through the applications and that’s it.”

Haru straightens up and his expression brightens slightly. “Oh... then thanks.”

“What?”

“Thanks for telling me. I was worried I didn’t get the job on my own. It’s been bothering me.”

Kisumi tilts his head in curiosity, now more unfamiliar with the person in front of him than he thought he was, and not immediately repulsed either. Haru’s just as placidly understated as he’s always been, but he really seems to have grown up too. He’s just… an adult. Nothing prodigal or
otherworldly, no underlying current of melodramatic teenaged angst. Just a tall and slender guy in worn plain clothes going home for the day.

“Who are you here with? Makoto?”

Haru shakes his head. “I’m on my own.”

“No shit,” Kisumi remarks. “Not even Rin?”

“On my own,” Haru repeats with a crease on his brow.

“You’ve really changed,” Kisumi continues without much of a filter. He figured the three of them would be in some sort of sheltered, stagnant quasi-codependent weirdo marriage somehow by this point.

Something that can only be Haru’s brand of amusement flashes across his features. “Yeah I’ve heard that tends to happen after high school.”

“Something in the water,” Kisumi jests easily.

Haru snorts. “Water jokes stopped being funny before I graduated.”

Kisumi pats his pockets down with exaggeration. “Well I got nothing. I’m fresh out of current jokes, I’m afraid.”

He blinks vacantly in response before cracking into the thinnest tell of a smile. “Okay that one was decent.”

“...Huh?” Kisumi grunts stupidly until it hits him. “Oh! I didn’t even mean it.”

It earns Kisumi a single syllable of chuckle that he nearly doesn’t hear. “I’ll let it slide.”

Kisumi sighs through his nose and lets his shoulders untense. “Sorry I didn’t say anything. Just never thought we really clicked, I guess.”

“Half my fault. Half yours.”

“Hey, I was nothing but nice.”


“I just wanted you to like me. Kids, you know?” Yet juxtaposed next to his currently very adult situation of too much touching, he feels a lot more guiltier than Haru probably means for him to. “But you’re right. Sorry again, really.”

He hums dismissively. “Not a big deal. Anyway, I just heard you scream in anger and figured it would be a good opportunity to say hi, as your pain has always been my pleasure.”

He must pull a truly pained face then, since Haru laughs openly at the sight, and for the first time in a while Kisumi’s problems are sitting quietly in the foyers of his mind. It’s really been ages since he shared a laugh with anyone. A desperately needed reprieve.

“I knew it,” Kisumi whines. “You really did fuck with me on purpose.”

Haru only raises his eyebrows playfully. “Hope whatever was bothering you works out,” he says, gesturing vaguely to minutes prior with a lazy wave of his hand.
Kisumi doesn’t know how to say *it probably won’t* without alarming him or making it seem like he’s fishing for pity, and settles on a nod. “See you around, I hope.”

“Well we don’t have much of a choice,” Haru says. “But yeah, I take my breaks at ten.”

He turns on that and walks away. Kisumi usually forgets to take a break, but makes a point to set up a recurring ten-o'clock appointment on his calendar before he goes to bed just in case he decides to remember.
Makoto wakes up sad and goes to bed angry— or sometimes it’s the reverse— but now a month out, the time inbetween the two events is getting a lot better. He’s struggling to find the energy to talk to anyone, but then again staying with Sousuke makes it easy to stay quiet as he never pries or even seems all that interested in Makoto’s presence at all. Instead he catches Sousuke in episodes of silence worse than his own, far away from reality for longer than Makoto has the heart to stick around and time.

A mutual break up, Haru told him, and Makoto isn’t sure if Haru lied or if he just doesn’t know how badly he hurt Sousuke.

His stocking job was recently expanded to nearly full time, even though it’s second shift. Just as well for him, since it keeps him out of Sousuke’s space more as he’s typically leaving before Sousuke is getting home. He’s not sure how much longer the other is going to put up with his residency, but he’s considering asking to be allowed to stay indefinitely anyway. The solitude is nothing short of soothing, and moving back in with his parents is a disheartening move to say the least when not even the twins are living there anymore and he’d only have to come up with another lie to explain why Rin isn’t his roommate now. He does his best to not leave any sort of impact that Sousuke might get annoyed with, even putting the bedding away every single day and taking his laundry to a laundromat.

It’s not all as depressing as it seems when he lists it out in bullet points. The last thing he’s wanted lately is companionship if he’s honest. It’s been… tranquil. Not having to worry about a relationship like he had been, unsure of himself every waking moment. Not overthinking Haru and Sousuke, not keeping up pretenses with Gou. No looming dread over the horizon for his future now that there’s no one around to be disappointed in him for not knowing.

He just is. For now it’s what he wants.

There’s a gym affiliated with the area apartments that he’s been taking advantage of when he has time. Despite everything, fitness is ingrained into him and he hasn’t slacked. Sousuke doesn’t use it much, and no one seems to actually look at the photo on the membership card when he flashes it to get in. He lifts it and returns it to a drawer in the kitchen without Sousuke noticing.

Well, until today.

“Eventually they’re gonna notice the disparity in handsomeness between that card and your shaggy mug, Tachibana.”

Makoto startles half-way through tying the laces on his gym shoes at the voice, thinking Sousuke was out for the day since he hasn’t seen him all morning. Actually, it’s Saturday and Makoto hasn’t physically seen him since Tuesday, but still.

“It’s not like you’re using it,” Makoto recovers, twisting to face him. Sousuke quirks an eyebrow.
Makoto notices only after he says it that Sousuke’s in gym clothes too.

“Today I am.”

Makoto huffs hopefully subtly enough that it goes unnoticed, and fishes the card from his pocket to return it to its owner. He’ll have to settle for a jog.

“You can still come with me. They don’t give a shit.”

“Then they’ll know next time.”

Sousuke rolls his eyes. “Get your own damn membership then.”

Makoto finishes with his shoes and stands. “I’ll just run around the neighborhood.”

“Gou wants me to hang out with you,” Sousuke sighs in admittance. “So you have to come.”

“Well I’ll tell her we had a wonderful time,” Makoto replies. He turns to the door, suddenly annoyed and ready to put another four days between himself and Sousuke, but Sousuke doesn’t let him.

“Hey you moody little shit,” he clips, making Makoto turn around again with a frown. “Last I checked, I don’t live with Haruka anymore, and I liked him enough to put up with it. Not the same with you.”

“You don’t need to go out of your way for me,” Makoto says. “I don’t even particularly want you to.”

He scoffs. “You’re a fuckin’ ghost, I forget you’re staying here half the time. If you’re gonna stay, we should at least establish some sort of shitty mutual connection. That’s what Gou said even though with how bitchy you’re being, I don’t really want to go out of my way for you either.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“What a novel concept for everyone,” Sousuke exaggerates with a wide spread of his arms. “You know what? I have a great idea. Come with me. You go all day without fucking lying to me or Gou, and I’ll let you stay. Otherwise, I’m gonna kick your ass out, because you’re pissing me off. Can you handle that? One day?”

Makoto stiffens, not in any way accustomed to Sousuke’s brand of abrasiveness. Rin’s was always superficial snark that was all bark. Sousuke’s is downright invasive and barbed. But none of his fire is reflected in his eyes, only wariness and concern. Makoto certainly doesn’t want any pity from anyone, and Sousuke isn’t the sort to give it. But caution is an interesting response he’s not sure anyone has ever had because of him.

“...I can stay if I go to the gym and don’t lie for you?”

Sousuke groans. “If you want to put it that way, sure. The gym is for Gou. Not lying is for you. I get nothing out of this.” He brushes past Makoto and swings the door open as he spins his keyring on one finger and cradles a water bottle under his arm, then furrows his eyebrows. “Actually, I lose out. Thought I’d finally have a bathroom to myself. Goddammit.”

Makoto allows himself a smile to Sousuke’s back, relieved to be able to stay and oddly amused with the other now that the initial shock of his words is waning. He finds he does appreciate Sousuke’s candor on some level he hasn’t worked through yet.
They jog to the gym; it isn’t far, then plan to go their separate ways once they’re there. The man at the front desk eyes Makoto and the membership card suspiciously, but doesn’t say anything. Sousuke takes up more cardio and Makoto didn’t think he’d find himself in any sort of situation where he’d need to be truthful so soon, but here he is.

“You should do weights before cardio,” he says just as Sousuke turns towards the treadmill. He turns back around and does nothing to keep the indignancy off of his face.

“I run before I lift. Always.”

“It’s better for your form if you have the energy to keep it in check.”

Sousuke glares and continues on. Makoto shrugs and drops it. He wanted honesty, Makoto delivered.

Makoto likes simple exercises. Rin always wanted to try new things and it nearly always ended in a strain somewhere for both of them. Overhead press, squat, bench press, deadlift. That’s usually good enough. The squat rack is chronically occupied with men talking to each other and doing no squatting, and Makoto makes it through the other three exercises while he keeps his eye on the rack, ready to step in and claim it as soon as the two chatterboxes there now leave. But Sousuke cuts across the room and, with a lean on the frame, says something that prompts the two men to nod and step away. Sousuke warms up with the bar and loads his weights next.

And proceeds to do a terrible squat that makes Makoto’s back ache in sympathy.

Makoto slides over quietly, bracing himself on the windowsill just next to him by the backs of his thighs, and folds his arms while Sousuke completes his first set. He racks the bar with a rattle and Makoto clears his throat.

“What?” Sousuke hisses.

“If you’re doing a high-bar squat, you need to fully flex your traps to hold the bar with your muscle, not your bones. Your feet need to be shoulder-width, not so close together so you can push off your heels without toppling.”

“Fuck off,” he growls.

“Haru isn’t good at this,” Makoto says. “So it’s not like anyone has seen you lift in a long time.”

“He wouldn’t even go. It’s irrelevant.”

“Well now’s your chance to fix it. It’s bad form, Sousuke. You’re going to hurt your back.”

Sousuke stands fully straight to face him and frowns. “Are you just fucking with me or getting back at me or something? Seriously.”

“No, I’m not,” Makoto answers. “I wouldn’t want you to be injured. I’m just telling you what I see. I spent a lot of money I didn’t have at a university to be able to learn this, you know.”

Sousuke sighs and turns back towards the bar again. “Fine, so it’s been awhile since I’ve had a form check.” He dips below it and pushes his weight up under the bar.

“Toes a little out. Yup. Shoulder blades together to flex,” Makoto corrects monotonously as Sousuke makes minute adjustments. “Don’t forget to drop your…”
“Ass?”

“... Butt. Yeah.”

Sousuke squats, bar over the middle of his foot all the way down- he at least has that much down- and pushes up solidly from flat feet. He repeats it for a total of ten, and Makoto clicks little things here and there along the way when he slips up. Sousuke racks, takes a minute, and goes for another repetition, and is finished. Makoto doesn’t say anything, just leaves to head down to the treadmills for his own cardio. He could stay and spot him for his other exercises, but doesn’t want to be overbearing. Just the criticism on one alone was probably enough to make Sousuke mindful of whatever else he’s planning on doing. It’s hardly easy to let someone step in and correct you on something you’ve been doing wrong, and Makoto’s definitely pushed his luck for the day.

They meet in the locker room an indeterminate amount of time later- well, seven kilometers for Makoto, but he wasn’t checking for how long that took him to run- Sousuke already showered and zipping up a bag. Makoto jumps in for a quick shower, or had the intent of doing do anyway, but ends up missing Rin, as he tends to do. He spaces out, thinks of Rin’s knack for occasionally crashing Makoto’s gym showers when it could be done discreetly. Making him nervous for all of about two seconds until he could convince him with his mouth and his hands that

“This is the best idea I’ve ever had,” Rin mumbles to his lips.

Makoto smiles and gropes his way up Rin’s chest until he gets to his neck where rivulets of the shower water run down the tendons and pool together where his collarbones meet. He dips his head and runs his tongue up the same path, and Rin gasps. “The best,” he repeats.

“The best?” Makoto laughs. “You’re jumping me in a public shower.” He drops his hands to Rin’s ass and squeezes the bare muscle. “Where I work,” he mouths next to Rin’s ear, making him shudder.

“Yeah, duh- uhn, fuck, Makoto,” Rin moans. “Because it pisses you off.”

Makoto hums, not pissed off at all, but grabs Rin’s lower lip between his teeth like he is. Bites like he’s mad and Rin kisses deep and slow like he’s sorry when he certainly isn’t. He kisses Makoto breathless, until everything is too tight between them and he kisses Makoto just to do it, since there’s no taking it further here. Rin comes over on his lunch break to find him, just to kiss him. Undeterred to find Makoto in the shower between classes, quick to strip down and jump in.

Just to kiss him.

“I love you,” Rin says first.

“You about done?” Sousuke calls, making Makoto jump away from the memories of fingertips along his outline.

He answers a muttered affirmative and finishes scrubbing away whatever this feeling is that’s clinging to his skin.

--

Sousuke makes him go to dinner later that day as well, and Gou meets them at the booth. He admits he didn’t figure Sousuke actually meant they’d be seeing Gou when he asked Makoto not to lie to her too, but now it all makes a bit more sense why he insisted Makoto spend time with him anyway. Gou’s likely had it planned, and if they never bond over anything else, they’ll at least bond over never disappointing Gou.
“Makoto!” Gou greets, yanking him to her from his sit before he has a chance to react. “I’ve missed you tons.”

“Same,” Makoto answers, returning her hug and releasing her to sit back down.

Gou slides in next to Sousuke, and Makoto doesn’t miss him sling his arm along the back of the booth. It makes him uneasy.

“Sou says you’re working nights,” she starts.

“Sort of. The four to midnight. Moving boxes, basically, to answer your next question.”

“Is that what it is?” Sousuke cuts in. “I was way off. Not a vigilante crimefighter,” he mumbles to Gou jokingly. She giggles.

“How could you not know?” she asks.

“He never told me,” Sousuke answers with a shrug. “I assumed the rogue Cat Man.”

Makoto doesn’t humor him and shifts uncomfortably, reaching for the water the waiter swings by to drop off as he does. From his position on this side of the booth, he feels like he’s on the precipice of sort of tortuous inquisition by the two smarmiest people he knows. That’s saying something, considering Haru is his best friend and feeds off of being sarcastic.

“And I assumed no one really cared,” he says instead.

Gou pouts. “Of course I do. I can only put up with it for so long when you fall off the face of the earth though, so I thought I’d be the better friend here and invite you out to prove I do care.”

Makoto looks down at the table self-consciously and twists his fingers together on his lap. “Sorry.”

“Oh it’s fine,” she sighs. “You all do it to me.”

“I’ll be better,” Makoto says quickly, looking back up, and finding he means it. He’s always hated it when Haru closes up and disappears without saying anything, and now he’s doing it. He already knows how shitty it feels to be walled out and he shouldn’t do it to Gou who never does it to any of them, at least. “I promise.”

“That’s what Haru said!” she cries. “And have I heard from in a month? No.”

“That’s probably also my fault,” Makoto mutters fraily. “I need to call him. I don’t think he really knows what’s going on.”

Gou smiles and rests her chin on her hand. “Don’t worry, Makoto.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s all going to work out, you know.”

It’s just so vague; Makoto can’t help but be irked by the blanket optimism. Everything working out means he can reconcile with Rin one day, and he doesn’t see that as even a whisper of a possibility unless they both take time to fix themselves apart. It’s so far away from where he is right now it’s barely on his radar.

Everything working out means he wants to feel something- anything- about Haru being so far away when he still feels nothing. It means he’s either happy stocking boxes for the rest of his life or he
learns to grow up and take the initiative to figure something else out. It’s being able to sit down and work out where he went wrong, but it’s also not letting himself take all the blame like he currently is. And finally everything working out is admitting to himself that the aforementioned thoughts even crossed his mind in the first place as he ignores all of the simple answers to desperately grasp at empty space for more complicated ones to justify his exceptionally early-onset midlife crisis. Though at this rate with the stress wearing him down, it just may be the middle of his life.

Gou narrows her eyes in amusement. “But you think that’s bullshit, right?”

Sousuke, quiet to observe the conversation, settles a little more into the booth with an expectant raise of his brow. Waiting for the truth.

“It is,” Makoto declares. “It’s bullshit.” Things don’t work out. They’re worked on. That much he’s learned.

She laughs and Sousuke shrugs at him in misunderstanding, indicating he has no idea where she’s going with it either. “You’re right. It is. But you still shouldn’t worry, that much is true.”

He’s saved from fishing for explanation by the waiter, who returns to take their order. None of them have looked at a menu but Makoto has been here a few times with Haru and orders a simple chicken udon as he usually does while Gou and Sousuke get pork.

There’s one thing they all have in common, and it’s the elephant sitting on the table going unrecognized: Rin. The conversation dies after Gou’s weird little tangent, and Makoto wants to ask if he’s all right, where did he go, what is he doing? But the questions pool weighted with fear in his core, and don’t even make it to his throat. He knows Gou and Sousuke have been seeing him, talking to him. He doesn’t want to find out that Rin isn’t interested in him. There’s a surprising amount of shit he’s finding he can take, but being forgotten by Rin, knowing he’s moved on and seeing someone else or simply not thinking about Makoto at all- that would snuff out the small, struggling flame he’s shielding and protecting with everything that he has.

He’ll continue to go to bed angry and wake up sad or let it fall in reverse as long as he needs to if it means he can hang onto it. But he’s not ready yet to know if Rin’s forgotten about him.

“So,” Sousuke sighs, “none of us are talking to Haruka. No one’s allowed to talk about Rin-”

“All right genius, you pick a topic,” Sousuke barks. “And don’t make boring small talk about work or you can’t live with me.”

“You can’t just add stipulations throughout the day,” Makoto pouts, raising his head.

“I can and I am.”

“If you really want to live with Sou, offer to do the dishes,” Gou half-whispers. “He hates it.”

Sousuke reaches cross-body to tap her on the shoulder. “Hey, that’s my trump card.”

She elbows him back. “Hey, you’re being a prick. Let him stay.”
Makoto snorts and sits up again. This actually might be the most harmless and easy-going he’s ever seen Sousuke and he lets himself loosen up a little as long as Gou’s there to keep him subdued. “I’ll earn my place, not bribe him.”

“A respectable person,” Sousuke says to Gou. “Unlike some underhanded con artists I know.”

“Oh please, Sousuke, if I wanted you to agree to something I’d just pull my shirt down and hike my skirt up. No conning necessary.”

Makoto watches that casual arm from before go stiff and awkwardly slide quietly away while Sousuke rolls his eyes nonchalantly. There’s a spark of curiosity in the back of his mind that he can’t ignore, even though it’s really none of his business. Something seems… off. Even if discussing Rin is off-limits, everything else about this meeting feels forced, including Gou and Sousuke’s interactions. They are usually comfortable with each other. Very comfortable with each other, Haru grumbled once, in a rare display of the sort of jealousy he can be prone to.

He’s not as ashamed of his blatant manipulation of the situation as he really, really should be when he speaks next. If Sousuke’s planning on moving on this quickly, Makoto would like a better handling of it. “Are you seeing anyone, Gou?” he asks lightly. “Speaking of, and all.”

She huffs. “Don’t you start. And no, I’m not, because everyone sucks.”

He laughs. “Even us?”

“Are you kidding me? Especially all of you.”

“Then have me and Sousuke take you out,” he offers. “We can help you screen.”

“Two terrifyingly wide and tall men on either side of me to weed out losers through sheer weight of intimidation alone?” She hums, and Sousuke actually glares at him while Gou stares forward in thought. “Actually… let’s do that.”

“I’m busy,” Sousuke says immediately.

Gou frowns over to him. “Aww, come on. Just Makoto isn’t effective at all.”

“Just me?”

“No one’s threatened by you,” she elaborates. “Him though. Look at him.”

Sousuke’s glare hasn’t faltered and he goes ahead and makes it worse with a scowl when Gou doesn’t let up.

“See? Horrifying.”

“Gou-”

“Take me out, Sousuke,” she says in what Makoto has only ever been able to identify as a distinctly Matsuoka tone; the tone either of them will use when they’re dead serious about something and don’t want to argue about it anymore. It works on Makoto ninety-five percent of the time, but from what he’s seen, it works on Sousuke one-hundred percent of the time, and this is sort of the outcome Makoto was hoping for.

But instead of giving in he abruptly pulls away and storms out of the restaurant so quickly that Makoto and Gou only gape after him.
“What’s with him?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Makoto answers. “Let me talk to him.”

“No, I should-”

“He seems pretty angry,” Makoto says nervously, standing for himself. “Just let me put up with it first. I’ll be back.” Because Makoto already knows it’s him Sousuke’s angry at, not her, but he doesn’t know him well enough to immediately understand what set him off.

He leaves the restaurant and doesn’t see him, so goes left in the direction of Sousuke’s apartment only to be pulled by his arm off to the side of the street, obscured from most traffic by a standing advertisement and a few trees. Sousuke pushes him towards the wall of the building near them.

“What the _fuck_ are you doing?” he nearly shouts, making Makoto’s stomach twist. He flattens against the mortar behind him to get farther away.

“I thought-”

He steps closer. “Do not think _anything_ about me.”

“Do you like her?” Makoto asks quickly.

Sousuke still looks like he wants to invert Makoto’s entire being, but he stalls on his next step. “What?” he says thickly and threateningly.

Makoto puts his hands up disarmingly in front of himself. “I just noticed it was different.”

Sousuke peers down coldly at his hands and steps again, until he’s pressing himself against Makoto’s palms. “Is it,” he states. Way too close.

“Why don’t you take a step back?” Makoto suggests calmly, not pausing to swallow down the sudden gravel to his voice, but not making a move to push Sousuke away and exacerbate the situation either. “And then we can talk.”

Sousuke stays still for another moment then lets his gaze drop along with his shoulders, and gives Makoto distance with two steps back.

“I don’t know what the _fuck_ I did to you to want to make you go and egg her on like that,” he says surprisingly vulnerably. “Just... what the _fuck_?”

“You have _feelings_ for her already?”

Sousuke shakes his head. “It isn’t your damn business.”

“It is. Haru’s my best friend and I live with you now. This is _not_ a secret I want to be made to hold and I won’t lie to Haru if you act on this.”

“It _definitely_ isn’t your business to tell Haruka,” he growls. “You are _not_ my keeper and you do _not_ live with me. Not fuckin’ yet.”

“You can’t ask me to not lie then turn around and do this.”

He’s quiet as he looks Makoto up and down, looking for any sort of snag in his demeanor that reveals Makoto is tricking him somehow into something. But Makoto stays tall. “Fine. I don’t know,” Sousuke says quietly. “I want to see where it goes with her. I _do_ know I still love him. But
he isn’t coming back, is he? So don’t get all fucking righteous on me, Tachibana.”

“I only want to follow the rules you put down. You want to move on from Haru, that’s fine, but diving straight into another relationship is reckless. It’s a rebound. Wanting to lie about it is even worse. How do you think Haru will feel?”

Sousuke furrows his eyebrows and Makoto could swear he has the ability to darken his face with fury alone. If he was only being intimidating before, he definitely looks like he wants to rip Makoto apart now. But he doesn’t get any closer. Instead Sousuke growls in what rings as familiar to Makoto as hopeless, eternal frustration, and turns to kick the trashbin between two trees.

“I never wanted to have to learn how to get over Haruka! But god for-fucking-bid someone ever felt the same about me, right?! Fuck him!”

Makoto slumps his edge away, the same tired sadness creeping back in that he can’t shake, even heavier now than it’s been. “Why did you make him think you were okay with this if you weren’t? What are you doing, Sousuke?”

Sousuke glowers briefly at his intrusive questioning, but can’t hold it for long. He’s too tired, too done. “I thought I found someone, finally, who might actually not take the first out they got without question,” he answers. “I was wrong, huh? So yeah, I want to forget him. As fast as I can. Gou’s here. She’s not going anywhere and she knows me. Is that really so bad?!”

Makoto’s heart aches for him, and also for the first time in this situation it aches for Haru. Sousuke has no idea what he did either, what his silence looked like to Haru, what it spoke in volumes for. Neither of them know- he realizes, not just Haru- and it cost them their relationship.

“Sousuke,” he utters with trepidation, “you made a mistake-”

“Shut the fuck up, Makoto,” Sousuke says quickly, a warning Makoto doesn’t heed.

“Plea-“

“He didn’t want me!”

“He does-“

“You think I want to hear this from you?!” he bellows, making a passerby jump and walk faster. “Because you’re a fucking scholar on this subject, aren’t you?! You and Rin are the goddamned patron saints of a stable, loving relationship, right? Give me a fucking break. I’ll do what I want and you thinking you have any sort of clout to pass judgement or give advice on this is a fucking joke.”

“I’m… I’m sorry,” Makoto apologizes quietly, and hates how small he sounds. How effortlessly Sousuke broke him down like the fragile twig he’s been after thinking he finally might be doing better.

Sousuke’s face clears up when he takes stock of Makato’s reaction, and he takes an additional step back in apparent shock of himself and runs an unsteady hand through his hair. “That was… so fucked up of me to say,” he laughs incredulously. “Holy shit. I- I didn’t mean that Makoto- not like that-”

Makoto suddenly can’t put with this anymore, and feels like he’s dangerously close to shutting down and walking away and not going back to wherever home is now. He needs to be stronger than that. So he stands straight, cutting Sousuke off with his body language, and forces himself to
stay planted. Sousuke’s right. What does he know about what others want? He obviously got Rin wrong, and hasn’t he been just as in the dark to Haru’s motivations as everyone else?

“Gou’s going to wonder where we are.”

“Makoto,” Sousuke calls.

“We can’t get out of taking her out, so get yourself together and meet us inside. You’ll be out and social, it’ll be a good chance to make a move.”

As he walks away and leaves him behind, he doesn’t find he’s angry at all, even if he doesn’t see a lot of restful sleep in his future over it. He’s wounded by Sousuke, and maybe twice shy going forward, but only wounded in the way a cornered dog might’ve bit him in fear if he tried to reach out to it.

The only thought he has as he rejoins Gou at the table with a disarming smile and an off-line about how Sousuke misinterpreted something, is that it’s the most backwards, fucked up way Makoto’s ever made a friend.

Makoto loses track of Sousuke and Gou later that night, and gets a text asking him not to wait up. He takes himself to the bar and orders a long overdue drink.

---

Rin’s always liked fashion. Perhaps on the down low, as it isn’t anything that ever interested literally anyone else he knows. He keeps it to himself and does his best to let the commentary about what he puts on his body roll off his shoulders, hard as it is to do sometimes when Sousuke and Haru can make a fucking revolving roast out of it.

Briefly, at college in Sydney, he was featured to model swimwear in the annual university sports issue. A large American publication apparently did something similar and this was just a fun rip-off of the same concept for the college sport fundraising. He liked the line of swimsuits, liked his body, and thought it might be fun.

It was a surprisingly stifling, confidence-shaking experience and he swore he’d never do it again until he was roped into a calendar for the same sort of thing through team peer pressure, and then he swore doubly: never again. He eventually forced Makoto to throw away the copy of the calendar Rin mailed him. Rin’s still not exactly sure he ever did. Makoto really loved it, and it was April in his Tokyo shoebox apartment for nearly an entire year before Rin cracked and begged him to destroy it.

In hindsight, considering they were only sort-of dating at the time, it may’ve been the most painfully obvious display of mutual romantic and sexual attraction the world has ever known and Sousuke’s raised eyebrow over the entire affair makes a lot more sense now.

Well in any case if he did keep it, he’s likely finally tossed it by now. Maybe lit it on fire too, and only pissed on it to put it out.

He should probably keep all that to himself right now.

“My mother is a seamstress, so I grew up around it. She tailored all of our clothes and taught me when she could sit me down long enough to show me anything.” He pauses to smile sheepishly. “But I was an athlete and didn’t know how to sit still, so I admit I didn’t learn everything I could.”
His interviewer smiles. "Swimmer, right?"

Rin stares until it’s probably rude, racking his brain over for when he even mentioned that to this man, and concludes he never did. “Uh, yeah, I was but uh-”

“Ayumi and I go way back. As soon as you mentioned her I realized you were the same Matsuoka. She never had a lot to talk about if it wasn’t about her swimmer son or her ambitious daughter.”

It makes him smile back at ease. “I guess you all would know each other in a place like Iwatobi.”

He nods. “Well it was certainly nice to meet you finally. You’d be a good fit here, I think, if you can put your time into floor sales and do well we can look at expanding your options in the industry down the road.”

He tries not to look disheartened, and just feel it instead. Sales again. “I’m looking forward to the opportunity.”

“I’ll discuss it with the owner and call you by the end of the week.”

Rin thanks him for his time, making sure he gets his business card on his way out. He got an offer on the apartment much sooner than he thought he would, and now some college kid is living out the lease for him and at least plans on taking it over for a year after that too getting Rin off the hook entirely, which after so much bullshit was a welcome reprieve of good news.

He takes the long way home, not having anything better to do with his time in this employment lull, and pauses to stare longingly into the athletic center he passes. As soon as he can afford the membership, he’s going to swim until he passes out and there better be a lifeguard around to get him from the bottom of the pool so he can go again.

His mother asked him to pick up dinner, so he stops by the store too. She was more than happy to have someone around again to help her with chores and errands. He’s still on the fence himself if it’s infuriating to be in this position again or comforting, but ultimately the free room and board is worth anything.

“I’m home,” he calls after putting groceries away in case his mother is around, but is greeted with silence. She’s developed quite the life since he and Gou left, working and going out with friends in her spare time. In the few weeks he’s been home, he’s really barely seen her at all. Honestly he’s felt isolated and lonely since moving back in, and is really itching to get back to work and the pool and the gym for at least the most superficial of social interactions to carry him through his days.

Rin misses being greeted. Misses kisses of hello that walked him back to the wall and held him there as he recounted all the details of his day in short gasps and giggles.

He pulls out his phone from an arbitrarily chosen spot on the floor he’s fallen on to answer Sousuke’s let me know how it goes from a few hours prior. The text embargo he set on Rin has been lifted, thankfully, and it’s nice to have Sousuke back in this capacity. In hindsight he really did text his friend way too much.

think it went well, but offering me floor sales. ugh.

His response is quick; sucks dude.

i’ll live with it. at least i have the experience.
how’s makoto?
stop. Sousuke replies simply.

Rin rolls his eyes. *fine. how are you?*

*sore.*

*this can mean so much...*

*from the gym. dick. i hate you.*

*makoto making you go?*

*stop.*

He frowns and sighs through his nose. *we should hang out.*

*my gym doesn’t have a pool. the one by you do*

He wonders if it’s a question or a poorly worded statement. Sousuke was never much for punctuation.

*yeah and it calls to me. (=A=)’’’*

*stop.*

*ok but i’m serious.*

*well you know im off weekends. sunday evening. to avoid people.*

*it’s a date.*

*stop.*

Rin laughs to himself and cuts it off there before Sousuke starts ignoring him completely. It’s usually a “three stops and you’re out” policy and he’s pushed it to four. He cranes his head back from the floor to take another look around the house in case anyone magically materialized while he was distracted, and resigns himself to the stale silence he already knows is waiting for him.

--

*Makoto,*

*I We Can we You shouldn’t have*

*I get why*

*I wanted to*

*Why did you*

--

Writing letters used to come much easier to him than this. For a while anyway, until he was too depressed as a kid to bother. He’s been sitting at the desk in his room for an hour and while the characters making up Makoto’s name are nicely written and weighty, the rest of the nonsense scribbling is disheartening. He doesn’t know what he wants to say at all, or really if he should even be doing this.
Maybe the real problem is that hasn’t convinced himself that this separation isn’t for the better, and that he just wants to believe it isn’t. His entire life is all his again. He can do anything. Some days he wakes up and the thought invigorates him. Other days it keeps him in bed paralyzed with even more compounding regret. Either way he’s finding himself drawn to pen and paper nearly every day to write something to Makoto, anything, and is never able to pin down the words that are waiting to be found.

He crumples up his latest attempt into a tight ball and banks it into his wastebasket in favor of getting his gym bag together. Swimming with Sousuke. Maybe he’ll never be a professional swimmer again, but he will always want to swim with his friends.

Rin didn’t make it. He swam and trained and it wasn’t enough, like it wasn’t the first time. The competition at that level is so cut-throat, so ruthless. His entire life could be measured in hundredths of seconds, and hundredths of seconds got him booted off the first string. Then the second string.

He’d be lying if he said Haru and Sousuke’s rejection of swimming on the world stage didn’t factor into his decision to just fucking quit. But it wasn’t the sort of weighty loneliness everyone might expect it to be. The reality of why he couldn’t do it alone is depressing, more depressing than a dramatic tragedy of crippling abandonment.

It’s not what anyone wants to hear, but Rin simply didn’t want to pick himself up again. It was a chore. His big secret is that there isn’t much of one. One day he woke up and the blare of his alarm clock sounded too much like the chirp of a stopwatch, and he panicked. Terror gripped him so hard he thought he was having a heart attack. He was late to morning practice by the time he got a hold of himself, then was scolded for it despite his explanation.

The windfall from such a silly slip knocked him over and he’s still finding his balance again. He realized after that day he was only doing it to fulfill the image of himself he forced down everyone’s throats, an image he no longer saw himself stepping into. It was an image that suffocated him and his dreams of dazzling gold blinded him until it hurt.

That’s the cold hard truth of it he’s put all of his energy into keeping a secret. He made his dream his fucking identity. Who is he without it? Just a sad fuck up who gave up? That’s never been him. No one would ever call Rin a quitter and that’s exactly what he is. Rin is no one without his swimming. It’s too bad he didn’t realize that until it was too late to go back and do it anyway, so at least he was someone to everyone else even if it wasn’t everything to him. Rin knows enough about himself to accept he’d make himself miserable before admitting defeat.

But a race with Sousuke helps him keep it all in the past for a little bit, and it’s been months since he’s been able to.

Rin jogs to the athletic center so he’s warmed up by the time he gets there. It’s a small pool, he realizes with disappointment once he’s finally inside and pays the one-time use fee. Four lanes wide and definitely not regulation length by any means. He’s stupid for thinking it could be robust in the first place; this is Iwatobi.

Sousuke emerges from the locker room just as Rin is walking towards it to put his things away. He flashes his friend a grin, and Sousuke slugs him lightly on the shoulder as they pass without greeting. Rin would never admit it to Sousuke, who would find it dramatic to say, but he’s beyond thankful that they can still have this even if Makoto is staying with him. It’s the sort of thing that could’ve made their friendship suffer, but they both chose to rise above it without complaint or argument.
Knowing Makoto, he’s probably barely making himself seen. Sousuke probably doesn’t talk to him, and before long Makoto will likely feel too guilty to stay. It’s temporary anyway and shouldn’t have any hold on his relationship with Sousuke even if Makoto did end up friends with him.

“Excuse me,” a voice carries behind Rin.

He steps out of the way so the person can get to his locker as he shuts his own, having stripped down to the suit he jogged over in, and Rin catches him out of the corner of his eye even if it isn’t polite to do so, because something just registers as attractive to Rin before his mind is even able to process the image. And damned if he isn’t; tanned skin with messy rust-brown hair, dark, dark eyes and a square jaw on top of a lean frame. He matches Rin’s gaze and breaks Rin’s resolve, putting him on a path out of the locker room to find Sousuke. He’s here to swim.

Sousuke’s already swimming warm-up laps once Rin hits the deck, so Rin slots into the lane next to him and pushes off the block to swim one as well. They emerge on the same side eventually, and Sousuke hoists himself out of the water onto the block in silent request for a race.

“Lane’s are too short,” he grunts as Rin steps onto his block.

“I know,” Rin sighs. “All we got with ISCR shut down now.”

“Fly?”

“Free.”

“Sure. Four laps, however the fuck long that is here.”

Rin snorts and takes his mark, pulling his goggles back down. Sousuke mirrors him, and cranes his head up at the white clock on the wall. “Top of the minute. Ready. Set.”

Rin’s halfway down the lane by the time the minute turns over, Sousuke right next to him detonating the surface of the water on every stroke. The familiar forward momentum bursts from Rin’s chest, like he’s being pulled along on a string, core nearly ahead of his limbs and mind reaching for the wall long before the first turn.

He pulls ahead of Sousuke on the first return enough that he’s flipped and pushing off to go back again before Sousuke’s even flipped himself. Of course he can win, he always does, but Sousuke never feels like he’s racing you. He feels like he’s hunting you. And even if Rin knows he wins by default, the fight-or-flight response Sousuke triggers is exhilarating and challenging to wield effectively. Swimming against Sousuke is like flipping the lights as a kid and running up the stairs before the monsters can grab you and pull you down.

On the final push he’s lost track of Sousuke, which breaks his focus, snaps the line. How? There’s too much movement for him to see around himself, so he keeps going straight, kicks and pulls, and slaps the wall. Rin gasps for air, and Sousuke is next to him doing the same, on the same beat.

“Me?” Rin pants.

“Dunno,” Sousuke answers.

“Was him.”

Sousuke and Rin look up to the stranger from the locker room peering down at them both. He’s gesturing to Sousuke.
Rin looks between them both. “Sou-you won?”

“... Guess so.”

“You sure?” Rin asks the man.

“Is it that damn surprising?” Sousuke grumbles as the man nods again.

“Well, shit, sort of! When was the last time?” Rin laughs.

Sousuke rolls his eyes and disappears for a quick dunk. The man shrugs but grins at Rin. Now that he’s looking at him, man hardly feels appropriate. He can’t be older than university age, and every year Rin grows is another year he sets the man title back on others. Young man, maybe. Twenty. Making Rin’s attraction to him feel... not good.

“Again?” Sousuke asks.

Rin quickly agrees, the young man volunteering to call it. The young man also raking his eyes down Rin’s body too when he hops onto the block. Sousuke shakes his head and sighs, as the guy is hardly being subtle, but he says nothing.

“Go!”

Rin loses again, switches to the fly.

And loses once more.

“Off day?” Sousuke asks, a lick of concern on the tail end.

Rin scoffs, irritated by this point. “You’re just getting lucky.”

Sousuke’s face drops to a dark scowl. “Welcome to being a normal fucking person. Asshole.”

“Hey-”

“Don’t talk down to me like that. We train the same now. I’m gonna win sometimes.”

Heat rushes to his cheeks and he barely bites his tongue in time to keep his retort behind his lips. “You’re right. I think I’m just going to swim a few laps on my own now, though.”

“Jeez,” Sousuke groans.

“Yeah I know. Call me a sore loser.” Rin grins disarmingly and takes off from the wall to kill the discussion. He is bitter. He’s always been able to depend on his swimming with friends for a confidence boost, always been able to beat Sousuke who never minded losing, and was always up for a rematch. The hot stranger has retreated to his own lane; a backstroke swimmer because of course he is.

Rin swims a few languid laps while Sousuke thrashes and and attacks in his own lane. Overall they swim for about an hour, and Sousuke hops out of the pool abruptly to check his phone on the bench.

“I gotta get going,” he calls over to Rin. “Have other plans.”

“Sure,” Rin answers. “Next weekend?”
“Yeah if you want. Don’t cry if I win, though,” he mocks. Rin inwardly bristles, but to Sousuke he only stares. Sousuke snorts and turns on his heel and walks towards the locker room.

Rin takes the opportunity to check in on his stranger, who is watching him curiously. He smiles— not just any smile, in Rin’s opinion— and disappears down his lane. Rin blows bubbles over the top of the surface— when did he get so desperate?

Sousuke walks by some ten minutes later, nodding to Rin in farewell. Rin waves him away, and continues his laps. When he decides he’s done about a half-hour later, the pool is empty. Hot stranger is gone, Sousuke is gone, and Rin is still angry.

He’s always won. Always been better. All throughout adulthood. Now Sousuke laughs off his victories?

Rin growls and throws a fist into the water. He all but storms into the locker room for a shower afterwards, feeling low. In another life, he’d play coy to the hot stranger sitting on a bench, fiddling on his phone. In another life it would be a game to pretend the young man wasn’t waiting for Rin, and Rin alone.

But that isn’t where he’s at.

“Don’t you have homework to do?” he asks him on a mutter, clicking his padlock over-36-10-59- and dragging his gym bag down to the bench.

“Infantilize me all you want, I’ve seen you stare.”

Rin scowls at the metal. “You’ve been anything but subtle.”

“So you picked up on it. Was worried you were just that dense.”

Rin turns to disapprove, but the stranger is already on him, hands on Rin’s hips, lips at his neck. One of his favorite things is a good grind in swim skins; an art he only perfected way later than he should’ve, and the hips rollings against his own are reminiscent of his initial discovery. A half-hard erection on his own, wet skin allowing the stranger to slide along the length of Rin’s torso and feel every curve and edge. Rin wants to kick himself for burying his fingers into the stranger’s hair, pulling his head forcefully to his own and locking their lips together because they’ve been teasing Rin all evening, from his perspective.

The stranger kisses him deep and hot, leading Rin’s tongue to his own and nipping at his lips, tugging on the edge of his swimsuit until Rin lets himself be led away to one of the shower stalls. The clink of the metal rings supporting the curtain trickles behind him, obscuring them from view, and the stranger turns the shower head on. Rin shudders when it’s initially cold, gasps when he’s pushed to the wall, and groans when he’s pressed all over again. Fuck, he’s turned on, and maybe hasn’t thought about how long it’s been since he’s got off, either.

Rin centers his hands on the other’s chest and shoves, pushing him to the other side. He kisses him sloppily— what he knows rings as slutty, even— and trails his eager mouth down his throat, his sternum, his stomach. He pulls his swim skins down and has a hand around the base of this fucking no-name’s shaft way before he thinks this is a bad idea, pulling his tongue along the tip and down, lips sucking and wet. The guy pulls his hair, bucking like the inexperienced college kid he is, overwhelmed with sensation, and Rin’s just honestly relieved to stroke himself off while feeling the pleasure of someone else at his command.

The bucking into Rin’s mouth is only slowed by the fist at the base, as Rin’s in no giving mood to
deepthroat some goddamned kid he doesn’t know. But he moans around the cock just the same- the heavy weight on his tongue, the salt at the back of his throat, fingers twisting tightly in his hair--triggering nothing but pleasure in him from years of anticipation and conditioning.

The kid sighs; you’re so fucking gorgeous- and Rin wants to laugh, because it’s so cheesy, so terrible, and still makes him get himself off faster, makes him suck the nobody down more eagerly. He’s moaning so loudly for Rin, this man he doesn’t know, using two hands now to thrust into Rin’s mouth. A cursory glance sees the muscles of his stomach rippling and contorting, ready to release.

The guy finishes on a shout, pushes Rin away, tags his chest and pulls Rin up from his knees to spin him around and finish him off roughly. So roughly. Rin prays to the ceiling and lets the grip squeeze too tight, chafe hard with the water hitting him, killing the glide. It’s what he deserves, it’s what he wants. To come hard and dirty, and he turns his head to catch his stuttered cry on the other’s shoulder when he does.

The stranger lets him go slowly- his only tender act of the day, really. Rin turns to kiss him and ride out the last vestiges of his pleasure, and finally steps back, clouds parting in his mind and revealing the wasteland underneath.

“I knew you’d be fun,” the guy muses, dragging two fingers over Rin’s collar bone through a mixture of his mess and the gym shower water. The texture of it- the slick, thick, pull- makes him choke on a grimace. “Nice to meet you.”

The natural response is see you around or you too, but Rin just watches him leave, pulling the curtain shut behind him. He looks down at the crosshairs dug into his knees from the grout of the shower, tastes the skin of someone else on every millimeter of his tongue, holds his breath until the water washes the staining on his chest away and down the drain.

Then unbidden falls a sob, quiet and hitching. A small spider crack in a dam he’s been building feverently for weeks. It’s a bad hangover, everything he just did, and no matter how many times he rinses under the flow of the showerhead, it’s not enough.

He knew he’d hate and regret this and did it anyway. He’s left alone to the cold tile and the trickle of low-pressure water that does nothing to make him feel warm.

He starts to walk home with his bag on his shoulder, but pauses within a few steps. The house will be empty. No one is there to comfort him, and if he tries to write a letter to Makoto right now, he knows that once again he’ll only make it as far as the characters of his name.

After fucking up that hard, he still doesn’t know what to write.

He instead turns in the direction of Gou’s, spaced out the entire way and it’s no short walk. At least she can yell at him and tell him what he needs to hear. He can’t chance dumping this on Sousuke. They were sort of tense today anyway, and Makoto could find out. Rin’s afraid of the concept as if he’s cheated, even if it isn’t true.

Rin gets his spare key to her place out as he climbs the stairs, guilty that he didn’t call ahead but he doesn’t know what else to do with himself and would only be lost if she turned him down. He knocks as a courtesy first, but she doesn’t answer, and he resolves to wait for her until she gets home.

There’s bile in his throat as he turns the door handle, his stomach has been churning with guilt for so long he’s half considering beelining for her bathroom to throw up or at least take another
Before he can do anything though he’s locking eyes with his sister, who’s staring at him in blanched horror over the back of her couch, arms around the neck of someone else who’s blessedly obscuring the rest of her from view. Hair loose, cheeks flushed, shoulders bare to further fill in the blanks of what’s going on on the other side of the furniture. Rin backs up, blindly reaching behind himself for the door, really this is the last thing he ever needed to see-

Then her partner shifts, and cranes his head back as he speaks. “Gou what’s- *Rin?!”

“What the *fuck?!” Rin bellows unchecked, dropping his things to the floor to cross the room and carry out his fresh, new objective of drilling his fist into Sousuke’s jaw.
“Get out of here!” Gou shrieks, clambering backwards, reaching for whatever to cover herself. Sousuke curses under his breath and springs to a stand as he refastens his pants, only narrowly avoiding Rin’s lunge at him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Rin screams, thrashing out, making Sousuke hop back and to the side on the defensive. “You fucking fucker you piece of shit!”

“Rin!” Gou yells, clinging to a fucking couch cushion as she approaches him and pulls at him by his elbow with one hand. Rin ignores her, swiping back, almost hitting her even and Sousuke is quickly losing his patience for this bullshit.

“Calm down!” he shouts back.

Rin snarls and swings again. “Fuck you!”

Sousuke gets his footing with one heel on the wall and catches Rin’s next fist in his hand, and darts his other arm down to snatch the wrist of the other fist before Rin tries to throw that too. “I said calm down.”

“I’ll kick the shit out of you,” Rin growls.

“For what?!” Sousuke yells, squeezing Rin’s wrists in anger. “For fucking what, exactly?!”

“For fucking her!”

“You asshole!” Gou cries behind him, rolling her t-shirt down over the shorts she also managed to find. She reaches out and yanks Rin back by his shoulders from Sousuke’s grip. Rin faces her with a face full of contempt and it’s everything Sousuke has not to lay him out then and there for looking at her like that. “What is your problem?! This is my house!”

Rin points at Sousuke like he’s some sort of goddamned dog. “You’re fucking him? My best friend?!”

“I can do what I want, you fucking psycho!” Gou argues.

“You don’t do that to me! Neither of you can do that to me! This is fucked up!”

“Hey you selfish bastard,” Sousuke cuts in coldly. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Rin whips to him. “Get fucked, Sou.”

Gou takes a step towards Rin, a fury on her face that makes Rin take notice and step back. “You barge in here, you have no respect for my space- my life!”

“That’s a lie!”

“You attack him- you attack your best friend- you nearly hit me, all because you feel uncomfortable with our choices? Nothing I do, or will ever do, needs your goddamn permission! This isn’t about you and your fucked up life! I don’t need your fucking protection, I don’t need your shit advice, and I certainly don’t need you!”

Rin drops his gaze to the ground along with his shoulders. “Come on, Gou.”
She shakes her head and steels her voice. “No. Get out. I don’t want to see you again until you grow the fuck up. I’m sick of it, Rin. All you do is use me. This is it, really. I’m done. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Gou, please,” Rin pleads, and Sousuke feels a little sorry for him the way his eyes glass over. But this isn’t his fight.

“Leave. Put your key on the counter.” She turns and walks away down her hallway, slamming the bedroom door.

Sousuke shuffles uneasily on his feet, the most obvious fly on the wall in the world. Rin stands without flinching another dead-silent moment and it’s Sousuke who needs out of this situation now. “Hey, look. Rin, I should’ve told you.”

“It’s fine,” Rin says brittly. “I’m sorry I flew off the handle, I-” He shakes his head and pinches at the inside corners of his eyes. After a few deep breaths, he stands straight again and shakes his head of his thoughts. “Forget it. See you around.”

Sousuke doesn’t know what else to say, and watches Rin walk out quickly, dropping the key as he was told to. He doesn’t pay it any more attention for now, pledging to himself to not let Rin flounder alone for too long, but right now he needs to make sure Gou’s all right. Rin, Makoto, now Gou. This balancing act is quickly becoming burdensome.

He knocks softly on the door to her bedroom, and waits for her quiet agreement to enter. When he does she laughs and shakes her head from where she’s sitting on her bed, leaning on the wall with her knees up. “How is it you know how to knock and wait and he doesn’t?”

“It’s Rin,” Sousuke sighs. “Can I sit?”

She pats the spot next to her and he takes it, frowning as he leans his bare back against the cold wall.

“Was I too hard on him?”

“Not if that’s how you felt.”

“It is.”

He hums. “You would’ve said it eventually anyway then. I’ll talk to him and make sure he’s all right.”

“I’m sorry, Sou,” she groans. “First Makoto dumps him, now me. Falls on you again.”

“It’s okay. He’s a fucking jerk today, but I’m not going to leave him alone either. Someone’s gotta keep an eye on him so he doesn’t make it worse. Don’t worry about him.”

She buries her head in her arms on her knees. “I wish I could put up with it but I’m just so at the end of my rope.”

“It’s fine, okay? I got it. He needed to hear it anyway; that reaction was bullshit.”

“He’s so stupid,” she huffs, and rolls to the side to lie down on her back and peer over to him. “Why does everyone have to beat him over the head with these things to make him understand? Why did he have to push me until I couldn’t do it anymore?”
“It’s just how he is.”

“This is why he lost Makoto.”

“I hardly want to talk about that. I can’t escape it.”

She pouts and prods him with her foot. “Sorry.”

Sousuke shrugs and shifts to lie down next to her, turning on his side to see her better. He smooths a hand over her stomach to grab at the other side of her waist lightly and get her attention, beckoning her to turn too. She rolls over and shifts up to be eye-level with him, bringing a hand up to study his face with her thumb.

She knows he’s torn. She knows he still misses what he had with Haruka, and wishes it could’ve been different while still acknowledging their split was inevitable. But she knows too that every day, he’s been missing it less. He hopes she knows anyway, he’s been as honest as he realistically can be about it.

She knew all of that before she kissed him at the end of the night he and Makoto took her out, because he told her, thinking it would reinforce that he wanted Haruka and not her. But it didn’t. All it did was make him realize that no matter how much he loved Haruka, he was always going to leave him eventually. He’d been telling himself that all along full of regret and mourning, but with Gou looking at him like she was, right there in front of him, not going anywhere… he thought of it for the first time as something sort of… all right.

She let her kiss him. Sousuke knew it was too fast, but he let her. Haruka doesn’t want him as he is, but Gou does, and maybe some things in life really are that simple.

“Are you thinking about him?” she asks distantly, neither jealous nor bitter. Just curious. He doesn’t know what to make of it, or her for that matter. He doesn’t feel any different even after kissing her.

He shakes his head. “Not in the way you’re thinking I am.”

“And what way is that?”

“In the context that I regret this.”

She hums thoughtfully, and frowns slightly. “I feel selfish… like I pushed you before you were ready, we’re not… we don’t know if this is anything.”

“We both said it’s experimental, right? We’re friends first; that’s something.”

“You’re right.”

She’s unsure, though, as she has a right to be. Moving on though he is, Sousuke can’t promise that he’ll never not love Haruka, or that he can fall in love with her, and maybe Gou hasn’t decided if that’s something she can live with. He certainly wouldn’t be able to do it if the roles were reversed.

They’re both dancing perilously close to an edge Sousuke isn’t sure he can balance on. She knows that, too. He wonders what it says for them both when he leans forward to kiss her with this knowledge, and she sighs into it like it’s some detail of inconsequence that’ll figure itself out.

He throws out Rin’s interruption and the rest of his cyclical thoughts to make room for her now, to run his hand over the curve of her hip and below the back of her unbuttoned waistband. She’s
utterly foreign feeling, and he admits he hasn’t felt quite this out of his element in a long time.

Maybe she senses his unease, and deepens their kiss to show that it’s not that different. Really, it isn’t, he’s relieved to find out. Gently she pushes him to lie flat so she can crawl over him, take over. He can’t deny it feels good when she reaches low to grope him through his pants, that her breathy sighs against his lips excite him when he returns his hands to her ass and rocks her hips down with a bit of force. He has no fucking idea how to be with a woman, but she seems to be remarkably interested in teaching him. Still, it all feels good. But not great.

What Rin interrupted was only just before the act, he’s yet to go through with it, has no goddamned clue how to chart this. But she is insistent, jumping right in for a physical relationship, and Sousuke figures if that’s how she connects then he’ll do his best to meet her halfway.

Gou sits up, removing her wandering hand, and frowns down at him. “Nervous?”

“I guess,” he mutters.

“I want this,” she says, as if that’s what he’s nervous about.

“Me too,” he counters. “I just… ah, I don’t know.”

“You weren’t hard on the couch either,” she muses, tilting her head, making him clear his throat in embarrassment. She slides off of him and lies flat on her back. “Come here.”

Sousuke turns to face her, and she guides him half over her. “Why don’t you just… explore?” she tries, taking his hand and placing it over her neck to start. “Maybe I’m being too pushy. I promise it’s not so bad.”

He snorts despite himself. “I know that.”

“Take my shirt off.”

He obliges, letting her sit up enough to do so. “Just touch?”

“Just touch.”

Sousuke ghosts his fingertips down her neck. Too delicate. She watches him move with interest, doesn’t flinch when he cups her breast, but does giggle when he knits his eyebrows in concentration as he does it.

“So studious.”

But really it’s because it doesn’t feel like anything to him, and that surprises him. It’s just there. He dares to rub a thumb over her nipple, eliciting a sharp inhale of air from her, and that stirs something in him. He moves in circles around it, over it, pleased she writhes under him ever so slightly as it hardens.

“Got that down,” she says breathlessly. “Guys like that?”

“… Some,” he mutters dismissively, the kindling he felt a moment prior going out by her even bringing that up.

She arches into his touch. “Keep going.”

“Here?”
Gou shakes her head. “Farther.”

Her stomach is nice. He admires the gentle slope of it, how soft it is all the way down. He rubs his palm down to her waistband, and back up, then down again.

“Do you want good luck or something?” she laughs.

“Shut up, it’s soft.”

“Hmm. Do you want to stop there?”

“No,” he says truthfully. “But-”

“Shush. Kiss me.”

Sousuke does as he’s told, turning his head to press their lips together. She sucks at his lip, and Sousuke slides his tongue to hers. She grasps his wrist while she kisses him, guiding him under her shorts, moving to slide her hand over the top of his and press his middle finger down past as far as he’s ever gone with her. He’s glad she’s running this; he’s nearly paralyzed.

Gou moans to his lips, keeps her hand over the back of his and does all the goddamned work. But this he knows, this much is familiar; a tight, wet heat, the contraction around his fingers. He hone’s in on that while he kisses her deeper and lets himself remember it as something else. She rocks her hips to the rhythm he sets, and Sousuke remembers that too. Remembers hips rocking down, fighting with the desire to thrust up into his hand. Breathless moans. He grinds himself against her, loses himself in his memories until it’s not Gou he’s touching anymore.

She shatters his illusion when she closes her thighs around his hand and sighs his name prettily, lightly. She comes because of him and his consciousness brings him back to watch her, waiting for that perfect moment- one of his favorite sights- when her eyes are lidded- sometimes glassy, sometimes soft- and her mouth is parted, cheeks flush and ever so imperceptibly splotchy the closer you look to her ears. The blink-and-he-misses-it moment when Gou’s already trying to steady her breathing but she’s still hitching on the syllables of Sousuke’s name or cursing some dead god to his lips-

He sits up fast, heart slamming into the back of his ribcage and looks down in paled horror, thinking she must know, she must know what he just fucking did he thought about it so loudly anyone could’ve heard his thoughts- but she’s only smiling with her eyes closed, and opens them slowly, looking over him with amusement.

“Not so bad?”

He swallows down a misplaced urge to cry, and too unsure of his voice to chance it, offers a shake of his head instead.

--

He drives home in silence, having excused himself from Gou in a hurry and citing work the next day as a reason. The silence is something he’s made a habit of since the long drive back across the country, and he sits in his car for an extra ten minutes thinking of nothing once he’s home. He snaps out of it when someone parked next to him sets their car alarm, and remembers despite what just happened he needs to make sure Rin is all right, and finds his phone to text him. He calls Rin first, and it goes straight to voicemail, forcing him to send a text instead.

call me. we should talk. this doesnt have to change anything.
Rin freaks out easily, but he doesn’t usually explode like that. That was nothing short of a nuclear detonation. Sousuke hasn’t seen him act anywhere near that since high school. Rin really does have a better handle on his emotions these days than people give him credit for. No, there’s something else going on, and the thought makes Sousuke lean forward and rest his forehead on the steering wheel for another few minutes. If Rin keeps this up, Sousuke really is going to be the only person he has left that’ll put up with him. And at the rate Sousuke’s going, he might not be able to deal with it much longer. There’s something to be said for a little bit of self-preservation.

Makoto must be working or something because he isn’t home. He’s still not open with his life and tends to come and go as he pleases. Sousuke finds it a relief to not have to worry much about him, though. At least not after their not-so-little altercation. Sousuke learned quickly that Makoto is more than self-sufficient from that. He still does worry, not because they’re suddenly best friends but because that’s just who he is and sometimes Makoto seems to be gone for days at a time, but he’s happy to know he can worry less. Haruka sure hasn’t inquired about him since the first time, so if Haruka isn’t worried then Sousuke shouldn’t lose sleep over it.

Not that he’s heard anything from Haruka in two months at all. About anything.

Sousuke sits down on the couch instead of making himself any dinner. He should eat after swimming as much as he did, after nearly making himself sick at Gou’s, but his appetite has abandoned him for the day.

Instead he dozes off and lets himself do it, happy to dream about something else for now. He dreams of weight over his hips and Haruka’s smooth throat, exposed as his chin points towards the ceiling when he throws his head back in ecstasy. He looks down and moves his lips, but Sousuke doesn’t catch what whispers from him. It’s too loud in the house.

He only wakes up to distant thumping that comes into focus as the usual movements of someone moving around in the kitchen, and his heart swells momentarily- forgetting where he is in life, forgetting it can’t be Haruka making them dinner to have in bed- and deflates just as quickly.

He finally forces his eyes open at the clatter of a bowl on the coffee table, sees it’s long since fallen pitch black outside, and checks his phone groggily to find it’s past midnight. At least it’s dim enough that Makoto can’t see the thin sheen of sweat his dream put on his brow.

“No dishes in the sink,” Makoto says, sitting on the floor with a bowl of his own at the coffee table.

“Huh?” he grunts.

“If you’d made yourself something to eat since getting back from the pool, there’d be dishes for me to do.”

Sousuke surprises himself with a hoarse laugh and sits up, reaching for the water that was placed for him at some point before he woke up for his parched throat. “You cooked?”

“Take out,” Makoto admits sheepishly. “The only sort you can get this late. I guess you saved me from eating too much of it.”

Sousuke leans forward and gathers a bowl of beef and noodles. It looks to be more salt than anything else, and there isn’t anything by way of vegetables. “You living off this shit?”

Makoto shrugs. “More or less.”

“Jesus, Makoto,” Sousuke sighs. “You’re paying me rent, you may as well use the fucking fridge.”
He smiles gently in response and skims his chopsticks along the surface of the broth in his bowl. “I can pay half this month. I finally caught up.”

“If I let you keep the difference anyway will you use the money to buy yourself groceries?”

Makoto laughs and shakes his head. “Maybe.”

Though Makoto is being genuinely outwardly kind and open tonight, Sousuke can swear he sees the wall still built up high around him. Some sort of thick aura. Even someone generally reserved like Haruka betrays his vacant expression with his eyes. Makoto though- he’s opaque from top to bottom when he means to really hide himself away.

The meal is soundly unsatisfying, but he picks at it anyway. The beef is tough and overcooked, the noodles undercooked, and the salt content has tacked a heart attack onto the end of his life as he suspected it would by sight.

He wonders if there’s any real way to sincerely apologize for what he said and undo the distance Makoto’s shoved between them since it, just as Sousuke thought he was beginning to bridge it, too-if nearly imperceptibly so. The distance feels just as permanent as everything else does lately.

He sets his bowl down, half-gone, and sees Makoto’s nearly finished already. He pales slightly realizing the other is just that used to this crap. “Hey so, I don’t expect you to forgive me for what I said a few weeks ago. It was radically uncalled for. I know it was fucked up but I am sorry, regardless of your forgiveness. We haven’t really had a chance to talk but I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

Makoto takes his time as if Sousuke never said anything and finishes his meal- blessedly leaving behind the broth at least, Sousuke’s not sure if he could bite his tongue if he tried to eat that too-and pushes the empty dish onto the table next to Sousuke’s. “And I shouldn’t have meddled,” Makoto finally replies. “With Gou or with Haru. It wasn’t my place to do so without you asking me to. Maybe you spoke harshly, but I definitely provoked you.”

Sousuke sighs. “Doesn’t make what I said okay.”

“True, but I was never angry. It’s more complicated…” He trails off and shrugs helplessly, like he hasn’t figured it out yet himself. “Well, just know I do forgive you, and I would’ve anyway. But thank you.”

Sousuke’s shoulders slump and at least some of the tension that’s been weighing him down slides away. After an honestly harrowing day, he’s disproportionately relieved that at least one thing hasn’t blown up in his face.

“How was it?” Makoto asks. “Swimming.”

“Is this a question about Rin?”

“No, it’s a question about swimming.”

Sousuke studies him to catch him in a lie, but he seems to be asking in earnest. “Went okay. Pool was too small.”

“Oh, I guess we did lose the only public pool with any sort of detail to standard size…” Makoto frowns. “Did you win?”

“Yeah, few times,” he answers vaguely, if not cautiously. Dancing a conversation around Rin feels
stiff, and Makoto’s literally never spoken to him so casually before.

Makoto smiles though, no hurt to be found on his face with Rin being brought up. “I imagine someone got pissy about losing.”

“You have no idea.” And boy, does he really not. “I hung out with Gou afterwards,” he finds himself admitting. Makoto knows, he supposes then that Haruka knows as Makoto reiterated he was standing by telling him, but they haven’t talked about it otherwise for obviously contentious reasons.

“Is that going well?”

“It sure is going,” he sighs. “I’m fucked up, you know that?”

Makoto snorts in surprise. “Do I want to know?”

Does he? He’s a bit of a gossip, seems to like his nose where it shouldn’t be. And maybe...

“Have you ever had sex with a woman?” Sousuke asks simply.

Makoto choke on nothing and stares at Sousuke with eyes fully round once he recovers. “Excuse me?”

Sousuke rolls his eyes. “Put your dick-”

“-in a chick.”

Makoto glares at him for finishing his crude statement, but only playfully. “In college.”

“Really,” Sousuke states incredulously, brows shooting high.

“Dated around quite a bit actually… turned out I was just in love with Rin the entire time so nothing stuck.”

“Okay but- girls. I thought you were gayer than Rin.”

“Girls,” Makoto confirms. “Mostly girls.”

“You’re the slut of the group!” Sousuke declares. “No fucking way.”

“Hey,” Makoto pouts.

Sousuke can’t catch the boom of laughter that escapes him, making Makoto pout deeper, but damned if it isn’t the funniest thing he’s heard in a long time. “Ah, holy shit. Go figure.”

“Jeez, I’m really not that bad am I?”

“Makoto if you told me Rin never saw you naked with the lights on, I’d believe you.”


His amusement ebbs, coming back down to the more serious reality of why he bothered to drag Makoto in. What, though, is he honestly planning on asking? Hey Makoto, did you have to fantasize about fucking a guy in the ass to even get half a hard-on from a girl? He probably
wouldn’t appreciate that method of delivery.

“What about it do you like? Having sex with women.”

“U-uh,” Makoto stutters, “the… act? The idea? Is this a trick question?”

“All of it? Like, all of the metaphorical woman is enticing?”

Makoto makes a quiet noise of consternation. “S-sure? Sousuke I really can’t tell if you’re trying to
trick me, I’m sorry, I don’t think that critically about it.”

“I’m not,” Sousuke insists, already sensing something really is wrong going by Makoto’s utter
confusion. “I like women too but things did not go well today.”

“Maybe it’s just because you’re nervous? Or not used to it. Haven’t you only really been with
men?”

“I mean, mostly just Haruka... but you think so? I really… couldn’t focus.”

Makoto shrugs it off. “It’s new, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Just like you were probably nervous with Haru?”

Sousuke grimaces. Thinking about talking to Makoto about his sex life with Haruka nearly feels
like explaining in detail to Rin what he’s done to his sister. But when he thinks about it, he and
Haruka pretty much jumped each other without ten tons of discussion or hand-holding body-
touching sessions. He doesn’t recall nervousness. It wasn’t great sex, they didn’t know each other’s
preferences at the time, had next to no experience, but there was certainly no mental checking out.

“Not the same. Maybe Haruka ruined sex for me forever,” he sighs wistfully. “Just seemed like it
was always supposed to be there with us.”

Makoto hums, twists his mouth slightly to the side. “Do you like her? This is what you want to
pursue, right?”

“I want to see where it goes, yeah,” he deflects.

There’s a blip of unspoken tension and it disappears just as quickly as it registers on Sousuke’s
consciousness. Whatever Makoto was mounting courage to say, he thinks better of it.

“Then give it time. Gou is different from Haru in… well, just about every way.”

He leaves no indication as to if he meant that in a good or a bad way, and Sousuke thinks his
personal sharing time is just about fucking done for the night lest he become agitated again by
Makoto’s neverending opinions on things. He means well, Sousuke knows that now, but maybe
he’s just not ready to trust him that much.

“You’re right,” he yawns, and stretches along the couch to hopefully convey he’s over it and tired
of talking about it. His eyes close against his wishes, thoughts of getting to bed soon lulling him
away.

“Sousuke,” Makoto says after several minutes of companionable silence.

“Mmm?”
Makoto doesn’t follow up right away, or for quite a while after for that matter until Sousuke opens his eyes to see him staring pensively at the floor. A battlefield’s worth of internal arguments break through his stoic opacity. “How is he?”

Sousuke chews his lip while Makoto isn’t looking at him. Fucked? Nearly totally insufferable? Makoto doesn’t want to hear that. Makoto doesn’t want to know Rin was checking out college kids at the pool. Really doesn’t need to know about his volatility, at least not until Sousuke can get to the bottom of it and slap it out of him first.

“A work in progress like the rest of us right now,” he decides on.

“Is he happy?”

A loaded question in Sousuke’s opinion. There’s no right answer to it, not from Makoto’s perspective, but Sousuke knows when that’s the case it’s just another thing to be honest about. “No, I don’t think he is.”

“Oh,” Makoto acknowledges quietly. “I’m sad to hear that.”

“Do you want him to be happy without you?”

“I want him to be happy no matter what he’s doing. He was already unhappy with me.”

“It’s not because of you, though,” Sousuke says, making it a point to stress it enough to force Makoto to look up at him. “You know that, don’t you?”

Makoto only stares impassively, walling himself back in, and drags Sousuke’s half-eaten dinner to himself to start picking at it without answering him.

---

No offense to anyone he knows or is getting to know, but basketball is really something on an entirely new tier of terrible.

Haruka’s job comes with a bonus he wishes it didn’t: a ton of free tickets to an endless number of sporting events. He’s weaseled his way out everything so far, but all good things must come to an end, he supposes.

“This will help,” Mika shouts over the noise of the stadium.

Haruka nods and groans internally. There’s a big project down the line that’s going to highlight Tokyo University’s starting roster in a dedicated issue. She insisted he wouldn’t be able to make the best spread he could without some eyes-on knowledge of the sport he was making graphics for. He knows little about basketball, and so far his opinion is critical. There’s too much running. Too much stopping. Too much sweating. The disheveled hair, soaked clingy jerseys, and general misery radiating from the court makes him uncomfortable by proxy.

There’s still half the game to go and he’s excused himself for the restroom three times just to get up and walk around. He wasn’t expecting the entire event to take this long, and now he’s starving. A pass by the concession stands tells him he isn’t that hungry though. Not for half a month’s rent for a corndog.

Suddenly the crowd erupts louder than they had been, but it doesn’t look like anything happened. Haruka scans the players on the court for anything out of the ordinary, but they’re all still sweating
a lot and running back and forth.

“Number 13 managed a triple double.”

Haruka whips around to look at Mika, hoping his irritation is as obvious as it feels.

She laughs. “Double digit figures in three categories. He had the points, the rebounds, and just nailed it with a tenth steal.”

“Sure,” he sighs.

“Mika!” someone calls next to him. Haruka turns to face the other way and gets a face-full of a coat being shucked off. “Ah, sorry Haru.”

Kisumi takes the seat that he’s been glaring others away from all night. He didn’t know Kisumi was showing up, he just didn’t want anyone sitting next to him. “Thanks for saving me a spot.”

“Sure, Haru’s a great guard dog,” Mika ribs. “Scared everyone off.”

Kisumi smiles at him, and hands him a corndog from a cardboard tray with a few items he brought with him. Haruka thinks Kisumi must be a secret millionaire. “Sounds about right.”

“Thanks,” Haruka mumbles, even though he knows it’s lost to the racket.

“Getting into trouble, Kisumi?” Mika asks. “Game’s already halfway done.”

He heaves a loud sigh. “Got stuck as usual. You should be used to this by now.”

If there’s one thing Haruka’s learned about Kisumi, it’s that he gets stuck often. Cuts his breaks short most of the time. Waves Haruka goodnight through the frosted glass of the Chiyoda Review.

If Haruka leaves late or- better- Kisumi actually leaves on time, they walk out together only for him to excuse himself for an off-site meeting.

It feels like he’s watching a television series where someone keeps skipping over vital episodes, leaving him to fill in the blanks of the plot through conjecture. The person doing the skipping seems to be… well, Kisumi. Haruka wouldn’t mind if it were his preference, necessarily, but it feels a lot more like Kisumi doesn’t want to be getting stuck so often, and he just seems so, so tired. But he’d never want Haruka to know it.

When Haruka looks over to him, he’s engrossed in the game already while he plucks individual pieces of popcorn from a bag and flicks them into his mouth. He only pauses to take deep gulps from a soda, or a bite from his own corndog. Haruka eats his slowly, maybe subconsciously fearful of choking while he watches the other inhale his gourmet crap at an impressive pace.

“If you ate lunch you wouldn’t be so hungry,” Haruka leans in to tell him.

Kisumi grins without tearing his eyes off the game. “I knew I had this to look forward to. Pretty good, right?”

More deflection. Haruka sighs quietly and turns his gaze back out to the game.

When Mika asks him as they’re leaving if he has a better idea now, he agrees of course even if he only watched a cumulative total of fifteen minutes. He’d rather not have to do this again any time soon, and it’s freezing out which makes him want to cut the conversation short.

“I’ll take the train,” Haruka declares before either of them can drag him along for a ride.
“If you want. See you Monday, Haru,” Mika bids on her way past him to her car.

Haruka nods and turns towards the station. He shrugs his coat up to cover his ears, and almost doesn’t hear Kisumi calling after him.

“Let me walk you,” he says once he catches up.

“It’s fine.”

“Of course it’s fine,” Kisumi laughs. “But we didn’t get a chance to catch up this week. Kept missing you.”

Haruka wants to tell him it’s because Kisumi never really left his office, but he probably knows that.

“Oh so you wouldn’t believe the stupid thing I had to write about this week. Honestly for such a serious publication, I sure do get put on a lot of stories about festivals. I can’t even keep them straight. So I went out to this mini-parade- no stipend for food, mind you- and I ended up stuck there for four hours, Haru. Didn’t get out of there until nearly eleven at night. All to bitch about the commercialization of time-honored ritual.”

Haruka snorts. “And is it?”

“Commercialized? Oh you bet. But god, who cares,” he gripes. “None of the attendees did, I can tell you that.”

“What else?” Haruka tries.

“That was most of it.”

He raises an eyebrow and hopes Kisumi is looking. “One festival for a week of work?”

Kisumi shrugs. “Eh, some other little things. Really nothing interesting.”

He doesn’t know how to express he’d like to be let in a little more without coming off as pushy. While Haruka isn’t an overtly curious creature by any means, he’d like to humor the idea that Kisumi is his friend- or as close to a friend as he has in this city- and could at least feel comfortable to vent a little bit about whatever’s dragging his feet. Kisumi putting him at arm’s length is beginning to make their interactions feel fake. Like Haruka is a convenient part of his front.

Kisumi keeps talking about inane things for the duration of the walk to the station, and Haruka only affirms he’s listening in grunts of different octaves. He’s not sure why Kisumi’s even bothering to talk to him, really. This can’t be fun for Kisumi, and Haruka would think his increasingly monosyllabic responses might tip the other off that it isn’t for him either.

They arrive to the stop just as Haruka’s sure that he can’t take another minute of it. “Good night, Kisumi,” he says swiftly, agitated and tired.


“I have a long way back.”

“I know. But, please?”

Haruka turns to face him, not that Kisumi will have anything resembling a convincing argument to make it worth the trouble.
“I uh… well, I’ve been busy, you know? It’s not anything-”

“You don’t have to tell me anything. I get it; we’re good for coffee breaks.”

Kisumi’s shoulders slump. “Haru, it’s not like that.”

“It’s a lot like that. We don’t know each other. And we don’t have to if you don’t want to. It’s fine, don’t worry about forcing it like this.” Haruka shrugs. “I’ll see you this week if you have time.”

Kisumi rubs at the back of his neck and averts his eyes. “I- yeah. Okay. I’ll make time. I promise.”

“Don’t go out of your way.”

Haruka continues on towards home, thankful Kisumi doesn’t try to stop him and give him anything else half-baked. On the train he gets a seat, and digs his phone out of his bag. He wrings it between his hands for a while, wondering if one day the old thing’s just going to break since he does it so often. The plastic grinds around so much, it’ll have to eventually. Maybe he won’t replace it.

Finally he sighs and flips it open, then bangs it on his knee once to get the screen to catch up with him. Would it kill anyone (and he’s thinking of Rin in particular) to ask him how he’s doing in a new city, at a new job? Rin could even stand to yell at him, be angry. But he’s simply vanished from Haruka’s life. Again. He hasn’t responded to Haruka once.

At least Makoto checks in, if superficially. Today he’s sent him a picture. Of what, Haruka can’t determine, as his phone is too old to open the large files newer phones send him. He’s told Makoto this more times than he can count, but Makoto never remembers.

*can’t see it, remember?*

He *thinks* Makoto’s doing okay, if Makoto’s words claiming such are to be believed. He can’t say that he’s *thrilled* that Makoto’s living with Sousuke, for reasons he isn’t sure of, but as long as Makoto’s getting it together, he can ignore that. Maybe it’s just that it makes staying in touch with him just as superficial as his relationships with everyone else, knowing Sousuke’s always in the background.

Makoto did mention that Sousuke’s been spending time with Gou, using that cautious tone he saves for times he isn’t sure how Haruka will react to something, which told him everything Makoto didn’t say. Haruka hopes they’re happy, and he also deleted all of his saved draft texts to Sousuke once he was off the phone with Makoto. It wasn’t as if he was going to send them before he knew. Most of them only said *hi* anyway.

In any case it makes his promise to stay in touch with Gou unappealing to adhere to.

It’s never hit him until now how difficult it is to maintain and forge strong relationships with people the older he gets, the more everyone splinters off and moves on. When having secrets becomes a deliberate means of self-preservation and not just something people do reactively when they’re unsure of themselves. It turns everything into a game. Nothing is unplanned, nothing is effortless.

And what sort of media doesn’t portray the sort of thing he and Makoto have as effortless? The childhood friends who can differentiate the fake smiles from the real ones. Everyone thinks their bond is there no matter what, that it takes nothing to keep up, when it’s been anything but effortless for longer than it wasn’t.

Or on paper where Sousuke and Haruka are the perfect love story, and in practice there’s one
insurmountable obstacle that forces them to make a choice: turn back or go around, and they don’t come to the same conclusion. And Haruka’s left wondering if he really knew Sousuke like he thought he did. He’s left wondering if Sousuke loved him at all, or if he was simply comfortable with him because he was there and available.

Rin, his fire. Who should be the one to yell at him when he messes up and support him in his endeavors anyway like Haruka strives to do for him. Rin, who should always be burning for him because they’re each other’s raw motivation— they share everything with each other, things that aren’t for Makoto or Sousuke. And he’s fallen to silence. He is nowhere to be found, he can’t even text Haruka the fuck you that he probably deserves.

It’s all romanticized, all so damn fake and choked with idealism. Nothing about a relationship is inherent.

ack, sorry! it was only a cat... Makoto responds some twenty minutes later. how was that basket ball game?

i can’t believe you almost chose it over swimming.

i’m retroactively angry at you.

it’s disgusting.

haha! yeah... well that was kisumi. is kisumi? who knows. :S he disappeared.

He might respond that he knows, albeit not much. But that might be a reveal better saved for an actual phone call. He always hated texting until he realized its potential for keeping him away from live conversation. It still makes him feel chained to people’s arbitrary inquiry, but not as badly as it used to.

Haruka’s half-way through a reply of changing the subject when his phone dies and his world goes solitary again.

It’s something he thinks about for the rest of the long trip home, and even after he’s taken a quick shower and put himself to bed; that a city like Tokyo could end up being so... quiet.

--

It’s Friday again when Haruka takes his mid-morning break and finds Kisumi waiting for him at the coffee stand with two cups; the first time all week he’s seen him. Kisumi smiles apologetically and outstretches what reeks as a peace offering, but Haruka takes it anyway and they find a seat without much by way of greeting.

“Yikes,” he starts. “Well I technically kept my promise. It’s still this week. Sorry.”

“Mm. I told you it didn’t matter.”

“It does to me,” Kisumi states sternly. “So what’s the issue this week? Mika isn’t spilling.”

“Injuries,” Haruka answers, sipping from his drink to find it’s green tea. At least Kisumi’s been paying attention when they do get five minutes. “Statistics and op-eds and reader write-ins.”

“Oh yeah? Sounds grim.”

“I’m trying to lighten it up with bright imagery, but yeah. It’s not the most uplifting thing in the world. Cartoon rabbits on crutches is just looking more sinister than I imagined it would in my head.”
He laughs. “Well I have been sicced on the municipal water supply,” Kisumi boasts sarcastically. “Apparently the city cut corners on some purification plant regulations, oh, two damn years ago.”

“Prudent,” Haruka quips.

“Isn’t it? Never a scandal gets by the Chiyoda Review, timely reporting or not.” Kisumi drinks long from his cup. “Except, you know, the scandals that matter,” he mutters.

Haruka looks up from the table, interest piqued by the drop in Kisumi’s voice. “… Like what?”

Kisumi frowns. “Ugh, that slipped. Please don’t hate me.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t,” he levels. Can’t talk about it.

Haruka sighs through his nose and occupies himself with his tea. It isn’t Kisumi’s fault, but he’s still irritated.

“I’m sorry, Haru.”

“Stop apologizing.”

Kisumi pushes his coffee to the side to slump over the top of the table and peer up at Haruka through his hair. It’s definitely that Shigino puppy-dog look from his childhood on full display, and it’s working to soften Haruka’s edge with him quickly, annoyingly enough. “I want to make it up to you.”

“There’s nothing to m-”

“Yes there is!” Kisumi nearly cries, straightening back up. He takes a deep breath. “There is, okay? I’m not trying to blow you off all the time. I don’t want to at all. I- it’s complicated.” Haruka’s taken aback by the fatigue that washes over his face as he speaks. “I know it’s a shitty excuse.”

Haruka looks down at his lap. “I don’t understand this, Kisumi,” he sighs. “I told you, you don’t owe me anything. You don’t have to tell me anything. Why are you beating yourself up over it?”

“I-” he starts, but his phone rings shrilly from his pocket. He checks it, anger picking at the line of his jaw in short ticks. “Fuck,” he hisses quietly. “I’m sorry. I gotta go. You know, this was probably a mistake. Just forget about all of it.”

Haruka blinks after him stupidly, not immediately registering what he prattled off at light speed before nearly sprinting to and out the lobby door. He figures whatever it is has nothing to do with the city’s water supply.

Forget about all of it?

He lets himself finish his drink before letting himself be angry, but it seeps in just the same as he walks back to his desk. He’s not even asking Kisumi for anything; why can’t he just be a break partner at least? Just one familiar face every once in a while for a light discussion is literally all he had the audacity to hope for.

Haruka’s sick to death of injured stock art rabbits by the time mid-afternoon rolls around. Goto, the stoic guy who sits next to him, glances at his work and mentions that it looks cryptic. Haruka takes it to heart, since Goto doesn’t lend his opinion often; only when he feels strongly about it. He’ll
have to start over, but only after he gets up to stretch his legs. He walks to the front and looks out the office window and into Kisumi’s, waiting for a blurred splotch of peachy-pink to make itself apparent, though it never does.

With his work in progress shelved, he starts over. Goto suggests nothing with faces considering the serious nature of the issue. Haruka’s in charge of layout for the op-eds and write-ins, so maybe there’s already enough personality within the stories that he doesn’t need to add anymore. He settles on sunset tones and simple minimalistic graphics, and doesn’t miss Goto nod in silent approval when he peers over to look at Haruka’s screen.

He’s satisfied with the changes, but the decision to scrap the rabbits mid-day leaves him working long after even Mika is gone and the doors switch over to automatically lock from the outside. It’s going to be dark and cold once he leaves the building, a combination Haruka is tiring of already and December’s not even over, so he drags his feet to the lobby front.

What a stupid day. He throws a glare angrily over his shoulder towards the coffee area since no one’s around to see him be petulantly pissy, until of course there is someone. In the dull security light, he sees Kisumi lying across a bistro table much like he was earlier facing away. Haruka stills his hand on the lobby door handle, going back and forth over whether or not he even wants to bother anymore. But maybe Kisumi accidentally fell asleep, and he probably shouldn’t let him stay here all night.

Haruka crosses the space, and thinks of how best not to startle him. He settles on clearing his throat, and Kisumi jumps anyway, sitting up fast and turning his head on a swivel for the source.

“Don’t tell me you really do live here.”

“Oh, Haru,” he greets in groggy confusion, reaching across the table to check the time on his prone phone. “Why are you still here?”

“Work.”

“Ah. Well thanks for waking me up,” he says dismissively, and Haruka can’t believe Kisumi would seriously think he’d just walk away at that after finding him like this.

“Come on,” Haruka sighs.

“Huh?”

“Let’s get dinner.”

“Ah, I’m sorry Haru. I can’t.”

“I’m really tired of hearing that combination of words from you.”

Kisumi frowns at the table. “I have a deadline for the water story.”

“It can wait. It’s already been two years, what’s another night? You’re exhausted anyway.”

Kisumi finally looks at him and runs a hand through his hair. “I’m trying to get you to go away, if you’re not picking up on it.”

Haruka shrugs it off, not letting it sting like Kisumi intended for it to. “Payback for all the times you never left me alone. Come on,” he repeats. “Just an hour and something light.”
Kisumi drags his phone to himself unenthusiastically and checks it again. “I have a half hour.”

“Whatever,” Haruka grunts. “Can we go now then so that we might actually have time to order something?”

“There’s a place we can walk to just across the street. Open late.”

“You would know.”

Kisumi pushes to a stiff stand, pockets his phone, and throws his coat on. “Stuff it.”

Once they’re outside, Kisumi walks quickly. If he’s cold or just in that big of a hurry to get this over and done with, Haruka can’t determine. But his chilly demeanor seems to thaw once they’re sitting at a booth and poring over the menu, and his eyes even light up in what Haruka has to assume is hunger. It’s a much better presentation of Kisumi, who until recently Haruka would’ve assumed never lost that mischievous glint. It’s always just seemed to be an unaltering fixture of his character, even after Haruka figured out he doesn’t always mean it.

By the time the waitress is standing and waiting for their order, Kisumi’s still reading it all over. He whimpers in indecisiveness. “Man it all looks good.”

“Pick something before you get dizzy and pass out from hypoglycemia.” Haruka turns to the waitress. “I’ll have chazuke with mackerel.”

Kisumi shuts his menu. “Ugh, okay. Curry with tonkatsu. With an extra side of rice.”

The waitress nods and brings out tea, then leaves them. Haruka eyes the clock on the wall. “Twenty minutes.”

Kisumi flushes red. “… I can stay a little longer.”

“Did you mean it?” Haruka asks, pouring their tea. “When you said to forget it.”

“No,” he groans. “I didn’t.”

“Good. I understand the sort of confidentiality you’re dealing with, you know. My degree is in journalism, too. You could’ve just told me it wasn’t a story you couldn’t talk about and we could’ve stopped talking about work.”

Kisumi doesn’t look any more at ease than he usually does when he’s stumbling over his secrets, but he at least doesn’t stutter out another apology. “It’s-”

“Complicated, you told me.”

“Well more than that. I’m…” He takes a deep breath. “Okay, I want to tell you, and I can’t. But I can say it’s not something I’m doing for the paycheck. It’s a huge shitshow, Haru. It gets worse every day.”

Worry settles in between Haruka’s eyebrows. “It’s not something you should be getting involved with, is it?”

“No,” Kisumi laughs bitterly. “But it’s too late. I already am. And I… I haven’t figured out how to say it quite right but it’s basically that I can’t risk anyone else more than I already have without… worrying you.”

“Kisumi, I do layout for an entirely unrelated magazine,” Haruka deadpans. “It has nothing to do
Kisumi licks his lips nervously and looks around, like he’s expecting someone to be eavesdropping in on their conversation in a divey restaurant otherwise populated only by teenagers. “I’m… really involved,” he strains, speaking lowly. “To the point where other people could be dragged in to force me to be uninvolved.”

“Drag me in then if it’ll help you get uninvolved.”

“No!” Kisumi protests in alarm, belatedly taking stock of his volume and frowning. “No, Haru.”

“I’m already worried anyway,” Haruka says. “I was before this.”

“And that means a lot, really. But-”

“Stop it,” Haruka bites, face heating up. “Just stop. Look at yourself. You’re one step away from being afraid of your own shadow. You’re looking around this place like someone’s going to jump you, do you notice that?”

“There’s nothing I can do about it but see it to the end, okay? I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not even denying what I’m saying.”

“Because you’re right,” Kisumi laughs. “You’re really right.”

Then it dawns on Haruka, a question twisting in his gut. “... Are you at the building so much because you’re afraid to go home?”

Kisumi looks down. “It’s easier on me to be in a place with cameras sometimes for a few hours, yeah. When I need a break.”

“A break from what?”

“I’m really involved,” Kisumi repeats, a whisper of a plea underneath for Haruka to understand it needs to stop there.

Haruka sits back, tries to will the worry off of his face because it probably isn’t helping Kisumi calm down. Where does he begin? Is Kisumi in physical danger or is he just paranoid about something?

For now maybe they should just start with getting him to eat. “All right,” Haruka concedes. “Let’s just eat and not think about it for a little bit.”

“Yeah,” Kisumi agrees with a waver. “Can you talk about something?”

“Huh?”

He smiles helplessly. “Anything? Just something else.”

Admittedly it’s not one of Haruka’s strong suits. It’s probably his weakest suit, actually, and it’s not like anything’s been happening to him while he’s been here worth talking about. Nothing happening back in Iwatobi isn’t loaded down with doom and gloom for him either.

Kisumi laughs after a few moments of Haruka pressing his mouth into a firm line as he thinks this through. “Some things don’t change I guess. Well why’d you come here, Haru?”
He shrugs. “Good job, a chance to get away from Iwatobi.”

“Been there all through college?”

“Yeah. Tokyo university plans fell through, or rather I decided I wasn’t ready to leave at the time. Makoto went on here though, but he moved back after to work with the swim club.”

“Rin? Sousuke?”

“Rin studied abroad and came back shortly after he finished. He was on the national swim team and on his way to the Olympics then… didn’t go. Came home and moved in with Makoto. We have no idea. Just didn’t work out, I guess. No one talks about it. He and Makoto were together. Now they’re not. Both working odd jobs now I think, since the swim club closed at the end of the summer.”

Kisumi frowns. “Oh. Why’d they split?”

Haruka sighs. “It’s a really long story that I don’t know all of. It’s sort of recent.”

“I see,” he mumbles. “Sou?”

He bites his lip until it stings a bit, and the waitress delivers their food in the waking silence giving him more time to compose a conservative answer. Kisumi doesn’t break eye contact, uttering a thanks for the food but keeping his focus trained on Haruka. “Haru?”

“He liked it,” Haruka responds thickly, a sudden bitterness he didn’t know he had putting a bad taste in his mouth, and keeping him from biting his tongue over what tumbles out next. “We were together too. We split so I could come here.”

Kisumi drops his chopsticks into his bowl, not taking the bite he was halfway to. “Want to talk about it?”

He doesn’t, but talking about it is the last thing he hasn’t tried yet to feel better, and he’d love to feel better at some point in his life.

“He didn’t want to come with me. I thought he was just being stubborn, that he’d change his mind. Sometimes he takes a while to come around to new things. But I guess I was wrong. He’s with someone else now.” Haruka keeps it as clinical as he can. Nothing was done wrong by anyone, after all.

“Holy shit, Haru.”

“It’s okay.”

“But you’ve only been here a few months, though- I mean, you… he’s with someone else? And you’ve been here thinking- hoping- he’d… I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Haruka repeats. “He didn’t want me to pass this up, it was kind of him. He helped me a lot. At least he doesn’t hate me for going.”

“But you didn’t think you’d end up here alone in the end,” Kisumi presses, leaning forward.
And just as quickly as it was able to spill freely from him, it becomes too much. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore, actually.”

“All right, sure.” Kisumi nods quickly and resumes eating.

But now he does feel better, now that it’s out of his own head. Less pressure behind his eyes. It didn’t hurt as much as he thought it would to confide in someone, if only for a few moments. No one else he knows felt quite right to go to, and the idea that it’s Kisumi of really any person on earth he’s spilled to nearly all the way is settling funny in his chest. Yet at the same time, Haruka’s thawing rapidly to Kisumi’s company tonight, and he’s not as surprised as he should be that he did it. Whether he’s just lonely and desperate or genuinely interested in him, he’s not sure. But he doesn’t regret it.

“Tell me how the rabbits ended up,” Kisumi requests with a soft smile.

So he does, even laughs a bit thinking about it and watching Kisumi imitate one of the injured hares with his chopsticks. It’s especially relieving apart from his own amusement that this seems to be Kisumi. When he isn’t afraid or angry or not taking care of himself which are the only states Haruka’s found him in until now. He’s confident, impish, energetic. He’s how Haruka remembers him, but also so much more this time around now that they’re one-on-one, and more grown up. Despite his nebulous personal struggles, Kisumi remains kind and open. Haruka appreciates that. Maybe he needs it, actually. A friend who has a smile and an ear to spare for him. He’s gone without support for longer than he cares for.

Haruka doesn’t want to see him anxious and upset. Not now that he knows what the difference is, not now that he can see what Kisumi is losing of himself in this secret fight of his.

It makes it all the more difficult to watch him close in on himself again when they’re leaving the restaurant to go home. He wonders where Kisumi’s secrets fall on the self-preservation spectrum he considered earlier in the week. It doesn’t seem to be helping him survive at all.

They stand at the junction where Haruka will part for his bus and Kisumi for his car. “Thanks Haru. This was nice.” The gray is seeping into his tone again, and Haruka pulls his coat around himself tighter in involuntary response.

“Are you going to be okay?”

Kisumi blinks slowly and shoves his hands deep in his coat pockets. It feels like he’s taking a step back from Haruka though he hasn’t moved. “Yeah. I’m all right.”

Haruka nearly lets him take his lie and run. They’re adults and Haruka isn’t his mother. Nothing good has come of Haruka keeping his mouth shut, though. He has no one to blame but himself for his loneliness if he doesn’t try harder, and on top of that Kisumi clearly needs support too. It’s not easy to ask for, so he may as well take a chance and assume. “Makoto’s my oldest friend, knows innately how to throw me off, and is the best liar I know. Yet I still know when he’s lying, and you’re a lot worse at it than he is.”

There’s a charged silence following his callout, where Haruka can’t determine if Kisumi’s about to blow up and scream at him for not leaving it alone, or thank him for it, but then he looks at his feet and dispels it by clearing his throat.

“Could I stay at your place? Just tonight; I hate my apartment. I could really use some sleep for one night,” he says nearly inaudibly, as if Haruka’s boxed him into a confessional that he isn’t allowed to leave until he fesses up. “I’ll leave super early tomorrow morning I p-”
“Yeah, of course,” Haruka interrupts before the other can get too anxious over it. He nods in the direction of the parking lot and starts walking towards it. “It’s cold, so get going already.”

He’s happy to hear Kisumi hustle after him without complaint.
Gou opens the filing drawer at her desk to fish out a termination form, and slowly begins to fill it out. She’s going to have to fire that newest girl, Yazaki, who can’t seem to catch on, and it’s a terrible way to end the week for everyone involved. It’s costing them money, it’s costing them time, and the six-week grace period has been stretched to three months of write-ups and correction. Gou’s been trying her hardest to help her, but the policy-dictated disciplinary ladder of the company only has so many steps they can climb and Gou’s a manager, not the vice president. Her pull isn’t endless.

The worst thing about it is, Gou can’t figure out what isn’t clicking. She seems perfectly smart and capable until she’s put to task. Follows directions, asks questions, then inexplicably messes something up late into the project and has no idea how it happened. Maybe if she knew where she was messing up, Gou could help better, but she’s just as baffled as Gou is when Gou shows her the errors in her orders, measurements, and submitted financial reports. Contracting construction work isn’t easy, sure, but the figures she’s using come from others. All Yazaki needs to do is order based on predetermined specifications and nearly no project she’s had in her queue has gone off without a hitch.

She starts filling out the form before lunch, knowing it’s going to take all day for her to do. She’s never had to let anyone go before, and wouldn’t have expected the first time to involve someone who’s as kind and qualified as Yazaki is.

On top of this issue, one of her other employees was involved in a car accident over the previous weekend. He’ll be out for at least a month, having broken a leg and requiring surgery. It makes her understaffed by two at the end of the day, and all of their in-progress projects will go to her. She doesn’t care personally for Inoue, as he’s rather cold, but he’s a worker who gets it done and has helped Gou fix some of Yazaki’s mistakes when she hasn’t had time herself.

There’s a preliminary planning meeting she remembers she needs to get ready for. The next big project, which she was chagrined to find out was a gut and remodel of the former swimming club. Filling in the pools, she’s assuming, is going to be way too expensive for the interested party. That or she’s hoping it is. Of all the people to be in charge of tearing that place down or converting it, she finds the former team manager of it’s former head coach to be the most cosmic of all ironic outcomes.

“Ms. Matsuoka?”

Gou nearly arm-bars her desk clear in a panic of the term form at the sound of Yazaki’s voice. It’s the non-secret in plain sight of course, but she doesn’t need to watch Gou work on it. She’s able to calmly slide it under the folder containing the ISCR blueprints.

“Hi Ms. Yazaki. How can I help you?”

She’s clutching a folder of her own to her chest, and Gou thinks it’s sort of darkly humorous that she chose to wear all black and pull her hair back in a tight updo today where she usually wears it down. Maybe Yazaki thought it would be cheeky too.

Gou gestures to a chair, and she takes it as she slides the folder across the desk. “I submitted this order electronically but I thought I’d print it out too so we could look at it right now.” Her expression is resolute with a firmly pressed mouth and a piercing gaze, and while Gou doesn’t have a ton of time before she needs to excuse herself, she figures Yazaki doesn’t have a lot of time
before she’s dismissed, either.

“Sure,” Gou agrees. She pulls the folder over and pulls up the file on her computer. Convenience store to pharmacy conversion in the town over. A simple task she couldn’t mess up.

“This is correct,” Yazaki states. “I brought it home, raked over it. Re-did it to make sure I came out with the same order three different times. All the supplies ordered meet specifications, are within budget, and use the correct vendors.”

“Hmmm,” Gou hums in acknowledgement as she focuses her attention on the submission. She then opens her own order she made for this project, something she’s taken a habit of in preparation for Yazaki’s being incorrect so that she can swiftly make corrections.

Down to the row of half-tile that will need to be custom fit to the supply closet, it matches.

“You’re right. It’s correct,” she says, looking to her. Yazaki sighs in relief.

“Ms. Matsuoka, I’ve been doing this sort of duplicate work for every order, trying to find out where my submissions are going wrong. I memorize these blueprints, I talk to the vendors. I’ve been fine to accept that I make mistakes, and have signed off on my discipline, but I swear to you I know what I’m doing and something is definitely not adding up between my submissions and what’s received on the other end.”

Gou stares in surprise. Yazaki is generally reserved and quiet, but there’s an intensity on every part of her that Gou doesn’t recognize. “Well what do you suggest the problem is?”

Her resolution wavers when she looks away. “I… if you’d let me show you my orders, if I started printing them from my home, before they were submitted, I could show you that I’m doing it right.”

Gou frowns. “Ms. Yazaki if I did that I may as well do it all myself. I rely on you- my team- to be able to do this work independently so that I can work with everyone else. That’s why your position exists because I need help.”

“But it’s right,” she pleads.

“Except when it isn’t,” Gou sighs. “The orders are submitted under your name. You’re the only one with your login. You’re simply making clerical errors. Little mistakes.”

She leans forward. “When I get it right, I order exactly how much I need, don’t I? Down to the custom fittings I am accurate. I know how to read the layout, include demolition variances, and I even advise on building code because I know my materials, and I know how much they weigh and how much they can hold. I-”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Yazaki-”

“Please give me one more chance. Just one.”

Gou wants to, she really does, because she likes Yazaki. Not to mention something about this still sits weird, and Yazaki has an energy about it entirely different from how she’s reacted to it in the past. Before there was insecurity, apologies… the way she’s presenting herself now is either a person who is fuller of themself than Gou has a personal taste for or a person who’s trying to prove something they don’t have the evidence for yet. Yazaki hasn’t ever been cocky, so Gou assumes the latter.
“I’ll talk to Takeda for an extension on your probation. I can’t promise anything. It’s not my call anymore.”

Yazaki pushes to a stand quickly, gathering her folder back to herself. “Thank you, Ms. Matsuoka.”

Gou smiles faintly in response and watches her leave. She throws the term form into her wastebasket, hoping the confidence to toss it will do some sort of magic on convincing Takeda to agree to yet another extension. For now she can’t worry about it, and will catch up with him after the preliminary meeting with the party interested in buying the ISCR building.

--

“A fucking fishing supply depot.”

Sousuke frowns at her from the kitchen table. “Seriously?”

“Can you believe that? I’m so angry! All I could do was sit there and tell them exactly what they’d need to do it, too. Shogura- the guy in charge? Just a fucking asshole in a nice suit that wouldn’t stop looking down my shirt.”

“Did you knee him in the dick?”

She chokes on a noise of disgust. “He looked like the sort that would enjoy it. Slimy fuck had the nerve to put a hand on my shoulder.”

“Want me to knee him in the dick?”

Gou considers it, truly. “Next time.”

“Is that even… a good business idea? That’s a ton of space just to sell fishing poles and worms.”

“Recreational and commercial work. Middleman the docks and the country-wide operations for a local storefront option. Nets and boating supply… god I don’t actually care because I really hate this idea,” she snaps. “I even quoted them extremely liberal cost estimations just to try and deter them and they said they’d think about it.”

He hums. “Well what else is it good for, I guess.”

“Someone could want to reboot it as a pool!”

“In this dinky town?” Sousuke laughs. “Sasabe got while the going was good. Population here hasn’t been trending up for years. Not gonna be anyone to swim.”

“Pessimist.”

“Uh, realist? It’s just as good to us as a fishing supply store as it is empty and drained now.”

“Makoto wanted to buy it.”

“Sure when he was with Rin and they could run it together, and even then only in their fucking dreams could they even afford half of it. It’s better they didn’t have the means now instead of facing bankruptcy in five years when enrollment would’ve tapered and died.”

Gou huffs. He’s so damn negative. What doesn’t he see the worst in? And speaking of...

“Hey grumpy, since you totally look for the worst possible scenario in everything, I need your
He scoffs. “Not if you’re gonna insult me without the decency to at least compliment sandwich it.”

“Well I’m certainly not putting more weight on that little chair so you’ll have to give it up for the couch if you want it.”


She rolls her eyes at him as he crosses the room and flops onto the couch, settling his head on the arm and patting his chest in invitation to her. Having a warm body pillow at her beck and call really is one of the better perks of this entire thing. He’s just too large for any other sort of arrangement on her small furniture, not that either of them are complaining. She crawls over him, kissing his cheek before resting her head on her arms to look at him.

“Yazaki.”

“You can her?”

“No,” she sighs. “She asked for one more chance, showing me her work on her current project. It was all correct.”

“A little late for that.”

“Sure but… there’s something else. I have a feeling it’s something else. But I can’t place it. She’s so smart, and everything is so accurate until suddenly one figure changes and messes it all up.”

He goes quiet and idly reaches up to tug her hair loose from the bun she threw it in when she got home, running his fingers along her scalp until she lays her head to the side and starts to doze off a little from the ministrations.

“One thing, huh?” he finally asks.

“Yeah,” she murmurs. “Just some random typo fucking the entire thing up.”

“You said you lost that toolbag this week too,” he states.

“Inoue,” she confirms.

“... Just how big of an asshole is this guy, exactly?”

She opens her eyes and lifts her head back to her arms. “Pretty douchey. He gets his work done so I don’t care, but he’s never pleasant past cold politeness.”

Sousuke raises an eyebrow. “I think you have your answer. Suddenly it’s right when he’s gone? Only ever fucked up by a small- quick- adjustment?”

Gou sits up slightly. “Holy shit.”

“Well. Someone’s still takin’ a boot to the ass.”

“What a prick. That poor girl. Oh I feel so awful!” she groans, burying her face to his chest. “I should’ve thought of it from that angle! I basically accused her of being sloppy.”

“You just don’t assume the worst,” Sousuke consoles. “It’s okay.”
“And you do,” she sighs.

“Hey. Where’s the other compliment? And honestly you’re lucky I let the cheek kiss slide as one.”

“You’re lucky you get anything,” she teases. “And I was saving the majority of my compliments for when you solved my mystery.” Gou wriggles her hips just once and just enough to get him to shut up.

“Gou,” Sousuke starts uneasily.

She wants to shake him already and he hasn’t done anything. Instead she whines slightly, a whimper of disappointment.

He’s splotching red down past the collar of his shirt, and Gou wouldn’t have figured he was even capable of blushing before she started trying to get some from him in earnest.

“It just hasn’t been uh, successful.”

“That’s why we keep trying.” She pouts for effect. Well she hopes it has effect. The lip thing with the big eyes that she has about an eighty-two percent success rate with. Not that she would ever sit down and work that out, or anything.

“I could take care of you?” he suggests over a well-laid plot of gravel, sliding his hands from her hair to her ass. She keeps falling for that, because in this position who wouldn’t? He knows just how to say it to get her off her crusade for the night, too. He can definitely take care of her. But she’s starting to wonder and worry if he’s only offering so he can remove himself from the equation without making her feel bad. Maybe he isn’t attracted to her, doesn’t find her petite form sexy, and doesn’t know how to break it to her.

It would be a problem, because her feelings for him are mixed, and not being able to have sex with him isn’t helping sort that out well. They’re just like they’ve always been in truth, but sometimes she gets a one-sided orgasm out of it now. It’s perplexing, even if Sousuke comes with a bit of emotional baggage over Haruka, she figured she would at least kiss him and feel something… closer. By now, anyway.

“If you’re still unsure, let’s flip the tables tonight?”

He frowns. “What does that mean?”

Gou sits up on his lap and slips down his legs. “Exactly what it seems like?” She runs her hand up his thigh, pleased to see he’s following her movements with his gaze. He goes still when she reaches his crotch, and breathes shallowly when she moves up slowly to the waistband of his athletic pants.

“Hips up.”

Sousuke obliges and she tugs his pants down, leaving his boxers for now. She leans over as she pushes his shirt up and kisses him just below his navel, and treks downwards. Her teeth graze lightly along him through the cloth, and slowly his cock stirs in response. She’s relieved, not that she’d tell him. When she looks up to check on him, his eyes are closed but his mouth is parted, and so she continues.

This isn’t necessarily her favorite thing to do and she was hoping she wouldn’t really have to try this. In general, she’s small; he isn’t. In particular, her mouth is small and it’s always uncomfortable no matter who it is. Most guys aren’t aware of how downright grabby they get once
they’re chasing an orgasm, either. Still his interest- that he’s even responding- spurs her forward. She wants him to want her, or else what’s the point of this?

He’s half-hard when she thinks he’s ready to lose his underwear, and she kisses his thighs as she looks up and only sees the underside of his chin where his head is thrown back. He gasps quietly as she starts and licks up the side, and then before she knows it he’s sucking in a sharp breath and pushing her off quickly.

Gou sits up and wills down her frustration. “What?”

Sousuke shakes his head and hastily pulls his pants back up. “You told me you hate doing that.”

“No for you I don’t,” she sighs. “Sou, I’m sort of worried-”

He gets up suddenly and disappears into her bedroom, and she thinks he’s gathering his things to leave as he always fucking does when this subject gets too serious, but he returns with a condom he tosses on the floor next to her and rejoins her on the couch, pushing her down by her shoulders as he captures her in a heated kiss that has her mood flipping so quickly she’s nearly dizzy. He rocks his thigh between her legs and dances a hand up her shirt, and the barrier the padding of her bra forces when he gropes her makes her ache in quickly mounting want.

“Sou,” she breathes when he breaks to kiss wetly down her throat. She grinds on his leg, making him buck forward and groan against her skin. His other hand wastes no time with gentle skimming up her leg, and he reaches up her skirt to tug insistently at her underwear. She sits up and pushes him back, wriggles the garment down while he steps to the floor and out of his clothing. The foil crinkles quietly as she all but rips her undershirt and skirt off, leaving her in a bra. Sousuke curses quietly under his breath and when she investigates, he’s fumbling nervously with the slippery condom.

Gou sinks onto the floor next to him and grabs it from his hands, and deftly rolls it down his cock- and maybe tries not to kiss him right then and there for even being hard for once, too- while he steadies himself for her. He looks up hazily when she’s finished, and throws himself at her again, pressings her flat to the floor and lining himself up between her legs. He sinks two fingers into her, mostly to warn her or out of some ingrained habit, she isn’t sure, but she’s barely thinking about the details as he’s looking down at her as ferally as he is. He says nothing, gives nothing away, and she really doesn’t give a shit at this point.

She’s not about to tell him that fingering her without any other stimulation isn’t very useful to her end, in case it scares him off. It’s like being groped through her bra before- part of what she wants, the sensation that she craves, but muted and far away. It almost hurts not getting what she wants, a deep reaching burn scorching all the way up her spine. Her breathing is damp and she whimpers as she toes the line between frustration and anticipation.

Sousuke lowers his lips to her ear, rolls her lobe between his teeth and slows elsewhere. He’s either teasing her or he’s still hesitant, and the entire thing is exactly as annoying as locking your car keys in the car and only having a hanger to push through the sliver of open window to get them hooked and out- then dropping them.

Impatient, she reaches down and grabs his wrist, pushing his fingers out of her and grasps his cock, tugging him gently forward and managing her legs around his waist. “Fuck me,” she commands as clearly as she thinks is possible for the love of all that she knows, she wants him to fuck her.

He flinches and stares at her, but only for a moment before he kisses her as he thrusts his cock into her in one long movement, the rapid stretch just one notch below overwhelming. Of course it’s too
fast, but it’s better than nothing.

“Holy shit,” she hisses, pulling away from his mouth to breathe, and again when he pulls out agonizingly slow and snaps back in. She squeezes her legs around his waist, feet barely meeting around his back, and urges him into her harder with each thrust he takes.

“Jesus,” Sousuke hitches, whatever he mutters after that drowned out by her pulse in her ears.

She pulls him down with arms around his neck so he’s flatter along her, letting her buck her hips to meet him and grind herself to him for more contact to ease how rough he is. It works; for a brief window they’re enjoying it, and Gou is keeping pace. But his rhythm falls out of sync quickly once she starts to get into it, and he grabs her waist to pull her down on him the best he can when he comes, crying something she can’t make out somewhere into the floor behind her and it’s over. Just when it was feeling good, too.

He takes a moment to catch his breath, and without prompting or a word pulls out and kisses down the center of her body until he’s between her legs. “Sou- you don’t-” she barely gets out, truly, honestly, happy with just being able to have sex with him for now regardless of her orgasm.

He shakes his head to cut her off, and looks determined, but quickly freezes up and swallows roughly.

“Sousuke.”

“Mmm,” he hums distractedly.

“Stop.”

He looks up and frowns. “I want to.”

“I know. But I can’t get off if you’re looking at me like I’m the boogie man, so let’s be happy with this today. Don’t push it. We’ll work on it.”

Sousuke breaks to relief. He swings back over her and kisses her appreciatively, catching her off guard. It’s certainly the most enthusiastic he’s been so far, and he has no hesitation in his movements when he touches her from there. A pity-handjob maybe, but she’ll take it. She doesn’t discourage him. He’s a decent kisser too, and she’s had worse orgasms in her life. Today was progress.

He rolls onto his feet and makes for the bathroom before she can say anything. She can’t get a read on him, for how stalwartly silent he was for nearly the entire event, but he had to have enjoyed something about it and he’s not bolting this time. So it wasn’t great sex, and it ended quickly. But he’s still adjusting and she’s satisfied. It could’ve been worse.

She considers she’s worrying over nothing. Sousuke just might move slow, and all she can do is be patient. The feelings can follow as they iron everything else out first.

He emerges from her hallway fully clothed. “I’m gonna take off.”

She sits up on her elbows in surprise. “Huh?”

“Got shit to do. Sorry.”

It blindsides her so suddenly she can’t stop him with much of anything. She stands up and starts to gather her clothes. “Did I do something wrong?”
“No, Gou, you’re great.” He sighs. “I just should’ve maybe… waited.”

“Can we talk about it this time?”

He moves like he wants to say something, but his hard eyes soften on her and he crumbles. “I don’t know what my problem is. Really. But it’s not you.”

“Oh… well okay.” She chews her lip. “Call me? We can try again when you’re ready.”

It’s clearly disagreeable to him, and she hates that it is. If he can’t do this then she wishes he’d just tell the truth.

“Yeah, definitely. Sorry again.” He bends and kisses her on the cheek, and heads for his shoes.

One step forward, two steps back.

--

“Mr. Inoue, do you have a moment?” Gou keeps walking past his desk as she speaks and continues into her office. This termination form took about five minutes to fill out, and she’s had it done and pro-dated for a week.

When he enters and takes a seat, Gou turns her computer monitor around and clicks play on a video from capture software she had installed on Inoue’s work computer. It shows someone logging onto the computer itself as him, but logging onto the ordering software as Yazaki. An order from the previous week is opened to edit, and two figures are changed and saved. Then the person shuts it down. The timestamp shows it happening just after hours, on a day Inoue submitted overtime for. Gou doesn’t speak while he watches it, and once it’s finished she turns the screen back around and slides the termination form towards him.

“I don’t know why you would do that to someone, Mr. Inoue. But I know I won’t tolerate it.”

He looks down at his lap and back up with a grim, bitter expression. He looks like he wants to argue it, throw Gou through a fight of proving it further, but thinks better of it. “Do you want to know why?”

Gou insists the form forward. “No, I don’t. Whatever your reasoning is, it’s wrong. If you had issues with Yazaki, or me, or the company, you should’ve been mature enough to take the proper channels to address them. This was simply cruel and underhanded. Please sign.”

He clicks his tongue but says nothing, and sloppily signs the form.

“I need to get my things.”

“Have them within a few minutes then; security will be here to walk you out shortly.”

He glowers at her, and Gou only smiles in response. She hopes he remembers that. If not, oh well. Some people are just that sour all the way through.

The rest of her Friday is aglow with productivity. No one has committed to the ISCR building despite multiple back and forth meetings on the matter over the last few weeks, which secretly makes her happy. She holds onto a small whisper of hope that it can be brought back, as financially unsound as Sousuke thinks it is.

She’s been so caught up in everything that she’s barely allowed a thought about Rin. It’s a relief.
Sousuke insists he’s fine, and not to worry about it until she’s ready to. Between figuring out the Yazaki mystery and having breathing room from Rin, she’s feeling better about everything, even if once again her romance life is limping along, next to nonexistent. Par for the course.

And speaking of, Sousuke will hopefully spend most of the weekend with her after he takes a morning for the gym with Makoto. He’s distant after their last evening together. Even when Gou’s invited him over just to hang out, no pressure for anything else, he declines. She doesn’t know what they have, but it feels a lot less than what they had before. Considering he’s literally the best guy she knows, if this doesn’t work out, perhaps it’s time for her to take a long break from bothering with any of this. If Sousuke can’t be her ideal man, she doesn’t know who can be anymore.

Makoto is a person who is doing just peachy, according to Sousuke. Their break up has really scarred over for her at this point, some four months out. It feels just as in the past as Sousuke’s from Haruka is beginning to feel. *Old*; only memories of a different point in time. Bittersweet, not too much of one feeling or the other.

“Ms. Matsuoka!”

Gou turns around from her car door she’s in the process of unlocking to see Yazaki hurrying towards her. Her hair is down and flying behind her, and her clothing not too formal. This saga was all a much larger weight off her shoulders than Gou’s, and Gou is happy to see her friendly and at ease again.

“It’s after five on a Friday, Ms. Yazaki. Gou is fine,” she laughs.

“Then Aki is fine for me! I just wanted to thank you again.” Aki bows graciously once she’s close. “I know you put yourself on the line for me and I am so grateful!”

“I should apologize to you,” Gou responds. “I put you on the defensive without considering all the variables. I’ve learned my lesson.”

Aki rightens and twirls the ends of her hair between her hands. Now that they’re in the sunlight, some distant pang of familiarity registers in Gou’s mind to see her not so uptight. Maybe they’ve met before, or seen each other somewhere? Iwatobi *is* small; it’s not unreasonable to say they’ve crossed paths at some point.

Gou thinks it’s a lovely chestnut and wonders if it’s been washed out until now by the fluorescent lights of the office for her to only be noticing it now in the natural sun; deeper and richer than Makoto’s but not nearly as red as hers. “Oh, no! Not at all! You trusted me and gave me another chance. It’s more than I could’ve asked for.”

She smiles. “I only wish I’d caught on sooner.”

“Please let me take you to coffee or, well, whatever you want! I’d really love to thank you no matter how much you think you don’t deserve it.”

Aki looks determined, like she did when she brought her work to Gou’s office to prove herself a few weeks prior. She’s kind and strong, in Gou’s opinion, and for all of her headaches with the men in her life, she really could use a friend who seems as independent as Gou tries to be. It would be healthy to branch out now that things are settling down, try and make new meaningful relationships, experience new things.

“I’d like that,” she answers, and Aki beams.

--
It’s really much richer than chestnut. Chestnut is a dull color by contrast. Aki wears it up when they meet on the weekend, a twisted messy bun that’s actually made up of strands of gold, and she nearly looks a different person in a set of casual winter clothes and large glasses. Sousuke declined plans with her, and while it’s disappointing, she isn’t going to let it ruin her day. He’ll figure out his issue in time.

“Well Iwatobi has a lot of charm, I think,” Aki muses over lunch. “I lived in Osaka from middle school through college, so I’ve had my share of the big city life.”

“Charming is just another word for quaint,” Gou says.

Aki shakes her head in denial. “I really mean it. I didn’t expect to decide to move back when I came out to visit my grandfather, but something about it made me look for a job here. I think I just like quieter places. My parents are thrilled there’s someone nearby for my grandfather too. He’s just too stubborn to go to Osaka and stay with them. What about you?”

“I grew up here. I don’t mind it. I’m pretty adaptable no matter where I am, and I like to be near my family.”

“Oh yeah?” Aki remarks after a bite of her sandwich. “Big family?”

“Small, actually. Just my mom and brother. My dad passed away when I was little, and Mom doesn’t have brothers or sisters or surviving parents.”

“I have three half-sisters, one fully related brother, I’m the middle kid. My parents divorced young and remarried, but we’re all still really close. Since my parents’ new spouses were both from Osaka, everyone moved out there to keep the family intact. Well,” she pauses and snorts. “Except grandpa. Stubborn. So I have like, two moms, two dads, a ton of grandparents and cousins, all that.”

“Wow, that makes for interesting holidays.” Gou pushes her plate from her as she finishes. “I always wanted a sister too, but I guess my brother keeps me on my toes enough for five siblings.”

“What’s he like?”

“My brother?”

Aki nods.

“Oh, he’s a pain in the ass,” Gou sighs. “He’s been going through some pretty big life changes lately and everything has to be so dramatic with him.”

Aki giggles in response and nods. “Siblings are like that. But I’m sure he’s happy to have you through it all.”

She doesn’t want to lay out all the reasons that makes her chest tight to someone she barely knows, so she only nods.

“So…” Aki trails. “Are you like the only other woman over twenty-five in this town who isn’t married?”

Gou laughs, slightly nervous. They’ve sure jumped quickly from boss-and-subordinate to asking about personal lives. “Um, maybe?”

“Boyfriend then?” she coos.
“No,” she answers immediately, and moves to stipulate sort of, but Aki keeps talking.

“And wow! Man you really are one of a kind.”

Her lips twitch with a smile and the correction dies on her tongue; they’ve never labeled it that way anyway. Maybe this makes Gou more interesting to hang out with; she knows she personally would find it more appealing. Besides, they work together. Aki doesn’t need to know all of this. She’ll bring up Sousuke once they’re not still learning how many siblings the other has.

“So hey, there’s a little museum that opened up in Samezuka last week. I was just going to go after this on my own, but do you want to come too? Supposed to have weird things in it like mummified animals.”

She’s quick to agree; she has nothing better to do for the day now. At the very least she should let Sousuke know she’ll be out for the day in case he needs her, so she excuses herself to check her phone at the table.

Sorry i bailed. Meet up tonight anyway- i want to try again. Been worked up, he sends, and her heart skips. He’s never tried to initiate. She can’t miss it; the keys are on that fucking hook again, so to speak. She’s going to go ahead and assume he meant worked up thinking about her, and it’s music to her ears.

After 7?, she answers. Busy until then.

Great.

“All good?” Aki asks.

Gou nods and smiles. “Very good.”

Aki chats the entire way over and Gou is dazzled by it. She’s startlingly different outside of work, as most people are, but Gou’s finding they have just enough not in common to talk so long they nearly miss the stop, and keep going all the way over to the museum.

It’s an oddities museum. Embryos in jars and implements from around the world with bizarre uses. All that is well and good interesting, but Gou’s focus is elsewhere. Has she had a friend like this since Chigusa? Her own friend, not attached to Rin in some way? When Chigusa moved away, Gou admits she had a low period over it. She’s now married and with a family, and their interests just aren’t the same anymore. It leaves the boys, who she loves of course, but there’s always been a void there for Gou that’s difficult to grasp and explain.

It shouldn’t matter if her friends are boys or girls, but there’s no denying that some experiences just don’t cross those lines. She can’t relate with Makoto on things like ill-fitting bras, or Haruka about period cramps. Some discussions need people who experience those things, and her mom isn’t quite what she’s thinking of.

On the way home they’re much quieter, but it’s companionable. Gou’s caught up in her thoughts anyway, not used to such a shift in her daily routine. If she asks herself how long it’s been since she’s done anything with a friend, she’ll just be disappointed with the answer. So she rests in the moment and lets Aki keep talking to prove it’s actually real and not a dream.

“God I haven’t hung out with anyone other than my grandfather in months,” she says as they’re ready to part with a smile so genuine and bright that Gou can’t help but stare. Aki really is beautiful. “Good friends are pretty hard to find at this point in life, huh?”
Maybe Aki knows what it’s like.

How far down its rabbit hole can a hare on crutches get, Kisumi wonders as he watches a woman deliver a package to Matsuda outside of a hotel down the street from the central city building. A woman he’s followed for a while now—over a month since he was tipped off to her errand running by one of his contacts. A woman who’s managing a laundromat on the other side of the district.

Curious that she’d have anything to do with Matsuda, whose dry cleaning is done at another facility, and whose normal laundry is done at home so far as Kisumi’s been able to track. He makes a note of the location in a spiral notebook that’s slowly gone completely dedicated to this thread of his cause, and snaps a photo of their distant figures on his phone. It doesn’t turn out.

Drugs, money, maybe both or maybe neither. But no matter what it is, it’s so much more than what it seemed originally. He waits in the dark of his car until the two part. The woman drives away and Matsuda turns around to go back into the hotel.

That’s enough of this for the day. He has a story on food allergy proliferation to finish. All of this darting out of the office at the first indication from his still-anonymous contact to track this woman has made his working until midnight practically commonplace.

It’s been quiet, at least. He’s backed off of approaching Matsuda directly anymore ever since he caught wind of something bigger at play, and especially ever since Haru called him out on being a neurotic disaster. Especially now, it’s for his own safety, if he’s being honest. If Matsuda would threaten to destroy his career and relationships over sexual assault, he’d surely threaten to put Kisumi in the hospital over whatever the fuck this could possibly be in addition to it. Living in constant fear is proving to be too much, his pride notwithstanding.

With that in mind he heads home to work from his bed for once instead of the office. Just the thought of being mostly horizontal makes him drowsy, and it’s only been recently that he’s been able to get more than a few hours of sleep at a time. Now that Matsuda isn’t teasing him and sending those goddamned photos to him over and over. Followed by the phone numbers of people he knows. Like his parents. And what’s really kept him up: Hayato’s number.

The shittiest thing is, he could send those whenever, regardless of Kisumi’s involvement at this point. Destroying his relationship with his family has nothing to do with his career. He could do that just because he felt like it. Kisumi figures he gets off on the idea for now and won’t, but he’s still mentally preparing his groveling for when it happens.

Or maybe he won’t do anything, an increasingly more enticing option. If he’s honest with himself, he’s growing emotionally numb to this blackmail. What’s a few highly pornographic photos of himself to his teenaged brother? Oh, everything, sure. But he’s tired. It might just be easier to cut himself off if it happens, and never face it. Nothing he does will undo the damage or fully turn around the falling out. As if his parents aren’t disappointed in him enough as it is for everything else he’s done. This will simply have them finally denying he exists.

One way or another, he’s facing the music for those photos one day. If not his family, eventually his employer. He deserves it for trusting Matsuda and agreeing to them, he figures. It’s a good thing at the very least he doesn’t have much by way of friends. He’s kept it that way since everyone fucked him over in Kyoto, and it’s only been reinforced that it’s for the best since he came to Tokyo.
Kisumi cooks rice once he gets home to his studio apartment and eats it with some half-assed steamed cabbage that he gets too impatient to wait for to cook all the way through. He sits on the floor leaning against his bed as he flicks through the news of the day on his laptop. Though he knows better than to do so, he reads the comments. It’s some sort of pseudo-social interaction to argue with people in his head that ties him over more or less.

When he opens his personal email, Haru’s sent him something he doesn’t open from earlier in the week. Whatever stupid piece of stock imagery he stumbled upon that day, likely. Haru sends a steady flow of images without any caption or outright expectation of response and started without prompting. Kisumi has to assume Mika coughed over his address. He’s both annoyed and endeared, because getting too close to Haru is something he’s actively trying not to do, but merely being thought of like that makes him ache all the way through until he feels transparent and bled out.

He wants to get closer to Haru and be there for him because he knows the loneliness Haru’s experiencing on some level. Kisumi’s been holding on tight to that night they spent together and the happiness and peace it lent him as if he’ll never feel that good again. And oh, he wants that to be untrue. He’s lost track of how many times he’s started a reply to Haru asking him to a meal or a walk or anything, really, only to delete it. He doesn’t want Haru to find out about all of his mistakes. He doesn’t want Haru involved or threatened. So he doesn’t respond to the friendly emails reaching out for support, making a genuine effort for Kisumi’s attention, and he feels like dog shit about it.

With that twist in his chest, before a shower and writing from bed until he passes out, it’s time for a 10 PM cigarette. He’s rarely ever home to take advantage of it, and steps out onto his patio with a blanket from his bed wrapped around his shoulders. Like clockwork, he hears the stuttered rip of a lighter from the patio below him where a woman he’s never actually seen lives. He finds it fitting to keep it that way, and she doesn’t seem to mind, and even let him nickname her Yuurei too in lieu of learning her actual name.

As soon as he slides the door shut behind him, she speaks. Their voices carry back and forth relatively easily as the vertical distance between the units at his rundown building isn’t much, though Kisumi has to stay partways over the edge for an easy conversation.

“That you, Kis?”

“For once,” he answers.

The sound of the lighter starts again. “Thought you split. It’s been a few weeks.”

Kisumi leans over the half-wall until his feet leave the floor, dangling his hand until she slides the smoke between his fingers. He pulls to a more comfortable lean on the wall and savors a long drag before speaking again. God, he could almost cry from how much he misses this. “Not yet.”

“I’m not gonna have to tell the authorities to look at the bottom of Tokyo Bay for you when you eventually do disappear, am I?”

He snorts in amusement. “Not that bad. ‘Sides I think the Bay is totally passé these days. Probably dump me in some garbage incinerator instead. Or a metal compactor. Make a nice solid block outta me and send me to China. Then melt me in with low-grade plastic and turn me into lawn furniture. That’s the modern way.”

“Kissy, Kissy,” she sighs in disapproval. “Tell me if I should be worried, hon.”
He drags his ceramic bowl to himself that’s been pushed off to the side since the last time and ashes his cigarette with two taps. “Nah. I got it under control.”

His eyes slip shut in relief as his mind buzzes comfortable and warm, and as always he needs to consciously remind himself why he doesn’t just buy his own cigarettes. Because it’ll never be just one like this; it’ll never feel this fucking good to chain smoke half a pack at a time like before, and he’s not much better off now as compared to then to have the willpower to not do it anyway. “Hey, Yuurei.”

“How do you put up with it? Being on your own.”

“Got you, on occasion anyway. Got my little grandkids at holidays and birthdays. Got the cat all the goddamned time. Not so bad. Spent thirty years married to a man I hated until his stupid ass kicked it so really, this is ideal for me. If I get too antsy I find a guy ‘bout your age, chew him up and spit him out, of course.”

He chuckles. “Meow, cougar.”

“If you got it, flaunt it,” she purrs jokingly, making him laugh again. “‘Course if you stopped trying to singlehandedly save Tokyo from corruption like some sorta comic book vigilante, you might find someone you tolerate long term, you know. Or rather and more accurately, someone who’d tolerate you.”

“I got you, babe,” he shoots with an overblown confidence she definitely won’t fall for, “maybe that’s enough.”

He barely hears her snort. “Only a harem would be enough for a peach like you.”

“‘S’cuse you kitty, I’m more celibate than a monk. At this point I’d settle for a pity handy in a bar bathroom if fortune’s really smiling upon me.”

She tsks him. “What a shame, Kissy. Going by your hands, you’re a looker. And you’re sweet as all hell if I’m wrong about that.”

There’s not a lot of time left, he thinks as he taps his ash away again. Who knows the next time he’ll be able to do this? “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Mm you’re gonna start asking permission now?”

His next exhale curls up and away, smoke chased by the air in his lungs condensing from the winter chill. “If I got taken advantage of again like I did- have, more than once- I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“What I’d do. All I’ve had are people who see me as something to prey on.Fuck, maybe I am, honestly. Maybe it’s just my role to play. Someone’s gotta be the cautionary tale.”

“Ah, Kissy. You’re upsetting me before my bedtime, hon.”

A wry smile pulls its way to his face when really, it should be a frown. “Heh, sorry.”

“You love easily; one of the first things I learned about you. It’ll get you hurt, guaranteed. So learn to pick yourself up and try again and don’t let’em win because someone out there, probably a few
people out there, are gonna benefit from that trait of yours one day. And they won’t hurt you for it.”

“Easier said than done, huh?” Kisumi snuffs out the rest of his cigarette. “Should I give this up? Focus on picking myself up instead?”

“I sure as shit wish you would. But could you live with letting it go?”

It has to be something he asks himself three times a waking hour at least. “Still don’t know the answer to that.”

“If you’re not saying yes right away, the answer is no, hon. If I could make you happy by willing it I would, but the way the world is says you’re going to have to figure it out yourself. And that’ll mean a little bit of bravery and a whole lot of gambling.”

Yuurei’s sliding door rolls along the tracks, and Kisumi squeezes his eyes shut to will back the sudden surge of tears at the sound of her impending departure. “I won’t be around forever, Kis. It’d be a shame to never learn what you sound like when you’re happy.”

“Goodnight, Yuurei,” he nearly whispers, not caring if she hears him.

“Goodnight, hon. Get some rest.”

--

He’s half-way through a Saturday before realizing it is one. All weekends are anyway are a chance to compile what he’s learned in the days prior and chip away at his sleep deficit. Maybe catch a show or two if he can stay awake long enough for an episode.

This weekend there’s a whole lot of nothing to discover. And only more questions. That’s all right, if anything this is a break. He should take some time for himself that isn’t staking out random locations across Tokyo in his car. It’s good to be home too, as much as he doesn’t care for the space aesthetically. It’s still where he sleeps, and he should feel safe here.

It’s also on days like this that he realizes how fucking easy it would be to walk away from this and move on. Have a life. Open Haru’s emails without ten metric tons of guilt on his chest or take himself out to a movie or travel for a few days to get away. None of these things feels right to do while he’s pursuing this. Dragging innocent people like Haru in by association or doing anything fun for himself when people have been hurt- are continuing to be hurt likely- by his inability to really pin down the problem.

His phone illuminates off to the side with a message as if on cue. Does he really want to do this today?

*trade happening*

Kisumi sits up on his bed in an instant, shoving his laptop away. It’s the contact that’s been texting him about the laundromat woman.

*When?*

*soon*

*laundry*

At the laundromat? This person is there?
Twenty minutes, he sends. He flies off of his bed, stomps into his shoes and throws his messenger bag over his shoulder as quickly as possible, then sprints down the stairwell and across the parking lot to his car. He hates dealing with this during the day, but a lead is a lead.

Maybe they work there, which would explain a lot, how they know anything. But then… if they’re just an employee, not a victim, how did they get to him and how would they know what he was investigating? Did he ever stop and ask himself where this person came from?

Kisumi parks down the road when he gets close with a funny feeling in his gut and pulls a knit cap from his bag to pull down over his head. He checks his phone again for an update.

see me waving?

Kisumi looks up down the sidewalk to see a man in a suit down the street, waving enthusiastically, and time slows. Something isn’t right. He slows his gait, and startles when a man he hasn’t noticed walks alongside him, grabs his upper arm, and shoves.

“Keep walking.”

Fuck.

He thinks he’s being led to the laundromat, but they pass it for an unmarked door in the alley next to it. The waving man is gone when his vision stops splotching with terror long enough for him to take stock of the street.

“Wait,” he ekes out when the guy manhandling him throws the door open.

“Shut up, go in.” He doesn’t wait for Kisumi to comply though, and pushes him through the threshold.

The door shuts behind him and he’s greeted with a basic table and chairs, and Matsuda in one of them. There’s a few filing cabinets, some safety posters. Probably just a hideaway room owned by the laundromat, nothing special. “Have a seat.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Matsuda slides a cellphone across the table. “Kissy-”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Take the phone. Give it a look.”

He flickers his gaze to it briefly. “I already know what I’ll see.”

“Do you?”

“You’ve been texting me,” he says thickly. “It was you.”

“So then you now know, I hope, that you are a small fish in a considerably large shark tank.”

“I prefer the metaphor of an injured rabbit.”

Matsuda laughs. “Still a shit no matter what, huh?”

“Why expose yourself?” Kisumi asks. “Why show me your shady trading?”
“So that when I inevitably brought you here to threaten you, you’d really understand that it doesn’t matter what you think you know. Which I’m assuming, as I’ve only been sending you on wild goose chases to watch small black bags exchange hands for well over a month, is next to nothing.”

Kisumi’s face burns hot with anger and embarrassment, and he’s sure if he could feel his body his palms would hurt where his nails were dug in. He turns on his heel to leave abruptly, but the door swings open and his escort steps in and blocks the exit.

Kisumi shouts mostly in alarm when the large guy pulls his arm behind his back by his wrist to force him to bend and smack into the tabletop.

Matsuda leans in, almost bored, and rests his cheek on one hand. “Look Kissy, call me soft, but I don’t want to get you in trouble. Despite the ulterior intentions, I enjoyed our time together. So let me make this crystal for you: back off. You are in over your head, and no one is going to help you. You can put that on the record if you’d like to.”

“Fuck you.”

Matsuda sighs and waves his spare hand lazily, and Kisumi yelps when a bolt of pain pulls from his shoulder where the brute behind him yanks his arm up. “If you go to the police, they won’t help you. If you talk to your boss, he will fire you. We know where you live, we know where your family lives, and if you ever decided to make friends- of which we know you have none, sadly- we’d know everything about them before you did, too. So let it die. Go and live your life.”

“You hurt people,” Kisumi growls. “What the fuck is this? You’re a goddamn press secretary.”

“I keep denying your allegations. I meet with you when you request it. I’m not touching you, though I admit I did in the past and for that I apologize. Past the boundary, I know. But other than that, I’m performing my job admirably, really.”

“Oh but this is fine. This is okay.” He tries to stand, and is shoved back down.

“Well you just don’t quit, Kissy. How many outs do we have to give you? Come on now. You brought this meeting on yourself.” Matsuda sits up and waves the brute off of him. Kisumi stands and rubs his shoulder, glaring out of the corner of his eye at his assailter. “So consider this your last opportunity to walk away mostly unscathed, all right? Find yourself a nice piece of ass, and a nicer apartment. Write your cute articles about the festivals. Get a yearly raise and use it to visit your family. A smart man knows when to cut his losses. You’re smart, I know it.”

Kisumi rolls his eyes in response to the thinly veiled condescension, anger boiling so strongly the only thing keeping him from lunging at Matsuda being the behemoth behind him that would grab him in time. “And if I don’t leave you alone? If I figure it out? What, you gonna fucking kill me like some sort of crime lord? Give me a break.”

Matsuda nods over Kisumi’s shoulder, and while Kisumi wouldn’t do it over again differently if given the chance, he’s also acutely aware that he’s about to be laid out. “Funny you should mention it. You know what I read in your publication just last week?”

The brute shoves Kisumi off balance, and the next thing he registers is whatever a brick to the left side of the head might feel like and in the following moment, the cold stripped concrete floor bluntly against the other side when he hits that with little recollection of the fall. Hitting the concrete isn’t right either. More like slamming; a crack splits along his skull he feels more than hears. He rolls onto his back and groans, fire just under his eye blooming outwards along the rest of him and head pounding in the aftershock with exertion.
“Muggings are on the rise, of all things,” Matsuda echoes somewhere around him. “I think you wrote it, actually.”

He tries to sit up and fight back when he feels hands on him, going through his bag, but nausea and dizziness keep him down.

“Here’s your I.D. and your train pass.” Matsuda flicks both at him and they bounce off his chest. “I’m going to go get myself lunch with the rest of your wallet. Pity your car isn’t nicer or I’d take that.”

It’s almost a fucking blessing that he’s already disoriented when the big brute winds back and kicks him somewhere along his side for good measure, or else he figures he would’ve felt much more of it than he does currently, curled up and struggling to catch his breath as he is.

“Hey hey, that’s enough,” Matsuda chides. “Kissy, who’s this recent text from in your phone here? Nanase?”

“No one,” he answers right away on labored breaths. “Co-worker.”

“I’m gonna text him for you, in case you’re concussed, you know? Your head smacked the ground pretty good. Did not account for you being unable to defend against that,” he chuckles. “Take a self-defense class after this.”

When he sits up to protest too quickly, he only tumbles back over. “Don’t text him,” he pleads. “I am fine.”

“For your own safety,” he mumbles, distracted by his text. “...There. Find your way out when you’re ready and go home, Kissy. It’ll lock behind you. Gorgeous as you are, I hope I don’t see much of you going forward. Ice your face.” Light cuts into the dim room when he opens the door.

“Oh, and call my office if you need to see a doctor for the kick and we’ll get the bill, all right? Muscles got a little out of hand here; didn’t mean to take a cheap shot like that.”

Then the door clicks shut, and Kisumi sits up slowly this time, grimacing when nothing feels unbruised. His breathing is hard and every wheezing breath hurts but he needs to get to his phone. There are two solid images of the screen reflecting back at him, and he screws his eyes shut to shake away the double vision. Haru has texted him at some point during the ordeal, prompting Matsuda’s discovery of him. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. At least it’s only his last name, no photo.

lunch?

He reads Matsuda’s message; actually, not feeling well, could you come over?

?

Mistext, wrong person, Kisumi punches out with some effort and multiple corrections. I’m fine.

sick?

He sighs and winces from it. He better not have a broken rib. God fucking dammit.

Just a cold, he nearly sends in response until he sees his thumb smeared a drop of blood across the the screen. He reaches up and feels his cheek, positively incendiary to the touch with inflammation, and realizes the skin is split over the bone, too. Something about it does him in, or maybe it drains the adrenaline from him, but his hands start to shake and his head hurts so fucking badly that his next breath is more of a frail whimper.
Just as Kisumi deletes the text, his phone lights up again.

need medicine or anything?

He texts his address and nothing else before he can think better of it.

--

Getting home is a blur he doesn’t remember much of. There’s something to be said for the power of autopilot. He pulls his hat down farther over his face to make it up to his floor without inquiry from anyone he might run into, and there’s no Haru waiting at his door, thankfully. He regrets texting the address now. He can walk, he just drove. He’s fine. But since it was all he texted with no explanation, maybe Haru won’t bother. If he shows up, Kisumi just won’t answer the door. Easy.

But as he’s fumbling for the correct key, memory blank again from the time he started climbing the stairs to his current stand at his door, Haru calls for him somewhere nearby. He can’t even tell from where.

“Shit,” he mumbles, keys jangling and no door key making itself known. There’s five keys on his ring, then there’s ten, five, eight. It’s blurry.

“Kisumi? Did you hear me?”

“N-no, I- I can’t find my key-”

He looks down at a hand stilling his wrist, and Haru takes his keys slowly. When he looks up, Haru doesn’t react to anything he sees, and only holds them up for Kisumi to look at. “What does it look like?”

“A house.”

“This one?” Haru holds one up, the one with three decorative holes punched into the top. It always reminded Kisumi of windows. A house.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, can you step aside so I can get the door?”

He nods- he thinks- and steps back, and Haru reaches out quickly to grab him by the shirt. Maybe he tripped. Haru doesn’t let go, and uses his other hand to unlock the door and swing it open, then guides him through.

“Sit,” Haru commands, and pushes him onto the closed toilet lid in his bathroom. “What happened?”

“Got hit.”

“Right, but what happened?”

“Robbed.” The impossibly long drop from standing to sitting makes his stomach churn again. He takes a deep breath through his nose that sputters out when he’s reminded that hurts to do, too.

“Where are your towels?”

“I don’t know,” he grits through his teeth.
“Kisumi, where are your towels?” Haru repeats.

“Out there.”

Haru sighs. “Please don’t move.”

There’s a spot on the floor that he stares at to make himself obey. It’s odd, he knows not to move, but he can’t convince himself he heard the command either. He gasps when the hottest part of his face burns hotter for a moment, before his brain’s able to work out that it’s actually cold.

Haru’s bent next to him with a dish towel, dabbing at his cheek. He pulls the towel off and rinses in the sink, then resumes dabbing. “It’s not too bad. The cut.”

“Oh.”

“Couldn’t tell at first.” Haru stands in front of him and bends so they’re eye level. “Where are you?”

“My house.”

“What’s the day?”

“Saturday.”

“Who am I?”

“Haru.”

He holds up his index finger. “Follow.” Kisumi sweeps his gaze after it back and forth a few times before Haru’s satisfied and stops. “Okay, where are you hurt?”

“A lot.”

“Where?”


“Do you want to go to the hospital?”

“No, please no.”

“Okay. So you need to show me then if there’s anything else so I can make sure you don’t need to go.”

Kisumi nods. “I got hit.”

“I know.”

“And then I think I hit my head on the ground.”

“Okay.” Haru reaches up and lightly feels around his head until Kisumi hisses. “Here. There’s a bump.” He looks at his hand. “But you’re not bleeding. Did you black out?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay. What else?”
“He kicked me. Under my arm.” Kisumi shrugs it, not feeling up to pointing. Haru squats, carefully lifts Kisumi’s arm, and pushes his shirt up to observe.

“You’re bruised. Does anything feel broken?”

“I can’t tell. It just hurts.”

“You can breathe though?”

“Yeah. Not great.”

“Take a full lung, okay?”

“Haru-”

“We need to make sure nothing’s punctured. I’m sorry.”

Kisumi draws slowly through his nose, and tilts his head back as it aches the deeper he breathes. Haru squeezes his shoulder and rubs his thumb in a circle, totally useless but it helps a little bit anyway. He exhales smoothly, thankfully. His breathing itself is fine, it’s just the ribs.

“Okay. Looks fine, too.” He drops his shirt.

“You keep saying okay.”

“I know. I’m glad you noticed. Elbow?”

“Maybe?”

Haru snorts quietly, and touches one elbow. It’s fine. He touches the other and Kisumi hitches, but he’s still able to bend his arm. “I think you just hit it on your way down.”

Kisumi finds the spot on the floor again; Haru’s attention on him is becoming weighty. His nausea ebbs until he no longer feels like he could throw up at any second. He registers the full movement of Haru walking away and out of the room, and doesn’t think he misses any time between when he returns with a glass of water. Kisumi takes it as offered and sips, and Haru hovers his hands around it until Kisumi tips it back for a larger drink, maybe to make sure he can hold onto it.

“I want to shower,” he states after downing most of the water.

“It’s probably not a good idea.”

“I need to,” Kisumi restates. “They’re all over me.” Matsuda touching him makes him lightheaded to even think about, much less experience again. He’d rather burn his clothing than try and wash it out.

Haru looks nervously from the shower stall to Kisumi. “... Okay. But I’m going to stay outside the door and knock every two minutes for you, all right? If you don’t answer me I’m coming in. Don’t take it too hot.”

Despite it all, he huffs in mild amusement. “Sure.”

Now that he knows where the towels are, Haru fetches him one and leaves him to it. It’s a challenge, but thankfully only because he’s so stiff. Mentally he’s clearing up even if he’s still reacting sluggishly. Haru knocks like he said he would, and Kisumi responds he’s there. He’s careful washing around his head since he still can’t quite pinpoint the cut, and is afraid to even
touch the contusion on the other side, but he gets through it. It wears him out, and when he shuts
the faucet off he feels like he may as well have just ran a marathon.

Kisumi finally gets a look at himself in the mirror, haphazardly wiping the condensation away after
he cracks the door to vent the steam. Haru doesn’t bother him; some clanging in the kitchen telling
Kisumi he trusts him to be alone now.

His eye socket has wasted no time staining a royal purple. The cut is a deep red and inflamed all
around but Haru was right; it’s not big. His side is dark where the shoe hit him, and just slightly
mottled around it. He can’t even see the contusion through all of his hair and his elbow is only
slightly swollen, nothing bad. Looks like Matsuda’s idea of relatively unscathed means a mild
concussion and a full-body ache.

Taking a sucker punch is much more physically devastating than he ever expected it would be.

Haru’s microwaving something out of sight when Kisumi walks carefully out of the bathroom and
gets dressed into sweatpants and a sweatshirt. He won’t be going anywhere for a few days, may as
well get comfortable.

“Lie down,” Haru calls from the kitchen. Kisumi is more than happy to oblige.

Relief washes over him to splay out on his bed. Haru appears a few minutes later with tea for them
both, sets it down on his nightstand, and leaves again to return with a bowl he insists towards
Kisumi.

“Miso and a few chicken scraps. You should eat a little bit but not too much in case you get sick.”

Kisumi takes it and finds he is hungry. He can’t remember if he’s eaten anything today.

“But if you do throw up, you need to go to the hospital. That’s the rule.”

He looks over at Haru who’s awkwardly perched on the edge of his bed. Kisumi doesn’t get
company so he never invested in anywhere else for people to sit. “You manage concussions
often?”

“Makoto gave himself one once because he’s clumsy. Mostly with him I just panicked, which
made it worse, and after that I made sure to educate myself in case it happened again.”

Kisumi smiles thinking of it. Well mostly at the image of the chaos, since Haru is always so
composed. “Thank you.”

“I’d say anytime but I’d rather there not be another related situation again.”

“Me either.”

“So…” Haru trails, “You have your car, and that’s usually the first thing to be stolen, so what
really happened?”

Kisumi consumes a good portion of his bowl, hem-hawing all the while for a response. “Isn’t
thinking too much bad for a concussion?”

Haru makes a face, corner of his mouth pulling to the side until he gives in and sighs. “I guess.”

“I’ll explain,” Kisumi reassures. “But honestly I’ve had a terrible day and my headache is so bad
my eyeballs hurt. So, tomorrow?” He tries to smile, knows it fails. Fatigue is positively dragging
him down, and the gravity of what happened to him is panning to the surface of his thoughts now that the confusion is dissipating.

“Kisumi.”

He startles slightly, and notices his appetite is whittling. Haru seems to pick up on it and takes the bowl from him, replacing the space between his hands with the mug of tea. He only manages a short sip before he doesn’t feel like he can hold onto the ceramic anymore. Haru takes that too.

“Are you okay?”

He hates that Haru is practically not even sitting on the bed, so far away. Everyone has always been so far away from him. He’s afraid again. His space is crushing him. Matsuda has at least part of Haru’s name as Kisumi stupidly called him a co-worker, so Matsuda would know where to start looking if he wanted to.

They really did threaten to kill him, and for everything he’s been afraid of, that always seemed too extreme to consider until today.

Could he live with himself if he let it go, Yuurei asked. What a great way to say it in hindsight, because he definitely won’t be living with anything if he doesn’t. And now, Haru’s here. Despite everything he tried to do to keep him away, here he is, and he’s part of this now when it was the last thing Kisumi’s been wanting lately.

“I could’ve died,” he admits. “If they wanted to. Instead of warning me. They had me all alone. No one would’ve known or cared. Next time-”

“Next time?” Haru bristles.

“No, no. You’re right. Because he saw your last name on my phone. I can’t give him a reason to look for more.” Kisumi sits up with a grunt and leans forward. “I tried, though, to keep you out of it. I’m really sorry. I didn’t think it would go this far.”

Haru is basically on his feet, no longer even perching. The sight makes Kisumi’s chest tight with dread, just like when Yuurei leaves. “Please don’t. I’m so sorry, Haru, I am. Please don’t go.”

Haru seems to only just realize then that’s he’s stepped back, and compensates by sitting all the way on the bed, and Kisumi wishes he could see himself in third person and laugh. How hopeful this movement makes him, how it’s such a stupid thing that no one else in the world has probably ever thought twice about. Someone is sitting close to him, for him, and it’s more than he’s dared to allow in so, so long.

“Do you want me to stay here?”

Kisumi nods his head slowly, voice lost somewhere else for now. Isn’t it a first?

“Do you want me to sit closer?”

He nods again.

Haru scoots up the bed and pulls his legs up with him, then turns to ease Kisumi back down from where he’s pushed himself forward. But Haru stops midway, raising his hand from Kisumi’s shoulder and lightly pressing his thumb just under the cut on his face briefly. He curls his fingers so their backs are flat along the rest of Kisumi’s face, and he strokes up and back down carefully and tentatively.
Kisumi should stop him, at least until he’s slept and had time to calm down and consider the pros and cons of letting this go forward and determine if his ache for another person on his bed really is turning into an ache for Haru specifically... but Haru doesn’t push anymore than what he’s doing, and there’s nothing to stop. Haru is letting him turn into this or away from this. And maybe that he is letting Kisumi choose is what helps him reach his conclusion sooner than he wanted to.

Haru doesn’t move his hand away when Kisumi kisses him. He unfurls his fingers and smooths featherlight over his ear to rest his fingertips at the nape of Kisumi’s neck instead, careful to avoid his damp hair so it doesn’t snag, and urges him closer but only by the most inconsequential tug. It’s comforting and warm above all, and Kisumi loves in the moment that Haru chose this instead of pressing for more. He doesn’t want to talk.

They hold it long enough for it not to be written off as a mistake, and Haru’s the one to end it, reversing his movements from before. From the nape of Kisumi’s neck, back to the side of his face where he smooths once more over skin that hasn’t been bruised, and presses his thumb under his wound. He continues the task he started of getting Kisumi to lie down with a firmer palm to his shoulder, and follows his arm down to settle onto the bed, warm body pressed along Kisumi’s good side.

“I’ll watch you. Get some rest.”
makoto & rin: soak the garment in cold water

can we talk soon?

Makoto almost answers it’s unkind to steal things from others, as there’s less than a snowball’s chance in hell that the text came from Haru. He can count on one hand the number of times Haru has suggested they speak on the phone over texting or meeting in person with a one week lead time in the last decade or so. But making such a claim or joke in response if it actually is Haru would only make his friend change his mind and not want to speak anymore. He’s still so fickle like that after all this time.

of course. about to leave for work right now, so tomorrow when you have a moment? i get home late.

Haru responds quickly.

can it be tonight?
i really need to talk to you

Makoto’s reaction, of course, is a bottomed out stomach and a surge of fear. Haru just doesn’t go to Makoto on his own like this. His phone goes off again while he contemplates calling Haru right then and there.

i’m fine, don’t panic

He laughs to himself, but mostly in nervous relief. i’ll call you when i’m home. a little after midnight.

k

It must be important for Haru to stay up so late in wait, even if it’s nothing Makoto should panic over. That in and of itself is enough to give pause. He hasn’t been so adamant about speaking since he committed to his Tokyo move some eight months ago now, insisting Makoto be the second person he told after Sousuke, of course, and taking a moment to clarify Sousuke only knew first because it affected his living situation and not Makoto’s.

Another thing Haru still is after all of this time and change is hyper-cognizant of Makoto’s feelings, even at Makoto’s expense on occasion as it was when Haru wouldn’t spill his motivations regarding Sousuke over lunch just before the world basically ended.

He frowns down at his phone as he thinks it, and drops it back in his pocket to resume shopping. He could do well by himself to shed that fatalistic filter he lays over everything and not let life hurt more than it really needs to. His world has certainly not ended.

The shopping basket digs angry lines into his forearm; Sousuke’s shopping list didn’t look like much at a glance but meats and vegetables are heavy. There’s an element of embarrassment sticking to him by not knowing that. He should. He should eat well enough to know he needed a cart, but he doesn’t. Sousuke sent him on this week’s trip for a reason, even if most of the food isn’t for him and Sousuke’s excuse for not having time was thin at best.

But he lets it by without complaint and does it. It’s better than a lecture he doesn’t need to hear, and speaks louder than one too. Hard to buy junk when Sousuke’s list is clean next to his own.
Because Sousuke stokes an already smoldering flame of competition in Makoto that’s only seemed to get weaker somehow over the years. He’s missed it, and didn’t realize he did until he felt it warming up again somewhere deep from within. There was no competition to be found in teaching kindergarteners how to float, and Rin’s brand of competition was always a bit jarring and overbearing for Makoto. Sousuke’s is a welcome balance. It’s a silent, raised eyebrow in his mind’s eye and a challenging *I dare you to buy those nasty cup noodles again.*

Fine. He’ll buy the goddamned salad.

It’s simple, it works. They’re comfortable with each other against what seemed impossible odds at first. Even though they’ve fought and argued even past the big throwdown outside of the restaurant, there’s common ground here. Their bickering is going away, though Makoto genuinely surprised himself when he realized he was arguing back- not really his thing usually- but Sousuke is *just* coarse enough to drag that out of anyone. Over the weeks though, their silences are falling more companionable than hostile. Their arguments are more of a superficial snark. Makoto enjoys his company.

He liked all that solitude at first, but eventually it will turn on him, he knows. He’s proven he can handle a bit of ruckus again, not that Sousuke is leaving him with a choice on the matter.

After shopping, he needs to get to work. It’s much of the same. He unloads trucks sometimes onto other trucks, sometimes onto shelves, sometimes onto carts or rolling flatbeds. Physically demanding, sure, but his co-workers are older and not interested in striking up conversation. He’s able to pop in earbuds and work with his mind elsewhere or on days that he isn’t doing great, his mind goes nowhere at all and rests. It’s been good to him.

It’s a quarter to midnight and there’s an unusual amount of work still to be done. Makoto is worried Haru will fall asleep on him if he’s too late, and the others he’s working with seem disgruntled at the sight. As if synched with his observations, a shout startles him just outside of the loading dock, and he heads towards it. He knows basic first aid, and that sounded pained.

When he gets to the source, though he can’t begin to piece together how it happened, there’s one of the older men bent over his leg next to a stopped forklift carrying a pallet and another Makoto recognizes as a young forklift operator named Kiyoda squatted next to him. Makoto notices blood staining the leg of the man’s pants, and takes his uniform shirt off as he kneels next to him.

“Corner of the pallet got me,” the man mutters. “Wasn’t his fault; wrong place wrong time.”

“Take this,” Makoto instructs, handing him his shirt. “Hold it to the wound, and I’ll find a first aid kit.” He probably shouldn’t be surprised when the only one he finds is not well stocked. Just not typical for a place like this to stay up to code in that arena. He grabs his water bottle from his cubby in the back and tops it off at the fountain, then returns to the man.

Carefully, he moves the pant leg out of the way and flushes the wound with water to at least clean it out. It’s a decent gash down the meaty part of his calf, and now he needs to call a cab for the hospital. They’ve attracted a small audience, he only realizes when he looks up to ask someone to call one so he can hold pressure to the wound for the man.

“I can take care of this,” Makoto reassures them. “Mr. Kiyoda, would you please get us a cab?”

Kiyoda nods and disappears around the corner, returning a few moments later to announce it’s on its way.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?” Makoto asks.
“Ichinose.”

“We should head out front to wait for the cab, Mr. Ichinose. Let me tie the shirt.” Ichinose silently complies, letting Makoto take the cloth so he can tie it in a snug knot. “I’ll help you stand and walk?” he offers.

The man grunts his reluctant acquiescence and Makoto moves to support him on his bad side. Kiyoda tails them. When the cab arrives, Makoto helps him into the back, and moves to get in after him, but Ichinose holds up a hand. “I’m all right.”

“Oh, but-”

“That’s good. Thanks for the help, I got it from here.” Ichinose leans and pulls the door closed quickly after that, and the cab takes off from there. Makoto is slightly relieved, as he really didn’t want to have to travel all the way to the hospital just to help the man get inside. Not like he would’ve been allowed past that point.

“Ah jeez,” Kiyoda frets next to him. “All my fault. I feel awful, I didn’t see him.”

“It was an accident,” Makoto responds. “Just a few stitches.”

Kiyoda sighs, and extends his hand. “Thanks. Glad someone knew what they were doing. So I’m Youto. Don’t think we’ve really met formally. Tachibana, right?”

“Makoto, please,” he corrects, taking the handshake out of politeness and dropping it quickly. “It’s nice to speak with you.” He fishes his phone from his pocket and sees it’s already after midnight. The last bus leaves at a quarter to one, so he needs to get out of there. “You may want to write up an incident report,” he says to Kiyoda. “I’m sorry, I would do it, but I have somewhere I need to be.”


Makoto nods and leaves to get the rest of his things together, pulling his light jacket tight over his undershirt now that he’s missing a layer. Not spring enough yet to try and get away without it for him.

“Makoto!”

He sighs privately and turns around. “Yes?”

Kiyoda smiles. “Thanks again, really. I was about to panic there with all that blood.”

“It was nothing. Have a nice night.”

“You know,” Kiyoda starts and already Makoto is losing his patience. Half after midnight now. “We’re the only guys here even close to the same age, so we should talk more.”


“Uh, yeah! See you tomorrow.”

Makoto’s mouth twitches at least half of a smile, and he walks swiftly out the building and down the street. Just as he was relishing in the silent environment of his workplace, it all has to come crashing down. It’ll be a juggle to try and keep Kiyoda at a distance without coming off as rude. Nothing against him, but he’s definitely younger and Makoto isn’t in the business of making new
friends at the moment. Not with so much damage to chip away at already waiting for him.

He barely makes it to the bus, having to sprint to catch it, and once seated texts Haru to ask him to give him another half hour to get home and situated. He only gets another k in response and not the miffed cold shoulder he expected.

Sousuke’s still awake somehow when he gets home despite it being the middle of the week, stretched out in the living room and watching a movie. Makoto hurries to get his shoes off and hang up his coat, and thinks he can break his record for the quickest shower he can manage if he sets his mind to it.

“Yo,” Sousuke calls.

“Hi, sorry, I need to call Haru,” he answers hurriedly, swiftly walking by.

“Uh, is he dying? Why would he still be awake?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I need to call—”

“Is that blood?”

“Yes! Later!” Makoto snaps, finally out of manners to spare.

Sousuke clicks his tongue and curses him on his way into the bathroom, but oh well. He quickly strips and jumps in before it can warm up, and is out before it starts to steam. Clean shirt, underwear, and sweats tied off with one hand while he calls Haru with the other, and then he realizes he doesn’t know where to take himself to speak since Sousuke has the living room. He opts for the floor of Sousuke’s bedroom, near the door so it’s not too intrusive. Haru picks up on the last ring and greets him with a loud yawn.

“I’m sorry, Haru, I got caught up.”

“Wh’y’work so late?” he mumbles.

“That’s my shift.”

“It’s bad for you.”

“I like it. It’s quiet. Well, it was. Today was not quiet.”


“Haru?”

“…Is Sousuke around?”

“Ah, no. He’s watching TV.”

“I haven’t told you something,” he confesses clearly. “Something important…” Haru sighs, and Makoto grips the phone tighter. “I don’t know.”

“What is it, Haru? It’s okay.”

“I just didn’t want to text you, didn’t know how to say it either… remember when you mentioned Kisumi after I went to that basketball game? How you said…”
“Er, no one knows where he is?”

“Yeah. Well, I do. I’ve known. He’s here. He works here,” Haru stutters uncharacteristically. “In the same building as me.”

“O-oh?” Makoto remarks in confusion. “Well that’s nice? I hope you’re getting along this time?”

The line goes suddenly quiet. “Haru?”

“Is… I miss Sousuke,” Haru says quietly. “But I kissed Kisumi and I’m afraid, Makoto.”

Makoto whips his head to the door as if Sousuke can hear this, and just in case lowers his voice anyway. Besides, this is so out of left field he’s not confident in his tone to stay calm if he doesn’t nearly whisper. “Y-you kissed him? Kisumi? Shigino?”

“Yeah. A few times… but… I feel like I’m giving up on Sousuke and I don’t want to.”

“You know he’s with Gou,” Makoto says gently.

“... I don’t want to give up,” Haru repeats. “But this is confusing for me. I don’t know what to do.”

This is uncharted area for Makoto and Haru. If he’d known he was going to be blindsided with something like this, Makoto might’ve suggested they waited until he was alone and both of them weren’t tired. At least it makes sense now why Haru didn’t want to wait, but what does he really expect to hear right now?

“Oh obviously I didn’t want this to happen,” Haru continues. “But you told me he’s with Gou… and that was hard to hear. I’ve been getting close with Kisumi since he’s nearby, and I don’t know what’s wrong with me but I like him too and I feel terrible, even though I shouldn’t.”

He sounds nearly panicked when he finishes, making Makoto’s chest tighten. So sure, so confident Sousuke would follow him. “Haru, you’re allowed to be unsure, but you can’t be afraid of that or you might miss an opportunity with Kisumi.”

“I don’t want to close that door. I don’t want Sousuke to see me keep going without him. Because I don’t want to do this without him. I don’t want this.”

Makoto swallows hard, and he feels like he’s part of this equation even if it has nothing to do with him. They were so stubborn, so unwilling to talk, that he half wants to tell Haru this entire situation is something he brought on himself, then drag Sousuke in for good measure and force them to confront each other and finally listen to each other since they certainly have no intention of listening to anyone else.

Maybe Sousuke and Gou aren’t good for each other romantically, and honestly that’s his fledgling opinion that he hasn’t quite been able to flesh out for himself yet, but expressing that to Haru would just tease him with false hope. But regardless of any of that, regardless of Haru’s desires or Sousuke’s hidden regrets or Makoto’s doubts, Sousuke and Gou are trying to make it work. Sousuke is now Makoto’s friend.

He can’t throw any of them- Sousuke, Haru, or Gou- under the bus to avoid the difficult truth he knows he can’t run away from here for his own comfort. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone, and unfortunately it means someone’s going to get hurt, because being fair isn’t always the same thing as being happy.

“Haruka… I don’t think this is your door to keep open, and I don’t know if Sousuke hasn’t already
Haru doesn’t respond right away, and Makoto doesn’t know what to expect. He knows it isn’t worth anything to point out that Kisumi can be someone new, someone to help him move on.

Because Haru is only just now breaking up with Sousuke. Everything up until tonight, Haru considered temporary. He thinks back to that day again for the second time since he got up this morning, how Haru was so nonchalant. Everything about that is only just becoming real for Haru now, and if only Makoto hadn’t taken so long to put this together, maybe he could’ve helped. Done something. Anything. Because even now though they have their own lives and independence Makoto would still do just about anything to not have to see Haru hurt.

“I want him back,” Haru finally says. Makoto almost doesn’t hear him, and considers carrying on as though he didn’t. This isn’t where his and Haru’s relationship excels. He doesn’t know what to do or say to comfort him, because Haru doesn’t share these sorts of feelings with him. “Why didn’t he want to come with me?”

Makoto bends forward over the twist in his core, never having been strong enough to weather the various heartbreaks in Haru’s life. This one hurts more than any of the others. He can’t be there with Haru, can’t offer him any sort of adequate alternative. The numbness Makoto’s been experiencing over his best friend being so far away begins to thaw, and at the worst possible time.

“He was hoping you’d stay,” he answers for lack of anything better to say.

“That is not fair,” Haru protests shakily. “That’s not fair for him to be so hypocritical and help do all of this—”

“I know,” Makoto agrees. “But that’s how it happened. It’s too late now but that doesn’t mean things can’t change, either.” He slips, he knows it. He shouldn’t say things like that. But Haru sounds seventeen again and he’s had about as much as he can handle of it.

“So what should I do?”

“I can’t,” Makoto fumbles. “I can’t know that.”

“What would you do?”

He’s already doing it, he thinks. He’s dreaming about Rin, hoping against all odds. Working on himself where he failed to try and show him he can be better. Wanting someone that regrets him until it hurts, and all he can wish for when no one’s around is that Rin will simply… change his mind. That Rin will confront whatever he’s going through and he'll still have feelings for Makoto once he does like Makoto does for him. And then they can do it right, maybe. He knows how objectively stupid it is to put his energy into that. He doesn’t want it for Haru, this sort of longing. It’s terrible. If Makoto could consider feelings for anyone else, he’d give it a shot and not choose to keep wandering through whatever sort of purgatory this is.

“Talk to Kisumi,” he says all at once, forced from him like he’s winded. Because it’s the right answer, even if it’s difficult to admit.

“Huh?”

“Give him a chance, but be honest that you still feel this way, and let Kisumi decide if that’s something he's okay with. I think I’d know best the sort of trouble it causes when lying is involved. I don’t want you to fuck up like I did, Haru,” Makoto says sternly.
“You didn’t… do that.” It’s always Haru’s kneejerk reaction, Makoto is finding, to insist Makoto is in the right about everything. He wonders if Haru does it protect him, or he just doesn’t realize he’s doing it, but this is one of the things he’d like to be different. It’s what made him believe things were okay with Rin when they weren’t for too long.

“I did, I’m okay with that, and I’m working on it. I am going to try for Rin. I know better than to make him my reason but I’m doing it anyway… because that’s what I need to move me. But that’s not you. I don’t want you to miss out on something good by doing the same thing I am. I don’t think we’re alike here, and waiting around for Sousuke…”

“Like I waited for Rin when I was a kid,” Haru fills in thickly.

Makoto nods to himself. “Like you waited for Rin. How much that hurt… even though he came back, you lost a lot of yourself back then for a long time. Don’t lose hope, but don’t drag yourself down with it either. And don’t be upset if that’s too much uncertainty for Kisumi. You’re telling him you have feelings for two people, after all.”

“Okay,” Haru breathes unsteadily. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I had no one else… I mean, Gou and Sousuke obviously I can’t go to. Rin hasn’t returned my calls. I just got to know Kisumi… you’re all I have.”

“Just because we don’t usually talk about this stuff doesn’t mean you can’t still come to me about it. Anything, Haru.”

“Same to you, you know.

Makoto smiles. Somehow, it’s good to hear it even if it was always implied. “Thanks Haru.”

“Okay. I’m tired and need to think.”

“I’m sure,” he laughs. “I’m glad we talked. I miss you.”

“… Yeah. Me too. Good night.”

“See you.” Makoto moves the phone from his ear, but catches his name again just before he hangs up. “Yes?”

“I’m also sorry that I wasn’t as supportive as I could’ve been when things were getting bad for you. I don’t think I took any of it seriously and I should have. It was wrong of me. It won’t happen again.” Haru sighs, more out of irritability with himself, it seems. “Anyway. That’s it. Bye.”

“Tha-” Makoto starts to say, but the call ends. Just as well.

For how difficult the conversation was, he feels warm for having it. Loved. Trusted. Makoto takes a few moments to wring his hands out on his lap as the torrent of emotion that brings with it is suddenly overwhelming. That apology means the world to him; the world that hasn’t ended.

He has Haru, and no matter what, he’ll do his part to make sure he always will. It’s worth something.

He takes stock of his surroundings again and stumbles to his feet to get out of Sousuke’s room. He was in such a hurry he didn’t fully think the move through. Sousuke is where Makoto left him,
passively watching something still. It looks like he’s drifting off and ready to go to bed.

“Sorry,” Makoto apologizes. “Had to use your room.”

Sousuke shrugs. “He all right?”

“Ah yeah, he’s fine. Why are you up?”

“Uh, well, for starters, you’ve been in my room.”

Makoto rolls his eyes and takes his seat at the coffee table as has become habit. “Before that.”

Sousuke looks like he has a reason, brows drawing over a frown, but he backs away from it. “... Couldn’t sleep. Got up to get a drink, you weren’t home yet. Waited up in case you missed your bus or something.”

“Oh,” he mumbles, embarrassed. “A man was injured today and I helped with first aid. Took a bit of time.”

“Yes, the blood,” Sousuke connects. “Got it.”

“I would walk home if I missed my bus. It’s late.”

“I know you would. I figured at least I could bitch at you for it if I stayed up and caught you. But alas, you made it.” Sousuke rolls onto his feet and stretches. “So I’m going to give sleep another shot.” He pauses at the edge of the living room. “You swear he’s all right? You’re not allowed to lie.”

“He will be,” Makoto answers.

“Was it about me?”

Makoto stares at Sousuke’s back and mulls it over. Maybe Sousuke’s tired enough to not turn around and literally kick him out for what he dares to say next, since it’s not like it went well the last time he tried to get through to him. “It was. And how you won’t be joining him in Tokyo. He thought you’d go, you know, and felt guilty for even considering dating again. He feels bad even though he knows how quickly you turned around to be with Gou. You’re not the only one feeling betrayed.”

He doesn’t move for only a beat longer, and resumes the slow walk to his bedroom. “Blood, huh? Didn’t take you for the type. Should do somethin’ with that.”

Sousuke’s door clicks softly shut, and Makoto decides he had a pretty good day.

--

It all sticks with him in the following days so badly that he starts to lose sleep.

Sousuke goes on as if their conversation didn’t happen. He stops bringing up Gou, not that he did often to begin with other than their painfully awkward conversation about sex that still, weeks later, has Makoto hung up.

Kiyoda really goes out of his way to maximize time with Makoto while he works, to the point that Makoto is shaking out of the mental lull he was in that made the place bearable. It’s going by way of stifling to have to worry about the man always wanting to speak to him. The repetitious nature of his task every single day is making him irritable by his break, itching to do literally anything else
with his life once more. He’s angry for a while that his calm stasis has been so violently disturbed.

“If you don’t like him, tell him to fuck off,” Sousuke advises on their walk home from the gym.

Makoto sighs. “It’s not that, I just don’t need a college student trying to be my friend. He’s like a clingy, yippy dog.”

“Oh, man, Makoto,” he says. “You’re thick. He has a crush on you.”

“Well that’s too bad,” Makoto grumbles. “A warehouse is not a place to pick up a date and I’m far from interested.”

Sousuke laughs. “What, you only gay for Rin?”

He kicks a rock down the the sidewalk to distract himself from becoming agitated with the conversation. “No, but I don’t just date anyone who likes me. He’s too young and not my type.”

“You don’t date anyone, period, I’m realizing.”

“Not often, no,” Makoto agrees with a sigh to suggest he doesn’t want to talk about this.

“Especially when you still got it bad for someone else, hmm?” Sousuke teases. Makoto wonders why he’s fishing for the information; he’s never brought up whether or not Makoto still has feelings for Rin. Makoto has been assuming Sousuke couldn’t be assed with it.

“If you want to be so damn nosey about it, sure.”

“Easy, tiger. Can dish the nosiness but can’t take it, huh? It’s been on my mind. You ever gonna actually talk to Rin if you want him back so bad?”

“It’s not that simple,” Makoto argues. Sousuke doesn’t seem to react that Makoto didn’t outright deny that he wanted him back, either, so he pushes it. “He might not want to. I walked out, not him. There’s still a lot to resolve, and even if he did want to try again I don’t think I’m ready anyway.”

Sousuke hums. “I’d tell you what he was thinking if I knew. Admittedly… I haven’t seen him lately. He hasn’t been answering my texts.”

Makoto looks over in alarm. “That’s what Haru said.”

“Ah, shit,” Sousuke mutters, scratching at the back of his head. “I just thought he was still pissed off about the Gou thing.” He pauses. “I guess I didn’t tell you. But he flipped the fuck out when he found out the uh, hard way. And Gou was livid and told him to get bent, took his key. Hasn’t spoken to him since.”

“So you’re saying… he’s not answering you or Haru. Gou cut him off. I haven’t seen him since I left.”

“I- Fuck.”

“I’m worried,” Makoto admits, biting the corner of his lower lip.

“Yeah. His reaction wasn’t normal, even for him it was overreacting. Shit I didn’t even consider all of that. He’s always talking to Haruka I just assumed that never stopped… we should do something.”

Makoto stutters on his next step and stops.
“Yes, you come too,” Sousuke answers before Makoto can ask. “I’m no good at being sensitive and this is definitely a situation that’s gonna call for it.”

“I don’t want to do that,” Makoto confesses. “I can’t yet, Sousuke.”

“Of course you can. You still care about him. We’re already out and about; let’s just go check on him.”

He shakes his head and takes a step back, higher-level thought processes grinding to a halt. “No.”

“What do you mean no? I don’t care what any of our histories are; when one of us could be in trouble, we set it aside. You know I’d drop it all for Haruka if he did this. I did it for you too even before I knew what had happened from Rin’s side.”

“No,” Makoto repeats. “I won’t until I’m ready.”

“You’re never going to be perfect, Makoto,” Sousuke says as if it tires him to get into. “And I know he has a nasty habit of making it seem that way sometimes, but Rin sure as fuck isn’t above any of us either. He’s just as flawed. Why do you put him on such a pedestal?”

“I left him,” Makoto snaps. “I am clearly able to recognize he isn’t perfect.”

Sousuke has the nerve to roll his eyes, and Makoto’s next breath is sharp and short as he tries to keep himself composed. “You left him because you blame yourself for his problems. You took the fall for everything that went wrong, and everything you’ve done since isn’t for you- it’s for him. You didn’t think you were worthy so you cut your own rope to save him, didn’t you?”

He looks down for a moment and considers making a fight of it. His arms itch with irritation as his skin heats up, but fighting about it isn’t confronting what Sousuke said. It’s just arguing. So he looks back to Sousuke resolutely. Because Sousuke’s not wrong, but he forgot something important about this entire thing. What everyone forgets about Makoto, and he’s sick of smiling it away.

“I told you from the beginning of this that I didn’t want to be with someone who regretted me. I never want to feel that way again. But even if it meant putting the fault on me, letting him blame me, I would do it if it gave Rin and I peace from all of that contempt neither of us wanted. I can shoulder that for us. While Rin works out what he needs, even if it isn’t me, I can take the fall. Sure it hurts to feel like I’m the problem, but the reason I do that is because I love him and I believe in him. I am not weak, Sousuke.”

“Makoto, listen-”

“No. Let me finish. I don’t like myself, I try every day not to hate myself. I don’t always do things for the right reasons but I do what works for me. I should learn to love myself, and never lie for my own sake, but to be honest? I don’t always have it in me. I want to be the best I can be for you guys. I trust you all and love you all so much more than I will ever trust or love myself. I’m getting better with all of that. But yeah, it’s never going to be perfect. One day I might be happy with myself, but until then I still need to keep trying and do what it takes to move. I’m not weak, damnit. I’m not helpless and I’m not doing all of this just to pity myself. This is for him as much as it is for me and that’s not wrong just because you don’t agree with it.”

Sousuke’s thoughtfully quiet after Makoto finishes spilling his soul. It wasn’t all what Sousuke needed to hear, but Makoto needed to say it at least for himself. In his many months of silence, he hasn’t reminded himself of any of that nearly enough. Hasn’t been living it like he should. Not if Sousuke still thinks this simply of his motivations.
“You did all that for him? When he fucked it up just as hard as you.”

“Of course I did,” Makoto answers. “It was the only way we could both move forward and grow. I want him back only if it’s right. Only if we’re both willing to put the effort into being better to each other. I don’t care which of us made the most mistakes. That effort starts with me this time.”

More silence fills the space between them. It’s not unpleasant. “I care a fuckton about Rin,” Sousuke states seemingly out of nowhere. “And I never gave you the time of day but you know-fuck it. He was lucky to have you. You’re right, I don’t agree. But that’s the most fired up I’ve seen you, so what the fuck do I know. I hope he figures it out, Makoto. I really do. He’d be stupid to throw you away and I’d be even stupider to argue with you about it when I don’t always do the right thing either.”

“Thank you, Sousuke,” Makoto says quietly. He keeps his eyes down, sure the fear within them betray his gratitude. “It means a lot that you listened.”

“But I want him to know we care. He’s thick about it sometimes. He might even be okay but he should still know, right? Please Makoto. I feel like his only friend lately and I want to at least try to get to him.”

Makoto chews his lip in apprehension. This would be the first decision since leaving Rin that he doesn’t feel in control of. It’s anyone’s guess how it might go, and while he’s always been aware of and ready to accept the possibility that he might never get Rin back, it’s still something he is terrified of. But isn’t it him who just told Haru not to be afraid?

Sousuke nods his appreciation and turns in the direction of Rin’s house before Makoto can answer.

“Sato,” Rin sighs, in that brief window of time when sex with this guy still feels good. Before inexperience coupled with a total lack of desire to get to know Rin’s body takes over and leaves him grinding his teeth sometimes in discomfort, and sometimes when it feels all right he grinds them in regret for agreeing to it again.

Today’s one of those discomfort days, when he told Sato he was ready when he probably wasn’t. When his long fingers felt good but Rin wanted his cock more, and asked too soon. It’s his own damn fault.

Sato flips him over and pulls his hips back to get Rin onto his knees and sinks into him too fast. Rin bites his fist to make that hurt more, and he must go stiff enough for even this usually careless guy to notice.

“You okay Rin?”

“I’m fine,” he answers, and waits to be totally not fine.

But Sato hesitates another moment, and folds over Rin’s back. Rin wills down a full-body sigh; the warmth of it is soothing.

“You’re cold,” he observes.

“And quickly feeling blue balled, so hurry up,” Rin snaps.

Sato chuckles and his warmth is gone, but his cock drags slow. Usually this guy would be half-way
to done by now, but today he decides to take his damn time. Rin gasps as his discomfort gives way to genuine pleasure, bows his back for more against his will. Sato is encouraged and picks up his pace, but never slams into Rin like he always does, and Rin doesn’t realize it’s him who’s moaning until Sato’s speaking again over him.

“This is different,” he breathes. “You like it slow?”

“No,” Rin protests. “I don’t have all day.” He betrays his words almost immediately, a near scream pulling from him when Sato thinks to not be a selfish piece of shit for once and reach around the front to stroke Rin off in time with a particularly accurate thrust.

“Hey, I got neighbors,” Sato laughs breathlessly.

“Then cut it out,” Rin rushes out. He doesn’t though, and hits and touches Rin right again. “Fuck, stop, Sato.”

“Why? Listen to you, you sound like you’re enjoying it for once.”

Rin can’t retort anymore or buck him off; and decides he doesn’t want to anyway. Fuck it. Sato comes undone when Rin gives in and loosens up, and loses his juvenile cockiness to moans that match Rin’s. He supposes he’s never given much up to the kid either; when Rin fucks him, he’s just as ruthlessly fast. This might be the first time both of them have enjoyed it.

Sato fucks deeper- lingers there- and Rin cries, pushing back onto him and pulling off until he’s setting the pace for them, reaching that peak, and about to come-

He chokes on an inhale when Sato squeezes his dick too hard and clicks his tongue next to Rin’s ear. “Not until I do,” he laughs again teasingly, offering Rin a challenge he isn’t up to, for once.

Rin drops his forehead to his clenched fist and whimpers through it. This is more like Sato, this is why Rin’s here. He twists his head away from the lips at his ear that’ve followed his head down with a snarl, and stops giving Sato what they both want. Sato is used to Rin’s left-field tantrums, and moves to get off without him. He finally stops fucking like he cares about Rin’s endgame, chasing his orgasm to its messy end and leaving Rin soft and unsatisfied from the brutal change in tempo, leagues below the spine-numbing pleasure he allowed for a precious few minutes.

Sato pushes Rin away to the clean side of the bed, such as it is. It’s a dorm bed so there’s not much to it. He belatedly registers a slick, unpleasant run down his thigh and glares at Sato as soon as he wipes himself down and joins him on the bed.

“Wear a fucking condom,” Rin fumes.

“You’re so angry, Rin,” Sato observes. “I told you, I’m clean.”

“And I told you, I don’t like your load in my ass.”

He laughs. “You’re crude, but you’re hot, so I’ll keep you around.”

“Cocky fuck.”

“I mean, literally.” Sato turns and faces him, inching close enough trail his fingers down Rin’s chest. “Want to call me my name yet?”

“Close enough, isn’t it?”
“Sato is the most common surname in this country, you know. My name isn’t. Feels cold, even for you. I’m not your whore.”


Sato perks up at Rin’s soft change in tone, daring to shift closer. Rin lets him. Lets him smooth down his stomach, over his hip, and nudge a leg apart. “Fine.”

“What are you doing?” Rin asks more out of annoyance, then sucks in a sharp gasp. Sato eases in his fingers, gently presses along Rin’s rim and walls until a small moan escapes him and he feels his neglected cock rouse.

“Why don’t you let me touch you like this?”

“I am right now.”

“You know what I’m asking.”

He closes his eyes, tired and sore and weak to the gentle handling of him now. Sato kisses up his neck as Rin opens up for him, spreads his legs angles his hips better. He shamelessly doesn’t mind the mess in him now in the slightest aiding Sato’s fingers back and forth with ease. “I don’t want to feel like I owe you shit. I’m just here to get off.”

“You don’t even enjoy that, though…” Sato muses. “So why bother?”

He only answers with a noise he can’t keep down. His ass is way too sensitive from Sato’s rough sex and his cock aches for release, making all of this a potent wash of stimulation. “Fuck me again,” Rin whines.

“I can’t,” Sato answers. “You gotta wait.”

“Well I need something.”

“Sounds like it. You want it to feel good for once?”

“What the fuck do you care,” Rin bites.

“You’re right, honestly. I don’t. But if you want it, I’ll do it. Only fair.”

“You’ll try,” Rin corrects with a gasp. “Fuckin’ kid.”

Sato cricks his fingers like he knows exactly what he’s doing, and all of his bad sex up until now has been a front. “I’m not the one with a rock hard cock right now. Walk away from this; I dare you.”

It pisses Rin off more than it turns him on. It doesn’t feel good anymore, only like a violation. “Get off of me.”

“I don’t think so,” he laughs.

“Get off!” Rin shouts, giving a hefty push. Sato sighs and gives him space, and Rin gets to his feet for the shower.

“You gonna be a dick and still use my water?” Sato calls after him.

“Use a condom next time and I won’t have to,” Rin retorts, and slams the door to the bathroom.
He needs to never come back here, he tells himself over and over again as he bathes. The last person he wanted to see the day after Sousuke and Gou turned on him is the same kid who jumped him in the locker room. Whatever shitty fate Rin had at the time had other ideas. He’s not sure what it’s called now that they hook up regularly. Probably nothing more than a series of bad choices on his part.

He finds his clothes and gets dressed while Sato changes his sheets. “Classes started, so I’ll be less available,” he says idly to Rin.

“Good.”

“My birthday’s soon, though. You should take me out for a drink.”

Rin snorts incredulously. “You’re a big boy; take yourself out.”

“Helps when someone at the table is legal to get it.”

He pauses near the door, hand frozen mid-reach for his phone. “Excuse me?”

“Legal drinking age?” Sato continues with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re not about to tell me you’re not at least twenty, are you?”

“Nineteen next week.”

Rin snatches his phone off the shelf even quicker and barks out a dry laugh. “Holy shit. All right. Yeah, we’re fucking done. Take care Sato.”

“Rin? What the hell?”

“You’re not even nineteen. I can’t believe this. Stop fucking guys like me! Bareback, especially-you’re gonna end up sick, you stupid fucker,” he says thickly. “Lose my number.”

He slams Sato’s dorm door behind him and keeps his focus on the exit as sets of young and curious eyes follow him out.

--

Makoto,

_I let a teenager fuck me today. And the day before that. At least twice a week for about two months now. I never asked, because I didn’t want to know the answer. The twins’ age, as it turns out. Aren’t you proud of me?_ 

_This is your fault._

_Rin_

--

He crumples up the stationary and throws it away. His wastebin is piled to a high peak of this bullshit now.

There goes the rest of his day. He didn’t plan on having nothing to do. The house is spotless; he’s cleaned it twice. He’s already been on a long run, and now it’s better if he avoids the pool for at least a few days. He has an agonizing three days off a week until he can prove he can make use of
more hours at work, and so far not so good. The sales aren’t snagging like he thought he could get them to. He’s been considering looking for a second job, just for something to do.

Admittedly, this move back home—while an unignorable blow to his ego—has made him the least stressed about money he’s been in well, ever. It’s not traditional to leave home like he did. Like any of them did, but they all had their reasons to do it. He’s never known a life without the looming threat of poverty, actually, since he grew up poor, then left to live abroad on strained funds, and finally moved in with Makoto poor.

His mother only found comfort after he gave her his trust fund to build off of. Gou’s helped support her since. While he could’ve definitely used the money gifted to him from his father’s side, his mother always needed it more and deserved every coin. He’s always been just one paycheck away from perhaps a moderate discomfort, but she’s gone hungry too many times where he never has.

And at least now she has a life, even if she’s never home. As she isn’t now—again—either.

Rin isn’t good at being alone with nothing to do. Gou would have ideas. Sousuke would at least hang out with him. But he isn’t happy with their newfound relationship, and he doesn’t fucking have to be. There’s something fucked up about it, something that makes him angry. Did Sousuke really have a crush on her while he dated Haru? Haru once confided this insecurity in Rin; Rin laughed it off. Sousuke and Gou have that weird bond, always have. That Makoto-and-Haru type bond, the super close thing beyond romance. There was just no way.

But Sousuke sure did turn it around quickly after ending it with Haru too. And Gou agreed, which is shitty too. It’s not right. No matter what their reasoning is. If Haru knows, he’s probably not taking it well.

Who the fuck is Rin to know the truth about it, though. All he knows is he doesn’t like it.

His phone vibrates as if on cue, clattering along the hardwood of his desk. It’s either Sousuke or Haru, and he isn’t up to speaking to either of them for entirely different reasons. He doesn’t need Haru’s thinly veiled judgement over anything that’s happened and he doesn’t want to hear Sousuke’s chummy hey buddy routine to smoothing things over when he doesn’t think Rin can handle anything more direct. It’s infuriating. Both aspects of both personalities.

But it’s Makoto this time, and by the time Rin comes back to himself from the shock and swipes to answer it, he’s missed the call. Forty seconds later, he has a voicemail that begins with Makoto nervously clearing his throat.

"Uh, hi, Rin… It’s me. Makoto. Sousuke and I were hoping to see you, we’re nearby but wanted to make sure you were home first… well the lights aren’t on so I guess we missed you. You should call me. Or Sousuke. None of us have heard from you in a while. Well, you know, for different reasons… Anyway, Makoto sighs brittly. I’m sorry, this was uncalled for. I’m sure you don’t want to talk to me. But check in with Sousuke at least when you have a moment. Or Haru. Take care of yourself."

He replays it twice, saves it, and sets his phone face-down on the desk gently, suddenly afraid of breaking it and losing the message forever. He can’t pin any one emotion down over the message. He’s pissed off and sad and hollow all at once.

I’m sure you don’t want to talk to me; Rin’s overflowing wastebin suggests otherwise. The countless ways he’s written I blame you all point to Rin having something to say.
Take care of yourself. It sits sourly in his stomach. As if he needs to be reminded to brush his teeth or eat.

And finally, the total lack of warmth in Makoto’s tone. Only nervousness and weariness. Suggesting Sousuke pushed him to call, pushed him to come over. Decided Makoto could be used as a shield, and Makoto who is so easily worried took Sousuke at his word that Rin must be in dire fucking straits, just because he has the nerve to not return a call. When Sousuke and Haru had been doing that to him as it pleased them the entire time they were together. Fuck, how soon Sousuke’s forgotten that Rin wasn’t allowed to even text him if it was about his relationship problems. And now he cares? Bullshit.

He angrily picks his phone back up to put an end to this shit, fumbling it and nearly dropping it in that wave of clumsiness adrenaline lends him.

don’t use makoto as your personal fucking peace offering. stop calling me. stop texting me. leave me alone. you can pass that on to haru, too, once you have a spare minute where you’re not fucking my sister or manipulating my ex.

Sousuke tries to call him—clearly just not fucking getting it—and Rin needs to get out of this house before he breaks something of his mother’s.

As soon as he’s out the door he takes a street he know he won’t run into Sousuke or Makoto on. Normally his stomping out of anywhere would take him to Gou’s, but with that no longer an option he simply walks and doesn’t think more than one square of concrete ahead at a time.

Iwatobi is quaint, but it’s not all that innocent. While they’ve all always lived in the brighter part of town, there is a side to it that Rin was not allowed into as a kid once given permission to wander. He now knows it simply as the side of town that isn’t so fucking uptight, and in the past when Gou was indisposed and Makoto was pissing him off, he’d make his way over to unwind with something bitter and fold in with a crowd who had worse problems than his own.

One bar he nearly became a regular at. Sometimes he was recognized, usually by the owner who’d occasionally be working the line. Rin’s rather unique looking; that he’s only remembered by one person here is a transparency that when he thinks about it a certain way, he appreciates.

The same owner happens to be working tonight, and offers Rin a nod of recognition despite the last time he was here being something like eight months ago. When he has a moment to do so, he pours Rin a gin and tonic with lime, which is some old fashioned drink Sousuke got him the first time they went out for a drink together here after Rin whined that the mixed drinks were too sweet, but the beer was too bitter. Here, you picky shit, he muttered. But he was right about it.

“Hey loverboy.”

Rin blinks up in confusion. “Excuse me?”

The owner smirks. “Ain’t seen you in a while. Get it all worked out?”

Oh. “No, opposite.”

Now he frowns but only shallowly, not really meaning the gesture. “Too bad. You were gung-ho about turning it around last I saw ya.”

“I was also tanked,” Rin mutters. “And apparently told you way too much.”

“True. But it was amusing even to me, and I’ve heard some stories over the years.”
Rin sighs and nurses his newly-wounded pride along with his drink. The owner takes a hint and bugs off, leaving Rin to himself. At least there are some people here, so he doesn’t feel as alone as he would if he were still at home.

By drink three he’s feeling it, that happy buzz. Cognizant enough to know if he keeps going he only gets sad and talks a lot, but taps for another anyway. By drink four he misses Makoto so much his eyes sting with tears he manages to keep in. It’s Makoto’s fucking fault he’s here. Rin doesn’t need to cry about it. He should be angry, but he’s been angry a lot already today, and isn’t finding the flame. Even that needs rest sometimes.

“You look sad.”

“What tipped you off?” Rin snaps without looking for the owner of the voice.

He chuckles and settles down next to Rin, and orders him drink number five.

“Thanks but I’m good,” Rin drawls within earshot of the owner.

“You’re sure? Still pretty early.”

Rin thinks to look him over. Nothing sticks out, but he isn’t bad. Just average. Considering who he was fucking about three hours ago, it’s not like his bar is set high, and there isn’t any of that red flag baby fat in his cheeks. He’s Rin’s age or older, eager, and distinctly lacking any sort of wedding ring. A giant green checkmark scratches over in his head.

“If I drink one more you can’t fuck me in good faith, champ. Unbecoming. ‘Sides, drink too much and you get whisky dick, and what’s that good for?”

The guy’s eyes blow wide for a moment and quickly settle back over a grin. “Well shit I was trying to play by the book, but you jumped to the end of it.”

“I’m a bit of an impatient asshole.”

“Noted. Well, your place or mine?”

If he knew for sure the guy would still sleep with him if he acted on his impulse to laugh at that question, he’d already be in hysterics. “My bed’s small, and I need room.”

Rin catches a Now Hiring sign on his way out, and makes a note to come back the next day to fill in those three days off a week he has.

And maybe good things come in unimpressive packages, or maybe he’s just too drunk to know what he should be doing, but when Sato #2 fucks Rin, he lets it feel good. Denying himself earlier in the day, hung up on his younger-than-acceptable fling, that voicemail playing on repeat in his mind... he lets this guy do whatever he wants to Rin because he is so sick of feeling like shit and doesn't know what else he can do on his end to make it better anymore.

He wakes up in a stranger’s bed to five missed calls from Sousuke, two more voicemails from Makoto, and more texts than he cares to bother with sorting who sent what. He deletes all of it without opening a single message.

“Gou says hi.”
“Ah.”

*Makoto,*

*I can do it without you.*

*Rin*

“Says you haven’t been in touch.”

Rin looks up from the scrap of old receipt for fabric he’s writing on as his mother sifts through a stack of them, discarding some to a pile and keeping others in some sort of semi-annual paperwork purge she keeps up with.

“She’s been busy,” he offers, knowing that’s the exact excuse Gou gives whenever she’s purposefully not talking to someone. “Hard to get a hold of her.”

“She always says that. I doubt it’s true every time.”

He lifts a few receipts off the top of the discard pile and nestles his letter between the halves.

“Well I’m sure Sousuke takes up a lot of her time,” he mutters.

“And that Aki girl,” Ayumi muses, half-distracted. “I hear more about her than about Sousuke.”

Rin plucks another receipt from the discard pile. “Who’s that? Sounds familiar.”

“Some friend of hers, I have no earthly idea where from.”

*Sousuke,*

*Did you even let your dick dry first?*

*Rin*

“That’s nice.”

“What’s got you all grumbly?”

He crumples up the receipt a bit too tightly to keep himself from snapping at his mother. “Nothing.”

Ayumi sighs and peers at him over the top of her reading glasses. “No matter how old you two get, you never stop being so immature about your fights. What’s it over this time?”

Rin may be an oversharer at times, but he’s not about to spill that *entire* story. Still, it’s a combination of comforting and irritating that his mother remains this perceptive after all this time. “I don’t think my sister has any business dating my best friend.”

“Why not? Sousuke’s always been a close friend to all of us. At least you know she’s with someone who can take care of her, and someone we know is trustworthy. You always admired his and Haruka’s relationship.”

“It’s different.”

“Why?” she laughs lightly.
He growls under his breath and eyes the clock on the wall. He won’t have to put up with this much longer. “It just pisses me off, okay?”

“You’re so much like Toraichi,” she scolds, undeterred. “Usually such a sweetheart, but so quick to anger, honey. Misplaced, at that.”

Being compared to his father is a source of his pride. This is the first time his mother has ever compared Rin to a fault. It knocks the wind from him, and serves as both a reprimand of his current actions, and a damage to the idea that he stubbornly holds onto that his father could have no faults.

“Is it Makoto?” she presses. “You don’t talk about what happened to me.”

Rin shoves to stand, an angry and sick knot in his stomach twisting unbearably over all of it. “No, it isn’t. I work soon.”

Ayumi knits her eyebrows unconvinced and frowns. “I only want you both happy. You’ve been so upset since you came home, and now Gou is being distant. Of course you two don’t need to tell me everything, but Makoto was part of the family and you and Gou have had a great relationship until recently. I’m only worried.”

“I am fine,” Rin stresses through his teeth. “This has all been good for me, mom.”

Rin lets her eye him up and down and even offers a smile that she returns sadly. “All right, Rin. But you don’t have to do everything on your own either, you know.”

He thinks about it on his way to the bar. He doesn’t have to do it alone, no. He wants to. No one seems to get this, and he’s increasingly growing irritated being under everyone’s scrutiny.

He bartends. It’s not difficult in a place like this. No one at an alleyway bar orders anything complicated. If they do, he looks it up on his phone and no one’s palate is developed enough to realize he’s making it for the first time.

Tonight is much of the same as it’s been for the last month, and he’s finally hit a groove for how things work in this industry. His sales at his day job are still mediocre, but he’s making up for it in tips here. It’s also a great opportunity to be social, as it’s never too busy that he can’t stop and chat. It’s exactly what he needed to make his schedule full up.

He sizes up a guy near to closing time who’s handsome and overdressed before he’s two steps in. The man takes a seat centered at the bar and orders bourbon, neat. Fancy. Too bad they don’t stock any good bourbon, but the man doesn’t seem to care.

“Where you from?” Rin asks curiously once he has a moment to lean on his elbows and strike up conversation.

“That obvious?” he laughs.

“This is a glorified fishing village. Suits stick out.” Rin narrows his eyes over the suit jacket in observation. Easily hand-stitched, at the very least meticulously tailored. Wool. “Canali?”

The man only takes a small sip of his drink, cut short by his eyes lighting up at the question. “Close. Brioni.”

“Interesting cut for a Japanese man.”

“A western cut,” he clarifies. “I like my shoulders a bit broader. Japanese suits are slim and
streamlined, but there’s something to be said for the subtle physical intimidation of the Europeans. I appreciate that.”

Rin sweeps his gaze down the bar to confirm they’re alone, and grins. This is a guy he could have extended fun with. He never learned Sato #2’s name, and there have been another few Satos since him, but this guy is on an entirely different level of attraction to Rin. “I’m Rin.”

“Shozo,” he answers smoothly. “You’ll have to earn the rest.”

“First names are a bit better for keeping ancestors out of your nightmares. So you wanna tell me why you’re in this backwater shithole?”

“You first. A bar is clearly not your day job.”

“Floor sales at a local suit shop,” Rin laughs. “Not like we sell Brioni. I just follow fashion week a bit too closely and do this for some extra cash.”

“Business,” Shozo answers vaguely. “Looking to expand some of our operations, and Iwatobi is just the cheap sort of port town I need. Had a meeting up the road that ran quite late.”

Rin hums and pours him another drink, then one for himself.

“I was doing research here on an unrelated matter,” Shozo continues. “By coincidence, Iwatobi is what I was looking for. Do you know anything about that old athletic building on seventh street?”

Rin nods curtly. How serendipitous, if not slightly dark to recall. Makoto’s sad smile of defeat flashes in his mind once they came out the other end of their finances with a solid no, we can’t do this no matter how we try to, his resigned oh, that’s all right said quietly and broken and devastated. “Old swim club. Grew up around it, actually. Owner retired at the end of last summer and no one… well no one could afford to buy it off of him so it closed down.”

“I’m getting the runaround from the contractor on it,” he says somewhat tersely. “I don’t know who else would be willing to renovate it if not this local company but their quotes are suspiciously high.”

Gou’s company, Rin realizes. “How do you mean?”

“I met with the project manager a few months ago now and was quoted nothing but over-inflated figures from her. It’s a negotiation in progress,” he mutters bitterly.

Gou’s the only woman that high up. It had to have been her. Rin’s sure his nostrils flare with a sudden surge of anger, and he hides it behind his stubby glass. Of course Gou would do that, knowing exactly what that building is and trying to save it for some future that doesn’t exist for anyone. Unnecessary meddling. “I might actually have some pull there.”

Shozo seems genuinely surprised. “Oh?”

“I’ll talk to someone I know.”

He laughs. “Are you going to tell me how?”

“Are you going to tell me what your business with it is?” Rin quips back.

Shozo downs his second drink. “Of course not. We both know neither of us care about that right now. When do you get off?”
“Depends on how good you are with your mouth. Five minutes if you’re seriously crafty.”

He smirks, eyes falling dark, and reaches inside his suit jacket for a pocket. Shozo sets a keycard down on the bar and slides it to him. “Tottori Hotel. Room 254.” Then he finds his wallet and thumbs through the bills, setting thirty-thousand yen down that he pushes up behind the keycard.

Rin’s stomach drops from the impossible height it climbed to until now. “I’m not a fucking hooker, and I’d charge a fuck of a lot more than that if I was.”

“Rin,” Shozo says mischievously, “even if you were- and you’d make a great one- I couldn’t afford you for everything I’ve only thought about doing to you since I sat down. This is just for the drinks and a thanks for the conversation. The rest of it I’m hoping you’ll just do out of the kindness of your cock.”

He winks and slides off the barstool, and is out the door before Rin can find his breath again.
sousuke & haruka: humuhumunukunukuapua'a

One of the perks of Sousuke’s apartment when he and Haruka were looking for one was the unnecessarily long bathtub. Now he’s not overly enthralled with it, as it takes up a lot of space and he only showers now, but he used to be. It’s a thought he carries to bed and a thought he’ll regret having so close to sleep.

Haruka pushes between his legs and carelessly sloshes the water over the edge with the movement, hungry for him. Sometimes he got that way. Gets that way? Lips wet and teeth sharp and fingers raking down Sousuke’s neck and chest. Sometimes Haruka could be loud, whining for him when they grind hard together like this because it’s not even close to enough. When Haruka is loud, Sousuke is quiet to listen. Haruka could get Sousuke off with his moans on their own, untouched, and maybe they’ve tried that before to success. Once. Or twice. Haruka puts on a show and Sousuke sees stars.

In short, Haruka turns him on with little effort.

Right now is a blessed perfect storm of a time where Haruka is loud while he touches Sousuke, and Sousuke’s wound so tight with arousal that he can’t even focus because he needs to try and last for it to be good.

Sousuke runs his hands down Haruka’s back and finds his ass, pulls him closer and makes it a point to press his fingers into the sensitive flesh on the insides of his thighs and rub circles. Haruka cries against his throat, breath damp and heady, and drops his head to roll Sousuke’s nipple between his teeth, then smooth over the sharp contrast with his tongue. He works back and forth until Sousuke breaks his silence sharply and undone, and Haruka has to take a moment to breathe because he’s so hard and so close, teased to the breaking point by Sousuke’s fingers inching inwards on his legs to lightly touch him where he’s silently begging to be stretched apart.

Guys like that?

... Some.

“Haruka,” Sousuke breathes, “I missed you, I missed this.”

I want you, Haruka answers, sending Sousuke’s heart once more into his stomach. He claws at Sousuke’s hips beneath the now tepid water once he sits back, grasps Sousuke’s cock and bites his bottom lip in a way that has Sousuke thrusting into his hand at the sight for more.

I want you, he repeats to Sousuke’s lips, down his neck, over his heart. Behind him when he guides him to turn over, and quietly along every bump of his spine. Haruka spreads him, pushes him over the edge of the tub as he does to fit because while it’s a long tub, it’s not forever, Sousuke remembers.

His elbows go slack over the edge with his full-body sigh and his head falls to moan at the floor when Haruka rims him, pressing his wet and bitten lips over the muscle and running his tongue flat, then in, and flat again, intimately and reverently. He sighs to Sousuke’s skin, pausing to press a finger on one hand past to only the first knuckle- one point of contact, so much pressure at once the room spins- as he kisses at the base of Sousuke’s back, rejoining himself, licking him wet until those stars find his vision once more. Until Sousuke’s voice is broken and catching when it rasps from him, and no part of him doesn’t belong entirely to Haruka just for a moment.
I want you, Haruka tells him. Sousuke falls apart.

He wakes up in a cold sweat. Freezing, actually, and immediately aware that dream-Haruka finished him off to a sticky end in real-time, too.

“Fuck,” he sighs. At least Gou isn’t with him this time. He hasn’t had wet dreams since puberty and now he’s fielding them twice a week, sometimes more.

He lumbers to the bathroom and slams the door in annoyance behind himself, and it takes one sidelong look at that fucking bathtub before his cock is standing at attention again. He’s a fucking disaster.

He’s never had a sex drive this alarmingly high, and doesn’t understand the appeal in the slightest. It’s terrible. It’s the most inconvenient and exasperatingly complicated thing he’s faced in fuck knows how long. And this is as he’s actively sleeping with someone. Calling her just for it, and she’s quick to it herself when that happens and they don’t talk much about it, just get right to it. He’s starving and getting only pieces of cardboard to chew on. Never, ever satiated.

I want you rings through his head after he’s cleaned up and made his way to the kitchen for breakfast. It bounces around where that laugh used to be. Maybe it’s just what the laugh has turned into. It’s still just as mocking, if not worse, because Haruka does not want him. Haruka is dating someone else too, Haruka is gone and has been for nearly nine months. They both hurt each other too much to ever go back to how it was, he’s now beginning to accept and shoulder, even if he doesn’t understand it completely.

“Good morning, Sousuke,” Makoto greets from the living room.

Sousuke grunts in response, fearful for how fucked out his voice might sound if he tries to speak right away. Hell, Makoto can probably fucking smell it on him anyway. Pheromones and all that. Or hears him at night. There’s no way with the level of intensity and sheer explicitness these dreams are hitting him at that he isn’t making his roommate increasingly uncomfortable.

He sits down with coffee from the pot Makoto made instead of any food once he sees it. Black and a half-pinchn of salt, which is apt for how he’s feeling anyway. Makoto is on Sousuke’s laptop, looking at something with intent as he sips at his own mug.

“The weird porn is hidden in the finance reports folder,” Sousuke jokes.

“Oh, thanks. Thought it was nestled among your grandfather’s eightieth birthday photos like any other normal person’s would be,” Makoto responds without missing a beat.

Sousuke drums his fingers anxiously along the side of his mug. Bringing up porn was not well thought out. Honestly this is just exhausting him at this point. “Speaking of. Makoto.”

“I’m already dreading this conversation,” Makoto mumbles so quickly he may've been expecting it.

“You should be.”

Makoto breathes deeply through his nose in that I didn’t sign up for this sort of way and breaks his attention to Sousuke. “Go ahead,” he sighs.

“Ohay. So I mean this as clinically as humanly possible, full disclaimer.”

It doesn’t earn him anything other than an even warier look.
“I’m so horny I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“I... Wow.”

“I’m serious. Not in a bro high five me way. In a I am physically suffering way and I literally have no idea who to talk to or what to do.”

“Why me?” Makoto groans. “I don’t want to know this. I want to pretend this isn’t happening, actually.”

“It’s keeping me up.”

“It’s keeping me up,” Makoto grumbles.

Sousuke freezes with terror. Somehow knowing that ahead of time didn’t soften the blow. “Shit-fuck this is so embarrassing.”

Makoto nods to himself and takes another deep breath. “I’ve had worse conversations with Ren.”

“No. Stop right there. I take it back.”

“Oh, shush. This is ten times worse for me, I promise. Talk.” Makoto snaps the laptop shut and sets it aside to give Sousuke his full attention.

Sousuke heaves a loud and suffering sigh. He could stand to get it off his chest, anyway. “I am so sorry for what I’m about to get into. I respect you, Makoto-”

“Just say it so I can have as much time as possible today to recover from this.”

Sousuke clears his throat. Here goes nothing. “I had trouble having sex with Gou, all right? Like, a lot of trouble. And she was getting worried so I had to do something before she thought it was her fault, you know? And now that I did that... the only way I can really find myself getting into it with her is...” He half-groans, half-whimpers. “By fantasizing. About. Uh.”

“Haru.”

“Haru,” Sousuke confirms before Makoto finishes the syllable. “Even like, and I’m not saying I jack off to him, you have to believe me, but even thinking of Rin was better than trying to be there in the present with Gou. I would not fuck Rin considering the circumstances. When we were younger sure. But not now, since you and all, and I respect you like I said and Rin too and I would never- like, never-”

“Noted and vaguely insulted. Please move on, for my sake.”

“Right. But we still have sex. More sex than what’s normal, even when I was with Haruka we didn’t have sex this often. And she’s super into it too, but not in a good way. Like it’s literally all we do. It’s not even a relationship. We never talk. And I have to close my eyes a little while I’m with her-”

“Stop,” Makoto whines. “So you’re saying you can only get off with her if you’re not even thinking about her?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“And you’re thinking about... other men. With faces you know. And please do not confirm or deny my participation in your fantasies. I can’t handle it.”
“Deal.”

Of course he fucking does, he thinks loudly, making Makoto glare at him as if he can hear it. Sousuke exercises with the guy; he’s the most recent body available in his mind’s eye to think about having sex with that isn’t Gou. Nothing personal, it really isn’t. Only his actual sleeping dreams have Haruka. The ones that are so intimate they’re as good as real, and the ones he checks himself over after he wakes up for marks of some sort of sexual stigmata. That’s where the difference is.

“And you asked me a few months ago if everything about a woman was supposed to be attractive to you. Which I’m pretty sure is a conversation I’ve replayed in my mind every day since and am still at a grasping, defeating loss for. Until now.”

“Sorry. So what do you think?”

“Sousuke, if I told you all this from my perspective and just said it was about a friend, what might you say was my friend’s issue?”

Sousuke thinks it over briefly, and finds an answer a bit more obvious than he would’ve considered before having spoken with Makoto. “That he’s hung up on what he knows, and should switch out the contents of his porn folder for something more pertinent to his current situation.”

“... Jesus. No, Sousuke,” Makoto sighs. “Wait- is there seriously porn on this work computer?”

“No,” Sousuke mumbles.

“Okay. While I’m not surprised you don’t know this, necessarily, since Haru doesn’t care about these things at all and you probably never discussed it, I’m still a little hung up on how to tell you gently in any way other than what I truly mean. So I’ll just be blunt; you’re gay. You’re not attracted to women like you thought.”

Enough time passes in the wake of it for Sousuke to down nearly his entire mug of coffee in suspended thought. “... Nah. I’m not. That’s an interesting theory, though.”

Makoto’s jaw hangs for a brief moment before he can snap it back. “You think about having sex with men, even men you wouldn’t have sex with in reality, just to be able to have sex with Gou. You’re totally sexually unsatisfied to the point of endless frustration and have no idea why. Does this not register as something askew? Maybe it’s because you’re literally sexually unsatisfied?”

“I mean, it does register. You’re right, it’s weird. I think I’ve conditioned myself in a way that’s totally fucked up. I’m just used to men so I’ll have to remember why I’m attracted to women too.”

“Remem- I- that… that isn’t how it works…” Makoto trails. “I mean you… it can all be fluid, but you feel nothing sexually for her. At all. You asked me what part of her is supposed to entice you- that’s a total lack of attraction. If you have to ask. Romance is different and- I mean- am I being… am I making sense?”

Sousuke snorts at the sight of Makoto’s unraveling composure. “All right, chill. That’s enough college campus alphabet soup support group talk for me. I know how this works. I’m not gay, Makoto. I’ve literally never identified that way, ever since I knew I was bi. Two genders. I liked girls first, even. Something else is the issue. I have had crushes on girls. I’ve only ever fucked guys- well, Haruka. I just got a steep learning curve now, you know?”

“Right- just crushes. Emotional. I’m saying physically, you don’t have it.”
“Well I get off, don’t I? Clearly something gets me there.”

“Yes. The explicit thoughts of men. So, okay, again-”

“I am not gay.”

Makoto raises his eyebrows uncharacteristically high. Like Gou does when he says something she deems geriatric. When he’s being silently judged. He pulls Sousuke’s laptop back to the arm of the couch and resumes looking at whatever had his interest originally, even giving a disapproving shake of his head. Sousuke’s not sure where Makoto found this high horse all of a sudden; it’s not like he’s ever expanded his smug confidence in sexuality theory to say, his parents or anything.

“Hey, unlike you, at least I like dick unapologetically and comfortably enough that you could realistically think that about me,” he says against his better judgement. “Hell, even my parents know.”

His already minimal filter’s been torn to shreds apparently, but that realization sinks in too late. Makoto’s head snaps up so fast Sousuke swears he hears the air snap.

“There are very few lines I won’t forgive you for crossing,” Makoto levels flat and dry. “That’s one of them. So I’d appreciate it if you’d reconsider continuing that train of thought, because I think we make a good team.”

“I- uh. Well, I’m wound up- and that sort of fell out.”

Makoto’s eyes fall back to the screen, expression going somber and soft. “Just apologize if you actually mean to.”

“I am. Er, I do. Definitely. I’m sorry.” Gou fucking warned him all that time ago, didn’t she? And he couldn’t leave it be. Stupid.

“... I get why you said it. I’m happy to help as your friend, but don’t take this out on me. That topic is no one’s but my own.”

Sousuke groans and slouches in his chair. “I’m really sorry. Sometimes I think about all the ways Haruka would fucking skin me if he knew some of the things I’ve said to you.”

Makoto smiles only just at the corners, still clearly unrecovered but willing to move past it. “One of these days you’re going to compliment me and it’s not going to be backhanded, I have faith in it,” Makoto laughs, making Sousuke a bit red at his ears with shame.

“You’ve been difficult at times,” Sousuke confesses. “I have to admit I never understood how you could capture Rin’s attention on a level no one else could, but shit you’re the only one cut out for the task, aren’t you?”

“One of these days you’re going to compliment me and it’s not going to be backhanded, I have faith in it,” Makoto laughs, making Sousuke a bit red at his ears with shame.

Sorry,” he mutters. He should get some damn air and clear his head at this point. He keeps speaking without thinking and if this was Haruka he kept tripping up with, he’d be in some next level shit by now. “Want to go out for the day? Skip the gym.”

Makoto blinks in incomprehension for a long beat. “... Um?”

“Me and you? Go do something other than piss each other off or nag each other in the squat rack
over form? Hike or lunch or both. A swim. Whatever sounds good, I don’t care.”

“I- really? You want to do that with me?”

Sousuke frowns. “Do you not? We don’t have to.”

“No! I’d like that a lot, I just wasn’t expecting it!” He smiles wide this time and shuts the laptop again. “Would you like to invite Gou?”

He shrugs. “Just us. She’s busy this weekend. We could use some fun for once anyway. We wear each other out too much.”

Makoto nods, smile still plastered there like it’s Christmas morning. For such a friendly guy, Sousuke wonders if anyone ever invites him out, and if Makoto wishes they did if they don’t. Sometimes people like Makoto don’t know how to ask for the company they want, and Sousuke knows how easily a smile that natural can be mistaken for contentment.

Without Rin, he’s feeling lonely too. Life was just bearable without Haruka’s company, but Rin’s scorn has been difficult to process on top of his other stressors. Now he’s alone day and night, unless Gou agrees to share her bed. And even that’s a means to an end right now. She’s otherwise busy she says, and barely returns his texts. Sousuke’s all for solitude, but even he needs company eventually.

Sousuke’s angered Makoto endlessly, and Makoto’s been a rough adjustment for him too, but right now he’s feeling like he should really be cherishing their friendship more than he has been. A friendship he has no business deserving for how he’s acted. Without Makoto around to talk to, Sousuke doesn’t see himself ending up in a good place. He might still blame Haruka for abandoning him. He would be lonelier than he is. From the looks of it, Makoto’s slowly eroding away from his own self-imposed isolation- and Rin’s silence- too. So why suffer all of this alone when they're crammed into sixty-five square meters together anyway and have proven to be willing to speak to and help each other?

Even Sousuke knows when he needs a friend.

--

“Oh my god!” Makoto squeaks.

“Shh, stop, stop, I can do it,” Sousuke laughs.

“No! Sousuke!”

“Okay- no. Wait. Ready?” Sousuke pulls a deep breath through his nose and raises his arms above his head and is about to go for it- “Are you fucking watching?!”

“Yes! Please-” Makoto begs and devolves to giggles. “Oh my god please don’t die.”

He glances at Makoto over his shoulder. “The fuck are you- it’s a handstand.”

“What a step! Your neck! You’ll break it.”

Sousuke rolls his eyes and turns forward again, equilibrium swaying, puffs out his chest, and throws his weight up and onto his locked arms. For a brief moment, he’s straight up and down, toes towards the night sky, fingers curled over the edge of the single step. Makoto’s gaping at him in surprise, upside down from Sousuke’s point of view.
Then he’s *continuing* on his path over, Makoto yelps, and he lands with a *thud* on the pavement one step below where he started from. They literally just finished dinner, and Sousuke realizes he’s had many better ideas than upending a full stomach like that only after he’s groaning weakly for it.

Makoto enters his line of sight, blocking his view of the streetlight above. “Sousuke!”

“That’s what parkour is,” Sousuke wheezes. “Except you gotta like… jump around more. And run. And climb.”

“… So it’s nothing like a handstand at all,” Makoto distills.

Sousuke narrows his eyes up at him. “*Dick.*” He thinks about getting up, but it’s not sounding feasible. “Can you help me up?”

“Hell no,” Makoto answers, dipping away from hovering over him.

“*God* you’re such a prick when you’re drunk,” Sousuke mutters.

“I can’t help,” Makoto clarifies, then laughs. “I’ll go right over too.”

Unless he wants to be stuck there, he better try harder then. Sousuke pushes up with some difficulty, finally on his ass at least. Makoto’s found a wall to lean on and stifles barks of laughter into his palm.

“How you feelin’?” Sousuke asks with a slur.

Makoto checks his phone. “Like it’s still early, and I’m only buzzed from dinner.”

“For you it’s early, y’nigh’ owl.”

Makoto smirks like he’s honing in on something. “So *that’s* what Gou means when she calls you old *all the time.*”

Sousuke balks and gasps, then scrambles to his feet. “All right- *fuck* you really *are* a prick. Fine. *Fine!* I will drink your ass under the table.”

Makoto shouts in laughter, quickly covering his mouth with alarm like it’s out of his control. “Sorry, that’s just *so* funny to me,” he muffles.

Sousuke’s just plain exasperated and caught off guard. Who the fuck is this? “Punk ass. You’re gonna regret it.”

That is what Haruka referred to once when he had a similar competition with Rin as Sousuke’s tombstone message. He’s definitely going to regret this. He’s going to regret it with the same intensity this god awful vodka has scorching down his throat in a bar a few blocks over from where Sousuke demonstrated parkour.

“I’m going to die,” he states in resignation and full-on grimace.

“Good,” Makoto responds seriously as he stacks their spent shot glasses.

“What the *fuck.* You just asked me not to die like a half hour ago.”

“I changed my mind.” He smiles *sickeningly* sweet and flirtatiously at the bartender for another round, and slides Sousuke another nail for his coffin once he gets it.
Sousuke sighs and lifts it up and out. “To whoever the fuck you are.”

“And to your health, what’s left of it.”

“Man, you’re ruthless.”

They toast on it and kick it back. Sousuke eyes the clock on the far wall and gives himself ten minutes until detonation. If he’s going down, he’s taking Makoto with him at least.

“You gotta update me on that Kiyoda situation.”

Makoto groans and slumps forward. “I hate it.”

“He that desperate?”

“So desperate, Sousuke. I don’t know what to do to get him to go away without being mean.”

“What? You should just fuck him for fun. That’s probably all he wants.”

Makoto tilts his head side-to-side in shallow consideration, using his chin as a pivot point. “I don’t want to fuck him. He’s too eager. And I have to work with him, and you shouldn’t shit where you eat, I’ve heard it said.”

“Watch your damn mouth. Who are you? Me?”

“Fu-uck-yo-ou,” Makoto sings with a lilt, then angles his head to look at Sousuke and grin. “Let me have this.”

“Fine. You’re not the real Makoto anyway,” Sousuke reasons. “Just some mean-spirited, foul-mouthed knock-off.”

Makoto giggles. “Sorry. Am I that bad?”

“Nah,” he denies and smiles. “I’m having fun.”

Sousuke earns a wide smile in response, and Makoto sits up straight with a surge of energy. “Me too!” He frowns. “And I’m tanked,” he finishes on a mutter.

“Mmhmm,” Sousuke agrees.

“Time to settle it,” Makoto declares.

“God, Makoto, no more.”

“Yup. We agreed to this. I can still say humuhumunukunukuapua’a. So I’m totally okay.”

“What the fuck,” Sousuke laughs.

“It’s a fish. It’s a drunk test.” The bartender is within reach again, and Makoto goes stone-cold sober to order the last round before he closes out his tab.

They both stare at their drinks for a weighted moment before Makoto smiles again, warmly this time. “Once Rin couldn’t say it, we knew to stop drinking. He’d try, and it was so funny. He’d get to hoo-moo and keep saying it. He’d forget how many hoo-moos there are and just keep going and going and going,” Makoto explains with escalating laughter at the memory.
Sousuke chuckles. “Ho-mo-ho-mo-ho-mo-ho-mo.”

Makoto’s cackle is a cracked whip on the air so sudden and loud, the other patrons glare at them in warning. “Oh my god no no no you have to *drag out the O!*” he squeaks out between guffaws with tears in his eyes. “Christ, Sousuke! I know we talked about it but you don’t have to come out so soon.”

Sousuke groans in embarrassment, one long ribbon of grief, and waits for Makoto to get his giggles out over his painful slip. There are no words to save his face here. “Shut *up* about that! You ass. Hoo-moo-hoo-moo-hoo-moo?”

“Yeah!” Makoto sighs and wipes at his eyes, catching on hiccups on his way down. “*Then* he’d get flustered when I laughed. It was cute. But you know, it makes you, like—” Makoto purses his lips, a kissy-face that does not belong on him. “—do that when you say it, so I’d kiss him so hard. And then he was fine with it.”

“Grooooss,” Sousuke grouses as he takes up his shot glass, making Makoto laugh again.

He didn’t keep track of how much he had to drink at dinner. A third shot here now is guaranteed hangover territory. He’s not even sure how he wins this challenge. Maybe he should just focus on living instead.

Everything is pleasant after that. So much so that he doesn’t mind how bottom shelf that booze is anymore. Makoto sways next to him, occasionally looking over and offering a reassuring grin. Sousuke’s all at once relieved Makoto can be happy, and sad that it took this much liquefied help to get there.

“You should… do medicine,” Sousuke says, forgetting the name of the profession he was really after.

“You think so?” Makoto asks in wonderment.

“‘Cuz the *blood*. You’re good at blood, right? You can be a dude- *no-* the dude who rides the ambulance.”

He furrows his eyebrows in concentration, mining for the right word as well “... A paramedic?”

“Yeah, yeah!” Sousuke agrees enthusiastically. “That’s the one.”

Makoto’s eyes go fully round. “Oh that’s. That’s too difficult.”

“Ain’t! Not for you.”

“It’s *so* hard, Sousuke, I- there’s no way I could do that.”

“Why not?”

“I- I’m not that calm! Oh god, I’d get someone *killed*. I would panic.”

Sousuke shakes his head vehemently. “You- are *so scary*. When you’re focused and serious I would bet money you could do like, brain surgery when you get like that. Honest to fuck nearly made me piss myself at least… three times now. You would *own that shit*. You’d be so good at it.”

“Oh…” Makoto trails. “Wow, I don’t know. I’ve never considered anything like that.”

“You should. Maybe you’re not thinkin’ outside the box enough.”
“Maybe…” Makoto drops his gaze to the bar, and his shoulders bounce in amusement. “You should too.”

“Wha?”

“Think outside the box! Of your boxy cubicle.”

“I like my cubicle,” Sousuke protests. “I have a calendar with lizards.”

“You can have cubicle with lizards in it anywhere.”

Sousuke blinks a few times and lets that bounce between his ears for a while. “I can’t have lizards just anywhere.”

Makoto frowns and rests his chin on his hand in thought. “You can get a tattoo of it. Then you could.”

He snorts. “You’re drunk.”

“So are you. We can go get tattoos of our boxes.”

“What’s with the tattoos?”

“I want one,” he says. Then he sits up, eye going wide with realization. “I do want one. We should go get one together. Like right now.”

Sousuke gapes at him as he pulls his phone out and starts searching for a nearby parlor. He’s totally obsessed. “Makoto.”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re not serious.”

Makoto turns to him and in a flash, drops that dopey smile and adopts that stern-scary look Sousuke just commented on. “I am serious. I’ve put myself through hell for nearly a year now and I’m sick of hating myself. I want a fucking tattoo and I want it to be a stupid, awful mistake and I will love it and it’s not going to be the end of the world if I do it.”

Sousuke nearly reactively shuts him down again. It’s just too stupid of an idea even for how sloshed he is. Before he does he looks Makoto over for any lingering signs of doubt and doesn’t see any, and when he opens his mouth to deny him again he finds no other rebuttal in himself like he expected to. His drunk settles for a moment long enough to catch Makoto’s clear gaze head-on. He’s serious.

Sousuke heaves a resigned sigh. “Let’s stop and get cash first.”

--

“We want hearts,” Makoto declares to the artist after they’ve put on a show of sobriety to sign waivers.

“We do?” Sousuke asks lowly.

“It’s a nice shape. And… love hurts.”
“Oh my god.” Sousuke raises his gaze in brief reflection to the ceiling. How did he end up in this shit hole parlor? Are people shooting heroin in the back? Is he up to date on his tetanus vaccinations?

“Do you want it or not, pal?” the artist grumbles.

Makoto casts him pleading eyes, like he can’t do it without Sousuke or something. Sousuke doesn’t want a fucking heart tattooed on him until he dies in the slightest. All signs point to no, fuck no. But he slumps his shoulders and starts thinking of the least terrible place to get it instead of backing out as he should. “Yeah, yeah.”

He chooses the inside of his right middle finger, making Makoto laugh at the obscene demonstration. Makoto chooses the inside of his left forearm, slightly larger than what Sousuke’s gunning for.

“Sure? That’s noticeable.”

“Good,” Makoto says simply, and offers himself to go first. He gets a quick stencil that takes no longer than a few minutes to draw up and apply, and nods his approval. The artist lays his arm over an elevated perch once his station is set up, palm side up, and discusses it quickly one more time with Makoto. Just an outline, he confirms, and Sousuke thinks it took longer to set up than it took for Makoto to get the damn thing. He’s beaming down at it fondly before Sousuke’s even gotten comfortable on a nearby chair.

“Your turn,” Makoto says excitedly once it’s covered and done and the artist is fiddling with the needle gun for the next person.

Sousuke rolls his eyes, switches out, and lets the artist position his arm for the best angle. He offers no stencil. In three uneventful, slightly painful minutes, he has the outline of a heart on his middle finger and what he hopes is Makoto’s eternal, undying friendship. He wouldn’t even do this shit for Rin.

Makoto pays the artist practically nothing for both, smiling all the while, and nearly skips out of the parlor without looking back for Sousuke.

“I can’t believe this,” Sousuke remarks for the fiftieth time on their long walk back. They sway and wander across empty streets of Iwatobi, though it’s not that late. People just turn in early here, like Sousuke tends to do, but he finds he’s invigorated through the slush of his buzz to be out and defying everything he knows about himself instead of in bed and halfway to sleep like he would be any other day.

“I’m so happy we did it.”

“I can tell. It’s growing on me now. I can tell people to fuck off- with love.”

Makoto nods and stumbles a step, laughs at himself, and keeps going. “Thanks Sousuke. For everything.”

“Same to you,” Sousuke sighs. “I don’t know the last time I had such a good time.”

“Definitely worth skipping the gym for. Something different.”

He watches Makoto walk ahead of him slightly on his wobble, mind foggy but mood clear. He really hasn’t been this happy in so long, drunkenness notwithstanding. It’s so perilously easy to slip into a routine and forget to let yourself shatter it every once in awhile. Take chances. Learn
something different, even if it’s silly. Like, for example, the fact that Makoto curses like a sailor when he’s drunk. No one other than Rin probably knows that, if Rin knows it at all.

He wonders if that’s what Haruka realized about them long before he’s able to stop himself from thinking it. Were they routine? And not in a good way, or a happy way. Maybe they were just... stale. Maybe Haruka felt trapped, because it sure as shit isn’t a lie that Sousuke has been unwilling to bend. He wouldn’t doubt Haruka tried to tell him either, and he just refused to really hear it.

Gou accepts him for what he is, and it wasn’t any other thought that got him to kiss her that night. He wanted to be needed as he was, he didn’t want to have to sacrifice a single thing. And it’s a memory in a new context that makes him wonder if he pursued her for all the wrong reasons.

He’s been dating her for over half a year. Can he claim to say he loves her any differently from when he started this with her? Can she? She’s never come close to implying it. They’ve never even talked about it, their relationship, their boundaries. Nothing. Now they don’t even talk as friends.

Makoto’s gone quiet next to him as well, and by the time they’re back home at least the ground has stopped warping, but he’s still a few sheets to the wind. Or at least, when he looks back on this he’s going to shoe that in as an explanation for everything.

Sousuke grabs them each a glass of water and finds Makoto on the floor at the coffee table as he usually does. He sits to face him, leaning one elbow on the edge after Sousuke sets the glasses down and gracelessly thumps to his ass. Makoto’s looking over his tattoo in thought, turning his arm around so that the healing ointment glistens in the low light of the living room.

“I love it,” he states barely above a whisper.

“Good, ‘cuz you’re stuck with it.”

His eyes crinkle slightly at the corners before he faces back to Sousuke, relaxed and sleepy on the edges. None the worse for wear for everything he’s been through, and Sousuke envies his strength for the first time.

Rin is lucky. He has someone who would do anything for him, someone who even let him go out of the kindness of his heart when he knew he didn’t deserve the shit he’d had doled out to him to begin with. Makoto still loves him even though Rin took everything out on him and never had the decency to explain exactly what that everything consisted of.

Makoto was never bitter about having to make a choice like Sousuke was. Instead he’s trying to work on himself, so that next time might be better. Whatever next time may bring. Rin brought that out in Makoto to begin with; to always try harder the next time. Sousuke hopes one day, Rin can be prouder of that than any swim he’s ever done.

Sousuke was lucky too. He had someone who saw something other than the status quo in him after he’d resigned himself to that fate. Someone who wanted to grow with him, and reach towards new things together if only he could budge a little and help them move. And he rejected that idea, dug his heels in even deeper than they were. He rejected a relationship built on growth and reached for one built on comfort, taking advantage of Gou all the while for her bottomless acceptance of him. He just didn’t see any of this until now. He has Makoto to thank for showing him the difference between breathing and living, which is a wild thought considering where they were a year ago.

“Say it,” Makoto says quietly. He’s staring at Sousuke’s mouth, and Sousuke knows full fucking well what Makoto’s commanding of him before he clarifies. “Drunk test.”
He knows, and yet he nods and clears his throat of treacherous anticipation to speak. “Humuhumu-”

It’s as far as he gets. Makoto sighs against his lips like he’s stretching his muscles after a long day, and Sousuke twists fingers quickly into his tangled hair to steady his head, already biting for his lower lip and moaning when Makoto twists their tongues together. Makoto leans in to kiss him as completely as he can make it happen, hands grabbing at Sousuke’s shirt and when that’s not enough, planted firmly on either side of his neck and guiding his jaw with his thumbs to better work with his parted lips. They slide and clack together increasingly desperate and hungry, easing back to gentle nibbling to breathe and opening wide and wet again as soon as he thinks it might end because neither will deny it just feels so fucking good.

They whisper and whimper under the intensity drowning out everything else. Sousuke’s mind wanders behind him and down the hall to his cold bed. He wonders what Makoto looks like when he comes, how he would feel picked apart under Sousuke’s hands. Does he breathe damp and thick moans or does he growl from somewhere solid in his chest? Does he scratch or soothe? And how different it would all be going forward if he ever found out.

Makoto gasps for him, pulls for him, and starts to fumble with shaking fingers at the button to his jeans. Sousuke can only feel the faintest tell of his fingers on his cock through the fabric, but he sucks sharply on Makoto’s lip to quiet the needy whine it gives him, he tries to suppress the shiver it pushes his hips forward with and fails. Their murmurs twist together and grow more frantic, less distinguished, until it’s only one plea of want they’re sharing, and by that Sousuke knows Makoto is asking himself the same questions about him and thinking about his bed, too.

Should they choose it then, down this path is only them. No more of their struggles, no more stumbling and uncertainty. Down this path it doesn’t matter if Rin never speaks to them again-because he wouldn’t- or if Sousuke can bring himself to admit there’s a chasm of a difference between the light contact unraveling him now and what makes sex with Gou even bearable. It doesn’t matter if he’s ever able to see a life outside of Iwatobi, if Haruka’s really gone for good, and down this path Makoto could quietly retire the armor that both protects and weakens him on his journey.

And Sousuke can’t do it. He can’t go through with that.

“Stop,” Sousuke breathes, and swears it physically hurts him to say.

The hands at his clothes still entirely and Makoto pulls back enough to show Sousuke the stormy, conflicted expression he can’t keep down either. “If… No. We can. We can, Sousuke.”

Sousuke shakes his head. “I know, and that’s the scariest part,” he chokes out unevenly. “Because you love Rin, and you’re about to give up on that with me. He’d find out. You know this shit never stays buried and you know this crosses a line no one comes back from.”

Makoto’s face goes slack with shock and he slowly returns his hands to his lap. “I…”

“You love Rin.”

“I do,” Makoto barely says. It’s quiet like a prayer, it’s what carries him. It’s sacred to him, and Sousuke is responsible right now for making sure it stays that way. “So fucking much- you have no idea.”

“Then this can’t happen, right? I won’t take that from you.”

“And… Haru… you… I know, Sousuke.”
All he finds in him to offer is a sad smile. Makoto doesn’t go to Gou first, and it says so much for what he thinks about it by saying nothing at all. And Sousuke does love Gou unconditionally, but can he say it in the same way Makoto just said he loves Rin? The way he says it to Haruka in his dreams?

He only hopes she won’t hate every inch of him, though she has a right to, and Sousuke won’t lie to her about any of this tomorrow.

But Haruka does not want him, and despite all of his evolving thoughts on everything, that one fact has held true. Haruka didn’t want him as he was, even if Sousuke finally understands why. Haruka doesn’t want him as he’s changing now. Because he’s found someone else—presumably someone who wants to grow with him without needing to be forced to—and it’s too late.

“We’ll see, huh?”

Makoto leans for him, but only gently rests their foreheads together in nothing but support for his sudden somber tone. “Okay.”

Sousuke strokes a thumb along Makoto’s cheekbone, and holds him. He’ll never get to do it again anyway. “This can’t happen again. No matter what.”

Makoto nods in acknowledgement as he lets himself lean into the touch and rest. They stay that way for an eternity, turning those words over and processing the meaning of them in their own ways. Another one of those things of life, Sousuke concedes. Maybe they would be happy together, maybe they wouldn’t. Rin would hate him for the rest of eternity either way, sure. And he’d deserve it. But if he wanted it, he could choose it. But this sort of path isn’t his, and it’s not Makoto’s either.

“It won’t,” Makoto finally agrees. “I promise.”

“I’m sorry.”

Makoto gives him one last impish smile before he takes it away for good, pulls back to the closest distance they’ll ever share again, and pushes their moment into memory without remorse. “I’m not.”

Uncharacteristically nervous, Haruka bounces his knee until he loudly thwacks it on the underside of the conference table, earning him a few glances from his coworkers. Mika’s been talking about his pages for triple the amount of time she usually does at the month-end staff meeting.

“Between Goto and Haru we have two layout designers who understand how to move numbers and make them look alive, is the point I’m trying to make. I understand that sometimes we’re bogged down with stories on statistics, and that there’s only so much you can do to make it interesting. But remember this is a publication people subscribe to, spend money on. We need to do our best for our patrons and sponsors. I’m sure Goto or Haru would be more than willing to offer constructive criticism on anything you’re not sure about.”

Haruka flinches involuntarily. He most certainly would not be willing. Goto’s constantly frowning anyway, but Haruka can see him dig it in imperceptibly deeper too.

Mika adjourns the meeting that’s run over by thirty minutes and Haruka is the first out the door. He loathes the month-end staff meeting. It’s really awkward to be in a room with his peers and
have their boss highlight what was done right and what wasn’t done right, no matter what end his work ends up on.

His phone clatters across his desk once he’s back at it. It’s an obnoxious grinding noise he’s now tried out for the first and last time. He sets it back to silent before checking the text.

romi is over here crying ON me \(\#^{'D'}\)/
wtf did you guys do???

she used script font again, Haruka supplies.

oh, well in that case. i’ll shun her.
wait she’s crying more.
that was a mistaaaaaaake.

Haruka snorts and shakes his head. He’d keep the banter up if he wasn’t a half hour behind now. But he needs to work.

“Where’s Romi?” Goto sighs from off to Haruka’s side.

“Bothering Chiyoda.”

Goto looks between the door and his desk and commits to retrieving her. “Shigino shouldn’t coddle her. She’s never going to learn,” he grumbles on his way out.

He’s barely able to get Photoshop booted up before he’s interrupted again by an instant message from Mika, asking for him to swing by when he has a moment. He figures he does now, since he can’t seem to get started on anything.

Mika’s at her desk and smiles up at him when he lets himself in and finds a chair.

“Really great work this month, Haru.”

“Thanks,” he mumbles.

“You’re getting really good so quickly. I don’t mean to put you on the spot like I did but showing the crew how fast our newest designer learns I’m hoping motivates them a little bit. We can always be better, and sometimes we fall into routines and stop innovating.”

Haruka nods in acknowledgement without having a whole lot to say about it. It makes him extremely anxious to be used this way, but it’s sort of a part of belonging to a team, he figures. This just isn’t a team he’s ready to be seen as any leading authority on is all.

“I think you should come to the writer’s room next week.”

He looks up in surprise from where his gaze has landed on her desk. Sometimes designers are invited to the content planning, but not often. “Um,” he starts uneasily. “I’m not much of a writer.”

“Mmm no, but I think you look at things a little differently and could have good input. I like a designer in the room when we’re pitching ideas. Sometimes they’re so focused on the stories that they forget there’s a visual component that’s equally as vital to our success.”

“Okay,” he concedes.

Mika rolls her eyes. “Oh jeez, Haru. It’s not that bad, I promise. I won’t make you say anything this first time. Just listen and learn.”
“I will.”

“Thank you. That’s all, I won’t torture you anymore today. Have a good weekend if I don’t see you before closing time.”

Haruka excuses himself and finally gets to return to more baseball statistics. Swimmers care about times, and that’s pretty much it. All of these other sports are really concerned with odd things. Like shoe sizes and palm sizes. So concerned that people will pay money to see all of the numbers laid out side-by-side with predictions on how that will impact someone’s game. It’s utterly bizarre to him, but then again few things in this industry are not.

By four in the afternoon he’s sick of baseball figures, though. He forgot he turned his phone to silent again, and frowns a bit ashamed of himself of it when there are messages he’s missed over the last few hours from Kisumi and Makoto.

romi said it’s happy hour this week? you going?
are eggs supposed to explode when u hard boil them?
...nevermind
i’ve been told the answer is no.
related: scrambled is better anyway.

He’d forgotten about happy hour. He tries to make an appearance, even though he usually would rather not. It’s been good for his work relationships even if he can think of five hundred other things he’d rather be doing on a Friday evening.

i guess. i don’t really want to. do you want to come? he answers.

i’m proud of you, he sarcastically sends to Makoto.

pass, Kisumi sends back. i’ve had enough Romi for one day.

Kisumi always ducks out of it, but Haruka always asks him anyway. He’s still sensitive and wary about opening up his circle and is easily overwhelmed by it. Romi’s newfound interest in Kisumi has him socially tapped out most of the time. Haruka feels bad about it. She means well, but she isn’t fluent in body language and Kisumi’s too nice to ask her to chill out.

want me to drop off dinner for you when i’m done?

oh! you mean it? sure! let me think about what i want and text me when you’re ready to order to-go?

He frowns, sends back his agreement, and starts to clean up his space.

--

“She’s always railing me, Haru,” Romi whines with her chin perched on her tall glass. “We just don’t have the same design aesthetic.”

“That isn’t a lie,” he responds, and Kasaki laughs across from him.

“That’s Nanase’s way of sayin’ your spreads are gaudy, Ro.”

She gasps and huffs. “It is not.”

“It isn’t,” Haru agrees. “Just different. Your’s are gaudy, Kasaki.”
He folds his arms across his chest. “So what?”

Yuu, one of the writers, glares at him from beneath dark bangs. “You always make my work look like Candyland threw it up.”

“Well all of you are into this monochromatic phase and it’s just so boring,” Kasaki argues. “My pages catch interest. I have an award, you know.”

“You tell us every time,” Romi says, and sticks her tongue out at him.

Haruka sips his water and watches them argue back and forth for a while. Every group of friends he ends up with are so high-energy compared to him, going all the way back to middle school. He wonders why that is, when he can hardly be bothered to get riled up about anything. Maybe it’s surrogate energy. He surrounds himself with people to be excited for him. Or maybe compared to him, everyone is high-energy.

Still, after all of his mounting loneliness leading up to his first invite out, this is a welcome change. It’s helped ebb his hurt, even if it still isn’t completely gone. Far from it. So while there are five hundred other things he’d rather be doing on a Friday night, he’s not going to take the company for granted.

Especially not while Kisumi still needs so much distance, and Haruka has no idea what they are. If they’re anything at all. There’s something there, and they had a talk per Makoto’s suggestion. Not per Makoto’s suggestion, Haruka honestly told Kisumi he would take Sousuke back if he decided to join Haruka in Tokyo. He also told Kisumi that didn’t mean they couldn’t be together, too. Kisumi walked away from it unsure and unconvinced and worst of all, slightly distant.

Which is difficult to accept, because Haruka’s decided that he really likes him.

There’s been progress since they first kissed and then talked about it two months ago regardless, and they spend a lot of time together compared to what Haruka’s used to. Kisumi drops by at work for quick chats, and has made friends with Romi and Goto as a consequence. They take breaks together, and they both leave on time. He doesn’t jump at his shadow like he used to, and he smiles much more than Haruka’s ever seen him do so. As he promised, he explained his involvement with the Mayor and his press aide, and further promised he’s done with pursuing all of that since the threat, and Haruka has no reason not to believe him.

This avoidance is of a different brand. Haruka knows it well from his youth. It’s the avoidance people take with you when you’re different and they don’t know how to react to it. Haruka thinks loving two people is an easy answer. He didn’t anticipate that sort of explanation would not resonate with others as easily.

Some days, Kisumi’s downright affectionate. Some days Haruka can’t go two minutes without some sort of touch from him or a kiss that knocks his balance off-center (which is quite the adjustment). Some days they get far enough for Kisumi to look like he wants to say something, and then he inexplicably backs off with harried apologies so upset that all Haruka feels like he can do is apologize in return and give him more space. And then, some days Haruka can’t even get a text back.

Haruka would like to know what’s going on with him as usual, but he can’t push it. Whatever the issue is, pushing it will make it worse. He would know. Kisumi will come to him once he’s ready, and Haruka can’t argue with something that simple.

He sighs. Relationships are so difficult. Why does he even want one? Much less two.
Romi slides a menu to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. “You got that look on your face that means it’s time to order something to-go and ditch us.”

“I had to stare at baseball statistics all day. I think I’m nearly blind,” Haruka deflects. “I’m just tired.”

She smiles in non-offense. “Totally get it. Baseball is my least fav.”

He takes that as cue to find out what Kisumi would like to eat. So that he can drop it off for him. And take Kisumi’s nervous shuffling as a hint to leave. He sighs again. Does Haruka really come off as a sinister and untrustworthy person?

Kisumi answers that he can’t decide, but “something with chicken!” would be “exactly perfect”, so Haruka orders him chicken karaage as a bit of an unhealthy indulgence. He admits he takes shortcuts like junk food to get Kisumi to brighten up if only for a few moments. He’s constantly chasing that full feeling in his chest he got that night in the dead of winter when Kisumi put on a display of imitating the rabbits for him. It’s a fullness he misses so much, and now that he’s reminded again of its existence, it hurts like hell when it’s gone. It’s a closeness he left behind with everyone in Iwatobi, but a closeness he wants here too.

He pays for the food and departs from his co-workers, and starts to walk to the bus stop. He’s genuinely surprised to find Kisumi waiting for him, already changed out of his work clothes for the day and in a thin summery top and pants.

“Okay, I’m an idiot,” he greets. “You bring me food, right? And it only crossed my mind earlier today that I make you take all this public transportation to get it to me. I’m the one with a car.”

“You don’t make me do anything. I don’t mind. I have to take the same bus anyway, it’s just one stop sooner to get to you.”

Kisumi shakes his head. “I could still get off my lazy ass and give you a ride. Besides,” he pauses and looks around, “the weather’s picking up.”

“Haru!”

Haruka turns to Romi running down the sidewalk towards them. His plastic bag of Kisumi’s food on her arm. That is some next level spacing out on his part; he must’ve left it on the booth at the table as he said goodbye.

“Well that’s embarrassing,” he mutters.

“You really are tired!” She looks past him to Kisumi. “Oh? Kisumi, what are you doing here?”

Kisumi looks nervous for a moment. “Just walking by.”

Haruka can’t keep his eyes from rolling and takes the offered bag from Romi. “Thank you.”

“Sure. Well, see you guys Monday!”

Haruka watches her skip back to the restaurant before giving Kisumi his most crystal clear really? look. Kisumi shrugs apologetically.

“I don’t know, just in case.”

“I don’t care if she knows that we see each other outside of work.” Haruka shoves the food at him.
“Oh- you don’t?” he asks in mild bewilderment as he takes it.

“Why would I?”

He frowns for a moment. “I guess I didn’t… yeah, you’re right. I have no idea.”

“Okay, well. I don’t need a ride home. I got you karaage.”

There it is; that spark of excitement. Haruka’s chest twists with it. “Um, I was hoping you could come over actually? We can share this. My patio is really nice when it’s this warm out.”

It feels like what he’s come to deign as Kisumi’s brand of a peace offering when he’s felt he’s done something wrong when he hasn’t. Tea at the stand after a busy week where they can’t meet up, a pastry after a dark weekend where he hasn’t returned Haruka’s texts, now an offer to split a meal for denying their relationship in front of Romi, he figures.

Of course, he’s going to agree, because Haruka’s only declined one invitation from Kisumi in the months they’ve been getting closer, and while Kisumi did his best to hide it, he was devastated at the response. He clearly needs the company and Haruka isn’t heartless.

Kisumi seems to be in an extremely good mood today though, and hums or sings the entire way back to his old building. Another thing Haruka’s learned about him is that while he’s chatty, and likes to fill in silences, he isn’t chatty at Haruka. Something Haruka always assumed about him but isn’t true. He’s learned Kisumi expects no response, and just likes to make comments about things. It’s actually reminiscent of Makoto, and he finds it comforting.

Once at his place, Kisumi lays a thin sheet on the ground of the patio outside for them to sit on. They can’t see over the half-wall and into the city this way, but he’s right. It catches a nice breeze and is perfectly shaded for this time of the day.

“Do you smoke?” Haruka asks incredulously once he notices the ashtray pushed off to the side. Seems so not him in the slightest, and Haruka’s never smelled that on him or any of his things.

Kisumi smiles and shrugs helplessly. “Used to. Sometimes now. College was rough, and after college was like, apocalyptically terrible for a bit. And now sometimes I cave. I won’t deny that it helped. Or, helps, rather.”

“Oh, okay,” Haruka acknowledges. He doesn’t really care, but if only for Kisumi’s health he might not encourage it. That and he kissed Sousuke once after he had a one-time cigar at some extended family celebration and it was terrible, but he could put up with it if he had to he supposes.

“I know it’s bad for me,” he frets.

Haruka unbags the food and props open the container and side sauce. “Everyone needs something to get through a bad day. I’m not your doctor or mother.”

“What do you use?” Kisumi asks with a tilt of his head.

Haruka thinks about it as he dunks a piece of chicken. “I shut people out and shut myself in when I’ve had enough. That’s bad for me too.”

“Hmm. People still want to kiss other people who avoid others, though. So it’s got that benefit over a cigarette,” he jests.

They’re sitting close enough for Haruka to feel cheeky about that claim. He turns to press their lips
together quickly, snorting as he sits back at the flush it earns him. “I’m not noticing a difference.”

“Haru,” Kisumi groans, dropping his face to his hands and rubbing roughly at his cheeks. “Come on.”

He shrugs and finally takes a bite to eat. “You started it.”

Kisumi sighs and recovers, taking his own piece. “What are we doing?” he mutters, and Haruka isn’t sure if it’s one of those things he’s asking the void or actually asking him.

“What do you want to be doing?” he chances.

“You know that already. But you love Sousuke.”

“I told you I can love more than one person.”

Kisumi isn’t moved and trains his stare to a spot on the ground. “Haru… I’ve thought a lot about that actually. And it’s why I wanted you to come over.”

Haruka’s stomach goes cold at his turn in tone. He knows he loves them both. He knows he can continue to love them both. He wants to be with Kisumi, and if Sousuke ever decides to join him, he’d want to be with him too. It’s so simple, it really is as uncomplicated as it seems.

It took him a long time to reach that conclusion. Weeks of endless reasoning. But in the end of him asking repeatedly and beating himself up over the idea that he had to choose one way or the other if it came to it, he had a realization: why does he have to choose at all if he can love them both without disadvantaging either? What’s the downside?

“And?”

“If Sousuke ever… you know. You’d choose him.”

“I told you I’d choose you both.”

Kisumi rolls his bottom lip between his teeth. “I know that’s what you said. But that’s not… normal, Haru. If he asks you to choose, you’ll choose him.”

Haruka stares at the ground with him. His fears that Kisumi finds him different for thinking this way were well founded, and it picks at long closed wounds. “If he made me do that then he isn’t who I thought he was, and we’re not good for each other. Why isn’t it normal?”

“Someone would get hurt, Haru. There’s just no way to be equal.”

“Why not?”

Kisumi sighs pinches at the corners of his eyes. “I’ve been left for lesser things. If I don’t want to be with Sousuke too, then what? If Sousuke doesn’t want that? He’s allowed to want monogamy.”

“You two don’t have to be together to be with me. But you’d have to respect that I’m with you both. And if you can’t share in that case… it won’t work. For anyone. If he shows up I won’t leave you for him. I feel differently now, I can’t go back to what it was and deny you ever happened to me.”

Kisumi falls quiet in thought and picks at the food half-heartedly. “You were with him for so long before I showed up. I’m not trying to discourage you, but I think you’re making it too simple. I trust you Haru but that’s a lot of memories to measure up with, and sharing a relationship is not
easy even when everyone starts on equal footing. I don’t even have that here.”

“If any of this even happens, we’re starting over. Of course Sousuke and I have a past and a lot of it was good. But… it didn’t work. I wasn’t happy. Obviously something wasn’t right. You shouldn’t compare yourself to a relationship that didn’t make it in the end. We’d do it right this time if Sousuke joined us.”

“But you’re adding me to something established and I just… there’s no way I mean as much to you, and Sousuke and I would be starting as strangers. Any realistic person would look at this critically.”

He doesn’t know how to explain to Kisumi that it isn’t a competition. That he isn’t any less valued just because Haruka doesn’t have as much of a history with him. Besides, he’s fretting over an idea. Sousuke isn’t even available. Haruka would just like Kisumi to know that he would take Sousuke back in addition to his relationship with him should that opportunity present itself. He’s not packing up and leaving Tokyo to go back to Iwatobi. In fact he’s comfortable here now. So really, there’s only one way it would work with Sousuke and Haruka’s not convinced anymore Sousuke will ever change his mind.

Gou is important to him; if they’re happy- even if they’re not- Haruka would never try to manipulate Sousuke away from her. They deserve all the happiness in the world if that’s what they want to move forward with. But Haruka needs to do something with his feelings for Sousuke. Reconcile them in some way. Because they might not ever go away, even if he’s falling for Kisumi. It will be a part of his relationship with Kisumi- if he can ever get it off the ground anyway- and if Kisumi can’t accept even that much then it’s not a relationship he can have.

He sighs. “When I was getting to know Sousuke he didn’t think he could measure up to Makoto or ever think he could be as close to me as him, you know. Luckily we already shared Rin, but I made room for Sousuke and showed him that I am capable of it. Makoto’s part of the deal too. Just differently so. And I don’t value either of them more than you, either, and I’ve known Makoto since birth. Or Rin or Gou or anyone I consider close. It’s not finite I don’t just run out of feelings to give and you don’t get less from me just because the others have been around to receive them longer. That’s asinine.”

Kisumi laughs despite the serious tone of their conversation. “You’re really trying here, aren’t you?”

“I am,” he bristles. “Because you haven’t told me no yet.”

“I haven’t,” he agrees, a bit tired and battered around the edges.

Haruka isn’t going to beg Kisumi to get it or expect him to jump on board after only two conversations about it. What he’d really like is a chance to prove it, and that’s what he’s hoping the most for. This is a lot to pile on Kisumi, he knows this. Kisumi’s only just recovering from everything he’s gone through, and Haruka doesn’t even know the entire story. He’s selfishly asking for blind faith probably too soon but it was important to Haruka that he was honest as soon as he could be about his feelings this time.

“I worked my ass off to get into Kyoto University,” Kisumi says suddenly, sterile and devoid of anxiety or bias. “And I barely graduated with a degree in journalism.”

Haruka settles back against the wall, food forgotten. Kisumi chews a lip and visibly debates himself if it’s worth continuing until Haruka nudges him with an elbow.
“...I’ve never been book smart. I have a hard time focusing on that stuff, and school’s a little difficult for me. I try really hard, it just doesn’t get me straight A’s, you know? But no one really cares about how hard you try. So I had to make up the difference with a blitz of volunteering and internships and a ton of other things to make me marketable. It landed me a job in the mailroom for the city’s biggest paper. And I was so proud of myself even if no one else was. Fuck ‘em, I thought.”

“I worked my way up over a few years. I proved myself. I was there late helping with whatever I could, coming in on weekends, sticking around seminars that didn’t concern me just to learn something new. I made sure I knew the name of every single person in that building down to the part-time night shift janitor and I made sure I knew at least one thing about every person, too. I wanted to be a writer, I wanted to report. And I did what I needed to do even if it meant I had to do a lot more than other people to get there.”

He looks over at Haruka for a second and sighs before looking back out when Haruka nudges him with encouragement again.

“People hated me for it. Hated me for being such a try-hard, or a brown-noser, whatever. People have always hated me for that. In school as young as Sano when me and Rin would get picked on for stupid shit, we wouldn’t stay down, and still nearly twenty years later at my first real job when I tried to make something of myself, they’re pissed I wouldn’t stay in the mailroom part-time. The difference though… when people hate you as an adult, they can really hurt you with it more than just the mental torment.”

“I had one friend during all of this. I dated her and loved her. Her name was Misa. And she happened to be the chief editor. Obviously, once I got up high enough and there was a very real chance she could become my boss, I broke it off. My profession was important to me. I had goals. I’d made that crystal clear from the beginning, but she was still hurt. I was up for a promotion to the writer’s floor- everything I wanted. I applied and interviewed and I had a chance. I turned myself in full compliance to Human Resources about my relationship and that it was over. I did everything right as I was supposed to. But as I said… people hated me. And a promotion like that put me above a lot of them.”

“So of course when they invited me out to congratulate me on my promotion, I went. I still wanted their companionship, I thought eventually I could win them over and of course to do so I needed to be friendly and accept invites out, right? I really, really strive to be an open, trusting person. There’s enough nastiness in this world, you know?”

Kisumi pauses and finds another piece of chicken to nibble on, as if this is any old conversation that doesn’t have Haruka’s stomach in knots.

“That trust earned me too many ‘free’ drinks, a stolen phone while I was distracted, and a bunch of texts sent to Misa not from me. A fake argument where Misa replied to the fake messages and someone pushed it to make it look like I threatened her. Misa was complicit and reported it as harassment. And I was fired from Kyoto’s largest newspaper publication two days later and no one would hear it that I was innocent. And what reputable publication is going to hire a guy with mediocre grades and a black mark on his employment history?”

“Kisumi,” Haruka breathes. He’s frozen as he sits, because that story is just Kyoto. There’s an entire shitty chapter of Tokyo ahead of him still, and Haruka should never have asked for his trust like it was so easily earned. Were he in Kisumi’s position, he’d never trust anyone again.

Kisumi pulls a deep breath through his nose. “Chiyoda Review, of the political sector in Tokyo, hired me though. After more applications to places than I can count, they took me on because I
made acquaintance with the lead writer through one of my volunteer opportunities years prior. I had no money and took it right away. I was depressed and angry and it was a lifeline in the dark. Off I went. After my first promising week, I ran into a handsome man outside of the building after work one evening. Shozo Matsuda. I thought it was all too good to be true that we hit it off so quickly, after such a great impression at the paper, but I let it happen. My life was so shitty up until then, like who wouldn’t fall for it?”

“And oh, that pig. He was such a lover, so passionate for me. Someone really liked me, someone thought I was smart and determined and all of that shit no one had ever said about me before. I fell so hard. He was an artist he claimed, and artists need photographs of the people and things that they love, right? So, ‘Kissy, lay down for me, baby. Spread for me, just like that.’ And I did. I let him touch me and pose me and take all sorts of pictures. I’d never felt more revered in my life.”

“Then he abruptly broke it off. Around the same time I was busy getting shitfaced at every waking moment to deal with that, in comes the tip that the mayor is lecherous garbage and so is his press secretary: Shozo Matsuda. I think I threw up three times that afternoon alone. And hey, you know the rest from there.”

He finishes bitterly, beaten down and brittle. Haruka still can’t move.

“So yeah… I trust you Haru, and you’ve been so, so great. But I have a lot of reasons to believe you’ll just end up hurting me.”

“I understand now,” Haruka replies meekly.

“I don’t want to let any of those assholes beat me,” Kisumi continues. “I don’t want to be afraid and angry my entire life. But it’s not easy when it feels like no one’s ever going to give me a break.”

“I understand,” he repeats.

Kisumi shifts closer, though, which Haruka doesn’t expect. “I didn’t tell you my sob story to show you why I’m oh so jaded and don’t believe you or any of that dramatic shit. I told you because I’ve never told anyone before, and you mean a lot to me and deserve to know why I’m such a fucking mess. Why I need you to be patient. I want to be with you Haru. I want to try. Maybe I could get to know Sousuke too if he joins you. One thing at a time, right? Just, you know, if we want to break up one day, maybe you could let me down easy, instead of destroying my life?” He offers a weak smile as he finishes.

A lot floods over Haruka all at once. Every emotion he’s ever had. He had no idea. In a thousand years he wouldn’t have guessed Kisumi went through all of that, anything close to that. He nods in response, exhausted from it all; his words, Kisumi’s words, an entire new chapter turning over for him he never could’ve predicted a year ago. He could honestly sleep right here where he sits, and Kisumi’s proven to be warm to sleep next to. His resolve is steeled after this; Kisumi is strong, he’s a good person. Haruka believes in him more than ever, doesn’t doubt his feelings for him in the least and wants to show him exactly what that security feels like as soon as he can.

He’ll settle for now on the kiss he’s given, warm in its own right, soft and sure. Kisumi sits back and Haruka’s a little disappointed, eyes set on something less on the chaste side at this point, but the brevity is quickly explained.

Kisumi sighs in relief and his tension visibly drains. “How’d I do, Yuurei?” he asks a bar louder.

Haruka’s sure his unchecked bewilderment is a sight when a voice he’s never heard in his life calls
back with laughter from below: “Sounded great, hon.”
Aki’s hair is even better than it is under the sun when it’s beneath Gou’s fingers.

She sighs from her lounge on Gou’s lap. It’s only been ten minutes since she got there and already Gou senses she’s restless and itching to go out. “I want to go do something.”

“Like?” She catches a snag in Aki’s hair and pauses brushing through it to gently pull it apart. It’s always tangled.

“In Tottori, there’s a sandcastle competition today. At the dunes. It’s still early, we could make it over in time to see the entries.”

Gou laughs. “Do you just keep a calendar of events in the area or something?”

She hums. “... Pretty much.”

“Well get off me, then. I need to let Sousuke know.”

Aki finally sits up to stretch, and Gou looks away from the sight of her back under her loose tank top. She not sure Aki realizes how… comfortable she makes herself. Increasingly so in Gou’s presence.

While Aki gathers up her hair to make a mess of it again into her loose bun, Gou stands and finds her phone in the kitchen to cancel on Sousuke. She wonders if he just expects it now, but no matter how much she apologizes or tries to reschedule, he just doesn’t seem to care anyway. It’s probably time to admit it’s not going to work. She’s sick of fuckbuddies.

For once though, he’s texted her first.

gonna hang w makoto today hope thats ok. call you later.

She sighs quietly in relief. sure, have fun!

“Can I borrow those shorts with the cherries on the bottom hem?” Aki calls from her bedroom.

“O-okay,” Gou stammers after her. “Second drawer!”

“Got ‘em!”

Gou nearly asks what’s wrong with the shorts she has on, but Gou’s learned it’s better if Aki doesn’t stroll out of her room half-dressed to demonstrate the difference. Chigusa was never like this, and Gou’s a bit at a loss for what’s considered normal for girls to share. There are few relevant things in her life at this point she doesn’t have a good grasp on, but learning Aki is like learning an entirely new culture.

Aki emerges, cherry-printed shorts and clashing yellow top. Uncharacteristic of Gou, she lets Aki lead the way out and to Tottori.

The thing about Aki is, whether she takes Gou to big events like this or they simply go on a walk through her side of Iwatobi, Gou’s always surprised when the end of the day finds them. The sandcastles are no different from the museum on their first day together; it ends as soon as they get there, and Gou’s hardly able to pay attention to the event much like she couldn’t focus on the jarred embryos. She thinks an undersea kingdom won the contest, but it could just as well have
been the Escher staircase recreation for all she knows. The only difference between the museum
and now is Aki’s satisfied bright smile has only grown wider and wider, until her eyes crinkle
where it overflows.

And, that’s not technically right. Another difference is how much harder it makes Gou’s heart
pound to see it. It’s utterly foreign feeling, she’s never experienced a reaction to another person like
this. It’s a feeling that makes her worry for her health, as heart problems could run in the side of
family she doesn’t know and she’d have no idea, but it’s also a feeling she anticipates and looks
forward to.

Aki gets them slushes from a vendor as some of the festival stalls are starting to close up after the
event. She never lets Gou pay for anything, which is perplexing considering Gou is her boss, and
obviously she makes more money. No one ever gets the good bosses gifts, she explained once.

“Cherry for me, of course, and I don’t know what yours is… I just asked for whatever,” she laughs.

Gou tastes it tentatively, in case it’s gross, but she’d probably drink it anyway if it were. “Blue.”

“Yes I see that,” Aki snorts.

“No like, that’s the flavor. The blue flavor.”

“Raspberry?”

Gou huffs. “I don’t know why it’s called that! It tastes nothing like raspberries. It’s just blue. Like
the grape flavor doesn’t taste like grape. It’s just purple.”

Aki blinks down at her slush and holds it up. “So this is just red?”

“No, it’s cherry, because it tastes like cherries.”

“You’re so technical about everything! It can be grape or raspberry if it wants to be, so there.”

Gou blushes in mild embarrassment at the reprimand and takes a long drink through the straw to
cool her cheeks. “Doesn’t mean I don’t like it.”

Aki smiles triumphantly and turns to walk away from the stalls.

“What now?” Gou asks.

“I thought we could… just sit.”

She nearly freezes on her stride. Aki’s never suggested that they just sit. Gou’s seen more of this
area of Japan in weekend increments over the last few months than she has in her entire life. Aki’s
even throwing out some weekend destinations lately. A trip to Osaka to see her family, or a trek to
the north to Hokkaido to camp and hike.

Aki takes them the shortest distance she ever has, maybe fifty meters, and stops at the beach where
the sand is still dry. She kicks a few rocks out of the spot where she’d like to sit, never one for
simply finding an area without rocks to begin with.

Gou wants to tell her she’s just going to get sand in the folds of her favorite shorts like this, but it
doesn’t make it past her throat. Instead she sits down next to her and quietly enjoys the slush under
the late afternoon heat.

“I think I’m finally getting a tan,” Aki states with relief, holding her free arm out in front of herself.
“I used to be like, a perpetual golden statue as a kid when I swam all the time.”

Gou holds her forearm out to compare. She’s still rather pale. “Where’d you swim?”

“Well, Iwatobi elementary as a kid. Then more in Osaka. Stopped for college so I could run track instead.”

“Hmm,” Gou hums. “You probably knew my brother back then. He’s your age and also went to that school to swim.”

“Rin, you said his name was?”

Gou nods.

“Yeah, I guess I would’ve had to. Sort of like, I know who you’re talking about, I can see what your brother would look like just looking at you? But not really? I guess it was so long ago… When I go home to Osaka again I can look through old swim photos. That might be fun! Maybe teeny tiny Gou is in some,” she teases.

It’s a relief she barely remembers, if they even knew each other at all. It is exasperating in her mind though that not even Aki is apart from Rin. It’s silly, but the idea that Gou finally had a friend with no connections to Rin was empowering. This must be as close as she’s going to get.

“But hey, he’s a stranger for all I know. You’re clearly the superior Matsuoka, and he’s a jerk for not introducing me to you back then.” Aki furrows her eyebrows. “Think of all the trouble we could’ve gotten into.” She elbows Gou playfully as she finishes.

“Yeah,” Gou responds timidly.

“Well, now we can make up for all the lost time. I really like you, Gou.”

Gou tears her eyes away from the water to see Aki smiling gently in profile, for once not bursting with energy and happy to just be where she is. When she turns her head to acknowledge Gou’s stare, Gou misses the steps between that and when she’s tasting cherry- not red- on Aki’s chapped lips, and she doesn’t stop Aki from kissing her back.

“Oh,” Aki laughs when they part. “That clears a few things up.”

That feeling she’s been anticipating suddenly makes a lot more sense, everything that’s been missing or wasn’t quite right everywhere else snaps loudly into place in the silent white noise of her mind, and she brushes her fingers through Aki’s hair to pull her close again and chase after her heart that’s thrumming leagues ahead of the rest of her.

--

we should talk soon. do you have any time today.

Gou stares at her phone as her stomach bottoms out of her body and into oblivion. Not because she knows Sousuke’s about to end it- she’s seen that combination of words a million times before and they always mean the same thing- but because Aki’s currently curled around her middle as she sleeps and Gou’s only now feeling terrible about it. No matter how distant they were, that wasn’t a reason to do this. If only she let herself think that last night.

If he’s going to be angry with her, it will go better over food.
want to get lunch?

no probably better to talk at your place. sorry.

She looks around her bedroom at all of the various items Sousuke’s left behind. He either wants to be able to get his things, or he already knows what she’s done somehow and doesn’t want to be in public for a fight that big.

Gou’s about to lose her best and oldest friend, and suddenly she can’t breathe. Sousuke isn’t big on forgiving betrayal, and second chances only exist for Rin.

“Gou?” Aki murmurs groggily.

“You should go,” she whispers. “I’m sorry, Aki.”

Aki disentangles herself and sits up to level Gou with a frown of concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Please put a shirt on,” Gou pleads, looking away from Aki’s bare form as her face burns with a sickening combination of lust and shame.

“It’s not like what I was wearing yesterday covered much,” Aki says, tilting her head innocently. “On purpose, to be honest.”

“Please, Aki!”

Aki chews her lip and sits back. “Um. I’m sort of confused?”

“I’m with him,” Gou confesses as she drops her head into her hands. “Sort of. Sousuke.”

“... Oh.”

“I’m sorry. There’s no excuse.”

The weight shifts on the bed as Aki steps off of it. “Are you going to talk to him about me?”

Gou nods. “I need to break it off with him if he doesn’t get to it first. He already texted me this morning that we needed to talk anyway... I should’ve told you, I would’ve done it sooner if I’d known, but I just… didn’t realize until yesterday. Any of this. I didn’t know.”

Aki is quiet for a moment. “Just… call me when you’re done?”

She nods again and still can’t look up, even when Aki calls for her one more time.

“We can talk. But, whatever you’re thinking about, I’m not angry, okay?”

“Okay,” she answers, and waits until the front door shuts to unfurl from herself and find her phone.

now?

give me thirty.

Gou uses the time to take a shower and make tea to calm her nerves. She fucked up, but this is Sousuke. He’s not mean. He’ll be hurt, but he won’t yell. He’s never raised his voice at her in anger. Maybe, just maybe, he’ll speak to her again in the future once enough time has gone by.

She startles when he knocks, and sits frozen in place until he knocks again. Slowly she answers it,
and she opens her door to his passive face. He’s dressed down and hasn’t shaved, his eyes are red and he’s pale with unrest.

“I’m really hungover,” he mutters when she frowns.

“I made tea."

“Thank god.” He lets himself in and gets out of his shoes on unsteady feet before helping himself to a mug with a bag and the kettle in the kitchen.

Gou retakes her spot at her kitchenette, knees drawn up and nerves unraveling all over again. He has no idea, why would he? She still wishes she didn’t have to tell him this, which is a passiveness that isn’t like her at all.

When he sits he holds up an apologetic hand to drink from his mug and close his eyes for a minute. “Jesus I think I’m dying. I’ve seen the light three times already but I’m too miserable to reach for it.”

“Makoto can drink,” Gou teases weakly.

“It’s terrifying, I had no idea.” He sets his mug down and flips her off. “Look at this shit.”

She grabs his wrist at the sight of the ink to take a closer look at a fucking heart, and truly has no words for him.

“Makoto wanted this, I can’t... “ He sighs. “Any-fucking-way. I’m not gonna be feeling any better any time soon so it didn’t matter if I came over now or later.”

“Before you start,” Gou blurts out. “I know why you’re here.”

His jaw goes slack, and his eyes might go wide as well if they weren’t so heavy with exhaustion. “Uh, sorry but, how? Makoto might actually be dead, I didn’t check but he sure as shit ain’t awake. Did he drunk text you last night?”

“Why would he? Did you talk to him about me?”

“N-no?” Sousuke stammers. “All right I’m confused. Why do you think I’m here?”

“You’re breaking up with me?” Gou matches in confusion. “The text wasn’t subtle, we barely hang out anymore, and we’ve clearly slipped into fuckbuddy territory?”

“Uh,” Sousuke grunts, and clears his throat. “I am, yeah, but it’s not... that simple.”

“What does that have to do with Makoto?”

“I’m definitely getting to that part.” Stalling again, he drinks his tea and rubs at his eyes and face. “I drunkenly made out with him and stopped it before it went too far.”

“You... kissed Makoto?” she asks in disbelief. It’s not even registering as possible.

“Oooh yeah,” he sighs and chuckles interchangeably. “That’s a real rosey way to put it, but yeah. We kissed, and we stopped. I swear on the meager remnants left of my life that we stopped.”

It’s not that two wrongs make a right, or that any shitty deed cancels another out, but Gou finds herself laughing anyway, to Sousuke’s visible surprise. She stands for the kettle and pours both of them more water; even if Sousuke’s hurt by what she’s done, there’s an element of comedy here
she won’t let go unacknowledged. “I was going to break up with you too.”

“I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“I slept with Aki last night.”

Sousuke blinks slowly; to his credit he can hold an impressively neutral face even under the weight of a bombshell like that. “I don’t know how to respond to that,” he repeats.

“I’m sorry, Sousuke. It was wrong, and I won’t make excuses for it.”

“I… made out with Makoto and you had sex with Aki. While I made out with Makoto.”

“Yeah I’d say that covers it,” she says.

He hums thoughtfully and takes a drink. “I’m… not even mad. Why? I should be.”

“I don’t know. I’m not either.”

Sousuke sets his tea down and lays his hand down on the surface palm up in silent offering. Gou takes his hand, and he squeezes her fingers. “Gou, you’re beautiful, you know that?”

“Sousuke,” she breathes in shock.

“I do love you, but I’ve decided it’s… different. I’m sorry for using you, I know I did. I feel like shit for all this. It shouldn’t have happened and I think we would’ve ended this a while ago if you knew…” he mutters at the end, face going red. “There’s another, much more uh, concrete reason we’re not gonna do this anymore…”

“I’m gay,” she says, wherever it comes from, and from there it all braids itself together. Every snag she’s hit along the way, every doubt in herself at the end of every relationship she’s ever had. But there aren’t any doubts or snags here. “I like Aki, but not like I like you, and sex with you is good but I need more than sex for it to work.”

“I like you, but I’m not either.”

“I’m gay,” she says, wherever it comes from, and from there it all braids itself together. Every snag she’s hit along the way, every doubt in herself at the end of every relationship she’s ever had. But there aren’t any doubts or snags here. “I like Aki, but not like I like you, and sex with you is good but I need more than sex for it to work.”

“I do love you, but I’ve decided it’s… different. I’m sorry for using you, I know I did. I feel like shit for all this. It shouldn’t have happened and I think we would’ve ended this a while ago if you knew…” he mutters at the end, face going red. “There’s another, much more uh, concrete reason we’re not gonna do this anymore…”

“Why would you steal my thunder like this?” Sousuke pouts. “You’re the first person I’m gonna tell ever and you come out first? No, I’m gay. Annoyingly so.”

She giggles, more lightheadedly than anything. “Why’s that?”

“Like I said, you’re beautiful. But Gou, since we’re at this point right now, and you technically cheated harder, I’m just gonna say it and level the field. I am not getting enough dick, and it’s ruining my life.”

Gou gasps and drops her forehead to the table with a long groan. So much in hindsight is suddenly obvious. Painfully so. “Did you even like sex with me?”

“I fucking tried to, I swear. I roped Makoto in on it- since he’s a goddamn retired gigolo let me tell you- I read about it, I watched different porn- nothing, Gou. Nothing. All I could think about to get it up-”

“Oversharing,” she whines. “I get it.”

“Last night I kissed him and it’s more sexual relief than I’ve felt in months. We didn’t even do anything else. I just had to admit it then. And it’s bullshit because you really are hot, Gou.”

“Oh stop,” she laughs. “I’m only a little bit offended, don’t grovel.”
“Well I’m fully offended you only stuck around for the sex.”

“No you’re not.” She slides her fingers from his grasp and strokes gently along his palm. “Well, what now? Do we hate each other? I know I took it too far at least, I really betrayed you.”

“No,” Sousuke answers quietly. “I mean, it sucks. I wish we hadn’t done this to each other. But if this had to happen to anyone, I’m happy it happened between us because personally I know you didn’t do it to be a dick. Hope you know I wouldn’t either.”

Cheating isn’t something she ever thought she was capable of, and Sousuke’s so devoted no matter what that her mind can’t supply her an image of him even kissing someone else. But that’s what they did, and he’s right. It wasn’t to hurt anyone, it was her finally coming across an answer after a lifetime of looking and Sousuke simply making a mistake that unearthed something unignorable. This was their inevitable outcome, and like most things in life it could’ve been handled better, but it can’t be undone. “I feel like that too.”

“I’ll give you space. You have something new to pursue, but when you’re settled I want you back how it used to be. We were better that way.”

She nods over a lump in her throat. Somehow and ironically, it’s the most romantic thing anyone’s ever said to her, and she’s just so happy to un-do this mistake and come out the end of it with her friend.

“I took advantage of you,” Sousuke says sternly. “I won’t reduce you to a person only around to make me feel better. Throwing our relationship away like that for comfort was fuckin’ shitty of me.”

“I still agreed to it even though I knew I was your rebound. Because you’re a good guy. I thought if it wasn’t you, then it wouldn’t be anyone, you know? Like it was the only factor that mattered…” She sighs. “I never stopped to question where my own disconnect was coming from.”

“Was I a good looking tool at least?”

She smiles coyly and sits up. “Shush. Haruka? Did you ever stop loving him?”

Sousuke snorts. “Nah. Fucker wraps everyone around his finger for good, you know that. He’s moved on, though. So I need to put some focus into healing from that, finally. I’ve neglected it, thought it would go away if I did. But it hurts a bit…” He sighs. “Okay, a lot.”

“So, Makoto then?”

He sits back and licks his lips nervously. “I mean, if we wanted to… we could. There’s attraction there, who’s denying that? But he really loves Rin, and he shouldn’t give up on that. We decided we shouldn’t. He needs to talk to Rin.”

Gou takes a deep breath at the mention of her brother. “He’s lost, Sou. And he’s crafty enough now to stay that way if he wants to. You’ve seen how reactive he is.”

“Well, you know Rin. He’s tough to get through to when he’s angry but it’s not impossible. You know where he is?”

She shakes her head in denial. “Mom says he’s literally never home anymore. Sometimes he leaves a note for her and it’s the only evidence he’s been by all day.”

“He shut my ass down and every time I try to find him, I can’t. Makoto’s nursing the rejection of
Rin not acknowledging his calls. So we don’t know either.”

“Let me work on it,” Gou offers. “He’s angry with you, but I think he’s just avoiding me because I was angry with him. We love him and don’t want him to disappear from our lives if we can help it, no matter how big of a prick he’s being about it all.”

Sousuke shifts uncomfortably in his seat and rubs at his eyes again. “… Can I ask you something that bothered me and Haruka about his entire story?”

“Okay,” she answers, and prepares the truth. She already knows what he’s going to ask.

“Did he really pass those time trials? It never added up. That he was offered a spot in London and chose to come home and be with Makoto instead of devoting his life to that. It’s not him to do that, to just give up his dream for what at the time, was at best his high school crush. I checked those results, Gou. His name wasn’t there.”

“He never qualified.”

A pin could fall from a low height and still be audible in her kitchen in the wake of her reveal.

“… Wow,” Sousuke says. “Yeah. I thought so. Does Makoto know that?”

“‘All Makoto needs to know is that I’m home’,;” Gou parrots, unable to just say no, he doesn’t. He has no clue.

“Jesus,” Sousuke breathes out in a hiss. “I’m gonna need to sleep this entire conversation off for three days. I come over here expecting you to put my face through a plate glass window and come out the other side with two gay awakenings and somehow for the first time ever, neither of them have to do with the real topic of conversation: Rin.”

It makes her laugh. She’s going to need it for the next step.

--

Though Gou has more pressing family issues to attend to for now, she calls Aki long enough to explain that it’s all okay. She ends the call and a weight drops off her shoulders. It all could’ve been disastrous, truly she would’ve deserved Sousuke’s scorn. But no matter what happens with Rin, she has Sousuke, and now she has Aki too. Her girlfriend.

The rest of her Sunday is now for Rin, and though she stays at her mother’s house, calls him, texts him, walks around his usual venues- he’s nowhere to be found. And then she starts to worry. By sundown, he isn’t home. By nightfall, he’s returned no message. By bedtime his mother is home, and reveals she hasn’t seen him in days this time with an exhausted sigh. This is not just a case of Rin keeping himself distracted anymore. This is Rin getting into trouble somewhere, somehow.

“Would you mind if I stayed here tonight?” Gou asks. “I was going to take tomorrow off anyway.” She wasn’t, but now she is.

“Of course Gou,” Ayumi answers. “Maybe if Rin comes home we can go out for lunch. It’s been a while.”

Gou can’t worry their mother- not yet. Whatever excuses Rin’s been telling her for his absences, she buys them. Gou agrees, and her mother retreats to her bedroom to get some rest. Gou eyes the closed door to Rin’s room, torn between looking for clues for wherever he might be spending his time and keeping his privacy intact.
She’s worried. If there’s anything there that could give her peace of mind, she needs it.

Rin’s room is spotless in a way that makes it looked unlived in, like he never moved back home. Everything is in its place as it’s always been. There’s only one thing disturbed, one thing that tells her he’s ever spent more than five minutes here since he came back. His wastebasket is piled high with crumpled pieces of paper of all colors and sizes.

Curious, she sits on the floor next to the basket, takes one off the top, and uncrumpled it.

_Nakoto,_

_You didn’t come after me._

_Rin_

She swallows over the lump of dread in her throat, smooths the first letter flat on the floor, and grabs another.

_Nakoto,_

_You’re a liar._

_Rin_

_Nakoto,_

_Exactly how fast did you move on?_

_Rin_

_Nakoto,_

_Why didn’t you answer?_

_Rin_

_Nakoto,_

_I let a teenager fuck me today. And the day before that. At least twice a week for about two months now. I never asked, because I didn’t want to know the answer. The twins’ age, as it turns out. Aren’t you proud of me?_

_This is your fault._

_Rin_

Gou’s pulse spikes as she goes letter by letter. They’re all variations of the same thing, all silent confessions or accusations. Every one of them choked with anger and vitriol and all of it not really about Makoto or even meant for him in the least.
She balls all the letters back up into the trash with unsteady hands. When has Rin ever been this bad? Who was watching him, making sure he was coping with his losses? It wasn’t her, who shoved him out of her home and told him not to come back. Sousuke was shut out, now she knows why. Rin didn’t want Sousuke to see him like this. Makoto needed room. Haruka isn’t physically here.

She calls him again, gets his voicemail again, and leaves another plea for a response. She takes herself back around his stomping grounds long after the town’s gone to sleep and loops through them twice, branching out farther and farther to no success. Finally she wavers at the police station for a few minutes, out of ideas and and so worked up she feels ill. But if she calls Sousuke or Makoto, they’ll panic and be out all night and Rin might make himself scarcer if he sees them. If she calls Haruka, he’ll drop everything before she can finish speaking and come all the way home when Gou really just needs more ideas for where to look.

Out of options short of making a manhunt out of it, she goes home once more and tells herself he’ll be there when she wakes up. She’ll stay in his bed so he can’t sneak by, she’ll scream at him for being an asshole.

It’s only after she sends him one last text to tell him she’s staying at home for the night if he needs her, and long after she’s spaced her gaze out over the wastebasket and resolved to empty it in the morning, that he calls her back.

She’s bolt upright in the bed as she answers it, sometime after 1 AM. “Rin!”

There’s no response, she only hears him breathing from a distance. “Rin.”

A few more deep breaths. “... Gou.”

“What are you?”

“Can- uh-” He starts, stops, breathes. “Can you come get me?”

He’s slurring and his pacing is uneven, and Gou has to assume he’s drunk. “Where, Rin?”

“I- don’t- know,” he answers with audible difficulty, each word like he’s saying it for the first time.

Gou cradles the phone between her ear and shoulder as she clambers out of bed to get dressed. If she was only worried before, she’s frightened now. “What does it look like?”

“It’s really dark.”

“Can you hear the ocean?”

He’s quiet. “Maybe.”

“Are you outside?”

“Yeah. I got out, I got away.”

She’s halfway to the front door already when he says it, and she stops. “… Away from what?”

“I’m outside,” he repeats. “Can you come get me?”

“Rin,” she pleads. “I need a landmark, or a street, or something. Are you even in Iwatobi?”

“No,” he answers, then growls with frustration. “Yes. Yes. The hotel.”
There are only two hotels in Iwatobi: the fancier prefecture-named Tottori Hotel that her company puts visiting businessmen up in, and the pit-stop motel without a title better purposed for crowds with one-hour intentions. Either way, what the hell is he doing at either?

“The big one?” she tries as she locks the door and starts towards her car; asking anything more detailed won’t help. Since the larger one is closer and the seedier one is in the darker part of town, she may as well start where she feels safer to wander alone.

“Please come get me,” he suddenly chokes on a high pitch. “I’m at the hotel, I want to go home.”

“I’m coming,” she says. “I promise. Stay on the phone with me.”

As she drives she chews her lip. Rin falls back to silences with uneven breathing, slow and deep followed by startled intakes. “Stay awake, Rin.”

“I’m tired.”

“Stay awake.”

He stops responding to her checking in every few minutes, but the call isn’t dropped. He must’ve fallen asleep anyway. However much he’s had, it’s way too much and she makes a mental note of her location in case she needs to get him to a hospital.

If he was in the lobby, someone would’ve already called him an ambulance or he would’ve insisted they speak to Gou for him. If he was in a room, he wouldn’t be saying he was outside. She parks and gets out to look on foot.

He got away, he said, so looking around the front of the property would be a waste of time as most people getting away from something wouldn’t hang out in the open. She circles around to the side past the dumpsters, phone still secured to her ear in case Rin wakes up, and through the cars of employee parking. Over the parking lot median and around a large shrub, she jumps and startles as she runs smack into something solid. It grunts; it’s a person.

It’s Shogura, the head of the company trying to buy the old swim club.

“Mr. Shogura,” Gou says in surprise.

He’s visibly bewildered to see her, brows low over wide eyes. “Ms. Matsuoka.”

“I-” Her eyes fall to his hand where a bright yellow t-shirt is clutched. It’s the ratty old swim club shirt from high school. Rin wears it to bed sometimes. “I’m-”

“I know our meeting isn’t until next week,” Shogura says smoothly. “I’m in town with a co-worker for another matter. We got a bit rowdy, I lost track of him. Have you seen him? Shouldn’t have a shirt,” he laughs, waving the one in his hand. “He’s a little adventurous-”

“You’re lying,” she cuts in without thinking. Every nerve is telling her that he is, and that he has something to do with Rin. She puts her phone in her pocket. “Where is my brother and what the fuck do you have to do with him?”

“You’re brother,” he parrots, then laughs. “Oh. Okay. Well this is embarrassing, then. It’s easier to say we’re co-workers. We’ve been seeing each other, I’m sure he hasn’t mentioned it, since our business d-”

“Where is he?” Gou asks again.
“Well sweetheart, that’s why I asked if you’d seen him,” he clips impatiently now. “See I lost my fucking phone and can’t call him, and I really need to find it. He might have it."

His jaw ticks as he speaks of it; there’s a dangerous rage boiling just beneath him. He takes a step towards her and she jumps back. “If you’re about to do anything other than walk away, I’ll hurt you.”

His face twists into something dark that stands the hairs of her neck on end. She hates this guy already purely superficially for wanting that old building, now she’s afraid of him. This is a man with more than one persona, a lifetime of experience with shitbags has taught her how to spot that. When he deliberates and doesn’t immediately turn heel and make himself scarce, she changes her mind and takes away his option. Guys like this don’t deserve a chance to walk away, because they never take it.

“Honestly Ms. Matsuoka, this is just a misunderstanding.”

Hopefully he doesn’t misunderstand a knee to the groin. He shouts in pain like he gets it anyway. Now that his face is bent forward and closer to her, she takes his nose out with a thrown elbow for good measure.

Then she runs and doesn’t look back. Gou sprints to the busiest and most well-lit street she can think of that’s nearby, hiding in plain sight. It’s two blocks over, she fumbles her phone out of her pocket once she’s stopped, and calls the police. They’ll be much kinder to whoever Mr. Shogura is than Sousuke or Makoto would be.

--

Hiro Shogura is actually Shozo Matsuda, press secretary to Mayor Shibata of the Chiyoda ward in Tokyo. He’s in custody, found wandering and looking for something in the area with a blood-stained t-shirt pressed to his nose, and that’s all Gou is made privy to after she gives her account of what happened and is released.

From the station she gets a ride back to her car and drives to the hospital, where Rin is staying for observation after finally being found not anywhere near that stupid hotel. Two kilometers away and at a bus stop, memory blank between there and the hotel lobby. He’s okay, she reminds herself. It’s just a precaution, because fucking rohypnol is in his system and he’s dehydrated. Either her steering wheel is going to crack first from her grip or her teeth will under the pressure of her clenched jaw. She should’ve stuck around to hit that prick again.

The police have long since taken Rin’s statement after he came to, and he’s alone when she gets there. When she walks into his room he sighs and looks away from her and out the window where there’s evidence of dawn peaking over the horizon now.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fucking garbage,” he answers, and sounds it too.

“Then get some sleep.”

“I wanted to see you first. They’re gonna kick me out in another hour or two anyway.”

She crosses the room and climbs onto his bed, forcing him to scoot over and making him grumble half-heartedly. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I know,” he sighs. “I’m sorry.”
“What happened, Rin? Did he hurt you?”

Rin grimaces and keeps his gaze trained to the window. “No. I was feeling a bit woozy after like, only a drink and a half, shit tasted weird, and saw a little bit of powder on the bathroom counter before it hit me hard enough and put it together. We’d had an argument, dickbag went to take a shower and cool off. He was just finishing up; when I went in to take a leak and found it. I just fucking bolted, I didn’t stop to get anything other than the phones and by the time I was out front I was already stumbling.”

“Why’d you take his phone?”

He lets out a bark of a laugh. “I mistakenly gave the impression that I was also a low-life piece of shit. Mentioned a brief fling with modeling- remember in college? Matsuda said he was a photographer. Showed me some photos of someone we know who posed for him, but something wasn’t right about it. These were personal and uh, graphic. Not modeling, not for showing to other people. Fuck that, took the whole damn phone with me. I was gonna delete the photos after we went to bed, but knew then I wouldn’t be around long enough to do that so I just… swiped it. I don’t know Kisumi these days but I’m positive nothing he did deserved that.”

“Shigino? Wow. That’s a… really interesting coincidence.”

“Yeah, guy got real quiet all of a sudden when I said I knew him, then pissed off when I said I wouldn’t let him take pictures of me too if he’s just gonna use ‘em against me like that. Fucking weirdo. Guess I’m not as surprised as I should be to have ended up drugged and nearly forced to do it. Walked right into that.”

Gou stiffens; the implication is sickening. “Rin, you didn’t walk into anything.”

“Save it, I know what I did,” he says distantly. “It was all bound to catch up with me.” Rin looks down at his lap, turning his hands over, flexing his fingers.

“What are you talking about?”

“… Eight.”

“Eight what?”

“I’ve fucked eight different guys since Makoto left. Didn’t give a shit if there was protection, if they gave me a name, or if anyone knew where I was. I didn’t care and I kept doing it. I brought this on myself.”

Maybe she’s exhausted and bordering on delirious or the stress of losing- then finding- her brother has finally caught up with her, but Rin’s hands go blurry as her tears cloud her vision. How could he think that?

“I fucked up,” he trembles. “Really bad, Gou.”

She forces herself under his arm and hugs him around his middle. “Shh,” she soothes and sniffs. “None of that matters, it wasn’t your fault this happened.”

Rin tries to speak and gives up on it quickly, shaking his head in surrender as he pulls her closer instead. Not now, he’s telling her. Anything else.

“So I guess I’m… some sort of not straight.”
Rin’s chest rumbles with a weak laugh. “That so? Might’ve thought so, didn’t know how to bring it up. No one who claims to like dick hates what it’s attached to as much as you do.”

She giggles. “I mean, love the body. Everything else? Hm. So I have a girlfriend now. She’s pretty great.”

“No shit? Sou know that?”

She nearly spills and thinks better of it. Not her story. “We spoke. It’s worked out. I think we sort of used each other to get by while we figured this stuff out, but I guess what are friends for?”

Rin laughs again. “Not for that. You guys have always been way too fuckin’ close and I stand by that more than ever. Sou never slept with me to bring me to terms with my sexuality,” he pouts.

She thinks it’s the other way around, but she’d rather Sousuke get into that detail. She is way too related to Rin to be having this conversation in the first place. “If you’re still not sure, it’s not too late. Not yet anyway.”

“Ten years too late,” he corrects. “But shit, if he offered, I’d consider it. He’s got a big-”

“Rin,” she groans.

He shrugs. “Common knowledge.”

Gou’s eyes are heavy and her body is spent. Rin gathers her up as close as he can get her, and it’s uncomfortable on this narrow hospital bed but she isn’t about to pull away. Not again- never again.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles through sleepiness.

“She’s got a big-”

“Me too.”

Kisumi still gets headaches. Maybe he always will, or maybe his head is still recovering from his injury months ago and they’ll go away eventually. He hopes it’s the former; they can lay him out for hours when they’re bad.

Today’s a rare day where he’s had to leave early from work because of one, light bursting at the corners of his vision so violently he drives the side streets to get home safely. He takes a long shower once he’s inside, even sitting on the tiles and letting the hot water run out before considering it done.

Once in bed and in loungewear he drags his laptop onto his legs to work as much as he can from home. Haru’s e-mailed him one of those stupid stock rabbits. He seems to have gone out of his way to accumulate one for literally every ailment; this one featuring an ice pack strapped to the top of its head, the most specific of which sporting a bandage over the rabbit’s ass sent to Kisumi when he slipped on ice on his way into work one morning in February.

All things considered Kisumi gets quite a bit done. It helps not to have office lights beating down on him and by the evening he feels confident that he’s achieved enough to stop for the day and can commit to dozing off the rest of his migraine.

Around six in the evening there’s a knock at his door, and his face splits with a smile knowing it’s Haru come to visit after work. Maybe stay the night if he’s not too tired. Despite his reservations
and uncertainty, Kisumi really loves him. He keeps it to himself; Yuurei told him he loves too easily after all and he wouldn’t want to freak Haru out who only speaks of love conceptually.

But he answers the door to two police officers.

“Kisumi Shigino?”

He swallows hard. “Yes?”

“I’m Office Yamato, this is Officer Hiyori. We’re here to ask you to come down to the station and answer a few questions for us regarding your relationship with Shozo Matsuda.”

“Am I in trouble?” he bumbles out nervously.

“No sir. We’re hoping you’ll aid us in an open investigation. Is there anything you could bring with you that might help us?”

A box of notebooks, tons of blurry photographs, saved texts, voicemails, all of the information he got permission to obtain from the Mayor’s office. All of his research from the last year and a half. Everything. He could bring it all. “... Do I have to?”

“No sir. You’ve been listed as a witness, but you’re not under arrest. We’d really appreciate any information you might have on the press secretary, and by extension the Mayor, so that we can formally prosecute. We would be willing to get a subpoena, but given the nature of your involvement it was assumed you might come willingly.”

His breath stops dead in his chest and he doesn’t know whether he’s closer to getting sick or passing out. Matsuda has to be in custody or out on bail. He got caught. He got caught. Kisumi pales further when Haru walks up behind the officers and frowns.

“Haru,” Kisumi says more by habit.

The officers turn and acknowledge him before returning their attention to Kisumi. “Um, yes. I’ll go. I have some materials if you’d let me speak with my friend a moment and go get them first?”

The officers nod and step back to let Haru by, and Kisumi shuts the door after him. “Matsuda, he was caught doing something. They want what I have.”

Haru sets down a bag of takeout in the kitchen. “How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know. Not until I know how and why he got caught. I’m really nervous.”

Haru watches him as he gets under his bed and pulls out a medium-sized box and gathers his wallet and keys. “But you’re not in trouble?”

“No,” Kisumi answers. “But in order for that to be true, someone I didn’t want to know about those photos had to have seen them. It’s not like Matsuda would’ve listed me as anything other than an accomplice.”

“It’ll be all right,” Haru says. “Food will be here when you get back.”

Kisumi sighs as he hitches the box up in his grip to rest it on his chest. “Will you be?”

“Would you like me to be?”

“It’s the middle of the week, you don’t have to if you don’t want to.”
Haru rolls his eyes and leans over the box to kiss him. “I’ll stay until you’re back at least to see how it went.”

Kisumi nods, too worked up to really appreciate Haru’s gesture. He can pay it back when he returns. He slips into his shoes and Haru gets the door. The police officers walk him out and offer a ride, which he’s happy to take.

At the station they take him to a room and ask him to set his box on the table. They state the nature of their questioning, and inform him Matsuda was taken into custody a week and a half ago at first for causing a public disturbance and later once the stories came to light, attempted sexual assault.

In Iwatobi.

His cellphone was turned over to authorities by the victim stating there was evidence of nonconsensual material, and a search of his hotel room confirmed his victim was drugged to lend credence to the claim regarding the phone. Whoever the victim was identified Kisumi as one of the photographed parties- there were multiple- and further dissection of the contents of his phone revealed evidence of an international prostitution ring that implicates Mayor Shibata. The case was turned over to Tokyo PD in alliance with the Iwatobi division of Tottori PD, with the hopes of making a federal investigation out of it. As for Iwatobi, it seems Matsuda planned to use it as a port of operations to trade people and money between his ring and China via a privately owned fishing boat that was more than met the eye.

Kisumi stares at the officers in muted shock as they speak to him, sickness only abated by the fact that it’s all finally- finally- coming to a head.

After they finish he takes a deep, shaky breath, and tells them his story.

--

It’s well past eight by the time he gets home; if Haru’s gone, Kisumi can’t blame him. He’s taken to getting up earlier before work to start swimming again now that he’s settled, so he’s typically in bed by nine or ten.

Yet when he walks in, it smells like his own soap and Haru’s on his bed using his laptop. In his worn sweats too. It’s near the end of May, but both of them share the trait of always being cold. The sight makes his heart ache.

“Run out of spare clothes over here?” Kisumi greets.

“No,” Haru answers simply. “I like your sweats. Are you hungry?”

“I should be but I’m not,” he confesses as he falls on his stomach next to Haru.

Haru clicks his tongue in disapproval and moves the laptop against the wall and out of the way. “At least you’ll have lunch now.”

“Mm.”

“Kisumi.”

Kisumi turns his head to rest his cheek on his folded arms. Haru lowers himself down to lay a bit closer.

“Are you okay?”
“I feel numb,” Kisumi says honestly. “He’ll go to prison, Haru. That entire office is about to be dismantled.”

Haru’s mouth draws to a stressed, thin line for a fraction of a second. “Good. He hurt you.”

“But I—” He stops and sighs. “Someone named me, someone saw those pictures and because of that, I helped with the case. So was it a good thing it happened then? I don’t know if it’s worse if I’d gone through all this for nothing or that it all had a reason.”

To his credit, Haru doesn’t answer him either way. Kisumi doesn’t want it, he just wants to vent. Haru is quick to discern the difference.

“It’s just a tool,” he continues with a crease on his brow as the thought forms.

“What is?”

“Me- my body. For him, the police. Just a tool. I was trusting someone, I felt special. Something that was supposed to be intimate and meaningful is just… evidence. I was forced to feel ashamed of myself for it. And now I’ll end up as blurred out slides for the case.”

He hates that these thoughts are finding him. They are dark clouds behind his eyes, feelings he shouldn’t be having now that this is over and he really did do his best. This is the sort of power he didn’t want this shit to have over him, but it spills from his lips like it’ll burn him if he doesn’t let it.

Haru is quiet and Kisumi rolls onto his back to drag his hands down his face. “God I just keep dumping this stupid shit on you.”

Kisumi moves his arms out of the way to Haru leaning over him, expression pensive and fingertips reaching to sort Kisumi’s disheveled hair. It’s one of Haru’s best qualities, at least in the face of all of this. He always looks thoughtful in situations where someone else would give Kisumi pity.

Haru’s hand falls from his hair to his jaw to guide his chin up for a kiss. It surprises him, even from Haru. He’s sure he’s not setting much of a mood. But Haru is insistent at his lips, which is new for him. Kisumi returns it though he doesn’t know why he’s receiving one to begin with, and barely gets by a kneejerk noise of protest when Haru takes it deeper. He doesn’t want Haru to stop, but it ekes from him unbinned, and Haru pulls back but stays close.

“I’m not good at knowing what to say,” Haru explains. “But I can’t touch the you in those photos, I can only touch you here. That’s what matters to me.”

“You’ve never even seen how bad they are and now everyone else will.”

“They’re just pictures,” Haru says, lightly pressing points down Kisumi’s neck. “They’re not… this. They won’t know what your skin feels like here or know what it sounds like when your heart beats. They’re just shallow impressions, they’re not you. They’re as much you as the dumb bunnies I send you.”

It’s not a logic Kisumi can personally follow, since he’s the one saddled with the memories of taking them- how elated he was feeling, how hot his skin was, how spent and soft the sheets beneath him felt. But it is a logic he can understand, and while he would never take Haru for the type to judge him critically for this chapter in his life, tension falls from him on his next breath to know Haru really, truly doesn’t look at him and see a bargaining chip. He’s never seen the photos, he’s never seen Kisumi in anything less than a tank top at this point or ever pushed for that.
They have no bearing on Haru’s impression- the person who matters to him right now- and maybe if that’s the case, Kisumi could learn to find solace that such a terrible time in his life could end up helping someone else, and one day he might even find peace with it.

Haru’s still above him in a suspended kiss, ready to leave it unfinished or continue it if Kisumi lets him. Kisumi pulls him back by the front of his sweatshirt, wanting very much to continue it. He wants a lot from Haru he doesn’t know how to ask for or know if he’s even ready for. When Haru kisses him with intent, he’s happy his body still knows it’s allowed to feel good even if the rest of him hasn’t caught up yet.

The fingertips pressing at his neck skip to push under the hem of his shirt, making Kisumi swallow another protest he doesn’t want to make. He’d like to slap himself; his sex drive’s been in another dimension ever since he was exploited for having one, and now that it’s returning some eighteen dry months later he has no business fighting it. He doesn’t want to. He wants Haru to touch him and kiss him like this. He wants to taste Haru’s lips and curve his spine like he is to reach Haru’s fingertips.

Kisumi stutters on a noise he isn’t familiar with hearing from himself while Haru tilts his head to kiss him deeper. His handghosts up Kisumi’s stomach to squeeze his chest as he sucks at Kisumi’s tongue, rolls his lips between his teeth, and takes quick, small gasps of air that make Kisumi’s pulse quicken to hear.

He dares to touch Haru back- something he hasn’t done yet. He anchors a hand on Haru’s hip and doesn’t let it sit for long before he’s tugging him to roll closer, which Haru takes as an invitation to straddle him. Kisumi freezes, Haru sits up again, and he curses under his breath at himself.

“Is this okay?” Haru asks with a faint pull of a frown. “Kisumi, we don’t have to do anything.”

“I want to,” Kisumi responds. “I really want to, I’m sorry, I don’t know what my problem is.” Just Haru sitting back on his lap makes him shut his eyes and take a deep breath to calm himself to absolutely no avail.

“... Nothing is,” Haru says. “Don’t be sorry. Do what you’re comfortable with then? I won’t do anything unless you ask.”

Kisumi reaches for Haru’s waist and tugs at his sweatshirt. “... Take this off?”

Haru pulls it over his head, the movement on Kisumi’s lap another wave of heat. Haru doesn’t comment on that, but doesn’t stop his hips from canting forward just barely to acknowledge his arousal.

He’s noticed Haru filling out under his clothes as he’s taken up swimming again, but to see him bare is so much better. Haru’s not that muscular- not the chiseled rock he used to be- but some lines will always stay with him, the same lines Kisumi traces now. He likes that Haru’s a bit softer, likes the padding on his hips.

Haru watches him drop his hands from his hips and run his fingertip just under the waistband to his sweatpants. Kisumi wants to touch where he sees the outline of Haru’s cock through the shapeless pants, and the thought heaves his chest forward and moves his hands over the tops of Haru’s thighs and along the inside. He inches up his legs and Haru’s lips part open while his eyes follow Kisumi’s movements.

“Can I touch here?”
“Please,” Haru murmurs.

Kisumi grasps Haru well enough to circle his thumb around the head of his dick, the thinning fabric rubbing damp after only a few moments. Haru breathes shallowly with his eyes still trained on Kisumi’s hands, and he pushes himself forward for more of Kisumi’s touch. Haru drops his hands back to Kisumi’s stomach, pushing up under his shirt again and so clearly wanting it off of him.

Kisumi sits up enough to pull it off, pushing the rush of anxiety that comes with being exposed to someone else down. Haru takes in the sight of him silently with lidded eyes – not like he’s prey to take down and tear apart but like he’s a landscape to take in– reaching out again to press points down the center of him like he did with Kisumi’s neck. Kisumi’s flushed head to toe and lets his hips push up to grind to Haru experimentally while he’s bent forward like this. It shouldn’t feel that good. His head drops bonelessly back to the bed in the wake of the shiver it causes. It’s been so, so long.

“Do that,” he breathes.

Haru adjusts so he can grind them both together, cocks aligned through fabric. He tucks his lip between his teeth, bracing his hands on his thighs, and makes Kisumi moan on his next exhale. Haru is effortless gorgeous in Kisumi’s eyes, not that he hasn’t subconsciously reached that conclusion already, but seeing his features yawn open this earnestly gives Kisumi the first ideas he’s had of feeling all of him. This same position but with his cock tight and slick in Haru’s ass, Haru whimpering how good he feels when he slams down and Kisumi honing in on his small mouth and how he looks when he speaks with a slack jaw over a bitten tongue with wet lips. He has the first idea of how Haru looks with those lips stretched over a cock.

Or better yet- if Haru would dig his fingernails into Kisumi’s thighs like he is his own right now when he pushed in to fuck Kisumi– god he misses that too. He groans at the thought of Haru fingering him and licking him open while his back is pressed against the hard cold wall and his knees are pulled to his chest.

Unbidden– suddenly, vividly– falls the thought of there being another sturdy, warm chest behind him instead, reaching around and thumbing the slit of his cock while Haru spreads his fingers and bites pinches to the insides of his thighs. His arms tremble with the strain of holding his knees up; Sousuke nips at his neck and growls encouragement into his ear where Haru can’t reach. He says–

“Kisumi,” Haru pleads. He’s hard and his sweats are darkly stained, but it’s as far as he can get from this position. The thought of Haru coming in Kisumi’s clothes really makes him shudder, but he wants to feel him directly now so much more.

“Fuck, Haru, come here.”

Haru throws himself forward for Kisumi’s mouth and Kisumi pushes his hands past Haru’s waistband for his bare ass to push his hips down harder.

“Do you want me to come like this?” Haru mumbles to Kisumi’s lips.

“God fuck yes but no,” Kisumi answers in a hurry. “I want to fuck you, Haru, I want Sousuke to fuck you.”

Haru cries against his neck and reaches to tug the clothing down, which Kisumi would’ve given consent for anyway now. Haru manages Kisumi’s cock out too, and the first slide of them together unbearably hot and smooth without any barrier and with Haru’s hand around them taps his mind
blank and free of all of his barriers.

“I want that,” Haru breathes, and kisses him as he says it, his lips moving with a vigor that lets Kisumi know he’s thought about it already.

The thought of this near-stranger in his bed with him and Haru isn’t so scary, not marred by the competition or jealousy he’d been afraid it would be if he dared to let himself fantasize about it; it’s sexy. It’s otherworldly erotic and makes him feel wanted, not left out. He can see Sousuke watching them now, that serious gaze he’s always had and probably still does only betrayed by his hand palming his erection down as he watches them, having been asked not to touch himself until they’re done.

“But you don’t have to think about that right now, it’s just us.”

“I want to.”

Haru only groans. “Lotion? Lube?”

“Yeah,” Kisumi answers, letting go of Haru’s ass for his nightstand where he owns no lubricant anymore, but has lotion leftover from the dry winter. “Shit I actually have a sex drive again I need to get a shopping list together. Sparkles or no for your cockring?”

Haru laughs a beat and quickly takes the bottle from him, warming a pump up in his hand before bending over them again and Kisumi nearly yells in pleasure, settling on a bite to his forearm. He’s not going to last, not with a vague idea of Sousuke sharing this in his mind and Haru making these noises above him.

Kisumi grabs Haru’s head to manipulate his mouth to his own, words failing him as he edges towards orgasm under Haru’s hand; god he can’t stop thinking about it now that the floodgate is open. Him and Haru double-teaming Sousuke, or Sousuke demonstrating something Haru loves but won’t admit to. Kisumi likes toys; would Sousuke? Does Haru? Sousuke sliding his cock down Kisumi’s throat while Haru takes him tight from behind, choked and full. Their hips stuttering out of sync as they come; Sousuke first, and Kisumi takes it down.

It’s all he can take though Haru isn’t finished. He climaxes on the thought of Sousuke bending and kissing away the mess at the corners of his mouth, fingers pulling tight in Haru’s hair how Haru might pull at his as he thrusts into Kisumi for those last hard slams.

Haru sits up and releases him, granting Kisumi the sight of Haru unabashedly finishing himself off with his sharp eyes boring into Kisumi’s, one hand on himself and the other pulling fingertips down through Kisumi’s cum, soon joined by his own. It’s beautifully shameless and all for him.

Haru pants heavily on top of him unmoving while Kisumi descends back to his own head. Lust is interesting and powerful, because now all those thoughts that were drowning him in pleasure turn on him in shame. Would Haru have rathered he kept his fantasies exclusive to them?

“I don’t know why I thought about him,” Kisumi says bewildered.

“I didn’t mind,” Haru answers quietly. “I’m… really surprised, though.”

Kisumi shakes his head. “It just came out of nowhere, god Haru it was so good and real and we should’ve talked about it first.”

“It’s okay, Kisumi.” He climbs off Kisumi and stands to pull his pants back up. “Stop worrying so much about… everything.”
Kisumi sighs and looks to his ceiling. He winces when Haru wipes him down with a dishtowel from the kitchen.

“When I talk about us I’m implying a sexual relationship, you know.”

“I know.”

“So trust me, I’m happy you could enjoy more than one bed partner, otherwise I see a sore ass in a future where I’d have to bounce between you both.”

Kisumi breaks to a laugh, the first he’s ever had in the face of this hypothetical situation Haru likes to build narratives around. It was scary at first. Haru’s been full steam ahead with the idea. Like he’s never considered just the two of them, like they can’t exist without the thought of Sousuke. It used to feel cold. When Haru first brought it up, Kisumi nearly cried- here he’d found someone he loves so much, and Kisumi isn’t enough? All of him and his love isn’t enough for Haru? Haru doesn’t want to be with Kisumi or devote himself entirely to him like Kisumi wants so badly to do for him? It hurt, and he was terrified his feelings really weren’t reciprocated, not like how he wanted them to be.

Haru smiles back wide and genuine and extends his hand to help Kisumi up for the bathroom to wash up together. In the cramped shower that still doesn’t have much of its hot water back, Haru kisses him privately and tenderly, slow and deep. Kisumi’s heart races under it; there’s no way Haru can fake this. People who lie to Kisumi don’t kiss him like this, they’ve never said I love you without their voice because liars always need their words first before anything else.

Haru says it to him soundlessly with the soft and delving press of his lips and supportive hands on his neck, and Kisumi thinks if Haru loves Sousuke half as much as he loves him just in this moment, maybe Kisumi has nothing to fear. That’s more love than he knows what to do with.

--

Haru never knows when his phone is ringing, because it’s never off silent. The next time they see each other on a Wednesday afternoon, they spend the evening at Haru’s bigger apartment after a swim where Haru went until Kisumi was breathless on his behalf and Kisumi mostly floated on his back to relax. He isn’t a great swimmer, but he is an adept floater.

Kisumi makes them dinner, which is a lot of Haru making them dinner, because Kisumi doesn’t know where anything is. But he does the bulk of the cooking, surprisingly eager to stretch his culinary muscles after tapering off over the last few years in favor of quicker, easier options. They make curried tofu, per Haru’s insistence when Kisumi mumbled a craving for it earlier in the day. So all in all, it’s a pleasant day. He’s happy to call it early and get home in time to give Yuurei an update, who is oh-so interested in the path Kisumi’s life is barreling down, and the occasional cigarette has shifted from being an end-of-the-line stress relief between trembling fingers to simply a shared token between friends.

Haru’s managed to unravel himself from his doze on his floor to walk Kisumi out, and pauses at his entryway table to look at the silent phone resting in a catch-all bowl that Kisumi hasn’t seen all day. Haru frowns when he opens it.

“Haru?”

“It’s Gou,” he mutters, turning on his heel and walking back to his living room. Kisumi wavers between awkwardly leaving and following him back in, and is ultimately too curious to leave it be.
Haru already has his phone to his ear back at his kotatsu- something Kisumi hasn’t seen before. He takes his seat and Haru doesn’t even look up. Whatever it is, it has Haru on edge. A Gou and Sousuke marriage announcement, his brain supplies unhelpfully. Their relationship is a bit of an elephant in the room considering the nature of his and Haru’s conversations lately. It’s not like they’re planning to steal Sousuke out from under her; Haru loves her too much to do something so underhanded, and Kisumi would never want to be part of a scheme like that. If Sousuke and Gou wanted to take it further, Kisumi knows Haru would let it go then and there. Hell, Haru’s already made it clear he won’t even bring this up with Sousuke so long as he’s with her.

“Gou,” Haru greets. “Sorry I missed your calls.”

Kisumi can hear her sigh with relief before launching into something long-winded, no pause for pleasantries or anything. Haru nods along and then his eyes go wide, and Kisumi startles when Haru raises his voice.

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?!” His shoulders slump. “... I’ll get on a train tonight... No, I don’t mind. It doesn't make a difference if I leave tonight or at six tomorrow morning. I won’t sleep anyway… I’ll figure that out. Don’t worry about it. Does Makoto or Sousuke know?”

Kisumi frowns when he notices Haru’s relaxed hand curl slowly into a fist.

“Okay, well don’t tell Sousuke yet at least. He’ll just freak out and make it worse. Warn Rin that I’ll be there soon, I don’t need him screaming at me for showing up unannounced.”

Haru sighs quietly as Gou launches into something else. “It’ll be okay. He’s just upset. Like you are. Tell Makoto it’ll be okay.”

He nods again and goes to hang up, and Kisumi hears a distinct Haru as Gou tries to catch him for one more thing.

“... Oh,” he says dumbly. Whatever Gou said was so quiet Kisumi didn’t hear her say anything. “Okay. Well. I- ... No, I haven’t. I haven’t talked to him in months.” Haru closes his eyes under a wave of exhaustion. “That’s not a thing I’m thinking about now. One thing at a time. Rin first.”

Haru says goodbye and hangs up, then sits with his gaze downcast for a moment before speaking. “Rin recognized you in those photos. He turned it in.”

Ice grips Kisumi’s core. Matsuda would need to keep no pretenses in Iwatobi; he’d have no reason to hold back and Rin has the sort of personality that could land him into a fight. “Is he okay? He isn’t hurt is he?”

“No,” Haru answers. “He’s fine. But I need to go see him. He won’t talk to us.” Haru twits his phone in his hands and his face falls with guilt. “... I thought he hated me. He hasn’t returned any of my calls.”

“For what happened with Makoto?” Kisumi assumes. Haru told him what he felt he had to do and how it ended Makoto and Rin, but he’s locked up tight with how it’s affected him personally. Even now he looks reluctant to answer that, and regretful for letting it slip at all.

“... He’s tough to get the truth out of when he’s upset. I don’t know why he won’t talk to us. He’s never had a problem confronting me especially in the past, so I thought eventually he might get his thoughts together and let me have it… maybe that’s what I’m walking into.”

“So you’re going to leave tonight?” Kisumi yields. Haru shouldn’t be made to feel like he needs to spill it all just because Kisumi asks.
He nods. “It’ll take ages to get there. There are a ton of stops. The sooner I leave, the better. I’ll stay a few days. I think there’s a lot to get through.”

Haru stands as he finishes speaking and walks to his room. Kisumi joins him while he pulls a duffel bag out from underneath his bed and starts throwing clothes in without stopping to look at what he’s picking out.

“Let me drive you?” Kisumi offers. “Still takes forever but it’s like, six hours versus nine.”

“No,” Haru sighs. “Like I said it’ll be a few days.”

“I don’t mind. I haven’t seen my family in over a year now, and I wouldn’t be opposed to seeing everyone else again. I almost never call out of work.”

Kisumi can tell Haru wants to say yes, and not only because it shaves a few hours off of his travel time.

“I haven’t been back either,” Haru says as if it’s a guilty confession.

“We’ll go together, makes it a little easier? Hayato probably thinks I’m some deadbeat when all I wanted was to protect him from my mistakes, so… yeah, if I gotta see them, it would help if you were there.”

Haru doesn’t answer him at first in favor of packing quickly. Even though Rin’s okay, Kisumi is concerned by how jerky Haru’s movements are and how obvious it is that he’s stubbornly tamping down his worries about this. Kisumi’s not lying when he says he could use Haru’s support to reconnect with his family, but he hopes Haru knows Kisumi is also capable of supporting him, too. Even if it hasn’t seemed that way until now.

Haru shoulders his bag and stops by his bathroom for toiletries, and it’s only once he’s patting himself down for everything and getting his shoes on that he finally takes a deep, centering breath and refocuses on Kisumi. “Come on, we still need to get your things.”
makoto & rin: he ain’t heavy

For the first time in… well he doesn’t know exactly, but for the first time in a long time, Makoto finishes brushing his hair into order for the day and stares at his reflection for longer than the two necessary seconds to make sure nothing is sticking up more than usual.

He leans forward on the bathroom counter, using his hands turned back to hold him up and the first thought that forms in his mind isn’t …oh like it usually is if he dares to take stock of how he’s holding up physically. More like …huh.

Because he looks okay.

He has color where he used to be pale, he has a bit of muscle returning to his bones. His eyes are brighter and his skin is clearer. His silly heart outline adds a flair of personality without being too bold. He’s not just a gracious gentle giant- three words he’s come to resent. Not because they’re bad, but because Makoto is allowed to be these things plus other things, and has trouble explaining that even to himself. Being gentle doesn’t exclude him from passion and being gracious doesn’t make him a doormat. Giant? Well he is. But that’s more getting tired of being called tall all the time. As if he isn’t painfully aware of it already.

When he thinks back to the version of himself that lied, he sees a pale and thin ghost. One he never knew, one he’s glad is gone. That Makoto saw a help wanted sign in the window at the gym across town and came up with the idea to just say he got the job instead of walking in to ask for an application. If he’d looked closer at the glass that day, maybe he would’ve caught his unfamiliar reflection sooner.

Makoto may not ultimately have any fucking clue what he’s doing, but he’s not that same guy who couldn’t get out of bed for three days when plans to get Sasabe’s swim club from him fell through.

There have been many versions of Makoto- the one that hid behind Haru, the one that swam for the team, the one that struck out and forced his independence, the one that children called teacher, the one that lied- but no version before this eased its way over with quite such a sense of peace as this one currently is. No version of himself so far has begun with a simple, appreciative … huh.

He’ll take it.

He makes his way to the dining room and deliberates over lunch or a catnap at the table first. Looking good or not, he is exhausted, and his sleep has been spotty at best. He opts to rest for a moment, and must space out.

Sousuke walks out of his room and snaps a pile of papers down onto the table where Makoto’s been sitting cross-legged in the chair. He jumps; he didn’t even know Sousuke was home.

“Okay, one, it’s like eleven in the morning,” he greets as he takes a seat across from Makoto.

“I worked last night?”

“Whatever. Look at this.”

Makoto sighs and pulls the packet to himself. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“ Took a day off. Did you know if you bank too much vacation they won’t pay you out for all of it at the end of the year? Didn’t want to lose out on the money.”
“What a tragic situation,” he responds with an eyeroll, then actually looks at what he’s been given. It’s a program information packet for the local college’s emergency medicine course. Makoto sighs again. “Sousuke.”

“I was serious!”

Makoto flips right to the pertinent part of the packet and taps the table outlining costs. “This is a nine-hundred thousand yen program. And that’s just to get a basic license. Then there’s another year and a half of school for paramedicine, and more hundreds of thousands.”

“Well, yeah, I mean you gotta maybe save up a little.”

“A lot,” Makoto corrects. “Not going to happen.”

“Ah well, you have the information in case you feel like heeding your calling.”

Makoto flips the top back and pushes it away from himself. “Thanks anyway. Callings cost money.”

Sousuke snorts. “Yeah I guess so, huh?” He sits in the chair across from Makoto and props his chin on his hand. “Why you so tired?”

“I just told you.”

His eyes narrow. “You’re not sleeping. Is the couch not doing it for you anymore?”

Makoto holds Sousuke’s gaze for a solid thirty seconds and decides Sousuke won’t drop it for anything. “I caved. I tried to call Rin again.”

“Makoto,” he scolds.

“I just want to talk to him.”

Because he’s worried sick about him and can’t sleep for it, but Sousuke doesn’t need to be riled up with that. Makoto’s had an increasingly bad and nagging feeling that Rin isn’t just avoiding them. Rin is too confrontational by nature to hold out this long.

“We can’t force him to talk to us. And Gou said she’s gonna work on it.”

“And has she updated you on how that’s going?”

“Well, no,” he mutters. “But she’s his sister. She’s the best equipped to do it anyway.”

“I hate sitting around and waiting like this.”

“When have we not waited around for Rin?” Sousuke laughs.

Makoto rubs irritably at his heavy eyes. “I guess so.”

Sousuke stretches his arms over his head. “Call out of work today. Weather’s nice.”

“Unlike you,” Makoto says with no hidden amount of jealousy, “I don’t have an overabundance of leave.”

“Do it anyway. I want to go out. It’s boring to go alone.”
“You could call someone else? Another friend with *vacation time*, perhaps.”

The pause in Sousuke’s entire demeanor is answer enough to that suggestion. “...You need friends.”


“Fine, but I don’t whine about doing things on my own.”

“No, you just don’t know how to ask for the company. Look if you go to work you’ll just be obsessing over Rin, and this way you get a break from that *and* that Kiyoda guy you for some reason refuse to tell to fuck off. I’m trying to help you out.”

“I *did* tell him to fuck off,” Makoto protests. Last week. Resoundingly so. Okay, politely.

“Obsessing over Rin, then.”

Makoto considers this. Sousuke’s definitely said worse things about him. And it does feel nice to actually have a friend. He’s certainly not calling out of work, but he appreciates being thought of anyway.

Even if he sees right through this.

“What is it now?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sousuke balks.

“There’s something you want to talk to me about. I know this now better than anything.”

Sousuke glowers at him and holds it. Makoto doesn’t budge, and Sousuke finally relents with a frown. “So I value your opinion. And *maybe* this is something you have better than average insight into.”

“Sousuke, as long as it’s not about your dick in some way, I am here for you.”

“Ah, yeah, nope,” he mutters. “Got that whole gay thing sorted out. So will you let me take you to lunch at least? This really is important, like, relative to the other talks we’ve had even. And totally not about my dick. Directly.”

Makoto folds his arms across his chest and shakes his head in defeat. “Fine.”

And Sousuke slumps forward with relief, as if Makoto was ever going to say no.

--

Sousuke is uncharacteristically nervous and stalling over lunch. They’re well past halfway into their extremely obviously chosen comfort food of tonkatsu before Makoto can’t listen to another word of Sousuke’s sudden interest in maybe selling his car and getting a newer one, but also maybe not because he really likes the old thing.

“Okay. So I work in three hours and at this rate you’re never going to get to why you need to talk to me.”

Sousuke groans around a bite of pork. “Right. I don’t know how to bring this up.”

“I’ll bring it up for you. Haru.”
Sousuke’s face twists in offense, but why else would he be so nervous? Only Haru makes Sousuke this nervous. “Ah, thanks, you ass. Yeah, Haru.”

“What about him?”

“How’s he doin’?”

“Seems well. I think he’s doing a good job with his new position, by the way he underplays what he’s done. Started swimming again, and says he’s been enjoying that.”

Makoto sits back and waits as Sousuke works his mouth around what Makoto won’t spoon feed him.

“You know what I’m gonna ask,” Sousuke finally decides on saying.

“I think he’s very happy in his relationship, solely based on how he mutters and changes the subject when I bring it up.”

Sousuke’s face falls. “Hey, he should be.”

Makoto bites down the urge to scream I told you so, I told you to talk, as it won’t help. Sousuke does need closure to all of this regardless, and as his friend Makoto can try to be supportive and honest at least. “You know, Rin and I lied a lot and had our communication issues, but you guys never figured out how to talk to each other at all and that’s why I’m sitting here with you telling you this and not Haru.”

“Yeah I know,” Sousuke admits. Three small words a year in the making, and Makoto isn’t suddenly shoved up against the wall in defensive anger for having dared to urge him to say them. The little things. “I know what I did now. I wouldn’t have waited for my ass either in his position. It just sucks because I’ve loved him all this time and I’d take his friendship if I could get it, but again... I wouldn’t be my friend either.”

Makoto frowns as Sousuke’s tone turns forlorn. “He’d like to speak to you again more than you assume, Sousuke. That much I know for sure.”

“Will I at least like the new guy?” he asks miserably, head slumping to his forearm. “Because it really blows when you don’t like the person your ex-turned-friend is dating.”

And it hits Makoto for the first time that it’s never come up. Sousuke never wanted to talk about it before now, Makoto couldn’t just kick the door in and say hey, guess what? It’s Kisumi! unless Sousuke brought it up first like this. He clears his throat anxiously, unsure of how breaking this might go.

“Um, well. You know him, actually…”

Sousuke straightens up like a dog on high alert. “Makoto.”

Makoto’s frown deepens and he thinks very carefully of how to ease into this and not invoke the anger he might deserve over keeping it to himself. “It never really came up, and you never wanted to talk about it!”

“So someone I know from high school? Because we’ve already established I have no friends.”

“Ah, yeah, from high school.”
“Nitori? A Mikoshiba?”

“Who- What? Oh. No. No, Sousuke. This is Haru, remember?”

“I literally cannot begin to guess,” Sousuke answers. “Haruka liked you guys in highschool and that’s it.”

“Kisumi,” Makoto exhales, and Sousuke stares speechless, so he elaborates. “Shigino?”

“Ah, yeah, I fucking know who that is, thanks!”

Makoto looks to the side where Sousuke’s caught the raised eyebrows of a few patrons. “You’re welcome. I can’t tell how you feel about this.”

“That guy- that guy. Hates me. I mean, let me back up. He should fucking hate me. Haru probably fucking hates me, because if Kisumi has half a brain he remembers how fucking shit I was to him back then. Oh my god, Makoto. Really. Shit.” Sousuke drags his hands down his face and sort of groan-sobs, and it’s a bit on the excessive side of dramatic, but at least he isn’t angry.

“Calm down. Haru hasn’t said anything about that, and he certainly doesn’t hate you even a little bit.”

“And- wait. Doesn’t Haruka hate him?!”

“Haru never hated him, Haru was annoyed by him. I’m sure you’ve annoyed him the same way you’re annoying me now and he still learned to love you.”

“Wow. Anyway,” he sighs. “Well that’s that then. Really, I was not the nicest guy back then. I wouldn’t want to make Kisumi uncomfortable by being around as Haruka’s ex. If I were in his position-”

“Stop putting yourself down and in people’s positions as an excuse not to deal with something and talk to them instead. If Kisumi’s uncomfortable, he’ll let you know. Haru misses you, Sousuke. He’s not… and don’t take this the wrong way but he’s not like us, he sees these things differently. He misses you and he’s told me that.”

Which is one step short of telling Sousuke the actual truth that Haru loves him, but even Makoto doesn’t know what that means in this context, exactly what Haru meant when he said it, and he can only be a middleman for so many things. They need to talk, for closure or for whatever else could be waiting. Makoto wouldn’t put any idea past Haru, even ideas Makoto wouldn’t come up with on his own.

It seems to soften Sousuke somewhat, stress giving way to longing and finally resignation. “I can’t fault him for being happy either way. I had my chance, I blew it. I hope Kisumi knows…” He sighs and rubs at the back of his neck. “I hope he loves Haruka as much as I do. What else can I say about it? That’s all I can wish for, right?”

Makoto slowly nods his agreement, Sousuke’s helplessness over the entire thing creeping across the space and over him, too. He can commiserate with feeling like he fucked up the best thing in his life beyond repair, after all.

“Hey, listen,” Sousuke mumbles wearily after a heavy moment. “Thanks, you know?!”

“Oh, sure,” Makoto responds with a weak shrug. “It’s nothing.”
“No, it really is something. I have just been dumping every single little thing on you for months and you’re just... Even when you had no business helping me, you did. Since I never helped you when you needed it. I was an asshole for that.”

“It’s what friends do.”

Sousuke leans forward and grunts his disagreement. “No. Not just friends. You, Makoto. You’re really fucking great. You’re an incredible person and I can’t stress how goddamned important you are to us- to me- enough.”

His pulse quickens in his ears and his breath catches in his throat. Even as he caught every word as they were spoken, they don’t make a whole lot of sense, even less so the more he repeats them to himself. This is what he should be telling Sousuke, not the other way around.

“Oh, just accept it,” Sousuke says with an eyeroll. “Don’t have a heart attack.”

So he nods the smallest of proud smiles onto his face instead. Sousuke nods back curt and sure, and continues eating nonethewiser to who it was for.

--

Makoto takes his usual shower in silence the following day, the weight of Rin heavier on his heart than it’s ever been in the wake of his conversation with Sousuke. In many ways their struggles are similar. In some ways though, they’re not, and Makoto is having a difficult time coming to terms with their one major difference.

At least Haru wants to talk to Sousuke.

Sousuke successfully used a day of vacation and goes back to work the following day. He forgot to put the burnable trash out before he left for work that morning, leaving the kitchen in a ripe state of affairs. It was already bad the night prior when Makoto forgot to put it out before he went to bed, bogged down with dark thoughts as he was. Now it’s certainly unignorable. He ties off the bag and starts towards his shoes to slip on halfway.

When he opens the door, Gou stands in surprise with her fist turned knuckles out, arm mid-arch for a knock on the door.

“Oh,” Makoto utters in near-shock. “Gou?”

“You didn’t answer your phone, sorry.”

“I was taking a shower-” Makoto shakes his head. “Everything okay?”

“Not particularly? Can we talk inside or get something to eat?”

He thought Sousuke told her what had happened. Is she here to completely chew him-

Gou rolls her eyes. “I already know you kissed Sousuke. This is about Rin,” she fills in impatiently. “I don’t care about the other thing and no, Rin won’t be told by me.”

Makoto’s shoulders slump on his exhale. “Come in. We have food if you’re hungry.”

She nods and walks in as Makoto walks out to set the trash, and when he returns she’s rifling through Sousuke’s fridge until she emerges with one of Sousuke’s pre-made lunches for the week for herself.
After a few bites of salad, she leans her hip on the counter and sighs. “I need you to try to talk to him.”

It shouldn’t sting as sharply as it does, not after having such a good start to his day. “… He won’t talk to me, Gou. I’ve tried to reach out short of kicking down the door.”

“There are times when it’s hard for him to talk. He won’t talk to me, Gou. I’ve tried to reach out short of kicking down the door.”

“Whether he wants it or not, he needs his support back. You’re not as rough as Sou, and I think he needs a sort of gentleness I just don’t have in me either.”

Makoto shifts his weight uneasily. “You make it sound like something happened to him.”

“Something’s been happening to him for years,” Gou says with her gaze averted. “It all just finally boiled over. He got mixed up with a bad person, Makoto, not to make you worry. He’s all right. But it was scary, and he needs us and we can’t let him shut us out anymore.”

“It was scary,” he parrots dryly, tongue thick. Something scary happened to Rin and Makoto was doing what? He takes a deep breath to steady his nerves. “Would you mind telling me about it?”

She locks up, visibly reticent to divulge and it makes it all the worse. “Makoto…”

He makes something akin to a grunt of annoyance and turns sharp for his keys and phone where they’re resting on the table, and walks towards his shoes.

“Hey!” Gou calls.

“If you’re not going to tell me, I’m just going to go over there and wait until he talks to me.”

“Makoto, wait, just a second.”

Makoto hops and stomps impatiently to force his shoes over his heels without untying them. “No.”

When he heads for the door, Gou shoves past him and blocks him with her back to it. “Wait. We’re going to go over there, that’s why I came over! But I came here to tell you first and you can’t take this-” She gestures to him, implying his mood. “-with you.”

He stops and frowns, stepping back. “When did whatever this was happen? Please don’t tell me he’s been hurting.”

“Again, he is okay, and a little over two weeks ago,” she says, and Makoto needs to sit down to keep himself from running to him anyway. She follows him to the living room and sits on the other end of the sofa from him.

“Tell me so I know what to expect.”

“The only reason I haven’t told you yet is because we needed time together and I don’t want you to focus on the wrong thing about it,” she warns. “But he’s slipping from me again. So listen, okay? And let me tell you the entire thing first before you freak out.”

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose to get himself to back down. “Okay. Fine.”

Gou makes it as far as the word drugged before he walks out, and halfway down the street before she catches him to give him a ride.

--

Rin’s in his kitchen, throwing a sandwich together. Makoto hasn’t seen him in nearly nine months.
He doesn’t look up when Makoto walks in, or acknowledge that Gou’s excused herself, and only then does it catch up with Makoto that he doesn’t know what to do now.

“Hey Mako,” Rin says on a tired sigh. The first thing he hears, the first point of contact, and it sounds defeated. It sounds like Rin’s been trying so hard to outrun everyone and here Makoto is anyway, and by the wary look Rin casts to Makoto’s feet, he knows it’s true. “Gou drag you over? I asked her not to.”

“I may’ve tried to run here first.”

“Well thanks I guess. But I’m fine.”

Rin walks past him to his table, dropping the plate from high enough for it to crash, then he drops himself with the same carelessness into a chair. His movements are full of such weight when something’s wrong.

“Can we talk?” Makoto tries.

“Talk away.” Rin takes a bite and keeps his eyes down.

Makoto’s heart hurts to see him again. He idly rubs a hand over the center of his chest, and lets his eyes adjust to Rin’s hair like he’s stepped outside after sitting in the dark all day. He’s dreamed of Rin’s eyelashes, felt his hand folded along with his own on many lonely mornings at the breakfast table. He’s missed Rin, he’s never stopped missing him.

“I miss you,” Makoto fumbles out next as it wells up unbearably. “Shit.”

Rin looks up. “‘Scuse you?”

“I didn’t mean to say that. Yet.”

He looks back down and picks pieces of bread off of his meal. “‘Shit’. Stop hanging around Sousuke.”

“I sort of have to.” Makoto swallows dry as Rin hums and continues to pick. “Well, I do. Miss you.”

“Okay.”

“And I’m so sorry about what happened to you. It’s horrible.”

Rin looks up again, expression shuttering to blank. “I’m twenty-seven years old, Makoto, and nothing happened.”

“And it’s still horrible.”

“Is that all?” he snaps.

“No,” Makoto answers, firmly undeterred. He knew this would be tense. He’s prepared to stand his ground. Rin’s eyebrows crease. “I’ve wanted to talk to you for months.”

“So do it then.”

“Are you going to listen?”

His eyebrows crease further and a frown pulls at his lips. “I’m still sitting here, aren’t I?”
Makoto holds back a sigh of relief. An enormous one, actually. This is all he’s wanted for so long. “I wasn’t a good partner to you. I’m sorry for that,” he begins. Rin doesn’t move. “But I needed time to figure out what that really meant, and I needed to do it on my own to prove that I could. I was hurting you and I couldn’t let it go on. You deserved to be free of that.”

Rin scoffs at something he doesn’t lend a clue to, Makoto takes a deep breath.

“Looking back I know it was the right choice. I see now how broken we were. But through all of it, I’ve loved you still every day, and that’s something I’ve felt for you since the beginning. And mostly I just want you to know that I do, and while I don’t know if you feel the same it’s important I tell you for me. Because I’ve had a lot of revelations, and I think I’m back on track, but the one thing that hasn’t changed in all this is how I feel about you, Rin.”

Rin doesn’t flinch or let it sit unanswered for longer than half a beat. “Well you should move on. I have. Why do you think I didn’t answer your calls?”

No matter how many times Makoto’s told himself this was possibility, it still completely guts him to hear. A few months ago he might’ve cracked under it. Today he’s going to stay in one piece.

“Okay,” he says instead of shutting down. “I told you what I needed to.”

“And you thought what if you did?” Rin hisses, catching Makoto off guard. “That since you loved me, that’s it? I jump your dick right here and we move on like all this never happened?”

“No, Rin, of course not.”

“Because I need all of you to survive, don’t I? I can’t do it without you, Makoto. Without Sousuke or Gou or Haru. I’m just that fucking hopeless and weak. I get into trouble and all of you assholes have to share my story, show up in my house, and try to fix me no matter how many times I tell you I am okay.”

Rin slams a fist on the tabletop and grinds his teeth. Makoto sees his eyes gloss over with tears he’ll refuse to shed. “So you come over here, and you tell me that you love me and you have no fucking idea what I’ve been up to. You just step in here and say it and you don’t mean it, all you see is someone in trouble who needs you and that’s why you say it at all. You have no idea.”

He doesn’t expect it and can’t keep the hurt off his face. Rejection was okay. This is something else entirely, and once he can breathe again, he speaks carefully in response. “...We all need each other Rin. You taught us that. And I’ve loved you all this time because you’re you, and for no other reason.”

“You don’t know who I am!” Rin shouts. “You can’t tell me that! You wouldn’t love me if you actually knew who I was, if you actually thought about it for two fucking seconds instead of loving me out of pity.”

“Rin,” Makoto soothes, though it more croaks than anything. “I will never pity you. I will only ever admire you.”

He slams the tabletop again, and sweeps the plate with his food onto the floor causing it to shatter. Makoto sits up straight in shocked silence, and Rin burns him with a glare of disgust as he raises to a stand and walks out of the room without another word.

When Makoto looks after where he stormed out, Gou stands in the entryway staring at the pieces. “I heard him start to yell.”
“A little,” Makoto says quietly.

“Are you okay?”

“Um, no, I don’t think so. I mean.” He bites his lip to stop its tremble and clears his throat of its lump to no avail.

Gou takes up where Rin was sitting. “I didn’t know he would yell at you.”

“I- how long has he felt this way?” Makoto strain. “I wasn’t here.”

Gou shakes her head in dismissal. “You couldn’t have been.”

“But I needed to be,” he counters. “I was selfish, I was wrong and I wasn’t here.”

Rin doesn’t believe Makoto loves him, and nothing that’s happened between them has ever hurt worse. Maybe if he’d been around and maybe if he’d tried harder to get Rin’s attention before now that wouldn’t be the case. But no, he had to go fuck off on his own. He went and only thought about himself and he thought that was a good thing. He even had fun while Rin struggled, all alone.

“Makoto.”

He can’t look at her, though. He keeps his bleary eyes on the table even when she rounds it with the chair and sits nearer to him.

“We let him down.”

“No, Makoto,” she says. “It’s not that simple. You did what you had to do for you, and that’s just as important.”

“I’ve been so unavailable that he doesn’t think I love him.”

“He was unavailable. Don’t twist this so it falls on you. Not after everything, don’t fall back into that. And he’s upset and doesn’t believe any of us love him, this is why I wanted you to talk to him.” She sighs. Makoto flinches in surprise when her arm stretches along the back of his shoulders, and while he doesn’t regret what happened with Sousuke this is still the last thing on earth he expected from her.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admits. “I only ever wanted him to be happy and when I was with him I couldn’t do it, when I give him space he still isn’t. And the thought that I never made him happy and never can is unbearable.”

“That’s because his unhappiness never had anything to do with what you did. You are what held him together for so long, Rin is just slower to that revelation than I am.”

He looks over to her warily, and she squeezes his shoulders tighter.

“Look, I’m always going to keep my brother’s secrets and be his confidant first, but I can’t do this anymore. He didn’t give up London for you. He was never qualified for it to begin with. He came home to the people he loved instead of trying again- you included- and I swore I’d never tell you but that was wrong of me to do. I’ve seen how it’s affected you, as my pseudo-brother-in-law, and believe it or not I love you too, Makoto.”

Makoto leans on her under the sudden oppressive weight of her arm, and she uses both hands to
pull him in closer. He lets her do it, and breathes a private, shaky sigh to get himself under control. So much makes sense and yet, everything’s worse now for knowing that. “Why didn’t he tell me that?” he whispers muffled into her shoulder.

“You know why,” she answers.

He only nods against her. Because Rin failed himself, and he thought Makoto wouldn’t love him if he told him what happened just as much as Rin hates himself for it. And while he wants to disentangle from Gou, stomp up the stairs, throw open Rin’s door and shake him because how could Rin ever think that they wouldn’t love him? How could he be that disappointed in himself after all this time?

He doesn’t. Because Makoto knows a thing or two about how self-loathing works. He knows how ugly it is, how strong it is. How it drowns out everything and how it consumes you, piece by piece, until it’s convinced you you’re worthless and disposable. He knows above all how it never goes away once it finds you, not entirely, and Rin for all of his brazen confidence is no novice to feeling this way. This isn’t the first time.

“I’ll keep trying, okay?” Gou assures. But Makoto is so, so tired of waiting for Rin. Sick of not sleeping. Done with not doing anything, and has been for a long time.

“No. It can’t just be you or me again,” he responds, embracing her tightly before he sits back and lets go of the words. “All of us.”

She drops her hands to grasp his in support and searches his face for meaning with a tilt of her head. Then she abruptly stands and stoops to start picking up pieces of broken ceramic, and Makoto joins her to help.

“I’ll call him,” she says.

“I can do it,” Makoto insists. “I don’t mind.”

“I need to be the one,” Gou corrects. “He’s my brother, and I always go to Haruka when I need help with my brother.”

Rin tears up his written warning on his way out of the suit shop after his shift and dumps the pieces in the trash. It’s insulting he was even given one. Rin’s surprised his supervisor didn’t ask for a signature of acknowledgement on it from his mother.

Selling suits really is the last thing on his mind. Suits in general make him grind his teeth together if he looks at them for too long. He keeps to a corner of the store and tries his damndest to go unnoticed while he works on keeping the racks immaculate. Too bad sales is his primary job then, he supposes. He should probably start looking for another one before the axe gets him first.

He makes his way home. He’s off all work for a few days now, the worst possible thing. Gou’s always hovering at home now, taking random days off to bother the shit out of him with her relentless inquiry. Maybe he wouldn’t be in such a bad mood if she’d back off.

Maybe he wouldn’t feel like walking past his house and continuing onwards indefinitely if she hadn’t brought Makoto over the day prior to lie to him more than he already has.

And it’s a small blessing in a shitstorm of conflict; her car isn’t parked on the street when he walks
up for the first time in a week. She has a damn girlfriend; she should be more focused on that anyway.

He walks through his door and kicks his shoes off without much energy left for the day, and nearly has his hair out of its tie when a low conversation from the living room reaches him and gives him pause. One person is definitely his mother, but the other?

As if it’s someone there to rob them, Rin steps on the balls of his feet in the direction of the conversation to stay unnoticed until he can figure it out.

Haru sits on his sofa with a mug of tea between his hands, and looks up at Rin when he steps into view like he was always supposed to be there.

“Rin.”

“Haru,” he manages dryly.

His mother turns to smile at him. The way she does tells Rin that at least Haru didn’t tell her anything she definitely doesn’t need to know about his run-ins with certain shitbags. “You didn’t tell me Haru was coming over. What a nice surprise.”

“Must have slipped my mind,” Rin responds.

“Gou was supposed to mention it,” Haru supplies.

Rin thinks that his phone is currently far-flung in his closet and probably dead or broken, and that he’s avoided Gou since yesterday entirely, and that even if she tried to tell him through his door he was tuning her out with headphones. “Yeah, like I said.”

Haru frowns just enough for Rin to notice and frown back.

“Well Haru,” his mother laughs, “I have a play to get to. It was wonderful catching up, you should visit more. I miss your insight.”

He smiles and lets her lean forward give him a pat on the cheek, and when she stands Rin sees she’s all dressed up and ready to go out. She takes Haru’s mug from him and stops in front of Rin to give him a kiss on the forehead on her way to the kitchen, and prattles on about how late she’ll be, and finally slips out the door. All the while Rin doesn’t take his eyes off Haru, and Haru leans back unimpressed.

“Your turn, huh?”

“My turn,” Haru agrees.

Rin snorts and rolls his eyes. “Whatever, Haru. You’re just like Sou, you didn’t give a fuck about me before so don’t start now.”

“I know I didn’t.”

“What?” Rin seethes.

“I didn’t care. You’re right. Sit down.”

“Is this some sort of joke?” he growls. “Get out of my house.”

“Sit, Rin. I didn’t come all the way back here just to piss you off. I could’ve called you for that.”
Rin finally steps into the living room, unsure of how to respond to him. Haru impatiently nods his head to the other end of the couch in that infuriating way he has about addressing problems. All like it’s one big inconvenience. Rin sits.

“I already heard about what happened.”

“And?”

“Nothing, but you should know I know, and Gou only told me out of concern for you,” Haru explains with a shrug. “There’s nothing I can tell you about it that she hasn’t tried to say, so I’m not going to. Instead I want to apologize. I didn’t take your problems or your struggles with Makoto seriously.”

“A little late for this, Haru.”

Haru looks down. “I never considered your break up as possible,” he continues. “Because you loved Makoto so much I couldn’t get you to shut up about it, and there are days Makoto lives and breathes for you, you know. Days when it’s hardest for him to do it for himself. So I saw a rift and thought it wasn’t a big deal, and I wasn’t a good friend to either of you when you needed me most. I tattled on Makoto and ran on top of that, left you two alone to pick up the pieces of something I broke without talking to you first.”

Rin draws a shaky breath through his nose, laced with coiled fury. Haru looks back to him. “This is getting ridiculous. I’m not on my deathbed, you and Makoto don’t need to lay out your personal fucking regrets at my feet and beg for my forgiveness and all this shit.”

“I am not begging. Makoto sure as hell didn’t beg either,” Haru snaps. “I’m telling you why I’m partially at fault for you being such an ass right now.”

“I thought you didn’t come all the way here to piss me off,” Rin warns.

“I came all the way here to ask you a question, Rin.”

“Well fuck, Haru! Next time lead with your super important question then! Why are we wasting all this time when you can just be a condescending fuck from the get go?”

“Why are you so angry?” Haru yells over him.

The boom in Haru’s voice pushes Rin down from where he’s started to rise, and it’s strong enough to knock the subsequent fuck you back down his throat that he tries to get out.

“Is it because Makoto left?”

“I’m not angry.”

“Is it because someone tried to hurt you?”

“I’m not angry.”

“Is it because we’re trying to help you?”

“I’m not angry!”

“What is it, Rin? Why can’t you get your shit together?”

“Because he lied to me!” Rin screams. “He fucking lied to me! He’s been lying, all he’s done is
Haru sits back. Like the hardest part is over. Like Rin isn’t shaking and struggling to breathe and like it isn’t a big deal. Like he wants to laugh at Rin and say oh, that’s it?

“What did he lie about?” Haru asks calmly instead, disarming Rin of his adrenaline. “I owe you this conversation.”

“You know, I-” Rin starts, and swallows. “It’s not like it matters, Haru.”

“It does. Do you want us to leave you alone? That’s your prerogative, Makoto loves you to death and we’re all worried but you can make that choice, if you want it. But it would be nice if you could tell me why before you threw out nearly twenty years of friendship.”

“I don’t want that,” Rin realizes aloud.

“But that’s what you’re asking us for.”

It hits him all at once, what he’s really saying when he tells Haru to get out, when he tells Sousuke to fuck off, when he ignores Gou and when he won’t give Makoto an answer. He’s asking them to leave. And Haru is telling him that they will. They’ll all leave if it’s what he truly wants, and they won’t come back on their own.

As kids they might chase him to the ends of the earth. As kids they might drag him behind them kicking and screaming and eventually Rin would cave. Eventually they could force him to let them back into his life. But that’s not how shit works anymore.

All he’s wanted in these tumultuous months is the freedom to make his own choices and the opportunity to not need them. He’s getting exactly what he asked for, and they’re only giving him the courtesy of confirming: are you really sure about this, Rin?

“What did he lie about?” Haru asks again.

“He told me he loved me, and it’s not true.”

“Why?”

“Because I lied first,” Rin says. “He doesn’t love me. He loves the winner I set up for him to love. I failed, Haru. I didn’t qualify for London. I could barely make it through a practice, I was dumped to the bench. And you all… you all had everything going for you back home and you wanted to see me go pro so badly- I could’ve been great. I could’ve. But I swam the worst qualifiers I ever have and I… quit. For the first time ever, I didn’t try again, it was the last thing I wanted to do. I lied, because I didn’t want you guys to find out I gave up. I wanted you to think I had it all and chose to walk away a winner for Makoto. Not the shitty truth that I just sucked, that I didn’t make the cut, that every day I woke up feeling like death, and that loving Makoto was… second.”

Haru’s face falls slack with shock and Rin can’t look at it. That face of bewilderment has haunted him for years and it’s finally there in the open. The shock that Rin didn’t try again, a reaction that’s unaccepting of his decision to walk away from what he worked for, boasted about, suffered for. He drops his face to his hands and rubs his tears back and away to little success.

“... You dumbass,” Haru finally says, voice small and sad. Rin curls tighter over his lap. “You really believe we wouldn’t love you if we knew that? That Makoto wouldn’t? Do you honestly believe- is that what all of this is about?”
Rin gives up on his choking, hitching response and *cries*. For all of this. For every stupid thing that’s happened, every mistake he made and on behalf of every mistake everyone else made. For how much he wishes he could go back and do this over before it spun out of control. He wails after the idea that he could’ve had every little kiss and touch and moment with Makoto under honest pretenses if he’d just believed in Makoto instead of what his demons told him, if he weren’t so blinded by his own neuroses.

And finally he weeps for himself, because despite Haru’s insinuations, he knows he doesn’t deserve all that now anyway even if he would’ve before. Not after how he’s acted.

“I’d never felt lower about myself in my life,” he ekes out once he feels like he can without sputtering on it. “I failed, after all that work to get on a national team I still failed. I was making myself sick, Haru. Every time I came in *just* under the time I needed to be swimming at… hundredths of a second. *God*. The disappointment when I was finally benched was unbearable; my entire life riding on decimals like that ruined me. It wasn’t inspiring anymore.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? *Anyone*? None of us knew that.”

“Because I owed you all a victory after how you all helped me after the first time I failed. You all depend on my confidence, you all saw me as the swimmer… I couldn’t let you down and tell you what was happening. Just the thought of it made the panic worse. So I made it up and I lied until I couldn’t keep it in anymore. What sort of asshole pushes you, pushes *everyone*, brags about his dream until people tell him to shut up… then quits at the finish line? It was never Makoto’s fault. I took it out on him, made him feel like garbage so he’d have a reason to hate me because I was so disgusted with myself that I could trick him into loving me *that much*. I blamed him for being insecure when I was the reason he was.” Rin laughs bitterly. “*Why*?”

“You deserve us,” Haru says instead of answering. “You’re Rin who can swim. Not only a swimmer.”

“I wanted to show you all I could do it on my own and then I couldn’t,” Rin mutters.

“You *did*, though. What are you talking about? You did it on your own. You swam so hard you got to try out to compete with the best in the world. You could’ve tried again for the next games and you’re right, if you *wanted it*, you would’ve done it. You wouldn’t let one bad year stop you. But it stopped being worth it, right? It wasn’t worth what it was doing to you.”

Rin nods with his head still down.

“You decided to let it go. As long as it was what was best for *you*, not us, it wasn’t the wrong choice. That was all you.”

“But then I banked my happiness on a *person*, not a goal. And I treated that person like shit and blamed him for quitting when he couldn’t exist only for me. I hurt him.”

Rin looks up when Haru doesn’t immediately respond, gut twisting in fear. Haru should be infuriated that Rin would admit to this. Would dare say it out loud, especially after how Gou reacted to it months ago. Yet Haru sits with a passive face, shoulders slack.

“Yeah, maybe you did. Maybe if you’d talked to us… but it’s done. You can’t change it now.”

“I know.”

“So accept the consequences for it and move on. Don’t make the same mistake again; learn from this.”
Rin nods as his core bottoms out. All of it’s out in the open, after years. He’s nauseous and there’s cold syrup pooling in his limbs, but it’s done. Finished. There’s no relief in it. There’s only an uphill recovery ahead now that he’s exposed and bleeding freely, with all of the new problems he’s made for himself threatening to hold him down and never let him get back up.

“I wish that was all I’ve fucked up and have to move on from, Haru. I’m not done yet,” he whispers, sitting up. Haru’s since drawn his knees to his chest and regards him over the tops carefully.

“No matter what it is—”

“Don’t say that yet.”

“Okay,” Haru concedes. “Go ahead.”

Rin chews his lip and looks at the wall behind Haru’s head when his eyes well up again so he can blink it back. No more, he doesn’t get to cry about this part. He considers telling Haru, one by one. Their names if he remembers them. Their ages, because that’s nineteen more reasons for Makoto to give up on him. He considers it, but he knows that isn’t where his guilt lies.

He isn’t ashamed of sex. He could’ve gone about it better, not buried his problems with it. But he is ashamed of himself just the same for being so disgustingly careless. And he is racked with stress over facing this particular brand of shame and consequence alone. But here Haru is, still sitting there despite Rin’s confessions. He came all the way here for Rin alone; he truly didn’t have to. Rin should do this next part alone. But he’s starting to think that mindset is what got him into this mess to begin with.

“I… need you… to do something with me. I need you there.”

“Okay.”

“I need to find a- a clinic.” He takes a deep breath. “And… I need your support for now. About that. Until I get the results back. I slept around, Haru. A lot of… a lot of times. So I don’t know if I’m okay. And I’m terrified. I don’t want to go alone even though I should do it alone because it’s my fault I’m in this situation. I don’t deserve your support but I need it, okay?”

Haru falls quiet, making Rin screw his eyes shut again to avoid that look. But the weight shifts on the couch and Haru does his best to pull Rin into an embrace tight around his neck. It’s so shitty and awkward, Rin almost finds his laugh again, if he weren’t so surprised and warmed by the attempt instead.

“Okay,” Haru repeats over Rin’s shoulder. “You do know Makoto is still going to love you anyway, right?”

Rin squeezes Haru back around his chest until he grunts and complains under his breath. “No,” he admits.

Haru sighs. “So stupid.”

“Why’d you get tested?” Rin finally finds the guts to ask Haru on their walk home from the nearest health clinic. He could use the distraction. While he’ll have his initial results by Monday, he’ll need to go again a few more times over the next year due to differing incubation periods, and even then could still have caught something that won’t hit him until ten years from now. The reality of
how serious and irreversible this is is increasingly hard to swallow.

He shrugs. “Why not? It’s been a while and I’m planning on sleeping with Kisumi eventually. I haven’t slept with anyone since Sousuke but it might make Kisumi happy.”

“I guess...” Rin mutters. “I still can’t believe that. Any of it.”

“As far as coincidences go, it is sort of weird,” Haru agrees.

It at least got a laugh out of Rin when he didn’t think he’d be able to until he got his results back. “No shit.”

“You didn’t know, but you got Kisumi out of a really bad situation. So thanks for thinking of it. He’s had a terrible time with all of that.”

“Yeah,” Rin says. “It’s what any one of us would’ve done. Even if Kisumi’s been MIA he’s still one of us.”

“Mm. What do you think about me asking Sousuke to join us?”

Rin laughs, a bark he can’t stop. He’s not surprised he isn’t surprised, honestly. “Join you? Like, as in a one-time thing?”

“No, like permanently.”

“That ain’t how Sou rolls,” Rin says. “He’s got like that canine-style rabidly-loyal-to-one-person thing goin’ on.”

“Think so?”

“Oh I know so. We’ve talked about it.”

Haru side eyes him in suspicion.

“What? Don’t tell me you were never curious about me or Mako.”

“I will tell you that,” Haru argues.

“Goddamn liar. Anyway we did talk about it once, and Sou said it wasn’t his thing. He said the idea of kissing anyone but you freaked him out. And I said, even if Haru was cool with it? And he said ‘especially if Haru was cool with it, what the fuck Rin.’ And I said I think you’re missing the appeal, and he said ‘no, I’m just not a cheat’. And I said now you’re missing the appeal and the definition.” Rin shrugs. “Can’t even use a dildo on that guy without him worrying it’s unfaithful so it’s not surprising he’s a tight-ass.”

“I did get him to finally agree to that,” Haru says matter-of-factly. “He liked it.”

“Jeez.” Rin elbows him with a noise of disgust. “But why do you want to do that, though?”

“Use a-”

“No, Haru!”

“Oh. Well I love him, and I love Kisumi, and Kisumi is willing to try it. So I don’t see what the problem is.”
“The problem is he ain’t gonna,” Rin warns. “Unless he’s had some huge revelation since we had that chat ‘few years ago.”

“Well that’s his choice. But I’m still going to ask.”

“So, what,” Rin pushes, and kicks a rock down the sidewalk, “you just… have them both?”

“Yeah. I guess so. Do all the same things but there’s three. Or I can date them separately but between you and me that approach sounds like a lot of work and I’m hoping that isn’t what we all agree to…”

When they catch up with the rock, he kicks it again. “It’s not that I’ve never heard of it before, but you have a weird way of making it sound totally normal, you know that?”

Haru huffs. “It is normal. It wouldn’t be normal to suppress my feelings for one and flip a coin for who that would be. I’ve thought a lot about this. There’s really no downside.”

“And if he says no?”

“Then I’m going back to Tokyo. Even if he says yes I’m still going back to Tokyo,” Haru answers. “That much I know. I like it there. He would too if he could pull his head out of his ass.”

Rin cracks a smile. “I’m happy for you then, weirdo. Want me to butter up Sou beforehand? Try and sell him with a powerpoint? I can wear a button down with too many buttons undone like a real salesman.”

Haru snorts. “Maybe. I’m prepared to deal with his bullheadedness though.”

“How’s that?”

“He likes how I kiss him,” Haru reveals with a playful quirk of his eyebrows. “Call it long-term conditioning paying off. Do it just right and he’ll agree to anything.”

“My god,” Rin mutters. “You’re terrifying.”

“But… seriously. I should’ve been more insistent with him from the beginning. I’m not going to make that mistake again. I’m going to say what I feel this time. And I hope it means something to him and I hope he believes me.”

Rin looks to Haru at his sudden drop in tone and sees he’s drawn his mouth into a line with his gaze pointed sharply ahead of them. With all of his bullshit in the way, Rin realizes he didn’t give enough thought to Haru’s situation just the same as Haru didn’t take his seriously either.

“You know I thought the same thing about you and Sou. Just made for each other, never gonna be apart for too long, et cetera. But none of it’s effortless, is it? I was wrong when I thought coming home was the easier option.”

Haru nods. “I think that’s why we’re all in this situation.” He stops walking, and Rin makes it a few more steps before he notices and turns in inquiry. “How are you feeling?”

It’s delivered inexplicably soft and billowing, searching. Rin swallows down the warmth that spills over as it tries to rise and holds it in his chest, and looks down at himself for any mark it leaves behind as it fades. Magic isn’t it, but Haru has always been able to help him heal with nothing more than a few deliberate words. “Better.”
Haru nods and returns his tone to himself, drops it flat and locks away his spells wherever he keeps them hidden and waiting. “Well I’m sorry for asking this so soon but I can’t stay forever… Makoto is very worried about you.”

In what’s more in line with typical Haru fashion, he asked Rin absolutely nothing but also managed to ask everything, too. “I’m going to talk to him. I have a lot of talking to do, actually. Grovelling maybe.”

“Do you still love him?”

Rin frowns and swallows around a new lump in his throat. “... I don’t feel like I’m allowed to. I feel like I need to earn that again somehow. I mean I went out and willfully put myself in danger… and I didn’t care. So I don’t get to say I love him until I can make that up to him. Even if I come back clean. Who does that to the person they love, Haru?”

Haru is visibly taken aback and fights with a handful of responses. Then he shoves his hands in his pockets for his phone and flips it open once he has it. “I think that’s between you two, huh?”

Rin knows that, but he’s still afraid of it. Somehow he wished Haru would have a dumbass ready for him or at least roll his eyes. “You’re not texting him, are you?”

“I am… I need to meet up with Kisumi soon. He’s with his family and has his own confrontations to face with them. You need to talk to Makoto, Rin. This isn’t sudden, it’s a few years in the making. You’re ready. So step up to it already because Makoto deserves it.”

It twists his already fragile heart in a weird mix of anxiety and fire, but he doesn’t stop Haru from sending the text.

--

Makoto tries again, and Rin wonders why anyone considers himself the resilient one when it’s Makoto who doesn’t know the meaning of the word quit.

He shows up the next day with only a small smile and his hands in his pockets, but Rin sees the stress rippling beneath the corners of it, the sleeplessness dulling his cheeks. But otherwise

“God you look good.”

Makoto blinks a few times in surprise in the doorway, then slips to a nervous shuffle when Rin doesn’t say anything else.

“Sorry,” Rin sighs. “Seeing shit a little differently since yesterday.”

“Oh,” Makoto says sheepishly. “Um, thank you.”

He doesn’t make a move to go inside, and Rin continues to stand in the way and stare in wait until he can’t take it anymore. “Jesus. Just come in already. I already feel like I’m gonna throw up, don’t make it worse.”

Makoto laughs with relief. “Can I take my shoes off or should I assume this will be quick?”

Rin just glares at him for his dark humor attempt half-heartedly, and walks inside. He knows Haru worded this entire thing positively for Makoto, which Rin sort of wished he didn’t, but if Haru’s going to meddle at least this time it’s for another reason.
He walks to his room without waiting for Makoto, and climbs onto his bed to lean against the wall. Makoto appears a few moments later and slides the door shut behind himself, and takes up the edge of the bed on crossed-legs to face him.

“I like how your room looks the same as when you were a kid still,” Makoto observes, head swiveling around and eyes landing at his desk. Rin knows him well enough to not hear it as an offhanded small talk statement, but a lead into something he wants to say. “Do you still have an impressive collection of stationary?”

“Not as much now,” Rin answers, thinking of his heaping trashcan that Gou took out. “Need to re-stock.”

“Mm. I wrote you a letter once when we were little and shoved it under your mattress. I take it you never found it.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah,” Makoto laughs. “I was too afraid to give it to you. You and Haru were distracted and I took a piece of rocket ship paper and wrote it really fast: ‘Rin, I like it when you walk home with me. I hope you like it too. Next time I want to try and hold your hand. Makoto.’ Then I panicked, since you both were trying to rope me into some argument, and shoved it under the mattress and forgot about it until it was too late to not be really obvious about it.”

It makes him smile. Makoto was a cute kid. “Probably still there I bet.”

“We’ll have to check then,” he says. “The point is, I’ve always cared about you Rin. I’ve never not cared, not since I met you. I’ve always wanted to go home with you even since before I knew what that meant and I still want that. That’s what I tried to tell you the other day. But I don’t want to apologize for needing time to get myself together and becoming the person you might want to go home with too, because I’m not sorry for that. I needed to do it for you, and for me, because I love you and want to be good for you.”

Rin’s eyes glaze over with what are becoming increasingly familiar tears, and he blinks them back until he can finish what he needs to say. “I lied, Makoto, you never needed to fix yourself I was just a terrible person to you. I took it all out on you.”

“I know you lied,” Makoto responds and Rin’s heart stops. “Gou told me the other day.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He shakes his head of it. “You were never terrible, you’re not a liar. You were afraid of what we would think and disappointed in yourself. I wasn’t strong enough to see that then either. If I hadn’t been so terrified of rejection, I might not’ve made it so much about me and been able to help. Talked you through the decision better and supported you. Like I was supposed to do as your partner. So, yeah. I needed work too regardless of the lie. What we had wasn’t healthy, as much as we loved each other it was inevitable to fall apart.”

Rin nods slowly in agreement with that and a sob escapes him in mourning. Because what does that mean going forward? Once Makoto finds out how unhealthy Rin’s been in the meantime, how much he hasn’t been working on himself in the least, he’s not going to want to jump right back into dysfunction. Rin sees how much Makoto glows now, how much happier and at peace he really does seem without him.
All Rin has to show for the last year is a full STD panel out for review.

“But if you want to, Rin, I’d like to try again.”

Rin pulls his knees up and buries his face in his arms, hardly the reaction Makoto was looking for but he can’t stop himself. He can’t agree to that. Makoto needs to agree to him first.

“I fucked up, Makoto,” he whispers.

“We both did.”

“No, I really did, while you’ve been gone I really fucked up and you have to know. Haru says you won’t care but you will.” He sniffs and digs his fingers into his arms. “I slept with people.”

“That’s okay.”

“No- I didn’t protect myself.”

“... Oh, Rin,” Makoto gasps in dawning realization.

“I know. I know, I know, I know.”


“It isn’t.”

Makoto moves to him and coaxes his head up with a gentle sweep of his fingers through his hair, tucking some loose strands spilling over his arm behind his ear. “It’s okay,” he repeats. “I care so much about that, but not for the reason you think. We’ll get through it. That’s not going to stop me if it’s the only thing left in the way.”

“It’s a big thing, Makoto.”

“I don’t give a fuck, Rin,” he answers, delivering it with a smile. “I just want you back.”

“Don’t talk like Sousuke,” Rin sobs. He reaches out and locks his arms around Makoto’s neck to hide in his shirt as Makoto huffs at that, squeezing him as hard as he can. Makoto cuts off his air too in return, a nearly imperceptible wail rumbling in his throat and never making it past his lips that Rin tuned his ear to years ago to be able to hear.

Makoto doesn’t leave him to bury his face for long, pushing him back by his shoulders to kiss him impatiently and insistently. Rin laughs whatever’s left of his tears dry when he tries to break away and Makoto chases as he utters no, no, no before silencing them both again. Rin’s knees fall undrawn and Makoto moves to sit over his lap with a straddle, tangle his hands in Rin’s hair and pull until he lets Makoto kiss him harder.

Rin runs his hands up and down Makoto’s strong back and he remembers effortlessly where it dips and curves and bumps. He remembers everything about him, and doesn’t know why anymore he pretended for so long that he didn’t.

“I missed you too,” Rin says once Makoto lets him breathe, and grabs Makoto by the nape of his neck to kiss him again once he says it. “Fuck I missed you, I missed you.”

Makoto presses closer to him encouraged, and makes their kiss sloppy and needier. To Rin’s neck, his cheeks, his ears. It overjoys Rin. It makes him happier than he thought he could be any time soon. That Makoto can have this response to him, say he wants him and really mean it even after
Rin’s finally laid out all the reasons that Makoto shouldn’t want anything to do with him. He feels loved. And above all, Makoto kisses him like he deserves it.

Rin brushes a thumb along Makoto’s cheek bone and guides him over to lie down with him, a gesture so simple, and Makoto lights up as it unfolds. As he’s invited to do it. He faces Rin on his undersized bed, smile bold and unwavering. And they stay that way, cramped and grinning, making up for all their lost time with their lips.

Rin starts to doze in the late afternoon glare spilling through his window. Makoto wordlessly strokes the side of his face and smooths through his hair and lulls him to a foreign, sleepy peace. He is safe and healthy here as long as Makoto will hold him, and maybe he misses feeling that way most of all.

“Do you have work?” Makoto asks above a whisper to leave Rin undisturbed.

“Not tonight.”

“I called out,” he continues. “Either way this went, I was going to need some time.”

“So I got you all to myself?”

Makoto moves Rin’s hair behind his ear again. “If you want me to stay. If not, Sousuke sure is curious.”

Rin laughs. “He can wait. I want you to stay.”

Makoto looks down and draws his eyebrows together. “I kissed him one time. When we had been drinking.”

He opens his eyes all the way and sees Makoto mostly looking pensive, not upset. “Did you just want me to know that or does it mean something else?” Rin asks, guiding him back up by his chin.

“I just wanted you to know. I thought I might keep it to myself. But that feels wrong all of a sudden. Considering it’s him, and not a stranger.”

Rin feels nothing over it. Makoto’s in front of him, Makoto is telling the truth. He continues brushing Rin’s hair behind his ear, the movement full of longing and his eyes trained on Rin’s lips, and that’s what matters, not a stupid drunk kiss. He’s had plenty of those himself and knows how meaningless they are. It just isn’t anything to him, and Makoto being here proves it doesn’t mean much to him either.

“Shit happens,” he dismisses. A mark on Makoto’s arm catches his eye. “What’s that?”

Makoto blinks a few times and reddens at his ears. “Oh. A tattoo.”

“Wow,” Rin mumbles, holding his arm above them and turning his head to look up at it. It’s fitting on Makoto in its simplicity, one unbroken and thin line. Rin’s the romantic, but Makoto is the one with the capacity for a truly quiet, eternal love. “Another drunk decision?”

“It was, yeah... Sousuke has one on his finger to humor me. He doesn’t know it, but his will rub away eventually.”

“Jesus,” Rin laughs. “Well I like it. Sounds like an interesting night.”

“You’re not angry about any of that?”
“Nah,” he denies, lacing their fingers together when he lets go of his arm.

After everything else he’s never heard anything more trivial in his life by comparison. Sousuke’s a good person. It’s not hard to get close to him once he lets you. He’s not hard to love or search for comfort in despite what some might say and of course Makoto would be the type to see that through Sousuke’s rough edges. “I’m glad you had Sou, to be honest. One of us had to be smart enough not to push him away.”

Rin leans forward to kiss him with that and silently drop it, to remind him of the present and the future Rin’s focusing on now. “Did you know your best friend is conspiring to rope him into a permanent three-way? He’ll have enough on his plate. Me? I just gotta worry about you. And you’re already right here.”

Makoto snorts and brings Rin’s hand to his mouth to attempt to hide his laugh behind gentle brushes of his lips along his knuckles to no avail.

“Hey, it’s not funny, Sou’s going to short-circuit,” Rin scolds with his own chuckle betraying him.

Makoto laughs harder, pressing his forehead to Rin’s hand to obscure himself more, but Rin catches his laugh just as bad and takes his hand back to drag down his face. Makoto rolls onto his back as his beautiful, lilted laugh shakes his shoulders and tumbles from him downright boisterously. “He’s- going… he’s going to- oh my god,” Makoto hitches. “Haru-”

“You’re cruel, Makoto!” Rin squeaks. He laughs until his stomach hurts and Makoto wheezes next to him, hand clutched and twisted in his shirt over his heart, until it dies to giggling and finally he sighs.

“I’m not even surprised,” Makoto says breathlessly. “He just. He just- god. All I can do is laugh.”

“I know,” Rin groans. “No problem too big for Haruka Nanase, huh?”

Makoto smiles with acknowledgement, dropping his attention from Rin’s face to his hip. He squeezes there, and kisses Rin differently this time. All tongue and gentle nibbles until Rin’s breathing quickens and his skin is on fire. Makoto pulls him on a roll to rest on top of him, grabbing his waist and encouraging his hips down in circles that feel too good and make him miss too much, too soon.

“Makoto...”

“I know,” Makoto murmurs to his lips, and lets him go to rub his back. “Just... want to be close, okay? Feel you. Just like this?”

Rin nods. He keeps their lips just barely touching, and promises himself it’s the farthest he’ll let himself get from Makoto today until they let go to sleep. “Just like this.”
Sousuke & Haruka: the devil is in the detail

i need to talk to you soon.

Sousuke is half-way through texting back a weekend proposal so he has time to get his goddamn soul back into his body from wherever it lifted off to at the sight of Haruka’s name lighting up his phone when Haruka texts him again; tonight.

not tomorrow. saturday and all, he sends back.

i hate how you text.
a question mark looks like this: ??????
and no. tonight.

Sousuke scoffs at the scathing response. No contact for this long and he jumps out of the gate with a complaint.

i got plans with rin in like an hour.

reschedule. he lives here. i don’t. and i’m only here through sunday morning.
this is important, he adds.

What is also important is Sousuke’s relationship with Rin and getting it back on track, and the single burning question searing annoyance into his features of: why the fuck did nobody tell him Haruka was in town?

Sousuke sighs and drafts a new message to Rin.

haruka is here. i have to reschedule to tomorrow. did you know about this.

ya. but wasn’t our place to ruin the surprise, Rin answers, and Sousuke can hear the laugh Rin sent that with.

It’s little, but it’s nice to see Rin use we, us, our in all of his messages again. Since the day prior when Rin picked up his texts as if nothing happened, they’re already back to being commonplace. It looks right coming from Rin. He hasn’t seen sight of Makoto or heard anything directly about how that went, but he’s going to go ahead and assume it went well.

On some level, Sousuke and Makoto are going their separate ways now. There’s a bit of impending mourning lurking in the corners of his mind over it. Small, but there. Because they were there for each other during so much uncertainty. Sousuke came to depend on Makoto, and now he’s going to be on his own from here on out. Makoto knows Sousuke can handle it, Sousuke isn’t so sure, but the confidence in him is welcome.

Because everyone has someone, and suddenly Sousuke’s apartment is a lot bigger than it ever was with that knowledge on hand.

okay, he sends Haruka. then i’ll be home so drop by whenever.

Unless Haruka’s coming over specifically to delete his own number out of Sousuke’s phone, Sousuke can at least be content with the idea that after tonight he’ll have all of his friends back. Just that takes the sting off of his empty home. Why else would Haruka come over if not to acquaint him with Kisumi and hash out their long time apart? His snappiness through text is just
nervousness; Sousuke’s seen it a million times.

tell kisumi i don’t bite anymore, he sends in addition after a moment. To establish he knows and get that out of the way, and to hopefully take some of that edge off that’s overflowing from Haruka’s texts. Seems silly that Haruka would think he’d be angry or something.

But Haruka doesn’t send any sort of confirmation and Sousuke would be lying if he said that didn’t leave him stumped.

It’s nearly nightfall when Sousuke gives up sitting patiently and gives in to pacing restlessly around his living room. He’s worked himself into thinking this is going to go exceptionally poorly for him, somehow. When there’s a knock at his door it startles him so badly that he’s momentarily woozy, and he needs to take a series of deep breaths to deal with the future he threw away on the other side of the door. He can only hope Kisumi won’t look at him like the fucking idiot he knows he is.

It’s only Haruka, flushed in the face like he ran across town to get here, and it knocks away any sort of greeting Sousuke has been trying to put together for the last two hours. He’s awash with heartache at the sight of him, his hands twitch at his sides where he forces them to stay put and not just reach out and grab him and never let go.

But “… Uh,” is all he can get past his lips.

“Poetic.”

Sousuke frowns and lets him in, and walks to the kitchen to get him some water. “Walked?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Yes. It’s hot.”

“Where you staying?”

“With Gou.”

Sousuke hands him his glass where he’s taken up residence at the coffee table, what Sousuke’s subconsciously deemed as Makoto’s spot now. Fuck knows why he’s here but he clearly knows something Sousuke doesn’t. “Coulda called me, I would’ve got you.”

Haruka drinks long before answering. “I needed the time.”

“Mm,” Sousuke hums over mounting anxiousness.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” Haruka deadpans as Sousuke sits. Sousuke obviously hasn’t done a single thing to the place, and something about that joke irritates him.

“We gonna small talk our way into denial again?” he asks, and Haruka’s eyes go wide. “You know, convince ourselves that we haven’t been ignoring each other for nearly a year.”

Haruka looks down after a moment. “I’m not. It’s just now that I’m here, I’m struggling,” he mutters. “I stood outside for twenty minutes.”

“What’s there to struggle with? I’m happy for you, Haruka, and I missed you, all right? Let’s not make it weird when it doesn’t have to-”

“I love you,” Haruka exhales.

“… be.”
The analog clock in his bedroom diligently fills the silence in like it always does. Haruka clears his throat and takes a deep breath.

“I thought we were young and this wasn’t it for us, this wasn’t us in fifty years doing the same thing every day. I thought you would come with me. And when that didn’t happen, I thought you chose this over me. I thought, I thought, I thought. And I never asked. So before we talk at all, Sousuke, I need to know why you didn’t come with me.”

He’s paralyzed. He can’t identify the feeling that swells in his chest and cuts off his air. Some of it’s anger, some of it’s hopelessness. Some of it’s injustice, and some of it’s resignation. None of it is good, though. All of it makes his limbs numb and his mouth dry and all he does is stare.

“Say something,” Haruka pleads.

The clock answers for him, Haruka huffs impatiently.

“I thought we were happy,” he finally whispers. “I really did. I was, anyway, and um... When you said you wanted to go, and that you’d go without me, I knew I was something you could live without. So I stayed. Because it hurt to feel so disposable.”

“Well it hurt me that your bookkeeping job and the one bedroom apartment we’d had for six years was more important than my future with you. I had something good going for me and you wanted nothing to do with it beyond helping me pack my bags faster.”

Haruka’s shoulders are stiff and he looks ready to flinch away from whatever Sousuke lobs back at him. Whatever he wants to argue with, and he has a pick of them ready to go. Why should he have to give up everything? Why couldn’t their future be here? Why wasn’t he worth the same level of sacrifice?

He could argue back and fight. They’d raise their voices. They’d scream until they cried and Haruka would stomp out and slam the door and cut off whatever cruel thing Sousuke shouted after him that he didn’t really mean. Because as Sousuke came to terms with already, they hurt each other. Deeply. And it can never go back to how it was. All that damage is already done, and talking about who wronged the other more is just picking at the wounds and making them bleed again. So what would be the point? Unless his goal is to lose his friend. Makoto said it didn’t matter who fucked up more. He’s right.

“Yeah. I was a coward. And I’m sorry.”

Haruka isn’t expecting it. He knits his eyebrows in caution as his mouth presses firmly shut and doesn’t say anything. Sousuke can’t blame him; he’s been an unapologetic asshole for so long his apology doesn’t sound legitimate even to his ears.

“You did the right the thing,” he continues. “You put yourself first and you left the opportunity there for me to catch up. I didn’t take it. I sat here and blamed you for abandoning me instead when I could’ve been with you the entire time. So I’m sorry, because all of this irreparable damage is mostly my fault. I was comfortable, I was complacent. I took you for granted. And I only realized I did that when I turned around and did the exact same thing to Gou.”

Haruka’s cautious expression doesn’t relent as Sousuke finishes. But Sousuke’s said his piece, he’s put months of self-reflection into words. As with his apology to Makoto at the beginning, he isn’t looking for forgiveness. He’s just looking for his apology to be heard. He wants to own up where it counts to the people that matter.
“Do you mean that?”

Sousuke wants to sigh and insist, of course he does. Why else would he say it. But this is Haruka, who isn’t always as confident as he looks and tries to be. Not around Sousuke, anyway.

“I’ve had a long time to think on it and the best company around to help me reach the conclusion, so yeah,” he explains.

Haruka nods to himself, content with the elaboration, as he brushes his hands back and forth over his bent knees. “... And I meant it too.”

“I know. That’s why I’m apologizing.”

“Not that,” Haruka sighs. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Haruka, but not the same... and hey, that’s why we’re talking. Hash it out. Can’t promise I can get over it fast, but I will eventually, you know? I can because I want you in my life, and Kisumi too—”

“Stop,” Haruka interrupts. “You’re not listening. It is the same. I’m in love with you, Sousuke. Still. And I’m not planning on getting over it.”

Sousuke’s breath dies in his lungs and what’s left of it in his throat gasps from him unexpectedly. Haruka doesn’t break eye contact with him, hands over his knees squeezing to fists to put him at odds with how vulnerable he looks otherwise.

“This is... a bad position to put me in, Haruka,” he ekes out. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“No,” Sousuke denies. “No, Haruka, I won’t do that to Kisumi.”

“You’re not. He knows.”

“I don’t want to come between you two.”

Haruka shakes his head of the briefest of smiles. “That is literally and figuratively exactly what we want you to do.”

“We.”

“We, Sousuke.”

“I- uh. Excuse me?”

“We want you. Both of us.”

“Oh- what the fuck,” he stammers. “This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny. I want to be with you and I want to be with him. I want us to all be together. He knows that.”

“And you just- planned this together? To propose this to me out of no-fucking-where?”

“Well obviously we had to talk about it first. I had to convince him, too. Can I kiss you now?”
“No!” Sousuke squeaks. “What? No!”

“I know it’s different but I’m just asking for an open mind—”

“I’m not going to do that, Haruka. I don’t even know him anymore. Who the fuck is he? Because right now he’s just some stranger who wants to see his boyfriend fuck someone else to me and that sounds like a shorthand recipe for a few ruined lives.”

Haruka finally looks away briefly and huffs down at his lap before returning for another round. “Do you trust me?”

“Do not pull that shit. It’s not about trusting you. You’re asking me to be in a relationship with someone I don’t know as a condition of getting back together with you.”

“I’m asking you to be in a relationship with me first and accept that I also love someone else in addition to you as a condition of getting back together. I would never ask you to be in a relationship with Kisumi. That’s yours and his decision for later.”

Sousuke grinds his teeth together over his next reactionary argument and forces himself to calm down and think. Haruka sits back and lets him, folding his hands instead of clenching his fists to help dispel the pressure. There’s nothing to be gained from screaming about it, he’s not even angry quite yet, he’s just floored.

He pulls a deep breath through his nose. It’s been to his benefit to listen more than speak lately. He loves Haruka and doesn’t doubt him or his intentions in any other arena and the least he can do is hear him out. “Let’s back up. Tell me exactly what you’re looking for, Haruka. Exactly why you’re sitting here.”

Haruka nods and sighs with relief. “I want you to move to Tokyo with me. I want you to start over with me from scratch and I want us to talk… all the time. If you agree, I want you to respect that I’m also in a relationship with Kisumi. Because I love him too. I love you both. I want you both and not one more than the other. I came over alone because I’m not asking you to agree to that with him. Just with me.”

“So I have to share.”

“Yeah. In the most basic of terms.”

“So in the most detailed of terms, he gets to fuck you and you come over when you’re done with him and we eat dinner together and you kiss me with a mouth that was on his dick an hour prior and you say you love us both in the same day and we’re supposed to believe that.”

“Yes,” he repeats, undeterred by Sousuke’s deliberate phrasing. “I’m not going to speak around what I’m asking for. Don’t try and push me into a corner that isn’t there.”

Sousuke folds his arms across his chest. “You are asking me to change literally everything I know. Every single thing.”

“Yeah. I am. Because I’d hate myself if I let you go again without putting up a fight to get you to come with me.”

The only reason Sousuke thinks he might be telling the truth is because Haruka doesn’t have to put himself on the line like this. He doesn’t have to be here telling Sousuke he loves him when he has someone else he loves already. He wouldn’t have to presumably jump through the same hoops with Kisumi, explaining himself until he was blue in the face, that he could make it happen if he
truly didn’t think he could prove himself.

If somewhere deep down Haruka doubted this even on an atomic level, he wouldn’t be here to ask for it, because Haruka is not someone who would play either of them just to fulfill some long-standing sexual fantasy of having a threesome. He could ask Kisumi for a no-name if that were the case. He could’ve kissed Sousuke before he explained any of this and caught him up in a ruse before he knew what hit him.

This is something Haruka truly wants, he’s determined head to toe not only to get it, but to do it the right way, and he’s barely broken eye contact since he sat down. Sousuke has to wonder if Kisumi felt as battered by the end of the explanation as he does, and what about it got him to agree.

“I need time,” Sousuke finally says, and Haruka unravels from the impossibly tight coil he’s scrunched himself into in the wake of Sousuke’s silence. “I can’t say yes to this after a five minute discussion. I can’t even say maybe. But I won’t say no yet.”

He nods in response, only more determination in his eyes and no argument with Sousuke’s hesitation. It’s a good sign to him.

“But before I kick you out to stare at a wall for three hours in mild shock, I gotta ask. Why did Kisumi agree?”

Haruka searches the ground for the words and gives up on the hunt after a quiet moment. Sousuke leans back on his hands instinctively when Haruka moves forward enough to be nose to nose. “Can I kiss you now?”

Haruka places a hand to brace himself in wait over Sousuke’s chest where his heart is beating so fast it may as well be at a dead stop. Sousuke lost count ages ago how many times they’ve kissed again in his dreams, and really only remembers how close, but not quite they all were. This one can be for real. This can be something he thought he’d never get to do again regardless of the outcome of the rest of this.

So he tilts his head and presses their lips together, and Haruka takes that as permission to shove him to the floor and kiss him harder than he ever has. Sousuke’s kept a mental ranking all this time, too, and this is all of Haruka’s passion and longing all rolled into one loud and long kiss that reduces Sousuke to a moaning mess of himself with his hands wandering along whatever he can reach of Haruka since he can’t keep them at his sides anymore. Haruka directs his jaw with no small amount of force beneath his fingertips, angling him to kiss him deeper or bite down on his lips and soothing them over with his tongue when it makes him hiss.

They begin to ease to languid, lazier pulls at Sousuke’s insistence and for the sake of not splitting a lip until Haruka stops and sits up, lets Sousuke yank him back down for more no less than three times, and drops his forehead to Sousuke’s chest to rest and catch his breath.

“That’s why, huh?” Sousuke directs on a rasp at the ceiling.

“You know I suck with words.”

“But not at sucking face.”

Haruka snorts and socks him in the arm hard enough to make him grunt, then rolls off to a stand. “I’m going to leave now. I think I’ve plead my case.”

Sousuke nods and stands with him and smooths his shirt back into order as Haruka walks to the door for his shoes. All at once Sousuke doesn’t want him to leave, loves him so much as if there
was never any doubt between them, and he figures that’s what the kiss was for. Sneaky fuck.

“Thank you,” Haruka mumbles. “For hearing me out.”

Sousuke steals one more soft kiss from him, which Haruka is eager to return. “I want you around no matter what, okay? That much I know.”

“Me too.”

“And I’m still happy for you,” he adds. “I can tell you’re where you want to be.”

“Thank you,” Haruka says again, smiling now, and lets himself out into the warm evening. “Yes, I’m walking.”

Sousuke rolls his eyes. “Don’t get so full of yourself, Nanase.”

He watches Haruka go, and by the time he steps back inside and latches the lock, it’s all beginning to sink in.

“Fuck.”

--

Sousuke sees on his jog to the gym that the swim club building remains inarguably closed and vacant. So much for a fishing supply. It’s too warm to put his all into the run, or that’s what he tells himself as he slows to a shuffle. The majority of his mental function is just a bit tied up in Haruka at the moment, and it’s keeping him distracted.

This of course is the other gym, the one with a pool and closer to Rin. The one he associates with things that got worse before they got better, and also the last place he saw his friend (when he wasn’t trying to beat Sousuke’s face in) months ago.

He’s getting good at these talks where he apologizes or speaks his mind. He hopes Rin is receptive to what he has to say.

Rin’s on a bench in the locker room in swim skins, bent forward so far with his hands hanging between his knees he doesn’t notice when Sousuke walks in. He’s deep in thought and Sousuke catches his strong frown even though it’s obscured by his hair.

Sousuke clears his throat to get Rin’s attention, making him bolt upright in surprise. “... Sousuke.”

A million things come to mind to say at the sight of him, but all he reaches for is the olive branch. “What’s got you pissy, shithead?”

Rin frowns again. “Ah, nothing...” He works himself up to say something else; something long-winded and full of explanation and emotion. Something they’d talk about for an hour and miss their opportunity to swim before it got crowded. Rin ramps up and backs off a few times in a row before Sousuke puts him out of his misery. That’s revenge enough for him.

Looking at Rin now, in the same room, with the same bond they’ve always had... they don’t need this again- this talk. They know exactly what the other did wrong. They only need to do what they’ve always done and that will speak for much more than either of them could ever say. If neither of them were sorry for how they acted, neither would be standing here and ready to swim.

“Buck up. You haven’t even lost yet. We gotta swim first.”
Rin looks side to side like it’s some sort of joke, mouth parted and eyes wide, but he recovers quickly and smirks. “Gettin’ a bit big for your spandex there, Sou.”

“What are we without our double entendres, Rin?”

He laughs and stands, stopping to squeeze Sousuke’s shoulder as he walks past him and out onto the pool deck. “Hurry up and get changed.”

Sousuke meets him at the pool where he’s snagged two lanes side by side, one lane away from a few others swimming laps. It’s still relatively early in the morning so they have some time before kids crash the place. He jumps in for a warm-up lap just to acclimate to the water, and hops out for the block.

“Who’s callin’?”

Rin shrugs. “Top of the minute, free, four laps. I think it’ll be obvious who wins,” he goads with a grin, snapping his goggle band and poising to go.

“I’ll let you know how your turn looks from the other side.”

Muscle memory carries them over at the turn of the minute, and it’s too close to call a winner. Allegedly.

--

“Y’know,” Rin muses on their walk back to his house, “Haru wouldn’t date Kisumi if he weren’t like… a little like you. On some weird level. So you might learn to like him, since you’re a narcissist.”

“Do we need to play the stop game?” Sousuke mutters. “This is stop number one.”

“So I got two more? All right.” Rin rubs his hands together. “Second point-”

“You’re walking street-side, and traffic is fuckin’ heavy today, so be smart, Rin.”

“Second point. Your job is boring as fuck. I don’t know if anyone’s ever had the guts to tell you this, but you could go get another boring as fuck job anywhere. It’s not that special.”

“It’s been pointed out by your drunk asshole of a boyfriend, yes,” Sousuke answers. “Stop. That’s two.”

“Isn’t he though?!” Rin snorts. “Jesus he’s a prick. Hot when he’s mouthy like that, but at the cost of my ego. Anyway. Point number three.”

Sousuke sighs, and should’ve known absolutely no one would take this as seriously as he does. Especially not Rin.

“Third is… you love Haru, he loves you, stupid. Why are you even deliberating over this?”

“Last one,” Sousuke groans.

“No, not yet. So he’s got Kisumi. Big. Fucking. Deal. We know him, first off, and can vouch for him. He’s a total lover, not a fighter, if you’ll recall. Ergo, if Haru loves you, Kisumi will love you. And you are obligated to love whoever Haru and I love. It’s in the bylaws of our friendship.”

“Er-go fuck yourself. Three stops.”
“Speaking of fucking-”

“Rin,” Sousuke pleads. “Please take this seriously! This is my entire life.”

“Speaking of fucking,” Rin continues, “I believe you, as a man of respectably high libido, are seriously underestimating the power of a sexual relationship like that.”

Sousuke shoves him hard enough to make him stumble. “That is the last component on my mind.”

“Well, okay, that’s literally the biggest lie I’ve ever heard in my life but I can move past it.” Sousuke swallows dry. It didn’t sound convincing to him, either. “So what? You don’t want Haru nonexclusive to you?”

“It’s not something I find immediately appealing, no. I mean, what if Makoto came to you with that? Said he loved someone else but still wanted you. How could you buy that and believe he could be fair about it?”

Rin hums and snaps his big mouth shut for once to think about it. “It would take time for me... but I also think emotions are more complicated than we give credit for. You can’t help who you love, Sou. And Haru happens to love you both. You know what he said about it is... how’d he put it. He loves you both, and denying that to one of you and himself is like flipping a coin or some shit. It’s not natural. He said it much more convincingly but you get what I’m trying to say.”

“Not at all, actually,” Sousuke says with an eyeroll. “I’m glad you all are totally blasé about this, thanks for making me feel like the unreasonable one for being wary of it.”

Rin shrugs and dodges another attempt to shove him into traffic. “Look Sou, doing things your way lost you Haru. If you’re cool with that, then by all means. Continue. But to be fucking honest with you, if I learned anything during my adventures in wanton slutdom- a tale I still need to regale you with by the way- it’s that you can go and do whatever the fuck you want and no one’s gonna stop you. You can do it all your way pal, and it might be all you really wanted. Probably not, though.”

“Wanton slutdom,” Sousuke parrots in wonderment.

Rin ignores him. “In my case it nearly ruined my fucking life. But in your case you’re giving the finger to something solely because it’s different and you gotta stop doing that. Because hey it could go to shit, sure. But not even giving it a chance to work is fucking stupid. Iwatobi will still be here and as unimpressive as ever if you decide come back.”

They round the corner to Rin’s street as he finishes talking. “That’s three stops,” Sousuke says.

“All right,” Rin concedes, throwing his hands up in surrender. “That’s all I gotta say. Owed it to Haru. Since he told me I was being an ass.”

“Any one of us could’ve told you that.”

“Yeah but he does it the best, you know?”

Sousuke can’t argue with that. He can’t argue with a lot of this, and it’s leaving him unnerved and uncomfortable, not relieved. He’s beginning to feel manipulated into agreeing to something he isn’t one-hundred percent confident in, and this could be a problem. Being pressured never feels good.

They get to Rin’s door and Sousuke stills Rin at his wrist when he goes to open it. Rin looks to him in wait.
“Can you ease off a bit?”

Rin shrugs him off, but claps him on the upper arm before returning to the door. “I already said that’s all I had to say. Do what makes you happiest, Sou. I know I gotta stick up for Haru too, but your happiness is what’s important to me, all right?”

Sousuke nods, placated by it for now. “Why are we here, by the way?”

“I gotta show you something,” Rin says with a grin as he opens the door. Sousuke can already tell by his tone that it’s something to do with Makoto, and probably something he’s going to groan over.

Makoto has his nose in a book on Rin’s bed and smiles up at them as they enter his room. They set down their gym bags and Rin disappears to hang up their suits for a moment before rejoining them.

“You get to be a lazy fuck now that Rin’s back?” Sousuke jokes. “No more Saturday gym?”

Makoto closes the book and sits up with a deliberately long stretch that ends in a sigh. “Yup, this week I deserve it. Who won?”

“To the naked eye, every race was a draw. To a stopwatch- and where it counts- definitely me,” Rin answers. He sits down next to Makoto on the bed and Sousuke takes the chair to sit backwards on at Rin’s desk.

Makoto rolls his eyes faster than Sousuke can, making Rin snort. “Fine, maybe he eked out a millisecond win or two. The point is I probably won and I want a victory kiss, just in case.”

Makoto leans over and plants a peck to his temple, and unsatisfied, Rin pulls him for a real kiss that Makoto sighs and submits to after the initial surprise. Sousuke finds it rather awkward until he realizes this is what Rin wanted to show him. Rin angles Makoto just enough in front of himself to be able to see Sousuke past Makoto’s head, and he razes a sharp and serious gaze to burn Sousuke head-on with, unwavering. Knowing. Not angry, not jealous. Only a silent request for Sousuke’s agreement.

Oh.

Sousuke nods just once in what he hopes Rin reads as nothing but the utmost respectful of understandings, and Rin lets Makoto go when he does. Then it’s in the past where it belongs. Rin’s grin is plastered back on as soon as Makoto can see him again, and Sousuke gives them their due process groan.

He gets it, even if it wasn’t necessary. It was important to Rin to communicate exactly where he and Makoto are at; a fragile, liminal place on thin clouds that to stay afloat requires careful attention and no distractions, and Sousuke will reassure Rin a million times if he needs to he won’t be one.

“How about it?” Makoto laughs.

Sousuke waves his hand. “Whatever. You get a week pass before it’s annoying again.”

A giggle carries over from the kitchen and raises all their eyebrows. It’s distinctly Gou. Low chatter rolls louder as she and someone else ascend the stairs and get closer to Rin’s open door.

“Hey, giggles!” Rin calls, cutting off Gou mid-sentence.
She pops her head around the corner and smiles. “Oh! Almost everyone! This is just like high school.”

Her mystery friend gasps and steps into view. She must be Aki, Sousuke assumes, and Sousuke sees why he never stood a chance in hell. Even at a glance she is perfect for Gou; strong, tall, and cute. Which he could argue he is too, but she’s got a nice rack he doesn’t have as well as a specifically lovestruck, adoring gaze from Gou he’s never seen her use on anyone before. “Finally! The elusive men!”

Makoto gasps. “Zaki?!”

She blinks in confusion and unrecognition for a moment that nearly goes stale before gasping loudly in return. “Makoto!” Aki whips around to Gou. “Now I know exactly who your brother is! Oh my god I’m such a ditz!”

Rin laughs and hops off the bed, wasting no formalities and throwing himself at Aki with absolutely zero restraint. She catches him, barely flinches.

“I knew that name sounded familiar. Still stronger than my boney ass, huh?” Rin jokes as he releases her. She beams.

“You look like you might be able to lift me now, don’t be so hard on yourself. Makoto though! My god you’re broad how do you fit through a door?!”

“Sideways, usually,” Rin answers for him, and Makoto scoffs.

Aki puts her hands on her hips and looks between them all. “So you’re Sousuke?”

“Ah, yup.”

“Sorry about all that, mmm… confusion?”

He shrugs and casually lets himself drown in surreality. Why the fuck not at this point. Threesome proposal one night, the chick his then-girlfriend slept with all chipper and bubbly to the point Sousuke sort of adores her the next day, and it’s all just another goddamned walk in Sousuke’s park. “No problem.”

Rin and Makoto share a glance and Gou shakes her head from the door to disarm them of their questions.

“And who’s sleeping with who now? And where’s Haru?”

“Rin is with Makoto,” Gou supplies. “Sousuke is in limbo. Haru is staying with me, remember?”

“Oh jeez, that is not who I pictured when you said Haruka… Oh well. We’ll have to stop by so I can say hi to him too. He was just a moody little shit back then... It’s all coming back to me.”

Rin walks backwards to lean on his bed again. “He still is. So what’re you guys here for?”

“I left my shorts here and Aki’s been losing sleep over it. She wants to wear them.”

“They’re cute, and you keep forgetting them. I’ve been as patient as I possibly can be.”

Gou sticks her tongue out at her. “Then we’re off to the beach again.”

“It’s so warm, why wouldn’t we?!” Aki squeaks.
“I’m not disagreeing. You guys wanna come? I could call Haruka too.”

Sousuke hates how immediately everyone is on board with that without even sparing him a glance, but sure. Fucking whatever, again. He can handle it. He can handle either or both.

“All right, then I’m gonna find those shorts while I call Haruka and then we can do the funky car shuffle since I didn’t see Sou’s car out there.”

She turns on that and Aki follows her the rest of the way down the hall. As soon as they’re gone Sousuke glares at Rin and Makoto hard enough to make them frown.

“You assholes.”

“Come on, Sou. It’s harmless. It’s been months since we all got together and we’re all a little less shitty than the last time. Kisumi’s probably just as nervous as you and won’t even go.”

He wishes he was surprised when Kisumi’s the first person he sees once they get there.

“Are you sure about this?”

Haruka nods and watches Kisumi grip his steering wheel tighter. “It’s fine. He’s not mad.”

“But he’s not sure. I don’t want to aggravate him by being there, Haru.”

“You won’t. Besides, they’re all your friends too. Rin would really like to see you all things considered.”

Kisumi keeps his eyes straight ahead. “Yeah. And I’ve missed Makoto.”

“Then you belong, okay? Sousuke has no issue with you. I keep telling you that.”

“I know.” Kisumi chews on the corner of his bottom lip. “Sorry Haru, this is a lot. All of this trip has been a lot.”

His parents had nothing but criticism and harsh words waiting for him. Hayato had been distant. They never saw the photos, and it hurt Haruka’s heart to hear Kisumi say he wished they had, so at least they could’ve just ignored him instead of begrudgingly agreeing to see him only to leave him feeling unwelcome. It will take time and effort to repair those relationships.

Haruka might not be big on soothing, empty promises, or kisses only meant for distraction, but Kisumi deserved a few of each last night. Everyone does sometimes.

“I’ve pushed you into all of this fast. Don’t apologize. That’s what I have to do.”

“I’m just happy I have you,” Kisumi deflects without agreeing or disagreeing. Haruka lets him this time.

And then, as Kisumi has been mining for reassurance since they got here that he still does have Haruka; “You do.”

He smiles, at least.

They park near the beach and while Haruka enjoys his new city, he does miss this much about
Iwatobi. It’s sunny, breezy, warm, and the beach is clean. It will do everyone good. Haruka has no doubt Kisumi will feel at ease once they’re all together, either. Sousuke’s not that sort of person.

“Are you going to swim?” Haruka asks on their walk to the water. Kisumi didn’t bring a swimsuit, and only has a t-shirt and jersey shorts as the next best thing. Haruka tried to warn him before they left that you don’t just go to Iwatobi without a bathing suit, but he didn’t listen.

“Oh maybe… if I feel the need to drown myself in embarrassment. They’re going to ignore me, Haru. Do that strained smile routine and everything.”

Haruka rolls his eyes. “It will be fine.”

“They have every reason to treat me like a promiscuous man-stealing leper.”

Haruka can’t keep himself from laughing. He stops and turns to face Kisumi and leans forward to kiss him before Kisumi can register the intention and jump back from it. “No, they do not.”

Kisumi’s whiny Haru is drowned out by another from somewhere behind him. “Haru!”

Makoto waves from across the street with Rin and everyone else standing along with him. The traffic breaks and they walk across, Sousuke lingering in the back, shielding much of himself with the beach umbrella, and looking just as nervous as Kisumi is. “Look, he’s jumpy too.”

Kisumi turns around and frowns. “He looks mad.”

“No, that’s just his face.”

Haruka hasn’t had a chance to see Makoto yet since he got here due to his odd work hours. Even at a distance he looks so much better than he did the last time they saw each other in person. Less tired, less grey. Rin’s practically glued to him already, too. Haruka sees he’s keeping a genuine smile on despite a weighty stress lurking underneath it, and his worry for Rin finally begins to slip away. He’s going to be okay. He’s back with them all. And Makoto came through for him, like Haruka knew he would.

Rin beelines to Kisumi, to Haruka’s relief. No awkward re-introductions or Makoto trying to break the ice, which never goes well historically.


He loops an arm around Kisumi’s neck and drags him to the side. Haruka sees right through that, especially by the way Rin drops the energetic front nearly right away and speaks quietly of what Haruka assumes is their unfortunate mutual connection. Makoto steps in effortlessly to let them have their privacy, always Rin’s protector even when he doesn’t know the entire story.

“Good to see you, Haru.”

“You too.” He looks to the other three and can’t believe his eyes when he looks right at Aki Yazaki. “Oh.”

“Oh?” she laughs.

“Wow, I’m just. Surprised. How are you doing? I didn’t realize it was the same Aki when Gou told me.”

“Same about you! And I’m great, haven’t lost anything in any rivers lately!”
Haruka snorts and nods to Gou. “Well she can’t swim so be careful with your things going forward.”

“I can too!” Gou argues, but Aki already has a hand around her waist to tug her towards the beach and an apologetic pout on her lip.

“Guess I have to teach her like, right now. We should talk later though Haru!”

Haruka, Sousuke, and Makoto watch them bound away. Aki was restless and impatient like that when they were younger too, so no surprise there. He catches Rin in an embrace with Kisumi over Makoto’s shoulder, and when they release each other they return to the three. Kisumi keeps tight to Haruka’s side, but he’s not so drawn up anymore. Haruka will have to thank Rin for his perceptiveness. Or obliviousness. Either way.

“Haru helped Aki get her scarf back from the river once when we were little,” Makoto explains, drawing Sousuke and Kisumi’s mouths to a simultaneous oh that has no business being coordinated or endearing like that. “... Then he almost drowned...”

“Makoto,” Haruka mumbles.

“Hey, wow, bad memories?” Rin interjects. Even Haruka can barely recall it. The event was an unspoken off-limits discussion and time eventually eroded it away to irrelevance. “All right, I sort of want to bask and tan here. Chit-chat on the beach.”

Rin is smart enough to keep himself from dragging Makoto with him and leaving Haruka to immediately make things awkward and ruin everything with Sousuke and Kisumi behind them. He drags Sousuke by the arm instead to pull him ahead of the group, earning a suffered groan from him.

“Don’t know about you, but my suit is still wet from earlier, and I just gotta say my dick is fuhrreezing.”

Sousuke groans again as he hikes the umbrella up in his grip. “Thanks for the update, Rin.”

Kisumi laughs next to Haruka and Makoto shakes his head. “We get what we ask for when we want things to go back to normal. But it’s nice.”

“They’ve always been like that,” Kisumi muses.

“You too,” Makoto adds. “I meant all of us. I want to hear about what you’ve been up to.”

It’s a small gesture, and a downright obvious one. Makoto doesn’t try to hide it. But Kisumi lights up anyway.

Haruka is reminded his gratefulness for his friends is bottomless.

--

Sousuke keeps his distance, but it’s not all unpleasant that he does. Haruka knows him, knows he might be physically far away but it doesn’t mean he’s being avoidant or neglectful. Haruka’s sure he’s adjusting in his own way, and he looks over at them occasionally.

Kisumi is content to watch him in turn, or study him or something; Haruka can’t determine what he’s thinking about it. But he’s not about to disturb the head that finally made it onto his lap over a folded towel Haruka’s had poised for it after a near hour of hesitation to be anywhere near him,
and only after Makoto was called over by Gou and Aki to look at something gross they found.

“Go swim,” Kisumi says. “You’ve been here the entire time.”

He’d like to, his body aches and longs for it. But leaving Kisumi on his own in this situation would be neglectful, even if Kisumi insists he do it. “If I jump in there while Rin and Sousuke are in there being themselves… chaos. Probably a fist fight.”

“Between who?” Kisumi laughs.

He pushes his fingers just past the edges of Kisumi’s hair, an increasingly enticing idea lately and no better time to try it. He hits a snag right away and carefully works through it. “Tough call… I’d shove Rin, Rin would try to shove me back and hit Sousuke instead… it snowballs from there.”

“You’re the instigator, huh?”

“So I’ve been told.” He picks through the tangle and runs straight into another.

“I brush it, I swear.”

“Sure you do.” Kisumi blinks up at him and squints when he pulls his bangs back and exposes his forehead, curious what he’d look like with short hair. “... No.”

Kisumi snorts. “That’s why it’s long.”

Haruka leans forward over the top of his head to see him better, a hand on either side of his face to hold him still. “Is this okay?”

“I’m having a good time.”

“Good.” He kisses him while he has him there, nose bumping his pointy chin. Light at first in case it’s too much for Kisumi, but to Haruka’s surprise he lets him and even brings an arm up to hook Haruka’s neck and hold him closer.

It’s an awkward kiss to hold so Haruka sits up, and just in time to catch Makoto dragging Rin towards them as Rin pulls against him to the tide, yelling something Rin-like at Sousuke. He eventually gets Rin walking forward, and they sit just near the edge of the umbrella’s shade.


“He put seaweed in my swimsuit. Stand up for me.”

“I live with him, give me time to retaliate,” Makoto answers with a grin. “Ice water over the curtain on his next shower?”


Haruka sighs and looks down at Kisumi again. “You have to come.”

“Aww, Haru, I don’t even have a suit.”

“They’re just going to make out the entire time and you’re going to regret staying.”

“Sou’s with Gou and Aki anyway,” Rin adds, nodding over to the newly-formed trio in the distance. “So go away.”
“Rin,” Makoto laughs, then looks between Haruka and Kisumi sheepishly. “Fifteen minutes?”

Kisumi sits up and rolls his shoulders loose, then discards his shirt and reaches for sunscreen. Haruka makes his way out to the water ahead of him, formerly abundant patience waning rapidly.

It’s still cold, but in a soothing way under the scorch of the sun. He dives under the next incoming wave and skims the sand and rocks with his fingertips before surfacing to float on his back. It’s one of those things he doesn’t realize he misses so much until he’s experiencing it again. Now he doesn’t know how he’s gone so long without an ocean. Kisumi wades out to him waist-deep after an additional few minutes.

“Float.”

“I have to wait for the sunscreen to set. I’ll sit on the shore. Just wanted to tell you.”

He shrugs and doesn’t argue. Nothing worse than a bad sunburn.

Haruka kicks along parallel to the shore, flips occasionally to front crawl and cool off his chest before flipping onto his back again. He checks on Kisumi often at first, and then less often as he begins to doze as he floats. Kisumi just sits and stares out at the horizon line, so there’s not much for Haruka to be checking on anyway, but in this bright afternoon light he does look beautiful.

So it doesn’t register at first through the comfortably warm haze of his mind that the next time he looks over, Sousuke’s sitting next to him, nor can he determine how long he’s been there. Haruka stands quickly, whatever the surge of panic is over, he’s not sure. Kisumi doesn’t look to be under distress by it, and Sousuke’s a respectable foot away from him. And they’re just… talking.

He doesn’t know what to make of it, less so when they both look at him as they speak but make no gesture to bring him over. Kisumi holds his hand up in a shy wave. Haruka puts up with it for another few minutes, diving back into the surf to swim away, but ultimately can’t ignore it. It’s the last thing he’d expected to happen.

Haruka elects to sit in the water facing them rather than choose anyone’s side. Sousuke nods in greeting.

“Everyone’s uh, busy,” he leads. A cursory glance over Sousuke’s shoulder shows Makoto and Rin obscured from beachgoers by a towel, and Gou and Aki are nowhere in sight. ”And you seemed occupied. And he didn’t. So. Yeah.”

“How was your swim?” Kisumi asks.

“Nice. I miss the sea.”

“So, listen…” Sousuke mutters, grabbing at the back of his neck. “I know this is fucking awkward. I’m just trying to make it not so bad on all of us. If I’m making you uncomfortable I can split.”

“No, I think this is good,” Haruka answers with a tilt of his head.

“Right…” He sighs. “I just wanted you both to know… I still don’t know. I’m feeling pressured by Rin and shit and I don’t think that’s a good mindset to make a decision like this under.”

Haruka huffs. “I take back my gratefulness for him.”

“I get it, but… You know this is my life and my decision. That’s all. I want to make it with a clear head and I’m still rattled. Shouldn’t jump the gun after two days.”
All he can do is agree, as much as he doesn’t find this complicated like Sousuke does. Kisumi looks surprisingly content where he is, and perhaps he hears more hope in Sousuke’s words than Haruka does.

“Anyway,” he forces out as he rolls his neck. “I guess it’s good you’re here now too. Um, so I was saying I’m sorry, Kisumi. For being a fuck in high school. Blowing you off all the time and ignoring you. Doesn’t matter what shit I had going on, it was uncalled for. I’ve owed you that for a long time and just never figured I’d see you again to tell you. And well, shit, I’ve been on an apology spree, so I’m not going to miss the opportunity here even if everything’s weird.”

Sousuke can’t know everything Kisumi’s been through since then, or how much disproportionate weight an apology like that holds for him, so he doesn’t understand Kisumi’s bewildered reaction, can’t make sense of the lip he tucks briefly between his teeth before he looks away to hide it. But Haruka can see it, and his chest twists tight. He has no business being proud of Sousuke like this, but he is in the moment. Because he truly didn’t have to do that, and he didn’t do it because he knew about Kisumi’s past and felt sorry for him. He did it because he’s Sousuke.

“Thank you,” Kisumi says. “I don’t…” He sighs and gives up on what Haruka assumes was going to be it’s not a big deal and repeats himself instead. “Well, just thanks.”

“Okay, cool,” Sousuke mutters, then rakes a hand nervously through his damp hair. “Next on the agenda… I have a weird request.”

Haruka raises an eyebrow. “Shoot.”

Sousuke continues to mutter unintelligible syllables and heaves a sigh. “Can you kiss? In front of me.”

He snorts and Kisumi looks mortified. “Like hard? With tongue?”

“Jesus, Haruka,” Sousuke groans. “However you want!”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know! Just. Do that first.”

Kisumi looks at Haruka like he’s never seen him before in his life and Haruka has half a mind to grab them both by the shoulders and shake them for being so nervous over absolutely nothing. But patience is the most important variable to this entire scheme, even if he’s restless by this point for progress.

Haruka moves forward so he’s knee-to-knee with Kisumi. “Is that okay?”

Kisumi nods, keeping his focus honed in on Haruka and not letting it stray to Sousuke. Haruka kisses him simply like before, just enough so they fit, but Kisumi takes his lower lip this time to his teeth and runs the tip of his tongue across it. Haruka chases and tastes the stolen saltwater on Kisumi’s tongue. When Kisumi barely moans he doesn’t stop himself from looking to see if Sousuke heard it, and he doesn’t look away once he catches Sousuke’s eyes. They’re dark. Haruka kisses Kisumi deeper, open-mouthed, until Kisumi breaks to breathe out an aroused whimper that forces a low curse from Sousuke.

Haruka sits back and admires his handiwork. Kisumi’s flustered; Sousuke watching them a reality he was only fantasizing about up until now. Sousuke looks back and forth between them both and curses again.
“Now what?” Haruka repeats.

“Kiss me.”

“Okay,” he laughs. “Then what?”

“Haruka,” Sousuke warns as he looks to Kisumi. “That okay?”

“Um, yeah,” Kisumi answers.

Haruka complies and gives Sousuke his kiss, purposefully keeping it chaste and forcing Sousuke to act if he wants more. He takes the opportunity, but not too far. No one pushing anyone. But it’s enough to make Kisumi lean forward just enough to be noticed.

Sousuke doesn’t ask this time, he just turns and gives Kisumi what he’s leaning in for, short and sweet. It’s a big step on its own considering Haruka told him he didn’t need to be actively thinking of Kisumi yet in all of this. This one brief and experimental kiss is more than Haruka could’ve hoped for.

Sousuke draws a shaky breath once it’s over and looks out over the water. “Um. So. T-third- or fourth.” He clears his throat. “Whatever number request I’m on… An invitation. To come over.”

Kisumi and Haruka share a look while Sousuke isn’t paying attention, one full of disbelief.

“I want to know more,” he adds quickly. “I’m thinking something of the more, uh, private lesson variety. Without the kids running around.”

Haruka only then takes stock of how public this space is, but he’s happy to have had the experience on the water. No better place. Kisumi nods his comfort. “Okay,” Haruka agrees. “But I need to get some things out of Kisumi’s car.”

“Ah. Uh, no. I meant both of you. No faster way to get acquainted, or something like that, and you need to go back home soon…”

For once in this entire ordeal, Haruka is speechless, so it’s nice that Kisumi picks up the slack.

“We’ll give you something to miss.”

--

Haruka makes his promises that he and Kisumi will say goodbye to everyone properly before they leave, but right now there’s a much more pressing task at hand, and all three of them are going to pretend they didn’t catch Rin’s wink on their quick walk to their cars.

Sousuke’s last to take a shower after Haruka and Kisumi jump in together and spend nearly all of it fooling around, Haruka one orgasm down at the other end of it courtesy of Kisumi’s sudden interest in teasing him. A lot of good it does to take his edge off, though. He’s only more aroused by Kisumi’s emerging sex drive.

“You swear you’re okay with this?” Haruka asks as Kisumi lies alongside him on Sousuke’s bed, skimming his fingertips up and down Haruka’s chest. “We haven’t even had sex yet.”

“Haru,” he murmurs near his ear, “this is all I’ve been able to get off to for the last week.”

Haruka turns his head in interest. “Have you been getting off a lot this week?”
“You came on me,” he purrs. “Sort of hard not to daydream about after a dry spell.”

Haruka curses under his breath and easily slides his tongue between Kisumi’s parted lips, needing to taste him more than anything, wanting to hear him moan because he sounds so pretty when he does.

“Can I tell you something before we do this?” Haruka whispers, a pit forming in his stomach for no reason since he knows better, but this is never easy the first time.

Kisumi nods quickly, eyes on Haruka’s lips and the back of his hand stroking the skin of Haruka’s inner thigh with coiled anticipation.

“I know I’ve put you through a lot, but I love you and I haven’t told you directly yet. And I need to.”

Kisumi laughs, bright and happy, which says it all. “I love you too,” he responds anyway.

He kisses him again and doesn’t stop this time to speak anymore. They need to wait for Sousuke, but it’s difficult to do when Kisumi pulls Haruka to roll so he can stroke their cocks together. He’s taking too long anyway.

Haruka whispers as he edges close again and he considers leaving this entire affair to Sousuke and Kisumi for a chance to come like this, high on a rush of emotion and with Kisumi kissing him so wet and thoroughly with his own need he sings for more. But the bathroom door finally opens and Sousuke steps out nervously at first, eyes going wide once he sees what he’s been missing.

“Holy shit,” he mumbles, and Haruka thinks he catches an additional this is too much. Sousuke takes a deep breath and shakes out his nerves.

Haruka rakes him over with his hazy gaze as Kisumi drops his lips to his ear again. “He’s gorgeous, Haru.”

Haruka nods once and swallows dry, taking in everything familiar about Sousuke’s body and some of the features that are new. A mark on his finger he can’t make out but must be a strange tattoo, a muscular cut to his hips that wasn’t there when Haruka left, and thicker thighs than he’s seen in the past that Haruka’s already dreaming of trashing with his mouth.

Sousuke slowly sits on the bed. “Move over.”

“What took you so long?” Haruka breathes.

“Welp,” Sousuke says as if he’s suddenly out of patience for playing anything coy anymore, “you’re gonna fuck me, so I had to get ready. Now move because it’s been months since I got cock and I’m sure I’m slowly losing it, if this entire situation is anything to go by. Detailed enough?”

Haruka lets his eyes fall to Sousuke’s dick as he shifts to give Sousuke room to lie down, surprising even himself for holding out this long. In truth a part of him wishes he could be on the receiving end, as it’s been just as long for him too and Sousuke’s an expert at making up for lost time, but this is about them first. If it’s what he wants, and Kisumi didn’t protest.

“Can you help me out?” Sousuke asks. “You know, it’s been a minute. And you’re good with your hands.”

Haruka doesn’t need to be asked twice. He leaves Kisumi to watch and straddles Sousuke as he bends to the side to get into his nightstand, assuming everything is still in its place by habit from
his residency months prior. He tilts the bottle of lubricant along with his head. “… Pretty full.”

“Shut up,” he groans. “It’s not good alone.”

“Poor thing,” Haruka coos sarcastically. “and for someone who loves taking it as much as you, too.” He bends to kiss away Sousuke’s indignancy, sucks the retort right off of his tongue. Sousuke’s quickly aroused by it, hard where Haruka sits over his lap. He shifts down Sousuke’s body, stopping to lick the cut of his hip appreciatively, and takes his cock into his mouth to earn him a contented sigh.

Kisumi moves over to keep the top of him occupied. Haruka watches them kiss tentatively, just barely, with creased eyebrows. Before one of them can look to him for the permission he’s sick of giving, he sucks hard at the head of Sousuke’s cock and makes him cry out in surprise. He carries it down, and takes him as deep as he can without giving him a break. Sousuke’s hips roll as he moans, muffled now that Kisumi’s found a reason to kiss him.

Slowly, Haruka spreads Sousuke’s knees and pushes one up at a time as he sucks him off. Precum dribbles from his slit and smears across Haruka’s tongue and the roof of his mouth, and he takes it down enthusiastically. He loves how every single part of Sousuke tastes, thinks about it- has thought about it- often. Haruka can never get used to how thick his dick is, how much work it always takes to make Sousuke feel so good he can’t think and how unlike Haruka it is that he gives it his all.

Sousuke begging, Sousuke whimpering all broken and desperate, is worth every unit of Haruka’s energy, and Sousuke has to know that by now to put himself in this position.

Haruka squeezes at his thighs, and pops off of him to suck and bite at the softest flesh like he’s been thinking about doing. Kisumi moves to Sousuke’s neck and grope his chest, fully working his thick muscles as he assaults Sousuke’s sensitive throat. Kisumi is perceptive; he’s quick to learn what Sousuke likes and daring enough to dangle that in front of him already, and Haruka wonders what all he’s gleaned about his own body in such a short amount of time, too.

There’s no one on Sousuke’s cock or mouth, and so many places to put his hands he settles for a writhing torso and twisting helpless fists into the sheet as he’s teased and teased and can’t keep himself quiet or controlled anymore.

“Goddammit, please,” he finally breaks and cries. “Haruka, touch me, come on.”

His begging gives Haruka pause to touch himself instead for a few strokes and relieve some of the pressure, the needy keen on Sousuke’s voice making Haruka’s mouth water for his cock one more time. He licks up the mess he’s made on his hip, sucks and swirls his tongue at the head but doesn’t take him all the way in again, because he’s just too close coming and they’re not done yet.

Haruka finds the lubricant nearby and prepares his fingers with unsteady arms. Kisumi watches from the side as he murmurs quietly to Sousuke’s ear. Sousuke gives up waiting for the attention he wants and strokes himself to whatever clearly filthy scenarios Kisumi’s speaking out for him. Haruka enjoys the moment as the lube warms between his fingers.

Haruka pushes his knees back up where they’ve started to slouch, bats Sousuke’s hand away from himself, and admires the view. Kisumi locks playful eyes with Haruka’s own as he tells his stories, and Sousuke’s head lulls pleasure to hear them. His back bows and his knees spread and his cock rests rock hard along his stomach, and he’s unfairly gorgeous, Kisumi’s right.

“Who do you want, Sousuke?” Haruka asks thickly as he sinks one finger to the knuckle with no
warning. Sousuke whimpers in relief.

Haruka stares down mesmerized, the heat he’s only been able to think about at his whim again. He adds his middle finger, Sousuke pushes down on him unfazed. Despite the time apart, Sousuke trusts his hands and doesn’t resist him or freeze up. “Do you want me or Kisumi?”

“Both,” he croaks. “Both. One after the other.”

“What sort of things are you telling him, Kisumi?

Kisumi shrugs and smiles.

“You won’t last that long,” Haruka mumbles, and spreads his fingers, withdraws them, circles his rim with them to get him slick as Sousuke sobs for their return. “You’re already impatient.”

“I don’t care,” he breathes. “I’ll tell you if I do.”

Haruka returns with three, pushed in all the way and bent how he remembers to do it. Sousuke wails as he presses lightly, but never lets off completely, making sure he knows the sort of stimulation he’s asking for to demand them both. The sort that doesn’t let up, and the sort that’s brought Haruka to tears at least once before.

“Haruka, I need it, okay? So fucking do it and trust me. Please.”

“He’s so polite too.” Kisumi about chirps, getting off the other side of the bed and rounding to the night stand. “I’ll go first, you take him when he can’t see straight.”

Haruka continues to work him open and loose as Kisumi finds and rolls a condom down his cock and gets himself lubed, and moves out of the way once Kisumi’s ready and Sousuke starts to whine again. Kisumi’s only gripped with a split second of uncertainty that Haruka can catch before he’s hitching up Sousuke’s legs, lining up, and slowly pushing in. There was no going back anyway, not now.

Kisumi throws his head back as he inches in, fingers dug deep where he’s holding up Sousuke’s legs, and Sousuke’s gone taught and silent as he adjusts to the old stretch. Haruka moves closer and strokes Sousuke’s cock until he melts into the movements. His jaw falls slack and his eyes are lidded looking between them. Small moans die in his throat, and steadily grow louder with every thrust and stroke that goes from being foreign and uncomfortable to being something he can’t live without.

Haruka turns and pulls Kisumi into a deep kiss as his hips snap harder to acknowledge him, then moves to see Sousuke. Sousuke guides Haruka to his lips, each pull of his cock a moan to Haruka’s mouth and each hit from Kisumi a full-body shudder.


“Mm. Is it nice?”

“I missed it,” he agrees. “Fuck he feels so good.”

Haruka repositions to look at Kisumi while staying near Sousuke’s head, releasing his cock to draw out his pleasure and save some for his turn. The calm gaze Kisumi drinks Sousuke in with makes Haruka shiver.

“I feel good?” Kisumi repeats.
“Let me see you come,” Sousuke rasps.

“I’m gonna, Sousuke, don’t worry.” He moves faster, moaning their names in that pretty, breathy way Haruka’s grown so fond of. Sousuke drags his forearm to his mouth and muffles his cries into it, cock so close to spilling over but not quite there without the help, leaving him in limbo where it feels incredible yet just out of reach. Every slam into his ass racks him with a shake Haruka feels, and all of it tumbles towards overstimulation.

Kisumi moves unfamiliarly confidently, taking in his control and using all of it in steady movements, never in bursts. Haruka’s never seen an art to sex, it feels great but it’s honestly feral looking and messy to him. However Kisumi builds up his finish beautifully, and soon turns his face and bends to nuzzle the inside of Sousuke’s knee. He chants his name softly, his hips lock stiff, and Haruka is envious of Sousuke’s position.

Kisumi rides his orgasm on frail whimpers he consciously chooses to share with Sousuke, folding forward to kiss him for every last moment. Sousuke brings a hand up to cup his face, rubbing his thumb affectionately along his cheek and peppering kisses to his lips and chin so intimately, Haruka wouldn’t have guessed they haven’t spoken in a decade before today if he wasn’t there to witness the reunion. There’s something about witnessing that level of intimacy between people he loves that makes this feel right, like there’s no other way he should’ve ended up but right here.

He pulls away gently, dipping back to kiss between Sousuke and Haruka before he leaves them to each other, and rests on his side on the other edge of the bed. Haruka thought Kisumi was merely eager, but he sees now there was a purpose behind why he dictated this play out how it did.

Kisumi’s body is tired, but his eyes are bright with interest to see where Haruka will take the rest, and now it’s only Haruka, it’s only Sousuke. Haruka holds Kisumi’s gaze and tries to communicate his sincere gratitude for it, Kisumi smiles in return.

Maybe they just owe each other something raw after their crippling silence, but when Haruka takes Kisumi’s place, he wastes no time asking if Sousuke’s sure again. He’s sure, Haruka can tell.

Haruka forgets to breathe, and Sousuke wraps his legs around Haruka’s waist as he pushes in and forces him harder with each squeeze. He leans over Sousuke because staying upright is too far away from him, and kisses him longingly until his mouth aches. He lets Sousuke hold onto him with his nails at his back even though they slip and scratch for purchase through Haruka’s sweat and their own tremble. The friction between their bodies sends Sousuke over the edge; he utters soft praises and prayers a universe away at odds with the searing sting carving tracks of fire into Haruka’s skin when he falls.

There’s peace; Haruka slows and kisses him tenderly and thoroughly, Sousuke silently strokes his cheek with the back of his hand. It could end here. He could pull out and be done. Haruka is strangely unopposed. But Sousuke bites Haruka’s bottom lip too hard, and silently asks him to finish what he started.

It’s just them right now, they need this. Haruka’s cries are dry and cracked, Sousuke forces his own draining voice to stay behind his teeth as Haruka fucks him long after he’s raw, long after it’s overwhelming and should be too much. Somewhere along the way this stopped being about feeling good, and became all about fixing something each of them broke in the other, and it’s scary and inexplicably whole at the same time.

Haruka inches towards his finish, one he should’ve had already but is stubbornly willing down to keep this moment going for as long as he can. He doesn’t want it to end, he wants Sousuke until they hurt as badly as all this time apart has. But Sousuke chooses to end it for him.
“Haruka,” Sousuke growls in thick, rocky consonants to his ear, pulling him down by the hair at the back of his head with enough force to make his eyes water with the sting, make him gasp, “enough.”

He’s in the ocean on his back and floating over waves.

“Finally!” Rin shouts. “Someone else among us who appreciates a bit of tactile affection. I’ve always been starved, you know. You’d think Makoto found me repulsive.”

“Hey,” Makoto pouts, and Rin purses his lips with a smack to apologize.

Kisumi smiles nervously over Rin’s shoulder at Haruka, followed by a wince when Rin squeezes too hard and lets him go. Makoto offers him a handshake. Sousuke nods stoically from where he stands on the sidewalk.

“I’m happy you still picked me as your favorite after all this time, Haruka,” Gou giggles. “Stay with me again, I loved getting caught up, and Kisumi you’re just great. Yet another wonderful person my idiot brother did not properly introduce me to when he should’ve.”

“I’ll let her have that,” Rin sighs.

“Actually I should just come stay a weekend with you next, huh?”


“Oh I definitely will. Start finding things for us all to do. You’ll need a lot of ideas.” Gou steps forward and gets her hug from Haruka, one long overdue in his opinion.

“I see how it is,” Rin mumbles.

“Yes, you do,” Haruka agrees as he pats her back and steps away. “Always astute.”

“Shut up. Have a nice drive back. Enjoy the view and shit. What I’m saying is, don’t die, take it easy.”

“Thank you, everyone,” Kisumi gets out one anxious octave higher than normal. “I had a good time.”

“Yeah you did,” Rin goads, earning himself an elbow to the arm.

“Call me up tonight and I’ll give you a play-by-play, Rin, complete with sound effects,” Haruka bites back. Rin clears his throat and rolls his eyes. There is an art to de-fanging him, one Haruka takes pleasure in being a master of. “Ready to go?”

Kisumi twirls his keys. “While it’s early.”

Haruka nods Makoto over to him, and walks with him down a few squares of sidewalk while Rin and Gou finish saying goodbye to Kisumi. “Eventful stay.”

Makoto shrugs. “That’s all right. Productive. Always next time for us to hang out, right?”

“I miss you. We’ll plan something just for us soon.”

He smiles. “That would be great. When we don’t have our hands full with a ton of unruly men.
You especially, but Rin sort of counts for two sometimes…”

Haruka chews his lip and hums to the ground.

“He’ll come around,” Makoto assures. “He wouldn’t have spent time with you yesterday if he wasn’t already preparing himself for making the change.”

“He’s just so weird about it. Why have sex with us if he’s still not sure?”

“Well, Haru, it’s a big deal. Maybe not for you, but for him. Everyone’s different. In the meantime, get yourself used to making meals for three first, so you’re ready for his appetite to be back in your life.”

Haruka snorts. “Meals for five, then.”

“Better ask for a raise.” Makoto shifts his weight. “Thanks Haru. For helping Rin. He needed us and you know how to really hear him when we can’t. I’m so happy to have him back and he’s getting better, you know? Even so soon. When he’s not trying to impress you guys, I mean… Anyway. I’m just really lucky to have all of you and some days it’s overwhelming.”

“I’ve thought that a lot myself recently. You know I’m always here for you all.”

“Yeah,” Makoto smiles again. “All right. Go give your last pitch to Sousuke. I’ll wrangle Rin and Gou inside. Text me when you get home.”

Haruka agrees and waits for the street to clear out until it’s just him, Kisumi, and Sousuke. There’s nothing else he can say, really. So he just crosses the space between them and kisses him goodbye.

Sousuke’s been increasingly emotionally opaque since yesterday afternoon ended. It means he’s thinking hard on everything, and Haruka will take it as a good sign for now.


Haruka bites a smile back at Sousuke’s obvious reluctance to do too much unnecessary moving; Rin’s given him enough shit for his stiff movements since they showed up at Gou’s for a farewell breakfast as it is, and that would be bad karma since Haruka’s found he must rest his back on any seat gently for now and he’s been wondering why hips are so damn stiff for a guy not thirty years old quite yet.

Kisumi takes a step closer and stays still at a distance, Sousuke rolls his eyes and pulls him forward by his shirt for a kiss that puts Kisumi at ease.

“Come on, we’re at least past that.” He looks back to Haruka. “You know, your knack for turning my life inside out is impressively underappreciated.”

It makes him laugh. “Take all the time you need.”

“Liar,” Sousuke mutters. “But I’m happy you’re attempting to be patient.”

“Thank you. Talk to you soon, Sousuke.”

It’s more than enough for a temporary goodbye.
The best news of Gou’s Friday afternoon is that Aki is quitting.

“Hello, pretty girl!” Aki sings from the door to Gou’s office.

“Aki,” Gou laughs. “You still work here.”

Aki approaches Gou’s desk and hands over a folded letter. “Ta-da! In two weeks I won’t.”

“Then keep a lid on it until two weeks from now! You’re going to get me in trouble.”

“Sorry,” she pouts. “I’m just excited.”

After over a month of looking around and interviewing, Aki found a new job with a small architecture firm in Samezuka. It was the smart thing to do, and Aki volunteered to be the one to leave her position. Gou’s too established for now to really give her’s up, but she was willing to help Aki get a transfer to another department. She didn’t want it, Gou was privately relieved. This is much less messy.

“You have to listen to me whine about being understaffed now, you know that?”

Aki grins. “I’ll make it up to you after you take me out to dinner to celebrate.”

“Sure,” Gou agrees. “What are you up to tonight?”

“Ah… Good question. Nothing’s come up yet, surprisingly.”

Gou idly evenes off a stack of papers near her inbox, and starts to collect stray pens scattered about to put away. “I’m thinking about going down to the art walk on the pier.”

“Oh jeez, is it the end of the month already? We have to go, of course. I’ve been thinking about that Andy Warhol-inspired paw print collection since we went last time… I think I need to own something from it.”

“I think you’re right,” Gou responds. “Your place is empty.”

“Hmm… I guess I never knew how long I was gonna end up staying in the end. Didn’t want to settle too much.”

Gou pauses in the middle of organizing her desktop and raises her eyes slowly to Aki, careful to keep her alarm over the statement masked behind curiosity. Their relationship is only about two months old- hardly a blip in a lifetime- and Gou has been careful not to let her hopes up. “Oh?”

“Yeah, but I guess I’m finding a few reasons to stick around after all,” she says almost coyly, crossing her arms and tilting her chin up along with an eyebrow.

Gou rolls her eyes, mock-exasperation betrayed by her smile. “Get out of here already. Some of us have work to do.”

Aki winks and heads back out the way she came; Gou shamelessly watches her leave. Her vision is made up of strong curves and gentle slopes these days, and she hasn’t been able to get enough of it. While she wishes she could’ve come to this conclusion about herself sooner, there is no better person than Aki to be there for her as she learns to redefine herself, her life, and all of her
experiences from ground zero.

Aki never learned, she always knew. Her perspective on sexuality is a breath of fresh air, and any uncertainty Gou’s had about herself over this is quickly washed away by Aki’s intimacy and heart on a level Gou knows she’s never felt before now. She cares so deeply for her friends and romance always seemed superficial in comparison to the intensity of her love for them, but now she’s discovered she’s capable of loving romantically just as much as she does otherwise. It frightens her, but that’s why Aki is exactly who she needs, because Aki is fearless.

She finishes getting all of her paperwork organized into better piles and lingers her gaze over the bracketed folder containing all of her work on the swim club building. No bites now that it won’t be turned into a money laundering operation. There’s hope for it yet, she just needs to be patient and bring it up with Makoto and Rin at the right time once they’re settled again.

Her cellphone rings in her purse and she retrieves it to find it’s her brother, speak of the devil.

“Hey Rin,” she greets cheerfully.

“Ah, hi sis. Got a minute?”

Gou stands and walks over to her office door to close it for privacy. “Of course.”

“Having a good day?”

“Mmm. Aki turned in her two weeks just a minute ago.”

“She got that gig with the firm? That’s good.”

He’s reserved, tone flatter than usual. “Yeah, it’s great. So everything okay?”

He’s quiet a moment. “Everything’s okay. Well, I got my second round of testing back. Just got off the phone.”

It still makes her heart stutter in her chest, even though he’s been marked for clean once already. “Oh yeah?”

“Clean, still,” he reveals.

“I’m glad. Why do you sound so down?”

Rin clears his throat. “Just… sucks. I guess. Still feel shitty about it.”

Gou frowns. “I know. But you’re healthy. Did you tell Makoto?”

“When he gets off work. I don’t wanna bother him. He didn’t know I went for round two, I just… I don’t want him anywhere near it, you know? And he’ll just insist he come with me and it’s too much for me.”

“No, I get it. So are you done with this?”

“I’ll go back in a year. At least now I feel, well, safer to be around Makoto. And with him. We haven’t taken that step again yet because I’ve been so paranoid…” He sighs. “I’m happy to put the worst of this behind me.”

Normally Gou would tease him or tell him to keep it to himself, as she has no interest in his sex life with Makoto, but she knows how important this is to them and how much his ordeal has eaten
away at his confidence. There’s a lot to unpack, and he’s doing a great a job of it both on his own and with her’s and Makoto’s help. But it’s a task nonetheless.

“Call me whenever it gets to you, okay? Work getting better?”

He hums. “Yeah. Turning it around. Got a few sales this week. My last shift at the bar was a few nights ago too.”

He’s mentioned offhandedly that the suits make him nervous, but never whether or not it was anything unbearable. Gou gets the sense that it all benchmarks a time he’s trying to leave in the past. One of those things he’ll never be able to disassociate with Matsuda, or at least everything he represents to Rin. “How do you feel about staying with the shop all things considered?”

“I don’t know yet. But I guess I don’t know what to do otherwise, either. Me and Mako gotta put up with weird jobs for now, and if he can do it, I can,” he answers a bit sterner than he has been. “It’s not that bad.”

Gou looks at the swim club folder again and chews her lip. Maybe not an involved discussion about numbers, but perhaps she can suggest it for now. “ISCR is still vacant.”

“Yeah I figured you’d hold onto that,” Rin sighs. “Not in our cards, Gou. Give it a better home, would ya?”

“You two would be great at it,” she insists.

“There’s a lot of memories there,” he says. “We want to start over. That place is a lot of baggage for us.”

“Can I stubbornly ask you to talk to Makoto one more time before I let it go?”

He doesn’t answer right away. “... If it’ll make you happy.”

“We can make it work. We can make it more than work.”

“All right,” he agrees unenthusiastically. “I should go. Mom wants me to run errands.”

“Thanks for calling, Rin. I’m happy for you, don’t get too down on yourself. Makoto’s going to be elated.”

“Heh. I know, that’s why I can’t seem to buck the fuck up.”

“Hey,” she chides. “He’s proud of you, like I am. We love you.”

“Gou-”

“No more denial. It’s true.”

He sighs long, and breathes deep to center. “Okay. I’m just being weird. I love you too and I’ll talk to you soon. Tell Aki hello for me.”

She bids him goodbye and hangs up slowly, staring down at her phone long after the screen turns off trying to parse the entire thing. In any case, he’s not going to her with all of it, and that alone is something remarkable. She’s confident for the first time in recent memory that Rin will broach it with Makoto instead.

She gets back to work; there’s a date she needs to get ready and be on time for.
Gou is learning Aki isn’t all momentum— not all the time.

Sometimes she is gentle touches, a nuzzle into Gou’s neck. She is arms around Gou’s waist, she is their fingers laced together as they walk down the pier. She is a quiet conversation over a shared drink, she is bright, appreciative eyes taking in colors at a standstill and ideas locked away within canvases. She is Gou’s ongoing moment suspended in time.

Her breath catches when Aki looks at her, as it always does. It’s a strange feeling to expect doubts and then realize there aren’t any. She keeps looking for the tiny voice that tells her this isn’t going to work either, just like nothing ever works, but there’s only a curious silence that is patient to speak.

At the beginning of their outing, while it’s still on her mind, Gou brings up the swim club building with Aki.

“Rin seems so reluctant.”

“Well,” Aki muses, “maybe it really isn’t what they want to do.”

“Even though they’d be so good at it. And I could help them!”

“Being good at something isn’t a good enough reason, in my opinion. I’m good at plenty I’d hate to do for a living.”

Gou pauses to watch a group of high school girls run past them straight towards a comic stand. “It just seems like since they don’t know otherwise what to do, it’s a perfect opportunity and something they wanted to do back then and couldn’t but I could help them now.”

“Things change,” Aki offers. “If you like it so much why don’t you buy it and get it running again?”

She creases her eyebrows in thought, never having considered it. “Wow, well, I guess that’s an option. Be a real swim club manager this time.”


It bubbles over in her chest, and she’s almost proud of the concept. It’s something to think about.

Aki, usually so quick to conversation, lets the low murmurs of the crowds fill in the space around them after that as they take themselves through the stalls on the pier for the art walk. There are two long rows of stalls decorated in colorful strings of lights and lanterns crisscrossing overhead, leaving the pier and the streets in a soft wash of light in the dusky evening. It’s warm and breezy with a summer storm rolling in off the ocean and this close to the water, the salt is thick and heavy on the air. They drift together, shoulders brushing and hands interlocked, and Gou forgets she isn’t dreaming for how surreal it all feels, how perfect.

Aki gets a print from the series she spoke of earlier and grins with excitement that the artist still had a few left over. Gou picks up a felted cat figure with a mysterious smile for Makoto that reminds her of him. It’s all still dream-like, even as they finish up and walk back to Gou’s car and Aki finds her voice again, the soft light fades away, and thunder rumbles closer.

“-and I think I know a guy who can get me a cheap frame, so I guess I’ll call him tomorrow…. Gou?”
“Hmm?”

“You’ve been so quiet! It wasn’t totally shitty, was it?”

Gou turns in her seat and shakes her head. “Not at all, I had an amazing time.”

Aki hums unsure. “Promise?”

“It freaks me out,” Gou explains, averting her eyes. “I have so much fun with you, everything feels so right. I’m still getting used to it; it still gets unreal.”

Aki makes a small oh with her mouth. “Gosh you were making me nervous. Like you had doubts.”

“I don’t,” Gou says quickly. “I don’t have any. It’s never happened to me.”

It makes her smile, and she leans over to kiss Gou for the first time that day. “I want you to come with me to Osaka next time I go to see my family.”

Gou’s eyes widen in surprise. “Really?”

“Really! Honestly I can’t stop gushing about you and Mom- bio Mom- really wants to meet you. She remembered the Matsuokas! And confirms a picture of tiny you does exist.”

She giggles. “Okay. I’d love to.”

“And then… I want to go everywhere else with you, too.”

Gou swallows a lump in her throat that her heart volleys right back at her. “Aki…”

“I know you love your job. And I want to be here for my grandfather. But we’re going to travel and have adventures too and I’m excited for it.”

“Me too,” she agrees easily. Aki kisses her again, and Gou holds her there this time.

Aki smooths a hand up Gou’s thigh as their lips move and part; Gou wishes she hadn’t changed out of her skirt earlier at home in favor of shorts to walk in when her hand stops at the top.

Aki sits back in her seat and secures her seatbelt. “So let’s go home… You should stay with me tonight.”

Gou couldn’t agree more.

By the time they’re to Aki’s apartment, Gou’s head isn’t so far in the clouds anymore. It’s decidedly more level with the ground, picturing any number of surfaces she could use to push Aki against. All of those strong curves and gentle slopes she considered earlier in the day forces her to tuck her lip between her teeth. She doesn’t want Aki to think it’s all about sex, and doesn’t think she comes off that way, but the sex is good. It’s something she wants to learn be good at for Aki, who touches Gou with experience and deserves equal reciprocation.

They don’t make it out of their clothes to start, or even out of the car. Aki straddles Gou where she sits and continues kissing her as if they didn’t break. Gou can only reach her ass and does, rocking their hips together to grind on each other through their clothing.

Aki pulls Gou’s hair loose from its hairclip, and runs both hands through along her scalp leading by her nails lightly scratching. She tugs and Gou gasps to Aki’s lips in surprise, she pulls harder and Gou moans. Aki’s been cautiously gentle up until now, and that felt so inexplicably good and
unexpected.

The lack of space makes this punishingly close and hot. Aki’s breath is scalding on her neck when she moves to kiss and suck wherever she can reach. Gou’s rhythm falters as she edges close already, Aki sits up, and bumps the car horn, stopping everything in its tracks. They laugh.

“Fine. I don’t get to live out my car fantasies yet.”

“It was a good trial. But your bed sounds more welcoming.”

Aki opens the door from her position and steps out, offering a hand to Gou who takes it, and they make their way inside with quick steps and the occasional giggle. Gou lets Aki tug her to her bedroom without small talk, and a full-body sigh leaves her to finally rest horizontally. Aki climbs over her and takes the end of her sigh from her mouth.

Gou’s hips leave the bed in chase of Aki’s hand dipping her at her waistband. She pushes her hand to Gou slowly, rubbing her clit through her damp underwear with her middle finger experimentally.

“So you’re into me, right?” Aki teases.

“I’m not into your clothes anymore,” Gou answers breathlessly.

Aki snorts and pulls back and gets down to her bra, then helps Gou out of her clothes too, all the way. Gou pouts at the disparity.

“I like it when you take it off for me,” Aki explains with a shrug. She rubs a hand over Gou’s knee and nudges it apart and back to the other in thought. “I want to do something new. Well, for us.”

“Okay,” Gou agrees.

Aki folds a pillow over and lies down on it next to her. “Come here, sit over me.”

Gou moves to straddle Aki’s hips, but Aki tugs her up. “Closer.”

“Oh,” Gou realizes, heat swirling downwards at the thought. “Yeah?”

“Mmm,” Aki hums. “Come here, pretty girl.”

Gou’s breath quickens and she complies, moving up to be closer to Aki’s face, knees bracing Aki’s shoulders. “Like this?”

“Don’t smother me, but yeah. Use the headboard.” Gou gasps when Aki squeezes her ass and pulls her hips down and forward so she straddles Aki’s head instead. “Spread yourself, I can’t reach.”

Aki’s hot mouth on her aching clit is explosive when she starts; Gou throws her head back and moans with relief. She braces one arm on the headboard and rolls her hips forward to the cadence of Aki’s gentle ministrations, almost too gentle. She stops and licks Gou where she’s soaked wet and sighs through her nose at the contact, then works her there in and out with her tongue to drag this out until Gou can’t wait any longer and shifts to get Aki back to where she started.

Aki swirls and sucks at Gou’s clit and Gou hangs her head and whimpers as the pressure mounts, and she barely gets used to that before Aki pushes her over the edge and has her gasping for air after it’s knocked from her lungs. Gou sees stars and her legs shake, Aki hums a moan and the vibration takes Gou deeper into a wail of her girlfriend’s name.

Aki eases back to the gentle movements she started with, making Gou chase and thrust her hips.
into for more contact, riding the buzz of her orgasm well after it’s over until her senses return to her.

She sheepishly un-flexes her thighs where she’s boxed in Aki’s head and gives her room to breathe by retaking her spot on the bed next to her. “Sorry.”

“No,” Aki laughs with a rasp. “That was perfect.”

“What about you?” Gou asks, turning on her side and cupping one of Aki’s breasts now that she can. Gou loves her chest, and figured that out quickly. Aki loves that too, thankfully.

Aki answers by arching into Gou’s touch and sighing. “Kind of liked that grind we had going on in the car. Back to basics.”

“I could eat you out too this time,” Gou offers. “Feels unequal not to. And I think I’m getting better.”

She smiles one of those knowing smiles she uses when Gou’s arrived at a new door, so to speak. “Gou,” she says lightly, positioning herself over her hips with an effortless roll and lightly pressing her thigh down between Gou’s, “we just started.”

Aki dips her head and kisses her with intent, twisting one hand into Gou’s hair again and pulling sharply as she grinds to her. Gou’s aroused once more in no time. “It’s Friday. We can go as long as we want to, and we’ll get around to that.”

“Oh,” she responds dumbly, “okay, sure.”

“I know we’ve gone easy, but haven’t you had more than one orgasm?” Aki murmurs next to her ear. “My goodness.”

“N-no-” She pauses and gasps, overwhelmed with the sting on her scalp and the pressure from Aki’s thigh. “Oh, Aki, that’s nice.”

“I know,” she breathes, and pants tiny hitches as she works them together, “you’re so sexy I can’t stand it.”

“Yeah?”

“Knowing you’re right there in that office,” she purrs, “all day. And if I wanted to, you would let me fuck you on your desk.”

“I would not,” Gou protests weakly. She fumbles her hands behind Aki’s back to get her out of that suddenly wretched bra of hers and tosses it aside.

“Oh you would, I’d have you so wet so fast, baby-”

Gou whimpers and cuts her off, body going numb and mind going blank beneath her and her hair pulling and all of this hot, wet grind.

“I could, ah, bring a hard cock for you to ride, yeah?”

“Fuck, Aki!”

“Want me to? It can vibrate, for me, and I get a facefull of tits, so, it works out,” she continues, each roll of her hips making her groan and cry increasingly higher-pitched and broken between her words, “Or you’d let me trace the alphabet with my tongue into your beautiful soft thighs, your wet
lips, your *clit*- you’d come hard by the time I got to *O-*”

She pulls Aki to her mouth by the back of her head and kisses her deep as she orgasms again, Aki’s quick behind her and tangles her moans with Gou’s tongue and slowly lets go of her hair, slowly pulls off, as they both come back down.

Gou wheezes out of breath and lets the ceiling spin above her boneless body, fast at first, then to a lull and a stop. Aki stretches next to her, just as out of breath and sweaty and messy. Gorgeous and glowing, too.

“*Jesus,*” Gou says.

“Mm.”

“You’re still down one.”

Aki laughs, Gou makes good on her intentions.

---

On Sunday, Aki’s busy with her grandfather, so Gou lets Makoto know she’s stopping by to give him his gift. He’s actually at home for once, or rather with Sousuke, instead of at her mother’s house. She imagines Rin is likely growing irritated with that living situation. Makoto says he’s just on his way out to meet Rin for a run, but Gou figures she hasn’t had a good chat with Sousuke in a few weeks now, and as he is *still* living in Iwatobi and inexplicably *not* in Tokyo, they’re clearly due for a talk. Of the coming-to-Jesus variety.

Gou sets Makoto’s felted cat down on a side table, always forgetting he really has no bedroom. No wonder he stays with Rin in his tiny bed so often.

Sousuke’s just emerged from the shower going by his damp hair and half-assed, half-dressed attire. She takes a lunch from his fridge, earning an eyeroll from him.

“What? They’re always so available and you’re so dedicated to meal prep.”

“I’m lazy, that’s why,” Sousuke shrugs off as he collapses onto his bed and groans. “Fucking gym starves me and I don’t cook during the week.”

Gou sits on the edge to face him, crossing her legs and mixing around the beef and rice dish in its container after she’s heated it up. “How are you? Haven’t heard a peep.”

“Said I was gonna give you space. Been reconnecting with Rin though.”

“Oh good. Is he really okay or is he just hiding things from me?”

“He’s all right. Still sort of weird sometimes, but I get it. He went through some shit. But he won’t shut up about Makoto again so something’s on the right track.” Sousuke sits up and yanks the container from her hands to take a bite and gives it back. “Yazaki?”

Gou smiles. “We’re great.”


“If you don’t stop teasing me I’m going to brag and gush until you beg me to stop- and then I won’t.”
“Fine, fine. Good for you, chick.”

She passes the lunch back to him after a few more bites, and lets him finish it off over a few minutes of companionable silence. He sets the empty container aside and sighs. “All right, drill.”

“Why the hell are you still here, you stubborn moron?”

“I don’t know,” he mutters. “Took a bag down a few times, let it sit on the floor empty, put it back. Repeat every few days or so.”

“What about Haruka?”

“Nope,” he says with a loud pop on the p. “Not a thing. Thought he might ultimatum me by now and that’d light the fire under my ass. Offered a promotion at work instead two weeks ago. Shit ton more money, sort of dragging my feet.”

“Oh fuck the promotion,” Gou groans. “Sou!”

“I know. I hate myself for this, but-”

“Good lord!”

“And, if you’d let me finish,” he grunts, “You. And Rin. And Makoto. Sort of like you guys. Give me a break.”

“It’s not like you’ll never see us again.”

Sousuke sighs again. “Look, I’ve had you and Rin as long as I can remember now. Makoto busts my goddamned balls but I’m used to having him around too. I am about as useful as a pile of dog shit without your guys’s support, okay? If I fuck up with them none of you are there to tell me I did.”

“I’ll tell you you’re fucking up right now.”

“All I’m saying is, on my own? I make mistakes. That Haruka ever lived in Tokyo alone for longer than a day is testament to that.”

“You’re not on your own, though. You’re with people who love you. Haruka wants you in his life, Sou. You can’t just throw away a second chance because of this.”

Sousuke shifts uncomfortably and rubs at the back of his neck. “He’s real happy with Kisumi. I saw it when they were here.”

“He loves you, too. You have to trust him.”

“That’s what he said, but it’s not about trust-”

“How isn’t it?” she interrupts before he can spiral into something irrational. “You always trusted him before when he said he loved you, why’s it different now? Haruka doesn’t just talk to hear himself speak, Sousuke.”

He nods slowly to acknowledge her, but keeps his mouth shut and eyes downcast.

Gou huffs. “Just promise me that you won’t make a choice out of fear. You’re not a coward.”

Sousuke looks up agape for a moment, and nods again. “... I promise.”
“Good.”

He looks to the space next to himself, and tilts his head in gesture. Gou crawls up his bed to lie next to him and lets him pull her to rest her head where his chest meets his shoulder. They rest. He draws idle circles into her arm and she hums a tuneless song. This is how they should be, and never how they were when they tried to redefine their relationship.

“Do you think I should buy that swim club?”

“You know what I think about that swim club.”

“ Hmm. I would do a good job with it, though.”

He squeezes her arm. “Of course you would. You don’t need anyone to tell you that. Still don’t think it’s a good use of your money.”

“Even if I just got a few good years out of it… maybe it’s worth it.”

“Maybe it is, shit. The fuck do I know.”

“A lot,” she giggles. “That’s why I talk to you about this stuff.”

He groans and sighs. “Then do it if you’re gonna put your all into it. And I mean every spare second of time and unit of energy you got. Otherwise don’t. Or it’s just gonna be a pain in your ass.”

The first whisper of doubt about it echoes beneath the confidence. It would be her entire life indefinitely, he’s right. Makoto and Rin wouldn’t have drive for that when their focus is each other. Maybe that’s what Rin meant. “See? You’re so sensible.”

Sousuke snorts. He rests his head on top of hers and she curls further into his side and breathes in his soap, and some time later in the quiet, lazy afternoon warmth, she starts to doze.

“... I’d miss this,” he eventually mumbles distantly.

“Me too.”

“But are you happy now?”

“Yeah,” she answers as her eyes fall too heavy to keep open, “so go.”

Kisumi cocks his head in observation when Haru leaves the bathroom to join him in the living room with a long sigh.

“It’s too much,” Haru mutters.

“I don’t think so,” Kisumi responds. “It looks nice.”

Haru reaches up to adjust his tie again, though it’s as straight as it’s going to get. It’s a nice bright blue on a dark grey suit; if anything Kisumi would like him to wear it tonight because he’s nearly certain he’ll never see it again.

“If everyone else is dressed down I’m going to be annoyed.”
Kisumi shrugs and gestures down at his own conservative black attire. “You’re in good company in that case? Plus I’ve been to a few of these things. They’re always over-dressed. You’re not even doing your hair, so really in comparison you’ll look casual.”

Haru self-consciously reaches up and smooths the sides of his hair down. “Well I don’t like it brushed back.”

“So you’ve said,” Kisumi laughs. “This is for Yuu anyway. We’ll be at the kids table, and I bet you anything Romi and Kasaki will be dressed to the nines to out-do each other, and no one will pay attention to us.”

It seems to placate Haru, who’s been stressing way too much over this awards banquet today. Kisumi’s his plus one, and it’s him who should be stressing, not Haru. These aren’t really his people, after all. People he’s grown comfortable with, but still a circle he’s invited to, not a part of.

Haru doesn’t join him at the kotatsu for the last few minutes they have before they need to leave. Instead he folds his arms and narrows his eyes as if he’s preparing to scold Kisumi. “This should be an award you’re up for, too, shouldn’t it?”

“Nothing I did this year was up to par. So I didn’t submit anything for it.”

Kisumi shifts under Haru’s study, but he’s not lying. He had been too occupied with his own life to do his best work. He knows none of it is award-worthy; none of his co-workers or bosses have had anything to say about his submissions. He tries not to read his work, but when he does all he reads is exhaustion between each word. All he remembers are the dark thoughts dragging him down while he wrote about everyone else’s happiness.

“I’ll help you submit for it next year,” Haru says after a moment, and turns away for his kitchen. Kisumi smiles to himself.

He checks his phone to see they should leave soon, and stands to get his shoes on. Not before he stops by Haru’s kitchen to look Haru over one more time. Kisumi knows once they’re there, he’ll be too nervous and too occupied to look at Haru for any appreciative length of time. A shame.

Haru stares back over a glass of water. “What?”

“You look nice.”

He shrugs in response and looks away, so Kisumi crosses to him and anchors his hands on Haru’s hips. Haru continues sipping from his glass undeterred.

“I’m not just saying it.”

Haru hums and sets his glass in the sink. While he’s half-turned, Kisumi bends and kisses his neck above his collar. He trails up and to Haru’s ear when Haru doesn’t stop him, and along his jaw after that.

“Thank you. You look nice too.”

Pleased, he kisses Haru lightly. It’s not something Kisumi ever thought Haru would be into before any of this, given Kisumi’s past experience with laying a friendly hand on Haru, but he is. Haru pulls Kisumi back by his neck when he tries to step away for his shoes.

“Haru-”
“Just a minute,” he murmurs. “Everyone’s loud. This isn’t.”

Kisumi wouldn’t have figured Haru was feeling the same as him about all this either. This sort of thing is an exhausting event for both of them, then. Sometimes Haru’s so flippant Kisumi can’t determine if anything really gets to him, but over the last few weeks he’s shown sides of himself to Kisumi that he must keep carefully hidden and selectively exposed. Kisumi’s not about to tell Haru he’s relieved to have found a companion in something as annoying as social anxiety, but it does make him feel less isolated to not have to suffer it alone.

“Sure.”

Haru reaches to him to flatten his already flattened jacket lapels, straighten his immaculate tie, and brush invisible lint off of his shoulders. He finishes his movements with his hands on Kisumi’s neck, fingertips brushing back into his hair and pulling him close for another kiss he draws out and deepens. Kisumi never wants to get tired of it.

“Okay,” Haru breathes against his lips. Kisumi sucks at the bottom lip tucked between his own, sending Haru into another round of it, a needier round. Breathier, with quiet moans traded between them that are no longer in innocent territory.

Kisumi begrudgingly cuts them off when his hands travel south against his better judgement, and Haru’s hips twitch forward for his touch. He cracks a half-smile at Haru’s frown. “We’ll save some for later?”

Haru nods, and briefly drops his forehead to Kisumi’s shoulder before pushing him to a distance. Kisumi snorts and fixes Haru’s now-crooked tie.

--

There has to be an alternative career choice out there for Romi where she can just be paid to speak incessantly. Everyone should do what they love, after all. Kisumi would down another glass of wine if he weren’t responsible for bailing himself and Haru out of here at soon as it possibly can be managed. Romi must not have this responsibility herself, and it turns out she talks more when she’s drunk. Drunk-drunk, not his current lackluster dull-buzz drunk. Kisumi’s positive he’s lost the ability to keep a smile plastered on his face for the sake of getting by at this point. Not that it matters if she could read his look of despair, as she’s leaning on him too far to see his face anyway.

Kasaki shamelessly flirts next to her, Mika takes up Kasaki’s right. Goto rolls his eyes between them all. Haru’s on Kisumi’s other side, and blinks slowly and deliberately at him while he picks at the banquet dinner. It’s all about as painful as he was expecting it would be, though the treacherous boyfriend detail wasn’t one he saw coming.

“I think Kasaki likes me,” Romi whisper-shouts when Kasaki turns and strikes up a conversation with Mika.

“Yeah I’d put money on it,” Kisumi agrees with exasperation. Haru hides a smile behind his hand where his chin is propped up.

“I hear you, Ro,” Kasaki throws over his shoulder. “But I see you all comfortable with Shigino there, maybe he likes you more.”

“Kisumi likes Haru, stupid,” Romi bites back. “They kiss like all the time?”

Kisumi drops his gaze to the tabletop and swallows dry. He never told anyone, but that doesn’t mean Haru didn’t spill. Stupid of him not to ask Haru to keep it to himself for now, but he didn’t
want to cause any trouble in his newfound relationship so soon. It’s his fault for not bringing it up. And for thinking no one saw him sneak a kiss.

“Wait- don’t you?” Romi continues, sitting up when no one says anything. “I thought it was obvious and no one remembered to tell me?”

Haru’s a deer in headlights though, gaze slowly shifting to his boss and a brand of anxiousness lending stiffness to his movements Kisumi hasn’t seen before. Kisumi’s known Mika long enough to know she doesn’t care, but this isn’t Romi’s news to spill to, oh, everyone else.

“Romi, honey,” Mika sighs. “Perhaps we stay out of other people’s business?”

“Oh,” she mumbles. “I really thought I was just being left out of it, I’m sorry.”

“You were,” Haru bristles unexpectedly sharp. But the lights dim as he speaks, and the event falls underway, cutting them all off.

Romi is quiet, no side comments to award winners as they’re presented, and their applause for Yuu’s environmentalism piece is conservative. Kisumi just wants to leave. Preferably before the lights come back on. He reaches to his side to tug at Haru’s sleeve as the presenter steps back to the microphone for ending remarks, but Haru pulls his arm away in dismissal.

Yuu joins them at the table with her plaque as it wraps up, eyes narrowing between them all. “Thanks for the support, jerks.”

“Sorry Yuu, Ro made everyone mad,” Kasaki says with an eyeroll.

“Enough,” Goto cuts in with his deeper voice, getting their attention. Maybe the first thing he’s said all night. Kisumi doesn’t look up at him, always finding him too intimidating to stare at head-on. “Romi, you have a big mouth. But it’s true we already saw it, Nanase. No one cares.”

“Yeah Haru, Goto has a husband, we-”

“Romi!” Kasaki interrupts. “Dude, you are not getting it.”

“Oh come on, everyone knows this!”

Goto sits back and shrugs in agreement with that, though Kisumi had no idea.

Haru pinches the inside corners of his eyes and sighs. “Yuu, congratulations on your award.”

“Thank you, Haru,” she replies. “And it’s true. No one cares. You guys look like you’re about to be sick.”

Kisumi smiles nervously, but he does feel better. Next to him, Haru still broods. He checks his phone under the table and looks to Kisumi from the corner of his eye in silent request. Kisumi is more than happy to oblige him once an out presents itself.

“Now you two, on the other hand,” Mika directs towards Romi and Kasaki, “spill. What’s going on?”

Mika winks at Kisumi as the conversation graciously switches victims and Romi starts up all over again, Kasaki stumbling over her to defend himself, until everyone is caught up in it. He barely says they’re going to take off before the others say goodbye quickly and turn back to arguing, and he mouths a thank you to Mika as he and Haru stand. Mika waves to Haru and raises an eyebrow at
him expectantly; Kisumi owes her a coffee. Or something. He’s in debt, that’s all it means.

Haru walks out ahead of him quickly into the late night, stopped and leaning on Kisumi’s car as if he’s been there for ages by the time Kisumi catches up with him. Kisumi doesn’t press it, he wants to get home too.

“You okay?” Kisumi asks a few minutes into the drive when Haru doesn’t say anything.

“Yup.”

“Oh... Want me to drop you off?”

“No. I want to come over.”

“Ah. Okay.”

Kisumi works his nerves up the rest of the drive. He doesn’t know what he did, or what went wrong, but Haru’s mad. Should he have bragged they were together once it was out in the open? Should he have told off Romi so Haru didn’t have to? What did he fuck up now so badly that Haru wants to take it private to confront him about?

Haru’s already stripping out of his suit before Kisumi can get the door to his apartment open, and dumps it all in a wrinkled pile in the corner where he keeps a few overnight things. Kisumi gets his hung back up, as if the extra care to avoid folding anything makes up for Haru’s poor treatment of his own clothes.

“Haru…”

Haru shakes his head. “I’m pissed off, so I’m going to go outside for a minute, okay?”

Kisumi raises his hand after him, but Haru’s already slamming the sliding door shut and getting comfortable on the patio wall, slouching his weight onto one leg and staring out over the city with his back turned to the door. Not having anything better to do then, Kisumi hops in the shower. A hot one to distract himself from panicking.

When he gets out and dressed, Haru’s just as he left him. He can hear him speaking, though. It’s after ten, so Yuurei must be outside. Kisumi chews his lip in deliberation; ultimately he doesn’t want to try and go to bed with Haru fuming outside. He wants to know what he did, so he takes a deep breath and joins him even if Haru’s not ready.

“Hey.”

Haru looks over pointed at first, but his expression softens. “... Hey.”

“I’m here, Kissy, full disclosure,” Yuurei says below.

“I know,” he laughs. “Only reason I felt brave enough to come out here.”

Haru flinches. “I’m not mad at you.”

“... Oh.”

Yuurei sighs loudly. “Was just telling him how sensitive you were, Kissy. See, babe?”

His face twists in offense, even if she isn’t wrong.
“I’ll give you two some privacy,” she continues. “Haru hon, remember what we talked about.”

Kisumi nearly asks her to stay and listen, just in case she has insight, but she turns in earlier than she used to lately. The few times he’s caught her and asked for advice, she lets him speak instead of offering any. Maybe she’s stepping back, and maybe she wants him to trust himself more. She’s never been one for subtlety.

Haru waits for the door to slide shut on the floor below. Kisumi risks a touch; an arm around Haru’s waist as he leans on the wall next to him. Haru doesn’t shake him off.

“Sorry,” he begins. “I’m really not mad at you.”

“Romi?”

Haru sighs. “... I don’t care what they think, Kisumi. I’m upset because I wanted to be able to introduce you both. I was going to wait until… well.”

“Ah. Yeah,” Kisumi mumbles.

“Of course it’s been so long, people already noticed us. So I guess it wasn’t possible anyway. I just hate that I couldn’t.”

Kisumi tightens his arm around Haru’s waist. “I’m sorry, Haru. He’s dragging his feet.”

“He’s not coming.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“His silence says it all. Again.”

Kisumi’s heart twists at how sad Haru’s tone falls. “You should talk to him one more time.”

“I don’t want to beg him to be with me. Of course I want to talk to him, but what else can we say?”

“I don’t know,” Kisumi confesses. He’s asked himself that countless times in all of these weeks of unknowing. He’s not in love with Sousuke like Haru is, but he could see they had a connection with potential. He thought Sousuke saw it too. Above all though, seeing Haru this heartbroken every day in all of the little ways he can’t keep to himself tears Kisumi up.

“It’s all right,” Haru says. “Just got to me tonight. His choice.” He turns to put his back to the city, and guides Kisumi to stand in front of him. “Doesn’t change us.”

“Tell me next time if you’re pissed at me first?” Kisumi asks. “Overactive imagination, and fine, sort of sensitive.”

“That’s what Yuurei yelled at me for. Sorry again.” Haru pulls him to his lips to apologize there, too. “I’ll admit I’m feeling rejected and not always handling it great.”

“But it doesn’t change us?” Kisumi repeats, then sighs at his own timid voice. “… I’m being insecure.”

Haru shakes his head. “Doesn’t change us. I promise.”

“Okay,” Kisumi mouths over an intake of air when Haru tugs him closer so they’re flush.

“Thank you for being patient,” Haru says along his neck inbetween kisses. “And for trusting me.”
“Same to you,” he laughs. “I wasn’t easy to begin with.”

“... I wouldn’t do it differently if it meant we didn’t meet,” Haru confesses above a whisper. “I don’t know how to say it exactly, but I wouldn’t change it now.”

Kisumi momentarily forgets to breathe and hugs Haru tightly around his neck as if he’ll float away or disappear. I love you means so much to Kisumi, but this is nothing he ever expected to hear. Kisumi was fine being a happy accident, knowing if Haru had his way, Sousuke would’ve been here the entire time to begin with. Maybe they wouldn’t have grown close in that case, and there would be no Haru and Kisumi if Haru went back and did it all over. And that was okay. Kisumi’s happy it worked out this way, but he wouldn’t wish heartbreak on Haru or Sousuke just to be with him.

Haru’s telling him he would go through it again if it meant this uncertainty with Sousuke to end up here. With Kisumi. And suddenly his insecurity is far away.

“Me either.”

--

For the first time in two years with the Chiyoda Review, Kisumi is called to his supervisor’s office. After hours.

He shoots Haru a text about it, and not to wait up if he wants to get home. In truth Kisumi hopes he takes a hint and leaves, because this can’t be good. And he’ll need some time to himself after it’s over. Fired from two major publications in two major cities?

He has no back-up plan. This was his dream. At least he can say he gave it a shot. He wonders if Haru will let him crash at his place until he can find something else.

His boss, Fujiwara, is no one special. A newsy-type. Old school. Kisumi reports factually, which has kept him in his good graces even when his facts weren’t presented interestingly. But it also makes the guy similarly no-nonsense in personality, and Kisumi’s watched fellow writers walk in with a smile nonethewiser and out with a frown and a box of their things.

After six, he steps into his boss’s office where the door is open.

Fujiwara gestures to a chair. His desk is already cleared of the day’s work aside from an envelope, which bodes even iller for this entire thing.

“Good evening, Mr. Shigino.”

“Sir.”

“How are you?”

“Um. Well, nervous,” he admits.

Fujiwara pushes the envelope to Kisumi without an explanation. Kisumi reaches forward for it, and holds onto it for a suspended moment.

“I received this in the mail today,” Fujiwara says. “No return address. Can’t imagine why.”

He knows his hands are shaking, but there’s no stopping it anyway. All he does is tent the envelope open. It’s enough to see the photographs. Kisumi fumbles it back onto the desk, slapping his hand
down over it with a loud smack.

“Mr. Fujiwara-”

“I don’t know who thought I wanted to see this, Mr. Shigino, but all I want to know from you is that it is no longer an ongoing issue. What, with the press secretary and mayor in custody and all.”

“Sir, I have tried so hard-”

“Just answer me, Kisumi. I know what you’ve been up to already. I’ve spoken with the authorities. All I want to know now is that you are not involved with this anymore for your own sake.”

“I’m not,” Kisumi nearly shouts. “I haven’t been for months and those photos are from two years ago, Mr. Fujiwara. I was never involved with what he or Shibata were doing. I swear on my life I did not know and that’s what I was trying to investigate in the first place.”

Fujiwara nods to himself and takes the envelope from underneath Kisumi’s hand. He turns in his chair and feeds it into a paper shredder. The mechanical grind drowns out Kisumi’s sob of relief.

“I’ll tell you this once. The next time you go off on a rogue year-long crusade against a political office like an idiot, watch your ass. Don’t ever let my publication get involved like this again or you won’t be reporting in this city anymore. This is not what we do. We are not a noir detective agency and regardless of the severity of the scandal or your own moral obligation to uncover it, it is not your job here unless I ask it of you and we will not suffer it on company time again.”

“Yes sir. T-thank you,” he stammers out. He’s certain he’s going to be sick at this point. His arms find his middle and squeeze to settle his queasiness. His head pounds with familiarity. While he wishes his publication would support him and all journalistic endeavors, and has wished it since day one, he is not in a position to argue if he would like to keep his job.

“So are you ready to report? Can I take you off fluff pieces?”

Kisumi stares in bewilderment. “E-excuse me?”

“You’re a good writer, Shigino. But I couldn’t have you on big stories while your personal life was a goddamned mess. Everyone could see it. Now we know why. So again; are you ready to report? What you did with Shibata’s office is admirable and at least proves you’re dedicated to a story and a good person, even if it was stupid of you to get tangled up in.”

“Yes! I can. I can report.”

“Good. Go home. Off the record and in my personal opinion, Shigino; you did a good job. I always hated that guy.”

Kisumi nods at the door and leaves while he can still hold himself together. Cleaning up his desk is a blur, he’s sure he says goodnight to everyone he passes but doesn’t recall it. He makes it to his car before he breaks down- a feat- and wails.

Ugly, chest-heaving sobs ring in his ears. His tears soak spots onto his pants as he leans his forehead on his steering wheel to hold himself up. He’s never needed to cry this badly in his life and none of his cries before this have ever felt this good, this freeing. It’s a storm in his lungs, thunder booming on each breath and lightning crackling from his voice, and soon his storm breaks to chuckles, hiccups, and laughs until it catches and racks his body.
He crash landed without a parachute after an aimless freefall and still stuck the fucking landing. He’s still here, he’s still fighting, and god fucking dammit; between ending up with Haru somehow, coming out leagues ahead of the man who hurt him, keeping his dream alive after all the work he put into it to achieve it, and being told for what might be the first time that he is good at something?

No, he did a great job.

Once he calms down, eyes red and throat parched and coarse, he finds his phone to call Haru. To take him out to dinner, to tell him what happened, to cry again with him- something. But his thumb hovers over his name and doesn’t press down.

He scrolls down his contacts for his newest one with a rare surge of bravado, and gasps in surprise of himself when he calls Sousuke instead. He doesn’t know why he does it, or what he’s planning on saying. Or if this is a terrible idea that’ll just ruin everything. But he hears Haru’s defeat in his ears from the night prior, and he owes Haru this small effort, as a person vested in his happiness.

“Hello?”

Kisumi clears his throat, though his voice is still hoarse from a moment ago. “Hi… it’s Kisumi.”

“Oh. Yeah. Uh, what’s up?”

He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. Sousuke waits. “I want Haru to be happy and I honestly think I’m doing a pretty good job of it. But you also make him happy, and he makes you happy. I think I can say that with confidence. I don’t know why you’re blowing him off again. I don’t know if it’s me, or Tokyo, or both, and I especially don’t know why I’m calling you when you already know all of this but he’s waiting for you, okay? So am I, because you’re important to him, so you’re important to me.”

Background noise answers him, a low thrum for a long time. “Why did you agree to it?” Sousuke finally asks. “That’s the only question Haruka didn’t have a real answer to.”

“I wanted to be with him,” Kisumi answers simply. “So it was worth a shot, right? You’re worth a shot? I’m persistent.”

Sousuke’s laugh is rich and soft. “Hmm. You with him right now?”

“No. I’m still at work but on my way out. Why?”

“… I might beat you to him then, I’m only a few blocks out. Keep it a surprise for me.”

“You’re serious?” Kisumi breathes in disbelief.

“See you at home, Kis.”
hey whoa here we are for a succinct ending after a lot of words. thanks for reading and thanks for leaving feedback! i've read some really cool things from you guys and got a lot more out of my own fic than i would've without it and for that i'm beyond grateful.

end song here, that i may have written to be read in time with certain cues of the music depending on how fast you read but you can't prove that for sure.

Makoto & Rin,

Sorry I didn’t say anything. Don’t think there was anything else to say anyway.

Threw all my shit in a few bags. Everything I wanted to bring. Decided to leave this morning. Yesterday morning. Whenever you see this, huh?

I don’t think this is just a day trip. Unless Haruka changed his mind.

- 

“Rin,” Makoto whispers.

Rin turns his head into the pillow and pulls a drowsy smile. “Let me have my gross, sweaty haze,” he mumbles.

Makoto’s happy he’s still awake. He moves Rin’s tangled hair off of his face and traces his thumb around the edge of his ear, still warm and flushed, then presses the cooled back of his hand to Rin’s cheek to break up the pink staining his skin.

“Hmm,” Rin hums, bringing his own hand up to hold Makoto’s there. “Fucking hot in here.”

“Want me to get you some water?”

“No.” Rin shifts closer, despite it truly being scorching in his room and the narrow size of Rin’s bed not helping to disperse the heat. Makoto lets him kiss his tired, swollen lips, knowing he’ll be gentle now. Rin’s tongue is soothing over where he’s bitten or sucked too hard; Rin remembers every spot. He pushes his fingers through Makoto’s damp hair and guides their kiss through slow twists and turns.

Makoto laughs when Rin begins to smile around them, at odds with kissing him more or flashing triumphant grins for getting to. He pulls to peck at the corners of his mouth and along his chin to allow Rin his victory.

Rin’s grin eases to contentedness, his fingertips stroke Makoto’s face. “I’d go for another round, but you wore me out.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” Makoto says to his forehead before pressing his
Rin snorts. “So it’s hot as shit but I could be convinced to stay here all day.”

“Actually…” Makoto trails hesitantly. “I was going to ask if you’d like to have dinner with my family while the twins are home on break…”

Rin freezes his movements, and his eyes are cautious. “Makoto, that’s not important right now.”

“To you it is, right?”

Rin can’t lie about it, not after so many years of arguing over it. He looks down. “We can wait.”

“We could. I don’t want to.” He tips Rin’s chin back up. “No matter how it turns out, it was never fair to you.”

Rin nods and moves to pull Makoto to his chest, shifting his arms around him despite the position on their sides, and holds him so securely Makoto thinks they might miss the dinner anyway at this rate.

“You’re sweaty,” he says.

Rin nuzzles the top of his head and squeezes him tighter. “Shut up.”

- 

_I paid the apartment through the end of the lease ages ago. All you need to pay are utilities. Left my key under the mat. Just sign the transfer paperwork below this and drop it off. I’m not going to need it and I took everything I wanted to bring, so it’s yours. The rest of it. Sell the junk off if you don’t want it._

_Do what you want to do with it. Take a breather, get situated again, save up some money together for whatever you want to do. Have a normal sized bed. Didn’t want it to go to waste._

- 

“I just need to stop by for a change of clothes for tomorrow,” Makoto tells him on the way to dinner.

Rin shrugs. “Sure.”

He doesn’t mind; it means Makoto’s staying over again, and they have more time before this dinner for him to get ready, mentally. A breeze rolls in behind them to take the drag off the summer air, and Rin’s reminded why they’ve always walked. Makoto’s never seen the need to rush and Rin’s finding more and more he agrees.

Makoto picks through his pile of folded clothes along the wall of the living room once they’re there, and Rin frowns to himself. He’s glad Makoto’s had a place to stay, but this is no way to live. At least Rin’s had a room, even if it’s small. He turns away from the scene with no small amount of shame over it, and catches a letter folded on the counter with their names quickly scrawled in a hurry on the outside from the corner of his eye.

“What’s this?”

Makoto looks over his shoulder. “No idea. Do you know where Sousuke is? I thought he’d be home...”
Rin takes the liberty of reading the letter while Makoto finds and re-folds the shirt he was looking for. Time stops.

“-in? Rin?”

His sharp intake of breath is loud in his ears once he realizes he’s been holding it, and he looks up to Makoto who’s dropped his change of clothes on the couch to cross the room and stand in front of him in concern.

“I uh- I think I know where he went.”

Makoto takes the letter from him and skims it quickly, eyes going wide before his face twists unexpectedly to something choked with emotion that must be contagious, since Rin’s throat swells too. “Oh.”


Makoto shakes his head helplessly and crushes Rin in an embrace, burying his face to his neck while Rin holds them both up with fists twisted in his shirt at his back and glassy eyes at the ceiling.

“Wellcome home,” Makoto murmurs.

- 

Maybe try traveling. Pretty stupid for Rin to know English then for you guys never go anywhere.

Anyway, I’m no good at this shit in person. And I’m going to look like a moron if I have to come back here with my tail tucked between my legs but I think it’s going to work out so I’m taking a gamble.

- 

Haruka supposes he’ll cook something comforting if Kisumi was called in for a reprimand. The tone of his text didn’t bode well.

He’ll do it in a minute.

Here by himself in the quiet of his home, he needs time to grieve. This is a side of himself he doesn’t want to hurt Kisumi with. It’s his own personal fight.

It’ll get easier.

He’s going to have a good life with Kisumi, just that alone takes the sting off. He’s so lucky; so, so lucky he met him again. He wouldn’t change it, he wasn’t lying. Sousuke isn’t out of his life either. He’ll just be there in a different way now. Haruka hopes he finds what he’s looking for. He hopes this was a hard decision to make, at the very least. Because it’ll be hard for Haruka to move on regardless of how lucky he is.

None of this stops him from curling up on his bed and letting it hurt, just for a moment where he doesn’t need to hold his grief in.

Then he gets up and goes to his kitchen, leaving behind a long, shaky sigh to return to and finish another time.

Dishes clang over one another as he gets out what he needs to cut up fruit and poultry. Something
light for a warm day.

Kisumi knocks at his door as he always does though it’s unlocked this time, and Haruka makes another mental reminder to get a spare key made for him this weekend. His place is bigger anyway, they should spend more time in it than in Kisumi’s studio.

Haruka’s hands are too coated in flour to get the door, so he yells for Kisumi to come in and returns his attention to dredging chicken cuts for the pan.

“So what did he want?” Haruka asks impatiently when he senses Kisumi’s presence in the entryway to the kitchen. He hasn’t heard anything since the cryptic text and it’s worrying him.

“Still don’t lock the fucking door?”

Haruka snaps his head up in alarm to see Sousuke leaning on the wall, all smug and stupid with a large duffel bag dropped at his feet.

“Holy shit,” Haruka chokes.

He grins briefly, and drops it away for something more intimate. “Sorry. I’m here now.”

“I hope you don’t like that shirt,” Haruka warns before he ruins it with flour.

- 

Rin. Be good. I love you.

Makoto. You’ll figure it out. I tolerate you.

-

She needs to say goodbye.

Aki stands next to her patiently in wait as Gou watches the sun fall behind the former ISCR building. From a certain angle, the light catches the window on the other side and illuminates the inside in soft golds.

As of today and after a short sell, it’s on a three-month remodel timeline to become Iwatobi’s premier high-end sporting goods store.

“You sure about this?” Aki inquires.

Gou nods. “Can’t start a business and travel around with you at the same time, can I? I need all the time off I can get.”

Aki giggles and sighs wistfully. “I still can’t believe it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, it’s just so good.” She leans her head on Gou’s shoulder. “You’ll love Osaka.”

Gou laces their hands together between them. “Then what?”

“Hokkaido before the summer ends.”

“When do we leave?”
Aki hums. “As soon as I can con my way into time off at the new place. Shouldn’t be hard.”

They sit on the curb until the sun dips beneath the window and takes the light with it, and then it’s off to a dinner reservation to celebrate.

-

That’s all I have to say. I need to hit the road to be there in time for dinner. I’m sure we’ll talk soon.

-

Kisumi races home and throws his car in park as he unbucks his seatbelt. He flies up the stairs, narrowly avoiding two movers maneuvering a couch out of a unit on the landing below Haru’s door, propelled forward by excitement, wonderment, disbelief. All of it.

He forgets to knock, or is too impatient to, and throws the door open. And if it weren’t for the flour smudged and tracked all over Sousuke’s shirt, his hair, his face- it would be any other couple helping each other cook dinner in the kitchen after a long day that he walks in on.

Sousuke looks right at him, and he could give Kisumi any sort of look while Haru isn’t paying attention. Anything he wanted to convey while he could get away with it, and he chooses warmth.

“There he is,” Sousuke says in a way that tugs Kisumi forward, prompting Haru to turn around.

Kisumi kicks off his shoes in impatient hops to join them and their smiles.

-

Thank you.

-Sousuke

End Notes

tumblr

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!